

INFORMED & ENGAGED

Creating A New Era for the
Central PA Information Ecosystem

Executive Summary

The Information Ecosystem Map of Central Pennsylvania is the first ever map and assessment of our 19-county region's local news and information landscape. It is a road map for new ways to build better informed and engaged communities across our region by documenting existing news sources, and utilizing community feedback to create more opportunities for engagement at the community level.

This work is essential at a time when the impacts of the broken business model of local news continue to accelerate. Newsrooms of the past relied on local advertising which has since shifted to big tech. No one solution has emerged to replace this revenue, resulting in the sale, shrinkage or closure of one-third of print newspapers since 2005. Recent research shows that just 1 in 4 Central Pennsylvanians report caring “a lot” about local news, that same data shows fewer than 4 in 10 Central Pennsylvanian residents feel at least “somewhat” connected with their local community. Just 1 in 9 feels “completely connected”. We believe that reliable local news is a vital ingredient to helping Central PA residents feel connected to their communities, and able to exercise civic agency, but to get more people to care “a lot” about it, new approaches are needed.

This report reflects findings from a months-long inquiry into the current landscape including the number and type of news organizations serving this community, including their platforms, ownership structures, business models, and depth of local and original content. This will create a useful baseline to track changes over time.

It also provides significant qualitative feedback from news and information outlets and the audiences they serve, but don't always reach.

As lead of Press Forward Central PA, The Steinman Institute for Civic Engagement—powered by the generosity of The Steinman Foundation—is



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You'll quickly find, as we did, that to meaningfully address our challenges we need to go "upstream from news" to where the water is shallow and more navigable to the themes of building trust, centering solutions and equipping engagement.

dedicated to growing informed and engaged communities. The Information Ecosystem Map is a first step into building a regional support network for both news organizations as well as community members to build trust, center solutions, and drive action at a local level.

This report seeks to lay out a case for expanding the definition of news and information by:

- ▶ Documenting existing news and information sources, in both traditional (newspaper, TV, etc.) and informal formats (primarily social media)
- ▶ Examining sentiments of our region about the current state of the news and information space
- ▶ Synthesizing reflections from community audiences about new ways for news and information to meet community needs

Our hope is that this work:

- ▶ Starts a different conversation about local news and information in Central PA – about what our sources are and why we need them;
- ▶ Highlights gaps and opportunities in the local news and information ecosystem to inform future innovation and investment; and
- ▶ Invites the community – audiences, journalists, funders, grassroots groups, innovators – to help co-create the future of news at the local level.

Our challenges are similar to those unfolding across the country, but we also possess unique opportunities to address them.

You'll quickly find, as we did, that to meaningfully address our challenges we need to go "upstream from news" to where the water is shallow and more navigable to the themes of building trust, centering solutions and equipping engagement.

Emergent findings:

- ▶ **A focus on building trust** between communities and news, but also between communities themselves can make societies more informed and engaged.
- ▶ **Centering solutions**, rather than problems allows communities to develop stronger sense of place and cut through pessimism and cynicism.
- ▶ **Equipping people to take action** can create stronger bonds between community members that can develop collective solutions to local issues.
- ▶ **Expanding the definition of news** to include these opportunities can position news and information sources to be more sustainable and relevant to communities.

We're grateful you're on this journey with us, and look forward to working with you to imagine and build a sustainable model for local news in Central PA.



Press Forward is a nationwide coalition investing more than \$500 million to strengthen local newsrooms, close longstanding gaps in journalism coverage, advance public policy that expands access to local news, and to scale the infrastructure the sector needs to thrive.

Press Forward Central PA, launched in 2024, is lead by The Steinman Foundation and The Steinman Institute to develop local philanthropic support for local news and information.

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Introduction

When does information become news?

When we asked the average person in Central PA “where they get their local news”, people first reference a mix of newspapers and television broadcasts. Most respondents struggle to find a clear answer. When we asked them “how they find out about their community, however, the answers came more freely, and the results became more diverse.

For many in communities across the country, the concept of “local news” is not front of mind, yet we are bombarded with information constantly from social media, friend groups, and influencers about the world around us – local to global. Today, our local news may be from a traditional newspaper, or it may be from a local WhatsApp chat; you might see coverage of a local event from a news broadcast at 5pm, which you may have learned about hours earlier from your neighborhood Facebook group.

As information consumption habits continue to shift away from legacy sources (many of which are increasingly imperiled due to traditional journalism’s broken business model), we believe it is important to understand the current landscape of local news and information: what sources exist, where the gaps are, and what new forms of information-sharing are emerging in their place. By better understanding the ways community members are learning and sharing information, we can develop new and invest in effective alternative means to empower people with information to be engaged community members.

An “engaged community member” may prompt images of voting booths and public meetings. That’s not the full story however. People can also be engaged by doing simple things like connecting with their neighbors, getting involved in things they care about, and enriching their sense of belonging. It is this engagement that creates thriving communities, and news and information sources power that engagement.



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As an opening invitation to this collective understanding, The Steinman Institute for Civic Engagement, operating lead for Press Forward Central Pennsylvania, has developed the region's first Information Ecosystem Map. This map combines data gathered from legacy news sources and documentation of new informal/digital news sources from across the 19-county region that encompasses the Press Forward Central PA network. In addition to surveys of and interviews with information sources, this report integrates reflections and insights from audience listening sessions conducted with key groups that are less engaged with traditional news, including rural, young, religious, Republican voting populations and BIPOC audiences about how they get their local news, and how they would change it if they could.

Why an ecosystem, and why a map?

In recent decades as local newspapers have declined precipitously across the country, various ecological terms have arisen to describe the information options available. “News deserts” refer to areas where there are no local news sources; “news jungles” are areas where there are many, often competing sources.

An **ecosystem** is about more than just weather or foliage, however. For an ecosystem to truly thrive, there must be symbiosis between plant life, animal life, climate and more to create harmony. If one part suffers, it impacts the others. For that reason, examining the ecosystem of news and information, especially at a critical moment of change, requires us to look beyond traditional sources, and even beyond the sources themselves to the communities they serve: the wants, needs, and ideas they are generating that can provide fertile ground for collaboration.

The result is a **map**. But a map is only useful if you are going somewhere.

We have the unique opportunity to nurture alternatives to the status quo and use Lancaster and other communities in Central PA as laboratories for learning and impact.



“News deserts” refer to areas where there are no local news sources; “news jungles” are areas where there are many, often competing sources.



This report is a starting point—an invitation to contribute, expand, and co-create the information ecosystem we need.

In other words, we are going somewhere: we're learning from our community and best practices far and near. Through this process, we have developed some ideas and insights for recommendations on the path forward, but we believe that the community itself will generate the best paths forward. In this map, you'll see observations and insights that can guide recommendations. More importantly, you'll see opportunities to join in this work.

An open invitation

Where we go with the map is actively up to us as a community, and as an ecosystem.

As with all things in the modern era, datasets are constantly changing, new trends are emerging, and habits are shifting. Our hope is that this map and report can serve as both a partial picture of where we stand in 2025, as well as a starting point for a new local conversation about how to create more connected, informed and engaged communities.

We present this as a living document operating with an open invitation for collaboration. The data presented is incomplete, and we need your help to expand it with community-sourced content to help tell a more complete story. Community input will inform The Steinman Institute Board of Managers, The Steinman Foundation, Press Forward Central PA, Press Forward National, and individuals who consume and value local news with insights about how to best invest philanthropic dollars in support of this work.

This report is a starting point—an invitation to contribute, expand, and co-create the information ecosystem we need.

Our Theory of Change

Why is reliable local news and information a pivotal ingredient to thriving communities?

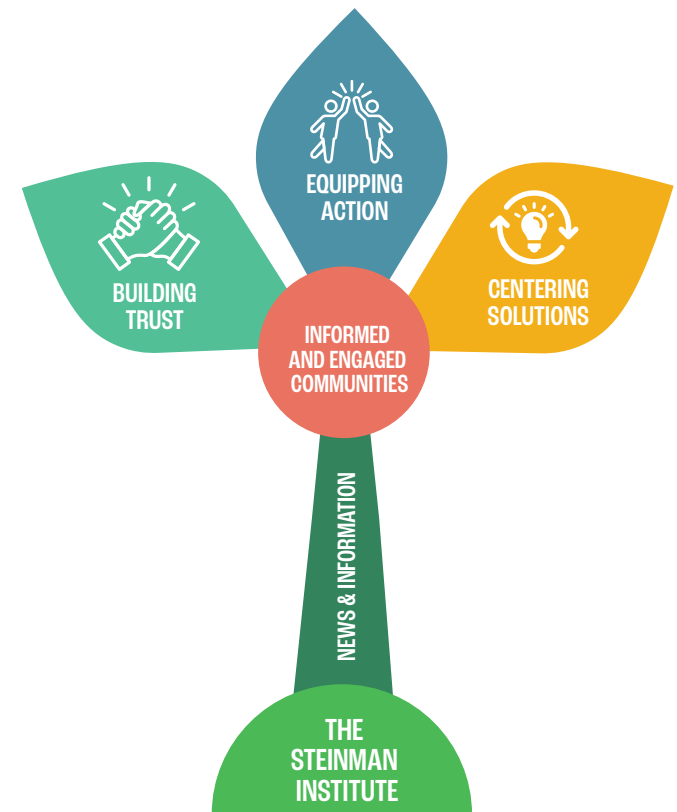
Local news and shared information help us connect, collaborate, and shape solutions to pressing issues together. It's everything from the results of your local high school football game, to the latest developments at your town hall, to the way you figure out your weekend plans with your friends; it's the way we learn what's happening in our neighborhood, connect with our neighbors, and hold people in power accountable to their promises.

For much of our community's history, newspapers and TV news were the predominant means of consuming information. But that, along with so many ways we engage with the world, has changed dramatically over the past 20 years.

The advertising dollars that paid for the newsrooms in the past are now flowing to technology giants like Google and Meta; large, multi-national corporations who have mined our data and perfected the art of feeding us content to capture our attention, manipulate our spending, keep us outraged, and maybe most importantly, do so at the expense of our sense of community.

Data of our region shows that social media – and particularly Facebook – is the primary news source for our community, closely followed by local, national and cable TV news options. Local newspapers or magazines (whether digital or printed) were used half as much as social media.

The entertainment and convenience keep many of us coming back to social media, but the consequences are profound: we have fewer reliable, community-based sources for information, we consume more information from national sources and miss local context, we get fewer good news stories in our communities that help us see examples of collaboration across difference, and algorithms deliver more news and information we agree with and fewer perspectives that differ from our own.





Instead of addressing these parts of a thriving community in isolation, we propose investing in community connection to strengthen a sense of place and belonging in concert with supporting news and information innovation to engage in the communities they serve to meet these needs.

Recent data of our region show that just 1 in 4 Central Pennsylvanians report caring “a lot” about local news, that same data shows fewer than 4 in 10 Central Pennsylvanian residents feel at least “somewhat” connected with their local community. Just 1 in 9 feels “completely connected”.

These factors contribute to documented community outcomes including increased polarization, reduced civic engagement, and less effective and less trusted public institutions. In short: local news and information keeps communities together.

This story of change is the same across the country, with an average of 2.5 newspapers closing each week, a pace that continues to accelerate.

We believe that reliable local news is a vital ingredient to helping Central PA residents feel connected to their communities, and able to exercise civic agency, but to get more people to care “a lot” about it, new approaches are needed

We believe the answers to this challenge are many. However they do not include focusing on the old ways of doing local news; to plant the same crops in inhospitable soil. Our communities have changed. The division, tension, and isolation around us have made agreement on a common understanding of facts about our community and world increasingly difficult. The way forward must respect that, and be about more than just the information we consume, and the people who provide it.

To reimagine our ecosystem, we believe we must go upstream from news to shallower water, to information before it becomes news. Upstream to where information is lived experience, personal connection, and curiosity about the ways we can create solutions for our community problems. By working at these intersections, we can nurture and re-thread civic connections that allow places and groups of people to thrive. Differences between us will still exist. But rather than seeking unity in our ecosystem, we can strive for what it truly needs to thrive: harmony.

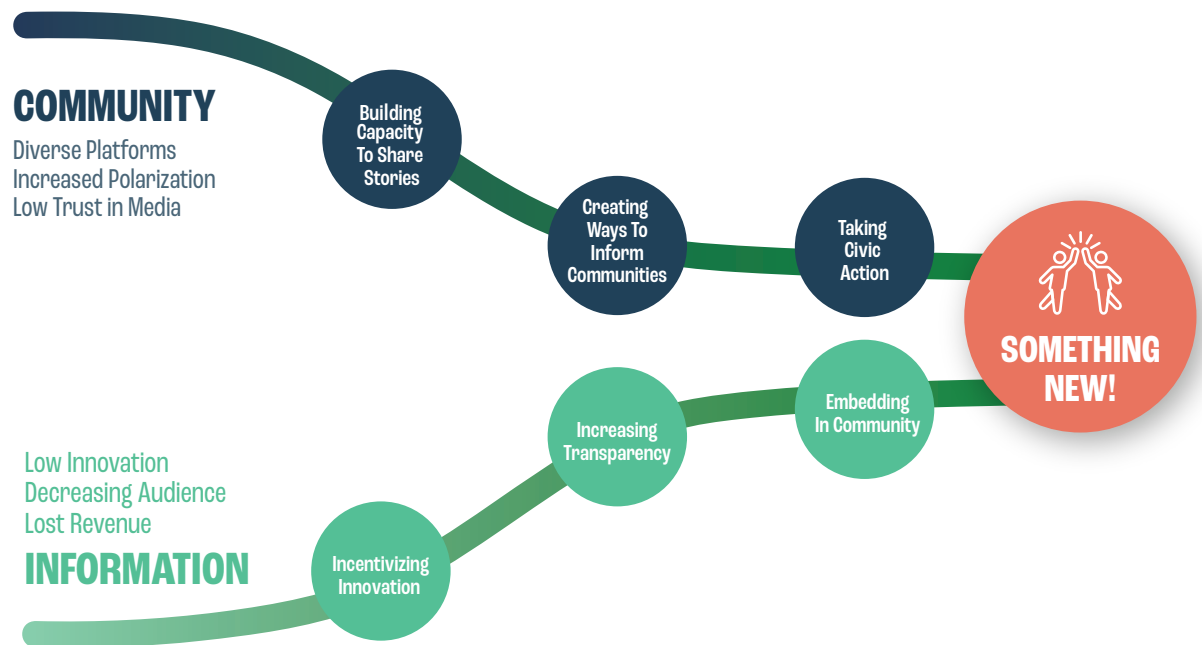


OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Unprecedented changes in how we get our news and information has increased the diversity of sources and speed of news. Audiences are overwhelmed by both the volume and negative tone of news. Traditional sources of news have often been slow to adjust to change leading to the decline or loss of many outlets. New voices (some credible, some not) are filling the gaps. The loss of shared sources of local news has eroded our sense of community and trust in each other and our institutions. Polarization has increased. New solutions are needed that leverage our assets and go beyond news as we've known it.

News and information sources have a key role to play in this shallower water, but require a different approach. We can expand the scope of local news to be the convener of rekindling community connection, to be a platform for building trust, and to be a launchpad for civic action.

Instead of addressing these parts of a thriving community in isolation, we propose investing in community connection to strengthen a sense of place and belonging in concert with supporting news and information innovation to engage in the communities they serve to meet these needs. By taking a full ecosystem approach, we can begin to heal, evolve and ultimately sustain a more engaged, informed, and harmonious community.



ECOSYSTEM MAPPING/LISTENING

A Process of Diverging and
Converging

Our approach: surveys and stories

Our goals in creating this Ecosystem Map were twofold:

- Create a snapshot of the existing ecosystem to understand the strengths, gaps and opportunities in it; and
- Synthesize qualitative reflections from community audiences into concrete recommendations.

This Information Ecosystem Map was developed through a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collections.

Through our process, Press Forward Central PA:

- Expanded on themes and learnings gleaned from a Steinman Institute commissioned funded analysis by SmithGeiger Group, which interviewed both general population and local news consumers in the 19-county region.



- Documented and surveyed legacy news and information sources in the 19-county region of Central Pennsylvania, discovering 110+ local legacy newspapers, television and radio stations.
 - The survey distributed to these publications included questions about newsroom size, coverage area and topic, growth, and aspirations for the future.
- Documented informal information sources in the same region, including Facebook neighborhood groups, Instagram accounts, Nextdoor groups, YouTube accounts, and more, discovering more than 200+ of these sources.
- An important note: this work focused primarily on Lancaster to start, where we are headquartered. As these sources are numerous and harder to identify, this is the first draft catalogue of nontraditional sources. The map facilitates the ability for community nominations of sources to be vetted and added going forward to build a more complete map over time.
- Conducted an audience survey of LNP | LancasterOnline readers, inquiring about the ways they get their news and information, as well as their preferences for content types
- Conducted a public survey distributed via in-person events and social media inquiring about the ways community members get news and information, as well as their preferences for content types
 - Conducted a sub-campaign of the same survey specifically targeting audiences who consume media such as Fox News, Joe Rogan, and other sources skeptical of mainstream media outlets.
- Held more than 150 data collection sessions, including one-on-one interviews, focus groups, listening sessions, and workshops to gather qualitative reflections, insights on the ways they get their news and information, and what kinds of new products they would be interested in using.
 - Sessions oversampled for select audiences, primarily rural, religious, and young (generation z and alpha) audiences.



The News and Information Ecosystem

Baseline data from SmithGeiger

In 2023-4 The Steinman Institute for Civic Engagement with WITF and LNP | LancasterOnline commissioned a community analysis of the Central Pennsylvania region from SmithGeiger Group. This study surveyed a representative sample of the region as well as active news consumers, including members, subscribers and users of WITF and LNP | LancasterOnline.

The survey was conducted over the course of three months and included more than 2,300 interviews of community members. These data serve as a baseline for news consumption and related civic engagement in the region.

Analysis of the data indicated:

- **Active news consumers are not representative of the general population**, and dramatically skew whiter, older, more educated, more civically active, and more politically left leaning.
- **Disconnection was evident, especially among non-news consumers.** Fewer than 4 in 10 Central Pennsylvanians felt at least “somewhat” connected with their local community, and just 1 in 9 feels “completely connected.”
- **Active news consumers were far more engaged in the local community than non-news consumers.** They were 73% more likely to vote in state or federal elections and more than twice as likely to donate to nonprofit organizations.
- The top two reasons that all people – news consumers and not – engage with their communities is because they think **it is important and that they want to be “part of the solution”** and the top two reasons they didn’t was because of time and money constraints.
- The **general population’s** highest news interests were about local news, happenings, crime, and lifestyle topics like food, health and nature, while **active news consumer** interests are more focused on local/regional/state/national news and politics, accountability of those in power, voting and democracy.



These data serve as a baseline for news consumption and related civic engagement in the region.

- **Social media dominates audience demand for finding out about local events.**
- **Social media – and particularly Facebook – is the primary news source for the general public.** Local newspapers or magazines (whether digital or printed) were used half as much as social media. Among active news consumers these statistics were flip-flopped: social media was utilized half as much as local newspapers and magazines.
- **Television still plays a critical role.** For all audiences, broadcast TV was the second most utilized platform for local news.
- Despite low levels of local news consumption, there is strong ideological support for the concept: **8 in 10 say it's a pillar of our democracy, and nearly 7 in 10 say local news makes them feel like they're part of the community.**

This data paints a picture of an information ecosystem that has a strong desire to become or stay informed and engaged, but is not being provided with tools that are meeting them where they are.

But what tools already exist? By taking a snapshot of the existing news and information region, we can determine what gaps and opportunities there are between populations and their preferences, and the ways that local news is being produced in Central Pennsylvania.

Information map of Central PA

The 19-county region of Central Pennsylvania surveyed is home to 3.2 million residents, varying widely in demographics. While the area features urban centers such as the cities of Harrisburg, Lancaster, and York, the majority of the region is suburban and rural.

Like much of the country, the region has experienced a marked shift in locally owned news sources, with many sources either decreasing frequency, as with the Patriot News in Dauphin County, merging with other news organizations in the case of LNP | LancasterOnline and WITF, or shifting towards national corporate ownership in the case of the York Dispatch and York Daily Record,

owned by Gannett, or closing altogether. We also see a few examples of new nonprofit news outlets, like Spotlight PA and PA Capital-Star.

Given the size of the data available, and our commitment to continuing to keep the data updated, the map is available as a digital tool [here](#).

Defining the ecosystem sources

Finding clear definitions of the ways our communities get and share information is becoming increasingly difficult. Currently, there is no universally utilized lexicon in this space. In fact, Press Forward has commissioned a taxonomy of the industry that is underway and is considering questions of ownership structure, audiences served, distribution, original content output, primary function, and critical information needs addressed.

For the purposes of this report, we have created working definitions to classify the forms of local news and information serving this region and are inviting a discussion with the community to refine and improve those definitions. As more universally utilized terminology is embraced by other funders and journalism support organizations, we will adjust accordingly.

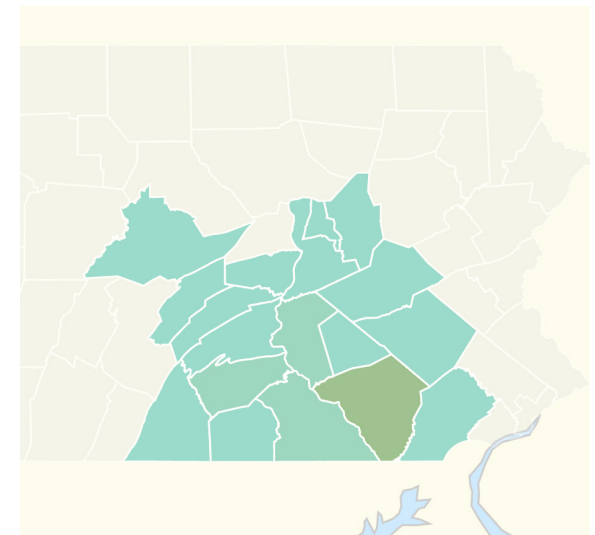
Traditional sources: sources of news and information that own their platform, publish a masthead with contact information, produce original content and predominantly adhere to professional journalistic standards.

Academic sources: institution-based publications, digital or print, that are produced by high school or post-secondary school students serving that student body.

Informal Sources: outlets that primarily utilize social media platforms, do not publish a masthead or share contact information, do not produce original content or may not adhere to professional journalistic standards.

As well, the lines between “news” and “information” are not always clear. We generally refer to reporting on current events, issues and people as “news,” and less time-sensitive and more broadly focused human interest content as “information.”

ECOSYSTEM MAP



County selection
Select an option x v

Newsroom type
Formal Informal Compare Newsrooms

Gettysburg Times Adams Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →	Berks Community Television (BCTV) Berks Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →	River Towns Bucks, Hunterdon, Mercer Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →
Centre Daily times Centre Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →	Daily Local News Chester Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →	Press Enterprise Columbia Information Ecosystem Data and Analysis See more →

In addition to the research conducted to aggregate existing sources, The Steinman Institute also distributed a survey to these legacy publications examining their newsroom size, their growth or decline, the challenges they face, and the goals they have as a news organization if they could have those constraints removed. The survey response was 30%, a response rate not unlike similar ecosystem mapping efforts across the country, as was the lack of participation from any non-locally owned news or radio, except for one outlet.

Our survey was based off the University of Maryland's Merrill College of Journalism's study, but because The Steinman Institute and Press Forward Central PA are new entities, we believe that this unfamiliarity with us suppressed response rates. We expect that with map publication and broader ecosystem engagement, over time we will build more robust data about news sources.

Where we were unable to engage with outlets, we combed publicly available data to discern ownership structure and depth of local and original content.

As a starting point, this map serves to create a baseline of legacy outlets in the region to track over time, and a robust start to evaluating the ever-evolving non-traditional sources of news and information. Both of these tools derived from the mapping can be a springboard for growth and collaboration for our region.

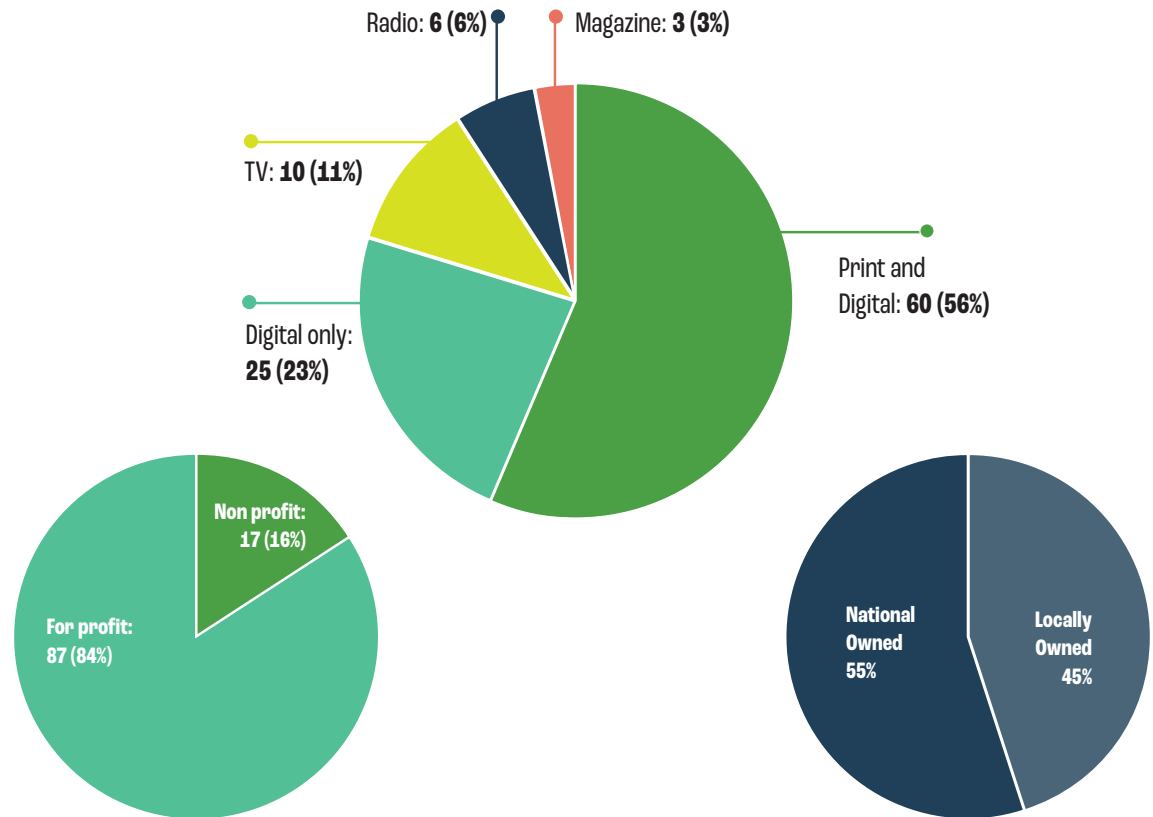


Total number of sources

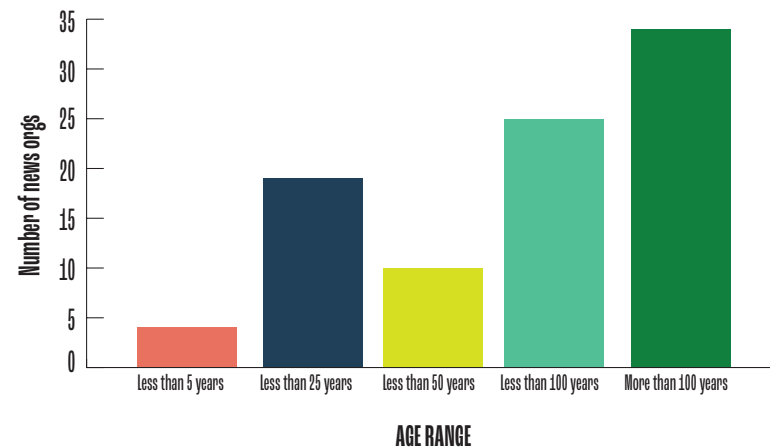
Type of News Source	Number
Traditional	105
Academic	97
Informal	200+

Sources by county

County	Number of News Sources
Lancaster	41
Dauphin	18
York	11
Franklin	8
Cumberland	7
Adams	6
Schuylkill	6
Centre	6
Lebanon	6
Berks	5
Perry	5
Mifflin	4
Juniata	4
Montour	3
Columbia	3
Union	3
Northumberland	2
Snyder	2



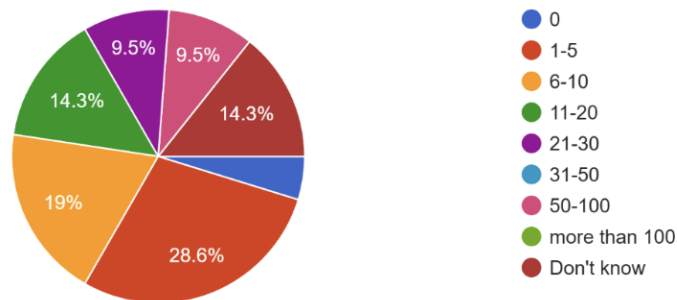
How long has each news organization been here?



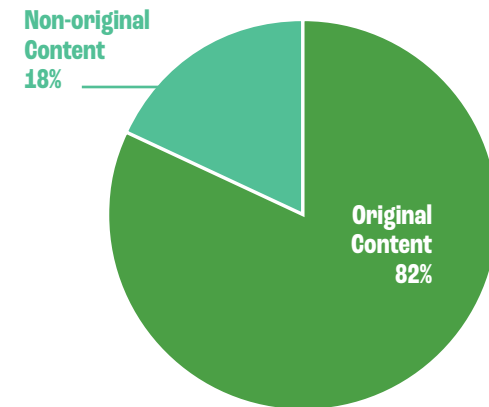
Newsroom size and needs in the News Ecosystem

How many total newsroom staff work at your organization?

21 responses



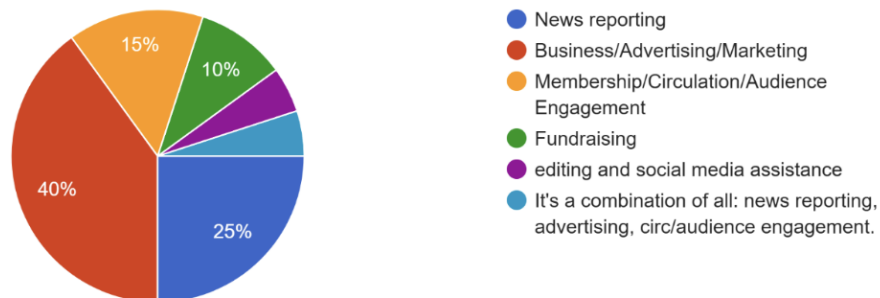
Original vs Non-original Content in the News Ecosystem



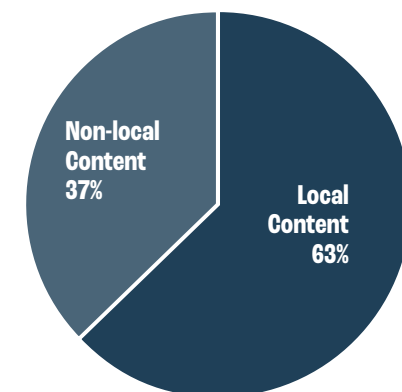
Original content is defined as content created by staff of news publication, whereas non-original is a reprint of third party content such as the AP.

What is the most important current staffing need for your organization?

20 responses



Local vs. Non-local content in the News Ecosystem



Local content is content that is produced about the specific area the news organization covers, whereas non-local content covers regional, state, or national issues.

Key Survey Takeaways

Though the data is limited, we can report several key takeaways from our survey and interviews with regional news outlets.

Relative stability:

76% answered that they have reduced staff or stayed the same in the past two years. Just over half (52%) of respondents said they plan to maintain the same staffing size in the coming year, while 38% said they were not sure.

Growing digital demand, but limited capacity:

Two thirds (66%) of survey respondents indicated an increase in their online audience in the last 12 months, with 46% reporting an increase of 11-25%. Despite this increase in demand, nearly half (48%) of these organizations employ a newsroom of less than 10 people and cite difficulties finding training to use new digital tools. The data were inconclusive regarding trends in print so it is unclear whether subscriptions are rising overall, or just transitioning from print to digital.

Opportunities and obstacles

The most consistent responses about what news organizations would do with more resources were to hire business/marketing/sales staff and hire additional reporters, as well as develop a pipeline for talent recruitment. Several news organizations highlighted a “missing middle” in staffing, where newsrooms are populated by fresh and inexperienced hires and veteran reporters who are nearing retirement. This tension is cited as leading to staffing being stretched and burnout.

Organizations with non-local ownership repeatedly noted the number of reporters as the key issue, with some outlets operating with just one reporter and others operating with not many more. Lack of local autonomy was also seen as an obstacle, with centralized operations like print production leading to minimal local input and early deadlines which lead to delayed news of less value.



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Newsrooms reported a strong interest and dedication to developing tools that deepen community involvement and efficiency, including things like:

- Content management services (CMS) software
- Customer relationship management (CRM) software
- Research tools to aid with things like archival search and legislation and policy
- Workflow tools to aid in circulation planning and productivity
- AI tools to assist with things like public meeting summaries
- Professional development in areas like sales, digital platform management and fundraising
- Audience engagement support

Investing in Newsletters

While the core product of many of the news organizations remains their daily publication/content production, many newsrooms reported focusing on daily newsletters to deliver better community engagement with strong returns on investment. This more specialized content could be an effective tactic to reconcile some of the coverage gaps cited by newsrooms, whether by geography, topic area, or demographic.

Potential in Partnership

Newsrooms consistently expressed interest in audience engagement, collaboration, content sharing, and opportunities to learn emerging best practices but cited limited capacity to take those steps on their own. Some news organizations that own multiple regional publications are already implementing a “local wire” service for their publications for content sharing, as well as some partnerships between other independent news organizations. This approach could be expanded to serve the larger ecosystem with support and facilitation.



In the ever-changing digital space, new information sources have emerged on platforms like Facebook, NextDoor and Reddit.

The informal space

In the ever-changing digital space, new information sources have emerged on platforms like Facebook, NextDoor and Reddit. In some cases, these sources exist to provide deeper levels of engagement on community issues where local news is already being produced, but in others, it serves as the primary news source for communities, particularly Facebook neighborhood groups.

At publication, we have identified more than three times as many information informal sources as news traditional sources, and it is likely higher by the time you are reading this.

Although they are all serving similar purposes—to keep a group of people informed about a given topic—there are key distinctions between them, as well as between them and more traditional news sources.

Specialization

While many groups are simply community pages for all things related to a specific town or city, many information sources are strictly for hyper-local content. These groups could cover geographic areas like individual neighborhoods of cities, school districts, or even across interest area in a region.

Town square vs. Town crier

Some groups are designed to be open forums for any to post, while some are largely one-way streets with a small group of admins or individuals are the primary voices and the group members are receiving the information.

Moderation:

While all social media platforms have a version of community standards, the ways in which they are implemented and the rigor with which administrators enforce these standards (as well as others they may require on their own), varies greatly. This can result in either an environment that is tightly regulated, or one which has a lot of spam and noise.



One man news aggregator

Jim McClure, a retired journalist, leverages Facebook to keep delivering local news, managing over 10 York County groups and cross-posting to 20 more. Building on the York Daily Record's digital legacy, he now fills a near full-time role sharing hyper-local content, fostering trust through parasocial connections and strengthening readers' sense of place. [Read more](#)

Duplication:

It is often the case in the region (specifically on NextDoor and Facebook) that there will be multiple groups established covering the same geographic region, or subset of people. This could be the result of differing social dynamics, or one group simply falling out of use. The result in an incomplete picture of the community depending on which group you are (or aren't) in.

A Darkening Forest:

While some groups on social networks are public, far more are private and can only be accessed by being approved by a moderator. Further, there are increasing trends online towards closed off, anonymous, and/or encrypted means of communicating across groups. On platforms like WhatsApp, Discord, Signal and more, communities are sharing vital information in their groups but it can only be accessed through specific invite codes. This makes it difficult to quantify or assess the breadth of these information sources.

Given these differences, it was almost impossible to compare these spaces in a uniform way. However, the continued emergence of these sources of information represent both an existing gap in information reach, as well as an opportunity to engage communities in new ways around their desire for reliable local news.



[Share feedback on this section](#)

Community contribution to the ecosystem

Elevating community voice

While examining the current state and public perception of information sources is important, to get a complete picture of the information ecosystem we must look to the ways the landscape is both changing—and needs to change—from the ground up.

What are the ways that members of communities are using—or not using—local news in their day to day lives? What are the ways that they wish they could better use it? Is local news even something that they consider as an important part of their community?

In order to address these questions, The Steinman Institute built on the baseline data from the Smith Geiger study and conducted surveys (distributed online), interviews (one on one conversations), listening sessions (attending a club/gathering or presenting to a group of people to gather feedback), and workshops (conducting an interactive idea generating process with a group of people), to gather qualitative reflections and stories that could expand and enrich the themes covered in the surveys, through storytelling and conversation. We also asked audience members where they sought out informal sources of news and information to better identify sources to include on the map.

At each of these sessions and in surveys online, Steinman Institute staff engaged in conversation with community members to discuss the places they get their local news and information, what they see as trusted sources of news locally, and what they'd like to see change about their local news sources

Survey takeaways

The Steinman Institute disseminated a survey summarizing many of the above themes via a link in LNP | LancasterOnline, through paid social media placement to general audiences, as well as a sub-campaign specifically targeting audiences that consume right-leaning news and media skeptical channels like Joe Rogan, etc.



One of the first key differentiators we used in responses was on the question of traditional vs informal news and information: we asked respondents to identify the primary source for finding out about their community. Of the 400 respondents, 66% identified newspaper (digital or print), radio or TV news as their primary source, while the rest of the respondents listed a more informal source such as social media, podcast, church, etc. This result validated the increased use of social media (primarily Facebook) in the SmithGeiger research of large sections of the region, as well as the differences in preference for content type.

While many themes were shared across these different populations (desire for convenience, interest in positive storytelling, etc.) the ways in which they would like their content delivered differed:

Theme	Respondents who use traditional sources	Respondents who use informal sources
Trust & Credibility	High value on fact-checking, concern over misinformation	Implicit trust in speed; less discussion of fact-checking
Access & Convenience	Concerns about logins, print/digital transition issues	Prioritize immediacy, mobile access, and ease of use
What they most want from their source	Stay informed about local government	Find out about local events
Positive Storytelling	Want uplifting stories that celebrate community good	Prefer engaging, entertaining, and shareable content (gamified, joyful)

Further, there was strong interest from respondents in qualitative questions about content that would help them take action and better connect with their community. When taken with the baseline SmithGeiger data which indicates low levels of civic connection, there emerges a clear opportunity for local news and information to meet a growing community need.



There was strong interest from respondents in qualitative questions about content that would help them take action and better connect with their community

Thematic Differences by Demographic Groups

At the end of the survey we asked respondents to provide optional demographic data. While roughly one third of the respondents declined to identify, we were able to identify trends and themes across various demographic groups using the data provided.

Race (where stated):

- Underrepresented racial groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, Latine, Mixed) (11%):
 - Emphasis on visibility and fairness: Suggestions like “more Black voices”, “profiles of underserved neighborhoods”, “justice-focused journalism”.
 - Stronger orientation toward bridge-building through dialogue, as well as mentions of needing “more perspectives at the table” and “spaces where people can listen.”
- White or not stated (89%):
 - Often emphasized objectivity, “just the facts”, and reducing partisanship.
 - Some expressed skepticism about formats that involve opinion-based content or polarization.

Generation

- Younger generations (Millennials, Gen X, and Gen Z) (44%) tended to suggest creative formats (e.g., “Instagram Q&A takeovers”, “interactive story maps”, “text alerts”) and sometimes embraced AI-assisted tools, but also warned about overuse.
- Older generations (Boomers, Silent) (56%) leaned toward in-person connection, letter-style formats, and concern over civility and trust.



Community Listening Sessions

From school classrooms to rotary clubs, from Young Professionals of Color meetings to the PA Farm Show, The Steinman Institute conducted more than 150 sessions, interviews, and conversations with community members from across the region. In as many cases as possible, we sought to meet groups where they were already gathering, rather than convene groups ourselves, to reduce dynamics that might result in less authentic feedback. Groups and populations were prioritized in rural communities, faith communities, young people, and the intersections therein.

These listening sessions were as wide ranging in format as the audiences we sought to engage with, but all centered on both identifying the ways the community members get their local news, as well as developing a broader understanding of the wants and needs of the audience for news products.

Local snooze

The divisions between traditional and informal information consumers both in surveys and while in conversation and dialogue with community clearly indicate that addressing local news in itself was insufficient to tackle the issues facing the information ecosystem.

When engaging with community members, the conversations often became bogged down in specific, local context: if we were having a conversation in Lancaster, the solutions suggested ended up being about small ways the local newspaper should change (usually lowering prices, adding more content or adding more national coverage). If we were holding a session in York, it would be about existing York-based local news sources providing a new product or beat. This was not unhelpful feedback but it did not generate insights for how to build more sustainable models for local news.



These listening sessions were as wide ranging in format as the audiences we sought to engage with, but all centered on both identifying the ways the community members find get their local news, as well as developing a broader understanding of the wants and needs of the audience for news products.

When we engaged with less connected or media skeptical populations, the answers came even less freely, as it was clear local news was not on their minds at all, or worse, was dismissed because it was not trusted enough to engage with.

De-branding local news

In a series of experiments with our listening sessions we began focusing on an expanded definition of local news, speaking instead about what supported community members in going about their days, and being informed and engaged members of their communities.

Instead of asking about local news, we started asking community members things like:

How do you find out about what is going on in your community?

Are there gaps in that space you'd like to be filled?

What kinds of events or activities do you like to participate in your neighborhood?

What's something you want to see changed in your community, and what information would you need to make that happen?

How often do you interact with people in your community? How often do you interact with people who have a different worldview than you? Does that work for you or do you want something different?

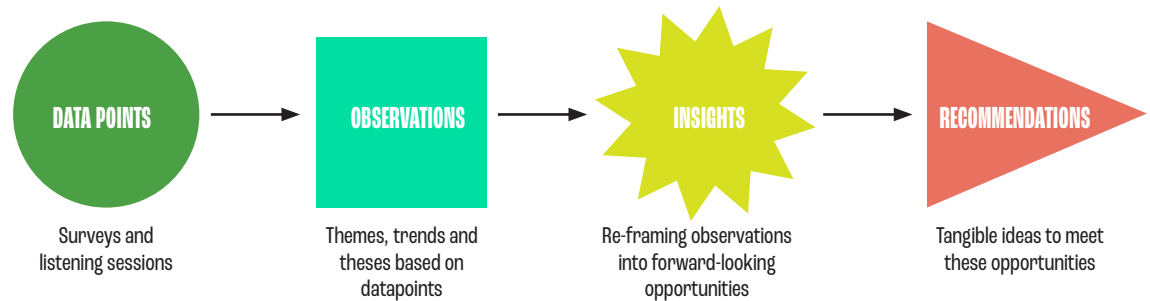
This approach was generative enough to begin to paint a picture of the needs of an information ecosystem more free of from constraints of existing sources or products. And the picture it painted showed recurring gaps in our ecosystem.

Following the dozens of community conversations, workshops, and interviews, we began the process of synthesizing the reflections and qualitative data into ways to move our information ecosystem forward.





This process of synthesis helps us come up with insights that might have been missed by a traditional survey.



Observations into Insights

Using the qualitative and quantitative information gathered, we underwent a process of data synthesis, looking for common themes to turn into **observations**. Some of these observations were fairly straightforward: things like paywalls keep certain audiences from engaging with local news and therefore less connected with some parts of civic life. Some observations however, required synthesizing different data points and perspectives to tell a larger story, such as an overlap in the reasons that older people love their local television news, and younger people gravitate towards influencers and content creators (even though both might look down their nose at the other for that reason): they are both looking for human connection and parasocial relationships to be presented along with their news, which oftentimes print journalism doesn't provide.

This process of synthesis helps us come up with insights that might have been missed by a traditional survey, and even address survivorship bias, in which ideas are generated using the data that created the desired outcome, rather than the full picture of data, which could be telling a very different story. In our process, an insight re-frames observations that can show us a way forward out of the reality of the observation and into the future of a recommendation.

From these myriad observations, we consolidated them into four themes and created actionable insights. From there, we are soliciting community feedback about drafted recommendations to put those insights into practice through pilots.

The Four Themes

1. Breaking News: Model

OBSERVATION: The business model for local news is broken, but the value it provides is not. There is a larger awareness gap about this than ever before.

Former revenue sources are declining, reinforcing downward trends of shrinking newsrooms and less content reaching smaller audiences. Many traditional news sources still have an observational posture, which doesn't inspire innovation or drive to sell their value proposition and grow new revenue sources by embedding themselves more deeply in communities. Audiences for traditional news skew older, whiter and more affluent, with a preference for print products, while print is far more costly than digital.

Furthermore, perceptions of bias, lack of transparency, and coverage gaps contribute to distrust and disinterest in local news products. Add to this the tension that local news sources are more rigorous (and thus slower) than social media, while social platforms have trained audiences to expect reporting to come for free and be instantaneous, even though most reliable information shared on social media originates from local reporting. When these services are diffused through social media and other avenues, many community members don't knowingly experience the day-to-day relevance of local news.

INSIGHT:

News organizations have an opportunity to reposition themselves in the community: with products, platforms, audiences and revenue.

Where this is working:

Texas Tribune and Salt Lake City Tribune

In two very different geographic and cultural ecosystems, local news is growing. The Salt Lake Tribune and the Texas Tribune are both nonprofit newsrooms (though Salt Lake was the first private enterprise to convert to nonprofit)



Feeling deserted in a news jungle.

Representing Narvon, PA, a town of 62 on the Lancaster-Chester County line, Becky and her friend Kathy are technically covered by local news. They subscribe to LNP | LancasterOnline and a weekly circular, but living closer to Coatesville means key issues in their community go unreported. As Becky puts it, “I only see my community in print once or twice a year.” [Read more](#)



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MICHELLE JOHNSON



The ordinary work

In much of the Press Forward Central PA region, Christian faith communities play a central civic role: often serving as key news sources through sermons, bulletin boards, and prayer walls. Their leaders navigate the challenge of guiding diverse congregations, fostering harmony through authenticity, understanding, and love. What lessons can we draw from them? [Read more](#)

who have seen their revenue, subscribers, and reach grow year over year by leveraging a diverse strategy of donor cultivation, community engagement, and product innovation. Despite covering large areas, both of these newsrooms maintain lean operations of less than 100 employees, and under \$20 in budget and expanding footprints. [Read more](#)

2. Bridging Difference to Foster an Ecosystem:

OBSERVATION: People are divided locally, but shaped by national narratives.

It's no secret that our communities are facing high levels of polarization, whether that is along the lines of race, politics, age, culture, economics, geography and more. While these differences are real, the breakdown in deliberation and civil discourse between communities that represent these views are largely being framed in national contexts and reinforced by national information sources and algorithms that limit the information and perspectives we see. We have fewer spaces (both on and off line) that invite, encourage and facilitate engaging across difference. This creates a lack of common understanding in our communities of facts that shape our world.

Even when speaking to audiences who preferred local TV news, we observed that names and call signs followed their preferences and perceptions of bias. Community members who identified as conservative and distrustful of mainstream media preferred FOX43 (our local FOX affiliate), and/or viewed WGAL (our NBC affiliate) as biased, even on local issues.

And when there are less and less outlets of trusted local news, the result is an increasing sense of isolation from civil discussion about important issues impacting communities. Respondents in the SmithGeiger research indicated that 1 in 5 Central PA residents never discuss politics face-to-face with their community, despite voting rates remaining strong. This signals a disconnect between local civic connection, and opportunities to experience it as a community.

**INSIGHT:**

Quantum Civics: in order to increase trust in local information, we need to first increase trust in each other.

For a quick detour to help us see a path forward, let's turn to everyone's favorite subject: physics. In "classical" physics, big objects like cars and planets follow one set of rules: things move in clear, predictable ways. But tiny things, like atoms and even smaller particles, follow a totally different set of rules, we call this "quantum" physics. The same goes for public life: at the national level, issues feel overwhelming, chaotic, and divided. But when you zoom in to the local level, things get more grounded: people know each other, problems feel more real and solvable, and there's more space for conversation and collaboration. The scale changes the rules—and the opportunities—for civic harmony. We call it quantum civics.

When issues are stripped of polarizing labels and put in local context, there are more opportunities to humanize the holders of these views and practice conversation to find common understanding. Yet there are fewer spaces in communities for this to happen than ever, whether it's in a club, a cafe, or a church group. The previously referenced distrust in local news feeds into this fissure, resulting in virtually no universal or shared sources of local information, and very limited (literal) common ground for interactions and experiences to happen across difference.

When we can break divisions down to the local level, we can work to facilitate understanding across difference and use that common understanding to create more informed communities which can solve real local issues. This is a role that local news and information can play in communities.

Where this is working:

Braver Angels is a volunteer-driven nationwide organization focused on bridging the political divide at the local level, where local chapters host events that foster dialogue across difference. The Braver Angels Sacramento Alliance piloted an effort called "Walk a Mile in My News" to break people out of their media silos by getting them to read articles from the other side of the political divide get to know someone who appreciates those articles. [Read more](#)



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In one of our interviews, the former manager of a local TV news station told us “good news doesn’t have to be happy news.” It may sound counterintuitive, but it’s true.

3. Dooming the Doom Scroll

OBSERVATION: The dominance of bad news in information spaces is leading to burnout and disconnection.

The most common reason why people we spoke with said that they don’t follow local (or national) news in our interviews and listening sessions centered on bad news.

“It’s so depressing I can’t even turn it on anymore,” admitted one PA Farm Show go-er to us, “it’s just crime, corruption, and people yelling at each other.”

While it’s the duty of local news to publish the stories of the communities around them, it’s also a well-known truth that anger and outrage is an engagement tool, and the generations of news producers following the credo of “if it bleeds it leads” has led many away from news entirely. In the best-case scenario, an onslaught of bad news leads to disconnection and disengagement from news. In the worst case however, it can lead to distrust in our neighbors, our communities, and in the institutions that keep all of it together.

But the opposite of bad news isn’t always good news. Tune in to evening broadcast news and you will surely see at least one heartwarming story of human kindness or generosity; but why are community the news stories of real-life consequence to communities (safety, policy, etc.) so often negative?



INSIGHT:

News you can use: information about the ways our community is working well can help build civic connection and trust. And that news should flow both ways.

In one of our interviews, the former manager of a local TV news station told us “good news doesn’t have to be happy news.” It may sound counterintuitive, but it’s true. Even if the story may result in making you “happy”, the core of good news could be focused less on isolated experiences and more on showing ways our community is working well: stories of collaboration to solve problems, pro-actively seeking out ideas working to address issues that could use a larger platform, and

engaging communities in active discussions about solutions, rather than problems.

Many local news sources do this to a limited extent, but baking this into a philosophical approach for a news organization would be a shift away from “admiring problems” towards a coverage approach that would prioritize centering solutions in support of stronger communities.

Communities also need stronger tools to tell their own stories, whether on their own terms or in coordination with local news sources. “We’d love to tell more positive stories, but you should see the press releases we get,” said the same local news manager. “Every day we need to make decisions about who to cover and whether it’s worth it to get a crew out, and they don’t even have ‘who’ ‘what’ ‘when’ ‘where’ in there.” Providing organizations, individuals, and businesses with ways to more effectively tell their positive stories can help both local news sources gather better content, and content and spread information in communities that can support positive civic life.

Where this is working:

Mississippi Free Press is a nonprofit newsroom devoted to going beyond partisanship and publishing solutions journalism. They focus on stories that profile solutions to challenges and go steps further to facilitate engagement that encourages and equips people to get involved. [Read more](#)



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Building the perfect voter guide (with post-its)

Did you do your voter homework? How can we help? We spoke with a group of new and first-time voters in Lancaster about what they need to create the perfect cheat-sheet for election day. While legacy news and other organizations often print county-wide voter guides, giving community members the ability to dream up and customize new features for the ways they can be better civically engaged was a powerful exercise (and we even got some new ideas).

[Read more](#)

4. From Information to Action

OBSERVATION: Information is difficult to turn into meaningful action.

Even though there are important differences between audiences that consume local news and those that don't, both groups of people list their number one reason for getting involved in their communities as wanting to "be part of the solution." Yet a common refrain from our interviews was that when people struggle to find data and understanding about public institutions and community needs—combined with a deep sense of overwhelm by so much bad news—it breeds disengagement, resignation and even apathy about our shared challenges, even at the local level.

Despite our unprecedented access to information through the internet, social media and artificial intelligence, finding a navigable path forward on civic engagement has become a confusing and isolating experience for many. The availability of data and information at the hyper-local level is inconsistent across communities: while some borough or township websites may keep their websites accurate and up to date, others do not. Further, declines in newsrooms across the country have led to less coverage of municipal issues, like township supervisor meetings, school board meetings, and other areas that have profound impact on the day to day lives of communities.

In focus groups, we heard that even more civically-engaged people have to overcome the general feeling that local government is "boring." Participants said they need to know how to connect the dots but showing how government or community organizations help and fix things.

INSIGHT:

Building civic joy: We can combine information access with civic engagement to equip agency.

When people are motivated to make change in their community, they are often operating from a place of anger or frustration. Anger is a strong force for change and doesn't have to be a negative one, but when anger is experienced in isolation, it can exacerbate many of the issues with distrust that have led to disengagement in our community. Instead, we can strive to create civic joy: the sense of satisfaction and agency that comes when community members can meaningfully engage, and to do it with others.

We learned that community members need information about how much of local government works and the issues public organizations are positioned to address. People we spoke with also look for easy on-ramps to connecting with neighbors and other members of society around that information.

In many communities, social media groups and local clubs can serve as the convening place for people motivated to take action, and local news outlets provide the data necessary to keep people informed about the issues. However, for many of the reasons addressed in the informal information source mapping, the increasing toxicity and fragmentation/duplication of online spaces, as well as the decline in local coverage from news sources erodes civic engagement tools.

Local news and information sources have a unique opportunity to respond to these needs and reposition themselves as conveners and resources for people hungry to experience civic joy.

Where this is working:

CivicLex, a nonprofit organization in Lexington, Kentucky hosts multiple events and programs focused on facilitating civic engagement in their community.

"On the Table" was a key part of their 2023 Lexington Comprehensive Planning process that facilitated small group gatherings of residents to eat together and have a conversation about how the city is growing and changing, and contribute their input into the comprehensive planning process. [Read more](#)



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Informed, Engaged, and In-Person

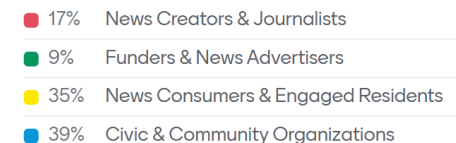
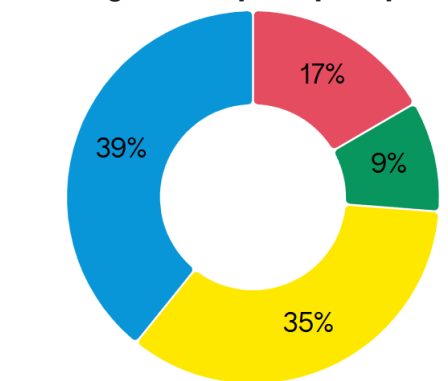
With the completion of the data gathering and synthesis, on May 19, 2025, more than 200 community members (former listening session participants, local news creators, civic organizations, and more) joined The Steinman Institute in a co-building session. At the session, groups participated in facilitated conversations about the Institute's approach, the report so far, as well as developing and prioritizing potential ideas informed by the insights to turn into pilots.

The ideas discussed by the group:

- **Central PA Media Partnership:** convening newsrooms for trust-building and collaboration
- **Dialogue Across Divides:** structured dialogue and faith-based civic influence
- **Targeted Trust-Building Efforts:** campaigns to create a shared sense of community
- **Lancaster In Common:** a coalition of businesses and orgs that can highlight what we share across differences
- **Stories that Share Civic Joy:** highlighting community collaboration and uplifting stories
- **Reimagining Story Submissions:** simplifying and democratizing how the public contributes stories
- **Investing in News:** competitions and invitations to fund community-driven stories
- **Solutions Circles:** convening neighbors to elevate solutions and provide seed funding to launch
- **Neighbor Network:** moderated digital space for neighbors to share, connect, and take action
- **Civic Data Dashboard:** tool for residents to more easily access local civic info
- **Civic Navigators:** trusted messengers helping residents take action
- **Equipping the Next Generation:** efforts to engage youth in media and civic literacy

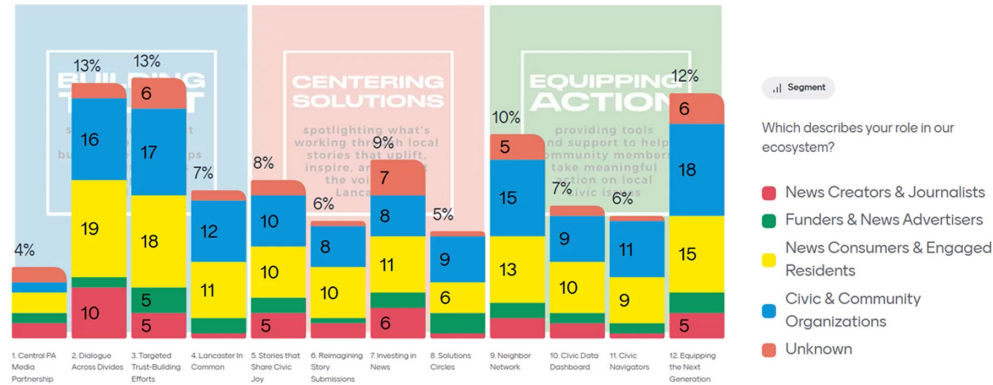


Percentage of event participants per sector



Imagine you were funding these different ideas...

Which ideas could make the biggest impact?



A focus on community connectedness

In small groups, event attendees self-selected into table discussions about their preferred ideas in three rounds. Each round focused on a different stage of an idea to help generate a flow from conception to action.

Round 1: What is the heart of this idea – and how could it realistically take root in Lancaster?

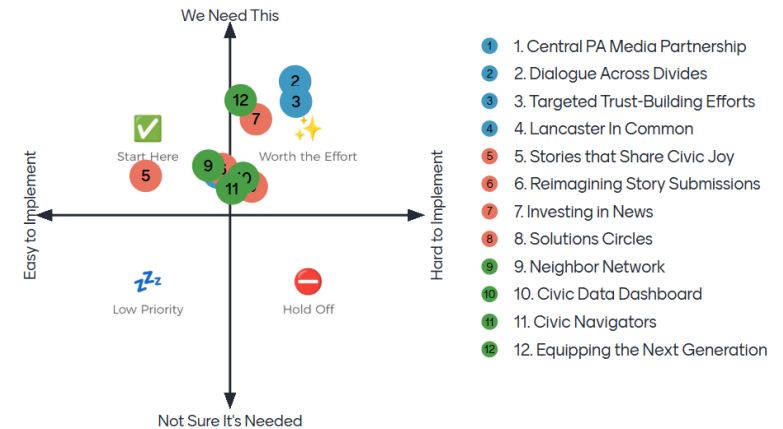
Round 2: What would it take to make this idea more impactful and viable? What needs to be further tested, prototyped, or strengthened?

Round 3: What are the next wise steps for this idea? What is one way you could contribute or one invitation you could make to others?

After the small table discussions, we invited participants to vote for the ideas that they would like to see piloted in the community, giving each user six votes to use towards the 12 ideas that they think would have the biggest impact.

The results of the poll show a clear preference amongst attendees for initiatives that focus on community connectedness: bridging difference, creative experiences to build trust across communities, as well as equipping the next generation.

Which ideas are most needed and achievable?



In addition to ranking preferences, we asked participants to score each idea on two factors: whether they believed the idea was needed in the community (higher score = more needed), and whether they thought the idea would be easy to implement (higher score = harder to implement).

Again, the ideas with the most momentum behind them, efforts meant to build trust and connection with residents, as well as efforts to equip the next generation with civic and media literacy scored highest on priority, while only having modest difficulty associated (though they are the highest difficulty scores as well).

With the data collected in the event, we believe more than ever that going upstream from traditional news towards efforts that can re-thread our community's civic fabric is both an area that has high potential for news and information to support, as well as momentum and interest from residents.

View more from the event:

[Recap Podcast](#)
[Notes Summary](#)

Conclusion & Invitation into Engagement

Through data collection, community listening, and insight synthesis, we have taken a vital first step in mapping and understanding Central Pennsylvania's evolving information ecosystem. What emerges is not just a snapshot of how local news is consumed—or avoided—but a layered narrative of disconnection and potential. While traditional models of local news are struggling to meet the needs of a diversifying and digitally fragmented public, communities are expressing a deep desire to be informed, connected, and part of shared solutions.

The stories, statistics, and sentiments captured here underscore a crucial truth: our region is rich with people who want to be part of the solution, but lack clear, trusted pathways to do so. Whether through newsletters, neighborhood Facebook groups, or fledgling nonprofit outlets, the appetite for relevant, resonant local information remains strong. The opportunity for local news, both established and emerging, is to meet that appetite with new forms of engagement, storytelling, and collaboration built with community trust.

Some quick ways you can join the work started in this report:

Help us further build the map

We know that we have only just scratched the surface of datapoints to help community members find out where information is shared. If you see a source that should be included but isn't yet there, please let us know by submitting it [here](#).

Pitch a solution

We have some ideas and recommendations for things to support and pilot going forward, but we believe the majority of impactful solutions will come from the community. Community members can stay informed about emerging grant and partnership opportunities [here](#).



What supports currently exist for local news and information in Central PA

As an industry that was self-sufficient prior to the massive shifts of the past 20 years in advertising revenue, the work of journalism support organizations (JSOs) and funders is still in relative infancy.

Industry groups like PA NewsMedia Association, academic institutions like Duquesne and Temple, and funders like the Lenfest Institute, The Steinman Foundation and Berks County Community foundation have provided critical support to news organizations in our region and are continuing to evolve to meet the need.

Join a pilot project

From these buckets of insights will come recommendations that for concrete grant investments, co-signed by community. We need members of our community who are dedicated to helping to make these ideas a reality. Sign up to keep be part of the process here.

Support your local information source(s)

The average age of a traditional news source in the Central PA region is nearly 80 years old. That means that for many of the people reading this report, there have been reliable, locally owned news and information sources working to keep their communities informed and engaged. While the road ahead is uncertain, it certainly starts with supporting the tools that exist now while you still can.

The ecosystem map, survey findings, and qualitative insights presented here are not meant to be final answers. They are designed as an invitation: to journalists and newsrooms to reimagine their roles; to funders and civic leaders to invest strategically in building community trust and capacity; and to everyday Central Pennsylvanians to see themselves not just as consumers of information, but as co-creators of a healthier civic culture.

Our future will be shaped not by nostalgia for what local news used to be, but by our collective imagination of what it can become. Together, we can move upstream toward a model of news and information that is participatory, pluralistic, and powered by community trust. We envision a Central Pennsylvania where reliable local information strengthens social ties, fosters belonging, and equips residents to act with agency on issues that matter.

We hope this report serves as both a foundation and a rallying cry. Together, let's build upon it to forge a new era of a connected, informed, and civically engaged region.

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