Local News and Community Resiliency in Appalachia

How media institutions can strengthen communities by empowering individuals, promoting inclusive dialog, and seeking new solutions to problems.

By Michael Clay Carey, Ph.D.
Abstract

This study examines the ways local news organizations in rural Appalachia may better serve communities. Through interviews with 23 current and former journalists, community development professionals, and activists who work in rural Appalachia, the study identifies several actions and habits associated with “good” journalism in rural communities: the provision of critical local information, the pursuit of solutions to local problems, and an inclusive, accessible approach to news coverage. Using those themes as a foundation, the study argues for an institutional approach to local news in rural communities, in which news organizations help facilitate open discussions of community issues and create opportunities for the development of bridging and bonding social capital. The study considers factors that may deter news organizations from acting as community institutions, including ownership, news routines, and communication infrastructure, and it makes recommendations for news organizations, individual journalists, community members, and policymakers interested in strengthening rural journalism.
Introduction

The study of local news systems is, at its heart, the study of democratic interaction. Media and communication are essential for participation in civic life, and the presence of news and community information can help individuals develop the efficacy they need to become active community members. However, research has shown that the structures that facilitate mass communication are not evenly spread. Contraction and consolidation of print media – still the most reliable source for hyperlocal news in most U.S. communities – have challenged many rural communities. As local newspapers have closed their doors and as regional metropolitan news organizations have reduced the sizes of their coverage and distribution areas, residents outside of urban centers increasingly find themselves with fewer traditional options for vetted news and information.

The presence and availability of reliable, credible, and good local news and information is vital to all communities. This study is principally concerned with what good local news looks like in rural communities in Appalachia. Based on interviews with 23 journalists, activists, media advocates, and community development professionals in the region, the report proposes a series of traits associated with local news outlets that serve their communities the best, and acknowledges particular information needs in Appalachia – a region burdened with significant economic, social, and environmental inequality as a result of its history of resource extraction. The traits of good journalism identified by interview participants orbit a central theme: the idea that local news organizations must orient (or reorient) themselves not first and foremost as businesses concerned with generating profit and continuing to exist, but rather as community institutions responsible for fostering engagement, responsibility, and leadership oriented around community development – understood broadly here as “a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems.” The best practices described in this report include the provision of basic information needs, a willingness to incorporate diverse sets of voices in news coverage, and a willingness to challenge local institutions when they operate counter to the needs of their constituents.

Previous studies of rural communities in Appalachia have illustrated the ways that local news organizations in the region often fail to contribute to, and sometimes actively impede, efforts that could lead to community change and resiliency. Some of those failures are products of economic and social factors
that are especially pronounced in Appalachia. Others are failings that plague news organizations all over the world. Interview participants here emphasized the need for local news organizations to be accessible to the public, to include diverse voices, and to provide the critical information that individuals need to participate in civic life. More broadly, they recognized the need for news organizations in distressed communities to view themselves as institutions for community development – an identity that creates certain social obligations for editors, publishers, and owners.
“Media Deserts,” “Ghost Newspapers,” and Local Journalism in Rural Communities

Ready access to credible, reliable information is a cornerstone of healthy communities. Research has demonstrated that the loss of local newspapers, for example, has negatively impacted government bodies’ abilities to borrow money for public projects and civic engagement, and has contributed to the increasing polarization of U.S. politics. Government officials have associated diminished local news reporting with increased partisanship in local government and fewer opportunities to consider alternative viewpoints. As COVID-19 and the coronavirus spread in the United States in early 2020, the importance of local news became even more clear. In a poll conducted in the United States in April 2020, 23% of those surveyed said they paid more attention to pandemic-related news in local outlets than in national outlets; another 61% said they followed national news and local news about the virus equally. In a separate survey in June, participants reported having more confidence in the credibility of local news about the pandemic than in national news. Although a 2018 survey showed that, for the first time, more Americans reported getting news from social media than from print newspapers, local television broadcast news and newspapers remain vital components of local news ecosystems in many communities in the United States. In a 2019 analysis of 663 local media outlets in 100 communities across the country, newspapers were found to produce nearly 60% of the original local news stories that filled a critical information need in a community (critical information needs include information about emergencies and risks, health, education, transportation systems, environment and planning, economic development, politics, and civic life) – more than local television stations, radio, and online-only outlets combined.

Despite their importance, local news organizations in many communities, like a number of their national counterparts, are crumbling. The number of newspaper reporters in the United States fell by 50% between 2008 and 2019, and total newsroom employment over that period fell by 23%. Cuts brought on by the financial strains of COVID-19 have exacerbated those declines. Writing in March 2020, Ken Doctor made note of the “terrible irony” that the “amount of time Americans spend with journalists’ work and their willingness to pay for it have both spiked, higher than at any point since Election 2016, maybe before. But the business that has supported these journalists – shakily, on wobbly wheels – now finds the near future almost impossible to navigate.” According to a study conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina, more than one-quarter of the newspapers in the United States disappeared.
between 2005 and 2020, “leaving residents in thousands of communities –
inner-city neighborhoods, suburban towns and rural villages – living in vast
news deserts,” geographic areas where there is little or no ready access to
local news and information. During that period, at least 1,800 communities
that were once served by at least one local news outlet found themselves
without one.17 Many more communities found themselves served by “ghost
newspapers” with “greatly diminished newsrooms and readerships.”18 In the
two years leading up to the publication of the 2020 report, 300 newspapers
closed, 6,000 journalism positions were eliminated, and newspaper
circulation fell by 5 million.19 Those losses are not evenly spread; the UNC
study suggested that news deserts tended to experience more poverty and
have lower average median incomes than the nation as a whole.20 “Massive
consolidation in the newspaper industry has shifted editorial and business
decisions to a few large corporations without strong ties to the communities
where their papers are located,” the report declared. “As profitability has
superseded journalism’s civic mission on many newspapers, trust in local
media has declined.”21

In rural communities, newspaper cutbacks, consolidation of radio ownership,
and broadband internet access issues have further challenged residents’
abilities to access credible local news that meets their needs.22 A 2015 study
of local newspapers found that 85% of all newspapers in the U.S. could be
classified as community newspapers, “the vast majority of them weeklies.”
“Metro dailies” and “big weeklies” (weekly publications with circulations
greater than 50,000) accounted for less than 4% of newspapers in the U.S.,
the study found.23 A separate study, observing more than 1,000 weekly
newspapers between 1997 and 2009, suggested that the U.S. newspaper
industry had become more rural during that time period: the percentage of
newspapers in communities with fewer than 10,000 residents rose from 45%
in 1997 to 67% in 2009. Over that same period, the number of group-owned
newspapers rose significantly, from 49.7% in 1997 to 62.3% in 2009. While
the average newspaper circulation for urban weeklies fell during that time
period, researchers observed an increase in circulation for suburban and rural
weeklies, a trend that was in line with population trends.24 But increasingly,
employment opportunities in U.S. journalism are concentrating in the nation’s
largest cities,25 creating an “emerging pattern of ‘journalism haves and have-
nots’ across the country.”26 In a 2019 survey, rural residents were more likely
than urban or suburban residents to report that their local news organizations
mainly cover other areas; in that same survey, only 30% of rural residents said
they felt their local news media had a lot of influence on their communities,
compared with 38% in suburban areas and 44% in urban areas.27 Employment
in digital journalism has grown since 2008.28 Research has shown that, while
hyperlocal digital news sites have emerged since 2007, many underrepresent
minority groups and low-income residents in their coverage.29
News In Appalachia

Even before the 2016 election, writer and podcaster Catherine Venable Moore wrote, "Appalachia was treated (by national media outlets) as a kind of Rosetta stone for deciphering rural white poverty in America." Moore continued:

In its aftermath, media inquiries ... confirmed many residents’ deep-seated fear that the national press only shows up when the news is bad, or to make them look like fools or freaks. Instead of inviting input on how to frame their stories, reporters seemed to be looking for people to fit a frame they already had in mind.31

Appalachia is home to more than 25 million people, spread across 13 states, 420 counties, and more than 200,000 square miles of land following the Appalachian mountain range from western New York to northern Mississippi. It includes small towns and isolated communities, as well as larger cities such as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Birmingham, Alabama. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia has, during the past half-century, transitioned from a region of “widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts: some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads and water and sewer systems.”

Appalachia’s median household income ($49,747 in 2018) is 82.5% of the national average, and the region’s poverty rate (15.8% in 2018) is higher than the national average, but poverty rates have decreased across the region during the past five years. Despite the region’s complicated economic and political history and contemporary growth, mass media views of Appalachia often remain fixed on the “monolithic, pejorative, and unquestioned” view of the region as the home of the untamed, unkempt hillbilly. The perceived cultural deficiency associated with negative, incomplete portrayals may dissuade individuals from participating in broader discourses about solving problems in their communities, and such portrayals may feed negative public views that stifle efforts to challenge structures that promote inequality.

Several regional media efforts, such as the Whitesburg, Kentucky-based Appalshop, the public radio collaboration Ohio Valley ReSource, and online newsrooms 100 Days in Appalachia and The Daily Yonder, have emerged over the years to help residents tell their own stories, build efficacy, and move toward novel solutions to community issues. Appalshop, the oldest of those efforts, was established in 1969 as a film workshop for youth in the region. West Virginia University’s Reed College of Media Innovation Center, West Virginia Public...
Radio, and The Daily Yonder collaborated to create 100 Days in Appalachia in 2016, in an effort to challenge negative portrayals of the region during that year’s U.S. presidential election. Lyndsey Gilpin, founder and editor-in-chief of the website Southerly, noted that since 2016, Appalachia has been an “interesting case study” in what happens when media partnerships create more opportunities for individuals to tell their stories, and for media organizations to partner with one another. “I think it has been shown in the last couple of years that there’s more to the story in Appalachia,” Gilpin said.

Local newspapers, community radio stations, hyperlocal news websites, and other local media in Appalachia may also serve as vehicles for individuals in distressed communities to tell their stories and seek collaborative solutions to problems at the local level. However, local media organizations in Appalachia are fighting the same economic battles as their cousins in other parts of the United States. Since 2014, at least 88 newspapers in the region have closed or merged with other publications, according to a study on news deserts conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina. During the first half of 2020, the massive impacts of the coronavirus pandemic only exacerbated those losses. Metropolitan newspapers in the region, such as the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Charleston Gazette-Mail, reduced reporting staffs. The economic toll of restaurant and entertainment venue closures caused The Pulse, an alt-weekly in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the Pittsburgh Current to cease their print publications and led Asheville, North Carolina’s Mountain Xpress to lay off seven staff members, putting them among many metro entertainment publications and alt-weeklies to shrink or vanish – at least in print form – during the pandemic. Cuts were dramatic in more rural parts of the region as well: newsroom layoffs, furloughs, and cuts in newspaper publication frequency occurred across the region, from Gadsden, Alabama, to Oneonta, New York. Newspapers were closed or consolidated with other publications in, among other places, Gardendale, Alabama; Grayson, Kentucky; Morehead, Kentucky; Newland, North Carolina; and Lewisburg, West Virginia. In announcing his decision to step down as executive editor of the Alabama daily Anniston Star as the newspaper was laying off staff members in the spring of 2020, Anthony Cook wrote that journalists at the Star and other newspapers owned by its parent company, Consolidated Publishing, “deserve the support of the communities they serve. Not for any sentimental reason, but for the very tangible and valuable news coverage they provide that can’t be found anywhere else. … During the biggest story of our lives is no time to lose more reporters from an already small staff.”
As economic forces and advertising losses accelerated by COVID-19 continue to batter traditional news organizations, it is vital for those that remain – and for journalists and entrepreneurs who want to fill the voids left by legacy news organizations that have disappeared or failed to provide meaningful service to their communities – to scrutinize the contributions they wish to make in their communities. Those contributions are at the center of this study, based on interviews with 23 current and former journalists, community development professionals, and activists who work in rural Appalachia. Interviews focused on two intentionally broad questions: What do communities in Appalachia need from local news organizations, and how might those organizations meaningfully contribute to resiliency in struggling rural communities? Three main themes related to content and outlet/audience relationships emerged, and those themes inform a central idea that serves as the cornerstone of this study: To serve a community well, those who own, operate, and staff a local news organization well must view their news organization not as a local business, but as a local institution, accountable to its community in the same way as other community institutions on which local journalists may report. This idea is hardly new in the industry – Gil Thelen, former publisher and president of The Tampa Tribune, said news organizations operate best when they approach their work as “committed observers” of their communities who recognize that their needs are interdependent with the needs of the communities they cover and perceive a responsibility to help resolve local issues. Many interview participants noted the need for news organizations to provide content that fulfills basic critical information needs. However, they also noted that, to understand those needs, news organizations must facilitate – and engage in – broad, inclusive discussions in their communities. Several participants suggested that organizations that prioritize content over institutional mission will fail to connect with audiences. Media content is typically the product of a set of journalistic routines, especially at smaller news organizations with fewer resources. Interview participants observed that those routines, as well as other structural issues, including consolidated media ownership, may serve as barriers to the creation of community connections and inclusive discussions of social issues.

Individual themes are discussed in the following sections, culminating with a broader analysis of an institutional view of local journalism and of the barriers to that approach.
Fulfilling Critical Information Needs

Local news organizations are vital sources for critical information about local government, schools, and other civic institutions – information that, in underserved rural communities, may not be available from multiple sources. “Anybody can get national news anywhere,” said Carol Daniels, executive director of the Tennessee Press Association. “The community papers that are serving their community really well are focusing on what's happening in their communities.”

Virginia Press Association Executive Director Betsy Edwards observed that people need complete and accurate reporting of schools, local government, and community social life. “They can’t do it (amass and vet public information) themselves,” Edwards said. “The decisions these (government) entities make have real ramifications in those communities and towns.”

The public demand for information about health safety during the coronavirus pandemic provides a ready example of the importance of the value of local information. Daniels noted that regional television stations, for example, may only share information about recommendations and public requirements from the metropolitan area in which they are based, leaving people in other communities without information about the rules or conditions in their areas. People are “grasping for information” about the pandemic, Daniels said. “What matters to them is what is happening in their county.”

Several interview participants made special note of the role that local media play as purveyors of information about local government actions. Writer and radio producer Catherine Venable Moore noted that “my big concern is at the township level, the county level. Township meetings are just going unattended” by reporters. When journalists attend those meetings, their presence may encourage government transparency and accountability. “That sunlight journalists provide is really critical,” Moore said.

Local journalism in the public interest requires what Tim Marema, managing editor of the news website The Daily Yonder, called “the thoughtful curation and presentation of information.” Several participants said that news content must be developed with the needs of news consumers – and communities more broadly – in mind. “Lots of times, commercial news outlets have ideas based on what’s hot,” said William Isom, director of community outreach at East Tennessee PBS in Knoxville. Those “hot” stories, he added, may come across as contrived if they don’t reflect the needs and wants of audiences. Regular organizational routines may also produce news content that may feel disconnected from audiences. Don Smith, executive director of the West Virginia Press Association, noted that many news organizations remain committed to covering crime and criminal justice – topics that fit neatly into journalistic routines and beat structures – while reducing resources committed to reporting on other important topics, such as local businesses or religion. As a result, he said, newspaper front pages may be crime-heavy, and “it
becomes this negative dialogue” about the community.\(^{59}\) Rather than focusing exclusively on stories that are part of a standard routine, participants said, strong news organizations should pursue what Isom called “slow news” – editorial content that doesn’t focus exclusively on an immediate event, such as an arrest or a city council vote, but instead goes into more depth and demonstrates how events and trends connect with the lived experiences of community members.\(^{60}\)

In summary, participants noted that local media should remain dedicated to providing reliable information about critical subjects in communities – including health care, public safety, education, government, and civic life – and the local institutions that dictate policy in those areas. Doing so, as Catherine Venable Moore and other participants noted, requires resources, including reporters, editors, photographers, videographers, and freelance journalists. Employment in U.S. newsrooms has plummeted in recent years; a Pew Research Center study found that between 2008 and 2019, roughly 27,000 newsroom jobs disappeared. Newspapers were especially hard hit over that period, with the number of newspaper journalists falling by 51%.\(^{61}\) Some state legislatures have responded to the decline in local news via new policies and allocation of revenue. In 2019, New Jersey became the first state in the United States to provide funding for innovations in local journalism (aside from contributions to public broadcasting), when it approved $2 million to seed grants to fund the provision of news in underserved communities.\(^{62}\) State lawmakers in Massachusetts created the state’s Commission to Study Journalism in Underserved Communities in 2020, with the goal of researching news deserts and developing policies to ensure access to local news and information.\(^{63}\) Policies such as these can help news organizations fill critical information needs in the communities, especially those that are underserved. Other policy acts have tangible consequences for the provision of local news, as well. For example, the late Keith Rathbun, publisher of a weekly newspaper in Sugarcreek, Ohio, noted in 2014 that cuts and deregulation at the U.S. Postal Service, including the proposed elimination of Saturday mail delivery and possible increases in periodical postage rates, would cause significant harm to newspaper publishers, especially those in rural communities.\(^{64}\) State laws that move paid public notices out of newspapers and onto government websites reduce transparency by limiting access to public information and also cost newspapers revenue they receive for the publication of public notices.\(^{65}\) Creating and maintaining public policy positions that acknowledge the critical information needs local news organizations fill in communities are important, but news organizations also must take seriously their obligation to fill the information needs of all members of their communities. That requires a commitment to community connection and a willingness to listen to community members; those obligations will be discussed later in this study.
Probing Promblems and Solutions

Through rigorous “watchdog reporting” – a broad category of journalism that usually includes investigative reporting and accountability journalism – local news organizations can root out fraud and graft in their communities and, the Virginia Press Association’s Edwards observed, “keep people (in government) honest” and support communities by uncovering instances of abuse. “I think that watchdog aspect (of journalism) contributes to resilience. It lets people know somebody’s looking out for them,” Edwards said.66 Ivy Brashear, a former journalist and Appalachian transition director for the Mountain Association, which provides economic development assistance to organizations and businesses in Eastern Kentucky, observed that, while it can be easy for local reporters to get caught up in “being a PR machine” for powerful local interests, the best local news organizations hold public bodies and civic institutions accountable. “One of the foundations of resilient communities is strong local media,” Brashear said. “Without that piece of the foundation, it is bedlam. Local officials can do whatever they want, unchecked.”67

Some media organizations in Appalachia have a history of rich local investigative journalism. The Bristol Herald Courier in Virginia won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2009 for a series of articles exposing the “murky mismanagement” of natural gas royalties in southwest Virginia, which allowed gas companies to profit at the expense of landowners; the newspaper’s investigation prompted state government reform.68 Another daily newspaper in the region, the Charleston Gazette-Mail in West Virginia, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for its investigation into the state’s opioid crisis – but the newspaper declared bankruptcy the following year. Some smaller news organizations in the region, such as the weekly Mountain Eagle in Whitesburg, Kentucky, also have strong traditions of investigative journalism.70 However, it is important not to romanticize local news organizations – and especially local newspapers – in the context of investigative journalism. Several interview participants noted that, while there are some examples of local news organizations in Appalachia pushing back against extractive industries and other powerful institutions in the region, those entities too often operate without critical viewing. Resource limitations can contribute to superficial coverage of complicated issues, participants noted – if a local newspaper or radio station has a small staff, it can be difficult to dedicate personnel to investigative reporting that may require a great deal of manpower and, in some cases, financial expense. Social pressures may often come into play. “In all small towns, not just in Appalachia, there’s the dilemma of covering the news and living with the ire of people who don’t want the news to come out,” said Dee Davis, founder and president of the Kentucky-based Center for Rural Strategies.71 In Appalachia, that dilemma has often shown itself in the form of a reluctance to report critically on the coal
industry. “A lot of newspapers were just cheerleaders” for the coal industry and glossed over issues of health, safety, and environmental degradation, Davis said. “Some papers were stubborn and were really able to cover it, and some demurred.” While there are examples, such as those above, of media organizations willing to challenge the coal industry, “the recent history of Appalachia tells us it’s easier (for local journalists) to go along to get along,” said Al Cross, professor and director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, based at the University of Kentucky. Cross noted that the coal industry used to be “more of an outlaw” in the region; as the industry has shrunk and constricted, it has lost much of the punch it once had, but the legacy of its influence has outlasted its economic impact on communities. “That’s the kind of cultural thing that can be difficult to overcome,” Cross said.

Local journalists must find ways to be honest brokers of information, whether they’re covering coal in Appalachia, farming in the Midwest, or timber production in the Pacific Northwest. Several participants said local news organizations are especially well positioned not only to point out problems in local communities, but also to help residents find solutions. News organizations “need to drive that discussion,” said Phil Lucey, executive director of the North Carolina Press Association. Jim Iovino, who oversees West Virginia University’s NewStart program, which focuses on training community newspaper owners and publishers, said that news organizations do their communities a disservice if they merely report on problems without suggesting ways to resolve issues or showing audiences examples of communities that found a way to deal with similar problems. “I think that’s what journalists should be looking toward right now. … It’s your duty as a journalist to focus on those types of stories,” Iovino said. “If you are in your town for long enough, you may just accept things for what they are. … It doesn’t have to be that way.”

Jeff Young, managing editor of the reporting collaborative Ohio Valley ReSource, added that reporting on solutions should represent a long-term commitment: Journalists should report on the implementation of solutions and continue to scrutinize the process of community development, not just suggest possible fixes and move on to the next story. “You’re questioning whether these solutions can work. You’re not presenting them as a savior that’s going to come in and solve every issue,” Young said. Local news organizations, by virtue of their (presumed) proximity to their audiences, are especially well positioned to do that kind of work.

Young, like a number of other participants, also pointed out the value in reporting on the good things happening in Appalachian communities. If news organizations only focus on the negative things going on in the area, such as the decline of coal or opioid abuse, they offer a distorted view of the
Several interview participants pointed out that stories about successes were valuable to community morale. A few also noted the importance of demonstrating to those outside Appalachia, including policymakers, that common views of the region were skewed. “If it looks like the whole region is a dead end” – the portrayal often offered by national news coverage – “why would you as a taxpayer support putting more money into, for example, the Appalachian Regional Commission or other things that can help?” Young asked.77 Southerly’s Gilpin noted that one of the most frustrating things about reporting on rural places is that they’re often cast as hopeless and unable to move forward. “When you are that entity (a local news organization), you have the power to tell the truth and help build the narrative of a place,” she said. That includes describing how people innovate or could innovate. “You can show things,” Gilpin said. “People need attention on the work they do on the ground, especially the people and places that are underserved or have been left out of the conversation for so long.”78

Taken together, the data here demonstrate that local news organizations operating in the public interest should work to identify success stories, problems, and solutions to those problems. By recognizing the good things that happen in a community, news organizations may help bring people together and reshape, as Gilpin noted, the narratives of communities that, in the case of rural Appalachia, are often negatively portrayed in popular culture and national media. At the same time, it is vital that local news organizations be frank with their communities about local problems, including inequality and corruption. The time and financial resources required may often deter reporters and editors at rural news organizations with small budgets from attempting to undertake large-scale investigative reporting projects. Partnerships with other news organizations, as well as with nonprofit organizations such as Southerly, 100 Days in Appalachia, and others, can alleviate resource pressures.79 As they increase public knowledge about problems in communities, local journalists should also build discussions of solutions into their journalistic routines. The Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit training organization, notes that doing so “can elevate public discourse, spur citizen agency, and reduce polarization.”80 Research has shown that, while the pursuit of solutions journalism may sometimes require journalists to alter their routines, those changes often boil down to manageable shifts in how reporters conceptualize their reporting.81

**Bringing More Voices Into Public Conversations**

Much news coverage of rural Appalachia – including coverage originating from both outside and inside the region – fails to reflect the region’s diversity, research participants said. Local news organizations can amplify voices and perspectives from rural marginalized communities in ways that both improve
discussions of public issues and empower individuals and communities that often may be silenced or overlooked. “It is important for America that these voices be heard,” said Crystal Good, a poet and activist from West Virginia and part of the inaugural class of West Virginia University’s NewStart program. “The nature of who gets to tell a story has to change,” Good said.82

Open communication between news organizations and the communities they serve can and should facilitate better news coverage of those communities; that process is discussed below. It is also important to note the efficacy and social development that may occur when an individual in a community is empowered to articulate their own lived experiences. “Local papers do have the advantage of being able to tell local stories and give local people a voice,” said Mimi Pickering, director of the Whitesburg, Kentucky-based Appalshop’s Community Media Initiative. “For them, it gives them a sense of worth – they’ve got a story to tell.”83 Pickering and Good both noted that, when individuals are empowered to tell their own stories, then other members of the storytellers’ communities may see those stories and feel empowered themselves. “I think it changes the whole (social) ecosystem for people in a meaningful way,” Good said.84

Community members need venues where they may identify issues that they feel are important but need the means to elevate those issues into public discussions. Several participants pointed out that, historically, many local news organizations in Appalachia have failed to adequately and accurately represent – and have sometimes actively avoided – the views and concerns of underrepresented groups, and that the stories of public issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement in Appalachia are generally told through the lens of white reporters. “The model of journalism has not changed in so long, but these communities have changed,” said Southerly’s Gilpin. For decades, those at the helms of many news organizations haven’t been listening to their whole communities, she continued. “I think we’re having a reckoning right now” on how news covers crime, schools, race, and other issues, Gilpin suggested.85 As part of that, local news organizations must find ways to reach communities that historically have been neglected because of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, income, or geography.

It is important here to note that, while some participants in this study discussed reporting on underrepresented groups, most framed the issue in terms of creating space for members of those groups to tell their stories in their own words, through hiring more diverse staffs and/or by making conscious efforts to provide space for diverse voices and views. “Everybody’s a teacher, and everybody’s a learner,” noted Mekyah Davis, founder of the Black Appalachian Young and Rising Program and a member of the STAY Together
Appalachian Youth Project. Local media may be a venue for what Good calls “folk reporting” – editorial content produced by people who aren’t trained journalists. “Not everybody gets to go to journalism school,” Good noted. Folk reporters who produced content for publications would, in theory, not be beholden to traditional – and sometimes exclusionary – journalistic norms and ideas of what “news” should look like. “What news and media and the world really need is to accept the diversity of the world and the diversity of people who come into their profession,” Good said.

**Accessibility Is Key**

Interview participants also described sustained physical presence – and the trust and accountability that may come with it – as a necessity for local journalists in Appalachia and beyond. “Presence is a really important first step,” said Catherine Venable Moore. “Journalists have to be present, show their faces, get to know people.” Dee Davis, director of the Center for Rural Strategies, made a similar point: “What a community needs is for a newspaper to show up.” Often, interview participants juxtaposed the importance of presence against the reality that, in many communities in Appalachia and across the United States, local newsrooms are shrinking or disappearing. “The most urgent need right now is just being there,” said Jeff Young, managing editor of Ohio Valley ReSource. Physical and, by extension, social presence in a community or city allow journalists to build relationships with members of their audiences; interview participants said they believed that those relationships could help build trust and credibility. “Once you have interaction with how news is made, you put a face on it,” Young said. “Even if we do make mistakes – and we will make mistakes – people won’t assume we did it for some broad conspiratorial reason.” In a nationwide poll conducted in 2019, only 21% of Americans said they had ever spoken with or been interviewed by a reporter. Those opportunities were not evenly spread: White respondents (23%) were more likely than Black respondents (19%) or Hispanic respondents (14%) to have interacted with a reporter, and respondents with at least a college degree were about twice as likely to have interacted with a journalist than those with a high school degree or less education. The physical presence of journalists may also make them more accountable to the communities they serve: “They are responsible to, and part of, the places where they are based,” Southerly’s Gilpin said. Presence also may help reporters provide context and depth to stories – the opposite of the “parachute journalism” that often takes place in rural Appalachian communities. “Often, we in Appalachia kind of forget about all that (history) and don’t understand where struggles come from,” NewStart’s Iovino said.
Journalists and news organizations will almost certainly benefit from healthy relationships with audiences, but it is important to note that a healthy relationship is a two-way street: News organizations must be attuned to, and actively solicit, the media needs and desires of members of their communities – including segments of their communities that are often underserved by local news coverage – and news organizations should feel an obligation to act on those needs and desires. “You have to find a way to communicate with them (readers),” said David Thompson, executive director of the Kentucky Press Association. Iovino noted that journalists “have to build a relationship with their audiences.” That means being there and listening, but also understanding and acting on those concerns. “You’ve really got to understand the people there and understand what concerns they have and what’s important to them, and help them find answers to those issues if you can,” said Iovino. Dana Coester, executive editor of 100 Days in Appalachia, noted that local news organizations must “listen to and engage with the community to better understand what they need.”

It is unrealistic for journalists to expect robust relationships with their audiences to evolve organically – developing them requires thoughtful, concerted effort. Rural news organizations conduct surveys and undertake other means to generate audience feedback from time to time, Thompson said, but they too often fail to act on those efforts: “It goes on for three or four weeks, and you don’t hear anything about it.” When reporters, editors, and publishers process feedback only from traditional sources, such as government officials and prominent local business leaders, they risk getting caught in a feedback loop that may reinforce content produced for what Coester refers to as an “implicit audience” – an audience that a reporter, editor, or whole organizations think they’re serving – while ignoring or downplaying the interests and needs of underrepresented segments of their communities. Journalists and publishers who make efforts to extend their social networks beyond their routine sources and social networks may find that their preconceived notions about their communities do not align with the actual needs, wants, and experiences of their audiences (and, importantly, of community members who are not part of their audiences). Several interview participants suggested that sustained, intentional efforts to interact with broad swathes of a community – such as attendance at local civic gatherings and informal interactions designed to solicit ideas and constructive criticism – would help news organizations generate ideas for stories and efforts that could benefit the community as a whole.

The incorporation of more diverse voices into news content and efforts to become more accessible to community members may require local journalists to disrupt their professional routines. Research on local news in
small Appalachian communities has shown that coverage of local issues that excludes underrepresented voices can separate residents from local news organizations, causing residents to feel as though their perspectives on public issues are unimportant or not valued. Changing those perspectives will require journalists to act intentionally, by creating opportunities for community members to suggest changes and to critique local news products. Organized opportunities to connect news organizations and readers can be time-consuming and costly; smaller news organizations may be able to partner with nonprofit journalistic organizations such as *Southerly* to conduct them. The shift in routines here also obligates them to act transparently – that is, when individuals share their stories, they should do so with a full understanding of, and power over, how those narratives are shared (this power transfer will be discussed in more detail later in the study). Many participants pointed out that soliciting community input alone isn’t enough. Journalists must also reckon with how they will use that information to restructure what they do to give people what they need. That may be a massive undertaking that can force news organizations to fundamentally question how they see themselves in their communities.
Community Resiliency and Local Media Institutions in Appalachia

“People say, if you lose your post office, you lose your community. If you lose your school, you lose your community. Those things are true – you lose your capacity to keep a town together and rally around a common purpose. Newspapers are, by definition, the places where we get our common views and rally around a common purpose.”101
– Dee Davis, president, Center for Rural Strategies

Many of the themes discussed above relate to a thread that ran through many interviews: If news organizations are to contribute to resiliency in distressed communities, they must fundamentally operate not as businesses, but as institutions dedicated to the common good. A community institution, as I intend the term to be understood here, is an entity that exists principally to support the accomplishment of what Yuval Levin called a “socially essential task” 102 – in this case, inclusive participation in a public dialog that affirms visions for a community’s future103 and seeks solutions to community issues. When local news institutions help communities view challenges in different ways, and when they do so by incorporating multiple voices and perspectives, they may help communities identify novel approaches to social, political, and economic problems that can lead to community resiliency. To be clear, this does not mean news organizations should not concern themselves with revenue (although a number of participants expressed support for nonprofit business models for local news). Instead, it means that journalists should move away from the paternalistic role many have played in communities – suggesting that they know best what communities need – and move toward a more collaborative model of community service. Research on international development has shown that accessible, inclusive institutions that encourage civic and economic participation can help individuals prosper, while exclusive institutions that limit participation allow powerful entities to centralize resources.104 Dana Coester noted that one key to encouraging resiliency in struggling rural communities involves building a shared mission with community members and building a shared method of holding public institutions accountable: “We need more of a closing of the gap between being a publication and an audience,” she said.105 Mekyah Davis suggested that through coverage and other community efforts, local news organizations can shape the very idea of what “community development” looks like. “They have the ability to reframe or reshape what ‘economic transition’ is or what a ‘just transition’ is,” Davis said.106 News organizations can support
local groups that try to build toward consensus about what is important in a community, and they often are well positioned to serve as catalysts for those conversations themselves.

Nonprofit efforts in Appalachia, such as the Appalshop’s Community Media Initiative,\textsuperscript{107} have created opportunities for individuals in the region to disseminate their stories to broader audiences. Examples also exist of news organizations that have extended their institutional roles beyond the provision of content. In the 1940s in Tupelo, Mississippi, for example, \textit{Daily Journal} publisher George McLean organized and promoted a program that convinced Tupelo’s elite to invest in efforts to improve the lives of their less wealthy neighbors, and to support a network of “rural community development councils” that encouraged farmers to get involved in community efforts.\textsuperscript{108} In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic created a need for other, more simple ways that local news organizations in Appalachia – and beyond – could contribute to community efforts in ways that went beyond the provision of traditional news content. For example, public broadcasters in Knoxville, Tennessee, and other communities partnered with local school systems to provide classroom content to children who were learning from home.\textsuperscript{109} Some local newspapers helped direct efforts to get community members signed up to receive assistance from local food banks.\textsuperscript{110} West Virginia’s NewStart program includes courses on audience engagement and what an owner’s role in a community should be. The goal, NewStart director Iovino said, is to create good “community partners.” “They are not just there to run a business. They are there, really, to have a stake in that community and to move it forward,” Iovino explained.\textsuperscript{111}

When local media organizations make conscious efforts to engage in coverage that is more inclusive, and when they commit to engaging the exchange of ideas in a community, they may facilitate bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Robert Putnam described bonding social capital as the inward-facing “sociological superglue”\textsuperscript{112} that holds individuals together, produced by close networks such as fraternal organizations and country clubs. Bridging social capital can join different groups, fostering reciprocity and broader, more inclusive community identities.\textsuperscript{113} The strongest, most inclusive communities have high levels of both bridging and bonding social capital – those with strong bonding capital but weak bridging capital are often insular and riddled with factions and partisanship, while those with strong bridging capital but weak bonding capital may be less self-sufficient, and their residents may feel less connected to one another.\textsuperscript{114} Research on local news, especially in rural communities, often focuses on the creation of bonding social capital; bridging social capital could also be the domain of local news organizations if they seek to pull various groups together and if they make intentional efforts to be
inclusive. The production of bridging social capital is difficult to automate or to produce from afar – it requires institutional knowledge of a community and its various components, and responsiveness to local groups.

**What Stands in the Way?**

Several participants made note of a perceived reluctance on the part of local journalists in Appalachia to challenge powerful institutions, such as coal companies or local governments. “I know enough editors in Appalachia who really don’t have that much ambition or enterprise or drive” – they just want to produce their newspapers and support their families, said the University of Kentucky’s Cross. “I think a lot of people (in journalism) are reluctant to look at themselves as an institution,” Cross continued. If owners, editors, and publishers look at their organizations merely as businesses, they may focus on making money and disregard any sense of social responsibility. “The timidity that is the most common feature of a lot of these folks is enhanced as they see profit margins go from double digits to single digits,” Cross said. Even in communities where coal mines have closed, the region’s connection to the coal industry has created social attachments that may make it socially or economically uncomfortable for local reporters to criticize the industry. Young noted that, in order to serve their communities, reporters must “not being afraid to poke at some sacred cows. … One of the sacred cows is being honest about the coal industry and other extractive industries. There are too many local outlets – especially in local broadcast media – propagating bad information about the comeback of coal.” Coal production in Appalachia fell by almost 45% between 2005 and 2015 – more than twice the rate of national decline in coal production. Over the same period, the Appalachian Regional Commission reported a 27% drop in coal industry employment. “You have to be honest about the numbers and the broader trends in the industry,” and the reality of the need to diversify economies and address the environmental impacts of coal and natural gas extraction, Young said. “You are not doing coal-dependent communities any favors by lying to them about it.”

Interview participants also associated an unwillingness to challenge the status quo or powerful community institutions with corporate or chain ownership that incentivizes revenue over community involvement. Previous research has noted the “extractive” nature of chain ownership, which tends to emphasize short-term financial returns over commitment to community service. Cross noted that the “local soul” of a media institution may be lost if it loses local ownership. “In too many cases, chain ownership has enhanced the timidity you see in these places,” Cross said. Other participants, including some press association executives who represent both locally owned and corporate news organizations, agreed that ownership was often a key indicator of how
rigorously a news organization would fight for the local good, even if that fight might anger advertisers or other powerful entities in their communities. Jock Lauterer, a journalism educator and former newspaper publisher and editor, wrote that “a newspaper tends to be a mirror image of its ownership and the publisher’s attitude.” Corporate-owned news organizations may do great work, but local owners are tied to their communities in a way that corporate media executives usually are not.

Local news organizations in Appalachia and across the country – especially those in rural communities and small towns – also cope with shortcomings of capital, staffing, and resources. “The organizations exist, but they are extremely underfunded,” Catherine Venable Moore said. “I think it (the industry) has just been so eroded over the past 20 years.” WVU’s Iovino said that a lack of resources is a common excuse for not pursuing solutions-oriented journalism and larger projects. However, “your job (as a local journalist) is to be there and serve the community,” Iovino said, and if a news organization’s community needs solutions, then reporters and editors may need to reevaluate the time, energy, and space spent on other efforts and routines, he said. Several interview participants noted that partnerships and collaborations with other news organizations have helped local media outlets pursue stories that they might not be able to do alone. Southerly, Appalshop, Ohio Valley ReSource, and 100 Days in Appalachia have partnered with local news organizations on reporting projects and on events designed to encourage community members to engage news outlets in Appalachia and the South. Southerly’s Gilpin noted that collaborations that pool resources, as well as other efforts to bring more reporting into the region, such as Report for America, “can drown out the narrative that has been forced on the region.” Coester suggested that local news organizations may often be left out of broader discussions about collaboration, innovation, and reform in journalism. “There’s the ONA crowd and the NNA crowd, and those are not necessarily overlapping,” Coester said, referring to the Online News Association – a nonprofit organization for digital journalists whose board of directors consists of journalists and executives from The Wall Street Journal, Google, ProPublica, Twitter, and other large organizations – and the National Newspaper Association, whose stated mission is to “protect, promote and enhance America’s community newspapers.” That division, Coester continued, may leave small news organizations in a filter bubble that can make innovation and change seem “frivolous” or unrealistic.

Some widely embraced journalistic routines and habits also reinforce divisions in communities and may weaken a news organization’s ability to promote community resiliency as an effective institution. Research on local media deserts in Appalachia has called for journalists to “unlearn” or adjust
some common journalistic practices in order to better hear and understand what residents need from them.128 “There are a number of traditional journalistic conventions that I don’t have a problem with them going out the window,” including detachment and objectivity, said Coester of 100 Days in Appalachia.129 The Mountain Association’s Ivy Brashear suggested that interpretations of objectivity and fears of accusations of bias often tie organizations’ hands, pushing them toward a “just-the-facts mindset” and away from “stories that have a point of view.” As a result, she said, audiences often receive too little substance. “I feel like media really get wrapped up in the idea of objectivity in a way that can be harmful,” Brashear said. “It’s not about being objective. It’s about being complex.”130 Mekyah Davis made a similar point: “I do think objectivity is important, but more than that I think the truth is important.” He said he believed finding facts that matter to communities should be a local news organization’s core mission. “We can say we are not political and don’t believe in politics, but we have to realize our lives and daily actions are inherently political. … You can’t be afraid of that.”131

Access to broadband internet can be a challenge for many local news organizations in rural Appalachia, where geography may make extending internet networks expensive, and where cost may be a significant barrier for those who have access to it. In county seats, where media offices are often located, service may be fine, said the West Virginia Press Association’s Smith. But just a few miles out of town, broadband access and cellular service are limited, even on stretches of the interstate. “Someone living in San Francisco may be better able to access the West Union (West Virginia) newspaper’s website than someone five miles outside of town,” Smith noted.132 The Tennessee Press Association’s Daniels noted that, in some parts of East Tennessee, newspaper staff members struggled to work from home during the coronavirus pandemic because they did not have access to broadband networks.133

Social Media and Local News

In his essay on trust and institutionalism in U.S. journalism, Yuval Levin noted that social media platforms such as Facebook have contributed to a decline in public trust of media:

By multiplying and fragmenting sources of information, the web and social media have turned the work of journalism into artifacts of self-expression for different groups of Americans, as people filter and select among news sources, then distribute the work of those they choose – or those chosen for them by algorithms meant to predict their preferences – among their virtual circles. … These trends feed
into a self-intensifying cycle that exacerbates mistrust, undermines standards, makes comparisons of reliability a challenge, and leaves the public understandably skeptical about the integrity of contemporary journalism.\textsuperscript{134}

Participants in this study expressed similar concerns, noting the difficulties they had in competing with the often fragmented, incomplete, or inaccurate views present on social media. "No newspaper dominates its local news landscape anymore," said Cross, the director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. "I think the prevalence of Facebook as an information source has degraded the value of the local paper as a news source."\textsuperscript{135} Social media often provide a "very fragmented, very biased view of what's going on," said Edwards, director of the Virginia Press Association.\textsuperscript{136} Mike Buffington, a north Georgia newspaper publisher and editor and vice president of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, noted that many readers "have come to think of online rumors as news. ... A lot of it is inaccurate; a lot of it is distorted or opinion," but because it is free, people consume it, and as a result rely less on other, vetted sources of news and information. "At least with us (newspapers), they know the source, and they know who to call" if information is inaccurate, he said.\textsuperscript{137} Jeff Young of Ohio Valley ReSource noted that social media outlets readily promote emotion and outrage, because they thrive on tribalism. "We (journalists) are trying to shine a light, and they're trying to raise the heat," Young said.\textsuperscript{138} At the same time, he noted, the bulk of Ohio Valley ReSource's online traffic comes from Facebook, and the organization was approved to receive a grant from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative in 2021. Abernathy and others have noted that grant pledges from Facebook and Google pale in comparison to the advertising revenue those technology platforms have siphoned away from legacy news organizations.\textsuperscript{139} Some participants in this study – particularly executives with state press associations – echoed that sentiment, noting that news organizations were too slow to react to advertising losses.
Conclusion

“Local news is part of the fabric of a community,” Southerly’s Gilpin noted in an interview for this study; her sentiment was echoed, in other ways, by others whose views are included here. In many communities, the closures or consolidations of news organizations in the 21st century have left that fabric torn or missing; in others, incomplete content that does not truly and fully represent communities makes local media irrelevant to large swathes of a readership. As newsrooms have continued to disappear, calls for action to save local news organizations or create new ones have grown louder. Those calls often focus on the accountability journalism that is lost when a local news organization vanishes. That accountability is important, but it is just one contribution that a strong news organization can make in a community. Newspapers, local TV broadcasters, radio news programs, and hyperlocal websites should not be mere conduits for information. They have the ability to mobilize community resources for the common good. But to do so, they must be nimble, responsive, mission-driven, and connected to local issues and local residents.

This study demonstrates the value local news organizations bring to communities, especially those in struggling communities. Appalachia, as a region, has for generations struggled with public narratives that have cast it as backward, monolithic, and intractable, and those representations can shape public policy approaches to the region and perceptions within communities. At the community level, the challenges residents face – and the capacity of news organizations to help them face those challenges – vary widely. The best practices laid out here are discussed through the lens of journalism in Appalachia, but, at a fundamental level, they are applicable in other places – urban, suburban, and rural – all over the country. “There’s some uniqueness to Appalachia for sure, but a lot of the issues they have are common to other areas with depressed economies,” said Betsy Edwards, of the Virginia Press Association. “I think the difference between them (Appalachia) and other states is that they’ve suffered longer and for different reasons.”

Interview data presented here suggest that news organizations can help communities overcome obstacles when they view themselves as institutions that exist to help communities move toward inclusive solutions to local needs. They do so, participants said, when they provide the basic information that individuals need to participate in civic life, and when they provide platforms for broad, accessible discussions of civic matters. The pursuit of those goals may often necessitate a fundamental realignment of mission. To be an institutional
presence, a news organization must develop values and institutional knowledge, and it must be willing and able to act on that knowledge and to help others do so. In the process, it challenges some journalistic norms about detachment and gatekeeping: An institutional view of local news requires publishers and editors to cede some of their power to their communities. To be truly included in public discourse, individuals need to have some control over how they frame their own stories, and how and where those stories are told.

In practice, journalists, community members, and policymakers can encourage the building of strong, inclusive media institutions by:

- **Supporting public policy that encourages vetted, credible local journalism.** A robust U.S. Postal Service, low periodical postage rates, and third-party publication of public notices all help contribute to more informed communities. Policies that create more opportunities for communities and cooperatives to extend broadband networks into underserved communities can make it easier for existing news organizations and new digital startups to provide critical information needs. Efforts like those in New Jersey and Massachusetts that direct government attention (and funding) to communities with unmet news needs acknowledge the importance of an informed citizenry in communities, as may policies that make it easier for news organizations to seek nonprofit status or rules that would allow publishers to jointly bargain with technology companies over advertising revenue.

- **Promoting collaboration.** Collaboration between news organizations, or between news organizations and nonprofit entities, can help journalists overcome resource limitations. In Appalachia and the South, organizations such as 100 Days in Appalachia, Southerly, and the Center for Rural Strategies have collaborated with local reporters on stories or public events. In Rappahannock County, Virginia, residents created the nonprofit Foothills Forum, which identifies important community issues and commissions freelance stories on those issues that are then provided to the local newspaper. In Colorado, the nonprofit Colorado Media Project – a group that includes journalists, businesspeople, academics, and others – works to connect journalists with resources they need for projects and to build support for local news.

- **Encouraging local media ownership and local control of newsrooms.** Programs such as NewStart, a collaboration between West Virginia University and the West Virginia Press Association, can help encourage local ownership of media by preparing would-be owners for the job. It
is “imperative,” the University of North Carolina’s 2018 “The Expanding News Desert” report noted, “that industry organizations, universities, government agencies, newspaper owners, elected officials and community activists redouble efforts to find new and creative ways for local news organizations to thrive financially in the digital age – especially those in small and midsized markets.” Preserving and encouraging local media ownership must be part of those efforts.

- **Changing or abandoning exclusionary news routines.** In many newsrooms, exclusionary routines and practices stand in the way of inclusive institutional action. By focusing on accessibility and actively seeking out underrepresented voices, local news organizations may shift local narratives, help communities develop new solutions to old problems, and empower individuals. In the process, they may encourage the bridging and bonding social capital that are present in healthy communities. Actively identifying and reaching out to underrepresented groups is one way to start that process, but it is just that: a start. Sustained engagement necessitates a regular cycle of communication within a community. Editors, publishers, and reporters who are willing to listen to community members but unwilling to act on what they say (especially when doing so would upset the local status quo) are not acting inclusively.

Much of the dialogue about local journalism described in this study focuses on local newspapers, because that was the platform that participants most closely associated with local journalism in rural Appalachia. It is important to note here that newspapers have not always acted in the best interests of their communities. As several participants noted, newspapers in communities in Appalachia and beyond have a legacy of contributing to inequality, racism, and the enabling of other institutions (coal companies, for example) that have caused significant harm. Acemoglu and Robinson noted the challenges associated with altering civic institutions to promote community development when those institutions themselves are the problem in the first place: “the institutional structure that creates market failures will also prevent implementation of interventions to improve incentives at the micro level.” Poor institutional actors can be found among chain-owned publications and mom-and-pop newsrooms, in large cities and in small towns. “People trust an institution because it seems to have an ethic that makes those within it more trustworthy,” Levin wrote. “People ‘lose faith’ in an institution when they no longer believe it plays this ethical or formative role.” It is possible to acknowledge that and at the same time view the promise rural newspapers and other local news organizations hold as positive institutions in their communities. Healthy communities may not need strong newspapers, but they do need strong newsrooms, owned and operated by trusted, trustworthy
individuals. There are no simple answers to the challenges that face local news in Appalachia and elsewhere. Levin suggests the loss of trust in journalism in the United States is part of a broader lack of trust in social institutions: “The goal cannot be simply to make Americans trust these institutions in their current forms. Rather, it must be to understand why and how that trust has been lost and to work toward rebuilding it by constructing and reconstructing institutions that deserve it.” That rebuilding process necessitates change in newsroom routines, business models, and public engagement with journalism. In rural Appalachia, and across the United States, it also presents an opportunity to rebuild local news organizations – not as tools of the elite or as entities that exist mainly to generate revenue, but rather as inclusive institutions, ultimately driven to foster resiliency by bringing community members together and helping them find ways to solve their problems.
About The Author

Michael Clay Carey, Ph.D., is a contributing scholar with the Center for Journalism and Liberty and an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at Samford University. He is a former newspaper reporter and editor, and the author of The News Untold: Community Journalism and the Failure to Confront Poverty in Appalachia.

About This Report

This report was prepared under the direction of the Center for Journalism & Liberty, a think tank supported by the Knight Foundation.
The interviews on which this research is based were conducted by telephone in June and July of 2020. The author contacted participants who had written about media issues in Appalachia, or individuals with journalism experience in the region (such as journalists with regional nonprofits and executives with press associations in Appalachia). Additional participants were recruited based on a snowball sampling method, in which interview participants were asked to recommend other participants. The semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 65 minutes, with an average length of 34 minutes. Participants were asked a broad set of questions about what good local journalism entailed, specific news and information needs in Appalachia, and ways local news organizations could contribute to resiliency in communities.


Philip M. Napoli, Sarah Stonbely, Kathleen McCollough, & Bryce Renninger, “Local Journalism and the Information needs of Local Communities: Toward a Scalable Assessment Approach,” Journalism Practice 11, no. 4: 374.


Shearer, “Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers.”


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, 8. The numbers reported here do not include newspaper cuts and closures that occurred during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


28 Grieco, “U.S. Newspapers have Shed Half.”


31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.


35 For an excellent summary, see Ronald D. Eller, Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008).


39 Carey, The News Untold; Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness.


Joshua Benton, “‘Total annihilation’: Coronavirus may just be the end for many alt-weeklies,” Nieman Lab, https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/03/total-annihilation-coronavirus-may-just-be-the-end-for-many-alt-weeklies/ [accessed June 8, 2020].


53 Carol Daniels, interview by author, June 4, 2020.


55 Daniels, interview

56 Catherine Venable Moore, interview by author, June 1, 2020.

57 Tim Marema, interview by author, June 24, 2020.


59 Don Smith, interview by author, June 2, 2020.

60 Isom, interview.


66 Edwards, interview.


Dee Davis, interview by author, June 8, 2020.

Ibid.


Phil Lucey, interview by author, June 12, 2020.

Jim Iovino, interview by author, June 12, 2020

Jeff Young, interview by author, June 24, 2020. Betsy Edwards, executive director of the Virginia Press Association, observed that those same pressures sometimes challenge media growth and entrepreneurship in the region: “Nobody's thinking, ‘I’m going to run to Appalachia and start a newspaper,’ because people think the area is poor and downtrodden,” she said.


Gilpin, Southerly's founder and editor-in-chief, said that local journalists should take the lead in partnerships with national and regional news outlets, so that they can control the framing of stories.


Good, interview.

Gilpin, interview.


Good, interview.

Moore, interview.

Davis, interview.

Young, interview.

Elizabeth Grieco, “It’s More Common for White, Older, More-Educated Americans to Have Spoken with Local Journalists,” Pew Research Center, May 10, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/10/its-more-common-for-white-older-more-educated-americans-to-have-spoken-with-local-journalists/ [accessed July 11, 2020]. In Appalachian metropolitan areas, the percentage of respondents who had spoken with a reporter ranged from 26% (Birmingham, Alabama) to 18% (Greenville, South Carolina).
The Pew study suggested that interaction with reporters had relatively little influence on how good of a job people think reporters are doing. Twenty-eight % of those who had spoken with a local journalist said local news organizations do very well at keeping them informed about local stories, compared to 24% of those who had not spoken with a reporter.

Gilpin, interview.

Iovino, interview.

David Thompson, interview by author, June 9, 2020.

Iovino, interview.

Dana Coester, interview by author, July 9, 2020.

Thompson, interview.

Coester, interview.

Carey, The News Untold.

Davis, interview.


Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty (New York: Currency, 2012). Acemoglu and Robinson’s work focuses heavily on the role of governmental institutions in a global context, their central arguments about inclusive and extractive institutions are congruent with the central themes about local news institutions in Appalachia discussed here.

Coester, interview.

Davis, interview.


The Independent Appeal, “March 31 from 10 AM – 1 PM, the Mid-South Mobile Pantry.” [Facebook post]. March 19, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/TheIndependentAppeal/posts/10157341195406596
111 Iovino, interview.


113 Ibid.


115 Cross, interview.


118 Ibid.

119 Young, interview.


121 Cross, interview.

122 Lauterer, *Community Journalism*, 56.

123 Moore, interview.

124 Iovino, interview.


127 Coester, interview.

Coester, interview.

Brashear, interview. It should be noted here that objectivity as a journalistic norm has, as Lough and McIntire noted in their study of solutions journalism, a “controversial history” (p. 37). Subjectivity permeates news decisions such as story selection and placement and the selection and exclusion of sources. In The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel argue that contemporary journalistic understandings of objectivity are “mostly muddled and confused” (p. 55). “The call for objectivity” in journalism in the 20th century, they wrote, “was an appeal for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information—a transparent approach to evidence—precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. . . . (T)he journalist was not objective, but the journalist’s method could be” (p. 101-3).

Davis, interview.

Smith, interview.

Daniels, interview. To increase broadband access in rural communities, Christopher Ali and other scholars have argued for the elimination of state laws that prohibit or limit cities’ and cooperatives’ abilities to deploy broadband systems, and for the government collection of data that better represents broadband penetration. See among others, Tony H. Brugesic & Elizabeth A. Mack, Broadband Telecommunications and Regional Development, London: Routledge, 2016; Whitelaw Reed, “Stuck in the Mud: Broadband ‘Disconnect’ has Big Consequences for Midwest Farmers,” UVA Today, October 8, 2018, https://news.virginia.edu/content/stuck-mud-broadband-disconnect-has-big-consequences-midwest-farmers [accessed August 9, 2020].


Cross, interview.

Edwards, interview.

Mike Buffington, interview by author, July 3, 2020.

Young, interview.

Abernathy, “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers.”

Eller, Uneven Ground; Carey, The News Untold.


to-rebuild-a-local-news-ecosystem/ [accessed August 9, 2020].


146 Acemoglu & Robinson, Why Nations Fail, 450

147 Levin, “American Journalism as an Institution,” 11-12.

148 Ibid, 15.