



# Public Media & the Future of Local Journalism



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**This paper is intended as a shared statement about public media's collective commitment to play a strong role in helping to address America's information crisis. The following leaders across public media and its related organizations hereby endorse this vision.**

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*President & General Manager, KCBX*

**David Lee**  
*President & General Manager, WUWM*



Priyanka Tewari, local host of Morning Edition (90.5 WESA, Pittsburgh).



Cara Chapman, a reporter for North Country Public Radio, interviews Rep. Elise Stefanik at a press conference (Mountain Lake PBS/Mike Hansen).

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Louisville Public Media reporters Jess Clark and Stephanie Wolf at the Kentucky State Capitol (J. Tyler Franklin).



Louisville Public Media reporter Jacob Munoz (J. Tyler Franklin).

## Executive summary

The dramatic decline of local newspapers has caused an information crisis in America. Today, 70 million people live without a credible source of local news.<sup>1</sup> This vacuum weakens our communities and our democracy, leaving people without the information they need to play an active role in constructively shaping our world.

This year, the philanthropic community announced an intention to make bold investments to revitalize local journalism in America.<sup>2</sup> They advanced a vision of a new “civic media system,” one that is collaborative and pluralistic, centered upon delivering civic information that strengthens democracy and meets the needs of communities.<sup>3</sup>

**The leaders of public media emphatically support this vision.** Together, we seek to partner with colleagues across nonprofit journalism to build a *stronger* local news ecosystem. One that better serves rural and marginalized communities. One that is innovative, open and cooperative. One focused on strengthening democracy and improving quality of life for all.

Researchers have observed public media’s potential to fill the growing gaps in local news, noting that we are an **established, essential and trusted local news provider**.<sup>4</sup> Noncommercial, broadly accessible and with an existing network of 3,200 journalists embedded in communities across all 50 states, **public media offers a strong and flexible framework to build upon.**

The urgency of America’s local journalism crisis has already sparked transformation across our network. Over a decade, local public media organizations **added more than 900 journalists**. We have forged innovative partnerships and expanded our public service to include an array of new digital journalism products. But our public service mission calls us to do more.

<sup>1</sup> “The State of Local News,” Penny Abernathy, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> [macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-will-award-more-than-500-million-to-revitalize-local-news](https://macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-will-award-more-than-500-million-to-revitalize-local-news)

<sup>3</sup> “The Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs.” Elizabeth Green, Darryl Holliday, and Mike Rispoli, February 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Reports published by the **National Trust for Local News** (2022), the **Shorenstein Center** (2023), and the **University of North Carolina** (2020) have highlighted the potential of local public media outlets to play a role in revitalizing local news.



Mississippi Public Broadcasting news director Teresa Collier trains reporter Maya Miller (Gulf States Newsroom/Rashah McChesney).

New philanthropic investment can accelerate these efforts and enable local public media organizations to **expand service and grow into anchor institutions**, supporting dynamic local news ecosystems in the communities they serve.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, public media’s national network will allow us to **scale innovations** and bring effective ideas to other parts of the country. Local outlets can serve as hubs, connecting local newsrooms throughout their community to the broader public media network, which can provide shared services inexpensively and at scale.

To achieve this vision, we propose a two-pronged strategy that includes **focused investment in local public media organizations and in the infrastructure to support and connect them.**

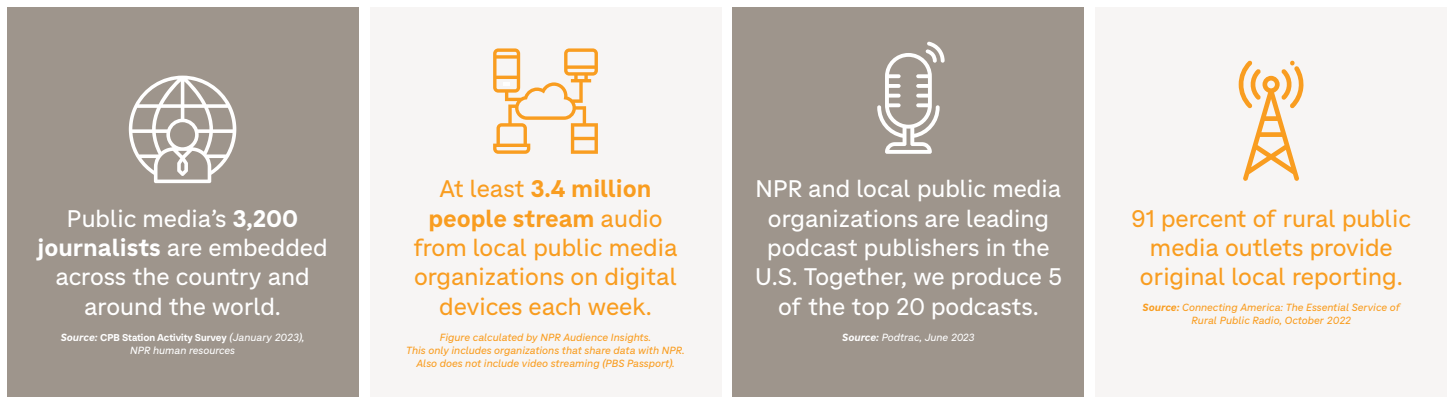
We are grateful for the philanthropic community’s focus on rebuilding local journalism and stand ready to act together to reimagine and revitalize local news. We look to the future with hope, ready to grow our public service, evolve the way we work, and use the full power—and potential—of our network to help reshape America’s local news landscape to ensure that all communities have the information they need to thrive.

<sup>5</sup> The authors of “The Growing Strength of Public Media Local Journalism” argue that many local public media organizations are poised to become “anchor institutions,” providing services and support that help other emerging outlets in their communities to thrive.

## Mission driven, trusted and community supported

Local public media outlets are independent organizations supported by the communities they serve. They provide rich journalism that improves civic life, a forum for civil discussion and a place to learn about local arts and culture. This vital content is **provided as a free public service**.

Public media doesn't just cover the news, we bring people and communities together. We report on events from the perspectives of people living through them and elevate voices that would otherwise go unheard. As a result, **public media is consistently ranked among America's most trusted news outlets**—a critical distinction at a time when public trust in the media remains near historic lows.<sup>6</sup>



## A growing force for local journalism in America

Recognizing that a well-informed public is crucial for the health of our democracy and communities, the crisis in local journalism has had a catalytic effect on public media. While our broadcast signals continue to cover nearly 99 percent of the nation's population, in many places, **local public media organizations have become hubs of journalistic innovation**. These outlets are breaking news and providing a growing array of digital journalism products including apps, digital news sites, email newsletters, social media content and podcasts.

In places like St. Louis, Denver and Portland, Oregon, public media institutions have become the largest newsrooms covering their regions. Many have expanded their reach by acquiring newspapers and local news blogs, and creating partnerships with other newsrooms—within public media and beyond. These partnerships are helping these outlets to serve surrounding rural and suburban communities, where local news from other sources is often lacking. In parts of the Deep South, Alaska and the Midwest, public media outlets are the sole providers of local news, serving communities that would otherwise be "news deserts."

NPR is also working with local public media outlets in innovative ways to expand access to local journalism. Through an initiative called the **Collaborative Journalism Network**, NPR developed a **shared services model** that provides public media reporters with training, tools and access to journalists with specialized skills to help develop ambitious local reporting projects.<sup>7</sup> The effort also launched four **regional newsrooms**, which are helping local outlets to collaborate and expand coverage, particularly in underserved parts of the country.

Increasingly, as public media works to help address the growing crisis in local news, we have been using our federated structure as an opportunity to test and scale innovative ideas. Our hundreds of separate newsrooms allow many ideas to be tried and iterated upon at once, with the best **innovations shared and adopted in other parts of the country**. That has been the approach used at regional newsrooms, where cooperative strategies to cover breaking news, engage audiences and expand the diversity of journalistic sources have been shared and broadly adapted.

<sup>6</sup> "Americans' Trust In Media Remains Near Record Low." Gallup, October 18, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> An example of the shared services NPR provides to stations is the **station investigations team**, which expands the capacity of public media to produce accountability journalism.

## Innovative mergers to strengthen local journalism

In 2023, public media outlet WITF and Steinman Communications, a family-owned company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, announced they would merge, with WITF assuming operations of the company's portfolio of daily newspapers and local news websites. The move will more than double WITF's existing newsroom and enable the outlet to serve almost 3 million people—about a quarter of the state's population.

This merger joins a growing list of acquisitions across public media, including Chicago Public Media's 2022 acquisition of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. These deals help public media reach new audiences, diversify revenue and strengthen local reporting. The WITF merger is the first outside of a major metropolitan area, offering a template for rural and suburban regions where news deserts are most prevalent.

## Developing a stronger, more inclusive network of community newsrooms



On-air and across digital platforms, **46 million** people rely upon public radio each week.

Source: Broadcast (Nielsen Nationwide, Fall 2022), NPR.org and NPR app (Google Analytics average 09/15/22 - 12/07/22), podcasts (Podcast Analytics Dashboard average 09/15/22 - 12/07/22) and YouTube (09/15/22 - 12/07/22). Overlap calculated based on comScore data and survey data.

A persistent challenge slowing public media's growth is resources. Today, many local outlets struggle to cover annual operating expenses while investing in new media and audience development. This is especially true at local outlets serving rural and under-resourced communities, where local news is most needed.

“The Roadmap for Local News” lays out a compelling vision for the future of local journalism, centered upon cooperation and shared resources.<sup>8</sup> **With focused investment in two areas, public media can serve as the foundation of this vision**, supporting vibrant ecosystems of journalists and newsrooms collaborating to serve the public good.

### Expand local newsrooms

First, we propose **bold investment in local public media organizations**, allowing them to grow in ways that are responsive to the needs of their communities. As local outlets add journalists, editors and other key positions, they will be able to exponentially increase the breadth and depth of their local service. This will also create opportunities for focused hiring and recruitment, which will help make local newsrooms more reflective of the communities they serve.

Additionally, philanthropic investment will allow more local public media organizations to grow into **anchor institutions**—hubs that **support and connect a diverse array of news providers and hyper-local creators**. As anchors, these outlets will foster collaboration, facilitate mutual learning and connect other outlets to shared services. The connection of these organizations to the broader public media network will mean **innovations and best practices are quickly brought to scale in other places across the country**.

For that reason, we see opportunities for investment in NPR's Collaborative Journalism Network, which provides resources, training and connections to local outlets. We aim to **expand the successful shared services model** to include access to experts in standards and practices (including guidance around AI), visual journalism, podcast production and other specialized skills, and to launch additional **regional newsrooms**, placing a strategic focus on regions with the most need.

### Invest in digital infrastructure

In addition, we propose investment to strengthen digital infrastructure and technology services. To date, public media's digital infrastructure investments have been limited. As a result, local outlets invest in costly,



*Gulf States Newsroom environmental justice reporter Danny McArthur (Gulf States Newsroom/Rashah McChesney).*

<sup>8</sup> “The Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs.” By: Elizabeth Green, Darryl Holliday, and Mike Rispoli, February 2023.

## Anchoring strong, vibrant communities of local news providers

Local public media outlets have the potential to connect and support local news networks. Since 2020, KERA in Dallas has developed innovative partnerships with news outlets across North Texas, ranging from digital start-ups to well-established outlets like the *Dallas Morning News*. KERA is also a lead station in The Texas Newsroom, a collaboration between local public media outlets across the state and NPR, which is providing statehouse coverage, daily newscasts, breaking news coverage and in-depth reporting.

These partnerships are building journalistic capacity and helping to connect residents with local news that impacts their daily lives, reaching towns and cities, as well as the rural areas in between. Creative efforts like these are critical in states like Texas, where more than two dozen counties no longer have a local newspaper.



Wisconsin Public Radio's Phoebe Petrovic (WPR/J. Potter).

standalone digital products that have limited functionality and make collaboration and content sharing difficult.

New digital infrastructure investments will allow for the **free movement of information across platforms and organizations**, making it easier to collaborate, coordinate coverage and for organizations to amplify one another's journalism. These technologies will not be one-size-fits all. Rather, they will offer interoperable, turnkey solutions for local newsrooms to publish, reach new audiences and collaborate. These investments will be a force multiplier, allowing local newsrooms to focus limited resources on creating impactful local content and developing new ways to reach and serve their communities.

Most importantly, these investments will improve the experience for the people we serve, making it easier for individuals to find the information they need using the products and platforms they prefer.



Public media is one of America's **most trusted news outlets**



No paywall: public media provides its content as a **free public service**

## Evolving a strong financial model

For vibrant local media ecosystems to flourish, they must be sustainable. Public media's **unique and flexible business model** positions us to serve as a foundation for emerging civic media networks that will include less-established providers.

Community support is public media's largest and most reliable funding source. This model ensures our independence and ties us closely to the needs of the people we serve. According to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, individual support for public radio has grown every year for the past two decades. In 2021, individual giving came to nearly \$630 million across local public media organizations, from a donor base of about 3.5 million people.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, as more local public media organizations invest in sophisticated development teams, major and planned giving are poised to grow.

We are now working to evolve our membership model for the future, engaging more of public media's significant digital audience as financial supporters. Today, fewer than one percent of NPR's 27 million digital weekly users donates—a dramatic difference when compared with the 10 percent of broadcast listeners who support their local outlet. Unlike

<sup>9</sup> Source: Corporation for Public Broadcasting Annual Financial Report (AFR) / Annual Financial Summary Reports (FSR).



Our network comprises more than **200 local news organizations** across the United States

our commercial counterparts, public media provides its journalism free of charge to all who seek it. We have never used paywalls or otherwise restricted access to our content, and we never will. That's why we are experimenting with new digital fundraising strategies and opportunities.

Future investment will help ensure the long-term sustainability of local outlets by enabling newsrooms to deliver a more streamlined, personalized experience on digital platforms—and this, in turn, will help to generate both the loyalty and financial support that public media has achieved on broadcast platforms. New digital products will create new opportunities for sponsorship. And stronger local journalism will better serve communities, creating a new pool of individual supporters for these newsrooms.

Another key role that public media organizations can play in building sustainable local news ecosystems will be engaging local and regional funders. Investment from national foundations will send a strong message about the urgency and importance of this work, and help to catalyze greater interest and larger gifts from these funders. Public media outlets can draw upon existing relationships with local institutions and philanthropists to help encourage robust investment.

## The Gulf States Newsroom: working together to serve communities

Throughout public media, collaboration has been a key strategy to help serve rural and historically underserved communities. One powerful example is the Gulf States Newsroom, a partnership between the public media outlets in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and NPR. Founded in 2020 to help address a regional gap in reporting, in just three years, the Gulf States Newsroom has doubled the number of full-time public media reporters serving the area. With journalists dedicated to covering beats like wealth and poverty and environmental justice, the collaborative is deeply attuned to the needs of the communities it serves.



Audience members at a block party hosted by Rocky Mountain Public Media's The Drop (Gerardo Federico).



Maine Public reporter Caitlin Andrews (Maine Public/Rebecca Conley).



A member of WNYC's community engagement team interviews people in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood (Theodora Kuslan).

## Journalism that informs, engages and activates communities

As philanthropists, community organizations and others seek to revitalize local journalism in America, public media offers a powerful foundation to build a stronger, more sustainable and more equitable model than what came before.

With strategic philanthropic investment, we can rapidly increase the breadth and depth of public media's local journalism, while providing a stable base to help strong, local news ecosystems to thrive. In partnership with other public media institutions and colleagues in other local newsrooms, we will strengthen the fabric of America's communities and improve the quality of life for all.



In addition to the many people who contributed to the development of this paper, thought leaders from across public media were interviewed in July and August 2023. Their insights and guidance were invaluable in the creation of this paper's vision and recommendations. They include:

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NPR

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PRINCIPAL  
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**Kerry Swanson**  
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**Adrian Velarde**  
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## About "Public Media and the Future of Local Journalism"

This paper was collaboratively created by NPR and leaders across public media in the summer of 2023. More than one hundred people contributed to the paper's contents and recommendations, including executives, journalists and fundraising staff from local public media organizations and NPR, as well as leadership from industry organizations. These collaborators read drafts, shared ideas, contributed photographs and made suggestions.

### Invitation to partner

We consider this paper to be a starting point in a larger conversation about the role public media can play in rebuilding local news in America. We welcome feedback, ideas and invitations to partner. More information is available at [publicmedialocalnews.org](http://publicmedialocalnews.org).

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Contributing editors: Sacha Adorno, Bruce Auster, Kathy Goldgeier, Sachi Kobayashi and Julie Parr

Design by: Eric W. Lee

#### Front Cover Photos (clockwise):

- Reporter Maya Miller conducts an interview (Gulf States Newsroom/Rashah McChesney).
- Senior reporter Stephan Bisaha (Gulf States Newsroom/Rashah McChesney).
- CapRadio reporter Nicole Nixon hosts a live debate (CapRadio/Andrew Nixon).
- Terrance Jones, a weekend student host in the WGLT studios in Normal, Illinois (WGLT/Emily Bollinger).
- Osage News editor Shannon Shaw Duty talks with KOSU Indigenous Affairs reporter Allison Herrera at an event (KOSU/Rachel Hubbard).
- Ashley Ahearn of Boise State Public Radio interviews Idaho rancher, Melanie Elzinga, on horseback (Louise Johns).



WCBU's Jody Holtz interviews a guest in studio (WCBU/Emily Bollinger).