

Tow Center for Digital
Journalism

A Tow/Knight Report

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL NEWS IN NEW YORK CITY

SAM FORD
with an introduction
and conclusion
by **CHRISTOPHER ALI**



Funded by the Tow Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Foundation to Promote Open Society, and the Abrams Foundation.

Acknowledgments

For their invaluable help in facilitating the conversation that produced this report and in bringing the report itself to fruition, I would like to thank Kai Falkenberg and Neil Padukone from the Mayor's Office of Media, Laura Walker and Jim Schachter from WNYC, Emily Bell, Katie Johnston, Meritzell Roca, Abigail Hartstone and George Civeris from the Tow Center, and all the participants who contributed to the discussion.

May 2018

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Executive Summary

US-based reporting jobs are increasingly concentrated within a small number of major metropolitan areas, driven by digital journalism outlets, according to research over the past few years from media analysts like [Joshua Benton](#) at Harvard's Nieman Lab and [Jack Shafer and Tucker Doherty](#) of Politico. As for cities where journalism jobs still flourish, New York City is atop that list. According to [a 2015 analysis by Jim Tankersley](#) in The Washington Post, the number of reporting jobs in New York basically held steady in the years between 2004 and 2014, while the number of reporting jobs outside that city, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., dropped by 25 percent in the same time period.

However, the proliferation of new, often unstable digital journalism hiring booms in the largest city in the US has masked just how dire the situation is for local reporting. [Paul Moses](#) illustrated this aptly in a 2017 piece for The Daily Beast, based on research for the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism's Urban Reporting Program, highlighting a lack of any dedicated reporter covering Queens County courts (which would be the nation's fourth largest city if it stood on its own). He wrote, "The problem for local news coverage is the simple fact that a story aimed at a national audience is likelier to generate heavy web traffic than a local one. Original local news reporting is threatened not only by layoffs but by the transfer of jobs to writing on whatever is of interest to a national web audience."

This common concern for the troubling state of local news in New York City led the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, the New York City Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, and WNYC to convene an off-the-record roundtable discussion focused on The Future of Local News on February 9, 2018, at the Columbia University School of Journalism.

The goal of the discussion was to bring together a select group of journalists, publishers, academics, funders, public-sector representatives, and other experts to discuss how to reverse the crisis in poorly resourced New York local media and work toward innovative solutions to ensure a sustainable future for local news.

The half-day roundtable took place in the morning and comprised a closed discussion built around three major questions:

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- What is the state of local journalism in New York City at the beginning of 2018?
- What trends and emerging business models in local news across the US and internationally might we be able to learn from?
- Where do we go from here? What are possible futures for local media in New York?

Insights

- As a 2018 report from Tony Proscio for Revson Foundation highlights, “New York City. . .has no major citywide daily newspaper devoted primarily to its civic affairs, much less to the more localized news of constituent boroughs like Brooklyn and Queens.” In a city where the population of a single borough is larger than many US metro areas, news resources dedicated to coverage for local citizens are stretched increasingly thin and are uneven in coverage across the city.
- Currently, reporting resources in New York City are often not well allocated, with multiple outlets across media types all providing slight variations of the same local stories and focused on the same localities, while other neighborhoods, institutions, and coverage areas are heavily underserved.
- The investment in national digital news publications located in New York City has masked just how dire the situation is for local journalism in the metro area, as has the generally good health of some New York City journalism institutions that no longer have a primarily local focus.
- Current research and thinking points toward a correlation between a lack of high-quality information and reporting about local issues and a population less civically engaged at the local level.
- The constellation of news sources that may not resemble traditional news organizations—neighborhood media, ethnic media, and local civic resources, among others—across such a large and diverse city makes understanding the exact state of local journalism hard to properly assess.
- Similarly, support for nonprofit media, new hyperlocal approaches, and civic information outlets and spaces all demonstrate grassroots models of what might be considered artisanal journalism, which may over time

act as a counterbalance to the diminishing presence of traditional mass commercial journalism.

- Some of the most instructive experiments in local journalism are not driven by new technology or skillful use of digital platforms but rather by the forging of deep and meaningful relationships with local audiences who are engaging, on purpose and with purpose, with local news organizations.
- Experimentation in local journalism must focus on models that are sustainable. But those models that are most resonant and sustainable in one locale may be the least likely candidates for success elsewhere, as they may build on the specific assets, culture, wants, and needs of the communities/neighborhoods they serve.

Recommendations

- Considering that the state of local journalism in New York City constitutes what many believe to be a market failure, there was near-consensus that those working in and around journalism must work collectively to find solutions—not just for the sustainability of their organizations but for building a thriving ecosystem for local journalism overall—even as some registered skepticism over the especially competitive nature of media in the city, which can make collaboration particularly challenging.
- The Jeff Jarvis mantra of “Do what you do best, and link to the rest” echoed throughout the meeting: Participants talked about better ways to allocate reporting resources around the city in order to avoid duplicative work that doesn’t add value for local residents, given that resources for coverage are so constrained.
- The foundational next step for addressing the challenges to the New York local journalism ecosystem must involve a comprehensive picture of the journalism efforts taking place throughout the city.
- Solutions must build on what’s already in place and address the areas where more support is needed, or where coverage is substantially lacking.
- Efforts at strengthening local journalism in New York must focus most heavily on sustainable ways to bolster coverage at the neighborhood and

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community levels, to ensure better representation, accountability, and civic participation.

- Sustainable solutions will likely include more professional reporters working at a local level, and their work may include collaborating with and providing resources to the communities they serve.
- Solutions for addressing the alarming state of local journalism in New York will likely require a diversified funding structure: a mix of existing commercial solutions, more significant opportunity for direct financial support from citizens, philanthropy, and potentially also support from the city.

Note on formatting: This convening was closed to the public and followed the Chatham House Rule. It was structured around themes about possible futures for local media in New York. Discussions were moderated by Sam Ford, who is a research affiliate with MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing, a Knight News Innovation fellow with the Tow Center, and an adjunct faculty member in the Western Kentucky University Department of Communication. Each topic included several lightning talks by renowned professionals and academics, followed by 45 minutes of discussion among participants from publishing, the public sector, and academia.

Introduction

By Christopher Ali, Tow Knight News Innovation fellow and University of Virginia assistant professor of media studies

The crisis of local news is one that we keep coming back to, and for reasons that make themselves apparent all too regularly. In January 2018, [the Charleston Gazette-Mail filed for bankruptcy](#), while in March The Denver Post—the only daily in Denver after the closure of the Rocky Mountain News in 2009—[laid off one-third of its newsroom](#). In response, the staff took to the pages of the paper, lambasting the Post’s hedge-fund owner, Alden Global Capital, in a series of articles and editorials, for failing to support its newsroom. In previous moments of doom and gloom, we heard tales of the struggles of The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, and the closures of the Rocky Mountain News and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Seldom, however, do we hear stories of the local news struggles in the country’s largest city—New York City.

Sure, we’ve heard about the struggles of The New York Times as it adapted to a digital world, but more recently we’ve been offered a steady diet of success stories about its [subscription increases](#) and even [a regular television program](#) on basic cable. The Grey Lady, however, is only one part of a local news ecosystem. Indeed, even the Times—America’s newspaper of record—has [severely cut back local coverage](#) of its namesake city. In 2017, two popular hyperlocal news sites, Gothamist and DNAInfo, [closed](#) (although the former has since [been resurrected](#)). What we now realize is that New York City is not immune to the crisis of journalism the country faces.

It is under these conditions that the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, the New York City Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment, and WNYC brought together journalists, editors, publishers, academics, community leaders, and industry watchers for a day of discussion on the state and future of New York City’s local media ecosystem.

In addition to facing similar challenges to local news ecosystems around the country—including competition for attention, a lack of revenue, problems of visibility, and questions of sustainability—New York news organizations face issues around balance: How do you balance being a cosmopolitan

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hub to the world, and a neighborhood city to New Yorkers? As more and more newspapers and news outlets focus outwards rather than inwards in their editorial choices, the balance has tipped toward the former.

This was one of several items discussed throughout the day. While the pages in this report detail the themes and preliminary conclusions, three main conversation threads from our discussion in February resonate with what we know of the local news industries and ecosystems of the United States: the value of local news, the definition of local news, and the ecosystems of local news.

The value of local news

First and foremost, one of the key points of agreement throughout our discussion was the value of local news. Research suggests that local news has multiple functions, including conveying information, giving voice to the community, campaigning, and investigating, along with fostering civic and democratic engagement.¹ Others point to less tangible but still crucial functions of local news. These include fostering a sense of community identity,² solidifying community norms and standards,³ communicating global events,⁴ fostering an attachment to “place,”⁵ and performing an important integration role for newcomers.⁶ Understanding the value of local news has led to the formation of standards for what have become known as the “information needs of communities.” In 2012, the Communications Policy Research Network undertook a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic and rested upon eight categories of critical information need: (1) emergencies and risks, (2) health and welfare, (3) education, (4) transportation, (5) economic opportunities, (6) the environment, (7) civic information, and (8) political information.⁷

The definition of local news

While the value of local news to American communities was understood among participants, and finds agreement in the literature, the definition of the term “local news” was, at times, questioned. With the ubiquity of advanced communication technologies, the nature of what counts as local

has shifted. In the 1840's, the telegraph extended our means of communication; more recently, expanding bringing a newspaper from one community into another meant that what was local was no longer confined to the geographic parameters of a community. Broadcasting has done the same, extending the reach of the local as far as the station's antenna permitted. With the advent of digital communications, we can literally bring our local news with us in the form of our mobile devices.⁸ We can read about news in Queens from Tokyo, or use the Facebook check-in function to be local, anywhere. But what does this mean to the definition of local news? Is local news defined as news about a community, news by the community, news produced in the community, or news of interest to the community?⁹

Trying to capture the definition of local news in the digital age has brought about a number of new terms. "Hyperlocal" may be the one with which most readers are familiar. While the term dates back further than the digital age, it gained prominence as it came to underscore a type of journalism that is neighborhood- (if not street-) focused, and is made possible by the low barriers to entry provided by the web.¹⁰ Other terms add further to our understanding of the way local journalism has shifted: Krissy Hess and Lisa Waller coined the term "geo-social journalism" to describe the ability for someone to be interested in "local" news even if not residing in that locality.¹¹ Local news can travel! Others still focus on the role of digital-era local news in newcomer communities. Wan-Ying Lin and Hayeon Song for instance talk about ethnic news being "multi-local" in that ethnic news outlets treat as local both the home and host localities in equal measure.¹² For them, both are local. Cheng echoes this with her term "geo-ethnic," which she uses to describe the task of ethnic news organizations that must localize news from home for a diasporan audience:

Geo-ethnic storytelling consists of two major components: first, geo-ethnic stories are ethnically or culturally relevant to a particular ethnic group; and second, geo-ethnic stories are geographically bound and concern primarily the happenings in the community. Hence, ethnic media with geo-ethnic storytelling practices may report home country stories like most ethnic media do, but they go beyond that to make their stories relevant to the local residents in the immigrant community. Conversely, ethnic media may act like truly local media to perform civic functions, but with geo-ethnic

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storytelling they do more than local media to address the concerns of a particular ethnic group in a residential area.¹³

Two things are consistent with this new thinking on the definition of local news. First is that we need to expand our thinking as to what constitutes local news and who practices local journalism. We need to include ethnic media, community media, user-generated media in our discussions. The case for ethnic media became especially clear in our conversations at Tow. The second takeaway is that local news, while a moving target, is always related to a particular geographic place. This may sound obvious, but the statement is important: As we have come to learn, despite a digitally connected ecosystem which allows for near-instant communication across the world, we still live our lives—go to school, get groceries, work, and perhaps most importantly, vote—in a place. We are fundamentally local.¹⁴

The ecosystems of local news

A key focal point of our conversation was on the idea of a local news ecosystem.¹⁵ That is to say, we need to take stock of all of the outlets and organizations providing local news in a community, even if that community is New York City. Studying local news ecosystems has become increasingly popular in order to understand the information needs of communities: The New America Foundation, for instance, produced four excellent “community information case studies”, one each of the Research Triangle area around Durham, North Carolina; Seattle; Washington, D.C.; and Scranton, Pennsylvania. The Pew foundation has done such studies in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Macon, Georgia; Denver; and in Baltimore.¹⁶ Phil Napoli did the same for three communities in New Jersey (Morristown, New Brunswick, and Newark), focusing exclusively on “local journalism sources based in and serving these geographically defined communities.” Napoli and his teams at Rutgers and Duke Universities employ an ecosystem approach, and note that it consists of four different layers: news, journalism, media, and communications.¹⁷

The aim is to catalog and assess the multiple news voices and outlets available in a geographic community and, as the participants in our conversation noted, figure out what type of news is being communicated, what

type is being neglected, and what the information needs of the community happen to be. As Napoli et al. write: “a key dimension of the health of any local journalism ecosystem is the extent to which a community is served by organizations and/or individuals producing local journalism.”¹⁸

The implication here is that any assessment of the local media ecosystem in New York City, or anywhere else for that matter, must move beyond the regular actors of daily newspapers and local television and radio stations, and recognizing the role that hyperlocal news outlets, ethnic news organizations, public media outlets, and community media outlets play in local news reporting.¹⁹

Another key point is that in order to fully understand this problem, we need to have a better understanding of the information needs of the diverse communities of New York City. This is a daunting task indeed, but if one side of the coin of studying local news ecosystems is assessing the available outlets and the content, the other side is understanding the information needs of the community members. This is where researchers and journalists need to work together to make sure that local news providers fully serve New Yorkers.

In the following pages we revisit these themes and report in detail the meeting at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism on the future of local news in New York City. The conversation revolved around three key areas that connect back to the thoughts in this introduction: The state of New York’s local media, trends and emerging business models, and where to go from here. Key to remember is that this meeting was only the catalyst for a much larger conversation, which must continue and expand. We invite you to join us in this conversation and to reflect on your own experiences with local news in the Big Apple.

Discussion I: State of New York City's Local Media

Even though so many journalists call New York their home, we see a continued decrease in positions dedicated to covering news with its residents in mind—a decline that has worsened considerably in the past year. How are journalism professionals in local positions approaching their work and serving their communities in this altered landscape? What is the projected state of New York journalism as we look ahead to 2018?

A catastrophic mismatch

At the beginning of the convening, one speaker evoked [Tony Proscio's January 2018 report for the Charles H. Revson Foundation](#) entitled “Out of Print: The Case for Philanthropic Support for Local Journalism in a Time of Market Upheaval.” The report leads by comparing New York City's local media plight with the news environment of Ireland, home of 4.7 million people, which is less than the combined population of just the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens (approximately 5 million residents between them). Ireland is home to eight daily newspapers and dozens of regional and local papers, while:

New York City, roughly twice the size of Ireland, and with a metropolitan population nearly the size of Australia's, has no major citywide daily newspaper devoted primarily to its civic affairs, much less to the more localized news of constituent boroughs like Brooklyn and Queens. One slender daily covers Brooklyn five days a week; there is no equivalent in Queens.

In particular, this passage from Proscio's report highlights the current plight:

The shrinkage of local reporting may be creating a vicious cycle: fewer local stories lead to a less-informed readership, which then grows less interested in local news, thus further reducing the incentive to report local stories. Evidence is plentiful that this decline in information contributes to a corresponding drop in civic engagement and an increase in political rancor.

One of the attendees added further context to this challenge, referencing the range of research “that shows reducing local news coverage leads to New Yorkers who are less informed on what's going on in their communities, ultimately leading to reduced civic engagement and in fact lower voter

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turnout in local elections.” For instance, the last New York City mayoral election had 22 percent voter turnout, while the primary leading up to it had a 14 percent voter turnout. As another attendee said, “We need smart, capable institutions and people who are capable of analyzing the news, filtering out the nonsense, and relaying that to the public.”

The challenges of sustaining local media, and the impacts of its decline, are not unique to New York City. As one attendee put it:

An industry full of talented and well-intentioned people (is) no match for an economic perfect storm. Talk about when bad things happen to good people—the newspaper industry should have their own self-help aisle in Barnes & Noble. For the most part, and there are exceptions...the jig for me is just simply up. Commercial media cannot meet the information needs of our communities. It’s a mismatch that is becoming catastrophic. In a generation, the U.S. has lost half of its full-time reporters and, on a per capita basis, two-thirds of its newsgathering spend...It’s not that Mark Zuckerberg took that away; the number of reporters in the U.S. has gone down every single year since 1990.

Another noted that the rise of national digital publications has obscured the true depth of the dire situation for journalism at a regional and local level: “Of course, it’s much, much worse than that...What’s masking (the decline) is that there are all sorts of new, interesting, national publications...that are hiring.” One person noted that the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which had counted full-time reporting jobs in the U.S. since 1978, “got so depressed in 2015 that they just quit.”

There are aspects of these challenges, and the implications of the broader issues, that are felt everywhere from rural communities to smaller cities to major metro areas. Consider, for instance, many of the constraints and challenges Christopher Ali and Damian Radcliffe unearthed in their 2017 Tow Center report on “[Life at Small-Market Newspapers](#).” And the concerns Proscio voices about how the decline of local reporting impacts the larger communication and civic engagement ecosystem of a place echoes many aspects of work that Andrea Wenzel and Sam Ford did through their 2017 Tow Center report on “[Lessons on Overcoming Polarization from Bowling Green and Ohio County, Kentucky](#),” and that Wenzel, Anthony Nadler, Melissa Valle, and Marc Lamont Hill conducted in the Philadelphia

Area through their 2018 Tow Center report on “[Listening Is Not Enough: Mistrust and Local News in Urban and Suburban Philly.](#)”

A market failure in local journalism

But the discussion about the state of local media in New York also highlighted the many challenges of covering local news in one of the biggest media markets in the world, where the odd dichotomy of dwindling local news resources in a city that concentrates journalism talent has played out. Multiple people in the room highlighted that several longstanding New York-based news organizations have moved further and further from a local focus and mandate as they made decisions in the interest of the financial health of the news organization overall. Whether that has come through covering New York-based institutions in ways that generate interest from audiences the world over, or morphing into national or global publications, or being heavily affected by digital traffic models built on “chasing traffic highs,” as one attendee put it, newsrooms in a city at the center of the digital publishing industry often invest in business models that preclude a local focus. The decline in New York-focused reporting was well illustrated by Julie Sandorf from Revson in her 2017 letter about the “[market failure](#)” in local journalism.

In particular, our February 2018 gathering was heavily influenced by the continued volatility in recent headlines—the conversation took place only days after tronc (owner of The New York Daily News) announced the sale of The Los Angeles Times and a few months after the demise of the Gothamist and DNAinfo (but a couple of weeks before the announced [resurrection](#) of Gothamist, DCist, and LAist by WNYC, KPCC, and WAMU). Throughout the discussion, it was clear that the health of the local media ecosystem (both journalists working locally and, perhaps especially, New York-based journalists working at nationally or internationally focused organizations) has been affected not just by layoffs and declines but also by cycles of investment in new strategies and new positions that don't last. (See, for instance, Susie Banikarim's 2018 Nieman Lab prediction on “[R.I.P. Pivot to Video 2017-2017.](#)”)

Overshadowing this discussion were the ways in which the algorithms

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of technology platforms have shaped the business models of many local newsrooms, as well as the need to find sustainable ways to reaching local residents in ways that depend on diverse revenue streams and aren't susceptible to major disruption each time a platform's algorithm changes.

During a discussion of the toll on accountability reporting taken by diminished newsroom resources, one attendee also brought up another area where the decline in local coverage had significant impact on a sense of common community—a local news mission aimed at “enabling communities to know each other not as cartoon characters, but as real people”:

One of the ways this was traditionally done was through obituaries. And wedding announcements. Birth announcements. Personal news. These were really important ways people came to understand one another. One of the side effects of the collapse of newspapers is that almost no newspapers have staff writers doing obituaries. It's actually a huge social change. We used to have this thing that newspapers would write about the lives of people in the community. Now, that's sponsored content...It's a big deal.

(For more on the impact these sorts of publications can have on understanding others or getting connected to your neighborhood, see Anna Clark's 2017 Columbia Journalism Review piece on the [role of obituaries](#) in telling the stories of the opioid crisis and Sam Ford's 2017 CJR piece about the [role of society columns](#) in rural areas.)

Do we deserve the things we're asking for today?

The discussion frequently turned to the difficulty of talking about the state of local media across a complicated array of not just neighborhood publications but also ethnic media rooted in New York City that cover communities across the city and beyond, and the difficulty for the group in attendance to adequately understand and talk about that vast, complex, and diverse media landscape. As one person said:

NYC is a group of villages, and trying to produce local news, one size fits all, is really a challenge. I don't know what the answer is. We still do our neighborhood newspapers. People still like them...I don't see the diversity

here that is needed to really understand what's happening throughout New York City and why people are reading or are not reading the news.

Another attendee pointed out a wealth of localized knowledge is lost when media at that level goes under, even if a new publication arises covering the same neighborhood or ethnic community: "One of the biggest things that we're losing in local news is that there are not many of the great editors left who know what happened 10 years ago, 15 years ago, and how this is the same old, same old."

The discussion also challenged a narrative in which there has been an imagined "good old days" of journalism in covering the New York metropolitan area, particularly when it comes to how local reporting resources were concentrated and allocated across the metro area. As one attendee put it, "There was never a halcyon day for coverage for some of us, not ever." Various attendees pointed to concerns about outlets in the current New York City news ecosystem often duplicating resources; for instance, with eight outlets reporting on the same general story separately, while other stories go unreported. One person voiced the concern that such an approach also leads to a lack of differentiated brands in some sectors of local New York City media when everyone takes the same general approach and covers the same general topics. Several people pointed out that those resources have often covered some communities to the exclusion of others. Another pointed to the lack of diversity within the editorial boards of the biggest newsrooms in the city:

Our companies, on the top, look very different than on the bottom. If we want to be careful with our communities and how we are covering these issues, maybe having someone from that community on top to talk about it and understand the problem and what is it we need to get done, that would be helpful for any company. The newsrooms that I've been to here in New York, in LA...they look the same. There's not a lot of diversity. We can talk a lot about diversity and covering minorities, but, if it doesn't come from the top, we're just wasting time.

One attendee emphasized the repercussions lack of coverage can have for communities and the need for news to bring real and immediate change to people's lives, particularly if news organizations are asking for direct financial support from residents:

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The state of...journalism isn't about us. I think about everybody who, when the coverage goes bad, disappears. I think about the people who die, who don't get fed, who don't get good water... Trust me, people understand how important news is when your house is three feet under water, and people have stopped coming. People understand how important news is when it's seven years later and they still haven't fixed most of the schools. We need to ask ourselves at the center, from our business models or whatever else we do, at the core, "Do we deserve the things we are asking for today?" We are asking people to support journalism and pay for journalism, when people are making less than they ever have before. We're asking people to give up more of their income...Are you going to spend time watching my program, reading the news, that you could spend with your kids, that you could spend navigating your train?... We do not necessarily deserve the trust we are asking for from people, but we still have to ask them.

Discussion II: Trends and Emerging Business Models in Local News

As we face the crisis in local journalism nationally—from rural areas to mid-sized cities to major metropolitan areas—a range of experiments and approaches are being tested and discussed. What can we learn from these experiments, in New York and elsewhere? What sort of support do they need to fully be explored? Which localized solutions can be scaled and duplicated?

Changing what we do

“What is innovation? It’s not just technology.” This was one of the primary themes for a thread of discussion throughout the gathering; it centered on finding approaches with the potential to work at both the neighborhood and at metro levels. This certainly includes innovation in technology, but also in funding, in audience engagement, and in thinking about scale. As one person said when the discussion on trends and models began, much of the most interesting innovation in journalism is being driven by “the shift to hyperlocal and hyper-focused startups serving very specific audiences, or with a very specific approach, that are really user-focused; collaborations and partnerships, both locally, nationally, and even with other institutions like libraries; and engagement, and not engagement as a checkbox.” (Related: see the recent Columbia Journalism Review piece from Sam Ford and Andrea Wenzel based on their Tow Center research, “[Sourcing Innovation from a Rural Journalism Lab](#),”) Many voiced the sentiment that “we have to get away from recreating print newspapers,” or trying to preserve the way things looked in the past.

Several pointed to trends of continued support and new models in hyperlocal journalism as examples of continued vibrancy and experimentation in the news. One person noted how heartening it is, during a time of what many consider market failure in local journalism, to see so many leaping to fill in the gaps: “We’re hearing a much higher proportion (of people looking to start new nonprofit newsrooms) are from people who are not editorial journalists. They either have worked on the business side or they are community people—they’re businessmen, community foundations, just concerned citizens—and they are trying to figure out, How do I pull together a coalition of money?” Another emphasized that this entrepreneurial energy

at the neighborhood level should be a point of inspiration for everyone in the room:

People are supporting small journalism. People are supporting journalism. Just because people aren't supporting the names we know doesn't mean that people aren't supporting journalism. People are supporting journalism so much that, when it is not done to their liking, they are doing it themselves...I'm not necessarily here to save everybody's job. We might have to change what we do, change who we'll be, change who we are. But the stuff we do is some of the most important stuff in the world.

Local is not dead

There was also a strong emphasis on sustainability—creating models for funding journalism that have enough reliable streams of revenue to avoid the volatility that has defined the plight of many news organizations, and the overall local news ecosystem, in the recent past. In particular, multiple attendees voiced the need for models that are realistic and that don't leave journalists disconnected from knowing what sustains a journalism operation. According to one attendee, “Local is not dead. There are a lot of organizations and a lot of people who are passionate about content who have no idea how to run a business. We're at a time right now that is evolving. Yes, people are going to go out of business, because you can't pay your editor what you paid them five years (ago)...If you do not evolve, you die...Creativity is what needs to happen in this room.”

Some pointed toward “co-creation” with local residents as one way to adequately cover neighborhoods, while “fostering and developing the next generation of reporting and editing talent.” One person called models of co-reporting and production training “a real win-win-win”: for editorial staff, who are “able to train locals and be able to assist in members of the public getting more education as reporters,” for community members themselves, who “come away with new professional development and investigative reporting skills,” and for “readers, viewers, and listeners of this coverage.”

A few of the outlets approvingly referenced in this conversation that readers may want to explore include [Bklyner](#), [The Rockaway Advocate](#), [Gay City News](#), [Caribbean Life](#), [The Haitian Times](#), [The New Tropic](#), [The Evergrey](#), [City Bureau](#), [Youth Radio](#), [MinnPost](#), [VTDigger](#), [Texas](#)

Tribune, Hoodline and its data-driven local wire service, Chalkbeat, Outlier Media, The Bristol Cable in England, The Ferret in Scotland, La Diaria in Uruguay, and La Nación in Argentina. Attendees also referenced the way in which De Correspondent has [provided full transparency in how members' money is spent](#), how Mother Jones has [walked readers through details of the cost of newsroom projects](#), and how The Daily Progress has [partnered with Charlottesville Tomorrow](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Like flowing water

The discussion also emphasized the need to think both about solutions and models for individual outlets and also of the needs of the news and information ecosystem in general. As one person put it, “The models for sustaining journalism and the models for serving communities are not necessarily the same, and we need to think about them both.” Another asked, “How do you create an ecosystem that is greater than the sum of its parts?”

While most agreed that the current models of commercial journalism weren't enough to sustain the ecosystem, there was skepticism that the economics of venture capital work out well for hyperlocal news solutions. There was agreement that nonprofit models could provide interesting building blocks and lessons learned for a vibrant news ecosystem. (See Sam Ford and Jeff Pundyk's [2017 Knowledge@Wharton piece](#) for more on this point.) There was also a feeling that the world of journalism could learn from the worlds of community service organizations and public service models. And there were specific references to how [the Lenfest Institute for Journalism](#) has built its approach in Philadelphia, to public service-oriented initiatives like [Report for America](#), to ideas like creating a [Community Information District](#), to support organizations like the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#), to initiatives like the [News Revenue Hub](#), to startups like [Local Standrd](#), to new approaches like the [Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism](#), and to the ways in which organizations like [Reveal](#) and [ProPublica](#) have partnered on a local level.

The list of organizations and projects above is not exhaustive. It was clear that the hard work and experimentation of many innovative voices in journalism provided significant energy and hope for those in the room.

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But as the discussion of models and experiments that currently exist turned to what might be done in New York City, one speaker cautioned that one model's success shouldn't encourage its admirers to copy it in ways that don't take into account what already exists across New York City communities and neighborhoods:

I would encourage people not to move too quickly to saying we want to build on replicable models, because I continue to be surprised by the things that go that I never thought would. I still think it's very fluid what will work. They're kind of like flowing water. They figure out how they will fit in the community, and then they try to build on that. They may look very odd. There's one that's a library that has become a major publisher. Some of them have started as events or just community gatherings and become publications. They are coming in all kinds of ways. We are always looking...for models that can scale...But we are always looking for these other things that we didn't expect. It's a very encouraging time.

This idea of creating models built on local assets and cultural facets unique to a neighborhood or community reflects findings in Andrea Wenzel and Sam Ford's 2018 Tow Center Columbia Journalism Review article, "[Truths from the Liars Table.](#)")

**Discussion III:
Where Do We Go
From Here?
What Are
Possible Futures
for Local Media
in New York?**

How do we address the immediate challenges of underserved communities, while simultaneously building the processes that will support and sustain quality journalism and drive informed civic engagement across a diverse range of communities in the city?

Getting outside our own institutions

As attendees discussed what might be done to strengthen the local news ecosystem in New York City throughout the day, one recurring theme was that solutions for the future cannot be a restoring of “the way things used to be”—as one person put it “nostalgia, or trying to replicate what journalism looked like in the Golden Age of Information.” Looking forward involves seeking new models and solutions that speak the language(s) of New York City and “[serve] the concerns of the cities of today and the future, not the citizens of yesterday.”

One common point of agreement was that there were areas where there should be greater collaboration among those working in local journalism covering New York City. But there was certainly disagreement as to where and when collaboration should be encouraged.

Many at the convening felt that it was time for a strong, collaborative, and overt push to respond to the challenge at hand. For instance, one attendee said, “We’ve got to get outside of our own institutions. Part of the exciting thing of partnering with...other folks is the ability to say, What is the need? What is the opportunity?” And not just thinking, What can my institution do?” Because we need to take the broader look.” Another echoed that sentiment, with a strong sense of urgency: “If we’re talking about doing something in New York City, every single person who works in New York City media should have to commit to supporting it, like, now.”

Another attendee, however, voiced the challenge of working with competitors in a commercial marketplace: “If (your competitor) is a sharp businessperson, they probably aren’t going to want to do business with you or give you visibility. Why? Everything is a threat. I look at every little ancillary business as a threat, because they can take away (audience) and advertising dollars.” For them, a shared ecosystem might focus on pooling resources around certain efficiencies (“I’ll let the same person deliver my

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newspaper.”) but little desire to partner in ways that promote a competitor. Others pointed toward room for sharing knowledge about tools and platforms that provide no particular competitive advantage but that can keep people from wasting energy and resources on “reinventing the wheel”: content management systems, customer relationship management systems, newsletter products, and donation processors.

Some were concerned, though, as to whether what they perceived as an ideal level of collaboration was possible in the journalism industry, where a zero-sum-game mentality often prevails. One attendee noted:

I can go to lunch with someone who runs a TV station, and they'll tell me how much they love (our site), and if I want to end lunch, all I have to do is ask them to help...If we all believe the future of journalism is really important and helping our communities is really important, then we have to help each other out...It just pisses me off when people don't want to partner with you while they tell you how much they like what you do. Do you really believe in local journalism that much? Because it seems like you believe in your local journalism and not journalism as a broad ecosystem.

Another was concerned about the potential of New York media in particular to engage in this level of collaboration: “New York particularly sucks at (collaboration)... New York, because of the resources we have and because of the egos we have, is 100 times worse. I'm pessimistic about our ability to do that, because we never have before.”

What's missing?

Various counterexamples were raised of partnerships that had been forged between news outlets across the city over the years in ways that at least demonstrated some hope for countering this trend—nonprofit news organizations collaborating with commercial media players on stories, for instance, or public radio drawing on newspaper reporters as experts on their shows. And, throughout the day, various attendees talked about the vast number of places, issues, and experiences that don't make the news, evoking a decade-old maxim from media critic Jeff Jarvis: [Do what you do best, and link to the rest.](#)

And some discussion centered on the idea that a collaborative approach for strengthening the ecosystem around local media engagement still left

plenty of room for competition—“An open process can be an open fight,” as one person said. According to another attendee, “We want a world in which local journalism and local media is acknowledged as a public good and treated that way, and we also want an economic model that is responsive and realistic.”

Many of those at the gathering felt that approaches to strengthening the local media system had to put significant focus at the neighborhood level. For instance, one attendee said, “We should focus our time here on what can work at the neighborhood level or the metro level...Bigger outlets just can’t do it. If there isn’t a system that can support people actually seeing value on their street corner, and they want to pay for that or find a way to support that, then we can’t solve our problem.” There was also a feeling that “every community deserves high-quality reporting,” but that might be most likely to be achieved through a combination of professional reporters and community contributors.

Few voiced disagreement with the idea that more professional reporters were essential to achieving the sort of knowledge and accountability essential for the news ecosystem, and to have “the ability to frighten politicians, because, otherwise, what’s the point of doing this if you can’t have impact?” A healthy journalism ecosystem for the city was defined as one which “works when nobody is paying attention.” As one person put it:

When you look at a lot of the problems we’re talking about, the missing ingredient is a boot on the ground...a reporter being there. It’s obvious, but for a lot of the last 10 years we’ve focused on technological options that would help expand distribution or make distribution more effective. We’ve focused on engagement tools that can better connect people to our readers. We’ve focused on storytelling tools that make it more vibrant. All those are true, and great, and essential ingredients...But any sort of business model we talk about has to have, as a result, more reporters.

However, this requires, in the words of one person, the need to “be lean. Do a lot with a little. We can’t make it only about investors and entrepreneurs. How is this done in neighborhoods where there isn’t a lot of capital?” In many cases, the role of those professionals might be not only to tell stories but also to act as professional interlocutor—“helping people, connecting communities, training people.” And that would require a much

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more open process for what it means to tell stories, gather news and information, and share stories about New York and its various neighborhoods and communities, to imagine journalism as a process in which more of the community plays a significant role. As an attendee put it:

It's a deep irony that, as journalism has become deeper and deeper into an economic crisis, it's also become more professionalized. It's more and more expensive to become a journalist. The pathways to having your voice in these conversations gets narrower and narrower...Is the question how we pay journalists, or how do we provide important civic information and make space for important local conversations where everybody is heard?

On the other hand, it's important that models that are lean not lead to models that are exploitative or unsustainable. (One attendee voiced that "there's really just two worlds in journalism," contrasting between prestige outlets and university projects, on the one hand, and cash-strapped neighborhood efforts on the other, noting "I got reporters sleeping in my spare bedroom all the time, because they don't have a place to live.")

One person voiced that the first part of the solution is to end an environment of panic that can lead to a feeling of helplessness or inevitable decline: "Stop thinking of this as a big dark cloud of a problem that's so scary we don't know how to deal with it. And we have these wrenching conversations that we have had for 13 years now, constantly...What I think we all need to do is a census of where we're at—What is it that we need, and where do we need it?—and demystify this problem." This point was repeatedly raised—that, to find a solution, the first step would require having a full grasp of what exists across the city, neighborhood by neighborhood, community by community. Another person added questions of what an audit or census of the existing state of local news in New York might ask: "What do we have? What is it? What's missing? Who's doing the best stuff? Who could help more?" And several pointed toward the need to support that existing ecosystem before building anything new. That may start with making a greater number of those already working to cover issues at the hyperlocal level part of subsequent conversations. And it might lead to an approach, as one attendee put it, with one central question: "Go in and say, 'What do you need?'" Some people need research. Some people need a whole team."

After such an audit, there would be a need to figure out structure, mod-

els of funding, and the overall mission—to learn what it is that a more concentrated effort would try to do. Considering the current state of market failure, there was strong emphasis from many in the room that commercial media alone could not solve the problem.

If there's a crisis in local news in Gotham, why waste it?

Regarding new revenue streams beyond traditional commercial approaches, more financial support from community members themselves was a key part of the discussion. According to one attendee, “People...will pay for news they value and trust, if we ask them. We have to ask them. We have to share our story. We have to make it compelling. And we have to let them know what their role is in supporting this.” Such an approach would require making residents part of this discussion about the future of local news in the city. (One attendee voiced optimism about people’s interest in such a conversation, considering New York’s long history of significant civic engagement.) As one person said about the fate of local journalism, “It’s not up to us to decide, it’s up to our communities to decide, and the people we’re serving. It’s their decision. And the more we can give that power over to them, the more people will reinvest in us, the more sustainable our businesses will be, and the easier our work will be.”

The direct role the city could play in supporting local news also came up, potentially through fellowships, investment in innovative companies, or some forms of operational funding support administered without direct control over how the funding was allocated (modeled, for instance, on the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#)).

One attendee said that the future of local journalism looked dire without significant public, nonprofit, and philanthropic support:

Over the next decade, one of two things is going to happen: we will either adopt the vast majority of our journalistic institutions as civic institutions, or our civil society will head toward an irreversible, drain-circling decline. We don’t tell our symphonies that they can only spend what they earn and sell in tickets. We have to get used to the idea that the new normal is

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that the idea of an informed public is the responsibility of the public itself, rather than the incidental byproduct of a series of commercial transactions.

Several questions centered on what level of a combination of philanthropic funding would be necessary to give a strong base of support to local journalism. (Is it ballet level? Symphony level?) But others also warned of the challenges of a nonprofit model that “strongly splits the funding from the journalism” in ways that makes it difficult to consider the revenue opportunities in audience engagement, for instance, because news becomes too divorced from discussions of where and how the community might financially support it. Another talked about the challenges public funding can bring (becoming a political football) and the challenge private philanthropy can bring, namely concerns about an ideological bent: “‘Who pays the piper calls the tune,’ whether it’s a well-meaning foundation or a well-meaning corporation or a local government that will always get complaints from local taxpayers (for making) some kind of content people don’t want.”

Many agreed that the antidote to these concerns is a collection of models built on diverse funding structures. And there was a strong feeling that this was the moment to develop those models. To sum up the conversation, consider these quotes from the meeting, which underscore the immediacy of the call to action:

- “More is more...Let’s not go for a single solution. Let’s go for as much as we can. We put 8 million people on two islands and a sandbar...There can be more than one. The issue isn’t that we have to find a solution. But we are talking about the fact that the solutions we have are often replicating each other.”
- “The notion of starting a large-scale experiment here in the largest city (in the country), that is one of the most diverse cities in the world, is incredibly exciting.”
- “Now is the moment for a movement in civic media. If there was ever a moment to change what happened in the past...It doesn’t feel like it’s one thing, but it’s one movement.”
- “A local ecosystem which is a civic asset, funded by...commerce and philanthropy, in the nation’s most important and visible market—If there’s a crisis in local news in Gotham, why waste it?”

Conclusion

By Christopher Ali

Our day of discussion brought to the fore some surprising points of agreement. One of the most notable was the agreement that local news in New York City, and throughout the country, is what economists would call a “market failure.” By this, I mean that the private market is unable to produce enough quantity and quality of a good that is deemed socially desirable—in this case, local journalism. Two other, less surprising points of agreement: the need to experiment in all facets of local journalism, and the fact that we need to spend more time understanding local news ecosystems of the country. Since I talked about the importance of studying local news ecosystems in my introduction, I use these concluding remarks to unpack the first two points of agreement and offer some thoughts about going forward.

Market failure

Market failure is a concept that has been greatly discussed in various circles of journalism studies and the political economy of communication.²⁰ I had never heard the term outside of the academy; it is defined in the words of Victor Pickard, Associate Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania:

(Market failure) typically refers to a predicament where the market is unable to efficiently allocate resources, especially public goods. Often this occurs when private enterprise will not invest in critical social services because it cannot extract the profits that would justify necessary expenditures. Market failure has been cited as a justification for state intervention in the provision of public education and other social services and goods not supported by market transactions²¹

In other words, a market failure arises when the market is incapable of supporting a public good. In this case, the public good is local journalism.

The question, of course, is what can be done to correct the market failure of local journalism? For those of us who specialize in media policy and regulation, regulation is generally considered under these circumstances.²² Regulators can establish quotas, mandates, and subsidies to ensure the market adequately provides for the needs of consumers and citizens. The

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government itself can even provide for these needs as is the case with public media, public education, and the military. Journalism professionals, however, tend to recoil at the mention of government intervention. But then what can be done if we agree that the private market has failed? In a more recent article, Pickard offers three remedies for the market failure of journalism:

- Greater non-profit journalism
- Allocate greater resources to public media
- Create an environment for more experiments in digital journalism (discussed more in the following section).²³

In the first remedy, Pickard highlights the growth of non-profit journalism organizations, noting the success of ProPublica, The Intercept/First Look Media, and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism.

Pickard's second recommendation is politically dicey. Greater public media support has been a rallying cry for decades, but has largely fallen on deaf ears. The current Administration's threat to eliminate funding for the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#) is a case in point. On the flip side, the recent [spectrum auction](#) has provided a much-needed influx of money into public broadcasting, some of which is being devoted to local journalism. In Virginia, [Commonwealth Public Broadcasting](#) earmarked its \$182 million proceeds from the sale of spectrum to a foundation. The dividends will be used to support local and statewide journalism projects. Additionally, the fact that WNYC paid to revive the Gothamist suggests that public media institutions are willing to flex their muscle in order to ensure that local journalism stays alive. Still, more can and should be done here, both by institutions and by governments to bolster the role that public media plays in strengthening local news—in New York and throughout the country.²⁴

As noted in this report, we engaged in a serious conversation about the need for local journalism to be supported by a mixture of market support, public support, nonprofit support, and philanthropic support. The underlying rationale is that journalism is not a market product but rather a civic institution.²⁵ Questions abound here: how much support is adequate? What happens if those offering the support start calling the tunes? Will this stymie economic growth in the industry? To be sure, these are impor-

tant questions but they must not overshadow the main problem: Journalism is in market failure and needs to increase its funding and diversify its revenue sources.

Pickard suggests the government can foster innovation in journalism by investing in digital startups. Mariana Mazzucato, in her book “The Entrepreneurial State,” offers a similar suggestion. While not focusing on journalism, she argues that not only does the state have a role to play in R&D by investing in startups and private sector research, but that historically, the state has engaged in these activities.²⁶ In terms of direct support, Pickard suggests that the government could support journalistic innovation through tax vouchers, diverting funds from international broadcasting, empowering journalism schools to take a more proactive role in news reporting, and “charging commercial broadcasters for their use of the public spectrum.”

What is clear is that saving journalism requires out-of-the-box thinking and experimentation.

Experiment, experiment, experiment

Experimentation was a major recurring theme throughout the day’s conversation. Experiments in funding and revenue generation were discussed, along with experiments in content provision, reporting styles, and platforms. One of the key points of agreement here was on the need for partnerships. News and reporting needs to be seen as a collective experience rather than a competitive one. Partnerships allow news outlets to focus on what Jan Schaffer of J-Lab calls “the master narratives.”²⁷ They also underscore the reality that in today’s local news ecosystem “you can’t do everything, but you can do anything.”²⁸

In one of our 2017 studies for the Tow Center on the state of small market newspapers in the country, Damian Radcliffe and I reported on a number of innovative partnerships. This included the content sharing arrangement between Charlottesville Tomorrow—an online hyperlocal news site focused on civic issues, zoning, and k-12 education—and the newspaper of record, The Daily Progress. We also talked about Oregon news organization

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the Klamath Falls Herald and News partnering with a local community college to produce augmented reality segments.²⁹

Partnerships and collaborations aside, other experiments might include using local tax dollars to form community information districts. Others still suggested a [transfer of wealth from Silicon Valley](#) to local journalism, and a doubling down on philanthropic contributions.

The focus on experiments reminds us that we are all in this together—policymakers, journalists, publishers, owners, researchers, readers, viewers, donors. It reminds us that this is a true ecosystem—an ecosystem that, even in New York City, is as fragile as the Everglades. Rather than see this as daunting, our discussion demonstrated a considerable energy and enthusiasm. The will to solve this challenge exists. What we need to do now is keep the conversation going, keep experimenting, and keep learning from our peers and our communities.

Next steps were difficult to pin down. All agreed on the importance of keeping this conversation going and the need to revisit our discussions in a few months time—a “check-in” for local news in New York City, as it were. Translating this moment into action requires a focus on structure, funding, and impact, and while no specific actions were prescribed, we were all encouraged to keep experimenting and innovating, with the understanding that local news is not dead and with the mandate that every community deserves exceptional local journalism.

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