



Local News for the People

A Policy Agenda for Meeting Civic-Information Needs

This policy agenda was crafted by [members of the Media Power Collaborative](#), an organizing space for media workers, movement organizers and allied researchers to create a shared vision for the future of our local-media system. The working group represented a diverse cross section of the community-media landscape — working journalists and writers, civic-media publishers, nonprofit-journalism advocates, academic experts and community-based funders, among others. The working group was facilitated by Free Press Action staff, and received generous support from News Futures, a collective of people, ideas and spaces focused on building a participatory and networked future for local news.

Journalism is a public good. We need policies that treat it as such.

The health of our democracy is inextricably tied to the health of our media system.

When we have abundant resources to produce and access truthful, relevant and representative news and information, our collective power grows by leaps and bounds. We can hold public leaders to account, stand in solidarity with our neighbors and develop solutions to create systemic change.

But right now, that system is falling far short of its full potential.

Despite the efforts of many hard-working journalists, our communities are being bombarded by misinformation and clickbait, with a shortage of local news that actually meets people's needs.

This scarcity has deep historical roots: The mainstream media have long underserved, misrepresented and maligned low-income communities, BIPOC communities, immigrant communities and rural communities. Today, the market collapse of newspapers has hastened a growing crisis in which giant corporations and hedge funds dominate our ailing channels of news and civic information. The endless profit-chasing and consolidation at the heart of our commercial media system has led to massive layoffs of journalists performing a key public service — and to a steady rise in sensationalist content.

All of this is happening against a political backdrop in which journalists and community members alike are endangered by severe cuts to federal assistance, escalating threats to free speech and press freedom, and growing instability within our highest national institutions.

Dedicated and innovative leaders have stepped up to fill these news and information gaps, but the systemic fissures are just too wide. As a result, we find ourselves struggling to build the knowledge and power needed to tackle the most pressing issues facing our communities. Extend this struggle across the country, and it's no wonder that we're ill-equipped to address the existential threats of our time — climate change, racial injustice, economic inequality and extreme polarization, to name a few.

This moment calls for a transformed media system, one backed by robust public funding with sturdy firewalls in place to preserve editorial independence. It calls for a media system in which the needs of the working and middle classes are valued over corporate profits and the interests of billionaires. An emerging wave of journalists, storytellers, organizers and community leaders has pointed us in the right direction, but policy change is central to unlocking the civic-media movement's full potential. The health and structure of our media system, and whose interests it serves, are the result of policy choices — ones we have the ability to influence. We can start this work at the state and local levels, while laying the groundwork for a national movement.

To deliver for our communities and create the change we wish to see in our media system, collective action is needed. That's why the Media Power Collaborative is introducing a policy agenda for local news that treats public-interest journalism and civic information like the public goods they are. By infusing values of community, equity and sustainability into policy solutions, we hope to unite community members, media workers, organizers, scholars and philanthropists behind a shared vision of local news that is truly transformative.

This vision calls on our leaders and policymakers to do the following:

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Prioritize Community-Information Needs

Local news is far more than a commercial product — it's a cornerstone of a community's civic health. As such, community-information needs should be at the heart of any policy solution. We must look beyond the profit-driven motives that too often define the commercial journalism industry and instead focus on supporting the production of public-accountability journalism and ensuring access to news that reflects residents' experiences, concerns and needs. Every community member should know what's happening in their local government, in their schools and in their neighborhoods.

Like safe roads and strong public schools, public-service journalism and civic information are public goods that benefit entire communities. Unfortunately, the market is critically underproducing these public goods: Estimates of what it would cost annually to bridge current community-information gaps range from [\\$1 billion](#) to [\\$10 billion](#) or [more](#). Even with promising new philanthropic investments in local news and civic media, public funding is essential to addressing a deficit of this magnitude and building toward a community-centered local-news system.

Actions

1 Use public funding to directly address community-information gaps, constructing robust firewalls to preserve editorial independence.

- Public grantmaking for local news should be a priority in any legislative roadmap. Policymakers can create independent grantmaking bodies to support local news and civic information, establishing reliable funding streams to support these efforts. Direct public funds provide the flexibility to account for community differences, utilize public dollars for the most valuable kinds of public-interest journalism, encourage philanthropic giving, and maintain essential firewalls between the government and media outlets.
- Lawmakers should prioritize support for the **parts of our media system** that are most engaged with their communities, most adept at providing public-service journalism, and least resourced compared to their large commercial counterparts: community-rooted publishers, independent newsrooms, nonprofits and ethnic-media outlets.
- Strong firewalls between the government and media outlets are a necessity. Public funds should be administered by a nongovernmental independent body that is overseen by a diverse, multi-stakeholder, nonpartisan board — and neither political appointees nor media owners should make up a majority of this board. Any public-funding legislation should explicitly prohibit government officials from interfering with editorial input. And ideally, a dedicated revenue source should support public-funding mechanisms so that they aren't subject to undue pressure in the annual appropriations process.

2 *Prioritize communities that the media system underserves.*

- **Research makes it clear:** Low-income communities, BIPOC communities, immigrant communities, and rural communities are the most underserved under our current media system. Any policy solution to support local news should center these communities and the outlets that are best positioned to meet their needs.

3 *Use public funding to directly address community-information gaps, constructing robust firewalls to preserve editorial independence.*

- Policy interventions aimed at supporting local news should be grounded in research on community-information needs. If this research doesn't already exist, then policymakers should provide trusted institutions with funding to conduct information-needs assessments. This would better equip lawmakers and the general public to understand the gaps, inequities and opportunities in our media landscape, while also ensuring that public dollars and resources are used efficiently and impactfully.
- Extensive community engagement and listening — particularly with the most-underserved communities — should be the base of any policy debate around local news and civic information. Community partners should be engaged in every step of the policy process, including design, implementation and evaluation.

4 *Expand affordable access to critical information.*

- The government already has a wealth of tools at its disposal to improve access to essential civic information. Even as lawmakers work to support journalists, they can also invest in libraries as civic-information hubs, support the expansion of affordable broadband access, provide funding for information hotlines, create community-gathering spaces and ease communities' ability to access vital public data.



Invest in Community-First Models to Democratize Media Power

By investing in community-centered models of journalism — both new and old — we can transform a local-news landscape that profit-driven commercial giants currently dominate. Instead of allowing corporate publishers, hedge funds and Big Tech platforms to hoard power and money, we should reallocate resources toward the community institutions and media workers serving the public interest.

In doing so, we can reclaim local news from corporate and tech giants and put media power in the hands of our communities. The result will be a local-news landscape that is both more responsive to the needs of the working and middle classes and better equipped to withstand changes in the market. By investing in this kind of transformation, policymakers can unlock all sorts of benefits for their communities: [Strong local reporting has been linked](#) to better governance, higher levels of civic engagement, higher levels of community trust and immense savings in public spending.

Actions

1 *Dedicate public funding to the parts of our media system that are most adept at providing communities with the information they need: nonprofit media, public media, community media, BIPOC media and worker-owned media.*

- Public subsidies — like grants, tax credits, and vouchers — should prioritize noncommercial local-media outlets. This sector is plugging critical information gaps left behind by ailing commercial models, and its long-term growth and sustainability will be fundamental to a transformed media landscape.
- Public-media funding is woefully low in the United States, with per-capita spending **just a fraction** of what the world's strongest democracies commit. Lawmakers should not only shield public-media funding from budget cuts, but strive to increase funding at the state and federal levels as direct investments in our democracy. In particular, lawmakers should earmark funding to expand public media's current scope of work, with a focus on newsgathering and local-information sharing.
- Public funding for commercial outlets should be tied to community-positive factors — such as commitments to **union neutrality**, and an emphasis on serving unmet information needs. In particular, policies that support commercial media entities should emphasize locally owned publishers and BIPOC media, which often have a strong track record of filling information gaps.

2 *Incentivize local ownership and local investments in for-profit media organizations that serve community-information needs.*

- Corporate chains and hedge funds are swooping into towns and cities across the country, snapping up publications from struggling local owners. Rebuild Local News has proposed enacting **“replanting” policies** to slow this troubling trend. Such policies would incentivize chains and hedge funds to sell news outlets to local owners. There are also increasing opportunities for local owners to **sell their publications to nonprofit trusts** instead of corporate owners.
- Lawmakers can also implement provisions that incentivize newsroom owners to transition their papers from for-profit to nonprofit status, allowing community members, local institutions and even the workers themselves to purchase outlets that are for sale.

3 *Invest in new and emerging models of public-service journalism, and create room for experimentation in public-funding efforts.*

- Building new models of community-rooted journalism often requires an extended runway: It takes time to develop trust with community members and establish a sustainable economic model. In evaluating public-funding decisions, lawmakers should prioritize community impact over short-term profits and recognize that public investments in local media have long-term societal benefits that financial data can’t easily capture.
- Public investments can catalyze private and philanthropic investments. Lawmakers should explore pathways to facilitate and encourage private investment in emerging models of community-first media, as they have in fields like energy technology and infrastructure.
- Economic-development programs aimed at small businesses — particularly at the local and state levels — should proactively engage and support new community-centered outlets.

4 *Break up the stranglehold that corporate media chains and Big Tech platforms have over the information landscape.*

- Federal policymakers should stop anti-competitive mergers and reinstate media-ownership limits. Regulators should prevent media companies from evading existing ownership rules.
- For decades, advertising was the primary revenue source for news outlets. Today, however, tech giants like Amazon, Facebook and Google dominate the advertising market, generating hundreds of billions of dollars while harvesting immense amounts of personal data. Lawmakers should place a small tax on the ad revenues of corporate giants and establish an independent body to distribute the proceeds to community-centered news outlets and civic-information initiatives.



Leverage Public and Popular Education to Support Civic Information and Local News

Community members should have access to the educational opportunities and resources they need to navigate and engage with their local media environment. Journalism education, media literacy, career support and vocational training are all areas in which our schools can help advance a new vision for local news and civic information. Other trusted public institutions that meet community members where they are — like libraries and community-media centers — can scale up their work on media literacy and media training.

Together, these steps can lay the groundwork for broader community engagement with the media system, increase popular demand for community-responsive local journalism and reposition institutions of higher education as true partners for community journalists.

Actions

1 *Promote media literacy across all ages and demographics.*

- High schools, community colleges, tribal colleges and public universities should make digital-media literacy a core graduation requirement. Policymakers should provide the funding necessary to build out the necessary materials and curricula.
- Funding can be set aside for public libraries to develop locally rooted programming and resources centered on improving digital-media literacy.

2 *Establish vocational and scholarship programs to support and expand the base of community-focused journalists.*

- Policymakers should create state-funded local-news fellowships in which journalists are paid fairly, placed in communities that existing media fail to serve, and supported in building long-term ties to both their newsrooms and their communities. As in [California](#), [New Mexico](#) and [Washington](#), these programs can be housed within a state-university system — or alternatively, within local anchor institutions such as community-media centers. Policymakers should also explore funding “beat” fellowships for mid-career journalists. In this model, experienced journalists would cover areas of critical public interest with financial and resource support from public universities. In exchange, fellows would provide student journalists with hands-on learning opportunities.
- Policymakers and public universities should work together to build journalism programs that reflect their communities’ diversity. An emphasis should be placed on diversifying journalism faculty and creating state-supported scholarship programs and career opportunities for journalism students, especially those coming from underserved communities.

- Community-media centers already provide venues for hands-on learning and public involvement in local news. With additional public funding, these centers could establish or expand media-training efforts.

3 *Expand support for community colleges as community-information and journalism hubs.*

- Community colleges can host digital media-literacy workshops that are open to the public and tailored to local needs.
- Community colleges provide a lower-cost, locally based entry point for people hoping to learn new skills and advance their careers. Funding community-college journalism programs would enable more people to participate in the flow of news and information where they live. This funding could be used to expand the depth and availability of journalism programs, hire trusted journalism instructors with community ties, create professional opportunities for community-college students and generate pathways to four-year universities.

4 *Open up resources within the public-education system to journalists and local media institutions.*

- Following the model of [legislation that was introduced in Oregon](#) in 2023, lawmakers can foster partnerships in which public universities serve as resource and collaboration centers for community-media outlets. In addition to distributing grant support, these resource centers could connect local-media outlets with students and faculty experts across universities for help with reporting, marketing, design, financial assistance and legal aid. They could also facilitate collaboration between media outlets as Montclair State University's [Center for Cooperative Media](#) does.
- Public research institutions and policymakers should direct specialized funding to academics and/or journalists who produce publicly accessible research on civic media and community-information needs.
- Policymakers can incentivize public higher-ed institutions to open up physical coworking spaces and access to research databases to local reporters covering critical community issues. [The Community Reporting Innovation Lab](#) at Stockton University in New Jersey is a strong template to follow.



Ensure a Just Transition for Media Workers and Protect Workers' Rights

Building a just media system means putting more power in the hands of media workers. Without a strong base of local media workers, access to critical journalism and civic information suffers — and as a result, so does our democracy. As we attempt to build a local-media system that survives the ongoing struggles of commercial models — and as corporate powers increasingly leverage new technologies like AI to maximize profits, degrade the quality of news and threaten the livelihoods of journalists — the government should help the labor force transition, expand worker protections and encourage the creation of well-paid union jobs in community-rooted newsrooms.

All media workers should have access to a living wage and key benefits including health care, retirement, mental-health support and immigration support. More broadly, policymakers should protect and affirm the media's essential role in democracy, incentivize unionization, expand media professionals' power in the workplace and chart the path to a just transition for journalism workers. The fight to support journalism workers is intertwined with broader fights to support all workers, and protections for journalists should be understood as essential safeguards against authoritarianism.

Actions

1 *Bring local-media workers to the table in any policy discussion about local news.*

- Lawmakers cannot create effective media policy without centering the perspectives and needs of local journalists and local media workers. They must be consulted in any policy effort.

2 *Protect editorial independence in policy solutions to support local news, and push back against state overreach.*

- Policy interventions to address the decline of local news should be carefully designed to firewall media organizations and workers from any sort of government interference.
- Policymakers should reject legislative efforts that could threaten outlets' nonprofit status based on the content of their reporting.

3 *Protect media workers' ability to organize and build power.*

- Unions are leading the fight for a living wage, access to critical benefits and dignity in the journalism industry. Lawmakers must protect the ability of all media workers to form unions. Funding should be prioritized for newsrooms where collective-bargaining agreements have not expired, and public funding should not go toward newsrooms that refuse to voluntarily recognize a union.
- Lawmakers should encourage the establishment and expansion of worker- and community-owned media cooperatives. This could mean allowing start-up news cooperatives to access funds within their first year of operation.

4 *Protect the rights of all media workers, regardless of their employment status, immigration status or identity.*

- Policymakers should enact strong anti-SLAPP statutes at the state and federal levels. **These statutes** can protect journalists — particularly freelancers and those who work with smaller outlets — from costly lawsuits aimed at chilling investigations and First Amendment-protected speech. State policymakers should work toward a strong uniform standard in crafting these statutes, leaning on template legislation such as the Uniform Law Commission’s **Public Expression Protection Act**.
- Journalistic work and journalists’ sources should be protected from undue government interference. Policymakers should codify work protections for full-time and freelance media workers alike and ensure that law-enforcement officers uphold First and Fourth Amendment protections. A strong template can be found in the federal **PRESS Act**.
- First Amendment safeguards protect media workers covering protests. Policymakers should use their oversight authority to uphold this right and hold law enforcement accountable in **ensuring open and equitable access for reporters during protests**.
- Drawing on legislation like the federal **Journalist Protection Act**, policymakers should protect journalists from retaliation, harm and harassment. Special consideration should be given to journalists working in the United States with a visa or another form of temporary status, who are guaranteed the same protections as all other media workers.

5 *Ensure that freelance media workers have access to critical resources and assistance.*

- Freelancers play a vital and growing role in our local-media landscape. Yet too often, they find themselves without access to basic necessities like affordable health care. One way lawmakers can address this is by providing state support to a pooled health-insurance fund available to freelancers and independent contractors. Another pathway is to expand access to Affordable Care Act exchanges as well as state and federal subsidies.
- Public funding for newsrooms should be contingent on outlets covering freelancers under media-liability insurance policies.
- Policymakers should explore legislation like New York City’s **Freelance Isn’t Free Law** to support and protect freelancers. These measures can include state support for legal assistance, payment-agreement protections and mandatory contracts, among other provisions.



Address and Repair the Historic Harms of Our Media System

“We must recognize that there was never a golden age of journalism for Black communities, other communities of color, the poor and other marginalized groups.” — [Media 2070](#)

From colonial times to the present, powerful journalism institutions have harmed communities of color by deploying deadly narratives that served the political goal of upholding and protecting our nation’s white-racial hierarchies. Government policies that supported these powerful media institutions have deepened this harm. Our country has yet to reckon, repair and redress this ongoing damage, which continues to undermine the struggle to realize a true democracy.

Efforts to transform our local-news system should work hand in hand with broader movements for social and economic justice — and equity should be at the core of any policy to support local news. Drawing on initiatives like the media-reparations work of [Media 2070](#) and the [Racial Equity in Journalism Fund](#) at Borealis Philanthropy, lawmakers should take proactive steps to repair the ongoing impacts of racism and white supremacy. There is an urgent need to redress the historical harms inflicted on BIPOC media, which have resulted in a dire lack of financial support for the sector despite its long history of public service and broad civic impact.

Actions

1 **Make robust investments to create a thriving BIPOC journalism ecosystem.**

- Policies to support local news should include a reparative approach that invests resources at the scale needed to both repair and redress past harms — and prevent new ones. [Research](#) from Borealis Philanthropy can be used as a guide in understanding the hallmarks of and the resources necessary to create a thriving BIPOC media system.
- The Media 2070 project has called for the vast majority of government and philanthropic funding to support local journalism to go toward BIPOC media that are serving the health and well-being of communities of color.
- Local and state governments can dedicate a significant portion of their advertising budgets to BIPOC media outlets, providing a much-needed boost to the sector. [In New York City](#), for instance, an executive order that requires government agencies to spend at least half of their advertising budget in ethnic and community-media outlets has created a critical and sustained source of funding.
- When governments hire outside contractors for media production aimed at BIPOC communities — like PSAs, public messaging and graphic-design work — they should prioritize firms and creative agencies that reflect the communities being served.

2 Closely examine past and present media harms when making policy decisions.

- Policymakers should proactively address the legacy of racism and harm in media policy — including at institutions like the **Federal Communications Commission** — and take reparative action.
- When crafting local-news legislation, lawmakers should hold listening sessions with underserved communities to better understand their needs, identify ways to repair harm and incorporate their perspectives into the legislative process.



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