



WHAT MAKES FOR GOOD LOCAL MEDIA POLICY?

Analyzing legislative proposals aimed at supporting local news and civic information

It has never been more clear that local news and civic information are load-bearing pillars of our democracy. Strong local reporting and robust access to civic information are [linked](#) to higher voter turnout, less government corruption, increased community cohesion and lower levels of political polarization.

It's also never been more clear that bold policy change is needed if we are to build a healthy local-media system. 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 have led to massive layoffs of journalists. The end of federal support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting will lead to the downsizing — and in some cases, the outright closure — of critical newsrooms across the country. Increasingly, communities are left in the dark or misinformed about what's happening in their streets, in their schools and in their halls of power.

The good news is that state and local lawmakers are beginning to step up to the plate. [Dozens of bills](#) to support local news and informed communities have been introduced and advanced from coast to coast, and there's growing recognition from community and media leaders alike that strong policy action is needed.

But how do we know which policies will actually strengthen our communities and our democracy? How can lawmakers, advocates and media leaders evaluate the strength of legislative proposals in this rapidly evolving space?

We put together this resource to help answer those questions. The information is designed as a guide — it does not prescribe a single path for local-news policy, but instead highlights the key questions and ideas that should be front of mind when lawmakers are crafting, reviewing or advocating for legislation.

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Diagnosing the problem and setting the right frame

Good policy always begins with an accurate diagnosis. What is the specific problem that we're trying to solve?

In this case, we don't need policy change to "save" the journalism industry, a framing that by nature looks backward instead of envisioning what comes next. After all, what exactly are we trying to save? The monopoly-advertising model that propped up newspapers for decades is gone and won't come back — even if regulators break up the tech giants' grasp over the advertising market. And even in print journalism's prime, the press underserved or maligned many rural, low-income, BIPOC and non-English-speaking communities.

In simpler terms, policy conversations need to be forward-looking and rooted in the needs of the public, not necessarily the needs of the legacy journalism industry. We should focus on how the collapse and consolidation of the commercial journalism market has impacted civic and democratic health — and consider what kind of media system we need in the future to have a thriving democracy. This allows for more flexible thinking on the policy front, lays the groundwork for broader coalitions and points us toward solutions that would allocate public dollars toward the public interest.

Any legislative debate, then, should start from these realities:

- **High-quality local journalism and civic information are public goods that benefit entire communities.** A strong news-and-information ecosystem can strengthen democratic participation, civic health, government oversight and community well-being. Because profit drives market incentives, we can't rely on the for-profit media system alone to produce the news and information that holds the greatest public value.
- **Our current media system — dominated by corporate chains, hedge funds and wealthy commercial broadcasters — is too often beholden to shareholders instead of community members.** A small handful of companies owns [more than half](#) of all newspapers in the country, and just three conglomerates own [40 percent](#) of local news-producing stations. [Deals](#) announced in 2025 will further concentrate ownership of local-news stations. Research makes it [abundantly clear](#) that this runaway consolidation is poisoning the local-news landscape — and, in turn, weakening our civic health.
- **In the shadow of corporate giants, the outlets that are closest to their communities and best equipped to meet their needs are left to struggle over a meager pool of resources.** These include community newsrooms, small publishers, nonprofits and ethnic media. With the zeroing out of federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, this competition will only get stiffer as public

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stations fight for survival. Philanthropy can absolutely play an essential role, but foundation and donor support won't be enough on their own.

- **Working-class communities and communities of color feel the news-and-information deficit most acutely.** Research has repeatedly shown that low-income, rural, non-English-speaking and BIPOC communities face the largest local-news coverage gaps. Correcting this inequity should be a primary consideration in any legislative proposal.

With these principles in mind, the core question behind legislation shifts from “How can we save local news?” to the following:

- What kinds of news and civic information do communities most need to stay safe, connected, and empowered?
- Which parts of our media system are best equipped to produce this information, and how can we support their survival and growth?

Identifying the strongest policy approaches

The next step is to determine which policy approaches will have the greatest impact. There are many different ways to direct public support towards local news: tax credits for newsroom staffing, government ad-buying set-asides, fellowship programs, “news vouchers,” etc. These approaches, if designed right, can help stabilize outlets, retain journalists and strengthen coverage while we build the long-term structural support our media system needs.

But it’s clear that the higher goal should be to create durable public infrastructure for local news and civic information. The destruction of federal support for public broadcasting only underscores the urgency of this work. Instead of patching holes in a sinking ship, we need to design a sustainable system for supporting the media outlets best able to serve their communities.

That’s why we see the creation of public grantmaking bodies as the strongest legislative model available.

Publicly funded grantmaking bodies — structured to operate independently of political influences and other external factors — offer a direct and flexible way to invest in high-quality local journalism. Unlike one-size-fits-all funding programs, these bodies can adapt to the unique information needs of every community, channeling resources to where they are needed most. They can also support a wide spectrum of media models: legacy and emerging outlets, commercial and noncommercial operations, as well as initiatives focused on reporting, training and infrastructure.

Because the grantmaking bodies are ideally housed in independent nonprofits or NGOs, these entities safeguard editorial independence while catalyzing support from philanthropy and local donors.

Ultimately, direct public funding through independent grantmaking is the most effective way to answer the fundamental questions that we outlined above: What information do people need right now to participate in democracy, connect with one another and stay safe? And which parts of our media ecosystem are best positioned to provide this information?

This model has the flexibility, accountability and scale necessary to meet those needs — while laying the groundwork for a healthier, more democratic information system in the long run.

A checklist for evaluating legislation

Legislative work can be complex, but you don't need to be a policy expert to roughly assess a proposal's potential.

This checklist offers a shorthand framework for evaluating legislation through a community-first lens, helping you spot strong ideas, red flags and unintended consequences. Use these questions to quickly gauge whether a bill aligns with the goal of building a healthier, more democratic media system.

- ☐ **Does the legislation contain strong firewalls to preserve editorial independence?** This is a must. The media's function as a government watchdog cannot be compromised, and editorial protections should be codified in legislation.
- ☐ **Does the legislation use community-information needs as its north star?** It's not enough to create "more journalism." Policies must prioritize high-quality reporting that performs a public service, supports civic engagement and addresses a critical information need. Lawmakers should place special emphasis on the communities our media system has historically underserved.
- ☐ **Would the proposal diversify the media system and limit corporate power?** We shouldn't pump public dollars into a corporate-dominated media hierarchy that we know isn't serving our democracy. The goal should be to democratize media power by lifting up community-centered models (independent community newsrooms, nonprofits, public media, BIPOC media, worker-owned cooperatives, etc.).
- ☐ **Does the bill put money in the pockets of hedge fund-owned chains or corporate broadcasters like Sinclair and Nexstar?** If so, that's a red flag. These corporations are doing just fine financially and have a history of prioritizing profits over communities.
- ☐ **Are there unintended consequences?** For example, in California and Oregon, lawmakers have considered bills that would have forced tech platforms to compensate journalism providers for using their content. This would create a direct incentive for platforms to block local-news content entirely, cutting off an essential traffic source for smaller publishers — and making local news even harder to access than before. Policies should not harm the very outlets they seek to help.

Looking to get involved in media policy debates in your state or community? The Media Power Collaborative is here to support you — contact Alex Frandsen (afrandsen@freepress.net) if you have questions, ideas, or just want to chat.