

# Reimagining Public Media

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND  
INNOVATION IN LOCAL NEWS

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# Introduction

In 2022, Wyncote Foundation published [a report on the “hidden strengths” of public media](#), citing public media’s robust business model, large audience reach, and expanding newsrooms—features that appeared to be underappreciated within the national movement to rebuild local news.

Two years later, concern about the disintegration of local news has reached a level that recalls the dismay in the 1960s about the [“vast wasteland”](#) of commercial television that led to the formation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Hundreds of digital news start-ups have been launched to fill news gaps in local communities. A few state governments have responded to calls to fund journalism.<sup>1</sup> Foundations and philanthropists have launched the [Press Forward](#) initiative to invest in local news and stimulate community support.

However, to many leaders of the movement to reinvigorate local journalism, public media’s role remains unclear. And despite its potential, public media’s response, as a whole, has not been commensurate with the crisis in local news, or shaped to reach today’s diverse, [digitally savvy](#) news consumers.

In [a 2023 paper](#), NPR and leaders across its network of affiliates shared a vision for how they are participating in the local news revival, highlighting regional collaborations and investments in local newsrooms.

Yet seen from the magnitude of the challenge, relatively few organizations seem to be taking meaningful advantage of their “hidden strengths.” LAist and Chicago Public Media are setting a pace that others have noticed, and followed. Local stations across the country are making significant progress in building news operations that focus on local needs, including those in Boston, Portland, Austin, Charlotte, Jacksonville, Louisville, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley and Wilkes Barre-Scranton, San Francisco and San Diego, and New Hampshire and Minnesota.

Such public media entities share a commitment to local journalism by serving as “frontline news providers,” where community-centered journalism is delivered through an array of digital platforms (websites,

newsletters, and social media) alongside high-quality broadcast service. Their topic specialties and story selection are informed by community input and civic engagement. They frequently co-create and share content with other local media partners. Crucially, their growing newsrooms push out a high volume of digital content aimed at attracting daily, habit-forming news consumption and, over time, attracting digital loyalty and revenue.

This evolution has the potential to embolden more public media organizations. In dozens of cities, experienced journalists are leaving the diminished newsrooms of declining newspapers to further their careers at local public media stations, which often house the second largest newsroom in their area.<sup>2</sup> Public media newsrooms are typically funded by a well-balanced revenue portfolio, often many times the size of recent start-ups in nonprofit digital news.

The resulting landscape—with some newsrooms moving ahead in bounds, while others are changing more slowly or not at all—invites analysis. What are the differentiating factors at public media organizations that are becoming frontline news providers, and how did they get to where they are now? How were some able to shake off the inertia that tethers public media affiliates to traditional broadcasting models, in order to innovate in their local news space?

*This report, made possible with leadership and support from the Wyncote Foundation, shares this analysis.*

*The conclusions are solely those of the authors, and persons interviewed are thanked but have no responsibility for its content.*

1. Catherine Buni, “Meet The States Using Public Funding to Support Local Journalism,” Nieman Reports, February 8, 2023, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/state-public-funding-local-news/>

Cameron Joseph, “New York just committed \$90 million to help save local journalism. Will it work?” Columbia Journalism Review, May 6, 2024, [https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/new\\_york\\_local\\_journalism\\_funding.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/new_york_local_journalism_funding.php)

2. <https://srg.org/scpr>

# Methodology

This report focuses on over a dozen public media organizations that have progressed along the track to becoming frontline local news providers in their communities. The group is intended to be representative, and is not inclusive of the many stations that have invested in deeper local news reporting. In-depth interviews with presidents, CEOs, and other executives at these organizations shed light on the factors, decisions, conditions, and mindsets that prompted them to adopt and develop their approaches to local news.

In addition, interviews with five individuals familiar with the changing local news environment—and public media’s response—added insight into the ways that the evolution of local journalism is playing out in their own research, funding, and consulting work.

The main goal was to hear how these organizations were able to overcome the obstacles that keep most stations within a traditional network-affiliate broadcast model.

After recording, transcribing, and analyzing the interviews, commonalities among them surfaced. Interviewees were explicitly given the freedom to speak candidly, without attribution. The six themes or “findings” of this report capture these providers’ commitment to a local news mission, and highlight the operational changes they made to navigate what was described as a challenging—and ongoing—transformation.

These findings are based on field interviews, but the findings are entirely the responsibility of the authors.

**The main goal was to hear how these organizations were able to overcome the obstacles that keep most stations within a traditional network-affiliate broadcast model.**

## WHAT THIS STUDY DOES:

- » Examine organizations that have embraced local news as a core enterprise function, generally within a single market.
- » Explore the challenges these organizations faced and how they have met those challenges as they evolved to become a frontline digital news provider.

## WHAT THIS STUDY DOES NOT DO:

- » Look at interstation collaborations across markets, nor organizations that may have enlarged newsrooms and news output but retain a priority on broadcast and audio.
- » Advocate that all public media entities take this path or make this commitment.

# The Purpose of this Report

## THIS REPORT AIMS TO REACH TWO DISTINCT AUDIENCES.

First, the observations gathered should inspire, and provide examples and reference points for, executives and board members at public media organizations that are considering increased investment in local journalism. The full shift to a “frontline news provider” often requires reforming every part of the organization (staffing, budget, branding). Knowing that others are making these changes—and flourishing—could be helpful in gathering the support needed for next steps.

Second, this report may be useful to the donors, philanthropists, and foundations who see the potential for local public media organizations to replace the lost capacity for local news delivery. For this audience, a unique look at the state of the industry at the network-affiliate level could lead to renewed attention for public media newsrooms that have already joined the movement to rebuild local journalism.

### DEFINING “FRONTLINE NEWS PROVIDERS”

**In this report, a frontline local news provider is defined as a public media organization that has or is developing the following characteristics:**

- » A clear pivot toward local news across all platforms, reflected in growing, high-metabolism newsrooms that, if not fully digital-first, prioritize digital output while maintaining high-quality audio-first reporting. These organizations often publish a range of e-newsletters and actively use social and digital platforms, focused around key beats and populations. They are using analytics to attract returning readers and to create habit-forming reliance for local news.
- » On-going (non-episodic) engagement with community, especially those who have been historically overlooked by legacy media. The insights of engagement inform the news operation in meaningful ways.
- » Staff and news content that intentionally includes previously underserved communities and reflects cultural competence; a staff that reflects the diversity of the broader community.
- » Commitment to innovation and adaptation in technology that supports public engagement, outreach, and news delivery, as well as new digital business strategies for increasing sustainability.
- » Commitment to mutually beneficial collaboration with other media organizations in the ecosystem.
- » Assurance of editorial independence and sufficient autonomy to be agile and innovative, and to pursue difficult topics with full organizational backing.

# Key Findings

- 1. Interviewees believe that public media has both the opportunity and responsibility to join the local journalism movement.** Some view the reorganization to expand local news as an imperative that allows them to advance their position as a valued civic institution and to expand their audience in the face of declining radio listenership.
- 2. Committed, strategic leadership at the staff and board level is essential.** The critical role of leadership showed up in every interview. Leadership at the executive level was often backed by a governing body willing to reimagine the role of the organization.
- 3. Becoming a frontline news provider requires a deep and challenging internal and external reconfiguration across the organization.** The decision to become a frontline news provider involves much more than “adds,” e.g. more reporters, an upgraded website, a newsletter strategy. It means a reformulation of the organization’s sense of purpose. The degree of disruption will vary depending on pace and strategy, but interviewees described the shift to local news as nothing less than a change in self-identity.
- 4. Interviewees described five key pivots in their organizations:**
  - a. Engagement with and participation in the local community and its existing news ecosystem.
  - b. A digital-first newsroom and appropriate adjustment of work streams between broadcast and digital production.
  - c. News assignments and production decisions consider community needs and interests before selecting the delivery format.
  - d. Extensive and consistent audience development and engagement.
  - e. A culture of innovation and experimentation.
- 5. No single strategy can be considered right for all markets.** In several interviews, the realignment of priorities toward local journalism emerged outside of an organization’s formal strategic planning process. And the approaches to change among the organizations varied greatly.
- 6. Approaches to sustainability for local news are complex.** Interviewees understand that the financial returns from the shift to local news remain uncertain. Several had recently made difficult choices to downsize staff amid fluctuating post-COVID revenues.

THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS FURTHER EXPLORE THESE SIX THEMES.

## FINDING 1.

# Local News as Opportunity and Responsibility

Interviewees often described local journalism delivered digitally to an increasingly diverse population as *the* important public media opportunity of this era.

In 2023, at least 200 counties in the United States did not have a single news source, and 2.5 local newspapers were shutting down each week.<sup>3</sup> Interviewees are using their scale and infrastructure, built across two generations, to address the nationwide trend of declining local news.

Some of the interviewees are already significant players in their local news ecosystems; others are just finding their footing. But many describe their commitment to local news as crucial to advancing their role as a local civic institution. In interviews, this commitment came across as full of conviction, even in the face of all the challenges it presents, as well as an imperative, if the organization wants to sustain and expand its audience and financial support.

- ▶ *After a news consumption study conducted by the organization, one executive shared: “I had suggestions from 3,000 people in the community that said, ‘Do local news. If you do local news, we’ll support it, we’ll even pay for it.’ So that’s where I decided to place my bet.”*
- ▶ *One executive, reflecting on the range of services delivered through stations providing both public radio and TV asked which service will “...best support and create the longest term impact for us as organizations? For me, it’s very clearly journalism.”*
- ▶ *“We had a lot of debt when I took over as manager, and I felt that we couldn’t conserve our way to prosperity. If we weren’t offering anything for people that would prompt them to become members or find enough value to spend more time with us or recommend [us] to their friends, then what was our value? And so I felt like we had to take some managed risks.”*

<sup>3</sup> According to November 2023 State of Local Media report by Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2023/report/>

## FINDING 2.

# Committed Leadership

**Leadership at the executive and board level is essential to catalyzing and supporting a meaningful transition to a robust, trusted local news source.**

▶ *One executive said that the board’s biggest role in the organization’s transformation was in hiring the new CEO with a news mandate from the start. “We stay in three lanes—news, education, arts and culture across the breadth of our services—but news has been the focus of a huge chunk of our growth. And from the board’s perspective, it’s a very low risk, diversified portfolio strategy.”*

In some of the frontline news providers, board and organizational leaders have print or digital media backgrounds or connections, making them particularly attuned to the changing landscape of local news in their communities.

▶ *They have experienced rapid shifts in the media landscape and are wary of complacency and lack of responsiveness from legacy brands. “I think PBS and NPR to an extent are doing a grave disservice by allowing people to believe that everything’s okay and everything’s going to get better.”*

▶ *The decline of the local paper may even provide leadership at the staff and management levels, helping catalyze change. At all 13 organizations that supplied interviews for this report, the newsroom leaders (executive editors, news directors, VPs of news) have a print or digital background.*

**Board members must stand together with the organization’s leader as they identify and seek the necessary resources—and take the necessary risks—to transform the organization.**

▶ *“Part of the work is getting boards and getting leaders—both—comfortable with being uncomfortable in the midst of these changes.”*

▶ *One executive described the importance of having the full support of their board, saying their messaging was: “‘Don’t be afraid, do whatever it’s going to take to really reimagine what this organization could be.’ So I did not have a board that was holding me back at all. They were saying, ‘We’ve got resources to put behind what you think this organization needs to evolve into, in order to navigate this very uncertain landscape.’”*



## FINDING 3.

# The Depth of the Change

Among interviewees, local news has become embedded into the enterprise as a core priority. News is not treated as an add-on, or “nice-to-have”; it is the embodiment of the mission. Regardless of whether the newsroom has substantial philanthropic support, the core budget reflects the prioritization of local news. In short, leaders think the priority is local news.

Prioritizing local news requires resetting enterprise priorities, reshaping leadership teams, making difficult choices among competing priorities, tackling financial challenges, and building the stamina to persist in the face of resistance to change.

▶ *One philanthropic organization said that in assessing who they'd support, they looked for evidence of a commitment to local news at an enterprise level—for an organization to show they prioritized news not because they “got a grant to do it” but as an ongoing commitment. That meant that the organization would be prepared to make trade-offs to support that commitment, and that it wasn't just treated like a series of projects.*

For many of the leaders interviewed, a changing relationship with the national network and its national funding infrastructure is reflected in both their journalistic and budgeting priorities.

▶ *One executive advocated, for example, for organizations to stop letting a small percentage of their revenues—what comes from the network and from federal funding—drive “a hundred percent of the strategy.”*

An important part of this change in self-identity may require reimagining the local public media affiliate as separate from the national programming it carries. For example, some organizations have reversed their traditional positioning on-air and in their digital content. Instead of calling themselves “NPR for [this place]”, they

market their services as “News and information for [this place]...” and add that they air NPR programming, perhaps at a specific time of the day.

▶ *“My message to the team was, we're changing the way we think about this. Morning Edition is not a national show that we just happen to air. Morning Edition needs to be a local show with national programming. Our hosts need to be the voice of local news in that show. And our newsroom needs to produce enough headlines so that when our anchor shows up in the morning, he has enough so that you really feel the local in Morning Edition.”*

Organizations also need to ensure that at the governance and policy level, journalistic ethics are not only understood but practiced. Some interviewees singled out an ambitious level of board training and discussion aimed to further the understanding of requirements for journalistic independence, conflicts of interest, and other elements of an ethics code that must be in place to be eligible for journalism support. Interviewees, even those embedded in university settings, shared that this was an important practice area in their shifts to greater investment in local news.

▶ *“If you decide you're going to be in the journalism business, and if you're going to adhere to a certain journalistic code, then you have to be prepared to ... report on or investigate things that you care about personally. And so you have to play your role very carefully.”*

Public media has traditionally worked in a fundraising environment where the standard is “credit” for support. In journalism, it must be more rigorous, focused on “disclosure.” This is second nature for print journalism, but can be an adjustment for public media donors and advancement staff.

## FINDING 4.

# The Pivots Required

In their organization’s transformation into frontline news providers, interviewees discussed many necessary changes. Five key pivots stood out in all the interviews.

**Organizations are investing time as participants in both their communities and in the wider local news ecosystem—and ensuring that these connections are reflected in their evolving coverage.**

Interviewees’ newsrooms are engaged in community centered priority-setting through regular listening sessions and outreach, activities reflected in their editorial focus.

Newsrooms are expanding sources for stories and increasing their responsiveness to community demographics in staffing and coverage.

They are also fostering intentional collaboration within the local news ecosystem that enriches reporting, extends the reach of news output, and supports smaller media organizations that offer unique insight and reach into underserved communities.

- ▶ *One organization has partnered with at least 18 local cultural programs and institutions and over 20 media outlets of various sizes, including ethnic and community media in different languages, allowing it to cross-promote and share content. Seven partnerships with institutions of higher education allow them to participate in educational programming, like get-out-the-vote campaigns.*
- ▶ *One leader shared that their organization frequently collaborates with another local media station. “We’ll give two reporters, they give two reporters, we spend six months—we do a big story together. And we get in front of [a new] audience.”*
- ▶ *At one organization, a portfolio that includes acquisitions and collaborations with other media outlets means that where they only had one reporter three years ago, they now have the work of 15 to 20 reporters—who are not direct hires of the organization—providing content. “That’s both helping stretch our*

**Organizations are acquiring digital sites or newspapers that augment news production and include diverse demographics of users in: Los Angeles, New York, Denver, Newark, Seattle, Lancaster (PA), Dallas, Chicago**

**Organizations are intentionally building connections with underrepresented communities and across different media outlets that provide fresh insights and benefit from the scale of public media collaboration in: Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, Louisville**

*services out, and diversify our services...stretching us out geographically, and from a news perspective, helping us cover our communities in more specificity.”*

- ▶ *Cultural competency is an ongoing challenge. One interviewee described needing to find ways for an equity lens to be built into the work across an organization, and not just carried out by one individual in a leadership position at any given time.*
- ▶ *There are varying levels of collaboration among media outlets, as illustrated by several interviewees. “The previous model is called the ‘throw it over the fence’ model. You report a story, and then you throw it over the fence, like, “You want to use my story?” A deeper collaboration shares more resources: “It’s more brains and more people.” In these scenarios, there’s more teamwork. “The sharing of information is at the GM level, it’s at the managing editor level, or chief content level, it’s at the reporter level, on down. And so that creates a much more sophisticated operation.”*

### Leaders are reorganizing their news operations to deliver digital, multimedia news at a rapid pace.

Newsrooms are adjusting to digital-first production of content, which has necessitated changes in work streams, and a shift in what Bill Davis, president of the Station Resource Group, has called “newsroom metabolism.” The focus on local news requires moving resources and bandwidth around the organization, and this can cause tension.

- ▶ *One executive described how resentment arose when they incorporated higher-salaried investigative reporters into a public media newsroom that was doing daily stories. They developed incentives to smooth over the tension, like pairing daily reporters with more experienced reporters on projects. Leadership described it as being a very difficult transition; some employees left, and with their replacements, they were slowly able to unite the newsroom.*
- ▶ *Another executive described the slow transition of integrating different media under one umbrella. “I knew that some of the hardest parts were not going to be necessarily the journalism, but really the culture.” In order to reach the collaborative stage, they began doing joint planning meetings, for example. The third stage is full integration.*

One of the characteristics of the organizations interviewed is the presence of former commercial print journalists, both in news leadership positions and in frontline reporting. The migration of print and digital-native journalists to public media organizations has brought these organizations greater knowledge of digital products and more comfort with data-driven decisions about story selection and packaging.

- ▶ *Executives talked about the struggle to train radio journalists to become more comfortable producing news in text, graphics, and images—the fundamental building blocks of most digital news.*
- ▶ *One leader also shared how pushing reporters to be the first to report a story, and report it well, paid off when the reporters started to see the results. “They’re used to 200 people viewing their stories online. And all of a sudden, it’s like 200,000... And so they started to hustle more, they started to understand how to own a beat more. And as we built momentum, our audience grew, membership grew, and they saw us adding resources.”*

Investment in technology tools (the so-called “tech stack”) is required to enable the full application of an organization’s digital capabilities. Engaging audiences on their preferred platforms, matching publishing schedules to an audience’s habits and needs, and building robust data and feedback loops can not only drive editorial decisions but also help mobilize the entire organization around growing revenue from digital engagement.

- ▶ *An executive at one organization shared their approach to a growing need for audience data. First, they had to focus on pinning down their geographic reach. They identified with specificity who was in their audience, in order to then ask who wasn’t in their audience, “and who should be.” Then, they looked across various demographics to understand potential audiences and use that to shape their services. “The biggest thing we’ve done is actually starting to do more original research around current audiences [and] potential audiences.”*

### The service and content take priority over its form.

News production at frontline news providers is driven by community needs for robust news and information. The form the journalism takes—for example, digital newsletters, photographs, videos, creative audio, or games—will be chosen to fit that need. An attachment to a form, like audio, or an approach, such as broadcast, should not solely dictate how the news will be delivered.

- ▶ *At one organization, it’s important to hire people “who are thinking about local news as the core product, not radio, not digital... and so that kind of product mentality has been really critical.”*
- ▶ *One executive shared a story to illustrate how difficult this pivot was in their newsroom when they assigned reporters more daily stories per week. Leadership had to remind the newsroom of public media’s mission: “to serve the community, not serve our own self-interests or the way that we want to tell stories.”*
- ▶ *Another executive described the decision to use a podcast to cover a complicated issue, the city’s housing affordability crisis. “The newsroom convinced me that the best way to tell that story was through audio storytelling, and to make it really accessible. And then it turned out to be a really successful podcast.”*

## FINDING 4.

Frontline news organizations identify and follow important community issues, as the story or issue evolves. Interviewees stressed that their emphasis on local news does not suggest a shift away from in-depth reporting, but actually doubles down on it as a distinguishing feature in both digital and audio formats.

- ▶ *One executive said they still carve out space for deeper work to add value beyond daily news. For example, they published a year-long project on affordable housing featured across the newsroom. “That reporting became a beacon for people who were looking for those housing solutions, and we put together some quick guides... about resources available to the community.”*
- ▶ *“I’m a big believer in embracing the value of the medium that you’re working in. Putting a newspaper on the web is not a winning proposition... we are not reinventing the local paper.” This executive said there was so much more potential in digital platforms, like data visualization, photojournalism, and interactive games. “All these things that we can do in this medium, that you can’t do in a newspaper, are part of the value proposition.”*
- ▶ *Another organization does public affairs podcasts targeting specific communities in their city. This part of their podcast strategy “is really focused on niche audiences that we know we’re going to have a hard time convincing to listen to an NPR station.”*

### **Audience development and engagement requires sustained investment and commitment in order to yield results that can be built upon and sustained.**

Interviewees reported that audience engagement now extends far beyond reliance on traditional member cultivation events. All interviewees described reaching out to their audiences through multiple newsletters, social media content, cross-promotion opportunities, and in-person events, as well as through collaboration with community leadership and local media partners. One outlet described partnerships with the local library system to ensure their stories showed in searches and their website appeared prominently on public computers.

- ▶ *“I went from being the only person who had ‘engagement’ in their job description, to having a team.”*

Extended listening sessions across diverse parts of the community sharpen newsrooms’ understanding of what concerns and interests matter to their audience.

- ▶ *One public media organization decided to run its daily editorial meeting in a local neighborhood where they were planning a community engagement event. “So we decided to do the news meeting at the listening session, and to give [readers] insight into how you do it. And then hear from them, like, ‘What would you have chosen to be the most important story of the day to go on the front page tomorrow?’”*

Informed, multi-platform, and high-volume output builds expanded readership and listenership. Interviewees reported feedback that residents “felt seen for the first time.”

- ▶ *For one organization, acquiring a newspaper with a different audience allowed the combined newsroom to reach those affected by the issues in their reporting. “Sometimes we’ve done these big, huge investigations about marginalized communities, and the people in those communities never hear the story or read the story.”*
- ▶ *“We don’t get the philosophical debate anymore around the need to be this [local news provider]. And I think a lot of that comes from the community’s response to us. The community has embraced this change and the reporters see, ‘Oh, this is what it looks like.’”*
- ▶ *One executive said they believed they were on the right path not only because they’d invested so much in the transition, but because of the impact they were having. “What we’re hearing from the community writ large is that increasingly ... we’re either the first one to cover the story or we’re the only ones to cover the story.”*

**The focus on local journalism goes hand-in-hand with a culture of innovation and experimentation.**

Interviewees described creating strong feedback loops to measure progress in audience reach, financial support, membership, and impact. They have learned to listen and respond. They are willing to abandon projects to pivot to new things. Rather than investing heavily in fully-baked products, interviewees reported experimenting and rapidly tracking audience reaction in order to develop products, editorial themes, and trusted voices.

- ▶ *“We don’t put all of our eggs in one basket. I think that’s something that public radio has historically been really bad about, is ‘We’re going to put all of our resources into developing this show, or this program, or this whatever it is.’ And then when it doesn’t work, or it doesn’t pay off immediately, then we get discouraged, and then we’re afraid to kill things. So if we act more like a startup, then we’re going to try lots of things. We’re going to take a lot of smaller risks. And that was what we started to do.”*

One station which eventually launched a free-standing digital news site conducted listening sessions across the community and operated a newsletter for a full year before launching a local news website. Another organization expanded local news by working with Report for America to hire a reporter for a specific, locally-relevant beat. Yet another pivoted its investment from a television news program to a free-standing digital news site after seeing the TV program fall short of expectations in viewership and audience diversification.

## FINDING 5.

# No Single Strategy Will be Right for All Markets

Interviewees pursued a variety of strategies and approaches toward building their local news capacity. Each approach was locally motivated, constructed, and sustained.

For these leaders, the decision to focus on local journalism started from their mission. The vision and intention of becoming an important local news provider then created organizational readiness to respond when opportunities presented themselves. And it drove planning processes designed to assemble the resources needed to launch or expand local news capacity.

Newsroom leaders shared examples of times that they had to make difficult strategic planning shifts, always stemming from the mission to provide local news. In [the recent case](#) of Colorado Public Radio (CPR), its executive described the decision to lay off employees in the podcasting studio as a way to rearrange resources “relative to our news focus,” and not a decision solely motivated by financial road bumps. CPR adapted its strategy to integrate podcasting into its newsroom—as a tool for providing the key local news service.

▶ *One executive described the transformation towards local news as “the retail level of being on the ground and talking to people and listening to the requests that we were getting for stories and via email and via text message and responding to that with staff resources. And every single time, it felt like jumping off a cliff because we were kind of sure that there was demand there, but we weren’t sure if people would really meet us with the financial resources that we would need to keep it going.”*

For some public media organizations, jump-starting their news operation has come through acquisition of, or a merger with, print or digital enterprises. In some unique opportunities, organizations are undertaking dramatic acquisitions that help preserve large community newsrooms that have uncertain futures.

▶ *In one instance, leadership had been working on a strategic plan that focused on increasing their journalism and the diversity of their listeners. And as they were finalizing this plan, they got a call about the opportunity to acquire a newspaper.*

Some interviewees described local news initiatives that are purposefully distinguished from the parent radio or TV station, so they are not tied to the brand of legacy public media.

▶ *“To our public radio audience, we don’t really keep it a secret that we are also the owners and operators of [the online newsletter]. But to the audience outside of our public media audience, my hope is that you wouldn’t know...We don’t need to debate the merits of whether NPR is left leaning or not, the fact is that the perception among many in our region is that it is, and I felt we needed to really establish our bona fides as being nonpartisan with a clean slate.”*

The Shorenstein Public Media Mergers Playbook provides an in-depth examination of stations expanding their journalism role through acquisition of digital properties. The organizational choices embedded in these acquisitions are almost as numerous as the case studies. A careful reading suggests that additional challenges may arise in trying to shift to a digital-dominant newsroom without the addition of people with digital experience. The required shift in the newsroom’s skill mix, and the adaptation of audio-based staff to new multi-platform demands, presents a deep challenge to the need for change.

▶ *One executive acknowledged the painful staff changes they had to embrace, and why they continue to make these difficult decisions. “We hire for where we want to be versus where we are.”*

▶ *“Even with an infusion of digital reporting talent, changing processes in legacy broadcast newsrooms can take time... all of the news leaders in the study agreed that public media is just beginning to understand what it means to be a primary news provider.” (Playbook, p. 110)*



## FINDING 6.

# Approaches to Sustainability for Local News are Complex

Media organizations from metro dailies to digital start-ups are struggling to create reliable paths to recoup investments.<sup>4</sup> Public media organizations looking to grow their local news operations will face a similar set of financial challenges, including the higher cost of expanded local content created and delivered digitally.

Almost all interviewees acknowledged this challenge. The funding need is significant, but in some ways public media is in a stronger position to secure support for local news than other media.

In some cases, the capacity to absorb these risks may be supported by the strength of the organization's balance sheet. Alternatively, the capital required to jump-start the shift may come from a one-time windfall, such as a large foundation grant, a bequest, or funds from a TV spectrum auction. Less resourced stations may start with incremental steps that provide proof of concept for new revenue that can accelerate the pivot to news.

Data show that even now, two decades into the explosion of digital media, most of the revenue flowing into public media stations still comes from people who listen to or watch broadcast programming. Developing significant, renewable revenue from digital services has proven to be unpredictable at best, in either the short or medium term. The prospect of achieving sustainability through digitally based revenues alone seems unlikely.

Interviewees described many complex factors at play. Community concern about the deterioration of local news, particularly in the context of local newspaper decline, can spark interest in local philanthropic support from institutional sources like foundations and corporations. It remains to be seen if those sources will

**Organizations are organically growing digital presence in quantum amounts in: San Francisco, Stillwater, Portland, San Diego, Austin**

**Organizations are launching free-standing news sites in: Jacksonville and Lehigh Valley (PA)**

provide ongoing general operating support if and when the sense of crisis recedes.

Even public media organizations that are generating relatively stable revenues through diversified sources—such as sophisticated membership and major gifts programs, and skilled sponsorship sales teams—recognize the unique challenges and stresses of sustaining expanded local news capacity.

For the frontline news provider, investment in local news becomes the priority in both funding and budgeting decisions.

▶ *One executive described developing multiple buckets in which to gather funding, including digital advertising and philanthropy. “What I saw was most [nonprofit news] organizations were getting nearly 60% of their money from grants. I didn’t want to be begging for my dinner every one to three years. So we reduced the reliance on grants down to the single digits.”*

▶ *Another executive described how they built demand for sponsorship of their products. “We had a very specific and deliberate advertising strategy, which has been very successful, and is really built on the newsletter.” Sponsors can have messages in the newsletter and an exclusive placement on the subsequent website. “We only launched that opportunity when we reached a certain subscriber base that we thought was going to be interesting.” This sponsorship opportunity now has a waitlist. “There is nothing that breeds enthusiasm within the organization—for example, within a sales team—like a new product that actually works and people actually want.”*

4. <https://inn.org/research/inn-index/the-inn-index/revenue-expenses/>

## FINDING 6.

The sustainability problem is well illustrated by the recent experience of Louisville Public Media (LPM), which operates three radio stations (two for music, one for news) and the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting. LPM, which displays many of the characteristics associated with a frontline news provider, developed through a decade-long transformation that included a \$1.7 million capital campaign to expand local news capacity and investment from the American Journalism Project. Faced with a \$750,000 budget shortfall, CEO Stephen George and his board cut eight staff positions: six full-time and two part-time employees.<sup>5</sup> Of the eight cuts, only one came from the news department. As other public media companies face similar challenges, frontline news will need to prioritize news over other important and valued services.

Despite these challenges, interviewees in this report talked about meeting the cost of their local news expansion as an enterprise commitment, as opposed to an add-on cost center. They see journalism capabilities as part of the organization's civic identity, important to building its reputation and contributing to its perceived value to its local community.

- ▶ *"It is the stories—the content, the journalism—that sells. You can talk about audience numbers all day long. What inspires and motivates people to want to support journalism—is the journalism."*
- ▶ *One executive described the discomfort some board members felt with prioritizing news over their traditional television content. "I compare the unique audience on digital to our TV viewership. And at this point, we reach twice as many people on a monthly basis through digital, than we do through TV. So to me, that says it all."*
- ▶ *One organization executive shared that they capitalized on the fact that there were still enough people in their community who remembered the heyday of its most prominent newspaper and wanted to support the organization that was bringing that caliber of journalism back to their community. "One of the things that I tell people when I talk about the growth that we've had is that it has to be market sensitive. You have to know your place well enough to know what people are interested in and going to support."*

5. See: <https://www.lpm.org/news/2024-05-30/louisville-public-media-laying-off-eight-staff-to-meet-budget-shortfall>



# Conclusion

This project began with a sense of the potential of public media to contribute to the national movement to revive local journalism. That potential was summarized in previous Wyncote research on the strengths of public media stations and their capacity to contribute to local news in their communities.<sup>6</sup> But, even as that report was being compiled, the authors could see that this potential was being realized only in a relatively small set of stations, around thirty, or less than 10 percent, of the NPR news station affiliates (and even fewer PBS stations).

Wyncote's experience in supporting digital transformation in public media and cultural institutions provided context for this report. So did observing how leaders in public media grappled with the arduous transition from audio production to text and images and the development of e-newsletters and optimized websites across hundreds of network properties. Today, the imperative to change has been amplified by the urgent need to address gaps in local journalism.

The interviews conducted for this report show that a core group of public media organizations are meeting this challenge. The tactics and practices compiled here may be a useful guide that others can follow to begin a similar journey in developing frontline news services. Aside from effective leadership, the key factor is the depth of organizational change required and these organizations' willingness to pursue it.

For a long time, public media has seen itself as a worthy recipient of support from those who care about local journalism. In fund drives, stations regularly ask listeners and viewers to contribute because they value news—and increasingly, our democracy. But public media too often falls short of these ideals.

To realize their potential as part of the movement to revive local journalism, public media leaders will need to face the problem articulated in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, published in 1997, in which Harvard professor Clayton Christensen dissected the reasons successful companies with capable managers are often unable to navigate waves of innovation. [One of his key arguments](#) is that

an over-reliance on and comfort with the success of established products and proven processes makes an organization vulnerable to competitors propelled by new methods and opportunities. Especially during periods of technological transformation, Christensen explained, company leaders have to move out of their comfort zones.

The leaders interviewed for this report demonstrated this willingness to face and overcome the innovator's dilemma. Their courage, confidence, and conviction stood out in every interview. And those who follow them will need to display a similar level of courage to move beyond the highly valued syndication pipeline that has worked so effectively and efficiently for many decades, to rise to the challenge of new opportunities to serve their communities.

6. The Growing Strength of Public Media Local Journalism, Hansen, Fuerst, Porter, Oct. 2022, [https://www.wyncotefoundation.org/\\_files/ugd/225a1d\\_94aab5d1ac40414e9e1d6015df141c5b.pdf](https://www.wyncotefoundation.org/_files/ugd/225a1d_94aab5d1ac40414e9e1d6015df141c5b.pdf)

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## Interviews

**Ashley Alvarado**, Vice President of Community Engagement and Strategic Initiatives, LAist

**Steve Bass**, President and CEO, Oregon Public Broadcasting

**Tracy Brown**, CCO, Chicago Public Media

**Bill Davis**, Principal, Station Resource Group

**Rob Dunlop**, President and CEO, Cascade Public Media

**Stephen George**, President and CEO, Louisville Public Media

**Yoni Greenbaum**, COO, Lehigh Valley Public Media

**Ron Hetrick**, President and CEO, WITF

**Debbie Hiott**, General Manager, KUT

**Rachel Hubbard**, Executive Director, KOSU

**Tim Isgitt**, CEO, Public Media Company

**Nico Leone**, President and CEO, KERA

**Deanna Mackey**, General Manager, KPBS

**Ju-Don Marshall**, President and CEO, WFAE

**Andi McDaniel**, CCO, City Cast

**David McGowan**, President and CEO, WJCT Public Media

**Kristen Muller**, CCO, LAist

**Stefanie Murray**, Director, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University

**Alison Scholly**, Managing Director, Public Media Company

**Michelle Srbnovich**, Vice President Growth Investments, American Journalism Project

**Stewart Vanderwilt**, Colorado Public Media

## Additional Insights

**Sarah Glover**, VP for News and Civic Dialogue, WHYH

**Fred Jacobs**, President, Jacobs Media

**Paul Jacobs**, VP/General Manager, Jacobs Media

**Michael Murray**, President and CEO, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations

**LaFontaine Oliver**, President and CEO, New York Public Radio

**Jessica Palombo**, Editorial Director, WJCT Public Media

**Miica Patterson**, Associate Director of Board Relations and Communications, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations

**Caroline Porter**, Director of Impact & Strategic Partnerships, National Trust for Local News

**Jim Schachter**, President and CEO, New Hampshire Public Radio

## About the Authors

**Feather Houstoun** is Senior Advisor for Journalism for the Philadelphia-based Wyncote Foundation. Since 2009, she has led philanthropic investments in a wide range of journalism enterprises spanning legacy media, public broadcasting and digital startups with regional and national coverage. She is on the boards of the Independence Public Media Foundation and the Fund for New Jersey, and was President of the William Penn Foundation from 2006 - 2011. At Wyncote, she commissioned the 2022 report, “The Hidden But Growing Strength of Public Media Journalism.”



**Mark Fuerst**, principal of Innovation4Media (I4M), has worked with public media stations, networks, funders and association leaders to analyze public service and business opportunities of digital media. Since 2012, Mark has managed the Wyncote Foundation-supported Public Media Futures Project to study the changing media landscape. In 2015, he was selected for the PRRO Award, citing “Outstanding Contributions Made on Behalf of Public Radio Stations Nationwide.” Prior to his work with I4M, Mark was General Manager of WXPB, Philadelphia, where he helped to develop the AAA music format for public radio and to launch World Cafe, NPR’s contemporary music showcase, featured on more than 200 stations around the U.S.

**Sarah Lutman** is founder and principal at 8 Bridges Workshop, a strategy, research, and evaluation firm based in St. Paul, Minnesota and working nationally with philanthropic, public media, and cultural organizations. Over the past decade, Lutman has led multiple Wyncote field research projects exploring the connections among public media organizations and local philanthropic support, and highlighting innovation in digital media and lessons learned. Prior to her work with 8 Bridges, Lutman was the Senior Vice President of Content and Media at Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media, leading local and national news, music, and cultural programming on 42 radio stations and more than a dozen national programs, including the launch of The LAist and other new program services.



**Paulina Velasco** is a multilingual journalist based in Los Angeles, California. She brings 10 years of experience in audio production, editing, and investigative reporting to her work consulting for organizations on the journalism and podcasting industries. She contributed writing to this report.

## About Wyncote Foundation

Wyncote Foundation’s mission is to support efforts that strengthen and enrich culture, community, and the natural environment. Based in Philadelphia, the foundation was launched in 2009 with funds from the Otto and Phoebe Haas Charitable Trusts, at the direction of John C. Haas.