

Philanthropy and Local Opinion Journalism: A Civic Opportunity

Kevin Loker, SNF Agora Visiting Fellow

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Loker is Senior Director of Program Operations and Partnerships at the American Press Institute, where he has spent more than a decade helping local news organizations improve their journalism and business. His research experience in journalism includes contributing to more than a dozen studies of U.S. news consumers through the Media Insight Project, API's collaboration with the Associated Press – NORC Center for Public Affairs Research; contributing to a major study of philanthropic funding ethics in news, as well as surveys of journalists; and serving as the research assistant for the fourth edition of "The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect," a widely used journalism textbook.

He was a SNF Agora Institute Visiting Fellow for 2023-2024.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN PRESS INSTITUTE

The American Press Institute supports local and community-based media through research, programs and products that foster healthy, responsive and resilient news organizations. API envisions an inclusive democracy and society, where communities have the news and information they need to make decisions and thrive. API is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization affiliated with the News/Media Alliance.

ABOUT THE SNF AGORA INSTITUTE

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Agora Institute is an academic and public forum at Johns Hopkins University that integrates research, teaching, and practice to improve and expand powerful civic engagement and informed, inclusive dialogue as the cornerstone of robust global democracy. The institute works by generating scholarly insights and transforming them into usable knowledge for civic and political actors who can enable real-world change.

Founded in 2017 with a visionary \$150 million gift to the university from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the SNF Agora Institute draws inspiration from the ancient Athenian agora, a gathering place for shared conversation, debate, and action that became the heart of democratic governance in Athens. The institute seeks to realize the promise of the ancient agora in modern times, by strengthening opportunities for people of all backgrounds to dialogue across difference, vigorously contest values and ideas that form the foundation of pluralistic democracy, and act together to have voice in developing solutions that lead to a better world.

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Intro: The Moment We're In

Journalism has played an important role in our democracy since our country's founding nearly 250 years ago. Our free press is that “great bulwark of liberty,” as my alma mater's namesake, George Mason, put it in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, drafted that same 1776. Journalism helps the public hold the powerful accountable, and when executed well, it helps the public make well-informed decisions and our communities thrive.

As a resident of Virginia interested in my family's and community's flourishing, it's encouraging for me to see today's community and philanthropic leaders affirm journalism's critical role in a democratic society. Since 2016, U.S. philanthropic support for journalism has increased just as the field promoting a healthy democracy has overall.¹ As one example, more than half of funders in a recent survey said their journalism grantmaking had increased in the past five years, with roughly a third reporting funding journalism for the first time. Notably, more than 7 in 10 funders said they had made investments to support *local* journalism.²

That interest is coming from multiple directions.

Interest in supporting local journalism exists across political divides, at least at the institutional level. The bipartisan More Perfect effort, a “campaign to align America around a shared vision for democratic renewal,” is one example. Founded as a partnership among all 14 of the country's Presidential Centers, it now counts more than 100 nonprofit and institutional partners representing a range of political persuasions, from Edward M. Kennedy Institute to the McCain Institute.³ More Perfect includes [“Access to Trusted News & Information”](#) as one of five “Democracy Goals,” with local news specifically listed alongside information at the state and national levels.

¹ [“Field In Focus: The State of Pro-Democracy Institutional Philanthropy.”](#) Democracy Fund, January 2024.

² [“Journalism and Philanthropy: Growth, Diversity and Potential Conflicts of Interest.”](#) NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with Media Impact Funders and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, August 2023.

³ Partners and more about More Perfect can be found on its website.

Longtime philanthropic supporters of journalism are doubling down on local journalism specifically—and encouraging others to join them. The MacArthur Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in 2023 anchored the launch of Press Forward, a “\$500+ million initiative to reimagine local news,” which in June 2024 counted 62 funders in its coalition. Their interim report projected a \$100+ million investment in local news by the end of 2024.⁴

Designed in part to bring new dollars into supporting local news, many Press Forward funders are local, empowering a trend already underway. Twenty-five Press Forward local chapters had been established by June 2024, with partners including community funders such as the Atwood Foundation in Alaska, the Blue Grass Community Foundation in Kentucky, and the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund.

And that says nothing of funders, both large entities and individuals of various backgrounds, that are exploring their own direct funding of local journalism initiatives. Corporate-connected philanthropy, such as Microsoft’s Democracy Forward program and Levi Strauss Foundation, support local journalism transformation. In July 2024, NPR announced a \$5.5 million grant from philanthropists Eric and Wendy Schmidt to launch regional newsrooms in Appalachia and the Mountain West, and to sustain other collaboratives. Individual giving makes up 29% of nonprofit news sites’ revenue,

according to the Institute for Nonprofit News, with almost a third of that coming from donors giving less than \$1,000 a year.⁵ The funding landscape now comfortably ranges from long-standing foundations to community foundations to individuals of high net worth to small donations from individuals that add up to large support.

Research on journalism’s role in inclusive democracy underscores the attention on—and the urgency of—these investments.

Research on journalism’s role in inclusive democracy underscores the attention on—and the urgency of—these investments. “News deserts” are growing rapidly, with

newspapers (often weeklies serving rural areas) closing at an average rate of more than two a week.⁶ When a newspaper closes, it increases political polarization, as measured by an increase in partisan down-ballot voting.⁷ But when a local paper stays focused on local issues, [it appears to slow polarization](#).

The philanthropic support may be welcomed by many in an ailing news industry, a complex information landscape, and a democracy challenged in 2024 by much more than polarization.

But what intrigued me and formed the basis for my project as an SNF Agora Institute Visiting Fellow was this often-cited last study, the one about the effects on polarization from news outlets keeping a focus on local issues. The findings were not that keeping *reporting* focused on local politics—that is, on city hall over the presidency—limited polarization (though that should be studied, too) but rather that keeping *local opinion and commentary* focused on local issues did so.

⁴ [“Building the Movement: A Look at Our Work to Date.”](#) Press Forward, 2024. (PDF download)

⁵ For reference, the Institute for Nonprofit News releases data on its nonprofit members each year in its “INN Index.” These numbers pull from the revenue section of the [INN Index 2024](#).

⁶ [“The State of Local News 2023: Vanishing Newspapers, Digital Divides, and Reaching Underserved Communities.”](#) Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, 2023.

⁷ “Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior,” *Journal of Communication*, 2018.

Further, from more than a decade of work at the American Press Institute, I have seen that philanthropy is not just funding more local reporters and experiments on the “news” side, an intervention that might signal a priority on “more facts, please” as leading to better civic health. It’s also funding experiments in *local opinion sections*, bolstering the civic discourse these community forums provide.

The trends highlight a key point: Local journalism has many functions. This report explores why philanthropy should be interested in more than one of them.

The bulwark needs both fact and commentary

When I moved as a kid to a small town in rural South Dakota, the paper I came to read every day provided facts (it held city hall accountable) but it also provided a vehicle, through the opinion section, for residents to share their views, debate, and influence the public conversation. As a newcomer, the op-eds and letters I read taught me issues my neighbors cared about, stakeholders for those issues, and that there was at least some room to air divergent views about what’s best for the community.

To George Mason and his contemporaries, the value of the free press would have always been about more than gathering and publishing facts. Alexander Hamilton and co-authors published *The Federalist Papers*, arguments to ratify the Constitution, in two New York state newspapers, the *New York Packet* and *The Independent Journal*. These written opinions were reprinted in papers across the state.⁸ And the early days of U.S. newspapers blurred reporting, commentary, and analysis, as political parties and politicians often subsidized newspapers (including Hamilton and his *New York Post*).⁹ News of current events mattered, but so did the space and the vehicle for discourse they provided.

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Of course, in the intervening years, the position of opinion journalism has changed. Historians note that the *New York Tribune* introduced the separation of news and opinion when it gave opinion its own page.¹⁰ That separation has largely held, with newspapers (including eventually the one I read in South Dakota) copying the format. Even new nonprofit news and commercial start-ups retain such distinctions.¹¹ Some media companies are doubling down on the distinction, even as the rise of self-publishing, enabled by the internet, may again be blurring lines.¹²

⁸ The [Federalist Papers](#), posted by the Library of Congress.

⁹ [“A Short History of Opinion Journalism.”](#) Digital Resource Center, Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University.
¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nonprofit news sites with opinion or commentary sections include, as examples: [CalMatters](#) (CA), [MinnPost](#) (MN), [Cardinal News](#) (VA), and [Bridge Michigan](#) (MI). Commercial start-ups that publish opinion, commentary, or first-person essays, as examples: [Lookout Santa Cruz](#) (CA), [LebTown](#) (PA), [Vinegar Hill Magazine](#) (VA), and [TAPinto Westfield](#) (NJ).

¹² The internet has empowered more people to begin publications for people who have long needed them and, simultaneously, empowered others to create publications that mix opinion and reporting for political ends. “Pink slime” and partisan local journalism are among new entrants. [“‘Pink Slime’: Partisan journalism and the future of local news.”](#) Columbia Journalism Review, 2024.

Ask American journalists today and one will find open debate about how much opinion *should* be in our press and where. What opinion should come through in news stories, if at all?¹³ Do opinion

Americans recognize that journalism should do many things. Majorities in surveys say it should be accurate and fair and provide diverse perspectives. Many say it should provide community forums.

sections cause more trouble than good and should they be dumped entirely?¹⁴ Are there middle grounds where fact and analysis or perspective can be labeled in a clearer way?¹⁵

Americans, however, recognize that journalism should do many things. Majorities in surveys say it should be accurate and fair and provide diverse perspectives.¹⁶ Many say it should provide community forums. Young consumers of news say about the same as older generations on these points—and young people who pay or donate to news are more likely to want the forums.¹⁷ And as far back as 2018, Americans signaled that clarity of purpose is useful. Roughly 8 in 10 said to address fake news and

misinformation, journalists should make the difference between news stories and opinion “more distinct.”¹⁸

These debates aside, philanthropists and researchers paying attention to the role of local journalism in U.S. democracy would do well to notice two modern trends:

1 Local opinion and commentary sections are reinventing themselves for today’s needs. The image of a standard opinion page, the same as it was decades ago, does not speak to the innovation underway in big and small ways across the country. To support civic discourse and better serve communities, news leaders are reimagining how they steward the local marketplace of ideas, the local “agora,” supporting democratic discourse. We are at the start of a movement where opinion editors are finding new ways to model healthy civic discourse, equip residents for healthy civic discourse, and even actively facilitate healthy discourse. These roles of the opinion sections complement and expand what’s possible with traditional reporting—together they fortify the bulwark—though limitations in staffing, resources, and skills inhibit experimentation.

¹³ This conversation happens among each side, i.e., among reporters and among columnists. Here’s one discussion from a contributing columnist at Dallas Morning News: [“Distinguishing news from opinion can help strengthen trust in the media.”](#) George W. Bush Presidential Center, 2023.

¹⁴ [“Trump’s USA Today op-ed demonstrates why it’s time to unbundle news and opinion content.”](#) Eli Pariser, Nieman Lab, 2018.

¹⁵ Semafor’s article format is one notable development in recent years. [“The media startup Semafor launches with a “more honest” article format and lots of global ambition.”](#) Sarah Scire, Nieman Lab, 2022.

¹⁶ Several surveys ask about concepts such as these. As one example, see this chapter from [“Americans and the News Media: What They Do — and Don’t—Understand About Each Other.”](#) Media Insight Project, 2018.

¹⁷ By this author on Media Insight Project data: [“Media can engage Millennials and Gen Z in community discussion. Here is where to start.”](#) American Press Institute, 2023.

¹⁸ Americans also expressed confusion around journalism language in the above 2018 study, including popular opinion words such as “op-ed” and “editorial.” [Trusting News](#) is one organization trying to help news organizations better label their content online and on social media, speaking to this and other concerns Americans have signaled about the information environment. In that same study, less than half of Americans felt they could easily sort news versus opinion online and in social media. It is indeed a varied landscape, where news reporting or opinion journalism sit side by side with information from a range of sources (professional, individual, and potentially fake). By the author: [“Confusion about what’s news and what’s opinion is a big problem, but journalists can help solve it.”](#) 2018.

2 While much philanthropic funding for journalism focuses on increasing reporters or the amount and quality of news reporting, grants and donations have also supported experiments that advance this reimagining of local opinion. People are seeing the value of local opinion journalism and the “agora” it provides to help civic life. Local media have found ways to partner with philanthropy or take donations to fund opinion editor positions, enable series on pressing local issues and from more diverse voices, and equip more residents to share their voices on the topics that matter to them. Like philanthropic involvement with traditional news reporting, unique ethical considerations remain. Yet news organizations and funders are navigating them for the good of better local conversation.

This report is designed as an introduction to both trends. It relies on discussions and planning from a convening I hosted among opinion editors, researchers, and philanthropists at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg Center in Washington, D.C., in 2024; two larger convenings of opinion editors I organized in 2019 and 2023 for the American Press Institute; and participation in programming with news leaders, philanthropists, and researchers at API since 2013, as well as new research, interviews, and surveys with involved parties.

Mini-case studies and discussions within this report will provide an overview of the ways philanthropy and community donations are helping reimagine local opinion journalism. They are complemented by reflections on the civic functions of opinion journalism, how quickly the landscape of opinion journalism has changed, and what news leaders see restrains them from embracing these functions more fully.

The report ends with implications and recommendations for academic researchers, philanthropists interested in the health of U.S. democracy, and news leaders themselves.

The moment we’re in is a junction for how stakeholders support and reimagine local journalism. It deserves a lens that includes what’s possible, and already happening, for both reporting *and* opinion.

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What Opinion Editors, Researchers, and Nonprofits That Support Journalism Are Learning

A new convening to learn

For my SNF Agora Institute visiting fellowship project, I gathered a range of stakeholders to discuss the trend of philanthropic support that's helping reimagine local opinion journalism. A list of participants is included at the end of this report.

Opinion editors rarely gather in person now, a casualty of a field weakened economically and working to adapt since the rise of the internet and other factors since at least the early 2000s. Members of the Association of Opinion Journalists, a trade association for such journalists and editors, gathered annually since 1947, when it began as The National Conference of Editorial Writers. But AOJ merged in 2016 into the American Society of News Editors, later the News Leaders Association,¹⁹ which itself dissolved in 2024.

Some exceptions include this D.C. fellowship gathering plus two convenings in the past five years organized by the American Press Institute.²⁰ In 2019, I helped organize a Phoenix gathering of opinion editors, researchers, and civil society representatives to discuss the experiments and possibilities of addressing polarization and improving dialogue through opinion journalism. In 2023, I helped organize and facilitate our API Local News Summit on Opinion, Civic Discourse, and Sustainability.

Opinion editors in attendance at the 2023 gathering in Austin, Texas, were keenly interested in an opinion section's connection to sustainability.²¹ Several asked questions of Kate Riley, editorial page editor of *The Seattle Times*, who discussed an opinion series on mental health that was philanthropically funded.²² Through conversations there and afterward, it became clear that such experimentation with philanthropy and local opinion journalism was happening across the country, but those involved were not connected enough to begin learning from one another. The SNF Agora Visiting Fellowship helped begin to address that.

Emerging conversations

Participants in the 2024 fellowship convening discussed and worked through several topics.

They wanted to discuss who was doing what and how; they strove to articulate the value they provide for democracy and their communities; and they sought to ground it all in the practical challenges and needs of their organizations.

The range of experiments

Experiments with philanthropy for local opinion journalism are numerous, and they differ.

¹⁹ [“AOJ-ASNE Merger,”](#) as archived on the News Leaders Association website and accessed in June 2024.

²⁰ As history has it, API itself played a role in kick-starting the NCEW in 1947. See [“NCEW: 50 Years”](#) as archived on the NLA website and accessed in June 2024.

²¹ Opinion sections can often be a driver for local news' revenue model. For more on the theme, see this article from API: [“Opinion journalism and sustainability: Publishers find out what works,”](#) 2023.

²² The Seattle Times is often seen as a national leader in collaborative models for funding local journalism generally. Read more about [Seattle Times' work with philanthropy](#) on its website.

In preparation for the event, I compiled this [list of how local media have worked with philanthropy in different ways](#) to:

- 1) **Fund positions.** For example, *The Desert Sun* in California has taken donations through the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation and funded its opinion editor position for about three years now.
- 2) **Build proofs of concept.** For example, the *Arizona Republic* experimented with more video in its opinion section via a grant from the American Press Institute, premised on the idea that many people have something to contribute on a local issue but not all people will want to write a letter or op-ed.
- 3) **Expand resources for engagement.** For example, the *Concord Monitor* in New Hampshire used funding from the NH Humanities to hold in-person letter-writing workshops to bring in and empower more voices for its opinion section.
- 4) **Spark topic-based conversations.** For example, as mentioned earlier, *The Seattle Times* used funding from a mental health reporting grant to provide in-depth commentary on the same theme.
- 5) **Enable collaborations.** For example, civic news start-up CivicLex and the *Lexington Herald-Leader's* opinion section worked together to broaden the voices represented on key local issues, made possible by support from the Blue Grass Community Foundation.

The experiments are happening at both for-profit legacy media such as newspapers, which almost invariably have an opinion section, as well as nonprofit news sites, some of which have added or expanded their use of commentary as they have grown. CalMatters, a leading nonpartisan reporting

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source for the country's most populous state, in 2023 launched California Voices, a new commentary forum "aiming to broaden our understanding of the state and spotlight Californians directly impacted by policy or its absence."²³ Cardinal News, a nonprofit news site serving southwest and Southside Virginia, in 2023 launched The Cardinal Way, its own expansion of commentary and "collection of civil debate."²⁴

Mechanisms for partnering with philanthropy differ. And the field continues to experiment. Mini-case studies on four of these formats are included in this report, specifically the following: *The Desert Sun* (for-profit paper working with

local foundation), *The Salt Lake Tribune* (legacy paper that is now a nonprofit), the *Concord Monitor* (paper working with nonprofit news collaborative for its own workshops), and the Charlottesville Inclusive Media Project (a collaboration of nonprofit and for-profits with a shared project).

The roles local opinion sections have served and can serve

Our conversation in Washington, D.C., also helped illuminate the value local opinion journalism might provide for U.S. democracy. Here is a summary of what came up with editors, researchers, and philanthropists during that gathering.

²³ ["Introducing 'California Voices,' a commentary mission to spotlight less visible authors."](#) CalMatters, November 2023.

²⁴ ["The Cardinal Way: Civility Rules."](#) Cardinal News.

Community rallies to support local paper's opinion section

Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation helps fund opinion editor position at commercial paper

Unfortunately, the story is common: The local newspaper planned to make staff reductions due to tight budgets. As part of those staff cuts, the opinion editor position was eliminated.

In Palm Springs, Calif., however, community members came together in 2020 to bring it back.

"If the opinion page of *The Desert Sun* goes the way of the dinosaur, this important forum for regional discussion will go with it," wrote Joe Wallace, then treasurer of the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation (CVJF), a nonprofit organization formed by a small group of community members who cared about journalism in their community.

Not too long before, *The Desert Sun* had gotten attention for being a news organization with an opinion section whose tactics limited polarization in the community. The book [Home Style Opinion](#) was about *The Desert Sun*. Before CVJF was established, the paper had worked with the local community college foundation to fund interns and had received two reporters via the national Report for America program. But the creation of CVJF took the paper's philanthropic support to a new level.

CVJF began supporting *The Desert Sun*'s opinion editor position in 2021 at a rate of \$60,000 annually. The nonprofit is now in the fourth year of supporting the job at that level.

"Our community has a strong track record of supporting a wide variety of nonprofits, so we were optimistic about our prospects when we launched the organization," said Julie Makinen, former editor of *The Desert Sun* and *San Francisco Standard* and current treasurer of CVJF. The organization has also raised [thousands of additional dollars](#) to support paid internships, reporting fellows, and, through some travel funds, reporting trips for media in the area, including local TV and digital-only outlets.

Today the funding from CVJF comes almost exclusively from the local community, with donations ranging from \$10 to \$10,000, according to Makinen. Most are from individuals, though the group has also gathered support from entities such as local governments and a

local realtors' group, and is exploring more grants.

Events are also an opportunity to garner support and awareness. An event in April drew about 130 people to the Rancho Mirage Library. At this event, award-winning cartoonist Mike Thompson and *Desert Sun* opinion editor Nicky Loomis presented on the history of newspaper opinion pages (based on *The Desert Sun*'s own archives) and the [history of editorial cartoons](#).

CVJF does encounter concern among some prospective donors about their money supporting work at a for-profit company, according to Makinen. (*The Desert Sun* is owned by Gannett.)

"Most of this concern has been focused on the national newspaper chain that owns the biggest local newspaper and has drawn fire for laying off staff, closing the local printing press, and raising prices," said Makinen. "There is little to no resistance to supporting locally owned outlets that are 'for profit,' as the perception is that these are local businesses that can struggle just like a local restaurant or barber shop."

"Given this, our strategy is to support the entire local news ecosystem, agnostic of ownership status or structure," said Makinen, "and emphasizing our support for the local editors and reporters who are doing the work of journalism day in, day out, in our immediate vicinity."

CVJF has discussed whether support for staff positions should have built-in sunset clauses, as the intent is not indefinite support "but to assist local newsrooms in maintaining positions while they work to develop plans to sustain these roles on their own."

Regardless, Makinen says, she thinks it's an approach that others can explore.

"We believe this model could be replicated in communities where there is a vibrant ecosystem of local nonprofits already, a core group of committed board members with experience in nonprofits, local media organizations willing to participate and help with publicity efforts, and [media] willing to work together for the good of the whole ecosystem and not just their own news organization."

Local journalism has many functions. It long has. At the American Press Institute, we've written about how it's time for media to embrace their role as community convener.²⁵

Media can convene community members in many different ways. Some of this might happen on the “news” side, where journalists engage community members in person to inform the focus of their beat or to complement something already published. A reporter may meet with teachers, parents, and students to inform education coverage, or they might hold a community event to share the results of their investigation on an educational policy and its implementation.

Opinion sections are natural spots for convening; in fact, it's what the section is for. Their structure, at its best, uplifts what different people care about and why, and it stewards conversation about matters of importance to local communities. That can be done in published columns and letters. Increasingly, it is also done in digitally native formats like video or through in-person gatherings.

Is opinion journalism's contribution to a local community different from other parts of local journalism? In our conversations, at least three distinct functions emerged: modeling, equipping, and facilitating. Done well, local opinion journalism can:

- Model healthy civic discourse
- Equip residents for healthy civic discourse
- Facilitate healthy civic discourse

Below I describe why each function of local opinion journalism matters for community members and U.S. democracy as a whole, and I provide examples of news organizations demonstrating the function.

Model healthy civic discourse

So many challenges face our communities and country today. As we face them, many people feel divided, particularly across political lines. As a stark example, few people would be okay with one of their children marrying someone from the opposing political party, a significant shift from a generation ago.²⁶

Few people are confident in public leadership on civic matters, too. As another stark example, the majority of the country in June 2024 described both U.S. presidential candidates from the two major political parties as “embarrassing.” Even more than a third of each candidate's supporters described their candidate as embarrassing.^{27,28}

²⁵ [“Journalism has many roles. It's time to embrace the role of convener.”](#) this author and Sam Ragland, American Press Institute, June 2024.

²⁶ These statistics are often cited. For an interesting discussion of related concepts and the question asked slightly differently, see this article by the author: [“Polarization, journalism and the ‘pictures in our heads’: A Q&A with Yanna Krupnikov.”](#) American Press Institute, 2022.

²⁷ [“Amid Doubts About Biden's Mental Sharpness, Trump Leads Presidential Race.”](#) Pew Research Center, July 2024.

²⁸ This was all before the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump, which prompted leaders across the political spectrum to strongly state there is no room for violence in our political life, even when we disagree. The risk of greater political violence is on many people's minds, given the events of the past several years and polls exploring what Americans think about political violence. For more on forces at work, including “rhetoric, culture, and an aggressive Republican coalition,” see scholars Lilliana Mason of the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University and Nathan Kalmoe of the University of Louisiana, e.g., [“How to Prevent a Spiral of Political Violence in America.”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, August 2024.

People lack examples that model healthy civic discourse.

Social norms, however, matter. In many cases, we become what we see. At a minimum, it influences us.

Done well, opinion sections that engage a wide range of community members might influence social norms. If you see people respectfully making a reasonable argument across lines of difference, or better yet, talking across them productively, that might influence behavior.²⁹ It can show people who want such conversation that they aren't alone, and it might "shame" others into acting respectfully.

We're influenced most by norms of people in our "group," whether that's a church, political party, or something else that unifies us with others. If you can make it a norm in *your local community* that you engage in civic matters in a thoughtful, solutions-seeking way, what might that do for you and your neighbors?³⁰

Media influence norms.³¹ They also have wide reach. Local opinion journalism, rooted in civic values and expressed either in text or new innovative formats, might be a prime way to model civic discourse that's healthy.

■ **Local media that's done it: The Tennessean**

The Tennessean in Nashville affirmatively states that its opinion section values healthy civic discourse—and it takes action to model it, too.

Seven years ago, *The Tennessean* editorial board introduced [Civility Tennessee](#), a set of guiding principles that its opinion and engagement director, David Plazas, told me "ensure we hold true to promoting civil discourse, welcoming diverse viewpoints, and amplifying underrepresented views." It's a written commitment of what will ground the section, rooted in "civility," not just as mere politeness but as the [duty of "citizens"](#) to uphold, sustain, and challenge society.

The Tennessean often reminds its audience of the commitment. Plazas, in July 2024, noted to me he referenced these values in two recent columns, one on what can be a [divisive local issue \(school vouchers\)](#) and one on the [national matter of standing against political violence](#) (following the assassination attempt on former President Trump). Even the simple act of writing and linking to the values may model something important in our divided times.

The Tennessean also focuses its resources based on that commitment. Plazas is a leader in engagement, hosting listening sessions and community events in partnership with many local groups. For their Nashville Mayoral Debates series in 2023, his team worked with the local News Channel 5, League of Women Voters, Belmont University, and American Baptist College. Collaborations can show commitment.

If you see people respectfully making a reasonable argument across lines of difference, or better yet, talking across them productively, that might influence behavior.

²⁹ The more people think others in their community are connecting across lines of difference, the more willing they are to do so. "[Social Connection Across Difference in the US, Pilot Study](#)" (More in Common), 2023.

³⁰ For a readable introduction to creating larger, inclusive group identities, see Jay Van Bavel and Dominic Packer's "[The Power of Us: Harnessing Our Shared Identities to Improve Performance, Increase Cooperation, and Promote Social Harmony](#)."

³¹ Here is one exploration of how that occurs: "[How Does Media Influence Social Norms? Experimental Evidence on the Role of Common Knowledge](#)." Eric Arias, *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2018.

Collaboration brings new voices —and funding opportunities— to local opinion

The nonprofit Granite State News Collaborative works with media across the state and helped make a *Concord Monitor* opinion project possible

Many opinion sections want to increase the range of voices represented in their forum. It makes the forum more reflective of the community, but it takes time—and resources.

To help better equip residents to share their voices on local issues, the *Concord Monitor* in New Hampshire developed an opinion writing workshop series. To make it happen, it got grant funding via NH Humanities and collaborated with Granite State News Collaborative, a nonprofit organization supporting journalism throughout the state.

“When this opportunity came about, all the players had already done all the good work of building up trust and understanding among one another,” said Melanie Plenda, director of the Granite State News Collaborative. NH Humanities was a “close community partner” of the collaborative, and the individuals at the paper were known to Plenda, too.

Why did the collaboration make sense to the collaborative, the existing nonprofit?

First, it was “just a great idea,” said Plenda, with lessons they could apply to other work. “[The *Monitor* also] graciously included our name and logo on their materials which helps grow awareness of the Collaborative and our connection to community and civic engagement.”

For the *Monitor*, the funding meant working with the expertise of local education facilitators to help make the workshop work.

“As an editor, I’m able to answer questions about

the *Monitor* and offer guidance and insight on how the opinion section operates,” wrote Allie Ginwala, audience engagement editor in charge of opinion at the *Monitor*. “But I’m not an educator, so having two professionals from within that space to help give people direction on forming an argument and how to properly vet sources added so much substance and value to what we were able to offer.”

And the series did help expand voices and involvement for the paper’s opinion section.

Submissions increased both from first-time and returning writers. Five people who attended one workshop had a Letter to the Editor published for the first time in the months that followed. One who attended and had written letters in the past decided to write a longer opinion essay and went on to submit such essays regularly. Another occasional essay writer started contributing weekly.

The Collaborative has supported another opinion-focused project: a column and podcast series by writer and community member Anthony Payton called [The Common Ground Initiative](#).

Asked if other nonprofits should consider collaborating to support opinion-focused projects like the workshops, Plenda said yes.

“Honestly, I’d say just go for it,” said Plenda. “Having civil civic discourse and engagement isn’t going to come about by one big thing. Rather, it’s achieved by many, smaller meaningful gatherings like this with neighbors and trusted community leaders.”

Importantly, *The Tennessean's* opinion section also models civic discourse online, outside the column format. Earlier this year, its “Tennessee Voices” video podcast held its [400th interview](#). These simple video conversations between Plazas and local community leaders demonstrate healthy conversation, and the large scale of the participation (again 400 episodes) may help show conversation is a norm.

“There is a desire by ‘Tennessee Voices’ video podcast guests and the audience to hold or watch authentic conversations with people in leadership positions,” said Plazas. He started the podcast during the pandemic, and, by design, the format has not changed since then. Plazas and the podcast guests discuss the guest’s work or mission, their self-care routine, and their origin stories.

“Video is a way to connect with our audience as attention spans have been shrinking and we get into some tough issues while demonstrating how to do so in a civil and productive way,” said Plazas.

Equip residents for healthy civic discourse

If we want robust civic engagement in this country, we need Americans to feel empowered with a range of civic skills.

Voting is one important civic behavior, an action many people may want to see increased. But it’s far from the only behavior we need for democracy to function as it should.

Democracy requires organizing. It requires participation, awareness, and negotiation, in addition to voting. And it requires persuasion and good argumentation.

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Nearly every level of democracy in this country requires people to join together, and almost all require making a case to others. People can join a movement or vote based on a compelling argument, and politicians and people should deliberate over the cases for policies or other paths forward.

Unless we want shouting matches or are okay with people making misleading arguments or ones built on negative characteristics like fear or bias, we need good argumentation. People need to be able to recognize good and flawed cases. And if we want democracy practiced at every level, they should be able to make compelling arguments themselves.

Arguments matter for “democracy,” yes, but they also help us individually and socially, too. Who doesn’t want to be able to lay out the best case for a more personal decision for a family member or friend? Who doesn’t want to be able to deliberate well at a meeting of their religious council, homeowner’s association, or workplace?

But in a country lacking good argumentation, we need more places to learn it and practice it. An engaged local opinion section, one with resources to help a range of community members share their voice and share it well, may be one training ground.

Now a nonprofit, long-standing paper takes support for reporting and opinion

***The Salt Lake Tribune* led a trend of papers pursuing nonprofit status and has raised support across reporting and opinion sides**

One way legacy newspapers have preserved their role in communities involves [tax status](#). Some have converted from a for-profit paper to a nonprofit news operation; others have fallen under nonprofit ownership. The opportunity can create more pathways for community support and hopes for sustainability—a path taken by for-profit media in [Illinois](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [California](#), as examples.

In many ways, *The Salt Lake Tribune* in Salt Lake City, Utah, led the way. In 2019, it became the first legacy news organization in the U.S. to receive approval from the Internal Revenue Service to become a 501c3. People have followed its work so much that they created a [playbook for their model](#).

They also may be a leader in fundraising for both traditional journalism *and* opinion.

Like other news organizations, the *Tribune* has evolved its traditional opinion section. Now called “Voices,” the section is clearer about its civic goal. The *Tribune* seeks to “create a public forum that disrupts the outrage machine and instead fosters curiosity, builds trust, and creates connection,” [wrote](#) Voices editor Sara Weber in 2023 when announcing the new focus. Messaging on intention is clear, even in auto-responses to submissions.

Since the revamp, the *Tribune* has received new grants to experiment. This includes elevating youth voices and using multimedia to feature more perspectives. The support so far has come from national players, including the Solutions Journalism

Network and the American Press Institute, but there’s interest locally, too.

“While we describe in detail the impact of local journalism in civic engagement, you can see it happening in real-time in Voices,” said Ciel Hunter, chief development officer at *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

And the focus of an opinion section—more on the public forum than the reporting—may interest *different* potential supporters for local media.

“[The] Voices [section] provides a very different realm for support,” said Hunter. “It is about perspectives, about conversation, about listening. It moves the conversation from underwriting or supporting coverage on a certain topic to supporting the very notion of hearing from multiple perspectives.”

The grant from Solutions Journalism Network allowed the Voices section to feature youth perspectives on mental health. A current grant from API will let them host in-person conversations with young Utahns around the elections, leading to deeper relationships and new social media-friendly opinion content.

Other signs validate the work. In a recent presentation, Weber shared that since she started and the change in focus began, median pageviews for op-eds have grown more than 80%. In Q2 2024, the *Tribune* also increased the percentage of contributions from “affected” populations to 37%, a number that previously sat between 8% and 20%.

■ Local media that's done it: *Kansas City Star*

The *Kansas City Star* puts in work to represent a wide range of voices in its opinion section—and to help those new to the craft to make arguments that may be heard.

“People live in Kansas City for a reason,” said Yvette Walker when she joined the paper as vice president and editorial page director one year ago.³² “It’s a great city, but things are happening all around them, and I think it’s up to us to help them understand and ask questions.”

As the editor, she and her deputy help people get their voices heard. They pay special attention to people in underrepresented communities and different age groups and encourage them to submit columns.

At the Washington, D.C., event and in a subsequent interview, we discussed the work that goes into helping people who are not used to opinion writing share their perspectives productively on important local matters.

Not everyone who has an opinion to share may be experienced or comfortable with writing. *Kansas City Star* editors seek to retain the author’s voice while making gentle suggestions about sentences and organization of the piece. Coaching the writer helps improve the content for the reader. It’s also something that writers can take back to the people they serve.

“It helps them in their community to begin to understand how to think about their own message and their own issues,” said Walker. “They can use that in many other ways. They can use that in their own social media, and they can use that in any marketing that they may want to do for this community.”

Some contributions arrive as drafts in good shape, with limited editing needed. But as the paper works to diversify voices from nonofficial sources that aren’t experienced in such formats, the coaching is important.

“That is going to take a little bit of time, but it’s worth it because we want people from the community to see themselves represented in the *Star*,” said Walker.

Facilitate healthy civic discourse

Whenever one faces a challenge that affects multiple stakeholders, it’s hard to find a situation that makes many people feel content.

But it’s a lot harder if there’s no structure or mechanism at all.

Mediators and moderators—be they people or institutions—help corral unfiltered opinions and channel them in constructive directions. Having a third-party structure and guiding the problem-solving or reflection of others helps people participate and share. It also helps things go fairly or equitably. Someone facilitating discussion can enforce rules, provide stability, and enrich the conversation and connection-making by what they see from their more-removed position.

Local communities benefit from structure and processes to help guide conversation and deliberation. A government can provide some level of this, but it’s easy enough to imagine how independence

Having a third-party structure and guiding the problem-solving or reflection of others helps people participate and share. It also helps things go fairly or equitably.

³² “‘Like coming home.’ *The Kansas City Star* hires Yvette Walker as its next opinion editor.” *Kansas City Star*, June 2023.

from some of a government’s incentives can help open deliberation about what’s good for community members as well.

But who has the reach to make a facilitated forum work? Media outlets are a good candidate for this—they have a built-in audience and built-in mechanisms for communicating, and many have a built-in forum already in the opinion section, one ready to be repurposed for more active facilitation on and off the page.

■ **Local media that’s done it: The Coloradoan**

The Fort Collins *Coloradoan* reimagined its opinion section for the digital age by creating an “opinion forum” built on a digital commenting platform—and deliberation expertise from a local university.

You could say, though, that the collaboration was born of necessity. Like other papers, staff reductions limited what the paper was able to publish, including for opinion.

The *Coloradoan* reimagined its opinion section for the digital age by creating an “opinion forum”, a collaboration born of necessity. Like other papers, staff reductions limited what the paper was able to publish, including for opinion.

“But [the section’s] absence as a community forum was missed by community stakeholders and our staff,” wrote then editor Eric Larsen in a 2023 piece for the American Press Institute website Better News.³³ With the help of Martin Carcasson and the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, the paper launched Coloradoan Conversations.

The experiment, which the American Press Institute helped support with a small grant, focused conversation online on key local issues. The *Coloradoan* staff, with assistance from the CPD, wrote recaps summarizing the discussion, drawing key insights, highlighting specific comments, and working to move the conversation forward. “The analysis borrows from research on deliberation and argumentation,” Carcasson wrote for API, “engaging questions of fact, bringing out underlying values and

tensions, highlighting key themes, and evaluating the quality of the interaction.”³⁴

The approach, thanks to its incorporation of deliberative expertise, raised the level of discourse. It also helped drive subscriptions to the paper³⁵ and was lauded by opinion editors at API’s 2023 summit as something many local media should pursue.

The collaboration, however, is on hiatus after the paper’s corporate owner ended use of the commenting system that the project relied on as well as staff changes.

“Overall, the project was a learning experience,” Carcasson told me in July 2024. “I think we sparked a lot of interesting discussions but ultimately never quite got our legs under us. We still believe in

³³ <https://betternews.org/how-a-university-partnership-helps-the-coloradoan-build-opinion-content-and-audience-engagement/>, Eric Larsen, BetterNews.org, January 2023.

³⁴ “[How local opinion sections can transform into public forums: Insights from public deliberation.](#)” Martin Carcasson for API, 2023.

³⁵ “[How a university partnership helps The Coloradoan build opinion content and audience engagement.](#)” Eric Larsen, BetterNews.org, January 2023.

the model, however, and are actively looking to develop its next iteration.” The Center for Public Deliberation continues to work with other Colorado news outlets on projects, including “Above the Noise,” a statewide initiative on local election coverage and civic discourse.³⁶

Each of these arguments—*The Tennessean*, the *Kansas City Star*, and *The Coloradoan*—may speak to why a community member—or funder—might see value in a local opinion section. But embracing all three at once would have benefits for local media as well.

Each function helps the organization’s prospects for sustainability and impact. Modeling healthy civic discourse might provide hope to community members and attract more interest and potential readership. Equipping more residents for civic discourse might give additional people a positive experience with their local media, making them more likely to turn to or engage with it in the future. And facilitating healthy civic discourse might increase the organization’s impact locally, boosting motivations for subscriptions or membership or offering new opportunities for partnership and support.

Those looking to reimagine local opinion journalism along these lines can use this [curated list of evidence and research findings](#) to inform—or make a case for—their work.

Needs and real challenges of local newsrooms

Our event also surfaced challenges of local media and stakeholders pursuing such projects. These include:

- Time and capacity
- Navigating the role of philanthropy in local journalism today
- Specific considerations when mixing opinion and philanthropy
- Gaining facilitative skills as jobs evolve

Time and capacity

The U.S. news landscape has seen substantial change over the past decade. Northwestern Local News Initiative’s State of Local Journalism for 2023 said the country has lost a third of its newspapers and two-thirds of its newspaper journalists since 2005. Many dailies, it said, have less than a fifth of the journalists they had on staff in 2005.³⁷

Opinion editors have felt those cuts, too. While the cuts have affected their work alongside everyone else’s, expectations around the scale of what can be published have not always kept pace.

I asked several opinion editors to expand this conversation on their time and capacity, including any staffing and/or resource changes that have affected their local opinion journalism over the past decade.

Said one opinion editor at a metro newspaper, the widest-read newspaper in his state:

Equipping more residents for civic discourse might give additional people a positive experience with their local media, making them more likely to engage with it in the future.

³⁶ More on [Above the Noise](#).

³⁷ “[The State of Local News](#),” Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, 2023.

“Our commitment to the opinion space is just me and whatever I can manage to do — the level of resources committed (e.g., my salary and a few hundred dollars per month for semi-regular columnists) has stayed the same, albeit diminished by the effects of inflation.”

Many local news opinion staffs are small, a team of one or two, and thus understandably focused on near-term demands. Much of the innovation throughout this report, however, takes time—to build relationships, to develop new skills for convening, or to help voices not used to the opinion section be heard well.

Said an editor at a metro newspaper serving one of America’s largest cities:

“Because we’re short on editors, we often don’t have time to polish a super-rough gem—the sort of piece that’s likely to be written by an individual, not a communications professional.”

“This does take more time, and maybe there’s a particular reason we should have a new FTE called community editor or something, that is paid for,” said Walker of the *Kansas City Star*.

Navigating the role of philanthropy in local journalism today

The scale of philanthropic involvement in local journalism may be increasing, but it is still relatively new for both sides.

To navigate this terrain, we are beginning to see communities form to discuss issues and best practices. The Lenfest Institute for Local Journalism launched the News Philanthropy Network, a community of practice for fundraisers and development professionals in journalism, in 2020.

Media Impact Funders, a network of funders formally incorporated as a nonprofit in 2008, has been growing in membership.

We are also seeing more efforts by for-profit local media to identify ways to partner with philanthropy. This provides promise for work that supports reimagining local opinion, as many opinion sections are still in commercial news organizations. But development jobs for local journalism are relatively new, with added nuance when based in commercial spaces.

On the philanthropy side, some may hesitate to fund work in commercial media. Many funders, however, still do.

According to a recent survey, while about two-thirds of

According to a recent survey, while about two-thirds of funders still “preferred” to support nonprofit news outlets, about 4 out of 10 had supported for-profit news organizations in the past five years.

funders still “preferred” to support nonprofit news outlets, about 4 out of 10 had supported for-profit news organizations in the past five years.³⁸

“More and more, all of us who are working hard on the sustainability of healthy local news ecosystems have come to recognize that nonprofit/for-profit is a tax status, not a business model,” wrote Frank Mungeam, chief innovation officer at the Local Media Association, in a recent piece about objections to funding local journalism.³⁹

³⁸ [“Journalism and Philanthropy: Growth, Diversity, and Potential Conflicts of Interest.”](#) Media Impact Funders, 2023.

³⁹ [“Overcoming funder objections to supporting local news.”](#) Frank Mungeam, Local Media Association, July 2024.

Specific considerations when mixing opinion and philanthropy

Ethical considerations are top of mind in conversations about journalism and philanthropy generally, with various groups, including the American Press Institute, helping craft guiding principles for relationships between news leaders and funders.⁴⁰ At times these relationships can be complicated at the local level.⁴¹

Longtime practices of opinion sections may add new considerations.

For example, many local for-profit newspapers have long published endorsements of political candidates, a nonstarter for nonprofits.

However, local opinion journalism as a field has shifted away from endorsements. Large chains in recent years have stopped the practice of publishing candidate endorsements.⁴² Many outlets have moved toward detailed guides for races, some issue-based, as a response to factors such as polarization or skepticism toward media. Editorials

have also decreased in volume. The institutional voice, clear in endorsements, is less common than it once was.

Moreover, the positive experiments in local opinion journalism mostly deal with practices that are less complicated for nonprofit funders. Much attention is focused on increasing the range of voices represented, such as in letters or in op-eds and columns, or in in-person engagement, which philanthropy often supports in other avenues.

In other words, the projects in local opinion journalism that philanthropy is most likely to fund do not approach endorsements or lobbying.

Gaining facilitative skills as jobs evolve

Many opportunities for news leaders to reimagine local journalism for better civic discourse—and to partner with philanthropy to do so—require new skills.

Many opinion editors may be used to being behind the scenes, or their byline, as my colleague Sam Ragland, vice president of Journalism Programs at the American Press Institute, would say. But the opportunities—such as organizing events in person or facilitating conversations online—require the comfort and skill to act as “community convener, conversation facilitator, and resource connector.”⁴³

Whether opinion editors develop these skills themselves or new positions and hires bring them into the fold, they will be necessary and further enrich what’s possible with philanthropic partnerships.

Many local for-profit newspapers have long published endorsements of political candidates, a nonstarter for nonprofits. However, local opinion journalism as a field has shifted away from endorsements.

⁴⁰ [“Guidance on philanthropic funding of media and news.”](#) American Press Institute, 2017.

⁴¹ [“Check out funders and maintain editorial firewall.”](#) Joe Bergantino for API, 2016.

⁴² [“Once key, US newspaper editorial endorsements fade away.”](#) Associated Press, 2022

⁴³ [“Here are the convening skills journalists are using to build trust and community capital.”](#) Sam Ragland and this author, American Press Institute, 2024.

Collaboration between for-profit and nonprofit news shows ‘opinion’ language isn’t necessary

In Virginia, a first-person storytelling collaboration between three different outlets fills the purpose of local opinion journalism

Some inspiring examples of media acting as a local “agora” may not emphasize the word “opinion” at all.

That’s the case with “First Person Charlottesville,” an initiative from the Central Virginia-based Charlottesville Inclusive Media Project. Three partners are involved: Charlottesville Tomorrow, a nonprofit news site; and *Vinegar Hill Magazine* and *In My Humble Opinion* radio show, both for-profit media companies serving Charlottesville’s Black population.

The outlets collaborate to enable community members to tell their stories. “Please keep in mind that we are not seeking pieces that are purely your opinion,” says a page online promoting the project, a platform for local first-person essays and other storytelling, including audio. “This doesn’t mean it can’t include your perspective; rather we want the focus to be your experiences or the experiences of the people you are writing about.”

Recent First Person Charlottesville stories have shared the perspectives under headlines such as, [“My downtown art exhibit was vandalized. Here’s why I’m keeping the damage.”](#) [“How one family owned and ran the largest Black-owned farm in Albemarle County—for generations.”](#) and [“Why this photographer wants communities in Charlottesville to say, ‘No, we are not oppressed.’”](#)

The approach doesn’t negate their involvement in discussions on the future of local opinion journalism. Sarad Davenport, founder of *Vinegar Hill Magazine*,

has participated in both the American Press Institute’s Local News Summit on Opinion, Civic Discourse, and Sustainability and the SNF Agora Institute visiting fellowship event on philanthropy and opinion.

“These stories that we continue to produce have far reach and are shaking up systems,” said Davenport. The work centers people who are typically “marginalized in life and by media,” he added. Charlottesville Inclusive Media Project’s overall mission is to bring more inclusive representation to local media.

Local community foundations and national funders, including Google News Initiative, have supported their work, which publishes first-person stories across each organization’s audiences. The FAQ page notes, however, that those interested in supporting the work of the partners can underwrite IMHO and *Vinegar Hill Magazine*, donate to the nonprofit Charlottesville Tomorrow, and donate to Charlottesville Inclusive Media through Charlottesville Tomorrow as the fiscal agent.

In *My Humble Opinion*, the Sunday talk show partner, launched a [related podcast series](#) in December 2022.

Charlottesville Inclusive Media Project recently revamped its website and is looking for additional long-term funding for capacity building and projects, including First Person Charlottesville.

This is another place where philanthropy can come in. Philanthropy is used to supporting nonprofits with expertise in building bridges and connecting across all kinds of divides, whether racial, socioeconomic, or political.

In some cases, collaborations between local opinion journalism and existing nonprofits working on these issues may make the most sense. There is precedent in the example of *The Coloradoan* and Colorado State University’s Center for Public Deliberation (mentioned earlier in the report) as well as elsewhere, such as when Good Conflict collaborated with the Rochester Beacon to engage community members in dialogue on the intersection of faith and abortion.⁴⁴

“What if we were to reframe opinion to engage communities and curate storytelling networks that bring people and communities together?” wrote H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer of Good Conflict when describing that experiment.

Whether gained through partnership, training of new or existing staff, or both, opportunities exist when embracing those skillsets.

Implications and Recommendations

Gathering the insights for this report was a yearlong project. It put me in one-on-one conversations with philanthropic leaders at national and local levels; opinion editors and development colleagues; and researchers at and beyond Johns Hopkins University. As a reflective exercise, I’ve outlined implications and recommendations based on the challenges and opportunities I heard in all these interactions.

The landscape and conversations lend themselves to several action steps and needs, which vary by stakeholder group: researchers, philanthropy, news organizations, and all involved:

For researchers:

- **Gather deeper data about the landscape and health of local news opinion sections, potentially mapped to other civic health indicators such as civic opportunity/engagement and news deserts.**

News organizations, researchers, and philanthropists have all gained from understanding the growth of news deserts and the loss of journalism jobs, where these trends occur and what the overlaps might be with other civic issues. Zeroing in on the health and/or output of local opinion content may help everyone see where and how to build.

- **Develop deeper understanding of the impact and experience on everyday citizens of being edited and supported by an opinion editor for publication in this particular “agora,” a local opinion section.**

If a community member is edited and supported in contributing a letter or opinion piece, what is the impact for that person? What can we learn about what they take away, their future involvement on the issue they wrote about— or their relationship with the outlet?

- **Develop deeper understanding of seeing people in your local area converse healthily across divides on a medium with shared community readership, such as in an opinion section.**

⁴⁴ “[Bring constructive conflict to local opinion journalism.](#)” H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer for API, 2023.

The Desert Sun example showed how keeping local opinion journalism local might limit political polarization. What are the effects on polarization if the formats also evolve—if it's not just stories you read, but videos you see, podcasts you hear, or events you participate in?

For philanthropy:

- **Adopt greater experimentation of funding local opinion journalism, especially natural extensions such as in-person engagement/convening and civic education/skill-building (e.g., helping opinion editors train individuals of all backgrounds to write persuasive arguments) that help build capacity in the news sector.**

Opinion editors are embracing their role as conveners online and off, but capacity has limited what is possible. Targeted projects or funding of additional staff focused on community engagement would further the reimagining of these spaces and bring about new examples for others in philanthropy.

- **Encourage discussion and sharing of best practices for this particular type of local journalism support (i.e., more case studies, more visible discussion).**

Networking groups and conferences might create space for focused discussion on civic discourse and local opinion journalism. The ethics are one place to connect on best practices, as are any opportunities to further understand the needs and challenges of local opinion journalists.

- **Support infrastructure that helps news leaders with experimentation and shared execution or distribution challenges, e.g., elevating opinion journalism that models healthy civic discourse in social/digital feeds.**

What might funders collaborate on to uplift local journalism that helps people work across divides or understand sources of division? Some may see opportunities to not just help particular news organizations but also to invest in infrastructure or support that increases the impact of individual outlets' efforts.

For news organizations:

- **Embrace partnerships that allow for experimentation within capacity constraints, enabling proofs of concept.**

There is little time to wait. Working with another media organization in your area that complements your existing skills or strengthens your existing weaknesses can often help accelerate what you learn and create relationships to build upon.

- **Identify ways to build new skills/create new jobs, e.g., in fundraising or facilitating.**

News leaders, including opinion editors, would be wise to find others pursuing similar objectives and discuss how they are or might fund or lead the work. No one has to learn alone.

- **Explore bridge-building and deliberative concepts from other sectors that would strengthen and help reimagine local opinion journalism.**

Opinion editors do not need to learn only from other opinion editors. Nonprofits and researchers have worked elsewhere on creating healthy relationships and healthy civic discourse, and that knowledge can help guide what is possible.

For all:

- **Take inspiration from the reimagining of local opinion journalism and examine other ways that local and community-based media might model, equip, and facilitate civic discourse.**

For some communities or media types, a distinction between news and opinion may not fit. Nonetheless, philanthropists and news organizations should search for and invest in creating civic discourse through media everywhere, regardless of platform or business model. Researchers would do well to understand other approaches and their impact. The burgeoning experiments in local opinion journalism can point toward a path.

Conclusion

U.S. democracy is approaching its 250th anniversary—a profound milestone. For one-quarter of a millennium, we have kept the American experiment going, and journalism has played an important role in that. The free press continues to be a bulwark of liberty—providing an important check on power and a venue for the free exchange of ideas—with both factual reporting and space for opinion playing complementary roles.

To lead us into the next chapter of U.S. democracy, philanthropy, researchers, and news leaders should think expansively about how local opinion journalism can serve our communities' flourishing and civic health. Opinion sections are a replicable, existing structure in newspapers across the country. They are continuing in the nonprofit and online commercial start-ups. And news leaders and philanthropists together are demonstrating ways they can model civic discourse, equip new voices for discourse, and even facilitate it.

Philanthropy has shaped the news sector for the better, and it can do so again. Nearly a decade ago, I saw news leaders and philanthropists come together to discuss guiding principles for navigating ethical relationships in philanthropically funded journalism. It was a smaller space then, but it wasn't long after that the field of nonprofit news ballooned. It's possible philanthropy and reimagined local opinion journalism follow a similar trend, with effective experiments like those in this report pointing the way toward growth.

Regardless, the trend points to the many functions local journalism can fill in a community— and the many needs communities have. We all would do well to learn from such innovation and imagination, remembering the “right” philanthropic support of U.S. journalism is an experiment, just as the country itself.

Appendix A: Resources/how-to's

Several resources exist for philanthropists or researchers to go deeper on these topics.

Here are new resources created by the American Press Institute alongside this report:

- [Get inspired with examples of philanthropy + local opinion journalism](#). Where has this trend occurred? What are the basics of what was funded and how might that connect to community impact? This list, written for news leaders, gives examples for all stakeholders to build from.
- [Gather research on why philanthropy + local opinion journalism makes sense](#). Where can I find studies about national political polarization and local media, or interest among Americans in community forums? What do Americans think about philanthropy's role in some of these issues? This list, written for news leaders, curates reports and papers for all stakeholders to consult.

You may also wish to consult these organizations and resources:

- [Press Forward](#). A national movement to strengthen our democracy by revitalizing local news and information.
- [Media Impact Funders](#). A membership organization that advances the work of a broad range of funders committed to effective use and support of media in the public interest.
- [American Press Institute](#). API supports local and community-based media through research, programs, and products that foster healthy, responsive, and resilient news organizations. Many years ago, API published [guidance on philanthropic funding of media and news](#), and the organization continues to help media and philanthropy understand one another. API at times also offers [experiment grants](#) to news organizations, including several noted in this report.

Appendix B: List of event participants

The following people participated in “Reimagining Local Opinion Journalism: Philanthropy’s Role,” the fellowship convening that took place March 19, 2024, at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg Center in Washington, D.C.:

Lisa Adkins, BlueGrass Community Foundation (Kentucky)

Yousef Baig, CalMatters (California)

Tricia Cantor, American Press Institute (Virginia)

James Dao, The Boston Globe (Massachusetts)

Sarad Davenport, Vinegar Hill Magazine (Virginia)

Elvia Díaz, Arizona Republic (Arizona)

Johanna Dunaway, Syracuse University Institute for Democracy, Citizenship & Journalism (Washington, D.C.)

Alison Grubbs, New Pluralists (Washington, D.C.)

Ciel Hunter, The Salt Lake Tribune (Utah)

Ben Klutsey, Mercatus Center (Virginia)

Kevin Loker, American Press Institute (Virginia)

Julie Makinen, Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation (California)

Andrew Perrin, SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University (Maryland)

Amy Petty, PATH Foundation (Virginia)

Kara Piccirilli, SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University (Maryland)

Melanie Plenda, Granite State News Collaborative (New Hampshire)

Luanne Rife, Cardinal News (Virginia)

Kate Riley, Seattle Times (Washington)

Amy Saltzman, Chronicle of Philanthropy (Washington, D.C.)

Michael Skoler, Weave: The Social Fabric Project at the Aspen Institute (Washington, D.C.)

Daniel Stid, SNF Agora Institute and Lyceum Labs (Maryland)

Yvette Walker, Kansas City Star (Missouri)

Mark Williams, Baltimore Banner (Maryland)

Louise Yokoi, CalMatters (California)

Richard Young, CivicLex (Kentucky)