

DAY **ONE** **PROJECT**

**Expanding the Corporation for Public
Broadcasting to Fund Local News**

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June 2021

Summary

The Biden administration can respond to the rise in disinformation campaigns and ensure the long-term viability of American democracy by **championing an expanded Corporation for Public Broadcasting to transform, revive, and create local public service newsrooms around the country.**

Local newsrooms play key roles in a democracy: informing communities, helping set the agenda for local governments, grounding national debates in local context, and contributing to local economies; so it is deeply troubling that the market for local journalism is failing in the United States.^{1,2} Lack of access to credible, localized information makes it harder for communities to make decisions, hampers emergency response, and creates fertile ground for disinformation and conspiracy theories. There is significant, necessary activity in the academic, philanthropic, and journalism sectors to study and document the hollowing out of local news and sustain, revive, and transform the landscape for local journalism.³ But the scope of the problem is too big to be solely addressed privately. Maintaining local journalism requires treating it as a public good, with the scale of investment that the federal government is best positioned to provide.

The United States has shown that it can meet the opportunities and challenges of a changing information landscape. In the 1960s, Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), creating a successful and valuable public media system in response to the growth of widely available corporate radio and TV.⁴ But CPB's purview hasn't changed much since then. Given the challenges of today's information landscape, it is time to reimagine and grow CPB.

The Biden administration should work with Congress to revitalize local journalism in the United States by:

- (1) Passing legislation to evolve the CPB into an expanded Corporation for Public Media.** CPB's current mandate is to fund and support broadcast public media. An expanded Corporation for Public Media would continue to support broadcast public media while additionally supporting local, nonprofit, public-service-oriented outlets delivering informational content to meet community needs through digital, print, or other mediums.
- (2) Doubling CPB's annual federal budget allocation, from \$445 to \$890 million, to fund greater investment in local news and digital innovation.** The local news landscape is the subject of significant interest from philanthropies, industry, communities, and individuals. Increased federal funding for local, nonprofit, and public-service-oriented news outlets could stimulate follow-on investment from outside of government.

Challenge and Opportunity

Information systems are fracturing and shifting in the United States and globally. Over the past 20 years, the Internet disrupted news business models and the national news industry consolidated; both shifts

¹ Hansen, E. (2019). [Can Public Media Help Fix Market Failures in Local News](#). Shorenstein Center, December 4.

² Pickard, V. (2020). [American journalism is dying. Its survival requires public funds](#). *The Guardian*, February 19.

³ See, for example, work and policy proposals by Steve Waldman at Report for America, Elizabeth Hansen at The National Trust for Local News, Emily Bell at The Tow Center at Columbia Journalism School, Jennifer Preston at The Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School, Margaret Sullivan, Free Press, PEN America, Knight Foundation, and many others.

⁴ For more background on the history of the CPB and the need to broadly imagine new forms of digital public infrastructure, see: Zuckerman, E. (2020). [The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure](#). Columbia University, Knight First Amendment Institute, January 17.

have contributed to the reduction of local news coverage. American newsrooms have lost almost a quarter of their staff since 2008.⁵ Half of all U.S. counties have only one newspaper or information equivalent, and many counties have no local information source.⁶ The media advocacy group Free Press estimates that the national “reporting gap”, which they define as the wages of the roughly 15,000 reporting roles lost since the peak of journalism in 2005, stands at roughly \$1 billion a year.⁷

The depletion of reputable local newsrooms creates an information landscape ripe for manipulation. In particular, the shrinking of local newsrooms can exacerbate the risk of “data voids”, when good information is not available via online search and instead users find “falsehoods, misinformation, or disinformation”.⁸ In 2019, the Tow Center at the Columbia Journalism School documented 450 websites masquerading as local news outlets, with titles like the *East Michigan News*, *Hickory Sun*, and *Grand Canyon Times*.⁹ But instead of publishing genuine journalism, these sites were distributing algorithmically generated, hyperpartisan, locally tailored disinformation. The growing popularity of social media as news sources or conduits to news sources — more than half of American adults today get at least some news from social media¹⁰ — compounds the problem by making it easier for disinformation to spread.^{11,12}

Studies show that the erosion of local journalism has negative impacts on local governance and democracy, including increased voter polarization,¹³ decreased accountability for elected officials to their communities,¹⁴ and decreased competition in local elections.¹⁵ Disinformation narratives that take root in the information vacuum left behind when local news outlets fold often disproportionately target and impact marginalized people and people of color.¹⁶ Erosion of local journalism also threatens public safety. Without access to credible and timely local reporting, communities are at greater risk during emergencies and natural disasters. In the fall of 2020, for instance, emergency response to wildfires threatening communities in Oregon was hampered by the spread of inaccurate information on social media.¹⁷ These problems will only become more pronounced if the market for local journalism continues to shrink.

These are urgent challenges and the enormity of them can make them feel intractable. Fortunately, history presents a path forward. By the 1960s, with the rise of widely available corporate TV and radio, the national information landscape had changed dramatically. At the time, the federal government recognized the need to reduce the potential harms and meet the opportunities that these information systems presented. In particular, then-Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Newton Minow called for more educational and public-interest programming, which the private TV market wasn’t producing.¹⁸ Congress responded by passing the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, creating the Corporation

⁵ Grieco, E. (2020). [U.S. newspapers have shed half of their newsroom employees since 2008](#). Pew Research Center, April 20.

⁶ Abernathy, P.M. (2020). [News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?](#) University of North Carolina, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, June.

⁷ Turner, S.D. (2020). [How Big Is The Reporting Gap?](#) Free Press, June.

⁸ Golebiewski, M and boyd, d (2019). [Data Voids](#). *Data & Society*, October 29.; and EC, Copeland, R., Fan, J., and Jael, T (2019). Filling [The Data Void](#). Assembly: Disinformation Program at the Berkman Klein Center, May.

⁹ Bengani, P. (2019). [Hundreds of ‘pink slime’ local news outlets are distributing algorithmic stories and conservative talking points](#). Columbia University, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, December 18.

¹⁰ Shearer, E.; Mitchell, A. (2021). [News Use Across Social Media Platforms In 2020](#). Pew Research Center, January 12.

¹¹ Wardle, C. (2019). [Information disorder: ‘The techniques we saw in 2016 have evolved](#). First Draft News, October 21.

¹² Donovan, J.; et al. (n.d.). [The Media Manipulation Casebook](#). Shorenstein Center.

¹³ Darr, J.P.; Hitt, M.P.; Dunaway, J.L. (2018). Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior. *Journal of Communication*, 68(6): 1007–1028.

¹⁴ Synder Jr., J.M.; Strömberg, D. (2010). Press Coverage and Political Accountability. *Journal of Political Economy*, 118(2): 355–408.

¹⁵ Jennings, J.; Rubado, M. (2019). [Newspaper Decline and the Effect on Local Government Coverage](#). University of Texas Austin, The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, November.

¹⁶ Thakur, D.; Madrigal, D.H. (2021). [Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender](#). Center for Democracy and Technology, February 11.

¹⁷ Wilson, C.; Haas, R. (2020). [Oregon Officials Warn False Antifa Rumors Waste Precious Resources For Fires](#). NPR, September 13.

¹⁸ Zuckerman, E. (2020). The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure.

for Public Broadcasting (CPB). CPB is a private nonprofit responsible for funding public radio and television stations and public-interest programming. (Critically, CPB itself does not produce content.) CPB has a mandate to champion diversity and excellence in programming, serve all American communities, ensure local ownership and independent operation of stations, and shield stations from the possibility of political interference.¹⁹ Soon after its creation, CPB established the independent entities of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR).²⁰

CPB, PBS, NPR, and local affiliate stations collectively developed into the national public media system we know today. Public media is explicitly designed to fill gaps not addressed by the private market in educational, youth, arts, current events, and local news programming, and to serve all communities, including populations frequently overlooked by the private sector. While not perfect, CPB has largely succeeded in both objectives when it comes to broadcast media. CPB supports²¹ about 1,500 public television and radio broadcasters, many of which produce and distribute local news in addition to national news.²² CPB funds much-needed regional collaborations that have allowed public broadcasters to combine resources, increase reporting capacity, and cover relevant regional and localized topics, like the opioid crisis in Appalachia and across the Midwest.^{23,24} CPB also provides critical — though, currently too little — funding to broadcast public media for historically underserved communities, including Black, Hispanic, and Native communities.

Public media and CPB’s funding and support is a consistent bright spot for the struggling journalism industry.²⁵ More than 2,000 American newspapers closed in the past 15 years, but NPR affiliates added 1,000 local part- and full-time journalist positions from 2011–2018 (though these data are pre-pandemic).²⁶ Trust in public media like PBS remains high compared to other institutions; and local news is more trusted than national news.^{27,28} There is clear potential for CPB to revive and transform the local news landscape: it can help to develop community trust, strengthen democratic values, and defend against disinformation at a time when all three outcomes are critical.

Unfortunately, the rapid decline of local journalism nationwide has created information gaps that CPB — an institution that has remained largely unchanged since its founding more than 50 years ago — does not have the capacity to fill. Because its public service mandate still applies only to broadcasters, CPB is unable to fund stand-alone digital news sites. The result is a dearth of public-interest newsrooms with the skills and infrastructure to connect with their audiences online and provide good journalism without a paywall. CPB also simply lacks sufficient funding to rebuild local journalism at the pace and scope needed. Far too

¹⁹ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). [About Public Media](#).

²⁰ In 1969, CPB created the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to connect and distribute locally requested programming content to local public television stations and to aggregate funding for local stations to create and acquire programs. In 1970, CPB created National Public Radio (NPR) with a similar but more expansive purview for radio. Like PBS, NPR is authorized to acquire and distribute programming to its network of local radio satellites. NPR is also a news-gathering and production organization in and of itself. (Source: McLoughlin, G.J.; Gomez, L.A. (2017). *The Corporation for Public Broadcasting: Federal Funding and Issues*. Congressional Research Service, RS22168.)

²¹ Public broadcasters are not fully funded by CPB. While CPB provides operating support and a critical, stable source of funding, public broadcasters raise on average about \$6 of private funding—from individuals, state and local governments, philanthropy, private industry, etc.—for every \$1 of federal investment.²¹ (Source: Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). [CPB FAQ](#).)

²² Schaffer, J. (2019). [Should We Disrupt Public Media to Create More Local News?](#) Corporation for Public Broadcasting, November 20.

²³ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). [Public Media Journalism](#).

²⁴ National Public Radio. (n.d.). [Collaborative Journalism: NPR and Member Stations Working Together](#).

²⁵ Abernathy, P.M. (2020). News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers.

²⁶ Edmonds, R. (2019). [As other local news outlets struggle, NPR affiliates are growing—and quickly](#). Poynter, November 4.

²⁷ Ali, C.; Van Den Bulck, H.; Lee, B. (2021). [PBS could help rebuild trust in U.S. media](#). *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 9.

²⁸ Sands, J. (2019). [Local news is more trusted than national news—but that could change](#). Knight Foundation, October 29.

many people in the United States — especially members of rural and historically underserved communities — live in a “news desert”, without access to any credible local journalism at all.²⁹

The time is ripe to reimagine and expand CPB. Congress has recently demonstrated bipartisan willingness to invest in local journalism and public media. Both major COVID-19 relief packages included supplemental funding for CPB. The American Rescue Act and the CARES Act provided \$250 million and \$75 million, respectively, in emergency stabilization funds for public media. Funds were prioritized for small, rural, and minority-oriented public-media stations.³⁰ As part of the American Rescue Plan, smaller news outlets were newly and specifically made eligible for relief funds—a measure that built on the Local News and Emergency Information Act of 2020 previously introduced by Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Representative David Cicilline (D-RI) and supported by a bipartisan group.³¹ Numerous additional bills have been proposed to address specific pieces of the local news crisis.^{32,33} Most recently, Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO), Amy Klobuchar (D-MI), and Brian Schatz (D-HI), along with Representative Marc Veasy (D-TX) reintroduced the Future of Local News Commission Act, calling for a commission “to study the state of local journalism and offer recommendations to Congress on the actions it can take to support local news organizations”.³⁴

These legislative efforts recognize that while inspirational work to revitalize local news is being done across sectors, only the federal government can bring the level of scale, ambition, and funding needed to adequately address the challenges laid out above. Reimagining and expanding CPB into an institution capable of bolstering the local news ecosystem is necessary and possible; yet it will not be easy and would bring risks. The United States is amid a politically uncertain, difficult, and even violent time, with a rapid, continued fracturing of shared understanding. Given how the public media system has come under attack in the “culture wars” over the decades, many champions of public media are understandably wary of considering any changes to the CPB and public media institutions and initiatives. But we cannot afford to continue avoiding the issue. Our country needs a robust network of local public media outlets as part of a comprehensive strategy to decrease blind partisanship and focus national dialogues on facts. Policymakers should be willing to go to bat to expand and modernize the vision of a national public media system first laid out more than fifty years ago.

Plan of Action

The Biden administration should work with Congress to reimagine CPB as the Corporation for Public Media: an institution with the expanded funding and purview needed to meet the information challenges of today, combat the rise of disinformation, and strengthen community ties and democratic values at the local level. Recommended steps towards this vision are detailed below.

²⁹ An explainer published by the University of North Carolina’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media defines a “news desert” as “a community where residents have significantly diminished access to important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy.” The explainer continues by noting that “[t]oday, more than 200 of the nation’s 3,143 counties have no local newspaper. Half – 1,540 counties – have only one newspaper. Two-thirds – 2,000 – no longer have a daily newspaper. Digital news sites have failed to fill the void, leaving residents to turn to social media or regional television stations in distant cities for news.” (Source: University of North Carolina. (2020). [News Desert Report FAQs](#). Hussman School of Journalism and Media, June.)

³⁰ Harrison, P. (2021). [Distribution Plan for the American Rescue Plan Act Stabilization Funds](#). Corporation for Public Broadcasting, April 15.

³¹ Office of Senator Maria Cantwell. (2020). [Cantwell, Kennedy, Klobuchar, Boozman Send Bipartisan Letter Urging Support for Local Media Outlets Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Press Release, December 21.

³² U.S. House of Representatives. (2020). [H.R. 7640: Local Journalism Sustainability Act](#). 116th Congress, introduced July 16, 2020.

³³ U.S. House of Representatives. (2019). [H.R. 3126: Saving Local News Act](#). 116th Congress, introduced June 5.

³⁴ U.S. Senate. (2020). [S. 4772: Future of Local News Commission Act](#). 116th Congress, introduced September 30.

Recommendation 1: Expand CPB’s Purview to Support and Fund Local, Nonprofit, Public Service Newsrooms.

Congress should pass legislation to reestablish the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) as the Corporation for Public Media (CPM), expanding the Corporation’s purview from solely supporting broadcast outlets to additionally supporting local, nonprofit newsrooms of all types (digital, print, broadcast).

The expanded CPM would retain all elements of the CPB’s mandate, including “ensuring universal access to non-commercial, high-quality content and telecommunications services that are commercial free and free of charge,” with a particular emphasis on ensuring access in rural, small town, and urban communities across the country.³⁵ Additionally, CPB “strives to support diverse programs and services that inform, educate, enlighten and enrich the public”, especially addressing the needs of underserved audiences, children, and minorities.³⁶

Legislation expanding the CPB into the CPM must include criteria that local, nonprofit, public-service newsrooms would need to meet to be considered “public media” and become eligible for federal funding and support. Broadly, local, nonprofit newsrooms should mean nonprofit or noncommercial newsrooms that cover a region, state, county, city, neighborhood, or specific community; it would not include individual reporters, bloggers, documentarians, etc. Currently, CPB relies on FCC broadcasting licenses to determine which stations might be eligible to be considered public broadcasters. The Public Broadcasting Act lays out additional eligibility requirements, including an active community advisory board and regularly filed reports on station activities and spending.³⁷ Congress should build on these existing requirements when developing eligibility criteria for CPM funding and support.

In designing eligibility criteria, Congress could also draw inspiration from the nonprofit Civic Information Consortium (CIC) being piloted in New Jersey. The CIC is a partnership between higher education institutions and newsrooms in the state to strengthen local news coverage and civic engagement, seeded with an initial \$500,000 in funding.³⁸ The CPM could require that to be eligible for CPM funding, nonprofit public-service newsrooms must partner with local, accredited universities.³⁹ Requiring that an established external institution be involved in local news endeavors selected for funding would (i) decrease risks of investing in new and untested newsrooms, (ii) leverage federal investment by bringing external capabilities to bear, and (iii) increase the impact of federal funding by creating job training and development opportunities for local students and workers. Though, of course, this model also brings its own risks, potentially putting unwelcome pressure on universities to act as public media and journalism gatekeepers.

An expanded CPM would financially support broadcast, digital, and print outlets at the local and national levels. Once eligibility criteria are established, clear procedures would need to be established for funding allocation and prioritization (see next section for recommended prioritizations). For instance, procedures should explain how factors such as demonstrated need and community referrals will factor into funding decisions. Procedures should also ensure that funding is prioritized towards local newsrooms that serve

³⁵ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (2019). [Overview Fact Sheet](#). December.

³⁶ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). [About CPB](#).

³⁷ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). [Public Broadcasting Act of 1967](#).

³⁸ Rispoli, M. (2020). [Why the Civic Info Consortium Is Such a Huge Deal](#). Free Press, September 30.

³⁹ New Jersey Civic Information Consortium. (n.d.). [About the Consortium](#).

communities in “news deserts”, or places at risk of becoming news deserts, and historically underserved communities, including Black, Hispanic, Native, and rural communities.

Congress could consider tasking the proposed Future of Local News Act commission with digging deeper into how CPB could be evolved into the CPM in a way that best positions it to address the disinformation and local news crises. The commission could also advise on how to avoid two key risks associated with such an evolution. The first is the perpetual risk of government interference in public media, which CPB’s institutional design and norms have historically guarded against. (For example, there are no content or viewpoint restrictions on public media today—and there should not be in the future.) Second, expanding CPB’s mandate to include broadly funding local, nonprofit newsrooms would create a new risk that disinformation or propaganda sites, operating without journalistic practices, could masquerade as genuine news sites to apply for CPM funding. It will be critical to design against both of these risks. One of the most important factors in CPB’s success is its ethos of public service and the resulting positive norms; these norms and its institutional design are a large part of what makes CPB a good institutional candidate to expand. In designing the new CPM, these norms should be intentionally drawn on and renewed for the digital age.⁴⁰

Numerous digital outlets would likely meet reasonable eligibility criteria. One recent highlight in the journalism landscape is the emergence of many nonprofit digital outlets, including almost 300 affiliated with the Institute for Nonprofit News.⁴¹ (These sites certainly have not made up for the massive numbers of journalism jobs and outlets lost over the past two decades.) There has also been an increase in public media mergers, where previously for-profit digital sites have merged with public media broadcasters to create mixed-media nonprofit journalistic entities.⁴² As part of legislation expanding the CPB into the CPM, Congress should make it easier for public media mergers to take place and easier for for-profit newspapers and sites to transition to nonprofit status, as the Rebuild Local News Coalition has proposed.⁴³

Recommendation 2: Double CPB’s Yearly Appropriation from \$445 to \$890 million.

Whether or not CPB is evolved into CPM, **Congress should (i) double (at minimum) CPB’s next yearly appropriation from \$445 to \$890 million, and (ii) appropriate CPB’s funding for the next ten years up front.** The first action is needed to give CPB the resources it needs to respond to the local news and disinformation crises at the necessary scale, and the second is needed to ensure that local newsrooms are funded over a time horizon long enough to establish themselves, develop relationships with their communities, and attract external revenue streams (e.g., through philanthropy, pledge drives, or other models). The CPB’s current appropriation is sufficient to fund some percentage of station operational and programming costs at roughly 1,500 stations nationwide. This is not enough. Given that Free Press estimates the national “reporting gap” as roughly \$1 billion a year, CPB’s annual budget appropriation needs to be at least doubled.⁴⁴ Such increased funding would dramatically improve the local news and public media landscape, allowing newsrooms to increase local coverage and pay for the digital

⁴⁰ Aufderheide, P. (2020). [US Public Broadcasting: A Bulwark Against Disinformation?](#) In: Bennett, W.L.; Livingston, S. [Eds]. (2020). *The Disinformation Age*. Cambridge University Press: 211–258.

⁴¹ Institute for Nonprofit News. (n.d.). [Member Directory](#).

⁴² Hansen, E. (2020). [Public Media Mergers Project](#). December.

⁴³ Rebuild Local News. (n.d.). [Rebuilding Local News: How government can help revitalize local journalism while preserving editorial independence](#).

⁴⁴ Turner, S.D. (2020). [How Big Is The Reporting Gap?](#)

infrastructure needed to better meet audiences where they are—online.⁴⁵ The budget increase could be made part of the infrastructure package under Congressional negotiation, funded by the Biden administration’s proposed corporate tax increases, or separately funded through corporate tax increases on the technology sector.

The additional appropriation should be allocated in two streams. **The first funding stream (75% of the additional appropriation, or \$667.5 million) should specifically support local public-service journalism.** If Free Press’s estimates of the reporting gap are accurate, this stream might be able to recover 75% of the journalism jobs (somewhere in the range of 10,000 to 11,000 jobs) lost since the industry’s decline began in earnest—a huge and necessary increase in coverage.⁴⁶ Initial priority for this funding should go to local journalism outlets in communities that have already become “news deserts”. Secondary priority should go to outlets in communities that are *at risk* of becoming news deserts and in communities that have been historically underserved by media, including Black, Hispanic, Native, and rural communities. Larger, well-funded public media stations and outlets should still receive some funding from this stream (particularly given their role in surfacing local issues to national audiences), but with less of a priority focus. This funding stream should be distributed through a structured formula — similar to CPB’s funding formulas for public broadcasting stations — that ensures these priorities, protects news coverage from government interference, and ensures high-quality news.

The second funding stream (25% of additional appropriation, or \$222.5 million) should support digital innovation for newsrooms. This funding stream would help local, nonprofit newsrooms build the infrastructure needed to thrive in the digital age. Public media aims to be accessible and meet audiences where they are. Today, that is often online. Though the digital news space is dominated by social media and large tech companies, public media broadcasters are figuring out how to deliver credible, locally relevant reporting in digital formats.⁴⁷ NPR, for instance, has successfully digitally innovated with platforms like NPR One. But more needs to be done to expand the digital presence of public media. CPB should structure this funding stream as a prize challenge or other competitive funding model to encourage further digital innovation.

Finally, the overall additional appropriation should be used as an opportunity to encourage follow-on investment in local news, by philanthropies, individuals, and the private sector. There is significant interest across the board in revitalizing American local news.⁴⁸ The attention that comes with a centralized, federally sponsored effort to reimagine and expand local public media can help drive additional resources and innovation to places where they are most needed. For instance, philanthropies might offer private matches for government investment in local news. Such an initiative could draw inspiration from the existing and successful NewsMatch program, a funding campaign where individuals donate to a nonprofit newsroom and their donation is matched by funders and companies.^{49,50}

⁴⁵ Martin, E.N. (2021). Can public service broadcasting survive Silicon Valley? Synthesizing leadership perspectives at the BBC, PBS, NPR, CPB, and local U.S. stations. *Technology in Society*, 64: 5, where “PBS Chief Digital and Marketing Officer Ira Rubenstein notes that: ‘We barely have enough resources to manage a [legacy] broadcast system, and we need to find resources and invest in digital infrastructure for the next generation of distribution and content.’”

⁴⁶ Rebuild Local News. (n.d.). Rebuilding Local News. The “Our Plan” section includes proposals for tax credits to support journalism, government funding for local media, and legislation to make it easier for for-profit news companies to transition to nonprofit status and to encourage the “re-planting” of newspapers, among many other strong proposals.

⁴⁷ Martin, E. (2021). Can public service broadcasting survive Silicon Valley?

⁴⁸ See, for example: Kille, S. (2021). [Report for America sustainability report offers hope for local news philanthropy as newsrooms raise 61% more per reporter](#). *Report for America*, February 22.

⁴⁹ NewsMatch. (n.d.). [About NewsMatch](#).

⁵⁰ Waldman, S. (2020). [A government fund to help journalism ... that wouldn't corrupt journalism](#). Poynter, July 2.

Conclusion

Local news is foundational to democracy and the flourishing of communities. Yet with the rise of the Internet and social media companies, the market for local news is failing. There is significant activity in the journalistic, philanthropic, and academic sectors to sustain, revive, and transform the local news landscape. But these efforts can't succeed alone. Maintaining local journalism as a public good requires the scale of investment that only the federal government can bring.

In 1967, our nation rose to meet a different moment of disruption in the information environment, creating public media broadcasting through the Public Broadcasting Act. Today, there is a similar need for the Biden administration, Congress, and CPB to reimagine public media for the digital age. They should champion an expanded Corporation for Public Media to better meet communities' information needs; counter the rising tide of disinformation; and transform, revive, and create local, public-service newsrooms around the country.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What do you mean by a fragmented information landscape?

With the rise of the internet, the range of places where people consume news and information has expanded and fractured. Today, people consume news and information across multiple platforms and sources, including TV, radio, social media, blogs, email newsletters, newspapers, and community groups. This wide-ranging "information landscape" allows people to access information quickly. However, as the scholar Claire Wardle explains, it also creates an environment in which accurate articles can easily be shared out of context and their content weaponized, false articles can be made to look professional and accurate, and misinformation (false content unintentionally shared) and disinformation (false content designed to cause harm and intentionally shared) can spread quickly.⁵¹

2. How is the current public media system structured?

In 1969, CPB created the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to connect and distribute locally requested programming content to local public television stations and to aggregate funding for local stations to create and acquire programs. In 1970, CPB created National Public Radio (NPR) with a similar but more expansive purview for radio. Like PBS, NPR is authorized to acquire and distribute programming to its network of local radio satellites. NPR is also a newsgathering and production organization in and of itself.⁵² The early decision to separate the entities in charge of lobbying for further public dollars from the entities in charge of making content decisions was an important one that has helped public media become the highly trusted and respected news source it is today.

3. Why do we need government funding for local news? Why can't local news be revived by the private sector?

The private sector adds significantly to the local news landscape. However, local news is a critical public good that is being underprovided by commercial markets. Private efforts like Substack's local news fund,

⁵¹ Wardle, C. (2019). [Understanding Information Disorder](#). First Draft, October.

⁵² McLoughlin, G.J.; Gomez, L.A. (2017). *The Corporation for Public Broadcasting: Federal Funding and Issues*. Congressional Research Service, RS22168.

which offers up to \$1 million in funding to 30 local journalists,⁵³ are laudable, but not enough to revive the number of journalism jobs lost over the past two decades. Nor is it clear that such models are sustainable in the long term. Other for-profit companies like Axios are also testing local news markets with business models fully reliant on advertising. Localized for-profit new entries into the media landscape are very welcome efforts to revive the landscape of local news. But it is unclear if these efforts can stay solvent based solely on advertising.⁵⁴ Recognizing that local news is a public good but the market is failing, the momentum of the industry is slowly shifting to see nonprofit and public media as the future of local news. For instance, in 2018, the formerly for-profit local sites Gothamist, LAist, and DCist were transitioned to nonprofit status and merged with public radio stations.⁵⁵ Philanthropic collectives of funders such as the American Journalism Project and new partnerships like the National Trust for Local News are stepping in to fill the gap as well. These critical efforts lay the groundwork for revival and expansion of local news but can only go so far. Only the federal government has the resources and capacity to rebuild the local-news landscape at the pace and scope needed.

4. How can government funding for local newsrooms be structured to prevent government interference in journalism?

CPB currently funds broadcast radio and TV stations, NPR, and PBS through legislatively structured funding formulas. Critically, CPB itself does not produce content. The majority of CPB's grants are allocated based not on content, but on stations' operational, technical, and community qualifications, as determined by Congress, CPB, and the FCC. Additionally, CPB only funds a percentage of the budget for any individual station or news organization. As NPR, PBS, and their affiliate stations have gotten off the ground and built reputations and relationships with their communities over the decades, they have attracted direct financial support from listeners, philanthropies, and businesses. Public broadcasters raise on average about \$6 of private funding—from individuals, state and local governments, philanthropy, private industry, etc.—for every \$1 of federal investment.⁵⁶ This diversified funding model helps ensure journalistic independence. Government funding for public local newsrooms should fill gaps and address market failures, but not be the sole source of funding.

5. How can government funding for local newsrooms be structured to ensure that new, digital public media newsrooms uphold high standards and journalistic practices?

Formulas that the CPB already uses for allocating funding for broadcast stations can be used as templates for new formulas for additional funding streams. Such formulas are important both for preventing government interference and for ensuring that digital-first newsrooms uphold journalistic practices and meet community information needs. For non-broadcast public media, CPB should continue its crucial practice of allocating funding based on operational, technical, and community qualifications, not based on specific content. CPB should also build on its existing eligibility requirements: e.g., that newsrooms eligible for federal funding must be nonprofits, have active community advisory boards, and file regular financial reports. Congress could also consider encouraging or mandating that CPB adopt a model like New Jersey's Civic Information Consortium, where newsrooms must partner with universities in order to be eligible for government funding. CPB could establish additional guardrails and specifications for how federal funding can be used to further ensure high standards and journalistic practices. And as stated

⁵³ Substack. (2021). [Introducing Substack Local, for a new generation of local news](#). April 15.

⁵⁴ Perlberg, S. (2020). [‘Go in small with clear-eyed expectations’: How a crop of startups are trying to make for-profit local news work](#). Digiday, November 11.

⁵⁵ Wamsley, L. (2018). [Gothamist Properties Will Be Revived Under New Ownership: Public Media](#). NPR, November 23.

⁵⁶ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). CPB FAQ.

above, diversified funding for local newsrooms is desirable and helps ensure journalistic independence. Government funding for public local newsrooms should fill gaps and address market failures, but not be the sole source of funding.

6. What and where should the immediate priorities be for funding local newsrooms?

CPB's goal should be to eliminate or minimize "news deserts" in the United States, meaning regions that have zero or only one newsroom or equivalent credible information source.⁵⁷ CPB should first focus on funding local newsrooms in communities that are or are at risk of becoming "news deserts", where the risk of future journalistic market failure is highest. Next, CPB should place particular focus on communities that have historically been underserved by public media, including Black, Hispanic, Native, and rural communities. Finally, CPB should prioritize newsrooms that demonstrate strong digital skills and the ability to connect with their communities in the digital age.

7. What are examples of newsrooms successfully meeting local news information voids?

The Texas Tribune's local coverage of the February 2021 devastating winter storm, when temperatures plummeted and the electric grid failed, offers a vision for the kind of digital, local news coverage that could be possible everywhere and would benefit communities. Recognizing their readers' reduced ability to access news and simultaneously increased need for accurate information while the electric grid was out, the *Tribune* quickly pivoted to sharing news via text message and publishing public-service emergency-response stories, such as stories about what to do if water pipes burst.^{58,59}

8. What else needs to happen to shift local newsrooms to become "public media"?

This memo proposes that CPB fund local public-service newsrooms, meaning nonprofit or noncommercial newsrooms that cover a region, state, county, city, neighborhood, or specific community; but not individual reporters, bloggers, documentarians, etc. While there are numerous exciting new nonprofit local news efforts, there are even more for-profit local newsrooms struggling to succeed in the digital age. Multiple policy changes are needed to make it easier for struggling for-profit local newsrooms to transition to nonprofit status. For example, the Rebuild Local News coalition has suggested changes to the IRS structure, tax incentives for individuals to support journalism and for newsrooms to employ journalists, and other reforms.⁶⁰

9. If this proposal is enacted, would it solve the disinformation problem?

Enacting this proposal would strengthen American journalism — a critical part of any strategy to combat the spread of disinformation and shore up our information ecosystem. However, a stronger local news ecosystem is not enough to solve the disinformation problem. Policymakers need to also hold social media platforms, big technology companies, and large media outlets accountable. For example, social media platforms need to better serve the public interest with improved design; clearer and better enforced policies to minimize harms like disinformation and harassment; and improved systems of transparency

⁵⁷ University of North Carolina. (2020). News Desert Report FAQs.

⁵⁸ Blanchard, B. (2021). [You can now text with The Texas Tribune for breaking news, power updates and more](#). *The Texas Tribune*, February 18.

⁵⁹ Bohra, N. (2021). [Here's what you need to know if you don't have access to clean water or are concerned about burst pipes](#). *The Texas Tribune*, February 19.

⁶⁰ Rebuild Local News. (n.d.). Rebuilding Local News.

and accountability. Large media outlets need to cover disinformation and harassment more carefully, making an active effort to avoid amplifying harmful narratives.

10. Would local newsrooms require further appropriations from Congress in the long-term?

Credible, high-quality local news is a public good that the private market is failing to provide. As such, many local, nonprofit, public media newsrooms would likely require some federal funding on an ongoing basis. (Currently, public broadcasters are not fully funded by CPB. While CPB provides operating support and a critical, stable source of funding, public broadcasters raise on average about \$6 of private funding— from individuals, state and local governments, philanthropy, private industry, etc.—for every \$1 of federal investment.⁶¹ Indeed, public broadcasters receive federal funds through CPB on an ongoing basis already. However, the level of funding would likely decrease over time, as newsrooms become established within their communities and attract funding from non-governmental sources, including pledge drives, individual contributions, philanthropies, or other models.

11. Is there enough talent available to staff a greatly expanded network of local nonprofit newsrooms?

Yes! Unfortunately, the overall decline in the journalism market has led news organizations to lay off employees rapidly. There are more trained journalists than there are journalism jobs available.⁶² Many students trained in journalism end up in fields like public relations. With paid opportunities available, these professionals could be recruited to work in local news.

12. What can be done if Congress doesn't pass legislation to evolve CPM into CPM?

If legislation is not passed, then CPB should interpret its purview as broadly as legally possible in order to address the disinformation and local news crises outlined in this memo and look for ways to increase its existing support for local news produced by broadcasters through new and expanded grant programs. For instance, CPB's existing purview gives it the flexibility to prioritize funding for regional or state-based grants that support public broadcasters in strengthening local news coverage.

⁶¹ Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n.d.). CPB FAQ.

⁶² Tanzi, A.; Hagan, S. (2019). [Public Relations Jobs Boom as Buffett Sees Newspapers Dying](#). *Bloomberg News*, April 27.

About the Author



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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Craig Aaron at Free Press for thoughtful comments and serving as an advisor during my Day One Project fellowship; to Priscilla Guo, Erik Nikolaus Martin, Ishan Sharma for guidance and comments throughout the fellowship; to Martha Minow, and Jonathan Zittrain for insightful comments on earlier drafts; and to the many scholars, advocates, policymakers, and journalists working to study and improve the information landscape and local news coverage. Any errors are my own.

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