

The Interdependence between Local Journalism and Civic Engagement

In the United States, the Fourth Estate wields significant power as the guardian of veritas. However, the media would fail to act as a public watchdog without the voice of local journalism, which, if silenced, would prevent citizens from fulfilling their civic duty that defines American democracy.

In a time of polarizing politics and fake news, “the fate of communities across the country – and of grassroots democracy itself – is linked to the vitality of local journalism.”¹ Yet over the past 15 years, nearly one in five newspapers across the country has shut down, and almost 200 counties have no municipal newspaper at all.² This decline of local reportage has resulted in not only a loss in neighborhood cohesion but also “a general disengagement from local democratic life.”³ If Americans shift away from community news, district election turnout will fall, and fewer candidates will run for local office.

As a result, local journalism defines the basis of everyday democratic life. It provides an anchor in the community and aims a spear towards the locally powerful. Today, 73% of Americans place at least a fair amount of trust in their local news, but only 59% do so for national newspapers.⁴ With local newspapers on the decline, Americans will have no choice but to turn to cable news and national media, increasing the reliance on partisan heuristics rather than trusted local rhetoric. As one in five reporters now live in New York, Washington, DC or Los Angeles, midwestern Americans may feel a lack of connection with these coastal news outlets that primarily produce reports on federal issues deeply polarized along partisan lines.⁵ Local media thus holds the indispensable responsibility of battling against this domination of partisan conflict. By affiliating national events with neighborhood perspective, readers

¹ Tom Stites, "About 1,300 U.S. Communities Have Totally Lost News Coverage, UNC News Desert Study Finds," Poynter, last modified October 15, 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2018/about-1300-u-s-communities-have-totally-lost-news-coverage-unc-news-desert-study-finds/>.

² Penelope Muse Abernathy and University of North Carolina's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, *The Expanding News Desert*, 2018, <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/expanding-news-desert/>.

³ Clara Hendrickson and Brookings Institute, *Local Journalism in Crisis: Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/local-journalism-in-crisis-why-america-must-revive-its-local-newsrooms/>.

⁴ Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, *All Media Trust Is Local? Findings from the 2018 Poynter Media Trust Survey*, August 10, 2018, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/media-trust-report-2018.pdf>.

⁵ Elizabeth Grieco, "One-in-five U.S. Newsroom Employees Live in New York, Los Angeles or D.C.," Pew Research Center, last modified October 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/24/one-in-five-u-s-newsroom-employees-live-in-new-york-los-angeles-or-d-c/>.

will gain a more nuanced outlook on municipal candidates' platforms and can better contribute to a shared search for nonpartisan local solutions.

In an age when almost a third of Americans believe that the news is the enemy of the people, local reporters rebuke the concept of fake news by diminishing the separation between media and community.⁶ It is easier to believe an article's validity if the writer is cheering on the local high school's football team or participating in a weekly book club. This trust was emphasized in 2016 when Art Cullen, the editor of *The Storm Lake Times*, a rural Iowa newspaper with a staff of nine, wrote a series of editorials attacking agricultural corporations that defended the pollution of local waterways.⁷ One year later, Cullen won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Writing, beating finalists from the *Houston Chronicle* and *The Washington Post*.⁸ A crusader amidst the world of diminishing local news, Cullen demonstrates the obligatory essence of local journalism not only in uncovering injustice but also within the democratic process. As the country prepares for another election year, local journalism must continue to foster civic engagement and bipartisan discussion for all Americans by remaining the democratic watchdog of the United States.

⁶ Ipsos, *Americans' Views on the Media*, 1, August 2018, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/americans-views-media-2018-08-07>.

⁷ Alex Kotlowitz, "How a Small-Town Newspaper Editor Won a Pulitzer Prize," *The New York Times*, November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/books/review/art-cullen-storm-lake.html>.

⁸ Columbia University, "Art Cullen of *The Storm Lake Times*, Storm Lake, IA," *The Pulitzer Prizes*, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/art-cullen>.

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