

**Building a future for local news through news-academic partnerships:
A white paper from the Center for Community News**

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II. The State of Local News Today

Early data suggests that news organizations of every size are in a more precarious position today than they were before the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic. According to the Press Gazette, the largest US newspaper circulations fell 12% in 2022 from the previous year. Local newspapers are on a similar trajectory, but while the pandemic may have exacerbated trends, it did not originate them. A 2020 Pew Research analysis of data found that weekday circulation was down 40% since 2015, (the first year available for such analysis) and total Sunday circulation had fallen 45% since 2015. The disappearance of local news outlets is only one unfortunate outcome of the diminishment of the industry, however. As Dr. Penelope Abernathy has documented, a significant number of remaining newspapers in the United States could today be considered “ghost newspapers” –

readers shifted to online news, advertisers were resistant to move with them, resulting in a precipitous drop off in advertising sales for news outlets large and small (Barthel).

Advertising losses have been a primary driver of the decline of local news, but certainly not the only one. The way Americans consume news, curate their exposure to information, and seek out information that reinforces their existing worldviews can be traced as far back as the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which allowed for the establishment of partisan national news options (Hmielowski et al.). These structural changes to the media landscape expanded news consumers' options for selective exposure, thereby limiting the viewpoints and information that many were encountering. These more polarized preferences in news consumption are observable in every aspect of the American news landscape today.

Despite these trends, there are reasons for hope. Over the past few years, more than half of all Americans have relied on local news at roughly the same level as national news for COVID-19 pandemic information (Shearer). Given the potential for local news to operate as an antidote to increasing polarization (Darr et al.) and its capacity to deliver comparatively trusted (Knight-

strategies that are working in select region and offer promises for the future of local n (e) 4uture

III. Why Local News Matters

The presence of local news is associated with some of the most essential ingredients in a healthy democracy.

Local news supports civic ties and community engagement. The roughly one-in-five U.S. adults (19%) who feel highly attached to their communities demonstrate much stronger ties to local news than those who do not feel attached (Pew Research Center).

Local news consumption is correlated with high voter turnout. Those who say they always vote in local elections (27% of U.S. adults) display strikingly stronger local news habits than those who do not regularly vote in local elections (Pew Research Center).

Local news improves economic outcomes for towns and taxpayers. Following a newspaper closure, municipal borrowing costs can increase by 5 to 11 basis points, and the loss of government monitoring is associated with higher government wages and deficits. Local newspapers hold their governments accountable, keeping municipal borrowing costs low and ultimately saving local taxpayers money.

(Gao et al.)

Local news supports robust and competitive elections. Areas served by newspapers with relatively sharp declines in newsroom staffing have, on average, significantly reduced political competition in mayoral races. Lower staffing levels at newspapers are also associated with lower voter turnout. (Rubado, Jennings)

Local news is a bulwark against political polarization. In areas where newspapers have closed, voters rely more heavily on national news and partisan heuristics to make political decisions. Split-ticket voting in national elections decreases when local news organizations disappear (Darr et al.)

same structural conditions at the local level that enabled partisan cable competition, local news consumers are forced to encounter viewpoints other than their own. It is this exposure to contrary viewpoints that may challenge the human proclivity toward confirmation bias (Ling). While uncomfortable, the dissonance these contradictory ideas may create also appears to play a critical function in our resistance to polarization (Boztas).

IV. A Role for Higher Education

In a 2021 essay for Times Higher Education, Meg

majors, but also the skills that make for active and engaged citizens, such as analytic and critical thinking, intercultural and global fluency, and ethical decision-making.

Equally important, this holistic vision must acknowledge that college is a social

With these goals in mind, the Center for Community News will harness and expand programs that are matching the passion of students and the resources of colleges with the needs of local news organizations. From reporting and research to business development and accounting, there are roles for students of vast interests to interact with the making of local news – and to help reimagine a model for local news that can thrive for years to come.

American colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to rebuild public trust and commitment to a common purpose by investing in the next generation of engaged citizens. We should seize the opportunity – for the good not only of our schools and our students, but of our democracy and our nation (Reilly, Watts).

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Reilly, Meg Little, and Richard Watts. "To Fix Democracy, Start with Colleges." Times Higher Education (THE), 19 Sept. 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/fix-democracy-start-colleges>.