

# Local Journalism: Shrinking Resources, Growing Challenges

A report on how the crisis in local news is affecting  
coverage of the major issues of this era

Interviews conducted November-December 2021 by Northwestern  
University's Medill Local News Initiative and the Konrad-Adenauer-  
Stiftung (KAS USA), a German foundation and think tank

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By Tim Franklin, *Medill Senior Associate Dean and  
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**H**uge issues face the United States and the rest of the world – issues that require rigorous local journalism to help people understand the problems and identify solutions.

Yet widespread financial disruption has handicapped the news industry just as the need grows. And the news itself – including the pandemic and climate change -- has made the challenge even greater for local journalists.

In a recent series of video interviews and a public webinar, 17 influential journalists and researchers around the world discussed the local news crisis, its impact on major issues and a few reasons for ... yes, optimism.

The project, “Local Journalism: Shrinking Resources, Growing Challenges,” was co-sponsored by Northwestern University’s Medill Local News Initiative and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a German foundation. Questioning was conducted by Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News; Penny Abernathy, an expert on “news deserts” who is a visiting professor at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications; and Sabine Murphy, program manager for KAS USA.

Among the key points raised by experts:

- » The loss of local news may have cost lives during the pandemic because it paved the way for misinformation to take hold and hindered journalism on breakdowns in the official response.
- » Because programmatic online advertisers avoided pandemic stories, there was a financial disincentive for outlets to cover COVID-19 more extensively.
- » National political divisions are filtering down to the local level, threatening the high public trust that many local news outlets have enjoyed.
- » Local newsrooms are making more connections between global climate change and climate-related problems in their own areas.
- » Government financial support of local news is a complicated question, with some experts worried that it gives leverage to politicians to shape the news and others seeing it as the most practical way to deliver information to all segments of society.



From left to right: Tim Franklin, Penny Abernathy, Sadie Babits, Jennifer Lawless, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Glenn Smith and Daisuke Nakai participated in a virtual discussion called “Local Journalism: Shrinking Resources, Growing Challenges” hosted by Northwestern University’s Medill Local News Initiative and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on Dec. 6.

# Local News in the U.S.: ‘A Complete Hollowing Out’

Jennifer Lawless, a University of Virginia professor and co-author with Danny Hayes of the new book “News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement,” is sounding the alarm.

“What we’ve seen over the course of the last several decades is a complete hollowing out of the local news environment while at the same time we’ve seen unprecedented growth at the national level,” Lawless said. “So if you’re interested in politics, in national politics, or you’re a political junkie, you can now indulge your interests like you’ve never been able to before, between social media and websites and cable TV shows that you can stream and watch it anytime you want. You can get more information about national politics than anybody would ever need.

“When it comes to local politics, though,” Lawless said, “the local newspaper remains the predominant source of information about local government, whether that be school boards, city councils, mayors, county commissions. And over the course of the last 20 years, and it started even before then, we’ve seen a steady decline in the availability of local news.”

The problem with the increasing dominance of national news over local is that local news has more credibility and trust among consumers, according to research. So its loss erodes community cohesion.

And time may be running out to take advantage of the greater trust in local news, Lawless said.

“Attitudes toward the media have become increasingly polarized politically,” she said. “We have reached a point in time where at the national level the sources that you consume are driven almost entirely by whether there’s a D or an R before your name. And at the local level, the time is short. We still haven’t gotten to the point where we’re that polarized yet. So if there’s going to be any kind of momentum behind a movement to try and reinvigorate local political news, it’s now. Because Pew data suggests that attitudes toward local news are becoming increasingly polarized. But we still have a window before it’s a foregone conclusion.”

Frank Fukuyama, the Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, sees two destructive forces at work regarding local news.

“You lose a community institution that is the source of trust and therefore you don’t have the glue that holds the community together,” Fukuyama said. “On the other hand — I think this is probably the more powerful force — you have all these national trends toward inserting these big political issues into everything that happens locally that’s undermining the way that the local papers cover things and therefore people’s trust in them.”

Lawless shared an anecdote illustrating the local news crisis: “We had an interview with one political journalist who told us that for a while he was actually



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*Frank Fukuyama,  
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Institute for  
International  
Studies*



**“There aren’t alternative sources for local news the same way that there are for national news”**

*Jennifer Lawless, Professor at the University of Virginia and co-author with Danny Hayes of the new book “News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement”*

getting a free Wall Street Journal, because when the newspaper delivery person would try to throw the local paper on his front lawn, it needed enough weight. It wasn’t heavy enough. [The delivery person would] throw in a Wall Street Journal just to provide the additional ounces.”

The losses or severe cutbacks of trusted legacy news sources create holes that cannot be easily filled.

“There aren’t alternative sources for local news the same way that there are for national news,” Lawless said. “That’s not to say that local TV news doesn’t exist. It still does. And it’s not to say that there aren’t impressive internet startups that exist. They do. But these two outlets have not compensated for the major, major losses of traditional regular newspapers.”

Lawless is among a number of researchers who are developing hard evidence of how the loss of local journalism is harming Americans’ sense of community and the strength of their democracy.

Philip Napoli, the James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy and Director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy at Duke University, partnered in a 2018 study of 100 randomly sampled mid-size U.S. communities.

“Probably the most significant finding from that work,” Napoli said, “was that among the 16,000 or so news stories that we analyzed, only about 17% of them were truly local and that, in terms of them being about the particular municipality that we had sampled, less than half of them were original and just a little over half of them addressed a critical information need.”

In a follow-up study, the findings of Napoli’s group confirmed Lawless’ view of the value of legacy newspapers.

“While representing only 25% of the outlets in our sample, local newspapers were accounting for nearly 60% of the stories that we were able to identify as local, which is more than all the other outlet types, you know television, radio, online combined,” Napoli said. “So I think one of the key takeaways from that analysis was, at least at that particular point in time and as hobbled economically as local newspapers already were, they still were operating as the most significant providers of robust local journalism in their communities.”

Dermot Murphy, an associate professor of finance at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was part of a research project that analyzed municipal bond issues and concluded that interest rates were higher in communities where news outlets had closed.

“What we found was that in the long run after a newspaper closes in a local community, people don’t want to lend to that community as much anymore, because they are concerned that the government is not being watched and the government is not being held accountable,” Murphy said.

So the municipality has to pay a premium to make up for that lack of trust. Page 4

“The effect was especially strong in the small and mid-sized communities, and I think that that’s where you see more of these local news deserts nowadays,” Murphy said.

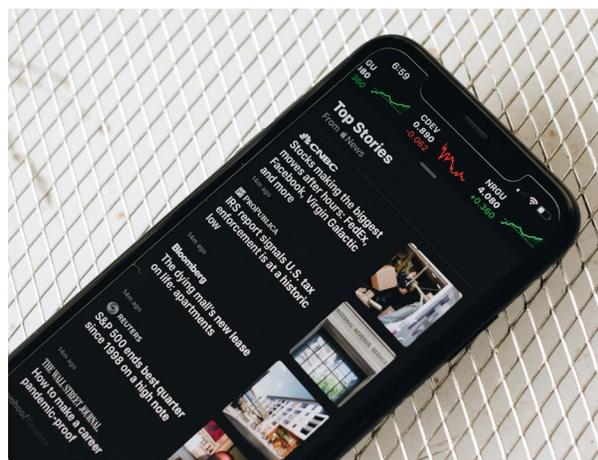
Murphy and his colleagues are considering research into the impact of hedge-fund ownership of local news outlets, with its often severe staff cuts. “I think it could make a great study,” he said.

The impact of oversight is well demonstrated by the Charleston (S.C.) Post and Courier’s “Uncovered” project, in which it partners with the state’s smaller newsrooms on investigations of government agencies and officials. The Post and Courier’s watchdog work, led by Glenn Smith, won a 2015 Pulitzer Prize.

Here’s how Smith explains “Uncovered”: “It actually had roots about three-four years ago. We were investigating a prosecutor who was in a partially rural area. We’d receive tips that he had spent lavishly on himself, and that proved true. He had taken trips all over the place and treated himself to parties and high-end meals, and a woman on his staff, his second-in-command, had dental work done on the public’s dime, traveled to family reunions. We did a series of articles on him. He ended up going to federal prison. Out of that we got tips that said, ‘You think he’s bad? You ought to look at some of these rural sheriffs.’ So we spent a year working on rural sheriffs, found all sorts of problems. A couple of those guys have been charged or indicted. We started thinking, boy, we’re finding a lot of these problems in some of these rural areas of the state. They either have very little coverage or nothing at all. Or they have a pretty dedicated little newspaper there, but it could be a one- or two-person shop. And they’re working, doing amazing work but they just don’t have the resources, maybe, to do these deep investigative pieces.”

So the Post and Courier teamed up with under-resourced local outlets to look into local government wrongdoing.

“One of the counties, the only true news desert in our state, it’s Allendale County,” Smith said. “It’s just really entrenched with poverty and all sorts of high unemployment and also all sorts of ills. They lost their newspaper in 2015. Since



Lucas Hoang/Unsplash

that time they’ve seen three local officials indicted for embezzlement. The state Department of Education has come in and taken over the schools for the second time. And more recently, some local activists pushed the county to do an audit and they found out that, basically, nobody knew how much money was on the books and who was spending what.... So it very much illustrates the point I think Dermot’s study showed, that when you don’t have that scrutiny bad things can happen.”

# Local News Overseas: ‘Many News Deserts in Many Countries’

Some experts overseas cautioned that the situation for local news is different outside the United States, in part because some regions never had strong local journalism in the first place.

“There have been many news deserts in many countries for a long time,” said Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, a University of Oxford professor who is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

“I always say that if the fall has been less brutal [in Europe], it’s just because they never climbed to the same height as U.S. local and regional papers,” Nielsen said.

“But the fundamental dynamics are the same. Local isn’t exclusive anymore from an advertising and distribution point of view, and local newspapers, which really are the backbone of local news production in the private sector also in Europe, are confronted with the fact that many of the types of information that people in the past got from newspapers, they now get elsewhere.”

Nielsen cited some hopeful signs, such as “important initiatives in nonprofit local journalism” and “encouraging” increases in digital subscriptions. Even so, he said, “We need to be clear-eyed that for the foreseeable future it’s only a minority and, in most cases, probably quite a small minority, who will be willing to pay for online news.”

Nielsen cited work by Matthew Hindman, a George Washington University professor, showing that only about 0.5% of activity online goes to local news. “And the figures in the UK are not so different,” Nielsen said. “Our most recent study from 2019 suggests that in the UK all local and regional newspapers combined accounted for 0.3% of time spent online.”

And then there’s the increasing dominance of hedge funds as local news owners in the United States. “If one is ruthless enough in the cost-cutting,” Nielsen said, “it can be treated as a West Texas oil field that you pump dry as cheaply as you can and then you shut it up when you’re done.”



Kyle Glenn/Unsplash

What’s required both in the United States and elsewhere is “a radical rethink of what makes local journalism distinct,” he said, because “‘You’ll miss us when we’re gone’ is not a business model.”

While some local news advocates in the United States are pushing for government help,

some foreign journalists are concerned about the media's economic dependence on government. That's certainly the case in Uganda, where Tabu Butagira is an editor at the Daily Monitor news organization.

"For many African countries, the government is a big advertiser and that therefore means that the availability of government resources in terms of advertising revenue is dependent on the character of the journalism of the media organization," Butagira said. "There are questions about independence, questions about self-censorship. ... Some of the journalists double as the commercial agents, so basically trading news for advertising, which is one of the worst experiences that I have had to share about this country."

Rosental Alves, a former Brazilian journalist who holds the Knight Chair in International Journalism and the UNESCO Chair in Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, said government support of journalism may be well-intentioned, but it doesn't always work out that way.

"Some local news only exists and has survived because of government advertising," Alves said. "And theoretically and we learned that historically from the European model of subsidizing journalism, it has been done in good intention of helping local news to exist, but in reality it's not exactly that. It's a way of buying media support, and so it works as a carrot-and-stick kind of thing."

Both Butagira and Alves emphasized how Facebook and WhatsApp affect news consumption.

"Compared with 10 years ago, we see the same symptoms of other countries, like the business model of the news organizations being deeply affected by the internet and by the [social media] platform," Alves said. "Brazil, like the rest of Latin America, is a country where the average use of social media is much higher than the world average."

Daisuke Nakai, a Japanese journalist who is New York Bureau Chief of Asahi Shimbun, said Japanese media have been more protected from the financial disruption of the internet than those in the United States.

"The U.S. local-news business model was much more advertisement-reliant especially [compared to] Japan and other countries as well," Nakai said. "I think it was supposed to be 80% advertising and 20% circulation. In Japan it's been more or less about 50-50 for a long time, so when the advertisement money basically evaporated, the impact was much bigger in the U.S., even though we



*"The U.S. local-news business model was much more advertisement-reliant especially [compared to] Japan and other countries as well"*

*Daisuke Nakai, Japanese journalist  
and New York Bureau Chief of Asahi Shimbun*

had similar situations in Japan as well. Because we have the circulation revenue we didn't have as big as an impact in the early years of the 21st century.”

That's not to say Japanese journalism isn't facing its own pressures.

“The problem has been as the population is declining, and also younger people are not reading newspapers, that circulation is going down as well now,” Nakai said. “So it's a more sort of drawn-out, longer downward spiral compared to the sort of crash that happened in the U.S.”

## The Pandemic and U.S. Local News: ‘So Much Less Equipped Now’

The COVID-19 pandemic is a huge story that has shown the demand for local news, but also has exposed the diminished resources of the journalists tasked with covering it.

“If there was ever a time that local news was important, it was during the pandemic, and it was during that time that also became particularly difficult to stay afloat, if you were a local newspaper,” Lawless said.

“Local news organizations are just so much less equipped now, both literally and figuratively in terms of personnel, to cover even something as consequential as the coronavirus pandemic has been,” said Viola Gienger, Washington Senior Editor for Just Security, based at New York University School of Law, where she is a research scholar.

Gienger, who sees the pandemic as a “national security issue,” said many news organizations have risen to the occasion, adopting an all-hands-on-deck approach at the start. But as Gienger put it, “Today you have very few hands on that ship to come up to the deck.”

Meredith Cohn, health reporter at the Baltimore Sun, said “we've done a pretty good job even though our staff is incredibly diminished. We actually had a health reporter in place. ... I'm not sure every other community had that benefit.”



Mika Bameister/Unsplash

Staff shortages required creativity. Cohn recalled that the Sun's “nuts-and-bolts numbers” story on the pandemic was initially written by sports reporters “because there were no games, so we deployed them, since I guess they're good with numbers.”

Boston Globe health care reporter Felice Freyer said her news outlet

was better equipped to respond than some.

“Luckily, we’re in a pretty good position,” Freyer said. “We’re not owned by venture capital or anything like that. We’re owned privately by a family that continues to support us. We threw everything at it, and so almost every reporter was covering something about COVID, and during that time, our online circulation doubled. And most of those people have actually stayed with the paper, so we’re up to 225,000 [digital subscribers]. That’s just online. Print is different. The number of hits we would get on each COVID story really shows how hungry people were for this information and how important it was to be able to answer their questions.”

Getting statistics from government agencies has been a challenge.

Cohn said the state of Maryland was “fairly forthcoming,” but in order to get racial and ethnic breakdowns, “we just hammered away.” The weakened state of local news means “I think they know we’re not going to sue them. We don’t have the funds always to go after them.”

Freyer, dealing with the state of Massachusetts, said the Globe also had to battle to get racial and ethnic breakdowns. “Similarly, there was information about nursing homes that was being withheld or not being produced. It’s hard to know when they just didn’t have the capacity to produce it and when they didn’t want people to know about it.”

An interesting aspect of pandemic coverage is how national news outlets and non-journalism institutions have created their own local news. For example, COVID-19 statistics from the New York Times and Johns Hopkins University have provided many people with specific information on the areas where they live.

In financial terms, the early days of the pandemic boosted local news organizations by driving a surge in digital subscriptions, but the lockdowns also caused a huge drop in online advertising.

Duke’s Napoli noted how digital advertising practices worked against pandemic coverage: “Programmatic media buying systems were being used in such a way as to avoid placing ads on pandemic-related news stories. ... It created a powerful disincentive to do the very kind of reporting we needed the most.”

Freyer, who is president of the board of directors of the Association of Health



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*Felice Freyer, health care reporter at The Boston Globe and President of the Association of Health Care Journalists*

Care Journalists, said membership in her group has held steady at about 1,400 since about 2013. But 27% of members were freelancers in 2018. Three years later, that number is up to 31%. “We haven’t done a survey, but I would be willing to bet that those are people who lost their jobs at newspapers or in other outlets,” Freyer said. “They lost their full-time jobs. They still want to cover health care and they’re going into freelancing.”

The impact of misinformation on public health cannot be denied. Gienger cited a Pew Research Center finding that people who relied on news outlets for their information on COVID-19 were far more likely to get vaccinated than those who relied on Donald Trump or on “personal and community connections.”

It’s indeed possible that the loss of local news coverage cost lives.

“When you don’t have a local news outlet,” Freyer said, “you really start to lose your sense of community and the sense that there is a trusted source that you can turn to, and that you understand what the government is doing, and that you understand that the people who run your local government are actually your neighbors, and things like that. You lose that connection with your community and that opens up a doorway for misinformation to pour in. ... So the loss of local news has a big role in my mind in the spread of misinformation and all the horrible things that have come as a result of that, including all the people who died because they didn’t get vaccinated. I’m drawing a line between the loss of local news and all these deaths and maybe you can’t connect every one of those dots, but it seems to me that that certainly is one of the big contributing factors.”

## The Pandemic and News Overseas: ‘Journalists Saved People’

Alves said a raging pandemic and an aggressive campaign of disinformation by Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro have challenged media on all levels.

“His policies killed people and journalists saved people,” Alves said.

“The entire relationship of the Brazilian government led by Bolsonaro in relation to the pandemic was denialism,” Alves said. “... The press has taken on its own responsibility to counterpoint the government, and this came to a point that when journalists note that the Ministry of Health was starting to manipulate the data of how many people died or contracted COVID, the big media in Brazil organized a consortium that now has the most trust-able data about the COVID pandemic in Brazil. So the press has been saving lives in Brazil in the most literal way that you can imagine.”

While mainstream news outlets in South America have fought for reliable information, startups have also met the moment.

“You may remember that Peru is the No. 1 country in deaths per capita in the world,” Alves said. “Peru, for example, developed one of those startups that is very beautiful called Salud con Lupa. This is a very interesting case of a startup of data journalism that spins off to be health-oriented, and this is the new kind of media that is showing up. In Ecuador also, you may remember how dramatic the situation was in Guayaquil that bodies were put in the streets and there is a local news [outlet] called GK. It’s a fantastic local news organization startup that two young people created, and during the pandemic, during the height of it, they did beautiful work trying to create an online memorial of people.”

The pandemic has disrupted the business model in many places.

Norbert Jeub, Editor in Chief of Radio Euskirchen in Germany, said his station was hard hit.

“During the lockdowns, advertising revenues have plummeted,” Jeub said. “While we usually had good revenues during certain advertising hours, this has totally collapsed. We’ve had days where we’ve had one or two commercials. That was a massive slump that lasted a long time. It’s recovering gradually.”

Butagira said Uganda and many other African countries were particularly disrupted because newspapers are commonly sold along the road by vendors, and “when there was a lockdown, there were no motorists on the road.”

The result: The closing of some regional newspapers and staff cuts at others.

“More experienced editors were sent home because they were paid more and then that took away institutional memory and put a higher burden of work on people who remained and long hours for nearly the same or less money,” Butagira said.

Medill’s Franklin noted that the rate of full vaccination in Japan was significantly higher than in United States (78% vs. 60%), and the seven-day average death total was much lower (1 in Japan vs. 1,289 in the U.S.). Franklin asked Nakai why he thought Japan did better.

In Japan, Nakai said, “you simply don’t have the sort of conflicting views, at least not political views, on the vaccine or the virus like you do in the U.S. ... I actually would compare it to climate change, and I think the U.S. is pretty unique in still debating over whether climate change is really a thing, [whereas] other countries have already decided that it is happening, and



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*“National media are not going to be able to be present in every community and really assess whether local authorities are [living up to] the responsibilities that they have in a crisis situation. ”*

*Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford*

the debate is more over what to do about it.”

Nakai said Japanese officials have been “fairly good” about releasing information on COVID, but “the problem for us is really, not just for us but for the public as well, is that the data isn’t there to begin with. So, for instance, testing was a really big problem in Japan because there just weren’t enough test kits to go around at the beginning.”

Nielsen said the lack of local news made oversight of the COVID response slower and spottier.

“One thing I think we have reason to believe is that the degree to which some authorities at the local level have failed citizens who relied on them, some of that would have been exposed earlier had there been local reporters,” Nielsen said. “You know, dealing with how some retirement homes handled situations where we saw absolutely atrocious things happening in the UK, with little attention from national media. And when we consider examples like this, where it’s perhaps less about the misinformation angle and more about the accountability side of things, where at the end of the day, national media are not going to be able to be present in every community and really assess whether local authorities are [living up to] the responsibilities that they have in a crisis situation. And I think this is in line with sort of research done for years in the United States about how local media can play a role in ensuring that public authorities, in particular, shoulder the responsibilities that they have.”

## Climate Coverage in the U.S.: ‘The Opportunity to Localize the Problem’

While the local news crisis has limited some outlets’ ability to cover climate well, bigger outlets and nonprofit organizations seem to be stepping up, according to Erica Goode, Managing Editor of Inside Climate News.

“Back when Inside Climate News started in 2007, hardly anyone was covering climate regularly,” Goode said. “But if you look around, there’s just many, many news outlets and everyone is starting a climate desk or has assigned a climate reporter. And that’s very encouraging. ... What you see is the big players like the Times, L.A. Times, Washington Post, etc. and the next layer of large city newspapers are adding climate coverage, adding climate desks, adding climate reporters. And then the next level down ... have lost coverage and maybe take a bit of nonprofit coverage.”

Rick Weiss, Founding Director of SciLine, a free service that connects journalists to scientific information, believes that “smaller nonprofit and sometimes hyperlocal news outlets [are] enjoying a little bit of a growth period right now thanks to philanthropic and other kinds of funding mechanisms. ... But they’re small audiences. Sometimes they tend to be more diverse or ethnic audiences, which is great also to hit those communities that are often overlooked. But I would be surprised if, in terms of number of eyeballs on stories, that that sort of

growth is making up for the general loss over the years now of specialty reporters at mid-sized publications.”

Goode recalled the situation at her former newspaper, the San Jose Mercury News.

“We were providing a column to the Mercury for a while, but they — this is telling, I think — they actually wanted this,” Goode said. “It was a clean energy column that we publish every week, and they wanted it, but they couldn’t spare someone for basically the half an hour that it took to produce the column on their website and transfer it. And this was pre-COVID. They were just so pressed for staff that to take — unless they were running something that got 20,000 — clicks they just couldn’t afford to do it.”

One promising sign is that local reporters are more frequently attributing local climate conditions to over-all climate change, Weiss said.

“The attribution angle over the last year has been getting stronger,” Weiss said.

“Which is to say, when a local reporter in Florida covers a hurricane, when a local reporter in California covers a wildfire, the odds of them actually saying something about the role of climate in the frequency, the intensity, of that kind of incident is higher now than it was a year or two ago. And that’s a good thing.” Such local coverage can get the public more engaged on the issue, Weiss said.

“Local news outlets have the opportunity to localize that problem, make clear what it means to people in their everyday lives and to focus on solutions that either are already going on and could inspire people in the way of adaptation and mitigation or that could tell a story of one locality that might be applicable in another locality,” Weiss said. “So it seems to me that local news is critical to educating and inspiring policy action from news consumers where national news

outlets and global perspectives on climate change can’t really get the juices going for people to care.”

Pandemic coverage did distract from climate coverage, but climate news seems to have bounced back, Weiss said.

“The percentage of our inquiries from when we launched in 2017 until January 21 of 2020 when we got our first COVID request was running, about 10% of inquiries were tagged under the term climatology,” Weiss said. “During the pandemic from January 2020 until actually January of 2021



intricate-explorer/Unsplash

that number dropped to 4%. And since January 2021 it's been climbing again and it's now up to 10% again."

Sadie Babits, a professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication and President of the Society of Environmental Journalists, said the Navajo Times in Arizona was an example of a local news outlet that was pulled away from climate coverage by pandemic coverage.

"COVID hit the Navajo nation very hard," Babits said. "[The Times'] environmental reporter, who also did climate coverage, had to pivot and continues to pivot to this day, and is having to do even more with less staff."

Another challenge in climate coverage is the segment of the audience that is skeptical about the science.

"There are conservatives, the moment they hear the word 'climate' they'll say 'fake news,'" Fukuyama said. "You know, 'This is just liberals lecturing us and telling us that we're really, really bad people.' And so, if you think about how do you get past that kind of polarization, it does seem to me that part of the answer's got to lie at this kind of a local level where people relate to one another through non-political things. ... That sort of creates the space that's in a way protected from this vicious politics on the outside. And it seems to me that if you have a news desert, obviously that's not going to happen. And I think that's one of the things that's really bad about the disappearance of these local papers."

## Climate Coverage Overseas: 'A Very Conscious Environmental Mindset'

Just as the Brazilian media has clashed with Bolsonaro on the pandemic, it has often been at odds with Brazil's leader on climate change as well.

"In general, the press has been the counterpoint of the anti-environment policies," Alves said. "Bolsonaro is destroying the policies to prevent the destruction of the Amazon in a very open way. He put in the Cabinet an environmental minister who had been working against the environment, dismantling all the systems of watchdogs, or you know these factors etc., and by and large, I see the press with a very conscious environmental mindset trying to expose this wrongdoing."

Jeub, the Editor in Chief of Radio Euskirchen, didn't have to go find the climate story. The climate story came to him. His area, the Eifel region of western Germany, suffered from severe flooding this July. While climate was already an issue in his country, Jeub said the disaster brought a renewed focus.

"Now, of course, in the aftermath and processing of this storm disaster, it is once again a topic that is being viewed from a completely different angle," Jeub said.

"People have suddenly experienced climate change. In all discussions during the processing of this storm catastrophe, vocabulary comes up that did not come



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*Sadie Babits, professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication*



Veerzy/Unsplash

up at all in the discussions before. Climate has never been a topic in such political rounds before and all of a sudden people are talking about it and even other parties that didn't focus on climate so much before, have now recognized the issue of climate and are mirroring it to us in the media."

Astrid Csuraji, a German news innovator, supported the idea that last summer's floods raised the profile of the issue.

"Since the flooding in Germany, even my aunt who's 85 understood all this climate change is really happening," Csuraji said.

"Yes, it's really happening, and it's neglecting that as a topic."

## Local News Innovation in the U.S.: 'We're Happy to Share that Model'

A number of new tactics are being employed in the United States to bolster local news.

Legacy publications are shifting from dependency on ad revenue to collecting money from their audience through subscriptions and membership. Just this year, more than 50 of them joined the new Medill Subscriber Engagement Index to get a better grip on how to retain their paying customers.

Meanwhile, digital startups are taking root in cities where legacy outlets have scaled back their staff and their mission. And philanthropy is taking a greater role, with a few legacy outlets converting to nonprofit status and nonprofit startups embracing focused missions such as climate and education.

In a major change in approach, collaboration seems to be largely replacing competition as the guiding principle for local news organizations. The Uncovered project at the Post and Courier in Charleston is a strong example of that. Smith said this model could be applied in news markets around the country.

"A couple states, a couple of newspapers, called us right after the initial piece ran and sort of picked our brains about how we would go about doing that, shared it with other reporters I know around," Smith said. "We're happy to share that model, happy to see it, and it's something that could easily be replicated anywhere around the country.

Another growing focus of local coverage is solutions journalism.

"I think we have to pivot to this idea of solutions for climate change, or even



*“We suggest that a public information campaign around this kind of thing might be what it takes to provide a little bit of a kick-start to saving the local news environment.”*

*Jennifer Lawless, Professor at the University of Virginia and co-author with Danny Hayes of the new book “News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement”*

responses,” ASU’s Babits said. “So how do communities, such as Palm Beach, Florida, how are they coming together, and sharing that conversation through their local paper or their local public radio station or their local TV station or digital platform? How are they coming together to solve that? The more we can do that style of reporting, the more we start to move the needle.”

This is especially important to younger people, Babits said.

“We have to think about audience and thinking about our younger news consumers,” Babits said, “because I think it’s shifting dramatically and millennials and Generation Z are demanding more from what they get from their news and it isn’t enough to just say, ‘Here’s the problem. Our planet is warming.’ It is so important to also include action that they can take and do that in a way that is falling within the tenets of journalism.”

In another philosophical shift, Lawless is calling for greater attention to the demand side of the equation, not just the supply side.

Lawless and her colleagues conducted an experiment outside polling places in Virginia in 2018 and 2019 in which they asked voters to fill out a survey. At the end of the survey, they asked people if they would provide their email address to get a local news update. With some of the participants, they first told them in one sentence that getting information about their community was important and then asked for their email address. With others, they asked for the email address without the sentence about the importance of local information.

“What we found is that one simple sentence was enough to increase the likelihood that people would give us their email addresses substantially,” Lawless said.

“We actually found a 7-to-8-percentage-point increase in the likelihood that someone would tell us that yes, they were interested in subscribing and that we could submit their name and they would get this local digest of news. What that suggests to us is that when people are primed to think about local news as an ingredient for being a good citizen ... they’re willing to say, yeah, I’d like to actually get that content, I’d like to know what’s going on. It’s just that they’re not thinking about it.”

The bottom line, according to Lawless: “We suggest that a public information campaign around this kind of thing might be what it takes to provide a little bit of a kick-start to saving the local news environment.”

## Local News Innovation Overseas: ‘More Green Grass That Is Growing’

While many legacy media in Brazil are in a knock-down-drag-out fight with Bolsonaro over information vs. disinformation, there are hopeful signs for the future of journalism there.

“I think that one of the most fascinating things that is happening in Brazil is the proliferation of news startups at different levels and different localities,” Alves said. “That, I think, is happening also in other countries in Latin America. I have been trying to help them in different ways, and one of the ways was to get some money from Google to create an organization that was launched after almost a year of groundwork. [It] was launched in May called AJOR and you can see them at ajor.org.br. It is the Brazilian Association of Digital Journalism.”

One example that Alves found “super-interesting” was a journalist in the favelas, or slums, of Rio de Janeiro. “It’s a guy called Rene Silva. I met him many years ago. When he was 11 in elementary school, he created this small one-page newspaper and gave the name of the newspaper The Voice of the Community in the favela he lived and still lives. That newspaper is still alive now. It became a printed newspaper. Covers not only his favela, and when we’re talking about favelas we’re talking about 100,000-people communities, 200,000-people communities. A real city within the city that had never been covered in this way, had been invisible for the local media, except for crime, etc. So there are those kinds of things and other kinds of media. For example, the black community. Brazil is a country with a sort of a disguised racism that Brazilians try to defend, but it’s a very strong problem. We have several ethnic or race-based news organizations that never existed before.”

Alves said that while concern about the spread of news deserts is valid, there many places that have always been news deserts.

“The media that is emerging on Facebook ... or on blogs is actually more coverage. This is one point that we should study somehow because this is more green grass that is growing than has ever existed in those places,” Alves said. “And they must be doing a good job because, unfortunately, they have been attacked, harassed and killed.”

Alves said “Facebook has been replacing the blogosphere of the past by being the platform where a personal blog or presence may become so successful that they hire another person, they start making money out of it or not, or making just prestige or other ways of monetizing the influence that they have by having so many followers. Same with YouTube. YouTube is another platform that has been used for a sort of instantaneous creation of news outlets that are very rudimentary but start growing on people.”

In an advanced media market like Germany, traditional thinking can be a problem, according to Astrid Csuraji, co-founder and CEO of tactile.news, a German journalism innovation hub.

“I don’t know if that’s a media thing, but they think innovation means to do something new and to add to the plate,” Csuraji said. “So they make more stuff and



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Communication at  
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try to do more things, while doing everything else that they've done all the time. And I tried to tell them if you want to do something new, you have to stop doing something old so you can't give your people more on the plate. ... You have to be brave enough to stop something. Maybe just print your paper on the weekend."



Csuraji challenged the thinking that all pandemic coverage should be free.

"My hometown newspaper never had a newsletter before," Csuraji said. "And then the pandemic hit and they said, well, we have to get this information out. The numbers are the most important things. So they asked us, do you know a data journalist? Yes, we know, so we matched them with a data journalist and said he can help you and he can show you, because it's not rocket science, how to get those numbers extracted and do some charts that people understand right away. Is it going up or down? And then they had this newsletter. Many people clicked on it, and many people read it. It was for free. I said, why are you giving out this information for free? 'This is a pandemic, and we should give it out for free.' Yes, maybe you should give a part of it out for free, then try to turn those people into a conversion and try to make them pay for the information, because if you already have them, you can try to convert them into paying subscribers. And they didn't, and I think that's a mistake. If your product is good, why should people get it for free? Try to add something and to give it a depth [so] that people say, 'Well, for that part I'm paying five Euros a month or I'm paying 10.'"

*"Sometimes we should not wait for traditional media to change, but we should just build a new house outside the old houses."*

*Astrid Csuraji,  
co-founder and  
CEO of tactile.  
news*

Csuraji said Germany was seeing "new local newsrooms popping up here and there" while traditional media try to innovate. But it would be a mistake to expect legacy outlets to lead the charge, she said.

"Sometimes we should not wait for traditional media to change, but we should just build a new house outside the old houses," she said.

Nielsen said that if local journalism was framed as a public good rather than simply as a consumer product, people might be more willing to devote government resources.

"I have to be very European and say we need to just recognize that there are, of course, policy options if we decide as a society that we believe there are market failures in the provision of local independent, professional reporting," Nielsen said. "Or if we believe that it has such intrinsic public value that we shouldn't even think of it in terms of market failure but as part of what sets civilized societies apart ... then we can make collectively binding decisions to dedicate resources. ... This can take the form of direct or indirect subsidies for for-profit providers. It can take the form of easing and incentivizing nonprofit news creation. It can take the form of investing public resources through mechanisms that ensure editorial independence and accountability.

"I feel like I'm some sort of European closet communist when I say these things, but we just need to recognize that there are actually existing policy options on the table. And if we don't use them, that's a choice as well, and that's fine. That's a political choice. I may have my own views on it as a citizen and those views would vary from country to country. I wouldn't necessarily want the same media policies in Hungary as I would in Denmark. But there are policy options."

# Interviewers



**Penelope (Penny) Muse Abernathy** is a visiting professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. Abernathy, a former executive with The New York Times and Wall Street Journal, was the Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the University of North Carolina from 2008 to 2020. Her research focuses on the digital revolution for news organizations, the information needs of communities and the emergence of news deserts in the United States. She is author of several books and reports, including "News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?" (2020) and "The Strategic Digital Media Entrepreneur" (2018).



**Tim Franklin** is the Senior Associate Dean and the John M. Mutz Chair in Local News at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University. He also leads two major local news projects, the Medill Local News Initiative and the Metro Media Lab. Franklin is the former President of The Poynter Institute, an international school for journalists and a media strategy center. He's the former top editor of The Baltimore Sun, Orlando Sentinel and Indianapolis Star, and he was a Washington Managing Editor for Bloomberg News. He's been named a Distinguished Alumnus of the Indiana University Media School.



**Sabine Murphy** is a program manager at Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung USA. She focuses on media with special emphasis on local journalism, but her portfolio also includes international cooperation on a subnational level and various other transatlantic issues. She has a background in journalism and worked as a producer for the German TV networks N24/Welt and ZDF. A native of Germany, Murphy is a dual U.S.-German citizen and graduated with a law degree from Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. She attended one-year international study programs in Dijon, France, and as a Fulbright scholar in Arlington, Va.

# Participants



**Rosental Alves** holds the Knight Chair in International Journalism and the UNESCO Chair in Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, where, in 2002, he founded the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, which he still leads today. He has been a professor at UT's Moody College of Communication's School of Journalism and Media since 1996, when he moved from Rio de Janeiro to Austin, after a 27-year journalism career in Brazil. He was a director and managing editor of the then-leading newspaper Jornal do Brasil. Alves launched the first real-time, digital news service in Brazil in 1991, and the first Brazilian newspaper edition on the web in 1995.



**Sadie Babits** is a professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where she is the sustainability director for the school's professional program Cronkite News/Arizona PBS newsroom. She teaches students how to report environmental stories as multimedia journalists. Babits is also the board president for the Society of Environmental Journalists, the only nonprofit membership organization in North America dedicated to strengthening the quality, reach and viability of journalism that advances public understanding of environmental issues. Babits was a Ted Scripps Environmental Reporting Fellow from 2017-2018, and before that she was the news director at Colorado Public Radio.

# Participants



**Tabu Butagira** is a reporter and editor with Uganda’s Daily Monitor, part of the Nation Media Group. His work also has appeared in The Times of London and the Mail & Guardian of South Africa. Butagira was a Humprey Graduate Fellow at Arizona State University. Butagira holds a bachelor’s degree in urban planning from Uganda’s Makerere University.



**Meredith Cohn** is a health and medicine reporter for The Baltimore Sun. She came to the paper in 2000 after positions at The Virginian-Pilot, States News Service and the Hagerstown Morning Herald. She was on a team that won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for reporting on a self-dealing scandal that led to the resignation and prosecution of Mayor Catherine Pugh.



**Astrid Csuraji** is co-founder and CEO of tactile.news, a German innovation hub that prototypes the future of news. Astrid and her team are exploring IoT, AI and how new technologies can empower newsrooms to do better. In 2020 tactile.news developed a software, 100eyes, to enable community-driven journalism based on messaging apps. Currently tactile.news is prototyping a children’s news adventure for smart assistants. tactile.news collaborates with both private local news companies and public broadcasters in Germany. Before starting tactile.news, Csuraji worked as a journalism trainer for more than 15 years. She holds an M.A. in Cultural Science from the Universities of Lüneburg, Germany and Bologna, Italy



**Felice Freyer** is the health care reporter at The Boston Globe and President of the Association of Health Care Journalists. Freyer is a former medical writer for The Providence Journal, where she was awarded the “Master Reporter” award from the New England Association of Newspaper Editors.



**Frank Fukuyama** is Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Mosbacher Director of FSI’s Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, and Director of Stanford’s Ford Dorsey Master’s in International Policy. He is also a professor (by courtesy) of political science. Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* has appeared in more than 20 foreign editions. Fukuyama received his B.A. from Cornell University in classics, and his Ph.D. from Harvard in political science. He was a member of the Political Science Department of the RAND Corporation and of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. State Department.



**Viola Gienger** is Washington Senior Editor for Just Security, a website on national and international security law and policy based at NYU Law School. She previously was Senior Editor/Writer at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, and earlier edited and reported at Bloomberg News, where she covered the State Department and the Pentagon, and at local newspapers around the American South. She was a journalism consultant and freelance writer in Eastern Europe and the Balkans for seven years. Her work has appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Newhouse’s Religion News Service, the Washington Post, The New York Times, Transitions Online, Al-Monitor, and the Atlantic Council’s Ukraine Alert.

# Participants



**Erica Goode** is the managing editor of Inside Climate News. She founded and led the first environment/climate reporting group at The New York Times in 2010, and later covered climate change as a reporter. In 18 years at The Times, she also served as the paper's human behavior/mental health writer, covered the war in Iraq, and was a national correspondent covering criminal justice. Before joining the Times, she was an assistant managing editor and senior writer at U.S. News and World Report. She has taught environmental journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.



**Norbert Jeub** is the editor-in-chief of Radio Euskirchen, a local radio station in the Eifel region of Germany that he founded in 1997. Previously, Jeub established a local radio station in the former German capital Bonn and the Rhein-Sieg district and served as managing editor. For twenty years, Jeub taught radio basics as a guest coach at the journalism academy of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. He studied business administration at the University of Cologne. Jeub was awarded the radio award of the State Media Academy of North-Rhine-Westphalia in 2011 and 2013.



**Jennifer Lawless** is the Commonwealth Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia. Prior to joining the UVA faculty, she was a professor of government at American University and Director of the Women & Politics Institute. Before that, she was an associate professor at Brown. Lawless, author or co-author of six books, is Co-Editor-in-Chief of the American Journal of Political Science. She graduated from Union College with a B.A. in political science, and Stanford University with an M.A. and Ph.D. in political science. In 2006, Lawless sought the Democratic nomination for a U.S. House seat in Rhode Island. She lost the race but remains an obsessive political junkie.



**Dermot Murphy** is an associate professor of finance at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He specializes in public finance, fixed income and high-frequency trading. His public finance research on newspaper closures has been extensively covered by high-profile outlets such as the Washington Post and Forbes, and has been cited in the most recent presidential election and the U.S. Senate. He has a PhD in Finance from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.



**Daisuke Nakai** is the New York Bureau Chief of the Asahi Shimbun. For the Asahi he started out at the Kofu Bureau in Yamanashi Prefecture, and since then has worked in Fukushima, Tokyo, Osaka and New York. He was previously in New York from 2012 to 2017, reporting from around the U.S., and returned to New York in 2021 after four years of editing in Tokyo.



**Philip Napoli** is the James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where he is also the Director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy and Senior Associate Dean for Faculty and Research. His research on local journalism has been supported by organizations such as the Democracy Fund and the Knight Foundation, and he has provided research and testimony on local journalism issues to government bodies such as the U.S. Senate, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission and the Government Accountability Office.

# Participants



**Rasmus Kleis Nielsen** is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford. He was previously Director of Research at the Reuters Institute and Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Press/Politics. His work focuses on changes in the news media, on political communication, and the role of digital technologies in both. His books include *Ground Wars: Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns* (2012). Nielsen earned a BA and an MSc in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen, an MA (with distinction) in Political Theory from the University of Essex and a PhD (with distinction) in Communications from Columbia University.



**Glenn Smith** is editor of the watchdog and public service team at The (Charleston) Post and Courier and led the team that produced the news outlet's 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation, "Till Death Do Us Part." Smith was a 2014 Guggenheim Journalism Fellow and was named South Carolina's Journalist of the Year for 2012.



**Rick Weiss** is the founding director of SciLine, a free service that connects journalists to scientists and scientific information. Based at the nonprofit American Association for the Advancement of Science, SciLine works especially with local and general assignment reporters to help them integrate research-backed evidence into their news stories. Weiss spent 15 years as a science reporter at The Washington Post. He has led science and technology strategic communications in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, including within the White House and the Defense Department. Rick earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Cornell University and a master's in journalism from the University of California, Berkeley.

# Contributors



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# Northwestern

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