This article underscores the importance of local investigative journalism and routine coverage for American democracy while acknowledging its current unsustainable financial model. Working from my experience as a newspaper editor and media columnist/public editor, I offer suggestions to improve the quality and content of local news. My suggestions include national legislation to support the sustainability of journalism, media literacy education for adults and youth, and subsidies to newsrooms via state universities.

*Keywords:* journalism sustainability act; tax incentives; local newspapers; investigative journalism; accountability journalism

# A Media Insider's Wish List for Saving Local Journalism

*By*
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For more than a decade now, I've been trying to explain the importance of local journalism and sound the alarm about its decline. I know the territory extremely well.

As the top editor for a regional newspaper, *The Buffalo News*, I saw firsthand how significant our work could be. Our skilled and dedicated staff of 200 journalists at the largest news organization in upstate New York performed as the watchdog for our community, and we did our best to hold powerful people and institutions to public account. I wouldn't argue that we did our journalism perfectly, but I do know that what we did do was crucial to the community.

Later, as the public editor (or ombudswoman) of *The New York Times*, I saw how often national journalism took its cues from initial reporting from smaller, local news

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organizations. At the *Times*, I pushed for those local journalists to get proper credit from Big Journalism—something that didn't always happen as a matter of course.

A few years later, while I was the media columnist for *The Washington Post*, I documented the precipitous decline of local newspapers and even published a book about the topic, titled *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* (Sullivan 2020). I kept making the case that when local journalism fades or dies, good citizenship becomes harder: people become less engaged in their communities; retreat into their tribal corners; and, in many cases, don't even share the same basis of reality.

To explain how much local news can matter, I offer the example of two reporters at *The Buffalo News* who helped to change the airline industry and, in doing so, almost certainly helped to save many lives. In their reporting, Jerry Zremski and Tom Precious (the paper's longtime Washington and Albany correspondents, respectively) followed the crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407, in which 50 people died. Taking off from Newark, New Jersey, on a normal-seeming February day in 2009, the plane had nearly reached its destination in Buffalo when it went into a stall; it never recovered and soon crashed into a house in suburban Buffalo. All the passengers—a cantor, a human rights activist, the widow of a 9/11 victim, and dozens more—were killed, as was the entire crew. Of course, this tragedy was a national story for a few days, but then, in an all-too-familiar pattern, the national reporters moved on to the next horror story in the next town. But Zremski and Precious, attached to the local paper as full-time staffers, did not move on. Instead, with the urging and support of their editors, they dug in. For many months, they developed sources, examined documents, interviewed relentlessly, and pieced together a series of stories that showed that pilot error was largely at fault in the Colgan crash. They also found that this pilot error probably could have been prevented by better training and by stricter regulations about, for example, the amount of time required for pilots to rest between flights. The combination of *The Buffalo News*' reporting and the tireless advocacy of the victims' families brought about major changes by the National Transportation Safety Board. This is the essence of local reporting—the kind of work that truly makes a difference both by informing local citizens of important community concerns and by signaling the importance of local issues in broader national dynamics. Consider the "before and after" of the aviation-safety reforms that became law in 2010: in the two decades leading up to the Buffalo crash, 1,186 people died in commercial plane crashes in the U.S.; but in the decade after the new regulations were put in place, there was only one such death—caused by a jet window that shattered, not by a crash. Zremski and Precious's journalism saved lives. It's not an exaggeration to say that, as a result, Americans fly much more safely now than they did before February 2009.

I'm sorry to say that such reporting might not take place these days. *The Buffalo News* still has a fairly robust newsroom, but one that's far smaller than it was even a dozen years ago. (When I left the paper, after 12 years as top editor, for *The New York Times* in 2012, we had already begun reducing the staff.) Nowadays, the paper has shrunk dramatically as Lee Enterprises, the relatively

new owner, cuts costs and maximizes profit. Today, the newsroom staff is about a third the size of the 200-person staff I headed.

For *The Buffalo News* to take on a long investigative project like the aviation-safety reporting (in addition to its day-to-day reporting) would be unlikely now. That contraction in coverage is happening at local newspapers all over the country; and in fact, the losses are even more extreme at most regional papers than they are in Buffalo.

Newspapers—once the engine that powered local news—are cutting their newsroom staffs to the bone or, in some cases, going out of business altogether. The longtime business model, so dependent on print advertising, has disintegrated with the dominance of the internet and the tech platforms, particularly Google and Facebook.

In one of my final columns for *The Washington Post*, I cited research from Northwestern University (Abernathy and Franklin 2022) that showed the depth and breadth of the problem: "Already, some 2,500 dailies and weeklies have shuttered since 2005; there are fewer than 6,500 left. Every week, two more disappear. And although many digital-only news sites have cropped up around the nation, most communities that lost a local newspaper will not get a print or digital replacement" (Sullivan 2022).

One-third of American newspapers that existed roughly two decades ago will be out of business by 2025, according to research from the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications (Abernathy and Franklin 2022). I've taken a closer look at local journalism in Jackson, Mississippi; during a visit last year, I met Jerry Mitchell, a former reporter for the legendary *Clarion-Ledger* newspaper. Mitchell's (2020) book, *Race Against Time*, provides another potent example of how local journalism matters and what we are in great danger of losing right now.

Mitchell was a reporter at *The Clarion-Ledger* for years when it had a fairly robust staff and was doing admirable reporting on the civil rights movement. Now that paper, owned by the Gannett chain, is down to fewer reporters than you can count on one hand; Mitchell left the paper to found the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting, a nonprofit dedicated to exposing injustices and fostering the work of a new generation of muckraking journalists. His book, which is subtitled *A Reporter Reopens the Unsolved Murder Cases of the Civil Rights Era*, explores infamous cold cases including, for example, the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist; and the 1964 torture and murder in Mississippi of three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. In part because of Mitchell's dogged and skilled reporting, some of the racist perpetrators of these murders were finally brought to justice and put behind bars.

Jackson is luckier than most places where local newspapers have faded into near oblivion. In addition to Mitchell's independent investigative reporting center, the city boasts a thriving nonprofit newsroom called *Mississippi Today*, which these days has a significantly larger staff than *The Clarion-Ledger*. *Mississippi Today*'s editor, Adam Ganucheau, told me that—as proud as he is of

his staff's work—he has plenty of worries. How can their journalism get through to those Mississippians who are so deep into their partisan echo chambers that truthful reporting doesn't seem to make a dent? And what about the distribution of the news they produce? No longer do most people living on a residential street receive the daily paper on their doorstep or front porch. Can they be expected to seek out *Mississippi Today*'s reporting by going to their website every day to see what's new, or will they encounter it in their social-media feeds? The nonprofit has tried to address this by offering its journalism—for free—to newspapers throughout the state; given their ever-smaller staffs, many papers have taken them up on it. Still, it's not easy to get the work in front of people's eyes in this largely postprint era.

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The newspaper industry faces many challenges and many questions. But one thing I'm sure of is that society abides and abets the decline of local reporting and local journalism at its own peril. Local reporting is more trusted than national news, it keeps an eye on powerful people and institutions, and it fosters engagement by citizens in how their community functions and is governed. It helps to knit communities together with common concerns, goals, and interests.

With all of this in mind, here are a few of the things I'd like to see happen. Call it a wish list for saving local journalism. In compiling it, I consulted with Steven Waldman, who cofounded the nonprofit organization Report for America and serves as the chairman of the Rebuild Local News Coalition. I also relied on my own research from six years of writing columns for *The Washington Post* and the work on my book.

With Waldman, I believe that a proposed bill called the Local Journalism Sustainability Act deserves enthusiastic and widespread support. Its original form (since somewhat watered down as it has been considered in Congress) included three major provisions: a payroll tax credit for news organizations who employ local journalists, a tax credit for advertisers who spend money with local news organizations, and a tax credit for those who subscribe or contribute to local news organizations. Waldman especially likes this approach because it would offer substantial help—the first provision alone would direct $1.7 billion over five years to local news, he says—while mostly avoiding the potential conflict of interest posed with direct government help to news organizations. (Journalists have long distrusted the notion of government involvement with news, since independence is so crucial to the journalistic mission.) "It amplifies the spending power of consumers and goes to the heart of the matter, which is the lack of reporters," he told me.

Waldman's organization prefers this bill, which was proposed by Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA), to a very different—and more controversial—bill called the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (JCPA), proposed by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), whose father was a newspaperman. That bill, which has some bipartisan support in Congress, is intended to help level the playing field between local newsrooms and the tech giants, particularly Google and Facebook. It may allow media organizations to negotiate collectively with the much more

powerful and financially successful platforms for compensation to distribute their content. Facebook has responded to the idea by threatening to take news off the platform altogether—a power move that would devastate many news organizations. But it's unclear whether that would come to pass.

Far from perfect, the JCPA has drawn understandable opposition because it may allow media organizations that don't deserve the help—Fox News and Breitbart, for example—to reap the benefits. William Grueskin, a Columbia University journalism professor who has studied what happened when Australia instituted a similar policy, told me that, despite its flaws, he favors the bill's passage, because the need to help local news organizations is so urgent. It could be, he told me, "a tourniquet rather than a cure." The News Media Alliance, a lobbying group for publishers formerly known as the Newspaper Association of America, strongly supports this effort as a way to wrest back some power (and ad money) from the platforms.

In addition to these two major policy initiatives, I'll add the following ideas to my wish list—not because they are perfect but because they are worthy of serious consideration. When it comes to how policymakers might intervene to avert the crisis, I propose the following:

- Media literacy taught in school and, when possible, to adults. Legitimate news-gathering and distribution is expensive, and this "demand-side" initiative is based on the idea that news consumers are more likely to pay for high-quality local news when they recognize how much bad information is coming their way. Organizations such as the Washington, DC–based News Literacy Project are acting on this idea with educational efforts that have reached millions of young people in classrooms around the country. Adults, especially older adults who tend to unwittingly share misinformation on social media, need this training, too.
- More efforts like the one based at the University of California, Berkeley, that provides $25 million in state funding for a fellowship program that puts 40 journalists in California newsrooms. This initiative may be the largest state allocation of money to directly support local journalism anywhere in the U.S. Although skeptical of direct government subsidies to newsrooms, I believe this program is worth watching to see if it avoids—or falls prey to—conflicts of interest or the diminishment of all-important editorial independence.
- Innovative legislation, first introduced in New York City and now replicated in Chicago, that requires city government to commit a portion of its advertising budget to help fund community media outlets. Under this requirement, New York City sent $20 million in advertising dollars in 2020 and 2021 to more than 200 community media organizations, with an emphasis on newsrooms that serve communities of color and immigrants. (The Advertising Boost Initiative was proposed by the City University of New York's Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and signed into law by then-mayor Bill de Blasio in 2019.) The same concerns about editorial independence apply here, but, given the dire need, I find the concept praiseworthy if appropriate guardrails can be built in.

However, news organizations and other public stakeholders do not have to wait on local, state, or national lawmakers to take action. The news industry and those who care about it might consider:

- Collaborations between large national news organizations and smaller, often struggling ones—whether newspapers, radio stations, digital sites, or something else. I was heartened to see that *The New York Times*, under the leadership of its former executive editor, Dean Baquet, has begun an effort to bring its resources to a new project that fosters local investigative reporting. ProPublica, the well-established newsroom dedicated to accountability reporting, has done many such collaborations, perhaps most notably with the excellent, Austin-based nonprofit newsroom, *The Texas Tribune*. Similarly, the Marshall Project worked with *Mississippi Today* on a powerful year-long reporting project that revealed how Mississippi forces people convicted of crimes—particularly low-income Black residents—into modern-day debtors' prisons, where they are placed into low-wage, often dangerous jobs to pay off their sentences.
- Philanthropic support for the best of the independent efforts currently shoring up local news. Report for America, for example, funds positions for hundreds of young journalists at existing local news organizations; loosely based on the Teach for America model, this notable success could and should be vastly expanded. Also admirable and worthy of support is the American Journalism Project, which, through major philanthropy, helps fund digital news sites that it first screens for a good chance of eventual self-sustainability.

When I published *Ghosting the News* in 2020, I came to two inescapable conclusions. First, that local news must be saved. The work mentioned here—Jerry Mitchell holding racist killers accountable, *The Buffalo News* helping to make commercial flights safer, *Mississippi Today* and the Marshall Project revealing inequity in the criminal-justice system—is too valuable to abandon. These stories are, of course, only a few of the innumerable instances of strong local journalism around the nation and, indeed, around the world. I continue to be inspired by that work, which almost miraculously continues despite the loss of local reporters and the withering of local newspapers.

Second, I realized that there is no single solution to the deep and troubling problem of the decline of local news. Those who care about strong, sustainable local news—particularly those in government and others involved in public policy—must take a varied, piecemeal approach.

There simply is no perfect answer, and even with all the worthy efforts underway, the forecast remains grim. But each of the measures discussed here has the potential to help, and it's possible that, if enough pieces came together, the picture for local news could improve. I fervently hope so, because the stakes, for our democracy and for individual communities, are so very high.

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