Free Press

NEWS WE TRUST

Bright Spots in the Movement to Grow Civic Media

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Newsroom leaders and Free Press Action organizers gathered in Madison, Wisconsin, to discuss ways to strengthen local news. Photo by Free Press Action

Cover photos: Top and bottom by WORT-FM; middle by The Kansas City Defender

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing movement to strengthen local news in the United States that's inspiring a wave of civic-information providers to innovate ways to inform people about their communities.

In the past, local newspapers and traditional commercial-media outlets dominated the journalism space. But today, as digital technologies evolve and local news disappears, community-centered information providers are becoming critical parts of local-news ecosystems. **As we reimagine the future of journalism, we wanted to spotlight a few of the inspiring practitioners who are redefining what it means to empower communities with information — and inspire them to take civic action.**

If we study the ways in which information flows in a community — both in places where there are many media options as well as in communities that are media-deficient — we can observe that the for-profit media system has by and large failed to inform people about crucial matters that affect their lives. But there are hundreds of civic-information practitioners across the country working to fill the gaps. These practitioners are a crucial part of the media ecosystem and merit further study on how they are facilitating civic participation.

To that end, we've interviewed and profiled five civic-media organizations to better understand how they provide more than just news in their communities. In this report, we examine their motivations, challenges and opportunities. We also explore the unique ways in which they are forging relationships, building trust and inspiring often-disengaged communities to participate in civic processes. We found that their role in the community transcends what traditional newsrooms provide.

These organizations view civic information as a public good. They go beyond just providing content and don't approach journalism as an extractive process. They engage in physical spaces, make an ongoing effort to get to know their audiences and connect civic processes to the quality of life in their communities.

Here are some of the ways in which these providers engage their communities and improve their civic health:

- They offer civic education in schools and use sports and music to connect with younger audiences.
- They provide physical spaces for people to gather and offer training and equipment to facilitate community-media access.
- They work with local governments to demystify civic processes and enable people to give input on policy issues and proposals.
- They offer explainers on civic issues and connect people to hearings, decision-making bodies and the levers of power where they can impact policies.

All of this is strengthening civic health — and by building a strong civil society, they are countering the harmful media practices that corporate-media outlets use in marginalized communities. **Strengthening connection, trust and media is a vehicle for that.**

The Philadelphia Hall Monitor covers how local-government decisions impact the 23 percent of Philadelphians living in poverty. Photo by Denise Clay-Murray



BACKGROUND

For the past decade, Free Press has been a partner and ally in a movement to foster local news that meets communities' information needs. In February 2023, this emergent local-media movement saw two major milestones. First, field leaders Elizabeth Green, Darryl Holliday and Free Press' Mike Rispoli, along with several contributing authors, published *The Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs*. This report is a clear-eyed assessment and framework for how to invest in and grow the local civic media that communities need to thrive. Second, a coalition of 22 funders launched Press Forward, a first-of-its-kind national initiative that's investing $500 million over five years to strengthen local news and civic-information landscapes. Since then, multiple states have explored or introduced legislation to better fund local media as the public good that it is.

In 2018, New Jersey passed the Civic Information Bill, historic legislation that allocated public funds for local journalism. The bill, which then-Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law, created a springboard for the emergence of new, independently owned local-media outlets — as well as projects from community groups and nonprofits that were designed to fill information gaps. The law created the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, a landmark nonprofit that, since 2021, has invested millions of dollars in state funding to more than 50 organizations focused on diversifying journalism, improving government transparency, providing community-health news and better serving communities of color and immigrant communities.

We've seen how these diverse local-media outlets, with help from these public funds, have met the information needs of communities that legacy media outlets have underserved. **The innovative ways in which these organizations deliver news and information reflect a broader national movement to reach communities where they are, in the medium of their choice.**

Through our organizing work in journalism collaboratives in Colorado, New Jersey, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, we've seen how media outlets, community organizations and nonprofits have all stepped into the role of communicators to fill information gaps in media-deficient communities. Newsroom leaders have told us how they're trying to encourage civic

participation on issues including food insecurity, public-health disparities, housing access and utility assistance.

We've also seen how these small, hyperlocal independent outlets are building trust and relationships in their communities and offering more than just journalism as part of their services. **While there's an ongoing local-news crisis and major shifts in journalism, there are also bright spots: Hyperlocal news and information providers are redefining traditional journalism and building new infrastructure for local news.**

Ethnic-media outlets like the Sahan Journal are reporting on the immigration crackdown in Minneapolis. Reporte Hispano in North Jersey is providing critical updates about immigration policy. Outlier Media in Detroit is reporting on the impacts of utility access and property taxes. Conecta Arizona is using WhatsApp to share news from Mexico and border communities. El Tímpano is using text messaging to bridge the digital divide and engage new audiences in Oakland and the broader Bay Area. The Jersey Bee is providing maps for food access, and the Birmingham Watch is doing essential reporting on voting rights and elections.

Knowing that our colleagues are doing such impactful work inspired us to take a closer look at some of these hyperlocal news outlets and the people working to improve the civic health of their communities. Our initial goal with these profiles, completed with support from the Walton Foundation, was to glean best practices from civic-media practitioners leading the way to transform the present and future of local news — and to share these learnings with other news providers, funders and policymakers as examples of approaches worth investing in.

Within the civic-media movement, there are several institutions organizing to innovate new funding strategies and build infrastructure. Groups organizing for the future of public media following the dismantling of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting include Free Press, News Futures and Press Forward, which are all looking toward new models to meet information needs.

The emerging cohort of local-news and civic-information providers is uniquely positioned to meet this challenge. **These organizations are providing more than journalism;** they're helping their communities resist harmful policies, access public resources and strengthen civil society at a time when authoritarianism is on the rise.

II.
CIVIC-MEDIA PROFILES

For this project we profiled five organizations: CivicLex, the Kansas City Defender, the Listening Post Collective, the Philadelphia Hall Monitor and WORT-FM.

We engaged these providers through in-depth interviews about their motivations, philosophies, practices and visions for the future of local news and civic media. We also did a content analysis of their websites, social media, news stories and educational content to understand their work.

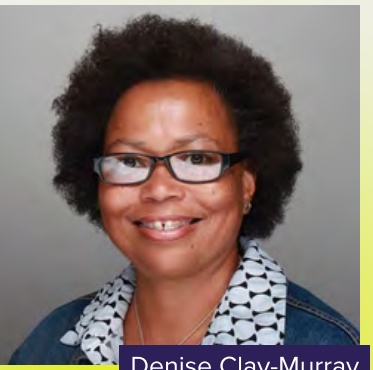
The case studies represent a small glimpse into the growing field of civic journalism and community media — and shed light on how these organizations are practicing a community-driven, reparative approach to storytelling.


Richard Young


Ryan A. Sorrell


Jesse Hardman


Nate Carlin


Denise Clay-Murray


Vanessa Maria Graber


Lawrence McGlynn


Lance Haver



CIVICLEX

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

CivicLex's founder, Richard Young, has a background in community development. "I spent a lot of time in city hall, and I spent a lot of time talking with my neighbors about things they wanted to see in our community," said Young. "I saw this significant disconnect where people felt powerless. People felt they had no say over the decisions impacting their lives. People felt a lack of agency.

"At the same time, I saw that there were a lot of decisions being made [in local government] with very few people engaged. But there was an interest from the government in engaging people.

"I wanted to create something to stand in that gap between the government and the local public."

CivicLex

Location: Lexington, Kentucky

Established: 2017

Engagement and Offerings:

- CivicLex Weekly: Local news and reporting on the lifecycles of local legislation
- Civic-education programs in K-12 schools and workshops for adults
- Local-government partnerships to change local decision-making processes

Communities served: Residents of Fayette County, Kentucky

Lineage/Background: Community development

Led by: Founder and Executive Director Richard Young

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING IN THIS WORK?

"My home, my community. I want them to know they matter," Young said. "Lexington is a wonderful place and it deserves a civic life that lives up to what the city could be."

WHAT COMMUNITIES DOES CIVICLEX SERVE?

CivicLex serves residents of Fayette County, Kentucky, which includes the city of Lexington. Young named three main audiences in their work:

- **The Civic Curious:** "People who have had an inclination to get [civically engaged] but haven't for one reason or another or don't really know what to do."
- **The Stymied:** "People who have been involved in the past but got frustrated and don't want to do it anymore."
- **The Directly Impacted:** "People who are going to be directly impacted by any major policy decisions that are coming up."

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES?

"Our mission is to strengthen civic health in Lexington, and for us that means helping our community make decisions in a better way to be able to solve our own problems. And information is a really critical aspect of that," said Young.

CivicLex offers multiple programs to demystify civic governance and engage residents in local decision-making. On the education and outreach side, its work includes offering a K-12 civic-education program, facilitating workshops on how city government and the city budget work, and leading research processes to make local boards and commissions more representative.

The organization's journalism product, The CivicLex Weekly, tracks legislative meetings, votes and ongoing issues to help residents understand what's happening at City Hall and learn how they can make their voices heard before leaders finalize decisions.

"News is always about 'what's already happened,'" said Young. "This gives people the feeling that the decision's already been made. We want to help people follow things through the process and find the appropriate time to engage before the decision is made."

HOW DO YOU DEFINE IMPACT?

"We've seen pretty significant structural changes in our government because of our work," said Young. "We've changed how public meetings function. We've created new positions in local government through our work. We have seen tangible, major shifts in how our community governs itself."

For example, in 2021–2022 CivicLex researched ways to improve the public-comment process in Lexington and made 12 recommendations. The city government has implemented seven recommendations so far, including moving the public-comment period to the beginning of council meetings, piloting pre-legislative meetings to guide policymaking priorities and posting clear guidelines for public comment at every meeting.

"Our goal is to convince people that it is worth it to be involved," Young said. "No one cares about local government! They care about the condition of roads, streets, trees and parks, and about the ability to find affordable housing and jobs. We work really hard to make our tone fun — while tackling issues in a thorough way."

For Young, their ability to attract families and youth to attend and "have fun" at CivicLex community-engagement events is another measure of their impact. "I want a barometer for us to be, how many bouncy castles are we renting in a year? If we're renting more than two, that's good, we're on track."

"WE'RE GETTING PEOPLE INTO THE TIMELINE FLOW OF HOW CIVIC LIFE WORKS."

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF?

"When I grew up here, Lexington felt like a good old boys' club and system," said Young. "A friend told me the presence of CivicLex has shifted that dynamic."

One outcome of this shift is that the city council is open to involving more residents in civic governance. In March 2026, CivicLex hosted Lexington's first-ever Civic Assembly to engage residents in recommending changes to the city charter for the first time since 1998. Thirty people were randomly selected through a civic lottery to mirror the city's demographics along nine dimensions, including age, race, housing status and annual household income.

"In November 2026, our city could potentially vote for permanent reform in how our city governs itself. I'm really excited and terrified about what could happen," said Young. (On Nov. 4, 2026, voters approved three amendments to Lexington's charter.) "Ultimately, it's all an experiment. I'm proud that we are even having the conversation."



"LEXINGTON IS A WONDERFUL PLACE AND IT DESERVES A CIVIC LIFE THAT LIVES UP TO WHAT THE CITY COULD BE."

Lexington's first-ever Civic Assembly engaged a representative group of 36 residents to recommend changes to the city charter. Photo by CivicLex



KANSAS CITY DEFENDER

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

In 2020, Ryan Sorrell joined local organizing efforts after George Floyd's murder and noticed traditional local media weren't interested in covering their issues. "Every time we called them, we would have to beg them to cover what we were doing," said Sorrell. "We were always at the mercy of non-Black people to control the narrative."

He then noticed a critical gap in Kansas City's media. "In journalism, there's a lot of talk about news deserts, but there can be an additional layer … a Black news desert. And the third layer is a Black digital news desert." Sorrell attributes this gap, in part, to a lack of local news aimed at young people — as well as the struggle of legacy Black outlets to transition to digital and social media.

"The fact that no information written by Black people was reaching young Black audiences and communities, that was one motivation for wanting to start the Defender."

THE Kansas City DEFENDER©

Location: Kansas City, Missouri

Established: 2021

Engagement and Offerings:

- Journalism arm includes a website and social-media presence
- Community arm includes the Mutual Aid Committee (offering clothing donations, a free grocery program, etc.); the Political Education Committee (featuring the B-REAL Academy freedom school), and the Arts & Culture Committee (featuring Black creative workshops, 3v3 basketball tournaments, etc.)

Communities served: Black Missourians and Black Gen-Z residents of Kansas City, Missouri

Lineage/Background: The radical Black press

Led by: Founder and Executive Editor Ryan A. Sorrell

WHAT COMMUNITIES DOES THE KC DEFENDER SERVE?

The KC Defender explicitly centers and serves Black youth in Kansas City in the tradition of the radical Black press. Its broader audience includes all Black Missourians.

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES?

The KC Defender began engaging its communities by conducting street-style interviews with local residents and building relationships with local talent. “We are a news outlet that all the top rappers in the city follow,” said Sorrell. “It was very important to us to establish our brand and build trust with everyday Black people and especially younger Black people.”



Kansas City Poet Laureate Melissa Ferrer Civil leads the inaugural Black Radical Education for Abolition & Liberation (B-REAL Academy) in February 2025.
Photo by The Kansas City Defender

The KC Defender began as a journalism-only outlet but became “half newsroom, half community organization” one year after its founding because the community needed space to grieve a tragic murder-kidnapping that the outlet investigated.

On the community side, the Defender co-organizes mutual aid, arts-and-culture events and political-education activities with member committees — and these engagement efforts form a reciprocal loop with the newsroom. “We had a 3v3 basketball tournament for Juneteenth,” said Sorrell. “Young Black guys who hadn’t even heard of the Defender … came to the tournament, and then they started following us on Instagram, and then they stayed engaged with our accountability journalism."

“ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PROFESSIONAL NATIONAL JOURNALISM PEOPLE, OR ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY?”

HOW DO YOU DEFINE IMPACT?

On the metrics side, the KC Defender tracks impact through its "Big 10": audience growth, number of stories published per week, editorial narrative power, political education, mutual-aid participation, community members served, arts-and-cultural engagement, membership health, its revenue-mix dashboard, and revenue growth/diversification. The Defender also has an #impact-updates Slack channel to track anecdotes.

Beyond that, the organization's impact has much more to do with filling listening gaps than with hitting numbers. **The KC Defender earned its communities' trust early on: In its first three months, it reported on a racist incident at a local high school.** That story went national. Afterward, high schoolers across Missouri contacted the Defender on Instagram to report racist incidents at their schools. "High-school students said these things are happening all the time but they didn't have anybody to talk to; they tried to bring it to the administration, but nobody would listen to them," said Sorrell. "They felt like they could tell us."

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING IN THIS WORK?

"I'm very inspired by the legacy of the radical Black press," said Sorrell. "I'm inspired by the Baltimore Beat, by Scalawag — also just seeing the impact that we have in the community. Talking with Black elders, talking with high-school students is very nourishing. It brings a lot of hope."

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF?

In September 2022, one year into the KC Defender's existence, locals raised an alarm to the outlet. "People were messaging us through Instagram, Facebook, saying that there were a lot of Black women who were going missing off of [Prospect Street] in Kansas City … which is historically known as a Black area," said Sorrell. Black community members suspected these disappearances were linked and recalled a tragedy in the 1990s where a serial killer targeted Black sex workers on the same street. "And then now, in 2022 … a lot of people were thinking it was a serial killer."

Sorrell interviewed several sources and published a TikTok of a local bishop raising the possibility of another serial killer in the area. The video went viral. Local police stated these were "completely unfounded" rumors and local legacy news outlets repeated law enforcement's messages without investigating the community's reports. National news outlets called the KC Defender a fake news blog.

A few weeks later, a Black woman escaped a house in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, 28 miles away from Kansas City. The Excelsior Citizen saw the KC Defender's earlier coverage of missing Black women and believed this woman's escape was linked to the earlier disappearances. It turned out they were. T.J., the woman who escaped, said she was taken from Prospect Street the month before, assaulted and held captive in a basement. She said her friends "did not make it out."

Sorrell reflected on the aftermath of one of the biggest stories the KC Defender has worked on. "The media in our city called it a so-called reckoning because of the fact that they tried to completely discredit us as an upstart Black media organization," said Sorrell. "They were having all these conversations saying that they need to be more community rooted and community driven — like how we are — because we had those sources in the community."

That was a critical inflection point for Sorrell's leadership and vision. "Whose opinion and who are we actually accountable to?" he asked. "To professional national-journalism people — or to the people in our community?"



LISTENING POST COLLECTIVE

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

Jesse Hardman spent a few years working internationally on community media and communications before turning his attention to his home country in 2013. “Communities all over the U.S. — despite what a lot of people would like to believe — did not have access to basic information,” said Hardman. “Do they have daily access to information that directly impacts their actions? Do they have access to resources and know how to engage with topics like education, public health, the workforce?”

For many communities the answer was, and still is, no. **He decided to apply community-information mapping strategies he’d learned while working internationally to the United States, beginning with New Orleans.**

Listening Post Collective
Powered by Internews

Location: National focus

Established: 2013

Engagement and Offerings:
- Community-information landscape model
- Online course
- Grants and coaching
- Civic Information Index

Communities served: Open to all U.S.-based media work, with a focus on communities facing a deficit of cultural- or language-appropriate local news and civic information; immigrant communities; Appalachian areas; Indigenous communities; and communities in the Southern United States

Lineage/Background: International media development

Led by: Carolyn Powers, director of U.S. programs at Internews (founder Jesse Hardman led the Listening Post Collective until 2026)

“DO PEOPLE HAVE THE INFORMATION THEY NEED TO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?”

WHAT COMMUNITIES DOES THE LISTENING POST COLLECTIVE SERVE?

The Listening Post Collective works with and offers seed grants to civic news and information providers that serve communities that existing media systems have underserved or overlooked. In 2022, it relaunched the Listening Post Collective Playbook as a free, self-paced online course that anyone can access to map their community's information needs. After individuals complete the course, they're eligible to apply for a seed grant from LPC to launch or strengthen their local news or information work.

As of 2026, **LPC is prioritizing funding projects in communities that face hurdles in accessing culturally or linguistically appropriate local news and civic information, including immigrant communities, Appalachian communities, Indigenous communities and communities within the Southern United States.**

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES?

The Listening Post Collective partners with local journalists, newsrooms and organizations to design projects to fill information gaps. LPC has helped numerous local-news and civic-media outlets launch across the country, including The Chile Wrapper in New Mexico, Conecta Arizona in Phoenix and Nowruz Media in California.

Hardman emphasized that each local-news outlet or civic-information project they work with starts with the same process, even though the final engagement strategies and news products are specific to each community. "If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's listening," he said. "If you're listening and really connecting with [each] community first, the solutions to information access and civic information will look different."

Take Maritza L. Felix, who partnered with the Listening Post Collective to launch Conecta Arizona during the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. "Felix responded to misinformation on WhatsApp as COVID was starting, knowing that there was a larger audience out there … that needed information to be bilingual," Hardman said. Felix was already a trusted

member of that Spanish-speaking community and knew the best ways to reach people to share accurate public-health information. “She knew how to package it in a thoughtful way,” said Hardman, “like this cafecito (a virtual coffee meeting) she did every afternoon.”

Contrast that with how New York City’s Documented — another LPC partner — listens to and engages with different immigrant communities. “They’re connecting with the Caribbean community on NextDoor, using Weibo to connect with Chinese communities in Mandarin,” said Hardman. “They understand everything from age ranges in those communities to language needs to cellphone access” — and tailor their engagement strategies to serve each demographic.

In California, Faisal Karim, an Afghan journalist in exile, mapped the Afghan diaspora using LPC strategies and launched Nowruz Media in 2024. “He's been using YouTube to explain the immigration shifts that have happened since January 2025,” said Hardman. “He’s informing people of their rights. And thankfully, he spent the last two years building up an audience and is providing really crucial civic information to people in his community. He’s worked his way through the Playbook to build that.”

“IF YOU UNDERSTAND A MORE HOLISTIC VERSION OF A COMMUNITY, I THINK YOU’LL HAVE A BETTER SENSE OF HOW JOURNALISM CAN HAVE AN IMPACT.”



A listening session organized by Ethiopique, an Amharic-language digital-news outlet serving the D.C. metro area's Ethiopian and Eritrean communities. Photo by Henok Mengistu

HOW DO YOU DEFINE IMPACT?

Hardman noted that traditional ways of measuring impact across the journalism field are limiting. "We've never quite seen a way to measure impact beyond, 'somebody wrote an investigative story and somebody resigned,'" he said. "That's great. But what's a more sustained example of better access to information people need? I think that's the missing piece."

Enter the Civic Information Index. Created in 2024 in partnership with the Information Futures Lab at Brown University, the Index creates a snapshot of a community's civic health based on 27 public datasets. "I would really love to use the Index to measure, over time, [whether] people's civic outcomes improve," said Hardman. "If that became part of the effort, you can go back to communities and say, this changed; this issue improved for a lot of folks in this community."

"The Index is meant to add to the listening exercise," said Hardman. "We look at the civic-health scores and that helps us determine where the most need is.

"Journalism doesn't operate in isolation. Education, public health, literacy — if you understand a more holistic version of a community, I think you'll have a better sense of how journalism can have an impact."

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF?

"More than 900 people have logged into the Playbook since we turned it into a step-by-step digital course," said Hardman. "Some of those folks are revisiting the Playbook and applying for grants to build something based on what they learned.

"We believe that everyone benefits from using these strategies of listening and building something that reflects their community back to them."

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING IN THIS WORK?

"My goal is that more and more communities are ready and have information networks that will be there and that they can rely on, and that journalism and civic information flow through," said Hardman. "The thing that keeps me going is having localized data about civic indicators around the country. My hope is that as more localized journalism and civic projects are invested in, you begin to see some of those data points shift."



PHILADELPHIA HALL MONITOR

The Philadelphia Hall Monitor

Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Established: 2016

Engagement and Offerings:

- Weekly community-radio and public-access TV show
- Facebook and YouTube stream and social-media content
- Weekly newsletter and online news website
- Live weekly broadcasts from the Philadelphia City Council meetings
- Fact-checking and verification services

Communities served: All English-speaking Philadelphians, especially the 23 percent of people experiencing poverty, who are likely most impacted by what happens at City Hall

Lineage/Background: Civic journalism and accountability reporting

Led by: Co-operative owners and reporters Denise Clay-Murray, Vanessa Maria Graber, Lance Haver and Lawrence McGlynn

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

City worker Dennis Link founded The Philadelphia Hall Monitor in 2016 as part of community-radio station WPPM's inaugural news-radio program because he wanted "more transparency within city government."

Philadelphia City Hall reporter Denise Clay-Murray, former English teacher and journalist Lawrence McGlynn, and consumer advocate Lance Haver joined the media outlet in 2021 when Link wanted to transition the program to other collaborators. In 2022, the Hall Monitor became a worker-owned co-operative. Free Press Senior Director of Journalism and Media Education Vanessa Maria Graber has been part of the Hall Monitor since the beginning and, in 2023, officially joined as a co-op owner and reporter to cover social movements and elections. (Qing Saville wrote the profile for this section.)

Philadelphia's high rate of poverty drives the work of the Hall Monitor staff. "We're the most unequal big city in America," said McGlynn. "How do we get information to the people who need it the most?"

This animating question shaped the Hall Monitor's coverage to focus on how local-government decisions impact the 23 percent of Philadelphians living in poverty — a lens that doesn't tend to shape other local-news outlets' coverage.

"We try to connect what's going on with City Hall with what's going on in your neighborhood," said Clay-Murray. "People really need to know what their elected officials are doing in their name, particularly in Philadelphia. We also try to connect people with resources to get what they need."

WHAT COMMUNITIES DOES THE PHILADELPHIA HALL MONITOR SERVE?

The Philadelphia Hall Monitor serves all English-speaking working-class Philadelphians with local civic reporting residents can use. **The outlet centers the 23 percent of people in the city experiencing poverty** who are likely the most impacted by what happens at City Hall.

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES?

The Hall Monitor's comprehensive coverage of the Philadelphia City Council and city agencies means that residents trust that if they ask the outlet to question local elected officials, it will follow through. "Credibility is all you have in this business," said Clay-Murray. "I'm proud of the fact that for some people, we are the source they go to when they want City Council information. I think we're really good at being approachable."

The Hall Monitor reporters have built strong sourcing relationships with legislative staff, elected officials, government workers and community leaders to follow local-policy changes early on. "Sometimes we're the ones practicing civic journalism in the purest sense," said Clay-Murray. "We talk to people that not everybody's trying to talk to, like the National Workers Collective, which just got a law passed in City Hall to better protect domestic workers."

The Hall Monitor uses multiple avenues to reach its community, including broadcasting on YouTube and radio, posting updates on social media and sending a newsletter that comes out three times a week.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE IMPACT?

The Hall Monitor thinks about impact in terms of actions its audience has taken as a result of its coverage. The outlet conducted its first survey in 2025 and asked respondents about possible actions taken, including learning about a City Council policy they didn't previously know about, contacting a City Council member about an issue, and applying for an assistance program or relief subsidy they didn't previously know existed.

More than 100 people responded to the survey and over 90 percent of respondents took at least one action in the survey checklist. "It makes me feel like we are doing our job," said Clay-Murray. "The whole purpose of a newsroom is to give people information they need to make informed choices about their lives and get the resources they need from the government they elected. If what we do makes people's lives better, then it's worth all the work."

> "WE TRY TO CONNECT WHAT'S GOING ON WITH CITY HALL WITH WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD." —DENISE CLAY-MURRAY

The Hall Monitor is fulfilling its goal of providing practical information that residents can apply to their daily lives. "If you fall behind on your water bill, you might not know that there's a program that can help you get caught up so they won't shut your water off," said McGlynn. "How can people save a few bucks on their water bill? We really focus on the things that don't get coverage."



Denise Clay-Murray and Lawrence McGlynn record a weekly broadcast of the Philadelphia Hall Monitor's program. Photo by Vanessa Maria Graber

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF?

A Northeast Philadelphia community group, which the city tasked to represent a neighborhood's perspectives on proposed developments, faced multiple lawsuits in 2023 from an out-of-town developer. The developer sued not only the civic group but every individual on its board. As the Hall Monitor reported, "it certainly appears that [the developer] is attempting to threaten the neighbors with high legal bills and the threat of losing their homes, to stop the group from fighting for what the neighborhood wants."

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press notes that these lawsuits — also called SLAPP, for "Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation" — are wielded as "an all-too-common tool for intimidating and silencing criticism through expensive, baseless legal proceedings."

Registered community organizations in Philadelphia include community-development corporations and neighborhood associations. They play an important role in planning and zoning decisions. "This registered community organization (RCO) was going to be destroyed, probably, by a SLAPP lawsuit," said McGlynn. "We did a story on it [and this group] showed it at the City Council, and the City Council passed a bill to help our RCOs. We're not to take all the credit for it, but the group told us if it wasn't for you, this might not have happened. You took the time to talk to us. So those are the things I'm most proud about. I feel good about that."

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING IN THIS WORK?



"We live here," said McGlynn. "I don't like seeing people where I live have to struggle so much. The fact that somebody who lives a mile away from me in the same city has a much more challenging life than I do — that doesn't make any sense to me, you know?"



WORT-FM

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS WORK?

“One of the strong needs that we hope to [meet] is the need for community,” said Nate Carlin, WORT’s news and public affairs director. “There’s a lot of people that are feeling adrift and tossed about by media. There’s also an ongoing hollowing of outlets that cover school-board meetings and local-government committee meetings. We are hoping to hold the line and maintain this granular local coverage, so you can follow an issue over its whole lifespan here.”

WHAT COMMUNITIES DOES WORT-FM SERVE?

WORT’s programming is available to all Madison residents and others within a 35–50 mile radius of the station. WORT also has about 300 volunteer on-air hosts, engineers and reporters who make its local programming possible. Media-production training is available to residents who apply to volunteer or who are accepted to host a radio show.

WORT EIGHTY NINE.NINE FM COMMUNITY RADIO • MADISON, WI

Location: Madison, Wisconsin

Established: 1975

Engagement and Offerings:

- Radio programs
- Media-production trainings
- Volunteer-led programming
- Community-access hour

Communities served: All Madison residents; 300 volunteers; language-specific communities served via a bilingual Hmong show and a Spanish-language show

Lineage/Background: Community-radio movement and community-media centers

Led by: News and Public Affairs Director Nate Carlin

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES?

Building community is the core purpose of WORT's work. The organization accomplishes this by providing media training and access to broadcast and digital platforms. "Part of our mission statement is about diversity of voices and trying to find people that are not on other radio stations," said Carlin. WORT's programming reflects this mission: It broadcasts a bilingual Hmong show, a Spanish-language show and a local-news talk show that's been on the air for more than 50 years.

The station also offers robust coverage of local labor issues, music and literature. Volunteers make WORT's news and talk-show programming possible and often hold leadership positions on the board and station committees. "We're inviting the people that want to give us their time to choose the stories and the places they want to go and investigate."

HOW DO YOU DEFINE IMPACT?



WORT looks at digital-engagement numbers, including the number of plays and page visits, while also acknowledging how limited these metrics can be. "Impact is not the same as reach, right?" said Carlin. "A story that had 15 reads could have been very impactful for those 15 people." It's easier to gauge the impact of the volunteer base, such as how many volunteers have produced how many hours of programming across multiple topic areas. "Sometimes the impact is, we're the only people doing it. This is a service that only we can provide or only we are providing."

One unique service WORT offers? **"I do think we are the best locally in terms of local-election coverage," said Carlin.** "If you want to know about a candidate for the county board, we're almost the only big [outlet] in town that has interviewed everyone."

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF?

"Our coverage of labor issues is pretty remarkable. Labor has been a huge issue for years now in Wisconsin," said Carlin. "I love that we are broadcasting in the Hmong language. Our community show is booked out six months right now; people are very excited to get on it. We're proud of a lot of stuff here."

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING IN THIS WORK?

"When I think of the future of journalism in Madison, I like to think of WORT as a place where there can be lots of different careers for people within different stages of their career," said Carlin. "It can have this robust on-ramp for local journalists and local volunteers. The future of journalism is more of a community of different ideas that are all sort of welcome, as opposed to being locked in on one particular approach."

"WE ARE HOPING TO HOLD THE LINE AND MAINTAIN THIS GRANULAR LOCAL COVERAGE, SO YOU CAN FOLLOW AN ISSUE OVER ITS WHOLE LIFESPAN HERE."



WORT-FM hosts and volunteers at the station's fall 2026 pledge drive. Photo by WORT-FM

III. LEARNINGS

All of our interviewees serve their communities in ways that transcend the production of journalism.

CivicLex, for example, provides educational workshops and engagement events in Lexington. The Kansas City Defender engages in mutual-aid efforts such as hosting a free secondhand-clothing redistribution effort. The Philadelphia Hall Monitor teaches civic workshops and assists community organizations in finding information in their city. WORT builds community through radio-station member events and volunteer opportunities. **Though journalism is an important function for all of these outlets, the other activities they engage in demonstrate a deeper connection to their communities.**

We also observed that each organization fills civic-information deficits in their community that no other provider fills, such as creating content for younger Black community members or providing in-depth coverage of city council meetings and elections. Even in bigger cities with numerous media outlets, there are still opportunities for hyperlocal civic-media providers to fill information gaps.

The groups we profiled invest more time in earning trust through community listening and relationship building. They tend to make engagement decisions based on cultural and historic relevance paired with an understanding of community needs and gathering spaces. This results in programming and content that responds to those community needs.

We also noticed that trusted civic-media providers often exist outside of traditional journalism structures and can have difficulty accessing resources and support networks. Some do not even consider themselves “newsrooms” but rather community organizations that provide news as one of their services. Funders and journalism-support organizations should widen their scope of grantees and target populations to include community-information stewards like the ones we profile here.

A CHILLING CLIMATE FOR FREE SPEECH

Two of the groups we profiled, the Philadelphia Hall Monitor and WORT, broadcast on the FM airwaves. We learned that these civic-media broadcasters face new challenges gaining access to sources and complying with shifting Federal Communications Commission rules at a time when the agency — and the administration more broadly — is attacking free speech.

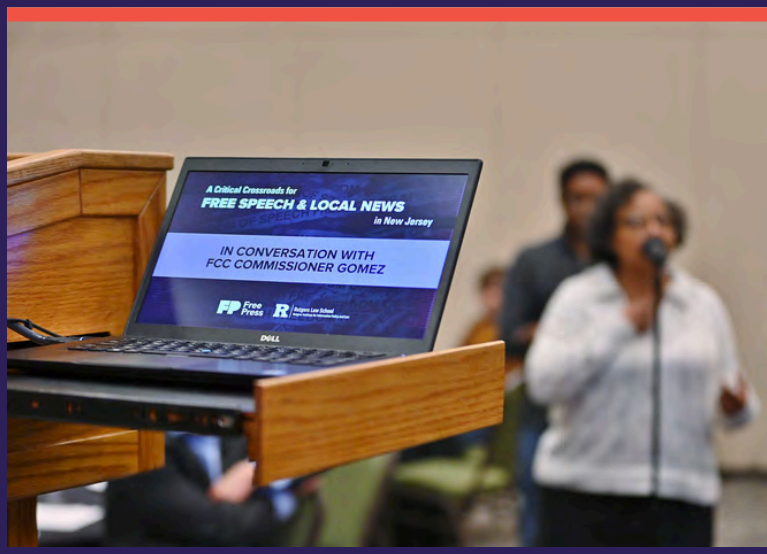
Several of the organizations we profiled described difficulties accessing sources and navigating the chaos in the regulatory landscape. "There's been a little bit more hostility to our reporters in the field," one civic-news provider said. "People are less willing to talk to the media and that's been across different ideological spectrums."

Another interviewee expressed dismay over the trend of elected officials refusing to talk with the media at public meetings: "We've been told, by comms staff from the mayor's office and other city government offices, we don't call on you because we're afraid of what you're going to ask us. I couldn't believe that."

On the regulatory side, broadcasters have had to contend with a rapidly changing legal landscape. "We feel like we're navigating a minefield," one interviewee said. "We're not sure what the rules are, and we're not sure what it would look like if we violated them. We have to know what compliance even looks like. Consistency and clarity of regulation is something we could really strive for."

"I don't think that folks have taken true notice of the chilling effect that the Trump administration is having on everything to do with the media, including funding," said another interviewee. "Every day, we're reminded that doing our jobs is not always the safest thing."

Community-radio broadcasters, especially those on the Pacifica network, have expressed concern over investigations and scrutiny of political content that might result in censorship. More training and discussion on this topic would be valuable to community-radio stations that often lack legal and regulatory support.



The Philadelphia Hall Monitor's Denise Clay-Murray asks a question at Free Press' "A Critical Crossroads for Free Speech and Local News" event in New Jersey.
Photo by Jesus Rincon

IV.
MEASURING IMPACT

Civic-media practitioners play a vital role in giving people the tools to participate in civil society.

However, it's difficult to understand the full impact of these providers' work because many don't track metrics related to improving a community's civic health — if they have the capacity to meaningfully track impact at all.

Providers have an opportunity to measure impact beyond audience reach to understand how people are using civic information to take part in democratic processes. Practitioners could develop surveys, focus groups and tracking tools that assess how people participate in civic activities and examine indicators for civic health.

In traditional journalism spaces, the conversation about civic engagement is confined to elections, voter registration and the census. However, a broader conversation is necessary. **Our field needs shared ways to document how news and information can improve neighborhood well-being, deepen trust in government institutions and better hold those in power accountable.** Funders should consider the various ways in which these organizations are contributing to the civic health of their communities instead of focusing solely on how many followers and subscribers they have. Civic information plays an important role in building infrastructure like information networks. Long-term, year-round civic participation is a valuable metric for a community's civic health.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR LOCAL-NEWS AND CIVIC-INFORMATION PROVIDERS

Who are you specifically serving? Who are you accountable to? (e.g., Black youth in Kansas City; the 23 percent of Philadelphians who live on $26,000 per year or less)

Engage first — and engage consistently. Listen to community members as much as you can with an eye toward building long-term relationships. People are curious about you. They want to meet you and would love to know whom to ask civic-related questions. As we've said at Free Press through our previous News Voices program, good journalism is simply good community organizing with a different end goal.

Name the specific value you bring to your local-news ecosystem. Prioritize where you can have the most meaningful impact with the time, resources and networks you have. To support your sustainability:

- Build three-year budgets.
- Reach out to local, regional and state donors that might resonate with your mission. Avoid chasing national donors.
- Build relationships in your local-media communities (or national ones, depending on your focus).
- Create evergreen explainer content for your communities.
- Before you launch any major project, consider where you can collaborate with others.

Think beyond just doing journalism. Use the knowledge that you have in-house to hold workshops and trainings on localized civic topics. Don't just report on the aftermath of a decision: Instead, offer people opportunities to engage with local civics before leaders make decisions.

Make time to document impact. Choose metrics that are meaningful to your community's unique information needs.

FOR FUNDERS

Name which communities you are accountable to. Which communities' outcomes are you committed to? Which civic-information providers — including and beyond news outlets — have relationships with and serve those communities?

Look beyond funding "typical journalists" and "traditional newsrooms." Funders should invest in groups that are strengthening civil society and providing civic information, especially in places that are otherwise media-deficient. Many providers will not look like traditional newsrooms. Focus on providers that are trusted messengers — providers that fill information gaps that no one else is addressing, encourage civic participation, and create multiple opportunities for civic education and relationship building.

These organizations are an essential part of the media ecosystem, especially during times of crisis, emergencies and natural disasters. Funders can maintain these providers' integrity by sharing industry standards for journalistic ethics, practices and equity.

Trust the people who are serving their communities with tailored solutions. Don't make every outlet you fund try to scale or franchise their model. Avoid enforcing a "one-size-fits-all" approach, including around delivery methods, platforms and engagement activities. Organizations that provide news and information are often trying to solve a problem that is unique to their community. Traditional local-news models are often not the most effective way for providers to bring about the change they wish to see.

Be mindful when hearing judgments that a civic-media outlet is "too activist/advocate." Does their audience happen to be non-white and/or lower-income? For example, many BIPOC-centered media outlets are operating within the context of a long history of media harm against their communities. Also, traditionally ethnic media, the Black press and community media operate with a different set of norms and ethics than corporate media.

Investing in civic-media organizations will help them become more sustainable and better inform their communities.
Civic-information providers help improve their communities' health, but these outlets are not resourced in proportion to the importance of their work.

Consider applying these grantmaking and funding strategies:

1. Create a collaborative local or regional model for grants.
2. Give three-year general operating funds and coaching to see what new civic-information projects can accomplish. Fund longer-term leadership and sustainability development.
3. For local, regional and state funders: Is there a way you can fund local-journalism work that offers civic information? There are very few local-journalism funders, meaning local outlets have to compete with larger newsrooms for national dollars.
4. Make more ecosystem grants in the South, in Appalachia, for multilingual access and for BIPOC-centered outlets.
5. Fund legal aid for civic-media outlets.
6. Fund safety training for journalists and civic-media practitioners.
7. Fund projects enabling civic-news providers to engage with people in their communities.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Legislators who want to help build infrastructure for local news and civic media should consider adopting the Media Power Collaborative's Policy Agenda.
Free Press' Media Power Collaborative provides a comprehensive local-news policy agenda that lawmakers can implement to help sustain local news. These policies define concrete ways public servants can take action to support civic-media outlets and journalism organizations that are meeting important civic-information needs and strengthening civil society.

Public servants should cultivate relationships with allied civic-media practitioners that are working to foster more civic participation in their communities.
Legislators can collaborate with civic media to share information about programs and initiatives that will benefit their communities and help stakeholders navigate complicated government processes. Public servants can engage with local chapters of professional journalism organizations like the Asian American Journalists Association, the Indigenous Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists and the Society of Professional Journalists.

Policymakers should engage with civic-information providers by hosting listening sessions, attending local-news events and engaging one on one with community members who live in media-deficient communities.
Policymakers should include civic-media practitioners who are not from traditional journalism organizations as stakeholders in local-news policy discussions. Connect with groups serving BIPOC communities, rural communities, people who speak non-English languages and other underrepresented communities. Solicit input from these organizations on how to help sustain them.

Assess the local-news gaps in your district and determine how they impact your office's ability to inform communities. Advocate for policy solutions that use public resources to support civic-information providers.
Conduct surveys and listening sessions with constituents about their information needs and analyze the data from incoming phone calls, emails and social-media messages to determine what the top inquiries are. Refer to community information-needs assessments and research conducted by local newsrooms and universities and compare the data.

While “the media” is a polarized concept, learning what is actually happening around you is important to everyone. There are plenty of stories that simply aren’t being covered right now, ranging from community-board meetings to high-school sports. In rural communities without easy access to broadband, it’s harder to inform people about extreme weather events or to send emergency alerts. **Without a vibrant local-news ecosystem, constituents are too often left in the dark.**



A member of Lexington’s first-ever Civic Assembly deliberates on a question about adjusting council-member pay. Photo by CivicLex

VI. CONCLUSION

These case studies present a snapshot of the many innovative and inspiring civic-media luminaries across the United States doing the important work of informing and empowering their communities with news and information.

Many of these groups are doing this work with limited capacity and resources because they are driven by the love of their communities and the desire to create positive change. Despite the dismal climate for traditional for-profit journalism — which includes rising numbers of corporate-media layoffs, media mergers, attacks on the free press and the proliferation of AI content and disinformation — hyperlocal outlets like the ones profiled here show us there are bright spots in the growing movement for local news and civic information. Imagine what these organizations would be capable of producing if resources were abundant.

Journalism-policy models centered on public funding provide solutions for organizations working to meet the critical information needs of media-deficient communities. We are seeing legislative movement in California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. We are also seeing more collaboration and organizing than ever before on journalism policy from people who value community-driven news. As a result, scores of local working groups, statewide coalitions and opportunities for collective strategizing around fundraising and policy have emerged in recent years.

Free Press' Media Power Collaborative and News Futures, a community of practice for civic media, provide a great entry point for conversations about sustaining local news and discussing best practices in community-centered journalism. We predict we'll see more collaboration in the coming years as more practitioners transition from production to organizing around local news.

What would these organizations look like if they were fully funded? Imagine how engaged the public would be with robust local-news ecosystems and civic-media providers that meet all of their information needs with care.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Free Press is a U.S.-based nonpartisan organization that defends free expression and press freedom and seeks to build the media and tech needed to achieve a multiracial democracy. Free Press believes that positive social change, racial justice and meaningful engagement in public life require equitable access to technology, diverse and independent ownership of media platforms, and journalism that holds leaders accountable and tells people what's actually happening in their communities. Free Press is a leader in the nationwide fight for free speech. Learn more at freepress.net.

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