

# This is local news now: Rethinking who creates, shares, and sustains it

Commoner Co.

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**A revised framework for understanding and supporting news  
and information sources serving today's local communities**

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With support from *Press Forward*

## Preface

After publishing our January 2025 report, “[The critical role support organizations can play in maturing the local news field](#)”,<sup>1</sup> we have heard from enthusiasts and skeptics alike about the local news field’s ability to unite around shared outcomes. But one question both groups have is whether it’s clear to people that they’re a part of the local news field and why it matters.

That’s why creating a shared identity is at the heart of our report on support organizations, commissioned by Democracy Fund, and this report on information stewards, commissioned by Press Forward to better inform their grantmaking strategies.

We define an information steward as anyone who is intentionally contributing to meeting a community’s information needs by making and distributing news and information. This term broadens the definition of who’s considered part of local news and information ecosystems, so we can be more expansive and creative in how we serve community information needs.

Defining shared terms matters because a shared identity is essential to any field of practice. It can help fields create shared narratives to attract more support, build unity against external threats, work smarter and learn faster.

For this report, we drew on our years of experience working in newsrooms, with support organizations and with funders; reading industry publications, peer-reviewed studies, attending conferences and roundtables with our peers in this space; and being in conversation with industry leaders across all three groups. Our job has been to sift through many peoples’ thoughtful and bold ideas and contextualize them for anyone who wants to support community information needs and to see themselves as part of the field-building work necessary for civic renewal across the U.S.

This report aims to further clarify the value of a shared identity for the field, and make the case that we can — and must — assemble diverse and representative voices to establish shared outcomes and coordinated action plans in the form of a strategic plan for the field.

And information stewards — who possess irreplaceable on-the-ground knowledge of local information needs and gaps — should be at the heart of informing that strategy.



2024 Colorado Media Project Summit

Credit: Thomas Cooper

## Funder’s note

*As Press Forward’s coalition of national, place-based and issue-focused funders has grown to more than 100 philanthropic leaders nationwide, it is crucial that our understanding of local news continues to evolve. Today’s communities rely on a vast array of sources that bear witness, produce, distribute, and verify local news and information. Having common, field-tested language for describing these different types of sources — their unique strengths, roles, and interconnectivity — can help us both understand and support their highest potential. We are grateful to Commoner and the many local news leaders who contributed their thinking to this report, and we second their commitment to “invite a wider range of people to see themselves as part of the solution.”*

— Melissa Milios Davis, Press Forward

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<sup>1</sup> Commoner Company: [The critical role support organizations can play in maturing the local news field \(January 2025\)](#)

## Introduction

For the last century, TV, radio and newspapers were shorthand for “news.” There was limited space to publish news across these mediums, and it demanded specialized skill. That access and scarcity made journalism a profession, and journalists were gatekeepers of that profession.

Then in the early 1990s, the journalism profession experienced what Internet scholar Clay Shirky calls “mass amateurization” in which the Internet and other digital tools enabled anyone to create or disseminate information. This massive shift has spurred worthy discussion and debate by journalism field leaders and researchers on redefining who is a journalist, especially at the local level, and the function of local news in a democracy.

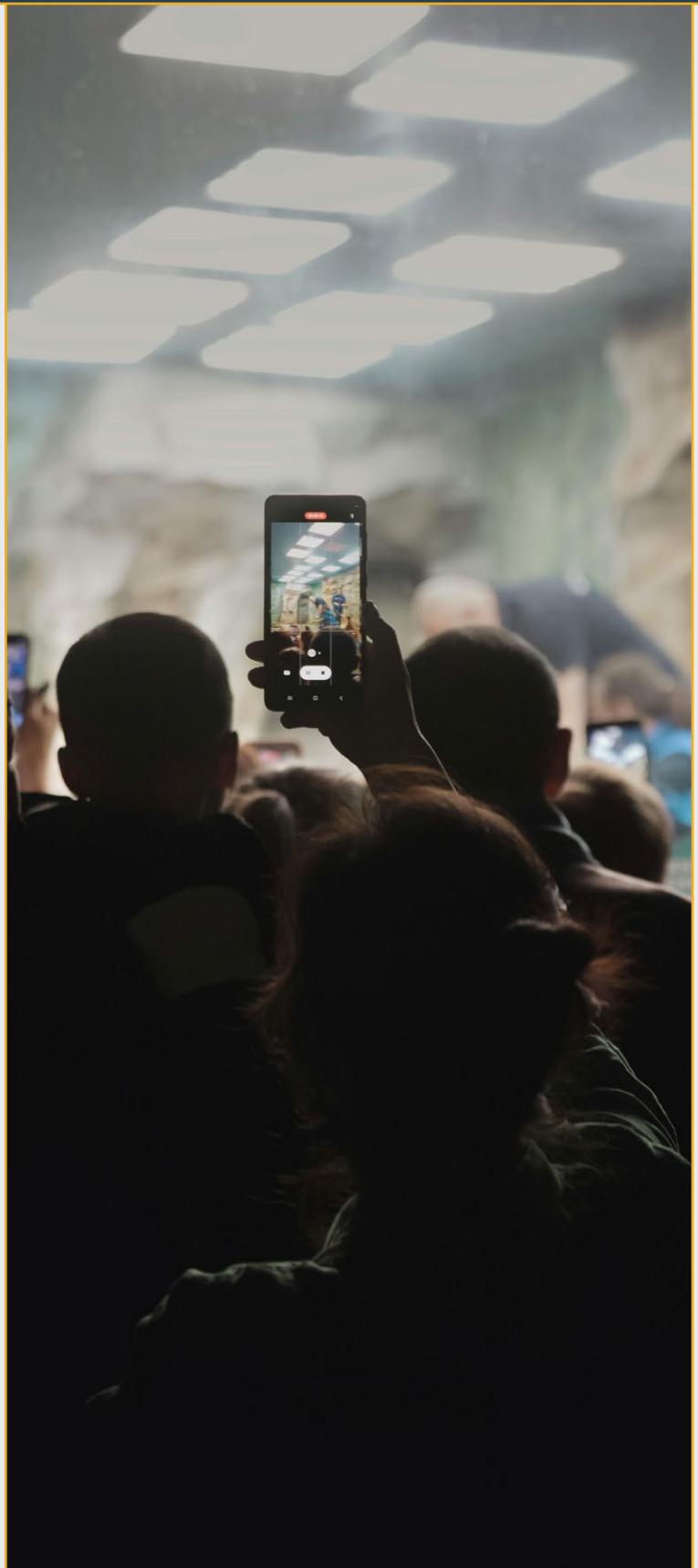
**The dominant way of understanding the different types of local<sup>2</sup> news and who can produce it is outdated and prevents the field from making the most effective investments to ensure communities’ information needs are being met.**

That’s because types of local news are typically organized by operating structure, not by their intended purpose of disseminating news and information. Also, when journalists talk about what qualifies as journalism, they typically overlook how other types of information influence people’s understanding of their communities.

Local news funders and practitioners are hungry for this redefinition so they can better understand how the field has evolved and their place in that evolution. For example, there are recent attempts to codify the news industry that build on—and break away from—an exclusive focus on news business models, like Liz Nelson of Project C’s [“News ecosystem 2025” chart](#), which includes characteristics, pros/cons and definitions for each news type. Also, Sarah Stonbely’s [research](#) for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism aims to broaden the definition of local news by mapping more sources of civic information. And Impact Architects’ Lindsay Green-Barber [offers a new model](#) to help categorize news organizations by incentive structures rather than tax statuses. The binary between influencers and creators [is also being challenged](#).

This report offers a redefined taxonomy for local news that centers on meeting community information needs, “the essential types of information that people require to live safe, informed, connected, and civically engaged lives within their community,” and shares recommendations on how to use these redefined groups to enhance field-level support.<sup>3</sup>

First, on the following page are some definitions of who may be considered a source of local news and information.



Stock

<sup>2</sup> We’re primarily writing this paper for a U.S.-based audience, where “local news” is a prioritized focus of journalism revitalization efforts. We also believe that much of what we share in this paper can be applied more broadly to other forms of journalism.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the Federal Communications Commission 2011 [report](#) on information needs of communities.

## Defining information stewards

There are three primary groups in the local news field: support organizations, funders, and information stewards.<sup>4</sup>

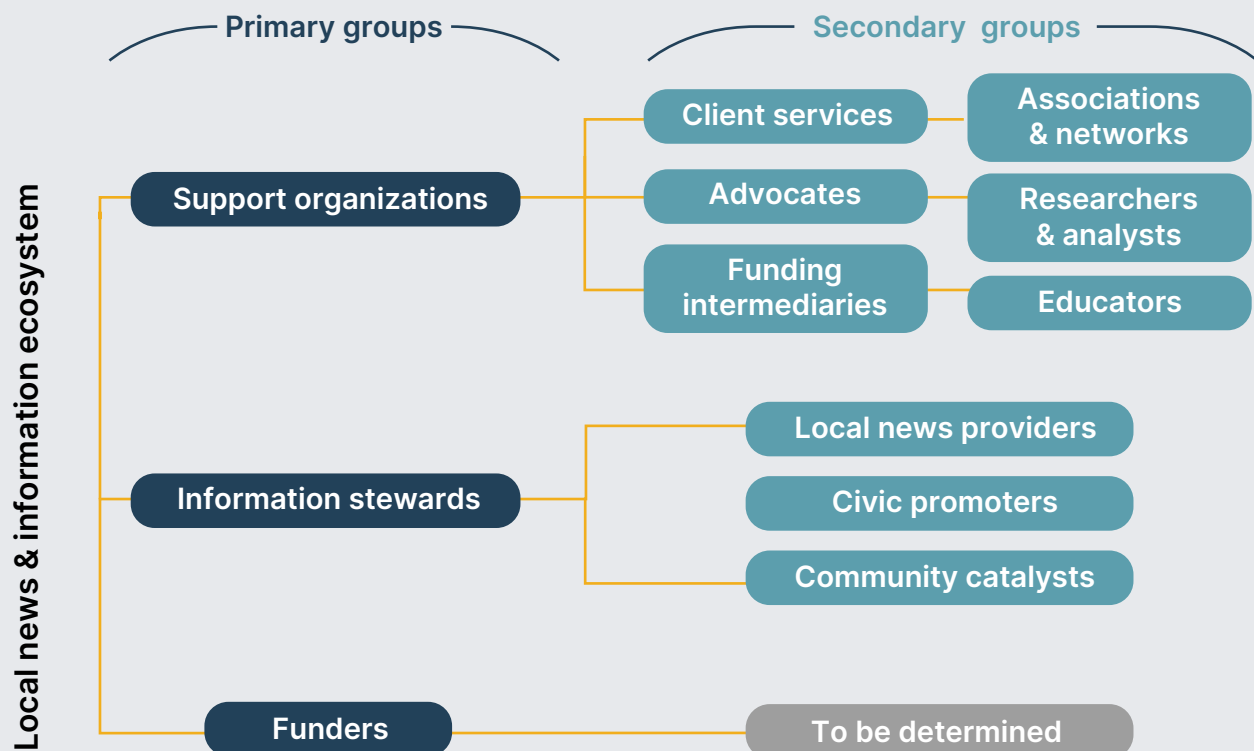
**Information stewardship** is the intentional effort to meet a community's information needs by making and distributing news and information. An **information steward** is someone who actively participates in this process, whether they're a journalist in a newsroom, the moderator of a neighborhood-based WhatsApp group, or a public information officer for a local government department.

There are three types of information stewards, based on an adaptation of the Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) developed by communications scholar Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach.<sup>5</sup> CIT argues that a community's ability to communicate effectively, especially about local issues, is shaped by a combination of communication resources and relationships within that community. The theory focuses on how communication networks influence civic engagement and social cohesion, two outcomes that many agree effective journalism should result in.

The following types of information stewards all play a role in meeting the information needs of any given community:

- ▶ **Local news providers** are the formal information intermediaries who gather, produce, verify, and disseminate news content to broader audiences. Within CIT's framework, they serve as crucial nodes that transform raw information into accessible news formats.
- ▶ **Civic promoters** are information sources and institutionalized community connectors who generate the raw material that feeds into the local communication infrastructure. CIT recognizes these actors as essential bridges between institutions and the public, providing both official information and grassroots perspectives. They make information available to other network participants.
- ▶ **Community catalysts** are residents who are motivated by civic life goals and actively work to circulate information that can help people feel more connected to where they live and/or drive community change. In CIT's conceptualization, community catalysts don't passively consume information but strategically share it to influence local institutions, services, or policies.

Here's a look at how information stewards fit into our field taxonomy, first published in our 2025 support organizations report.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>4</sup> In [our first report](#), we identified three primary groups in the local news field: support organizations, funders, and what we then called “newsmakers” to describe those who create and disseminate local news and information in their communities. After completing research for this report, we renamed “newsmakers” to “Information stewards,” to reflect a more nuanced understanding of news versus information and to broaden the lens of who contributes to this information ecosystem.

<sup>5</sup> University of Southern California: Annenberg School for Communication: [Metamorphosis project](#)

<sup>6</sup> Commoner Company: [The critical role support organizations can play in maturing the local news field](#) (January 2025)



Together, the three types of information stewards form an interconnected web that research suggests is essential for maintaining healthy democratic communication at the local level.<sup>7</sup>

In "Here Comes Everybody," a book about technology's impact on how people form groups and interact within them, the author Clay Shirky writes, "The change isn't a shift from one kind of news institution to another, but rather in the definition of news: from news as an institutional prerogative to news as part of a communications ecosystem, occupied by a mix of formal organizations, informal collectives and individuals."

Together, information stewards move and maintain information that encourages civic engagement and community problem-solving. A healthy future for local news will acknowledge and enable all three types of information stewardship, leveraging the assets of all three toward meeting community information needs. For this to happen, each group needs clear lanes for how they contribute. To develop those lanes, we've outlined some key similarities and differences in how each group makes and distributes news and information.

### Key differences between information stewards

In the latest edition of the foundational field text *The Elements of Journalism*, authors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write, "The first step for a field in crisis is to recall the fundamentals that informed the field in the first place." Based on their suggested fundamentals, and other newer frameworks and guidelines researchers have developed for non-journalism communicators, the chart below highlights three primary distinctions between these information stewards.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the distinction between these groups is not intended to create competition, but rather, increase coordination. "The new citizen sentinel will not replicate the work of the professional journalist, or even displace it, but rather inform, interact with and elevate it," write Kovach and Rosenstiel.<sup>9</sup>

It might seem that verification is the only attribute that should matter here. But as more information stewards can verify information, understanding their motivation for verifying information and what they stand to professionally lose or gain from making and sharing information creates a fuller picture of why consumers should pay attention to or trust the information being shared.

### Attributes of information stewardship

	Local news providers	Civic promoters	Community catalysts
Examples:	<i>Newsrooms, independent journalists</i>	<i>Government agencies, libraries, community-based organizations, local businesses, elected officials, educational institutions, faith-based organizations</i>	<i>Motivated residents, volunteers, independent advocates</i>
Verification standards:	Information made and shared <b>must</b> be verified.	Information made and shared <b>may</b> be verified.	Information made and shared <b>may</b> be verified.
Motivation:	Providing information that enables all residents to participate effectively in self-governance and maintain their freedoms as citizens. <sup>10</sup>	Sharing expertise or values to advance specific work or causes within the community on behalf of the institution they work for. <sup>11</sup>	Catalyzing change and building personal relationships and networks for mutual support, bonding, and collective security. <sup>12</sup>
Professional affiliation:	They are affiliated with an entity that identifies as a local news provider. Their work takes up the majority of their professional time and they are held to professional standards of journalism.	They are affiliated with an institution or business they're sharing information on behalf of. Their work takes up the majority of their professional time.	They are community residents who are most likely to share information on behalf of their own interests, rather than an institution or business, and are acting within their democratic rights as a community resident. Their work may take up the majority of their professional time or it may be ad hoc based on their available time and interest.

<sup>7</sup> Impact Architects' [2024 Report: Local news & information ecosystems](#) and [Pew Research Center: America's news influencers](#)

<sup>8</sup> Purpose: [The power of trusted messengers: Beyond traditional influence](#); Stanford Social Innovation Review: [Finding the right messenger for your message](#); American Press Institute: [API's guide to influencer collaborations](#)

<sup>9,10,12</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel: *The elements of journalism* (4th edition)

<sup>11</sup> Stanford Social Innovation Review: [Finding the right messenger for your message](#)



Community members participate in an event organized by the Oakland Low-down, a program of the Journalism + Design Lab, and LETS Studio to discuss downtown Oakland's empty storefronts.

Credit: Cole Goins / Journalism + Design Lab

## Key similarities between Information Stewards

Journalists are no longer gatekeepers of their profession, which means that anyone can commit “acts of journalism,” a phrase coined by Josh Stearns, now managing director of programs at Democracy Fund, in an especially prescient 2013 paper.<sup>13</sup> A few examples he provides: A teenager recording police brutality in Oakland, California, and that footage being used in a court of law—and a local Facebook group in New Jersey run by an urban planner with no journalism background that became the critical source of information for his community.

Stearns writes, “Around the country people are committing acts of journalism that are serving their communities, influencing national debates and changing the face of journalism. As barriers to entry erode, experiments in citizen-driven storytelling are expanding.”

The New School’s Journalism + Design lab has taken the “acts of journalism” concept one step further by outlining “a set of community news roles that anyone can undertake on their own, or in partnership with newsrooms or other community-based organizations to keep their communities informed.” This framework was born out of J+D’s [partnership](#) with community colleges and local media “to increase the flow of reliable news and information” by creating pathways for more people to participate in news production and distribution.

As a result, they designed a community college course that trains students on these roles. This framework points out the similarities in how local news providers, civic promoters and community catalysts can contribute to a local news and information ecosystem.<sup>14</sup>

**1. Facilitating:** Facilitators cultivate community listening, conversation, and connection. They foster dialogue on local issues, surface community needs and priorities, and bring people together.

**2. Documenting:** Documenters record what’s happening in a community. They document public meetings, community events and experiences and help preserve community history, information and knowledge.

**3. Commenting:** Commenters share their personal expertise or experience. They share things they know firsthand—lived or learned—to enhance the pool of knowledge people have about what’s happening in their community, or as a means to advocate ideas for community betterment.

**4. Inquiring:** Inquirers ask questions and dig deeper. They seek out multiple perspectives and original sources of information to get more context and understanding on an issue and share what they learn. Sometimes they do this to challenge power and promote accountability

**5. Sensemaking:** Sensemakers help their community understand and contextualize issues and events. They might do this by telling stories or making art—anything that helps other people make sense of what’s happening in their community and why. They can also help translate information to make it more accessible and relevant.

**6. Amplifying:** Amplifiers curate, share and distribute news and information. They may also help elevate underrepresented community issues or needs. They do this through a variety of means, from word of mouth to print materials to sharing on social media.

**7. Navigating:** Navigators assist others in accessing the information and services they need. They help people navigate challenges by connecting them with resources and information to take action, find solutions and problem-solve.

**8. Enabling:** Enablers share their time and resources to support local news ecosystems. They indirectly inform their community by ensuring that other people are better able to produce and share reliable news and information. They may do this by subscribing or donating to a local news provider; sharing a physical space or resources like printers, art supplies or distribution tools; or training other people to act journalistically.

<sup>13</sup> Josh Stearns: [Acts of journalism: Defining press freedom in the digital age](#)

<sup>14</sup> Journalism + Design Lab: [Community news roles](#)

## Examples of information stewards in a community

To better understand who may be a local news provider versus a civic promoter or community catalyst, these are examples from Seattle, Washington. It is, of course, only one city, but provides an opportunity to consider how information stewards may show up in your community.

### Local news providers

Institutions that provide news and information as their primary service for a community

- ▶ Journalists and editors at established media outlets including [KUOW](#), [The Seattle Times](#), [KING5](#), [CascadePBS](#), [The Stranger](#)
- ▶ Journalists and editors at primarily digital-only media outlets including [The South Seattle Emerald](#), [GeekWire](#), [The Urbanist](#), [Converge Media](#), [Infatuation Seattle](#), [Axios Seattle](#), [Publicola](#)
- ▶ Freelance reporters contributing across established and primarily digital-only outlets

### Civic promoters

Institutions that provide news and information to support the primary services they provide a community

- ▶ Government departments like the state transportation department's [Instagram account](#), King County TV's [YouTube Livestream](#) and video [shorts](#)
- ▶ Information from elected officials like [Pramila Jayapal](#)
- ▶ Information from government-funded services like Seattle Public Library's [blog](#)
- ▶ Community-based institutions promoting civic engagement, like Seattle City Club's [blog](#) and events like [Civic Cocktail](#); Town Hall Seattle [events](#); and Seattle Foundation's [Civic Commons initiative](#)
- ▶ Community nonprofits advocating on specific causes like [Solid Ground](#) and [Mary's Place](#) and [Real Change](#)
- ▶ Volunteer-led organizations like Seattle Council's [PTSA](#)

### Community catalysts

Individuals that provide information as their primary service for a community

- ▶ Business owners who write about the city, like Sol's [Civic Minute](#)
- ▶ Residents who create content to encourage Seattleites to explore their city like [Ann in Seattle](#) or [Conner Cayson](#).
- ▶ Residents sharing commentary on local news they care about, like [The Needling](#) or [Rainy Day Recess](#).

## Case studies: How information stewards can work together to strengthen an ecosystem

In May 2025, The New York Times wrote about the town of Oakdale, California, where thousands of residents were active in a popular community-run Facebook group.<sup>15</sup> Then, based on information shared in that group, a militia showed up to defend the town against what they believed to be a real threat, but turned out to be false. That was when the group's founder, Oakdale resident Julie Logan, enlisted a couple of other residents to help with fact-checking and moderation. But then that led to frustrated group members who believed they were being censored, and started creating their own groups, further splintering an already fragmented information ecosystem.

How to stop the spread of dis- and misinformation is a challenge that grows more complex by the day, especially given artificial intelligence, the latest iteration of Internet democratization. But of all the solutions discussed, less attention has been paid to the opportunity of an ecosystem approach that leverages trustworthy, reliable information sharing that engages with other information stewards to raise their own information-sharing standards.

In the article, the editor of the local weekly that serves Oakdale is asked about the Facebook groups and

says, "We're not trying to compete with it... I still feel like some people go to us, whether it's our website or our newspaper, for a more trusted news."

Rather than thinking about trusted information in siloes (e.g. only professional journalists can create trusted information) how might the ecosystem enable all information stewards to responsibly perform these community news roles in ways that strengthen how reliable, trusted news and information flows throughout local communities? There is value that the Facebook group (community catalysts); the police department and local government leaders (civic promoters) and the local news provider (the weekly paper) can each play in creating a strong information ecosystem, together.

There is already evidence of information stewards doing exactly this. Here are some examples.

### Local news provider collaborates with community catalysts

- ▶ Local news provider Signal Ohio is part of a network of more than 20 local news providers that use City Bureau's [Documenters](#) program to train community members who attend public meetings, document what they see and hear and share it back with the local news provider who may not otherwise have the capacity to attend those meetings. Signal Ohio is now also experimenting with making those public meeting insights more accessible with [short-form videos](#) and [short briefs](#).

<sup>15</sup> The New York Times: [It was just a rumor on Facebook. Then a militia showed up](#)



- Local news provider Resolve Philly paid [Info hub captains](#) to help contribute to and distribute a print newsletter to help meet their community's information needs. Resolve Philly offered infrastructure and support to community members who are “already naturally well connected” to empower them to tell their stories and get folks connected to resources they need.

#### **Local news provider coordinates community catalysts**

Local news provider Epicenter-NYC created a form for anybody to ask Epicenter for help registering for a COVID vaccine.<sup>16</sup> They helped thousands of New Yorkers book appointments and credited their “sudden scale and efficiency” of doing this work to their volunteers, community catalysts who offered their time and skills to book appointments.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Local news provider coordinates community catalysts and civic promoters to collaborate**

CivicLex is a nonprofit organization strengthening civic health in Lexington, Kentucky. Their website is designed to be a resource hub, first and foremost, for residents to “understand and get involved in local issues.” Most notably, CivicLex has hosted workshops where local government employees and residents unite to learn and engage with topics like the city budget and affordable housing. Its work has been so successful, that the city hired CivicLex to design a feedback process from residents for its strategic plan.

#### **Community catalyst communicates to local news provider who collaborates with civic promoters**

A local Detroit, Alex Alsup, who works for a property data company, published a Substack post (independent from his work at the company) about how Wayne County made \$20

million from thousands of tax foreclosures on homes. While other local outlets picked up the story and shared details on how to file a claim, local news provider Outlier Media took it one step further.<sup>19</sup> Its staff teamed up with local nonprofits and used public records to reach and help nearly 500 people, who were collectively owed nearly \$5.9 million, file their claims.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Civic promoters collaborate with community catalysts**

There are dozens of examples of civic promoters collaborating with community catalysts to share reliable information that encourages residents to engage with where they live and improve civic life. So far as we can tell, no local news providers coordinated or collaborated on any of the efforts listed below. A question to consider: What could have been local news providers' roles in the examples below? Where could a local news provider have added value?

- The East Oakland Black Cultural Zone Community Development Corporation recruited 135 residents to join a [neighborhood messenger team](#) “to serve as trusted conduits” for COVID-19 health and safety information in East Oakland communities throughout the pandemic.” The CDC leveraged its networks and organizing skillset to identify and train community members to spread trusted information on how to stay safe and healthy during a national pandemic.
- Boston’s local government has an Office of Civic Organizing hosts a Civic Summit that convenes neighbors, civic and nonprofit leaders to “engage with city resources and connect with each other.”
- Nonprofit Warm Cookies of the Revolution created an arts-based tool, [This machine has a soul](#), to educate and engage people in the idea and value of participatory budgeting in local government.

*Cleveland Documenters gather at Signal Cleveland for a Documenters community of practice.*

*Credit: Jeff Haynes / Signal Cleveland*



<sup>16</sup> MIT Technology Review: [How a tiny media company is helping people get vaccinated](#)

<sup>17</sup> Epicenter NYC: [This is the real heart of the epicenter: Our vaccine volunteers](#)

<sup>18</sup> NextCity: [How a Lexington nonprofit is increasing participation in local government](#)

<sup>19</sup> BridgeDetroit: [How owners whose properties were auctioned can get foreclosure profits](#); WDET: [Created Equal: Detroiters are turning more foreclosed homes into profit than outside investors](#)

<sup>20</sup> Outlier: [These former Detroit homeowners stand to get \\$5.8M, a fraction of what they lost to foreclosure](#)



## Defining types of local news providers

Local news funders and practitioners tend to talk about types of local news based on their operating structure, which is tied to distinct public policies that have influenced the landscape of local news we see today.

The public policies enabling these different operating structures have often established dedicated or preferred funding sources and mediums. In the case of public media, the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 encouraged “the growth and development of public radio and television broadcasting,

including the use of such media for instructional, educational, and cultural purposes.” As such, the term “Public Media” has become the umbrella term for broadcast TV and radio stations that historically received funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Both the dedicated funding source and mediums were defined by the original policy.

An understanding of the local news field that is primarily framed in terms of operating structures means we often default to describing local news providers based on their primary funding source, favored mediums or tax status.

## How public policy has shaped local news provision

Type	Most common funding sources	Favored mediums	Enabling policy
Public media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▸ State and federal support<sup>21</sup></li><li>▸ Corporate underwriting</li><li>▸ Individual donations</li></ul>	Broadcast	Public Broadcasting Act
Public access (Public, educational and government access cable television channel)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▸ Cable franchise fees</li><li>▸ State and federal funding</li><li>▸ Individual donations</li></ul>	Broadcast	Cable Communications Policy Act
Commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▸ Advertising</li><li>▸ Subscriptions</li><li>▸ Corporate partnerships</li></ul>	Broadcast, Newspaper, Digital	Postal Service Act of 1792 Legal Notice Requirements Deliver for Democracy Act
Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▸ Foundation grants</li><li>▸ Sponsorships</li><li>▸ Individual donations</li></ul>	Online, In-person	Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code
Social media creators / influencers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▸ Sponsored content</li></ul>	Online	Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act

**To be clear, the above taxonomy is not the preferred taxonomy or the one we’d advocate for using in field building work.** However, what is useful about seeing local news types laid out this way is recognizing the importance that public policy has had in influencing the types of local news we see today. It is why public policy remains crucial to the evolution of the local news field. And the challenge with our policies today is that none of them actually address the most critical way of understanding local news provider types: how they are serving community information needs.

So if operating structures aren’t the most useful way to categorize local news providers, what is? Perhaps a taxonomy that speaks to who local news providers are serving and why they’re serving them.

In other words, we need a taxonomy rooted in serving community information needs. These are the six types of local news providers we most commonly see in today’s local news landscape.

<sup>21</sup> After the rescission of federal funding, the CPB [announced](#) it will cease operations as of September 30, 2025.

## Six types of U.S.-based Local News Providers

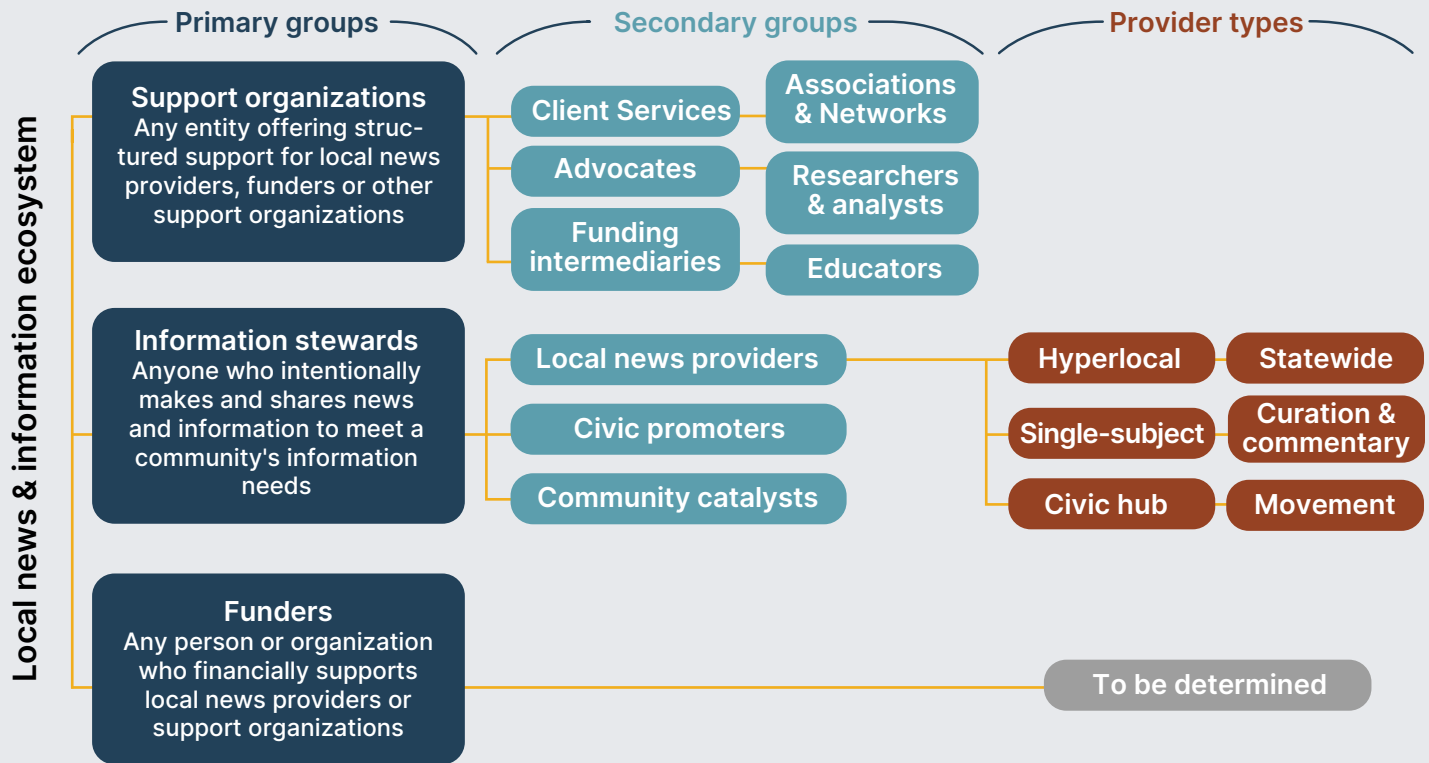
Local news provider type	Brief definition	Examples
Hyperlocal	Focuses on geographically-bound places, whether cities, towns or neighborhoods, to emphasize place-based reporting through journalists who are deeply embedded in their coverage areas. Can include networks of hyperlocal local news providers.	KQED Block Club Chicago Cicero Independiente West Seattle Blog
Statewide	Provides comprehensive coverage across state/region with emphasis on state government, legislative activities, policy decisions affecting residents	Texas Tribune VT Digger CalMatters WyoFile
Single-subject	Focuses exclusively on one topic area or sector (eg education, immigration, environment, health) or identity-based coverage (eg race/ethnicity, gender, parents, newcomers, veterans) and provides sustained, in-depth coverage that develops institutional knowledge and expertise	Chalkbeat Chicago Documented Technical.ly Black Iowa News
Curation and commentary	Curates, synthesizes, and analyzes news from multiple sources, adding context, interpretation, and explanatory frameworks to help audiences understand complex information ecosystems	CityCast Axios Local KTVU WTMJ
Civic hub	Offers a structure to equip residents with skills, information, and resources to participate in civic life and community decision-making	CivicLex Canopy Atlanta City Bureau CreaTV
Movement	Aligns their work with social justice movements and advocacy for marginalized communities, integrating journalistic practices with movement-building goals	MLK50 Black By God Riverwise Magazine Scalawag



*Residents participate in conversations, hosted by local news provider CivicLex, about the present and future in Lexington, KY, to shape the city's Comprehensive Plan.*

*Credit: Anthony Gilmore / CivicLex*

## Here's a look at how these local news providers fit into our field taxonomy



Many local news providers will feel they fall into multiple categories listed here. To identify field peers and clarify the primary value a local provider offers, it's useful to select one primary category while acknowledging that a local news provider can use any number of other types' techniques or approaches to reach their goal.

For example, a single-subject provider may use movement-building storytelling to meet its community's information needs. Or a state provider may use civic news practices to meet its community's information needs. We know that ultimately the "how" of the work — a local news provider's editorial strategy — cannot be categorized by a one-size-fits-all taxonomy, and should, instead, be informed by the specific needs of the community.

That said, naming these six types of local news offers novel ways of considering how to strengthen local information ecosystems by:

- **Identifying information gaps in an ecosystem:** As news continues to "unbundle" and fewer local news providers try to meet all of their community's information needs, funders can identify gaps and fill them based on these types.<sup>22</sup>
- **Exploring coordination and collaboration:** When a local news provider selects a primary type, it likely means they have a clear sense of mission and purpose, and know their role in an information ecosystem. That means they're better positioned to coordinate or collaborate

with other local news providers.<sup>23</sup> It may also become easier to create or carve out specific roles for civic promoters and/or community catalysts when appropriate.

- **Offering better support:** Well-defined local news types enable funders and support organizations to tailor their financial and other support resources for scaled support that is most relevant to each provider's intended outcomes.

The flow of local information has always moved between various actors and institutions beyond the sphere of professional journalism. If the field is able to successfully broaden who can play a role in the production, distribution and maintenance of high-quality information and create a why framework rooted in prosocial outcomes — ensuring communities information needs are at the center of any revenue strategy — field players can have more aligned conversations about how to best support information stewards in their communities.

## Recommendations

[Our first report](#) recommended creating a strategic plan with outcomes that the local news field could align on across at least these four categories: data and research, support for information stewards, policy development and cross-sector engagement. The following page features our recommendations on how to best support information stewards within each of these categories.

<sup>22</sup> The Rebooting: [The unbundling of publishing \(1/x\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> Commoner Co. wrote for [The Listening Post Collective](#) about what it looks like to coordinate and/or collaborate with partners.



**1. Data and Research: Focus news and information ecosystem research on who is meeting community information needs and how.**

Building on [research](#) from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, we recommend Press Forward chapter landscape scans include a community's civic promoters and community catalysts. Also, we recommend these scans incorporate local news provider categories and reimagine more useful categorization methods that reflect organizational structure and profit incentive, rather than simply tax status or revenue streams/models.

**2. Support for Information Stewards: Develop case studies and best practices on effective coordination and collaboration between information stewards.**

The field needs more research and best practices on how local news providers, civic promoters and community catalysts can effectively and ethically work together to serve community information needs. Local news support organizations can help facilitate learnings between information stewards. Examples to build on include American Press Institute's guide to [influencer collaborations](#), which helps local news providers understand how to work with civic promoters and community catalysts, and News Futures' [Civic Alliances Working Group](#), which is identifying "civic allies who work across libraries, digital spaces, grassroots organizing, and more."

**3. Policy Development: Center public policy debates on meeting community information needs and create the necessary resources to support that narrative.** Rather than centering policy solely based on supporting local news providers, we should broaden the aperture to adopt a community-first framework. This new framework should identify and prioritize local information gaps and consider the role of local news providers, civic promoters and community catalysts', in strengthening a local news and information ecosystem. Organizations that enable flexible, community-driven funding mechanisms, like the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium grantmaking board, can serve as a counter-balance to the dominance of well-resourced or extractive actors (e.g. hedge fund-owned conglomerates).

This strategy involves welcoming in more community members and leaders without journalism-specific expertise — like the community foundations seeding Press Forward chapters and California's [state library system](#) being asked to distribute grants to bolster local news coverage — which means we need more shared language and resources that help non-journalism experts quickly get up to speed on identifying the most critical gaps in local news and information ecosystems, and who is best equipped to fill those gaps. We hope reports like this one can help add to that list of resources, and we think more trainings, resources and tools are needed to help make our sometimes wonky, in-the-weeds conversations about journalism more accessible to other civic players, to build a stronger coalition of people who want to advocate for and support local news.

**4. Cross-sector engagement: Host more place-based convenings and conversations between information stewards.**

We recommend that funders, especially Press Forward local chapters, and other field builders create spaces for local news providers, civic promoters and community catalysts to discuss potential ways to coordinate or collaborate on meeting information needs of their communities. If this is already happening in a community, we recommend funders amplify that coordination, share best practices with others, and ask how they can better support the work. An example is Free Press' News Voices Project in New Jersey, which has assembled "thousands of people, including journalists, activists, students, faith leaders, union workers and artists" to support the future of local news.<sup>24</sup> That's similar to what Colorado Media Project Summit, hosted in 2023, did as well — as a cross-sector group of community and civic leaders co-developed a shared vision and priorities for a healthier news ecosystem.<sup>25</sup> Another example is a convening Commoner hosted in partnership with Civic News Company to talk with news organizations like Block Club Chicago and Chicago Sun Times/WBEZ and civic promoters like, Illinois Humanities, Chicago Public Library, the City of Chicago's Department of Innovation and Technology, The Illinois Answers Project. The goal of the conversation was to discuss the idea of creating a common information needs survey that would be sent out city-wide and the results would be shared with all news and information providers. By creating a common database of information needs data, these different information stewards could, in theory, coordinate their resources to ensure those information needs are being met in their community. Encouragingly, journalists are interested in more cross-sector learnings, as evidenced by the [Perspectives](#) project, launched in 2022 to connect journalists to "movements and people outside of news for inspiration, strategies, and frameworks for tackling some of our biggest challenges."

## Conclusion

The local news field is at a pivotal moment — one that demands we broaden our understanding of who informs our communities and how. We acknowledge the need for more local news providers, and want to decenter the narrative that this is the only way to meet community's information needs. By centering community information needs and recognizing the interconnected roles of local news providers, civic promoters, and community catalysts, we can begin to reimagine a more inclusive, resilient, and effective information ecosystem. This report offers a framework not to flatten distinctions, but to clarify contributions, encourage coordination, and invite a wider range of people to see themselves as part of the solution. If we want to build a stronger local news field, we must support and strengthen the diverse information stewards who are already doing the work — often with little recognition, but with deep impact. The future of local news is not just professional; it is participatory.

<sup>24</sup> Free Press: [News Voices New Jersey](#)

<sup>25</sup> Colorado Media Project: [2023 Colorado Media Project Summit](#)