Local News 2035 Scenarios Summary Chart

NAME	CORE ASSUMPTION	NEWS CHARACTERISTICS	OPPORTUNITIES	RISKS
COMMERCE DOMINATES *Continuing along a trajectory of commercial consolidation of news*	Consumerism continues to drive growth in tech, markets, and innovation, with small scale local innovations where supported by the nonprofit and volunteer sector.	Local and national news are commercialized, personalized, and platform-optimized. AI-generated content, influencer-journalists, and ad-driven models dominate. Local news becomes more consolidated, and the majority of print newspapers and public broadcasting stations close.	Innovation, scalability, global reach, profit potential, creative evolution of new forms of news and information based on emerging technologies.	Weakened public-interest reporting, given lack of commercial return on investment. Challenge to provide content that is locally responsive or reporting for historically underserved communities.
INFORMATION IS POWER *Collapse of the public square as we've known it*	Collapse might be triggered by a major systemic failure, like an economic crisis, political breakdown, war, widespread climate disasters, or social unrest. This exacerbates and is exacerbated by failure of the fourth estate.	News production fragments or becomes legally risky, institutions fail. Authoritarian control of the media means that misinformation, propaganda, and distrust dominate. Hyperlocal, minority-serving, or underground efforts may emerge but will be fragile.	Grassroots resilience (in rare cases). A unified funding field can offer resources *and* ideas for shared crisis response on the ground. Innovation and practice sharing persevere.	Public trust in news is near zero. Even reputable sources are viewed with skepticism or outright hostility.
TRUST, JUSTICE, AND A NEW AMERICAN WAY *A renewed civic society*	Sustainability, civic values, preservation, and restraint take priority over chasing audience or income at all costs. Public policy supports healthy civic discourse. Tech platforms are incentivized to be built for social good.	Local news and information is focused on public access, civic health and renewal. Local news is funded by the public through sustainable subscriber/donor models that are shielded from improper influence. Predatory market incentives play a limited role; local and public service news thrive.	Yields high trust, civically oriented journalism that engages with communities. Underserved community information needs are prioritized.	Slower innovation of media institutions and practices. Potential for ideological echo chambers. Resistance from legacy commercial systems.

Local News 2035 Detailed Scenarios

Commerce Dominates
CONTINUING ALONG A TRAJECTORY OF COMMERCIAL CONSOLIDATION OF NEWS

In this future, a commercial imperative for news production in the U.S. dominates. It's data-driven, platform-optimized, supported by subscriptions and driven by commercial advertising models.

Core Assumptions
- Consumerism continues to drive growth in tech, markets, and innovation, with small scale local innovations where supported by the nonprofit and volunteer sector.

News Characteristics
- Local and national news are commercialized, personalized, and platform-optimized. AI-generated content, influencer-journalists, and ad-driven models dominate.
- Local news becomes more consolidated, and the majority of print newspapers and public broadcasting stations close.
- National reporting in a small number of outlets and in high-value topic verticals in the U.S. stays profitable—driven by tech innovation, market demand, and personalization.
- Opinion and commentary dominate, while accountability reporting is harder to access
- Most independent, public, and nonprofit outlets continue to rely primarily on dwindling philanthropic dollars to survive

Opportunities
- Innovation, scalability, global reach, profit potential, creative evolution of new forms of news and information based on emerging technologies

Risks
- Weakened public-interest reporting, given lack of commercial return on investment
- Challenge to provide content that is locally responsive or reporting for historically underserved communities
- Increased opportunity for non-local stakeholders to influence the quantity and quality of local news and information
- Limited support for public service information
- Much news becomes a luxury good
- Becomes more challenging for local news providers to uphold traditional democratic roles, such as public accountability and truth-seeking.

More detail on news characteristics

- Expansion and Consolidation of Local, National, and Digital Media Powerhouses
  - Large media conglomerates and tech firms continue to dominate the information ecosystem, with increased national ownership of local newspapers, stations, and regional digital news outlets.
  - Traditional news institutions either adapt to platform models or are absorbed into tech ecosystems (e.g. news content embedded into the next generation of AI chatbots or immersive environments).
  - Independent news organizations continue to adapt experimentally in response to shifting consumer habits—or fall back to more traditional forms such as print.

- AI-Enhanced Content Creation
  - Both commercial and nonprofit newsrooms—local and national—increasingly rely on AI to generate articles, video content, and even investigative reports, using real-time data scraping, content summaries, and automated fact-checking.
  - Journalists become more like editors, curators, and analysts, generating and managing AI-generated drafts and visual content rather than reporting from scratch.
  - AI companies buy up or partner with national-to-local services to acquire zip-code level data about conversations and controversies, and hire low-paid local gig workers to gather news and information that's not available online.
  - AI companies rapidly produce newsletters that combine national and local news, which compete with or replace local newspapers, radio and television broadcasters, but with little of the quality control or ethics carried over from existing industries.
  - Many reporters, editors, photographers, and designers are laid off or need to retrain.
  - AI literacy becomes a concern, and new forms of fact-checking and verification need to be funded to address deepfakes.

- Hyper-Personalization and Fragmentation
  - Local and national audiences consistently consume news tailored to their beliefs, location, interests, demographics, and even emotional preferences, powered by behavioral algorithms.
  - New forms of information and entertainment emerge, and need to be assessed as to their role and quality as journalism.
  - People find news, information, spaces for civic engagement inside of other environments, such as gaming forums, woven into lifestyle content, or intertwined with online discussions of entertainment or sports.
  - This increases user engagement and ad revenue but further fragments the information landscape—as a result, people become more insular, less civic-minded, more isolated.

- Profit-Driven Editorial Decisions
  - Ever-more sped up content systems prioritize click-through rates, shareability, engagement metrics, and surveillance of consumers' purchasing and decision-making habits.
  - Information discovery through AI chatbots means that business models based on search or website visits are no longer viable.

- ○ Investigative and civic reporting survives only if it attracts sponsorships, philanthropic funding, or can be branded.

- Influencer-Journalist Hybrid Models
    - ○ The line between journalist and influencer blurs. Former reporters continue to build personal brands and monetize their work through platforms that combine not just audio, video, and print content, but interactive AI-generated personas and immersive experiences.
    - ○ News credibility has become decentralized, based more on audience trust in individuals than institutions.
    - ○ Influencers organize to identify shared interests, rates, bargaining power, legal protections and forge their own standards of behavior and quality without referring back to traditional news standards for ethics and accuracy.

- Corporate and Government Partnerships
    - ○ Media organizations partner even more directly with corporations on branded content production or distribution.
    - ○ While local and state governments may step in with limited support as federal dollars dry up, these partnerships walk a tightrope between resource access and editorial independence.

- Two-Tiered Access to Quality News
    - ○ Those still seeking high-quality, vetted news and information must now pay a premium for it.
    - ○ Subscription-based podcasts and streaming services are still consumed by those with means, but there is little or no free public news content.
    - ○ Civic news aggregators and translators may arise to fill the gap, but they will need to be nimble to reach audiences whose consumption habits shift in response to volatile technological change.
    - ○ It becomes more difficult to build regular demand for fact-based, vetted local information in the absence of trusted durable institutions, such as newspapers and local broadcast stations.
    - ○ Online-only news options may be prohibitively expensive for those who have to pay for broadband or mobile minutes.
    - ○ Literacy rates may also decline, in concert with parallel collapse in education, making audio, video and immersive content ever-more important as a source of civic information and dialogue.

Information is Power
COLLAPSE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE AS WE'VE KNOWN IT

This future represents the erosion or breakdown of traditional news ecosystems. Institutional, economic and civic foundations of journalism give way to an information landscape that is fractured, unreliable, and often dangerously manipulated.

Core Assumptions
- Collapse might be triggered by a major systemic failure, like an economic crisis, political breakdown, war, widespread climate disasters, or social unrest. This exacerbates and is exacerbated by failure of the fourth estate.
- Chaos ensues, loss of credibility is the norm, the safety of journalists is always in question. Truth becomes difficult to discern. Loss of a generation or more of reporting talent, dissolution of shared professional standards.

News Characteristics
- News production fragments or becomes legally risky, institutions fail. Authoritarian control of the media means that misinformation, propaganda, and distrust dominate.
- Hyperlocal, minority-serving, or underground efforts may emerge but will be fragile.
- News outlets fail economically, but also because it is impossible to perform given outside pressures and a failure of organizations to adapt to the new environment. In this context, the media landscape is a battlefield for influence, survival, and narrative control indistinguishable from propaganda or rumor.
- The news profession becomes fragmented, often dangerous, and increasingly irrelevant to large segments of the population. Access to reliable information is seen as a privilege or a weapon, not a public right.

Opportunities
- Grassroots resilience (in rare cases)
- A unified funding field can offer resources *and* ideas for shared crisis response on the ground
- Innovation and practice sharing persevere

Risks
- Public trust in news is near zero. Even reputable sources are viewed with skepticism or outright hostility.

MORE DETAIL ON NEWS CHARACTERISTICS

- Institutional Collapse
  - Legacy local and national media outlets shut down or become irrelevant, unable to compete with disinformation, competition for audience attention, government pressure and lawsuits, or economic pressures.
  - Public media becomes truly disconnected. NPR and PBS shut down, due to lack of station revenue and public support.
  - FCC regulations' shift allow for significant local consolidation under the same owners; public stations fail and are replaced with commercial or religious broadcasters or sometimes cannibalized for spectrum.
  - Decentralized and non-institutional forms of information acquisition (influencers, chatbots, niche messaging services, etc.) continue to rise and undermine both advertising and subscription-driven business models.

- Hyperlocal and DIY News
  - In the absence of stable institutions, communities build ad hoc reporting networks, such as neighborhood low-powered radio, analog bulletin boards, or encrypted newsletters—emerging around local needs, emergency response.
  - Citizen journalists fill the void, but don't have any resources, verification processes, uneven ethics and no legal protections.
  - Universities are also under threat, and for those that can retain journalism programs, student news becomes a site of breaking investigation and commentary—but also regular censorship and controversy.
  - Particular communities—regional, identity-based, or organized around shared politics/issues supported as a form of mutual aid. They capture unreported stories of injustices and shared triumphs, building community cohesion, unpacking bias and misinformation with limited dissemination.

- Rise of Disinformation and Propaganda
  - Government officials influence what is allowed to be covered or broadcast and serve to muzzle large corporate entities.
  - Extremist actors flood the information ecosystem with deepfakes, AI-generated narratives, and manipulative content. Conspiracy theories, extremist and xenophobic views not only distort the views of those who subscribe to them, but dominate mainstream discourse.
  - Paid and partisan operatives are elevated to leadership positions in previously reliable outlets, as well as government.

- Journalists in Peril
  - News becomes a high-risk profession. Reporters are harassed, jailed. Legal protections for the press disappear.
  - Threats to journalists from hyper partisan antagonists drive key reporters and personalities out of the profession.
  - Journalists experience trauma, burnout, and health conditions associated with stress.
  - Investigative news goes underground or is exiled, produced by diasporic groups or anonymous collectives.

- Infrastructure Breakdown
  - Power outages, internet instability, and a collapsed postal system make information harder to access—especially in rural or climate-affected areas.

- Emergency alerts and services are no longer publicly funded, leaving communities with little to no warning.
- Many people no longer own TVs or radios that can receive analog broadcasts, becoming entirely reliant on Internet access.
- Print media is almost entirely gone, and digital access is increasingly unequal.
- People get news—often unreliable—through closed networks, the equivalent of WhatsApp channels or private Discords.

- Media as a Weapon
  - News is used as a tool of psychological warfare, manipulation, and control—by governments, militias, or corporations.
  - In some areas, alternative realities take hold, where entire populations subscribe to internally coherent but completely false belief systems.
  - All standards of civil discourse are abandoned, libel and slander are rampant, death threats and discriminatory speech are normalized.

Trust, Justice, and a New American Way
A RENEWED CIVIC SOCIETY

In this future, a large swath of news is reoriented as a public service within institutions that can financially sustain themselves rather than a profit-seeking enterprise. Communications technologies are regulated to ensure that they first do no harm, and whenever possible, support equity and human flourishing.

Core Assumptions
- Sustainability, civic values, preservation, and restraint take priority over chasing audience or income at all costs.
- Public policy supports healthy civic discourse. Tech platforms are incentivized to be built for social good.
- Economic, environmental, or political crises may have forced the U.S. to adopt stronger central planning, civic responsibility, and ethical frameworks.

News Characteristics
- Local news and information is focused on public access, civic health and renewal.
- Local news is funded by the public through sustainable subscriber/donor models that are shielded from improper influence.
- Predatory market incentives play a limited role; local and public service news thrive.
- Approaches that support civil dialogue are foregrounded.

Opportunities
- Yields high trust, civically oriented journalism that engages with communities.
- Underserved community information needs are prioritized.

Risks
- Slower innovation of media institutions and practices.
- Potential for ideological echo chambers.
- Resistance from legacy commercial systems.

MORE DETAIL ON NEWS CHARACTERISTICS

- News as Public Infrastructure
  - News is treated like libraries and public education—a key public and social good that must be subsidized for people's wellbeing.
  - Public service media (e.g. not just NPR, PBS but adjacent new production models focused on digital media) are dramatically expanded, with robust protections for editorial independence and shield it from improper influence
  - Low-cost or no-cost access to broadband is available for individuals based on income.
  - Federal and local governments fund journalism through independent public trusts to ensure access to accurate information for all citizens.
  - Subsidies are provided for access to high-speed technology for schools, hospitals, libraries, community centers, etc.
  - Libraries and local media hubs serve as both access points and training grounds for digital literacy.

- Policy and Business Model Innovation at the Local Level
  - Local news is revitalized through funding, subsidies mandated from tech or media companies, plus tax breaks, and these are focused on community needs and democratic participation.
  - Newsrooms tend to be owned by non-profits, cooperatives, or in some cases municipalities–not shareholders. Commercial revenue models are curtailed and information technology is functionally regulated.
  - Philanthropy and local government work together to support the launch and sustainability of smaller independent and/or nonprofit newsrooms across the country– sometimes multiple within one community

- Civic-Minded Editorial and Engagement Norms
  - News organizations are ethically bound, focused on truth-telling, engaged journalism practices, and civic education.
  - Reporting prioritizes public health, democratic processes, equity, community well-being, and local impacts of climate change.
  - Journalism outlets stop relying on commercially driven algorithms and editorial decisions to prevent sensationalism, misinformation, or manipulation.
  - Anonymous commenting and media production is de-emphasized in favor of accountability and civic health.
  - Information stewards include trained community members (not necessarily full-time professionals) who collect, curate, and braid stories from the community, especially from those who have been marginalized.

- Equity-Focused Resourcing of News and Information
  - Philanthropic, donor, and government funding for media is directed to first water the driest news deserts, ensuring there is a basic supply of reliable information and local online spaces for dialogue and debate across the country.
  - Escalating global climate disasters increase the demand for emergency response information, and the power of crisis-driven collaboration in enabling innovation in media and civic information.
  - The news needs of people whose stories have been excluded due to various biases or inequities are prioritized so that their experiences can be shared and injustices can be addressed.

- - Just-in-time micropayment technologies allow donors and readers to flow support to smaller outlets and producers who represent and collaborate with communities that lack resources.

- Journalists As Weavers of Meaning, Not Arbiters of Truth
  - Public schools frame journalism as a practice of civic presence and empathy,
  - Journalism is taught as a form of civic practice in schools or apprenticeships, with a focus on deep listening, emotional intelligence, and restorative storytelling rather than speed or abstract objectivity.
  - Investigative journalism still exists, but is rooted in a value of repair and not just exposure.
  - Journalists subscribe to strong ethical standards and norms around accuracy, privacy, and accountability in news.

- Audience as Participants, Not Consumers
  - Schools teach news, media and technology literacy as a core civic skill in K-12.
  - Community media centers are well-supported and staffed, offering all kinds of production and community engagement training.
  - Participatory journalism and information, open science, tech for good, and open source software movements all see common interests and methods in this moment, and freely share tools, methods, learnings, obstacles, etc.

- Decentralized, Distributed Trust Systems
  - Verification doesn't rely on centralized institutions, but on blockchain-based trust networks and peer validation.
  - Anyone can publish, and content is ranked, flagged, or amplified by transparent protocols, not opaque algorithms.
  - Information stewards at the local level work hand-in-hand with nonprofit vetting tools—i.e. factchecking organizations or topic-focused research centers utilizing machine-driven rankings and decisions to refine or referee their conclusions.

- AI as Collaborative Co-Journalist
  - News gathering and analysis are co-produced by advanced AI systems and human collaborators. AI handles data scraping, verification, translation, and pattern recognition, while humans provide ethics, context, and empathy.
  - Journalism becomes fluid, conversational, and omnipresent, integrated into daily life through smart interfaces.
  - Instantaneous AI-enabled translation creates new audiences for reporters, stories, and personalities from around the world.
  - A peer-to-peer AI literacy beat emerges, with journalists and civic influencers creating explanatory content on fast-breaking disruptions that is designed to be amplified and used by those most affected by massive societal shifts.
  - Transparent sourcing for AI content, and copyright law deters use of human-created content without appropriate compensation.

Learn more about Local News 2035 at pressforward.news.