



Can They Do Good and Still Do Well? Local TV Stations and Communities' Information Needs

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the decline of local newspapers in the United States has created significant voids in community news coverage, with consequences that extend well beyond the mere absence or scaling back of a local paper. The impact is profound, leading to reduced civic engagement, diminished government accountability, and less social cohesion.

Based on a comprehensive survey of local television stations, this study investigates whether local television news outlets can assume a more substantial role in filling the informational gap created by the decline of the newspaper. The findings suggest that they can. Yet, they face significant hurdles, including entrenched editorial practices and tight budgets, the latter of which is particularly challenging for stations in smaller and medium-sized markets—the locations most affected by the weakening of the newspaper.

Local television stations have traditionally focused extensively on breaking news, weather, and crime. It's a proven marketing strategy. However, this study's findings indicate it's not the sole path to attracting an audience. Focusing on local governance and community issues emerges as not only a plausible alternative but a strong one. Stations that direct their news content towards local governance and community issues are outperforming most stations.

There is a trend among local TV stations to diversify their news offerings beyond traditional forms. By incorporating more enterprise, community, and investigative journalism in their news mix, stations can enlarge their community contribution. The evidence also indicates they gain a competitive advantage by doing so.

As audiences increasingly migrate online for their news, expanding digital content is not just advantageous but essential for local stations. However, transitioning to robust digital platforms requires considerable resource allocations, presenting a major challenge for TV stations constrained by tighter budgets. The need for significant investment in this area is imperative. Stations need to pay forward, and do so now, to position themselves for the years ahead.

Persistent limitations in funding and staffing complicate the effort to expand news coverage. These constraints often compel news teams to stretch their resources thin, adversely impacting the quality and depth of the content they produce. Without marked increases in funding—most feasibly provided by ownership groups—stations risk falling short of their potential to build their audience and contribute to their community's information needs.

Overall, as the media landscape continues to shift, local TV stations are well-positioned to help fill the news void created by the diminishing presence of local newspapers. By embracing an editorial strategy that includes governance- and community-centered reporting and hastens digital transformation, these stations can strengthen their position as vital sources of quality local news.

I. Introduction

The Local News Crisis

Since the founding of the nation, local newspapers have been a vital source of community news. That era is rapidly ending. Since 2000, more than two hundred local daily newspapers and thousands of weekly publications have ceased operations, with further closures expected. The workforce at daily newspapers has decreased dramatically, falling from around 75,000 employees to a mere 30,000.¹

If the decline of newspapers were merely a matter of job loss, it would be akin to the closure of any other local business. Yet, the impact is deeper. Newspapers are not just another local business; they are crucial to the fabric of community life. Research indicates that the loss of the local newspaper endangers all aspects of civic health. Without a local paper, communities experience a decline in civic participation,² diminished social cohesion,³ reduced awareness of local issues,⁴ increased political polarization,⁵ lower voting rates in local elections, and weakened accountability of local officials.⁶

Can Local TV News Stations Be Asked to Do More?

The decline of local newspapers has created a void that no single news outlet can adequately fill. At their peak, newspapers offered extensive coverage of local issues. Today, no single outlet matches that level of reach or content, nor could it, given our fragmented media system. To meet the information needs of America's communities, news outlets will have to collectively contribute.

In a previous study, we explored the potential of local public radio stations as a more substantial source of community news. These stations possess public trust, brand recognition, infrastructure, network support, and a commitment to their communities, positioning them to make a larger contribution. However, they face a critical funding shortage, a challenge that plagues the entire public radio system but is particularly acute in areas where newspapers have closed or significantly reduced their reporting. Without substantial new funding, local public radio stations cannot significantly expand their community contribution.⁷

Local television stations are in a stronger position. They command the largest local audience and enjoy a favorable reputation, seen as a more trusted news source than newspapers, cable networks, or digital media.⁸ Even today, more than half of American adults report watching local TV newscasts somewhat regularly.⁹

Local stations face funding challenges, but, even so, the problem is less severe than for newspapers or public radio. Although their advertising revenue has declined, it has been partially offset by retransmission fees—payments from cable and satellite providers—which account for a substantial share of their revenue.¹⁰ Additionally, every two years, local TV stations benefit from increased spending on political advertising—for example, the 2024 cycle temporarily reversed the recent revenue downturn.¹¹

However, local TV has inherent limitations. The entire content of a half-hour newscast would fill only two pages of a newspaper. Moreover, TV stations typically serve broader markets than newspapers, making it difficult for them to address the information needs of each community within their coverage area. The United States has about two hundred television news markets compared to over a thousand daily newspaper markets.

Within these limits, can local TV stations do more to help communities meet their information needs? The answer depends partly on whether they have the resources to expand and deepen their local coverage. It also depends partly on their editorial policies. A common critique of the industry is its focus on profit, which leads it to play up sensational stories like crime while paying less attention to local governance issues.¹² This paper delves into these questions, acknowledging that profit considerations underpin news operations. The closure of newspapers starkly illustrates that as revenues decline, so does the capacity for reporting.

The Study's Method

The study's evidence comes from a comprehensive online survey of commercial TV stations. In selecting our sample, we excluded certain local commercial stations—specifically, those that operate at low power, lack a news staff, rebroadcast news produced by other stations, or are digital-only. As a result, this study's evidence does not address some of the leading issues of local TV news, including the impact of Sinclair Broadcast Group's closing of some of its local newsrooms¹³ and the FCC's 2017 repeal of the main studio rule, which had required stations to have a physical studio in their broadcast area.

We reached out to all other local stations except for those that share management or news staff. In those cases, we asked our respondents to answer in the context of their leading station.¹⁴ This selection process resulted in outreach to 504 stations, of which 325 responded, yielding a response rate of 65 percent. This rate is significantly higher than the 44 percent average for published research based on online surveys.¹⁵ (The survey questionnaire is in Appendix B.)

Among the respondents, 63 percent were news directors (or, less often, assistant news directors), 24 percent were station heads (such as the general manager or CEO), and 13 percent held other positions such as newscast director. The survey included representation from over thirty ownership groups, with the largest being Gray Media (24 percent of responding stations), Nexstar Media Group (19 percent), Sinclair Broadcast Group (9 percent), Scripps Media (8 percent), and Tegna (5 percent). No other group accounted for more than 5 percent of the respondents. In terms of network affiliation, 26 percent were with ABC, 32 percent with CBS, 11 percent with Fox, and 28 percent with NBC Universal. Additionally, 3 percent were associated with other networks or operated as independent stations.

II. LOCAL STATIONS' POSITION IN THE COMMUNITY

The Local News Environment

Media markets vary in their mix of TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, and digital media outlets. They also vary by quality. Some locations have several substantial news outlets while others have fewer and less vibrant ones.

To assess such differences, we asked respondents what they perceived as the state of news and public affairs coverage in their communities, excluding their station's reporting (see Figure 1).

Just 11 percent of respondents described their community as having a “rich news environment,” which the survey question described as an area with “high-quality news sources that invest in local reporting.” A much larger number, 61 percent, characterized their local news environment as “adequate,” described as one with “news outlets that regularly produce substantial local reporting.” The remaining respondents had a less favorable view of the situation. About a fourth (27 percent) termed their local news environment as “inadequate,” meaning one with “some quality local reporting” but where such news was “generally lacking in quantity and consistency.” Only a small fraction (1 percent) saw their area as a “news desert” – a location “largely devoid of good local reporting.”

Respondents' perceptions of their local news environment differed from what we found in our earlier study of local public radio stations. In that survey, as compared with their local TV counterparts, respondents were twice as likely to judge

Figure 1 Trend in Area's News Coverage

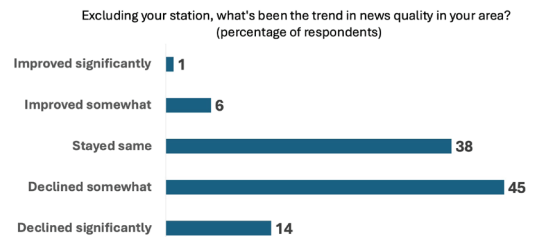
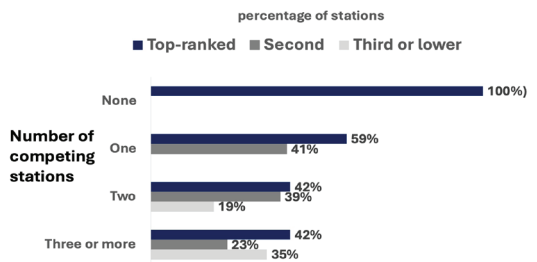


Figure 2 Stations' Market Position, by Number of Competing Stations



their local news environment as “inadequate” or a “news desert.” The difference owes to a tendency noted earlier. Whereas most local TV stations broadcast from communities large enough to support quality reporting, many public radio stations operate in towns and rural regions where audiences are smaller and reporting resources are fewer.

We also asked TV station respondents to evaluate the trend in the quality of news in their market area, again excluding their own station’s reporting. Only 8 percent observed improvement, while 31 percent felt the quality was unchanged. Sixty percent said the quality has declined, with a quarter of them categorizing the decline as very substantial. These assessments underscore the broader challenge of local news. Local journalism is weakening even in America’s larger media markets.

Market Competition and Position

Less than 1 percent of local daily newspapers compete against a daily paper located in the same community.¹⁶ Local public radio stations are in a similar position. Fewer than 10 percent compete directly with another public radio station and, when it occurs, one station often focuses on news and public affairs programming and the other on music.¹⁷

In contrast, most local TV stations compete directly in the same market with other TV stations. When we asked respondents about the traditional evening newscast, only 6 percent reported having no local TV competitor in that time slot, and 18 percent said they had but a single competitor. Most local TV stations contend with two competitors (33 percent) or three (28 percent). A smaller group, 14 percent, reported competition with more than three local TV stations.

Respondents then evaluated their station’s market position, with results presented in Figure 2, controlled for the number of competing stations. Most respondents considered their station to be highly competitive. Notably, in markets with only one competing station, three-fifths of respondents (59 percent) claimed their station to have the largest audience. In markets, with two competitors, two-fifths (42 percent) placed their states at the top, which was identical to the proportion with three or more competitors who claimed to be the top-ranked station. (A reason for the disproportionate number of top-ranked stations in our sample is that we asked respondents at stations sharing management or news staff to answer in the context of their leading station.)

We also asked respondents about “the trend in their station’s audience share for its main early evening local newscast” over the previous two years. Half of respondents (48 percent) said their station had gained audience share, although six of every seven of them said the gain had been “moderate” rather than “large.” That compares with 13 percent who said they had lost ground, having had either a “moderate” decrease (11 percent) or a “large” decrease (2 percent). Forty percent of respondents said their station’s audience share was unchanged.

Market Characteristics

In our survey, we also asked respondents to describe the economic, racial, and geographical characteristics of their station’s market area.

Most respondents (65 percent) described residents of their market area as being of average income whereas three times that number (26 percent versus 9 percent) said their market area was below average in income as said it was above average. In terms of race and ethnicity, most respondents (58 percent) said their area was mostly white with a sizeable minority population, while 30 percent said it was heavily white and only 12 percent reported it as mostly minority. More stations (34 percent) reported serving a market composed mostly of towns and rural areas than said they operate in a heavily urban market (11 percent).

These distributions differ from those we found in our study of local public radio stations. Compared to TV stations, these stations were more urban, affluent, and ethnically and racially diverse. The difference stems from the greater reach of television signals. Although usually originating in an urban location, the signal carries into smaller towns and rural areas. That is both a strength and a weakness of TV stations as a source of the information communities need to thrive. They serve a larger audience, yet also serve a larger number of communities, limiting the number they can adequately serve. As an assistant news director noted, “Our TV market is split about 55% to 45% in [one area] and [a second area]. About half our audience may not care about what’s going on in the other [location]. So we focus a lot on telling the best stories, regardless of geography.”¹⁸

III. LOCAL STATIONS' NEWS HOURS, STAFFING, AND CHALLENGES

Hours of News and Public Affairs Programming

When respondents were asked about the “hours of locally produced news and public affairs programming” their station aired on weekdays, the median was 6.5 hours, but the number varied widely. A fourth (25%) of respondents reported their station aired five or fewer hours of local content, whereas another fourth (27 percent) reported 10 or more hours.

Stations in areas with an “adequate” or “rich” news environment – ones where quality news was available – produced on average 7.8 hours of news each day, whereas those in areas with an “inadequate” news environment or one deemed to be a “news desert” the average was 6.2 hours. The weaker news environments are typically those where the newspaper has closed or sharply reduced its coverage. Although the areas of greatest need, they are also the areas where local TV news is a relatively smaller contributor.

In terms of hours of coverage, local TV stations are a more significant source of news than local public radio stations. In our previous study, we found that the average amount of local coverage for public radio stations each day was 2 hours with only a seventh (14 percent) of the stations reporting more than 5 hours.

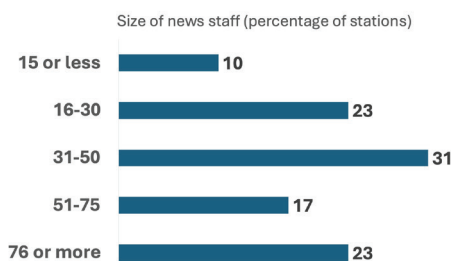
News Staff

The Bureau of Labor Statistics monitors employment changes across 532 industries. Over the past two decades, newspapers saw a massive 77 percent reduction in jobs, representing the largest drop of any industry.¹⁹ The trend in local television is markedly different. Employment in local TV newsrooms peaked in 2021 and has declined only fractionally since then.²⁰

The stations in our survey mirror the national trend. Asked about changes in news staff size over the past two years, 27 percent of the respondents indicated an increase in staff size, while only a slightly larger number, 30 percent, noted a decrease. A plurality, 43 percent, reported no significant change in staff size. However, there is wide variation in the size of stations' news staff. In determining news staff size, we asked respondents to include anchors, hosts, producers, editors, broadcast and digital reporters, videographers, and others involved in producing local news and public affairs content. In addition to full-time employees, we asked

them to include part-time employees, students, interns, and freelancers who regularly contribute. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of stations by staff size. On one end are stations with fifteen or fewer staff. They constitute 10 percent of the stations. On the other end, accounting for 23 percent of stations, are those with staff greater than seventy-five people, with more than half of them having a staff of 100 people or more. The station average was fifty-four people.

Figure 3 News Staff Size



Here again, local TV newsrooms contrast sharply with those of local public radio. Even with a similarly broad definition of what constitutes news staff, our previous study found that 60 percent of public radio stations have a news staff of 10 or fewer people, and nearly two-thirds of them have a team of 5 or fewer people. Only a small fraction, 10 percent, indicated that their news staff exceeded 40 individuals. The staff at more than half of local TV stations exceeds that level.

Although in an enviable position relative to public radio outlets, TV station stations worry about their ability to attract and retain talented staff. Local TV news has one of the lowest salary levels for college graduates of any profession,²¹ a problem of growing concern for local stations:

Salaries need to improve for all areas of our operation. Working in broadcast journalism is not sexy anymore. Most college graduates can't afford to pay their student loans and live a middle-class life based on our wages.

We need to boost salaries to retain young journalists so they can grow into their jobs. A lack of experience and good candidates is killing our industry.

Salaries for producers and reporters are embarrassing. I [tell them] that in the first 5 minutes of the job interview.

We have to increase wages so employees can afford to live and provide a good work/life balance if we are going to stop the mass exodus from newsrooms.

The problem is particularly acute in smaller-market stations that do not generate substantial ad revenue. Said a news director, “The pay is too low in small to medium-sized markets like ours – we are down to hiring warm bodies.” Another respondent coupled that complaint with a warning about her station’s future: “Local news is dying faster than people realize. Mid-market and smaller stations are unable to hire decent candidates due to critically low wages. We are frequently forced to hire reporters with no journalistic experience just to fill seats.”

Challenges, as Stations See Them

Recent developments like digital change have added to the perennial challenges that local news outlets confront. To explore this area, we asked respondents about the significance of some of the challenges their stations might face.

At the top of respondents’ list of challenges was serving “the community’s in-

formation needs.” Eighty-eight percent of respondents identified as “significant” or “very significant.” A news director explained, “How can we truly serve our audience to the best of our ability if we do not know exactly what they need? We have begun to survey our audience and ask for their feedback to help point us in the right direction for the information they truly need. We also need to ensure we are where they need us whenever they need us and that means fully committing to content on all platforms 24/7.” A second news director worried that they understood only part of their community. “We have thorough research that provides clear direction to what television news viewers want to see in our newscasts,” he said. “But we have very little research focused on people who have elected not to watch television news. I worry that we’re steering our content to the “choir” and not the congregation.”

Another concern to our respondents was the “shift of audience to digital,” which 80 percent identified as a “significant” or “very significant” challenge. That shift has been more pronounced among younger adults than older ones and, not surprisingly, “attracting young viewers” also ranked as a top concern, with 75 percent of respondents seeing it as a “significant” or “very significant” problem. A news director highlighted the digital challenge: “Local news outlets must be willing to meet the viewer where they are. Right now, that’s not on traditional television. Outlets must pivot to making their content available digitally, on social media and other platforms, and promote those platforms heavily.” A station manager saw the path to attracting young viewers as unclear and perhaps unreachable. “Broadcast news is not attracting younger viewers,” he said, “and there’s not a clear solution.”

Of less concern to stations were the “information needs of underserved local groups” and the “diversity of our news staff.” Each was mentioned by two-thirds of respondents as a “significant” or “very significant” challenge. Here, unlike the other concerns, the demographic composition of the media market was related to the responses. TV stations in racially and ethnically diverse markets were twice as likely as stations in heavily white areas to say staff diversity and the needs of underserved groups were “very significant” concerns.

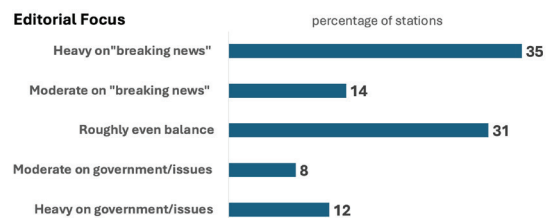
IV. TENDENCIES IN STATIONS' NEWS COVERAGE

Editorial Focus

Local TV news is said to give disproportionate attention to sensational stories about crimes, fires, and other calamities.²² Such coverage can result in the relative neglect of consequential community issues like local government and schools. To be sure, audience members are far from passive consumers of the news. Psychological tendencies like confirmation bias and motivated reasoning incline people to prefer news that reinforces their existing beliefs. However, the content itself also plays a crucial role. By shaping narratives, framing issues, and focusing on certain topics, news outlets influence perceptions of reality. This can sometimes enhance their understanding of the community but can also lead to misperceptions. For instance, viewers exposed to a constant stream of crime reports usually develop an exaggerated sense of the danger that crime poses to them and their community.²³

To assess local TV stations' reporting tendencies, we first asked respondents to assess their stations on a 5-point scale that ranged from a "strong emphasis on breaking news (such as crime and accidents)" to a "strong emphasis on local government and issues." The responses, as shown in Figure 4, indicate that stations tend to prioritize breaking news. Half of the stations highlight breaking news—35 percent placing heavy emphasis on it and 14 percent giving it moderate emphasis. Stations that highlight local governance and issues account for only a fifth of the stations, with most placing a strong emphasis on these subjects. Finally, a third of stations (31 percent) offer an even mix of breaking news and local governance and issue news.

Figure 4 Primary Focus of News Coverage



Topic Priorities

For a fuller understanding of coverage priorities, we asked respondents to indicate the attention their station gives to specific news topics like weather and local

schools. Respondents' options ranged from "not much" coverage to "a lot." The results, ranked in Table 1 from the most to least emphasized, indicate that weather is the highest priority for most stations – 53 percent of respondents said it receives "a lot" of attention on their newscasts while 42 percent said it gets a "quite a bit" of attention. Crime was second in priority with 31 percent saying it gets "a lot" of attention and 48 percent claiming "quite a bit."

With other topics, including local schools, the local economy and business, and local government and elections, fewer than 20 percent of respondents in each case said the topic receives "a lot" of attention on their newscasts. Sports, local entertainment, the arts, and traffic ranked even lower, with less than 10 percent of stations describing these topics as high priority. In general, when examined through the lens of the priority assigned to specific topics, the emphasis aligns with what we found when comparing the relative importance of breaking news versus coverage of local governance and issues.

The emphasis also aligns with a longer-term tendency in local TV news. The movement away from coverage of local government to breaking news is more than two decades old,²⁴ illustrated by the shift away from assigning a full-time reporter to cover city hall. When we asked respondents whether their station had a reporter assigned full-time to cover local government, only 32 percent said it did.

Table 1 News Topics – Amount of Coverage

Content Type	not much (1)	some (2)	quite a bit (3)	a lot (4)	average
weather	0%	5%	42%	53%	3.48
crime	2%	19%	48%	31%	3.09
schools	1%	27%	53%	19%	2.9
government/officials	0%	26%	58%	15%	2.88
politics & elections	1%	33%	51%	14%	2.79
business & economy	2%	35%	53%	10%	2.71
accidents, fires	9%	43%	33%	15%	2.53
lifestyle & human interest	10%	49%	31%	10%	2.42
sports	12%	51%	28%	8%	2.33
entertainment & arts	23%	54%	21%	3%	2.03
traffic	47%	32%	15%	5%	1.79

Outside Influences on News Content

Legal changes in ownership rules in recent decades have allowed for an unprecedented concentration of ownership of local TV stations by major media companies. The change has promoted operational efficiency but has raised the question of how deeply it has cut into local production, given that news content is also generated at the corporate level.

To address that question, we asked respondents to indicate the degree to which their stations relied on content from outside sources, such as their network, management group, or other providers. Most stations reported only limited reliance on such sources. Seventeen percent of respondents stated that "not much" of their content came from these sources, while 51 percent said their stations used only "some" outside content. However, the 28 percent of stations relying "quite a bit" on externally provided material and the 6 percent relying on it "a lot" were typically part of a large ownership group. By ownership, the percentage averaged 65 percent for Allen-owned stations, 48 percent for Sinclair-owned stations, and 41 percent for Gray-owned stations. In contrast, only 26 percent of the Network Owned-and-Operated stations (O&Os) and 19 percent of independently owned stations claimed to rely "quite a bit" or "a lot" on outside-produced content. Some

respondents argued their station benefitted from downplaying such content. Said a newscast editor, “We try very hard to be a local brand. We run very little network news stories or features from the network. Increasingly, the networks represent a form of bias to our viewers.” A station manager said, “We strive to separate our news product from that of national news outlets. We tell people that we are not associated with nor receive directives from any national news group.”

Our survey also sought to determine whether the partisan model of national outlets like Fox News and MSNBC has worked its way into local stations. Our respondents rejected that possibility when their station was at issue. An overwhelming majority – 93 percent of respondents – claimed their station adhered to the traditional model of impartial reporting rather than tilting to the left or right. They were less willing to say that of their competitors. Nineteen percent believed that a competing station in their market had a conservative bias, while 11 percent felt a competitor leaned liberal. However, they described competitors’ partisan slant as moderate rather than extreme. The low salience of partisanship in local TV news was also evident in responses to a question about the importance stations placed on the “intrusion of national politics on local politics/issues.” Only 9 percent saw it as a “very significant” issue in their station’s policies and planning, and two-thirds deemed it insignificant. (Our survey only included stations that air local news, thus excluding Sinclair-owned stations that have closed their local news operations.)²⁵

V. EXPANDING NEWS COVERAGE

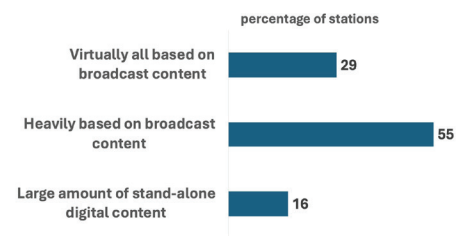
Digital Content

News consumption has shifted significantly in recent decades, with audiences increasingly relying on online sources. While local television has not been as severely impacted by the change as local newspapers, they have been losing viewers, especially among younger adults who prefer to get news on demand.²⁶ Said a news director, “[It’s doubtful] young people will age into TV news. We’ll have to find new ways to reach them.”

In our survey, half (50 percent) of respondents said their station places a “very high priority”²⁷ on developing digital content and platforms, with an additional 37 percent calling it a “high priority.” In their digital postings, stations prioritize local content. An overwhelming majority (84 percent) of respondents said their home page features local news stories. In this respect, local TV stations are better positioned than local public radio stations to meet their communities’ information needs. Our study of public radio stations found that less than 40 percent of them populate their home pages with local news. The majority feature national news or an even balance of local and national news. Public radio stations’ small news staffs are a severe limit on their ability to expand their local coverage, on the air or digitally. It is a less substantial constraint on local TV stations.

Nevertheless, digital is not an easy space for most local TV stations to navigate. They are organized to serve a viewing audience—appointment users who seek a particular type of programming at a designated time. Digital is the domain of on-demand users who seek a particular type of content or the latest update. As Figure 5 shows, only a sixth of respondents (16 percent) said their station is producing a substantial amount of stand-alone digital content, and more than a quarter (28 percent) said their digital offerings are stories previously aired on their broadcasts, a source of frustration for some respondents. Said a news director, “We need to stop waiting to post stories until the end of the day. We need to be able

Figure 5 Stations’ Digital Content



to post those stories as the day develops, especially when it comes to developing stories. We also need to create stand-alone content for digital platforms and stop putting so much emphasis on the linear product.”

The ability of TV stations to produce original digital content depends in significant part on their staff size. Newsrooms with sixty or more staff were three times as likely (37 percent to 13 percent) to produce this content as stations with thirty or fewer staff. While this tendency was expected, it runs counter to what would be of greatest benefit to communities. Bigger newsrooms are typically based in urban areas where, despite challenges, local newspapers still operate and typically have substantial digital offerings. In contrast, smaller stations often serve communities where local newspapers have faded or disappeared, leaving an information gap. Areas where a strong digital presence from local TV stations is most needed is where it’s in shortest supply.

Additional staffing would expand stations’ digital capacity, but most stations do not expect a substantial staff increase. Although two-thirds of respondents said a digital staff increase would be “important” or “very important” in terms of serving their community’s information needs, a mere 6 percent said it was “very likely” to occur with an additional 27 percent judging it “somewhat likely.”

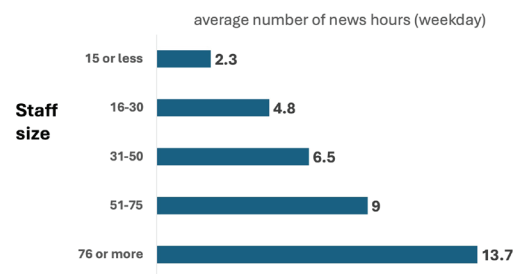
Increasing the Hours of News Coverage

In the early 2000s, the average local television station produced slightly under 4 hours of news each day. Today, it’s more than 6 hours – an increase of more than 50 percent.²⁸ There is no yardstick for how many hours a station should carry, but if it’s measured against the stations that carry 10 hours or more, two-thirds of local stations fall below that mark, some by a considerable amount – a fourth of them air 5 hours of news or less, and an eighth carry 3 hours or less.

Although respondents were not asked whether their station intended to expand its hours of coverage, we did ask them whether there had been a change in the previous two years. Half of respondents (48 percent) reported an increase in news coverage, with half of them saying their station had added more than an hour of programming. Only 3 percent of respondents claimed their station had cut back on its local news hours. Stations that increased their coverage were disproportionately those with larger news staffs. The correlation between staff size and increased coverage was .23. There was also a positive correlation (.31) between hours of coverage and increased coverage hours - the stations that expanded their hours were typically those that already aired a higher-than-average number of hours.

Staff size is a severe constraint on stations’ coverage hours, as indicated in Figure 6 which shows the relationship between staff size and weekday news hours. With each increment in staff size, the number of hours rises significantly. For the

Figure 6 News Staff Size & Hours of News Coverage



stations with the smallest staff—fifteen people or less—the average was 2.3 hours compared to 13.7 hours for stations with a staff of more than seventy-five.

Given the importance of staff size in the amount of local coverage that stations provide, do stations consider themselves understaffed? We sought an answer to that question in the context of whether an “increase in broadcast staff” would enable stations to improve their “ability to better serve audience’s information needs.” Two-thirds of respondents said a staff increase would be “important” or “very important” for that to occur. However, when these respondents were then asked about the likelihood that their station would be able to increase its broadcast staff, only 8 percent deemed it “very likely” while 33 percent judged it “somewhat likely.” Respondents from smaller-staff stations were marginally more likely to say an increase was likely.

Staff Size & Training as Constraints on Expanded Coverage

The staffing issue is not simply one of numbers. As technology has increasingly worked its way into news operations, it’s placed additional skill and workload demands on staff.²⁹ Additionally, the increase in news production without additional staff has made it difficult for many stations to devote time to staff training without compromising production. A widely expressed view among respondents was that their station’s reporting is declining in quality, partly from thinly stretched staff, partly from the departure of talented journalists, and partly from inadequately trained entry-level journalists:

My coworkers and I often find ourselves discussing how much the quality of local broadcast news has plummeted. The writing, editing, presenting - everything is subpar at best. Even large TV stations are producing content that would have been unacceptable at the smallest of stations not too long ago.

Simply put, we as an industry are not making the necessary investments in attracting, then retaining quality people in the industry.

Younger staffers lack news judgment and do not pay attention to news and often don’t know what is going on. When Hamas attacked Israel, we had staffers who failed to recognize the importance of the breaking news situation despite dozens of push alerts and wall-to-wall coverage on network monitors. It was embarrassing and frustrating.

We need to have staff who are better trained because right now that is my biggest obstacle in providing quality and quantity.

One of our big challenges lies with most of our reporters being fresh out of college -- where we used to be a second stop for a lot of reporters. That has essentially turned our station into college 2.0.

Today’s local television news stations are not those of yesterday, a time when local stations had one of the largest profit margins of any industry and were in a strong position to attract, hire, and keep talented news staff.³⁰ When respondents were asked about the importance of a significant budget increase “in improving your ability to better serve your audience’s information needs,” two-thirds claimed it was “significant” (43 percent) or “very significant” (27 percent). Yet, a mere 3 percent said it was “very likely” such an increase would occur while only

18 percent saw it as “likely.” Digital transformation has magnified the problem by commanding staff time without generating the financial return to support it. As one respondent noted, “We are focusing on streaming, [but] don’t have a revenue stream for our digital stream.” An assistant news director echoed that concern: “All local stations need to find a way to make digital content a more significant part of station revenue.”

VI. ALTERING THE NEWS MIX

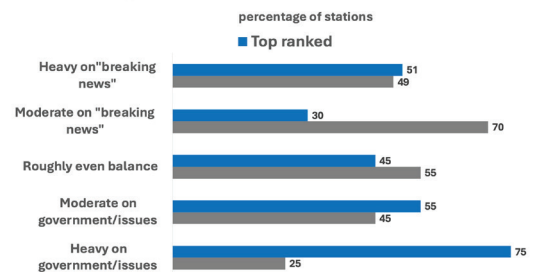
Adjusting the Editorial Focus

News is inherently a construct, shaped by subjective judgments about what is important on any given day. Certain events virtually command attention, but they are uncommon. News outlets have choices when deciding on the day's lineup of stories. News directors will weigh perceived relevance, interest, and impact in making these choices but there are no objective criteria. As a result, the "news" is not a mirror of the community but a curated narrative that amplifies certain topics while downplaying or ignoring others. Local TV news has traditionally prioritized weather, crime, and breaking stories, assuming they capture and hold viewer attention. Crime stories particularly elicit emotional responses like concern for personal safety, which can strengthen viewer engagement. This focus has, over time, shaped audience expectations, with viewers now seeking out this content, thereby reinforcing its demand.³¹

A breaking news strategy is an effective option. Our survey found that stations focused on breaking news dominated the ranks of top-rated stations, making up 52 percent of them. This preponderance is explained in part by the fact that such stations outnumber those that have a different editorial focus. However, their proportion among top-ranked stations exceeded their overall proportion by 17 percentage points.

Nevertheless, a breaking news focus is not the only effective strategy as evident in two-station markets. In markets with 3 or more competing stations, there are more than 25 possible combinations of competing stations' strategies that a station could confront, which is an imposing calculation. A two-station market reduces the calculus to the editorial position of the sole competitor. In these markets, the strongest performers were those focusing heavily on local government and issues. (see Figure 7). In two-sta-

Figure 7 Stations' Ranking in Two-Station Markets, by Their News Focus



tion markets where they competed, they were the top-ranked station in 75 percent of the cases. In contrast, in two-station markets where they competed, stations that featured breaking news were first in 51 percent of the markets and second in 49 percent. The frequency of being the top-ranked station for the other three editorial positions was 55 percent for stations with a moderate emphasis on local government, 45 percent for those with an even mix of breaking news and governance issues, and 30 percent for those with a moderate emphasis on breaking news.

Another measure of market performance is the trend in market share. An earlier section of this report showed that half of the sampled stations said they had gained audience share, although most described the gain as moderate rather than large. When examined in the context of stations' editorial focus, marked differences appeared. Stations that strongly emphasize local government and issues were most likely to report a gain in audience. Sixty-one percent of these stations reported an increase in audience share - 11 percentage points higher than the other stations' average. The only other stations that performed above the average were those placing a strong emphasis on breaking news - the increase in their case relative to other stations was 7 percentage points.

Our survey was not designed to offer local stations a path to maximum profits. Factors like market conditions, station resources, newsroom and local culture, and the competitive landscape necessarily affect a station's choice of market strategy. However, our findings indicate there is more than one path to attracting and building an audience. A breaking news approach is one path but so is a focus on local governance and issues. Prioritizing a community's governing needs doesn't preclude market success. The news director at a station that shifted from breaking news to a community-centered focus attributed the station's ratings increase to the change: "We addressed this question a couple years ago and decided to lean into neighborhood news. Rather than all reporters living and working within a 5-mile radius of the station, we now have reporters spread throughout our market living and reporting in communities that only saw a TV reporter when bad news happened. We have filled a vacuum of news and information in communities that saw a substantial decrease in local news outlets. We now report on local government, schools, businesses, and people on an everyday basis. This is in direct contrast to our traditional competitors who report heavily on 'breaking news' and crime."

Prioritizing News Topics

As newspapers have faced declining revenues, they have cut back significantly on news coverage, reducing the depth and diversity of information available to their community. Local TV news stations could help fill that gap by expanding their coverage, particularly by reporting in areas traditionally covered by newspapers, including local governance and issues.

To assess whether stations have changed what they regard as newsworthy, we asked respondents to indicate whether their station over the previous two years had placed less emphasis, more emphasis, or about the same amount of emphasis on the set of news topics discussed earlier. As Figure 8 indicates, aside from the weather, the largest increases in coverage were on topics that newspapers have typically highlighted and that can heighten residents' understanding of their community. Local schools received increased coverage from 30 percent of stations, fol-

lowed by the local economy and business (25 percent), local politics and elections (20 percent), and local government (20 percent). Less favored, in descending order, were crime, lifestyle and human interest, sports, local arts and entertainment, traffic, and accidents and fires.

Increased emphasis on governing and community issues was related to an increase in audience share over the past two years. That was true for each of the four governing-related topics: schools, local politics and elections, local government, and local business and the economy. To assess the cumulative impact, stations were given a score of 1 for each topic they gave added emphasis, resulting in a scale from 0 to 4. Stations that reported an increase in audience share over the past two years averaged 1.20 on the scale, compared to 0.88 for those reporting their audience share had stayed the same and 0.87 for those reporting a decrease.

It is unknown whether these shifts in topic emphasis and their relationship to increased audience share will persist, but, along with our previously cited findings, they suggest that heightened attention to community governance and issues does not conflict with stations' need to attract an audience.

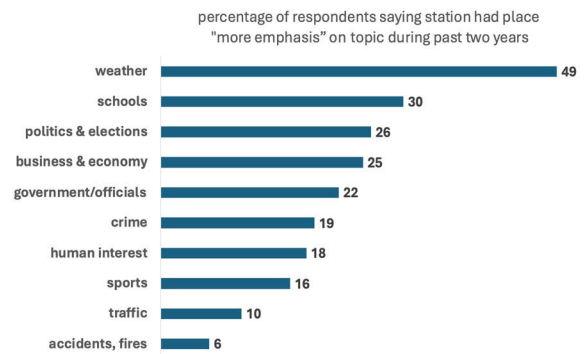
Employing Reporting Models

Among the hallmarks of newspaper reporting at its peak was a commitment to types of journalism – enterprise, community, and investigative reporting – that go beyond the straightforward reports of the day's events. Enterprise journalism involves stories that reporters pursue independently without relying on external prompts like press releases or news conferences. Community journalism focuses on covering local neighborhoods and groups, while investigative reporting seeks to uncover developments that are not readily evident.

We asked our respondents about the emphasis their station places on each of these types. Three-fifths of respondents indicated that their stations placed “quite a bit” or “a lot” of emphasis on enterprise reporting. Community journalism received slightly less attention, with half of the respondents noting that it was a significant element of their station's coverage. Investigative journalism was the lowest priority of the three. Fewer than two-fifths (38 percent) of respondents reported that their stations placed a degree of emphasis on this type of reporting.

Stations' use of these types varied with their editorial direction. Respondents from stations that emphasize “local government and community issues” in their coverage were much more likely than those that stress “breaking news” to say their station relied “a lot” on community journalism (25 versus 7 percent) and enterprise

Figure 8 News Topics Getting Additional Coverage



reporting (22 versus 12 percent). There was also a correlation, although weaker, between editorial direction and the level of investigative reporting.

Respondents were also asked about the two-year trend in these types of reporting. Half of the responding stations (49 percent) reported an increase in enterprise journalism with a mere 4 percent saying they were doing less of it. The trend with community journalism was also upward, with 29 percent of respondents reporting an increase with only 5 percent claiming a decrease. Investigative reporting also rose with 45 percent of respondents saying it had increased at their station. Nine percent reported a cutback, which nevertheless was but a fifth of the number reporting an increase.

Overall, the trend is in a direction that can deepen residents' understanding of their community. Enterprise reporting and community journalism go beyond standard news, providing stories and amplifying voices that help the audience to be more aware and connected to their community. By emphasizing these forms of journalism, while being mindful of their community's diversity, TV outlets can ensure that local narratives are aired. Investigative reporting is equally important but more challenging, given the substantial reporting resources typically required to thoroughly investigate alleged wrongdoing. Not surprisingly, our survey found that stations with larger news staff were more likely than those with smaller staff to engage in investigative journalism. The correlation was an exceedingly high .44. There was a less strong but still significant correlation (.30) between staff size and the extent to which stations engage in enterprise journalism. In contrast, staff size was unrelated to the use of community journalism, suggesting it is less an issue of resources than of editorial interest.

VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

State of the Community

For over a century, daily newspapers served as the backbone of daily reporting. With a sizable staff and many pages to fill, they offered a broad perspective on local life. Coverage of local government and community issues was a cornerstone, and in larger papers, these stories filled an entire section. As newspapers have declined, so has the civic health of the communities they serve, everything from residents' understanding of community issues to their ability to hold local leaders accountable.³² As the Knight Foundation's Eric Newton noted, local news gives people the information they "need to run their communities and their lives."³³

In our previous study of local public radio, in communities where the newspaper had declined, we found a strong commitment by stations to increase their coverage of local governance and issues to offset the decline. We did not find the same commitment among local TV news stations. In areas where the leading newspaper had scaled back its coverage, two-thirds (64 percent) of our TV respondents said their station had not made a change to accommodate the loss, while 27 percent claimed a moderate increase in coverage of local governance and issues, and only 9 percent reported a substantial increase. These differing responses of public radio and TV stations may reflect differences in journalism culture as well as how each defines "community." Public radio station signals have less reach, resulting in a more clearly delineated community, while local TV stations often serve broad geographic areas. Additionally, local TV operates in a highly competitive landscape. While only a few public radio stations contend with direct rivals, competition is the norm for most local TV outlets, which naturally directs their attention toward their TV competitors rather than other news outlets.

Ironically, this focus can work to the advantage of the communities that local TV stations serve. As noted at the outset, the decline of local outlets has created a void that no single news outlet can adequately fill. News outlets will have to collectively contribute to offset the deficit. Competition between TV stations could serve that end if stations recognize and act upon a finding of this study. An editorial focus distinct from that of competitors is advantageous. In two-station markets, stations with a distinctive editorial focus were 20 percent more likely to be the top-ranked station than stations with an editorial focus close to that of their competitor.³⁴ When a station sets itself apart from the competition, it gives the community greater choice, expanding the options available to it.

State of the Stations

In today's media landscape, competition in the news space is asymmetric. National outlets like *cnn.com* have expanded into local markets across the country, drawing substantial online audiences.³⁵ In contrast, local TV news stations lack the brand recognition and resources to draw the audience away from well-established national platforms, which continue to capture an outsized share of citizens' news time.

To compete in this environment, local news outlets need to rely on their competitive advantage—their focus on local news.³⁶ It sets them apart, not only from national outlets but also from other non-news media that increasingly attract people's attention.³⁷ Local TV stations should recognize the power of their brand as a trusted local source and enhance their ability to provide timely, relevant local content. While other content types can deepen audience engagement, local stations risk losing relevance if they fail to deliver consistent, robust local news. For audiences seeking local stories, the local TV station remains one of the few trusted sources, whereas when other content is at issue, there are more attractive alternatives. A news director said, "Our biggest challenge isn't other news outlets, but how we can be most relevant to viewers so that they continue to make us an important and valued part of their lives. We tend to focus less on episodic crime and spot news and more on issues and trends that affect more of our audience, such as economic challenges, education - even basics like road conditions."

Our survey suggests that local TV stations can compete by prioritizing the information needs of their communities. Stations that emphasize coverage of local governance and community issues are not at an inherent disadvantage compared to those focusing on more sensational topics. Some of these stations out-

Network O&Os

Within the realm of local television, Network Owned and Operated (O&O) stations stand out. Located predominantly in larger markets, these stations attract some of the top journalists due to their prestige and resources, while also having the latest technology. This positions them as "flagship" stations, serving as benchmarks for the other affiliates of ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC Universal.

That said, O&Os resemble other stations on most dimensions described in this report. In terms of editorial focus, for example, most of the O&Os play up breaking news and typically place a strong emphasis on it. When it comes to a focus on local governance and issues, only a small fraction—11% of O&Os place a significant emphasis there, nearly identical to the proportion for other stations. O&Os also didn't differ markedly from other stations in whether they expect and "increase in support from ownership" to help meet upcoming challenges.

Where O&Os distinguish themselves is through their capacity to leverage large news staffs. Compared to other stations, they are more likely to have increased their weekday news and public affairs coverage. They also were more likely to have expanded their enterprise and community reporting. The most striking difference, however, is seen in their digital offerings. O&O stations are three times more likely than their counterparts to produce a substantial amount of original, stand-alone digital content, positioning them at the forefront of the digital transformation within local television.

performed their competitors. Notably, an increase in coverage of local governance topics correlated with increases in audience share over the past two years, suggesting it is a viable path to audience growth.

Audience preferences evolve, and stations are remiss in not planning for such changes and experimenting with alternatives. That axiom even applies to the weather, which has long ranked as the top reason people watch local TV news.³⁸ However, almost no young adult tunes to local TV news for that reason. They get their weather from a smartphone.³⁹ Over time, news of the weather will diminish as a reason to turn to local TV.

Stations are understandably reluctant to change their editorial focus. Station managers need to maintain a station's position in the market, and the safe approach is to leave things as they are. In addition, there is uncertainty when change is involved, and local TV news is no exception. When respondents were asked about the potential effect of reallocating some emphasis from breaking news to greater coverage of local governance and community issues, there was no consensus on the likely outcome. Fifteen percent said they were unsure about the impact while 34 percent thought it would not matter. Thirty-three percent felt some increase might result, while 4 percent thought it could be large. Meanwhile, 10 percent anticipated a small decrease in audience decrease with 1 percent thinking the decrease would be substantial.

The grip of the breaking news model on local TV stations is substantial. It is not the case that the model has penetrated only urban markets or rural ones, more affluent communities or less wealthy ones, homogenous communities or more diverse ones. It holds

sway throughout the local TV news ecosystem, as can be seen in Table 2 which shows stations' editorial tendencies by region. On a 5-point scale, where a strong emphasis on breaking news was scored a "5" and a strong emphasis on local governing and issues was scored a "1", stations in all regions tended strongly toward the breaking news end of the scale.

News stations—whatever their editorial focus—have an opportunity to better serve their communities by framing stories in ways that promote deeper understanding. Studies show that viewers react differently to episodic versus thematic news reporting.⁴⁰ An episodic report on a crime, for instance, centers on the immediate details: the crime, the suspect, and the victim. When viewers are exposed to a constant stream of these incident-based reports, they may develop an exaggerated sense of danger and, in some cases, a greater distrust of certain groups, usually the poor and minorities.⁴¹ Thematic reporting, on the other hand, places incidents within a broader social context. For example, rather than just covering

Table 2 Editorial Tendency, by Region

Region	Nr. Stations	Average
Mid-Atlantic/N. England	29	3.77
South Atlantic	57	3.55
Great Lakes	58	3.68
West North Central	28	3.64
East South Central	33	3.64
West South Central	50	3.67
Mountain	28	3.82
Pacific	37	3.69

CATEGORIES: Mid-Atlantic/N. England (CT, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, VT, RI), South Atlantic (DC, DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV), Great Lakes (MN, WI, IL, IN, OH), West North Central (IA, KS, MO, NE, ND, SD), East South Central (AL, KY, MS, TN), West South Central (AR, LA, OK, TX), Mountain (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, WY), Pacific (AK, CA, HI, OR, WA).

the details of a crime, a thematic report might explore systemic community issues like economic hardship or the availability of social services. Such stories give viewers a fuller understanding of their community. Weather is another example. A severe weather event could be used to highlight a larger theme, such as climate change or local economic vulnerabilities. To be sure, most news events do not lend themselves to thematic reporting, but utilizing those that do can foster a more informed and resilient community.

Paradoxically, even as media competition overall has increased, competition in local news has weakened due to the decline of local newspapers and commercial radio news. However, local TV stations face a significant barrier to filling this gap: funding. We anticipated that funding might be an issue for some stations but found it to be a common challenge, impacting newsroom size, journalist retention, staff training, and access to technology. When asked about the importance of securing funds for technology upgrades, for example, 60 percent of respondents ranked it as “important” or “very important,” yet only 22 percent believed they would “very likely” receive the funding.

Funding is critical to expanding digital content. To become the “go-to” source for residents seeking local news on demand, local TV stations need to prioritize timely, robust digital postings. The local newspapers that have best adapted to the digital age have embraced this strategy. Stations that merely repurpose broadcast content for their websites will struggle to compete with such newspapers for the digital audience—an unfortunate development given the value to communities of having multiple local outlets providing comprehensive digital content. By strategically leveraging their assets to grow their digital presence, local TV stations can benefit both themselves and the communities they serve.

Increased funding is especially critical for stations in communities where the local newspaper has closed or sharply reduced its coverage. Most such stations have a below-average number of news staff and carry below-average hours of news coverage. They also lag in their digital offerings. Even a modest increase in funding would be significant. A news director at one of these stations said, “A few extra people in the newsroom – 2 more producers and 2 more photogs – would increase the quality of broadcasts and digital offering, not to mention morale and retention.”

Sources of Support

The decline of community-based news and public affairs coverage is a threat to civic life, underscoring the need to strengthen local TV stations. As they increasingly serve as the pillar of local news, ways to strengthen them must be found while ensuring they meet their obligation to serve the informational needs of their communities.

A promising avenue for support within stations’ control is partnering with other news organizations. In our previous research on local public radio, we found that three-fifths of radio stations engaged in joint reporting efforts with other news outlets. In contrast, local TV stations are far less likely to pursue partnerships—only 34 percent of respondents reported that their station had participated in joint reporting, which typically were confined to stations within the same ownership group. While our survey did not reveal the reasons why TV stations lag in partner-

ing with other news outlets, some respondents saw it as a missed opportunity. Said a news director, “[These] partnerships are critical to expand coverage areas, quality of stories, depth of investigative stories, number of stories, and overall benefit to the public.”

Partnerships can take different forms. The simplest is sharing content with other news outlets, which expands coverage without creating significant additional costs. Collaborating with other news outlets to create original content involves a larger staff commitment, yet it harnesses the complementary strengths of each partner, enabling more ambitious reporting than the outlets could achieve separately. This is especially true in the realm of investigative journalism, where communities have a stake in holding officials accountable for harmful actions. The investigative stories produced through partnerships are carried by all the partners, thereby reaching a larger audience, which magnifies their impact. Partnerships with journalism schools are also a fruitful option for stations. They bolster staff while providing valuable training opportunities for student journalists.

Nevertheless, the stations that would benefit the most from partnerships are typically the ones least equipped to pursue them. Stations with limited staff can struggle to maintain their current programming and cannot easily make the initial investment required to develop meaningful, productive partnerships. Although joint efforts increase capacity over time, they demand an upfront investment that can be difficult to manage. TV stations in our survey with a staff of twenty-five or fewer were 28 percent less likely than other stations to have partnered with news outlets.

This finding speaks to a broader issue. Additional funding is a pressing issue across nearly the full local TV news ecosystem. Ownership groups are a potential source of funding, although our respondents had differing views on the likelihood they would provide it. When asked about the significance of additional ownership funding, 24 percent said it was “very important” and 34 percent called it “important.” However, only some thought it would materialize. Among those who labeled it “important,” 23 percent thought such funding was “very likely” and 47 percent judged it “somewhat likely.” On the other hand, among those who felt a greater sense of the urgency of such funding – those calling the funding “very important” to their operations – only 10 percent thought it “very likely” they would receive it and 28 percent viewed it as “somewhat likely.”

Respondents who had strong backing from their ownership group made a point of saying how valuable it is to their operations. “Our ownership,” an assistant news director said, “proves that good journalism can be good business, It’s a blessing for our news staff and our community.” Nevertheless, the more outspoken respondents were those who felt their ownership was not providing the needed support:

We are chronically short-staffed. Ownership groups for decades have been extracting more output from fewer staff with less money. We’re getting ever closer to the point of simply being unable to get newscasts on the air because we just don’t have the people to do it. When our viewers have alternative sources for their news, this is a massive unforced error that we cannot afford.

Our corporate ownership cares more about making money than serving our community.

Local news needs investment from ownership, not just to increase content and coverage, but for staff. The current staff is spread too thin.

Corporate ownership groups need reasonable profit margins but their response is always “we need to operate lean” or “the money isn’t there this year.”

Corporate owners need to prioritize paying news staff higher salaries. We are losing too many good young journalists to jobs outside of broadcast news.

Our station’s primary function has become generating cash for the corporation.

Large media companies are telling us the revenue side of the business is so challenging, even in a huge election year and Olympics year, that there is no money for additional staff, no money for training young journalists, and no training budget for leadership. I’ll fight this fight until I die, but I feel like the number of good journalists who care and can do good work keeps getting smaller.

If local television news is to successfully navigate what is an increasingly challenging news market, paying forward should be a priority. Local stations have had less success than local newspapers in attracting users to their websites. The ratio of analog to online users is roughly 1:1 for the newspaper, whereas it is roughly 3:1 for local TV stations.⁴² The time to capture more of the online local news consumer, for example, is not years in the future but now. News audiences are more static than dynamic even in the digital age. When news consumers settle on a news outlet as their preferred choice, they tend to stay with it. Few take the time to discover whether there’s a better option. This tendency adds urgency to paying forward and was not lost on respondents. Said a news director, “Owners must be willing to invest more in funding newsgathering on a local and state level, without necessarily expecting a direct and immediate return on that investment--understanding that strategically protecting the existing investment means spending more in terms of money and resources for growth. There is no way to cut your way to growth.” A station manager echoed that view: “The importance of revenue is not lost on me, however, the only thing local news organizations have is our viewers and trust. If we lose that through short-sighted business policies, we lose everything. The number one priority of a local news outlet is providing critical information to our audiences and making sure they can get this information wherever they are in their day. We do that and local broadcasters will weather the tough times ahead.”

A common complaint of respondents, which we also heard from respondents in our public radio survey, is that their content is appropriated without corresponding compensation by digital companies like Google and Meta. Local stations do not realistically have the option of withholding their content from digital platforms, but it’s an unequal relationship. The platforms capture the monetary value of the content, determine how it will be positioned, and do not share user data in a way that would enable local stations to build stronger relations with users.

The situation could change with an act of Congress, and the odds of it happening could be increasing. Although some members of Congress distrust the media, it usually doesn’t extend to local media. Moreover, members of Congress increasingly voice displeasure with the platforms. That combination could result in a revenue-sharing model that would increase funding at local TV stations. Although corporate ownership groups might see that development as a boost to their bottom line, it would be short-sighted. Any such legislation would almost certainly have a revenue distribution model that funded news outlets in proportion to the amount

of content appropriated by the platforms. Corporate owners that don't pay forward to build up that content would lose out in the allocation process.

Amid the uncertainties in funding local TV stations is the certainty that America's communities need vibrant TV stations. Newspapers are not going to miraculously recover. More go out of business each year. Nor do digital news startups appear to be the solution to communities' widening information deficit. In most places where the newspaper has closed, no lasting digital outlet has risen to take its place.⁴³ Local public radio stations, already understaffed, are shedding staff at the fastest pace in their history, resulting in cutbacks in their local reporting.⁴⁴ The strongest pillar of local news is the nation's TV stations. They need to stay strong while deepening their commitment to serving their communities.

APPENDIX A

Section I- Thank you for participating in our local TV news survey.

The study aims to assess the role local TV stations can play in preserving and strengthening local journalism in America's cities, towns, and rural areas.

Your responses are confidential. In our report, we will not identify individual stations or respondents. Instead, the report will describe industry-wide tendencies.

Q1. & 2. The first few questions are for administrative purposes only. Again, we will not single out individual respondents or stations in the survey report.

- o Your Name (1) _____
- o Your email address (2) _____

Q3. Your position:

- o News Director (1)
- o General Manager/Station Manager (2)
- o President/CEO (3)
- o Assistant News Director (4)
- o Other (please specify) (5) _____

Q4. Your station's call letters (If you serve more than one station, please list the major station and answer the remaining questions in the context of that station.)

- o Primary station's call letters (1)
- o Please list here the other station(s) you serve. (2)

Q5. Your station's zip code? _____

Q6. What is your station's ownership?

- o Independently owned (1)
- o ABC (2)
- o CBS (3)
- o Fox (4)
- o NBC Universal (5)
- o Allen (6)
- o American Spirit (7)
- o Baha Kel (8)
- o Coastal (9)
- o Cowles (10)
- o Cox (11)
- o Cunningham (12)
- o EntraVision (36)
- o Forum (13)
- o Graham (14)
- o Gray (15)
- o Hearst (16)
- o Hubbard (17)
- o Imagicomm (18)
- o Lockwood (19)

- Marks Group (20)
- Marquee (21)
- Mission (22)
- Morgan Murphy (23)
- Morris (24)
- News-Press & Gazette (25)
- Nexstar (26)
- Sagamore Hills (27)
- Scripps (28)
- Red River (29)
- Sinclair (30)
- Standard General (31)
- Tegna (32)
- Univision (33)
- Vision Alaska (34)
- Other (name) (35) _____

- Q7. What is your station's network affiliation? (If more than one, check the one that's the main source of your national and international news content.)
- ABC (1)
 - CBS (2)
 - Fox (3)
 - NBC Universal (4)
 - Other (5) _____
- Q8. How many people working at your station are involved in creating local news/public affairs content? (A rough estimate is okay. Include full- and part-time employees and students, interns, or freelancers who regularly contribute. Please include anchors, hosts, producers, editors, broadcast and digital reporters, videographers, and others who create local news/public affairs content in its various forms and formats.)
- select if unable to make a rough estimate (2)
 - please enter the number of people involved in creating local news & public affairs content (1)
- Q9. Over the past two years, what change has occurred in the size of your news staff?
- has increased substantially (1)
 - has increased somewhat (2)
 - has stayed about the same (3)
 - has decreased somewhat (4)
 - has decreased substantially (5)
- Q10. Thinking about all TV, radio, print, and digital news outlets in your news market with the exception of your station, what's been the trend in recent years in the quality of local news coverage?
- has declined significantly (1)
 - has declined somewhat (2)
 - has stayed about the same (3)
 - has improved somewhat (4)
 - has improved significantly (5)

- Q11. Thinking about all TV, radio, print, and digital news outlets in your news market with the exception of your station, which statement best describes the local news environment?
- ‘Rich” local news environment- our area includes high-quality news outlets that invest in local reporting. (1)
 - “Adequate” local news environment- our area includes news outlets that regularly produce substantial local reporting. (2)
 - “Inadequate” local news environment- our area has some quality local news reporting but it’s generally lacking in quantity and quality. (3)
 - “News Desert” or nearly so- our area is largely devoid of good local reporting. (4)
- Q12. Local daily newspapers in most communities have cut back on their news staff and coverage. Some daily newspapers have closed completely. What’s the situation in your location? (If your news market is serviced by more than one daily paper, please answer in the context of its leading daily.)
- Our daily newspaper has closed. (1)
 - Our daily newspaper has substantially reduced its local news coverage. (2)
 - Our daily newspaper has moderately reduced its local news coverage. (3)
- Q13. How, if at all, has your station’s news coverage changed in response to the decline of the daily newspaper in your location?
- Our news has not changed in a substantial way for that reason. (1)
 - Our news has changed somewhat to give greater coverage to areas (such as local government) highlighted by the daily newspaper. (2)
 - Our news has changed substantially to give greater coverage to areas (such as local government) highlighted by the daily newspaper. (3)
- Q14. In general, what is the composition of your market area? (select the box that best describes your area)

Its economic makeup (1)	<input type="radio"/> more low-income people than most places (1)	<input type="radio"/> about average in mix of low-income and high-income people (2)	<input type="radio"/> more high-income people than most places (3)
Its geographical makeup (2)	<input type="radio"/> much of it is rural (1)	<input type="radio"/> somewhat balanced rural/urban (2)	<input type="radio"/> predominately urban (3)
Its partisan makeup (3)	<input type="radio"/> mostly Republican voters (1)	<input type="radio"/> somewhat balanced Republican/Democratic voters (2)	<input type="radio"/> mostly Democratic voters (3)
Its racial/ethnic makeup (4)	<input type="radio"/> heavily non-Hispanic White (1)	<input type="radio"/> mostly non-Hispanic Whites but with a sizable minority population (2)	<input type="radio"/> minority group(s) constitute a majority (3)

- Q15. Thinking now only of weekdays, how many hours of locally produced news and public affairs programming does your station air each day?
- Number of hours (please specify) (1) _____
- Q16. Thinking only of weekdays, what’s been the trend in the past two years i the number of hours of local news and public affairs produced each day by your station?
- increased by more than 1 hour per day (1)

- o increased by 1 hour or less per day (2)
- o stayed the same (3)
- o decreased by 1 hour or less per day (4)
- o decreased by more than 1 hour per day (5)

Q17. Thinking now only of your main early evening newscast, how many other local TV stations in your market also produce a daily local newscast in the same time slot?

- o None (1)
- o One (2)
- o Two (3)
- o Three (4)
- o More than three (5)
- o Our station doesn't have an early evening newscast. (6) (Skip to Q21.)

Q18. Thinking now only of the main early evening local newscast, what is your station's ranking in terms of audience share compared to that of your local TV news competitors? (if unsure, your best guess is sufficient.)

- o First (largest audience share) (1)
- o Second (2)
- o Third (3)
- o Fourth (4)
- o Lower than fourth (5)

Q19. Compared to your local TV news competitors during the past two years, what's been the trend in your station's audience share for its main early evening local newscast?

- o We've had a large increase in our share of the total news audience. (1)
- o We've had a moderate increase in our share of the total news audience. (2)
- o Our audience share has stayed about the same. (3)
- o We've had a moderate decrease in our share of the total news audience. (4)
- o We've had a large decrease in our share of the total news audience. (5)

Q20. Deleted in survey creation.

Q21. For the news topics listed below, please indicate the general amount of coverage each topic receives on your local newscasts.

	Not much (1)	Some (2)	Quite a bit (3)	A lot (4)
Weather (1)				
Sports (2)				
Traffic (3)				
Investigative reporting (4)				
Enterprise reporting (5)				
Live shots/live reports (6)				
Local government/officials (7)				
Local politics & elections (8)				

Local schools (9)				
Crime (10)				
Accidents & fires (11)				
Lifestyle, human interest (12)				
Local personalities/ influencers (13)				
Local entertainment/arts (14)				
Local business/economy (15)				
Community journalism (e.g., reports on local groups, neighborhoods) (16)				
Content provided by network, group, or other outside sources (17)				

Q22. Thinking now only of the past two years, what's been the trend in your station's local coverage?

	Less emphasis (1)	About the same (2)	More emphasis (3)
Weather (1)			
Sports (2)			
Traffic (3)			
Investigative reporting (4)			
Enterprise reporting (5)			
Live shots/live reports (6)			
Local government/officials (7)			
Local politics & elections (8)			
Local schools (9)			
Crime (10)			
Accidents & fires (11)			
Lifestyle, human interest (12)			
Local personalities/ influencers (13)			
Local entertainment/arts (14)			
Local business/economy (15)			
Community journalism (e.g., reports on local groups, neighborhoods) (16)			
Content provided by network, group, or other outside sources (17)			

Q23. In comparison with your local TV news competitors, how much emphasis do you place on the following local news topics?

	Less emphasis (1)	About the same (2)	More emphasis (3)
Weather (1)			
Sports (2)			
Traffic (3)			
Investigative reporting (4)			
Enterprise reporting (5)			
Live shots/live reports (6)			
Local government/officials (7)			
Local politics & elections (8)			
Local schools (9)			
Crime (10)			
Accidents & fires (11)			
Lifestyle, human interest (12)			
Local personalities/ influencers (13)			
Local entertainment/arts (14)			
Local business/economy (15)			
Community journalism (e.g., reports on local groups, neighborhoods) (16)			
Content provided by network, group, or other outside sources (17)			

Q24. Please indicate where you would place your station's news mix and that of the other local TV news stations in your community. (If you have more than 3 competitor news stations, answer with the top 3 in mind. If you have less than 3, skip the extra listing(s).)

	Strong emphasis on "breaking news" (e.g., crime, accidents) (5)	Moderate emphasis on "breaking news" (e.g., crime, accidents") (4)	Roughly even mix of local government/politics and breaking news (e.g., crimes, fires) (3)	Moderate emphasis on local gov't and local issues (2)	Strong emphasis on local gov't and local issues (1)
Your station's news mix (1)					
Station #A news mix (2)					
Station #B news mix (3)					
Station #C news mix(4)					

Q41. (Inserted question-presented to participants) Although most national news outlets have retained the traditional reporting model, some national outlets have tailored their news to a conservative audience and some to a liberal audience. How would you describe your reporting model and that of the other local TV new outlets in your community? (If you have more than 3 competitors, answer with the top 3 in mind. If you have less than 3, skip the extra listing(s).)

	conservative (1)	somewhat conservative (2)	traditional model (3)	somewhat liberal (4)	liberal (5)
Your station's reporting model (1)					
Station #A reporting model (2)					
Station #B reporting model (3)					
Station #C reporting model (4)					

- Q25. Do you have a designated reporter(s) assigned full-time to report on local government?
- Yes (1)
 - No, but we have a designated reporter assigned part-time to cover local government. (2)
 - No, but we share a local government reporter with another news outlet(s). (3)
 - No (4)
- Q26. Do you have a designated reporter(s) assigned full-time to report on state government?
- Yes (1)
 - No, but we have a designated reporter assigned part-time to cover state government. (2)
 - No, but we share a statehouse reporter with another news outlet(s). (3)
 - No (4)
- Q27. Do your journalists participate in joint reporting with journalists from other news outlets?
- No (1)
 - Yes (2)
- Q28. With whom has your station partnered in its joint reporting? (Please check as many as apply)
- Your station's ownership group (1)
 - Local daily newspaper(s) (2)
 - Local weekly newspaper(s) (3)
 - Other local TV news stations(s) (4)
 - Local radio station(s) (5)
 - Regional/state outlet(s) (6)
 - Our affiliated national network (7)
- Q29. If your station were to commit itself more fully than it already is to providing news of local government, politics, and community issues, what do you think would be the impact on the size of your audience?

- o unsure what the impact would be. (6)
 - o It would likely reduce our audience by a substantial amount. (1)
 - o It would likely reduce our audience somewhat. (2)
 - o It would likely not have much impact one way or the other. (3)
 - o It would likely increase our audience somewhat. (4)
 - o It would likely increase our audience by a substantial amount. (5)
- Q30. With people increasingly seeking their news on demand, news outlets have placed increased emphasis on digital products and platforms. How high a priority has digital transformation been for your station?
- o very low priority (1)
 - o low priority (2)
 - o moderate priority (3)
 - o high priority (4)
 - o very high priority (5)
- Q31. Which statement best describes the digital content you produce?
- o All or virtually all of it is directly derived from our broadcast content. (1)
 - o We do some original content for digital consumption but it's a relatively small proportion of our digital offerings. (2)
 - o We produce a large amount of stand-alone digital content. (3)
- Q32. Approximately what percentage of your station's total news audience is attributable to its digital offerings (as opposed to its TV broadcasts)? (A rough estimate is okay.)
- o Select if unable to make a reasonable estimate. (2)
 - o please enter percentage (1) _____
- Q33. How would you describe the content of the home page of your station's website?
- o primarily local news stories and weather (1)
 - o roughly even mix of national and local news stories (2)
 - o primarily national news stories (3)
 - o Other (4)
- Q34. The following are challenges and opportunities that some local TV news stations face. Please indicate the importance of each in your station's policies and planning.

	insignificant (1)	somewhat significant (2)	significant (3)	very significant (4)
Shift of audience to digital news (1)				
Attracting young viewers (2)				
Directives from station's ownership (3)				
Diversity of our news staff (4)				
Concern about station's profitability (5)				

Influence of ratings on our news decisions (6)				
What local news competitors are doing (7)				
The community's information needs (8)				
Intrusion of national politics on local politics/issues (9)				
Information needs of underserved local group ¹⁰				

Q35. For each of the following, please indicate its importance in improving your ability to better serve your audience's information needs.

	Slightly important (1)	Moderately important (2)	Important (3)	Very important (4)
Increase in technical expertise (1)				
Increase in technical equipment (2)				
Increase in broadcast staff (3)				
Increase in digital staff (4)				
Increase in support from ownership (5)				
Significant increase in station's budget (6)				

Q36. For each of the following resources, please indicate what you see as the likelihood of your station obtaining it in the reasonably near future.

	Very unlikely (1)	Somewhat unlikely (2)	Somewhat likely (3)	Very likely (4)
Increase in technical expertise (1)				
Increase in technical equipment (2)				
Increase in broadcast staff (3)				
Increase in digital staff (4)				
Increase in support from ownership (5)				
Significant increase in station's budget (6)				

Q42. Finally, if you have additional views on what local TV news generally, or your station particularly, can do to strengthen local news or address the challenges faced by local news, please share them with us in the space below.

Participant responses _____

Section V- Thank you for your participation in our survey. When the survey report is completed, we'll send you a copy at the email address you provided at the start of the survey. Thank you again.

Footnotes

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- 17 Based on information from multiple sources including our previous study of local public radio.
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average was 35 percent.,

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- 31 See, for example, Daniel Yanich, “Crime Creep: Urban and Suburban Crime on Local Tv News,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 26 (2004):535-563.
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This paper is part of Professor Patterson's ongoing research on local news. He earlier surveyed local public radio stations, research which was published as "News Crisis: Can Local Public Radio Help Fill the News Gap Created by the Decline of Local Newspapers?" in January, 2023.

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