Healthy Local News & Information Ecosystems:

Executive Summary

March 2021

VERSION 1.0

Hannah Stonebraker, MBA.
Lindsay Green-Barber, Ph.D.

IMPACT ARCHITECTS

This report was researched and written
by Hannah Stonebraker, MBA and
Lindsay Green-Barber, Ph.D.

Additional data analysis by Shannon Gair, MS,
Ph.D. candidate, University of Massachusetts,
Amherst.

IMPACT ARCHITECTS

© 2021 Impact Architects, LLC. Healthy Local News Ecosystems March 2021.

This work was supported by Democracy Fund, Google News Initiative, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

democracy fund

Google News Initiative

KNIGHT FOUNDATION

01. Executive Summary

Accurate, fact-based, trusted information is critical to the health of any community. Individuals need information to make decisions about their daily lives. Community connection is built through flows of information that fairly and accurately reflect the lived experience of all community members. Governments rely on information providers to effectively distribute information throughout a community, even as a healthy news and information ecosystem simultaneously holds government power to account. And better informed and connected individuals, families, and communities, in turn, can support local news and information providers through attention, engagement, and, in some cases, monetary support. The relationship between information providers and community members is, when at its best, one based in trust and mutual respect.

Community connection is built through flows of information that fairly and accurately reflect the lived experience of all community members.

But how do we know if a local news and information ecosystem is healthy? What are the most critical components to include in any assessment of "health"? What are the quantitative and qualitative data that can be applied across diverse news and information ecosystems? And where are aspects of an ecosystem's health so contextual and specific as to require on-the-ground qualitative research?

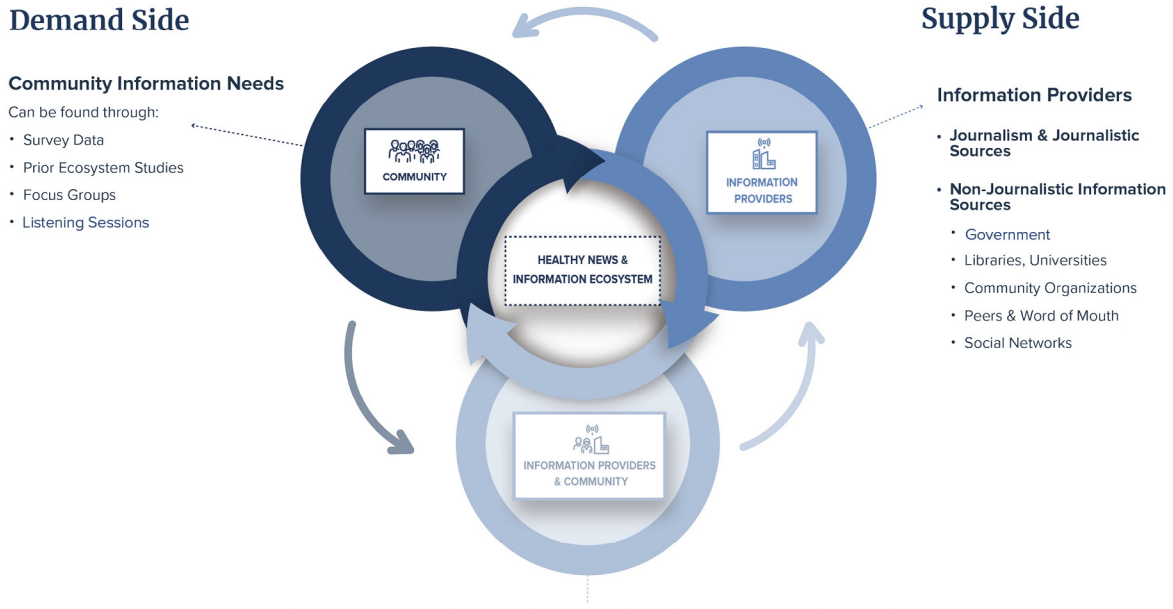
With the support of Democracy Fund, Google News Initiative, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we set out in March 2020 to architect a framework that would answer these questions. The framework we introduce in this project builds upon work done by individuals and organizations in academia, journalism, philanthropy, and communities across the US. Our decisions about what to include - and what to leave out - stem from our goal to put forth an approach for communities to use publicly available data to understand the baseline health of their news and information ecosystem that can be applied in any city or town, county, or state across the United States.

The project is comprised of three main products:

- A Playbook for anyone interested in measuring the health of their local news and information ecosystem to set baselines, identify opportunities to support their local ecosystem, and regularly measure progress in order to continually adapt the work.
- A full report, including methodology, where we apply the framework in nine communities in the United States - one state, two counties, and six cities - to understand the health of the local news and information ecosystems through a baselining of the communities, information providers, and the relationships among them.
- A literature review, which underpins the entire framework, available as an interactive annotated bibliography in Airtable. We invite you to share additional resources to make this a living resource for the field.

Ecosystems Products

This framework centers community news and information needs, as research finds that when these needs are met, there are positive individual, social, and political outcomes, including everything from individual physical health to greater community cohesion and less local government corruption. We draw a permeable boundary between traditional journalism (e.g., newspapers, broadcast television, and public radio) and other sources of information, including informal networks, recognizing that from a community member's perspective, a trusted source of information might not necessarily be journalistic in nature for any number of historical, structural, or logistical reasons. However, becuase there are not consistent databases or datasets for identifying non-journalistic sources of news and information across communities, we focus on journalistic information providers in the framework.



Relationship between Community Information Needs & Information Providers

We hope this framework will be a starting point for community groups, organizations, and foundations that are interested in including local news and information in their understanding of community health to identify new opportunities to support robust local news and information ecosystems.

In this work, we sought to address four primary questions:

1.

What are the expected **outcomes for individuals, communities, and politics** in healthy local news and information ecosystems?

2.

What **information providers are present in a healthy local news and information ecosystem**, including journalism organizations?

3.

What are the **best indicators to understand and measure the health of a local news and information ecosystem**?

4.

How can we systematically **assess local news ecosystems?**

Findings

We applied the framework to measure the health of nine news and information ecosystems in the United States. Using statistical analyses of the data gathered, we found trends that, while based on a small sample size, have significant implications. These trends are generally in line with prior research (included in the literature review), suggesting further validity of this news and information ecosystem framework.

- In general, communities that have greater racial and ethnic diversity among residents are home to fewer journalism outlets[1] and fewer national newspaper chains.[2]
- Reported trust in journalism is higher among white people than Black, African American, Hispanic, and Latinx people.[3]
- As the number of journalism organizations per capita increases, community satisfaction also increases, controlling for overall education of the community.[4]
- As the number of journalism organizations per capita increases, voter turnout increases, controlling for education.[5]
- As journalism trust increases, voter turnout also increases, controlling for percentage of population with bachelor's degrees.[6]
- As the number of journalism organizations per capita increases, journalism trust increases.[7]
- Journalism trust is significantly, positively correlated with percent of the population who say that their local news sources mostly cover the area where they live.[8]

[1] r = .68, p = .040
[2] r = -.71, p = .050
[3] non-Hispanic whites (M = 1.32, SD = .34) had significantly (p < .001) higher journalism trust compared to both non-Hispanic Blacks (M = 1.28, SD = .33) and Hispanics (M = 1.28, SD = .34)
[4] The ratio of population to journalism organizations was negatively associated with community satisfaction, controlling for percentage of the population with bachelor's degrees (r = -.43, p = .174) This relation showed a trend towards significance.
[5] The ratio of population to journalism organizations was negatively related to voter turnout, controlling for education. (r = -.42), This relation showed a trend toward significance (p = .183)
[6] (r = .34) and this relation showed a trend towards significance (p = .264)
[7] Journalism trust is significantly, negatively correlated with population per organization (r = -.88, p = .004)
[8] (r = .73, p = .040)

Key Lessons Learned

- The health of a news and information ecosystem can't be understood by the presence or absence of journalism organizations alone. Instead, baselining needs to begin with efforts to understand community information needs and whether or not they're being met.
- An ecosystem assessment must include the various dimensions of news organizations, such as diversity of business models, the degree to which newsroom staff reflect the community, and the communities the newsrooms intend to serve.
- An ecosystem assessment should consider the relationships among newsrooms and other sectors of the community, as well as other backbone institutions that serve as hubs of information exchange, such as libraries and universities.
- It is challenging to generate some of the most important indicators to measure the health of information providers in an ecosystem, such as equitable representation of diverse communities among the ranks of local journalists and accurate, broad, and deep coverage of many issues areas.
- In general, communities with more people of color have lower levels of trust in information providers.[9] This trend was true even if there were Black, Indigeous, and People of Color (BIPOC) serving media present in the community, suggesting that overall perceptions of "journalism" are likely formed and reported based on the history and diversity of legacy media companies and their relationship to BIPOC communities.
- There is significant inequity in philanthropic investment in journalism and media across the nine ecosystems included in this project, ranging from over $50 per capita in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to less than $3 per capita in New Mexico and less than $1 per capita in Youngstown, Ohio.

We invite you to visit the case studies in the Healthy News & Information Ecosystems full report to see what it looks like to apply this framework in practice and to use the Playbook as a starting point to baseline the health of your own community's news and information ecosystem. And, as your community begins to implement your own initiatives, we hope you will periodically revisit the framework, update the indicators, and assess progress toward healthy communities, information providers, and relationships across these groups.

We're eager to learn with you and hear how you're using and iterating on this work.

[9] A one-way ANOVA revealed that journalism trust varied significantly between different racial/ethnic groups, $F(2, 32412) = 42.29$, $p < .001$. Tukey's HSD revealed that non-Hispanic Whites ($M = 1.32$, $SD = .34$) had significantly ($p < .001$) higher journalism trust compared to both non-Hispanic Blacks ($M = 1.28$, $SD = .33$) and Hispanics ($M = 1.28$, $SD = .34$). There was no significant difference in journalism trust between non-Hispanic Black and Hispanics ($p = .898$).