



A community of collaboration

How journalists and non-news experts can work together better

Kevin Loker | December 2024



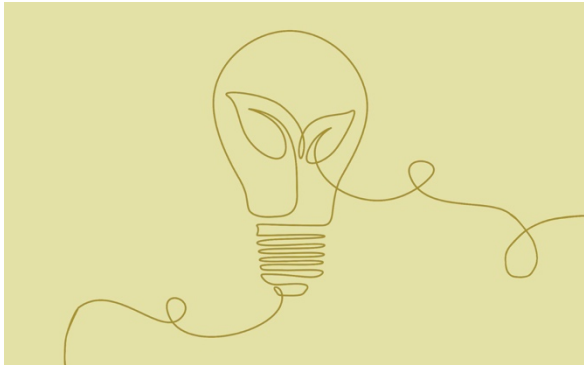
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Overview

The United States was founded on the idea that a free and thriving press is essential to an inclusive democracy. Local media play a key role. These place-based outlets — whether long-standing like a legacy newspaper or nascent like a nonprofit news site — provide communities with the information they need to make decisions and thrive. News leaders at these organizations steward their resources and time to create journalism with text, audio, video and in-person engagement that helps people understand themselves, how they relate to their neighbors and even the world they inhabit. The policies, happenings and culture in your backyard affect you deeply and daily.



As important as the work is, however, local media face significant challenges.

Some of that is the business: [“News deserts” are growing rapidly](#), with newspapers closing at an average rate of more than two a week. The pace leaves even the growing number of new nonprofit news sites and start-ups seemingly unable to make up the loss. Local TV news, often considered more stable, also [shows signs for concern](#).

Other challenges are social and societal: [With fewer journalists, Americans are less likely to know one](#) and have personal familiarity with them as members of their community. Further, many local journalists who remain are [burned out from their work](#) conditions. The field is discussing [ways to mitigate burnout](#), and isolating and naming drivers, such as [moral injury](#). But many interventions depend on cultivating strong leadership capable of redesigning long-rooted systems and news culture.

Imagine if findings were directly applied to the choices within news leaders’ control, and also, if the journalists — skilled at asking questions — could push such researchers to refine the research questions they pose.

These challenges don’t exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by and interlock with trends in communities and the country, such as economic and technological change, demographic and educational trends, and growing political polarization. Polarization, for instance, can threaten the ability to share factual reporting with the whole of a community. It creates space for misinformation and disinformation to fill the void, contributing to the overall decline of quality in the information ecosystem. As a downstream effect, it fosters an environment where journalists

are unable to conduct some of the work safely. And it's all worse if local media goes away. The presence of local journalism appears tied to political polarization; we know it [increases when a paper closes](#).

Those who see the press as vital to democracy should care about these challenges. And for each, there is knowledge from other sectors that can help journalism.

Take polarization and its cousins: anti-democratic attitudes, political violence and partisan animosity. One antidote, the [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#), [suggests](#) how to significantly reduce inclinations toward all three. For example, correcting misperceptions about the other party — including those individuals' willingness to take action to undermine democracy — lowers temperatures. The notions people hold appear to be a major challenge, one journalism seems primed and aligned to help address.

The press will be much more effective in serving people and strengthening democracy if it learns from what researchers are learning. In this case, journalists can use these findings to shape individual stories, beats, and how media outlets build relationships with and for communities.

Researchers, too, can strengthen their work if they learn more about journalism and the specific challenges news leaders face. Imagine if more such findings were directly applied to the choices within news leaders' control, and also, if the journalists — skilled at asking questions — could push such researchers to refine the research questions they pose.

Bringing ideas from outside of journalism into the conversation about how journalism evolves organizationally and in how it serves communities has become a mark of our programming at the [American Press Institute](#). And it is why this year we have embarked on an effort to better understand how to facilitate impressions that last, to understand how non-news experts and news leaders can best inform one another's work.

With support from the Templeton World Charity Foundation, this report will help researchers and news leaders understand:

- **[A landscape for news leader and researcher interaction](#)**. We overview the range of ways news leaders and researchers are interacting, especially in the journalism support space. We've done so with an eye to where people are engaging around [listening and learning in a fractured society](#).
- **[Insights specifically from our API Local News Summits, a major way we facilitate these exchanges at API](#)**. We reflect on how our staff sets the conditions for fruitful exchange between news leaders and non-news experts in these invitation-based events that we hold approximately three times a year. We outline what we've learned and what we're working to improve.
- **[What strikes journalists about depolarization/bridging difference specifically; and what strikes researchers who have engaged with journalists](#)**. We distill resonant themes and ideas on this topic, sourced from participants in these relevant convenings, which included approximately 180 news leaders and 30 non-news experts total.

- **Recommendations for those who want to enhance such exchanges.** Looking at all the information and drawing on our experience, we outline steps for interested stakeholders to augment or create new fruitful exchanges between researchers and journalists. We focus recommendations for nonprofits working to advance journalism or researchers and civil society groups that see common cause.

The report draws from a review of journalism support organization offerings; interviews with leaders at such organizations; direct experience organizing news leader and non-news expert interactions; and surveys with news leaders and interviews with non-news participants in API programming in 2023 and 2024. API, which as part of its programs provides grants to strengthen local news, has also helped support other entities with such pursuits. [Trusting News](#), which has received major funding from API, and [Perspectives](#), which has received event sponsorship funds from API, are included among examples.

We hope the insights spur conversation, action and intervention from stakeholders interested in bridging communities across lines of difference. Among the examples and takeaways, you will find that news leaders and non-news experts alike value the opportunity to think differently about the challenges in front of them, about how local news can change and how research can ask different questions.

We believe the press can connect and unify the American people, an essential component of the American experiment and, at a more basic level, for human flourishing. But we will be far more likely to succeed if we learn, evaluate and explore together, news leaders and researchers side by side.

Exchanges between researchers and journalists can go beyond interviews. They can also improve how journalism serves communities.

Most journalists interact with researchers and civil society leaders working to address social problems when they are writing a story and need a quote or to access a specific source of expertise.

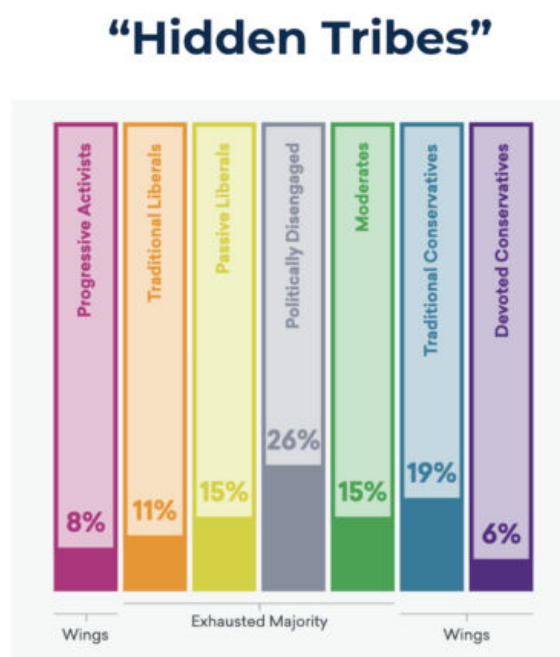
Expert sources add context and insight to reported pieces on topics the American public may need to know about, whether that's commenting on research or trends in mental health, the housing crisis, or political polarization.

The interaction between journalist and researcher is often transactional and usually without awareness or interest in how the trend or finding may affect the journalist's work.

Many researchers' findings, including on polarization (the main focus of this report), can help media and its leaders *shape* the journalism. The questions raised in research can help news leaders ask new questions about how journalism is done.

For example, take findings from the nonprofit research organization More in Common. The group is well-known for its "[Hidden Tribes](#)" research, which helped illustrate how most Americans are not on the extremes of issues but instead make up the "Exhausted Majority." They also have demonstrated the extent of the "[perception gap](#)" between Americans, or how Americans often overestimate how many people on the "other side" hold extreme positions.

These concepts of the Exhausted Majority and perception gaps can be reported on as findings, sure. But with more consideration and effort, they can transform the journalism. They can guide news leaders to consider:



More in Common's "Hidden Tribes"

- **More relatable approaches to headlines.** If most people do not sit squarely in engaged political camps, how might headlines appeal less to divides between party leaders and more to the issues this “Exhausted Majority” still cares about?
- **Story choice and context.** News leaders must still cover extreme positions, including when they pose real threats and cause real harm. But how can they be situated in an accurate picture of how common the view is or isn’t?
- **Beats, products and engagement on topics that unite.** If research shows where common ground is, that can point to opportunities for uplifting or solutions-oriented coverage or engagement on issues where many people would find interest.

Researchers in the interview setting, too, may not consider how their work might *aid or inform the reimagining of news*.

We explored such ideas, including with More in Common, in a Q&A series: [“How might journalists help communities overcome division in our digital world?”](#)

Thankfully, interviews are not the only way news leaders and researchers can interact. Across the country, nonprofits supporting journalism, universities and other groups are finding ways to bring journalists and researchers together in different exchanges.

One researcher present at an API Local News Summit explains how this can feel. Rather than a one-directional interview, exchanges can be “more of a back and forth,” where the researcher is “certainly sharing with them expertise, but also hearing their experiences in the newsroom, and their experience working with communities,” he said. “That hearing about their experiences, I think, really helped me think more clearly about how research can solve these *local* problems.”

The landscape of how news leaders and researchers learn from one another

Why might news leaders and researchers want to inform each other's work? And what might we learn from the ways it's occurred so far?

For this report, we've worked to identify and categorize a range of organizations and people that touch on this idea of cross-disciplinary learning between journalists and researchers.

The list below outlines various interventions one could take to help journalists and researchers inform each other about each other's work. It is sorted by three overall approaches or "purposes" for participation on the part of the journalist:

Purpose	Description
Learn from or alongside others' expertise	Some interventions are built for direct learning and incorporation of expertise from outside of journalism; it is why news leaders participate.
Address a news challenge, but with integrated expertise	Some interventions involve indirect learning and incorporation of expertise from outside journalism; it is not necessarily why news leaders participate, but a benefit.
Collaborate intentionally and mutually	Some interventions are built for shared goals: both journalists and non-news experts participate, knowing what they're doing and for a common cause.

For each, we've shared examples. For each example, we pose questions to help explore what might differentiate the approach from others. Specifically, we ask:

- **Audience:** What kind of journalist audience does this serve?
- **Benefit:** How might the journalist stand to benefit?
- **Exposure:** Is this exposing journalists to ideas from research or researchers themselves, or does it require existing relationships?
- **Interaction:** What level of exchange does it encourage?

- **Researcher motivation:** Why might a researcher take part?¹

After this list, we highlight “bright spots” for all those interested in building or supporting cross-disciplinary exchanges between journalists and researchers.

Purpose: Learn from or alongside others’ expertise

Some interventions are built for direct learning and incorporation of expertise from outside of journalism; it is why news leaders participate.

There are online resources that focus on learning expertise from others.

One way news leaders can learn about research (and researchers) that might help their craft is from publications and sites dedicated to that goal. Niche publications exist that curate studies, including [RQ1](#) (focused on media and journalism research specifically) and [Better Conflict Bulletin](#) (more focused on bridging divides but often touching on digital and media topics).

- **Audience:** Targets curious journalists who seek to follow research and ideas that can help their craft.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists improve their work with research insights, in a manner that fits daily habits and behavior (e.g. checking email).
- **Exposure:** Provides exposure to ideas but does not facilitate direct exchange.
- **Interaction:** Builds journalists’ awareness of researchers; interaction between journalists and researchers is limited.
- **Researcher motivation:** Increase reach of work and awareness of work among journalists.

There are in-person events for journalists that focus on learning expertise from others.

Programs exist that gather journalists in a physical space where they can learn about research and ideas that can help their craft. These can come from longstanding institutions: The [Faith Angle Forum](#) (focused on helping journalists understand religion and the public square) started at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and is now at The Aspen Institute. Another is [Perspectives](#) (focused on bringing in ideas more generally from outside of journalism to journalists), started by journalists themselves.²

¹ Facilitating successful exchanges, whether formal or informal, requires understanding the priorities of both journalists and non-news experts. For more on how this has worked for researchers and other fields, see the work of Adam Seth Levine at Johns Hopkins University, e.g., “*Unmet Desire*,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Spring 2022.

² The American Press Institute sponsored 2023 and 2024 events organized by Perspectives

- **Audience:** Targets curious journalists who seek to explore research and can step away from daily work.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists improve their work with research insights, in a setting removed from daily work that might allow the ideas to stick.
- **Exposure:** Provides exposure to ideas and adds a community element that might encourage future engagement with non-news experts.
- **Interaction:** Facilitates direct exchange between journalists and researchers.
- **Researcher motivation:** Increases reach of work with possibility of new connections to journalists.

Purpose: Address a news challenge, but with integrated expertise

Some interventions involve indirect learning and incorporation of expertise from outside journalism; it is not necessarily why news leaders participate, but a benefit.

Programs and resources for journalists can be informed by research and expertise.

Organizations can build programming and resources *based* on research; they can even facilitate their own collaborations with researchers. This is the case with the [Oklahoma Media Center](#) (which serves Oklahoma news organizations); they worked with local academics to study media trust in the state, which preceded grant and training programs to address the findings. [Trusting News](#) (which helps newsrooms demonstrate credibility and build trust) also often points to research for the individual recommendations it makes and has built resources based on collaborations with researchers.³

- **Audience:** Targets journalists working on a problem they face, not necessarily those looking for research.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them, with expertise integrated where relevant.
- **Exposure:** Provides exposure to ideas more often than researchers.
- **Interaction:** Can allow for some direct exchange between journalists and researchers (e.g., news leaders and researchers collaborating on an experiment that leads to findings; or Q&As for a wider group on what was done.)
- **Researcher motivation:** Informs the project/resource through collaboration and creates new opportunities for publication, as well as reach and relationships.

³ The American Press Institute has provided significant financial support to Trusting News, an [independent organization](#) previously co-hosted by the Reynolds Journalism Institute and API.

There are in-person events for journalists centered around their challenges, but with integrated expertise.

Organizations can incorporate non-news expertise in events organized around the problems journalists want to address. This is the case with API Local News Summits at the [American Press Institute](#) (which serves news leaders), where we organize invitation-based, participatory events on pressing challenges in local media. The summits gather dozens of news leaders alongside a curated group of non-news experts whose expertise is woven into the programming. This is similar to training offered by [Good Conflict](#) (which helps people in various fields reimagine conflict).⁴ The work is organized around the challenge with non-news insight integrated at relevant times.

- **Audience:** Targets journalists working on a problem they face, not necessarily those looking for research.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them, with integrated expertise where relevant. Forms new connections between researchers and journalists.
- **Exposure:** Provides exposure to both ideas and researchers themselves.
- **Interaction:** Allows for direct exchange between journalists and researchers at relevant points.
- **Researcher motivation:** Helps explore new applications of research or new lines of inquiry.

There are project-focused cohorts around challenges, where expertise is integrated.

Organizations can bring non-news expertise into longer-term support around the problems journalists want to address. This is the case in some cohort programs run by journalism support organizations. For example, the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) (which helps journalists rigorously report on responses to social problems) has done this in fellowship programs, such as its [Complicating the Narratives fellows program](#). This program helped journalists use conflict mediation techniques to “surface deeper truths about the communities they cover,” teaching such concepts and also bringing in guest speakers. The [Local Media Association](#) has incorporated climate communication experts from George Mason University and elsewhere as resources for participants in its [Covering Climate Collaborative](#).

- **Audience:** Targets journalists working on a problem they face, not necessarily those looking for research.

⁴ For one example of how Good Conflict's work is applied to local media, see this 2023 API essay: "[Bring constructive conflict to local opinion journalism](#)."

- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them, with expertise integrated where relevant. Forms new connections between researchers and journalists.
- **Exposure:** Provides exposure to both ideas and researchers themselves.
- **Interaction:** Allows for direct exchange between journalists and researchers at relevant points over time.
- **Researcher motivation:** Helps explore new applications of research or new lines of inquiry.

Purpose: Collaborate intentionally and mutually

Some interventions are built for shared goals: both journalists and non-news experts participate, knowing what they're doing and for a common cause.

In some programs, journalists and researchers can pitch projects together.

Organizations can offer funded opportunities for journalists and experts to collaborate. This is the case with a program for the [Center for Cooperative Media](#) (which supports local journalism, including collaborative journalism); it opened applications for "[civic science](#)" [collaboration grants](#).⁵

- **Audience:** Targets journalists with ties to researchers and a shared interest.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them, strengthened by expertise and increased capacity.
- **Exposure:** Relationship already likely exists, at least to some extent.
- **Interaction:** Requires direct exchange between journalists and researchers over time.
- **Researcher motivation:** Varies. Helps create new opportunities for publication, potential to increase quality of work, increases reach of work, helps local journalism and/or helps fund work.

Researchers and journalists can also collaborate outside of formal programs.

Collaborations can happen on one-off and local levels, where news leaders and non-news experts come together to address a challenge. This is the case with the [Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation and the Fort Collins Coloradoan](#), which worked together to reimagine the

⁵ The Center for Cooperative Media has also published resources on [meaningful collaborations between journalists and non-news partners](#).

local opinion section using expertise from public deliberation and psychology⁶. National organizations may also collaborate with local organizations, such as when [More in Common](#) and Kansas City Star worked on understanding social connection in the metro area.

- **Audience:** Targets journalists with ties to researchers and a shared interest.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them, strengthened by expertise and with increased capacity.
- **Exposure:** Relationship already likely exists, at least to some extent.
- **Interaction:** Requires direct exchange between journalists and researchers over time.
- **Researcher motivation:** Varies. Helps create new opportunities for publication, potential to increase quality of work, increases reach of work, helps local journalism, helps explore new applications of research and/or helps fund work.

Fellowships also allow journalists to address a challenge in proximity to researchers.

Organizations, especially universities, may offer opportunities for journalists to pursue a challenge in a setting with relevant researchers. This is the case with fellowship programs serving journalists, such as the [Knight-Wallace Fellowships](#) at the Wallace House Center for Journalists at the University of Michigan and the [John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships](#) at Stanford University. In these cases, journalists work on their proposed challenge during an academic year and with access to world-class resources and faculty support.



These are examples of entities facilitating exchanges between journalists and non-news experts.

⁶ The American Press Institute provided a grant to the Coloradoan, a Fort Collins newspaper, [for this collaboration](#) with the Center for Public Deliberation. The CPD has worked with other local media in the state as well, including Rocky Mountain PBS.

- **Audience:** Targets journalists ready to address a challenge, open to help from outside of journalism.
- **Benefit:** Helps journalists address the problem in front of them.
- **Exposure:** Relationship does not have to already exist.
- **Interaction:** Requires direct exchange between journalists and researchers over time.
- **Researcher motivation:** Varies. Helps researchers explore new applications of their research or new lines of inquiry. Helps support local journalism.

Reflections & Notes

All of these speak to different levels of openness and intent. And different approaches to facilitating exchange likely reinforce one another.

Settings where journalists gather to address challenges can create new ties between news leaders and researchers. Those relationships allow for individual collaborations with mutual intent. The content and spaces where journalists learn directly from subject matter experts keep the value of any exchange top of mind and serve people actively interested (e.g., journalists who were exposed in a program).

Five 'bright spots' on bridging across difference + journalism

When we set out to catalog the kinds of collaborative spaces between journalists and researchers, we started with an eye toward depolarization.

Notably, few of these initiatives focus on helping journalists and researchers inform each other's work on limiting polarization (or improving civic discourse) as a specific focus.

Given our goals and what might be on the minds of many stakeholders following the U.S. elections, we wanted to highlight where it has happened.

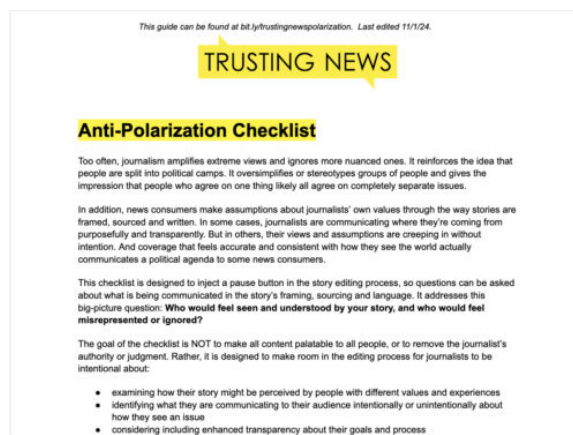
Below are "bright spots" for this topic specifically.

1) Play matchmaker between news leaders and experts to inform practical resources for the field (Trusting News)

[Trusting News](#) helps journalists actively earn trust.

It has seen success in [connecting researchers with expertise to willing news leaders in its network](#) to study and experiment with ways to depolarize coverage. For example, its "[anti-polarization checklist](#)" is one practical resource, informed by these relationships, that other journalists can use in their work.

The organization is currently involved in a project with [More Like US](#) and [AllSides](#), along with University of Florida researcher Myiah Hutchens, to test what happens when [Similarity Hub data](#) is included in stories. Trusting News is advising those involved. Executive director Joy Mayer has noted the value of that connector and translator role — e.g., helping researchers and journalists communicate in ways that are relatable and understand each other's needs and obstacles.



One of Trusting News' resources informed by researcher and journalist collaboration.



Political scientist Yanna Krupnikov discusses with news leaders her work on polarization.

2) Introduce non-news experts into news leader conversations about challenges (American Press Institute)

The [American Press Institute](#), publisher of this report, helps local and community-based media foster healthy, responsive and resilient news organizations.

API has seen success in integrating researchers and civil society leaders into invitation-based events for news leaders, called [API Local News Summits](#). For example, a recent summit on election coverage incorporated a polarization researcher from the University of Michigan, and a recent summit on rural journalism engagement included an expert in social psychology and deliberation.

What we are learning and trying to improve upon is detailed in the next chapter.

3) Pair researchers as key partners in cohort programs for news media (Local Media Association)

The [Local Media Association](#) and its foundation helps local media share, network and collaborate, with a general focus on reinventing business models for news.

LMA has seen success in including climate and climate communication experts as partners and resources in its [Covering Climate Collaborative](#). Participants have turned to experts from various organizations to aid in how they pursue and present reporting on the climate, including Climate Matters, SciLine and George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication.

"It's climate reporting 'plus,'" said Frank Mungeam, chief innovation officer for the Local Media Association and who has run the collaborative. The program helps with "reporting on the science," but "in a way that's intended to bridge divides, address misinformation and apply the science of effective communication." There's responsibility for not just getting the facts right, but helping it reach audiences, said Mungeam.

Mungeam said monthly calls with various experts on the record help with the appeal of the collaborative, in addition to the community of peers working on the shared beat. As the programs evolve, Mungeam said LMA is exploring additional ways to collaborate with experts to give journalists more practical guidance on effective ways to bridge information divides.

4) Incorporate news leader- and academic-led partnerships into class curriculum (Center for Public Deliberation)

The [Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University](#) helps enhance local democracy through improved public communication and community problem-solving.

The university center has seen success in working with local news organizations and teaching students through firsthand experience within that partnership. For example, when its staff worked with The Coloradoan newspaper to reimagine its local opinion section, students helped with the partnership. Students, trained in helping run productive small groups and in-person meetings, also helped [encourage productive discourse in the online forum](#) for the collaboration.

The approach helps students gain experience and provides some scale and capacity to a collaboration. At Colorado State University, a “deliberative journalism” class served as an anchor, with class assignments related to collaborations. Leadership and resource changes at the Coloradoan disrupted the relationship, but organizers continue to work with other local media in Colorado.

For the past year, the Center for Public Deliberation has partnered with Rocky Mountain Public Media, the Colorado Press Association, the Colorado Media Project, and a cohort of over 40 newsrooms to launch [Above the Noise](#), a statewide project focused on helping local newsrooms build civic capacity and engage their communities more productively. As part of that project, the group has supported convenings with 20 showings of the film [Undivide Us](#), followed by community conversations to help residents de-polarize and connect across political differences. Students have again helped facilitate some of the events.

[University partnerships for local news](#) remain a growing trend nationally.

5) Focus journalism fellowships on topics that allow for deep news leader and researcher collaboration (Wallace House Center for Journalists)

The [Wallace House Center for Journalists](#) at the University of Michigan fosters excellence in journalism through several programs.

Its [Knight-Wallace Fellowships program](#) allows journalists to step away from the newsroom for an academic year to pursue a project with access to faculty and resources at the greater university.



An event by Above The Noise at The Denver Museum of Nature and Science. (Photo by Mari Moxley)



The Knight-Wallace Fellowships program allows journalist and researcher interaction over an extended time.

The program has specialized fellowships, including the James S. House and Wendy Fisher House Social Science Fellowship; this can attract interested journalists who want to understand and use social science research, including on political polarization.

As part of the overall program, fellows take classes at the university related to the challenge they are pursuing. Some may structure independent studies with reading lists and case studies or reach out to faculty and other experts for informal conversations. Fellows do not report during their fellowship year, so “interactions on campus are all academic,” said Lynette Clemetson, Charles R. Eisendrath Director of Wallace House. “Because it’s not a transactional relationship, then the fellows can relax and the faculty can relax.”

Many scholars involved with the fellowship program appreciate the opportunity it provides to refine how they communicate their ideas.

Clemetson expressed similar interest: “Institutional experts are wrestling with the same thing that many news organizations are wrestling with — an erosion of trust from the public . . . I think grappling with it in silos is not the way to do it.”

**

The landscape and list above offer guideposts and insights for those who wish to build programs or collaborations that facilitate fruitful exchange between news leaders and non-news experts.

The more the journalism support space discusses the opportunities and challenges in this work, the better. To model that, we are sharing more about our API Local News Summits in the next chapter.

How API Local News Summits help news leaders and non-news experts collaborate on solutions

Adults learn differently than children, an essential point for anyone designing experiences to help advance journalism.

We have words for this: *pedagogy*, the teaching of children, which many know, and *andragogy*, the teaching of adults.

Research on andragogy helps design experiences for advancing thinking in any field, including journalism.⁷ It shows that adults come into any opportunity to learn with more awareness of the world around them. They have rich experiences to draw upon — but they need to be ready to learn. They need to be motivated to do so and to know how new information will help them. Further, adults do best when their learning is *challenge-focused* — when they bring their issue or problem into the experience.

At the American Press Institute, we think about this for our programming for news leaders. That includes [API Local News Summits](#). Each year, we host three of these highly participatory, invitation-based events for approximately 60 people. They're designed to provide a welcoming and collaborative space for media leaders to think boldly about the role of the free press in the future of our communities.

Our summits are *challenge-focused*. Rather than an open conference program tied by the bonds of the people attending, we bring together a diverse range of news leaders from different mediums and business models to work through a shared challenge. Invitees are facing the challenge in some way and trying to address it. They attend with a sense of how the two-day experience will help them when they return to their organizations. Recent summits have focused on creating collaboration and belonging across teams, evolving how election coverage flows into year-round coverage and embracing the role of convener.

Another mark of these summits is the expertise from *outside of journalism*. Each summit's 60 participants include seven to eight “non-news experts” — civil society leaders, artists and, often, researchers. These non-news experts share their insights to help news leaders on their challenge;

⁷ This author was introduced to the concept of *andragogy* in a workshop led by [Resolve Philly](#), a Philadelphia news operation that has also supported local journalism's transformation across the country. For an example discussion of andragogy, see this paper: “[The Six Characteristics of Andragogy and Future Research Directions in English as a First Language: A Literature Review](#),” Elsa : Journal of English Language Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2022.

the experts also gain ideas for further research and potential collaboration. They are an important element of these summits, though they are not the sole reason people attend.



Editor AmyJo Brown discusses using voting districts to kickstart community listening during the API Local News Summit on Elections, Trust and Democracy.

We've been evaluating how we make this work at our summits, where the interaction between news leaders and non-news experts is a top-rated attribute. We held three summits in 2024; 4 out of 5 of surveyed participants across summits noted these sessions as helpful or enlightening. And when it came to the topic of elections, where bridging was already on their minds, the response was even more positive. Some 95% selected it as helpful and/or enlightening.

One participant sums up a theme we often hear: "The overviews and meetings with the non-news leaders were terrific," this person said. "We all suffer from some amount of 'group think,' so whenever I can hear from folks who appreciate what we do as journalists, but can give us feedback on how to do it more effectively, I'm game."

We strive to improve our model and share what we are learning with others.

Here are some things we do that we think work:

- **The challenge is the event focus, not specifically learning from experts.** Each way journalists might learn from researchers can have a place — and we believe reinforces the others — but we find news leaders crave deep discussions with thoughtful peers about one challenge at a time. The focused headspace of an intentional two days away allows time for conversation between peer news leaders and the non-news experts, in a context not driving toward a story quote. Moreover, it attracts people who are ready to learn and who have their own challenges, allowing them to bring meaningful ideas and connections back to their news organization.

- **Attendance is small and curated.** The challenge drives the right list of attendees. When the challenge is narrowed, you as an organizer prioritize your outreach — and you create a context where each interaction someone has while attending can be of high value. Attendees can count on meeting people working on a similar issue, with similar influence in their organization — boundaries that also help the non-news experts focus what they share.
- **Expert inclusion is based on news leader needs and knowledge gaps.** In addition to curating the room based on the challenge, we inform the agenda of these programs with insight from the news leader participants. API staff conduct stakeholder interviews with many participants on key questions about the challenge at hand, the answers of which shape a pre-event survey that all participants complete. The learnings from that process shape the final program. The conversations also reveal the gaps news leaders have, suggesting what kind of expertise will most benefit participants.
- **Most of the event is shoulder-to-shoulder, news leaders and non-news experts as equals.** Aligned with insight from intergroup contact elsewhere, these events limit distinctions between news leaders and non-news expert attendees.⁸ Everyone walks in the same and completes Day One activities and reflections together, talking in small pairs and groups, no matter the person's background.
- **We change the orientation after everyone is comfortable.** It isn't until Day Two that we draw lines. We host non-news expert-led small groups in the morning. This timing means many people have shared meals together or talked with one another either in a



Participants at the API Local News Summit on Rural Journalism, Community and Sustainability share takeaways from small group sessions with non-news leaders.

⁸ One core idea of intergroup contact theory is that parties of different backgrounds must engage on equal footing. Here is one introduction to much more discussion of intergroup contact theory: "[What Is the Contact Hypothesis in Psychology?](#)" ThoughtCo, October 2019.

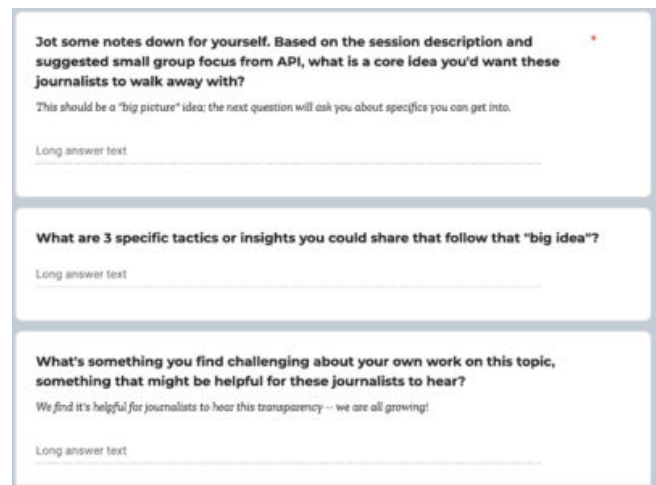
programmed exercise or the unstructured time around it. They've also all shared the summit experience so far.

- **We prompt news leaders to reflect.** After the small groups, we ask news leaders to reflect on their conversations and write down ideas they can bring back to their news organizations. The exercise helps the individual reflect, though we also place the anonymous reflections up for everyone to read — and to see the scale of learning possible together.

Here are some things we're learning:

- **People want more opportunities to engage during the events.** Once they're in small groups together, most participants want to keep going. We've learned in the past year and a half that one round where participants can choose from about seven non-news expert-led small groups is not enough. We've increased them to two rounds (each 45 to 55 minutes). This allows news leaders to participate in more than one non-news conversation.

- **It helps to prep non-news experts for these conversations about journalism.** It is not common in academia or civil society to enter into collaborative conversations with journalists about the role of the free press in one's community. Over time, we have worked on prepping non-news attendees for our small group formats using a Google Form that helps them outline what they will share through focused prompts about the topic and their work. After they submit, we offer feedback on what may or may not resonate with journalists and to provide insight into what is happening in the current news innovation landscape.



Jot some notes down for yourself. Based on the session description and suggested small group focus from API, what is a core idea you'd want these journalists to walk away with?

This should be a "big picture" idea; the next question will ask you about specifics you can get into.

Long answer text

What are 3 specific tactics or insights you could share that follow that "big idea"?

Long answer text

What's something you find challenging about your own work on this topic, something that might be helpful for these journalists to hear?

We find it's helpful for journalists to hear this transparency -- we are all growing!

Long answer text

A portion of the form API shares with non-news experts.

- **Focusing on key points keeps conversations productive — and a researcher's prep light.** While we put time into preparation, we keep the format of the small groups themselves relatively loose. Non-news experts are asked to share focused findings or examples for five to 10 minutes and to enumerate their ideas. From there, we want them to spend the rest of the time following the interests of the group, which number from seven to 10 people.
- **We can be even more mindful of the non-news experts' experience, even as we focus first on the news leaders.** API's core audience is news leaders, but we know we can still become more inclusive in how we instruct non-news experts to participate in activities that are mostly geared toward news leader participants. Some non-news experts like participating in these exercises from their own vantage point; others have liked imagining what they would do as a news leader; some have opted not to participate as much but to listen.

- **The interest in learning from non-news insights continues afterward.** We gather summit participants for a virtual “reunion” about three months after an event. Participants have valued repeating the non-news small group activities online — but we think it works best then because the bonds have been built. We have tried to feature non-news small group discussions as an optional session in a virtual program with limited success. As a result, we believe the in-person nature of our summits is an important differentiator for our own future programming. We know, too, that participants embrace the opportunity to engage each other beyond the follow-up events we organize. For example, after our election-focused summit, the Detroit Free Press invited University of Michigan political scientist Yanna Krupnikov to speak with staff.
- **Politics isn’t the only way to gain insights that bridge differences and reduce polarization.** We found an appetite for non-news small groups focused on bridging and depolarization at a summit for rural-serving news organizations. The interest mirrored when we wove this into a summit of politics editors at an election-focused gathering. This suggests that interesting work can be done in depolarization and journalism in spaces that aren’t first organized around it or have the obvious tie.

We’ll continue to iterate on the API Local News Summits, striving for excellence and for insights others can learn from. We are also keenly interested in what factors outside of the events themselves might help create more fruitful exchanges like this, whether organized by API or others.

Further, we know that getting it right is its own learning opportunity. When we, as a journalism support organization, model facilitation and event design that builds bridges and creates fruitful exchange among different types of people, news leaders can follow. News leaders, [increasingly conveners themselves](#), can bring their API experience back to their organization and elevate their offerings for their community.

What's striking news leaders about listening in a polarized world; what's striking researchers

Journalism is essential to creating the civic culture that many civil society leaders and philanthropists seek to foster — and that researchers desire to understand or improve.

At its best, an independent local press surfaces common facts we need for our shared reality. It holds powerful people and institutions accountable, those that affect taxes and rents, the water we drink and children's education and future. It elevates the individuals and groups working to address problems we see daily — and the communal experiences, such as the arts, that take us beyond them. It can [model and equip residents for, and even facilitate](#), conversations on all these fronts, including when they're challenging and across lines of difference.

The many functions of journalism matter nationally, too. But we feel deeply and daily when those functions deal with our neighbors. We know we need to bridge differences with the people we share neighborhoods.

As we consider how to chart paths forward after the November 2024 elections, local media's opportunity to [convene](#) must be part of the conversation.

"It's forced me to explore the various ways we are all responsible for fixing and fortifying our news and media ecosystem."

Our [API Local News Summits](#) offer one window into the kinds of work in "bridging across difference" and depolarization efforts that interest local news leaders. By their design, they also offer insights into how researchers in these spaces may think differently about journalism's connection to their work.

To support the work of civil society, philanthropy and research, we are sharing what we've learned in terms of what *ideas* have resonated.

Here are some of the calls to action that sparked interest from news leaders over several recent API Local News Summits:

- **Reach beyond the politically involved.** News leaders are already discussing how to counter news avoidance, and [a great deal of it occurs](#) around political news. Experts in polarization and bridging can add consideration around who is being served by that information. In our summits, post-event surveys show many people latched onto University of Michigan Prof. Yanna Krupnikov's work on "[The Other Divide](#)."

From one participant: “I couldn’t stop thinking that I was part of a very strange 20% of the population that cared about politics, and I needed to reach the 80%.” Throughout recent summits, many participants noted conversations about centering issues instead of politics in news coverage and using action and agency “as an ‘antidote’ to combatting disengagement.”

- **Elevate identities and shared experiences beyond politics.** Local media are eager to find ways to stand out from national news and information sources and to serve their communities in authentic ways. Several were drawn to ideas in psychology and survey research, such as from the nonprofit research group [More in Common](#), about collective identities that don’t lean on politics.

Said one participant: “I absolutely loved to hear from people outside journalism about how we can upskill by learning more about just humans and how humans work and think and behave.” Leveraging nostalgia was one uniting theme that many news leaders — writing the “first draft of history” themselves — wanted to explore.



News leaders post takeaways from small groups led by non-news experts at our API Local News Summit on [Elections, Trust and Democracy](#) in Akron, Ohio.

- **Design thoughtful community engagement structures.** As more news organizations [embrace the role of convener](#), news leaders are looking for the right ways to set up in-person and online engagement for quality discourse or connection. Many civil society organizations have meeting structures they believe work well, and some have research to affirm them; leaders gravitated toward structures, prompts and even specific language that is tested and tried. For example, one participant recalled a “starting point” question Braver Angels would ask a focus group of Michigan voters. Others expressed interest in processes from the world of public deliberation.
- **Develop skills to convene and facilitate.** Productive in-person engagement requires more than a tested script. Because it’s real life, conversations can evolve in unpredictable ways, including ones with tense moments and conflict. News leaders took an interest in [individual convening skills](#) and how to handle conflict in real time — skills that help them

listen and bridge on the fly. The “listening tips” API shared in summits were well received (and supported by research), but participants wanted more time to practice them.

Here are some observations from non-news experts following their interaction with news leaders:

- **The innovation of local media was out of sight.** While the local news landscape is uneven across the country, only some of our non-news experts knew the extent of the bright spots. This is especially true for in-person convening.

“What really stood out to me was the amount of community engagement that was happening in some of these media markets throughout the country,” said Tami Pyfer, co-creator of the [Dignity Index](#), and who previously interacted with local and state press as a city councilperson and state school board member for many years. “I think the overarching narrative that I hear is that local media is dying,” said Deborah Tien, founding steward of [Common Agency](#), who added that people in newsrooms she saw were “hopeful” and “open to exploring different ideas.” There was “much more focus on two-way communication than I had expected,” said another non-news expert.



Deborah Tien, founding steward of Common Agency, talks between sessions to news leaders from Kentucky and Texas.

- **The care and thoughtfulness of local journalists were often hidden.** Several non-news experts described how much they saw journalists cared about their craft — and their community.

Being a part of conversations with journalists “humanized them in a very positive way,”

said Steve Saltwick, a senior fellow at [Braver Angels](#), who described how journalists he spoke to very much wanted to be accurate and fair. Said Krupnikov, a researcher noted above: “I think academics have many criticisms for journalists, and it was really fruitful to hear that [journalists are] cognizant of these kinds of things [academics often note], and trying to address them.” Kate Carney, chief of staff at More in Common, spoke about local news as an anchor institution, with care as a visible driver. “Yes, they were there to provide news and trustworthy coverage and represent voices, but it was very much driven by that ‘we love our community’ piece.”

- **The resource and pressure challenges were out of sight.** Researchers and non-news experts who spoke admirably about the news leaders also spoke empathetically about their real challenges.

“There’s sometimes less consideration [from researchers] for the breadth and scope of challenges that [journalists] face,” said Krupnikov, pointing to a range of resource challenges that came up in daily tasks of small teams, not to mention other community pressures in publishing journalism. “These guys are at the mercy of a terrible business model, and they’re trying to do their craft,” said Saltwick. Some noted trying to adjust the presentation of their findings for busy journalists based on pressures they heard.

- **More research may have applicability locally, not just nationally.** Researchers and non-news experts noted many surprising intersections with their work and specifically the challenges facing local news.

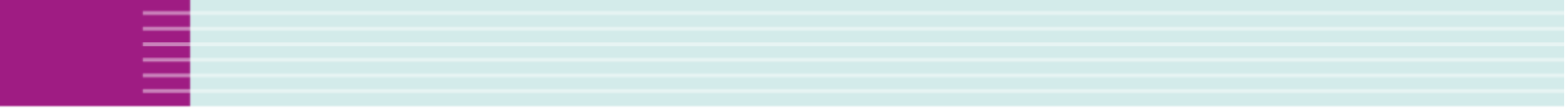


“I tend to think about [my work] in terms of impact on people’s global or national attitudes,” said Andrew Abeyta, a Rutgers University psychologist who studies nostalgia. “...[The summit] opened my eyes to how applicable the research is to what some would consider smaller local problems as opposed to big national problems.”

Said Pyfer: “It made me want to revisit how we engage journalists [with our process] because of this large amount of community engagement that was happening in local media.”

- **Researchers can learn from news leaders — especially their innovations in community engagement.** Several non-news experts talked about how the strategies discussed could help their work, too, including as more academics are pushed to share their work with broader audiences or to create community engagement projects for classes they teach.

Reflected Abeyta: “How can we create opportunities to interact, to be more front-facing



with the community, to share the research and to share our knowledge work with local partners?” Another noted the meeting was one of “kindred spirits.”

- **Improving the future of news and information is a shared challenge.** Many people found common cause with the news leaders or articulated how the press mattered for their vision.

Said Danielle Rugoff, who attended as head of movement activation and partnerships with the nonprofit [Starts With Us](#): “It’s forced me both to enter every conversation and to proactively discuss and explore the various ways we are all responsible for fixing and fortifying our news and media ecosystem.” Rugoff, now founder of Purple Lexicon, and others noted wanting to join others’ small groups to enlarge the conversation about research and civil society helping media. Several noted having a meal together and meeting each other for the first time.

These calls to action and observations suggest where to direct programs and research to fit news leaders’ needs and interests. They also point to ways to build fruitful exchanges between news leaders and researchers, and where to look for impact over time.

Recommendations to enhance how news leaders and non-news experts inform each other's work

We can all play a role in understanding and improving how the free press serves an inclusive democracy.

This was a yearlong project to understand how news leaders and non-news experts inform each others' work, in API programming and beyond. We remain committed to understanding and further facilitating these relationships.

For those interested in similar work, we are outlining implications and recommendations.

For nonprofits and universities seeking to advance journalism

- **Weave non-news expertise into programming centered on challenges.** Our field will do well in addressing the challenges of local journalism with a wide aperture. For example, what we learn from academic literature about slowing polarization or political violence can be integrated into how journalism support organizations help news leaders with coverage and planning. But the awareness of context also matters. When you're focused on solving a problem, research is most helpful — rather than asking most news leaders to consult on top of busy and demanding schedules.
- **Create space for in-person interaction that builds social ties.** Just as our field has put value on industry conferences and networking, it might also look for opportunities to help journalists and non-news experts connect in person. In our experience, this is where the genuine exchange happens and the opportunity for later collaboration arises — in physical settings far different than the most typical journalists-researcher interaction of an interview.
- **Create space for free exploration and collaboration between news leaders and researchers on challenges.** For more news leaders and researchers to inform each others' work, they will need more structure to support these collaborations. Fellowships are a particular avenue for serving local journalists since they can be expanded, as are summits and online spaces that nourish bonds and facilitate exchange. The practical needs of most journalists should be kept in mind. For example, during the Covid pandemic [JSK Journalism Fellowships](#) launched a "Community Impact Fellowship," which allowed fellows to remain in their communities. [Nieman Fellowships](#) offers shorter fellowships in addition to academic year fellowships. The Reynolds Journalism Institute offers in-person as well as remote fellowships. Journalists also benefit from the cohort experience of these programs, which provides important emotional and intellectual support.

- **Explore how these insights might fit into content and resources.** While understanding ideas from research should not feel like homework to busy journalists, journalists still need to keep up with innovations in their field and use resources to help them. How might ideas from research and researchers themselves be elevated to journalists when they are in a challenge-addressing mode? On this point, there is a culture of “expert source lists” and experimentation in resource design (e.g., [meeting discussion guides](#), decision trees, etc.) to build upon.
- **Apply the inverse ideas.** We’ve seen the benefits of having non-news experts in our API Local News Summits, primarily serving news leaders. Both sides benefit. What would it look like for more news leaders to participate in largely research spaces? Would their questions and fresh eyes — not in interview mode — enhance conference and paper presentations? What would deliberate programming for researchers based on this approach for news leaders lead to for researchers focused on listening and learning in a polarized world?

For researchers and civil society leaders wanting to improve journalism

- **Consider how your work applies to *local* news (not just national).** While necessary attention is on the national news and information landscape, local media is more trusted — and Americans [recognize the importance local media plays in community well-being](#). Moreover, local media are eager and open to how to better serve their neighbors. Many are already leaning into local identity and in-person engagement, ready for practical and tested ideas that help them serve and even improve their community. If civil society and philanthropy look at local solutions as an essential part of change, local media are logical partners.
- **Understand the unique pressures facing local news today.** While news leaders are eager for this work, their conditions are challenging. Local newspapers continue to close, and staffs are shrinking while the information landscape shifts. Covering current events, from disasters to divisive politics, weighs heavily. How any effort will sustain the business *and* its people should be part of the equation.
- **Design resources for the demands of news leadership today.** If the pressures are intense, the interventions and even the presentation of information must be realistic. Non-news experts in our interviews noted how leaders asked about clear, concrete applicability of ideas. Some noted how they make meeting templates and scripts that news leaders can use or adapt. Designing for speed and accessibility is critical.
- **Look for informal opportunities to share insights with local news.** Sparking ideas is just as important as sharing concrete evidence or templates. Non-news experts and news leaders who met in our events went on to connect outside of them, setting up calls for the researcher to help brainstorm ideas for a new kind of political coverage and inviting the editor to campus to discuss journalism. Friendly inclusion of one another as collaborators to improve community well-being is doable.

- **Build community around applying research to improving journalism.** One-off collaboration and study can be powerful, and we have seen interest in shared conversations with researchers about media's opportunities in bridging divides. This was surprising for us, but many non-news experts we involved in events expressed interest in getting to further know the other non-news experts we invited. It may be something to nourish and indicate the interest in media among depolarization researchers and civil society leaders more generally.

For all

- **Look for local and regional opportunities to create these exchanges.** While local news has faced significant challenges, one bright spot is the response. Community leaders are coming together to form a range of state-level and regional supports for local journalism ecosystems, such as the NC Local News Workshop in North Carolina and the Oklahoma Media Center. As these operations grow — and perhaps so do the number of local chapters in the national philanthropic Press Forward movement — there are additional opportunities to help local news leaders and non-news experts shape each other's work. One-off collaborations that are featured in this report, formal and informal, often had ties by geography; these spaces where people meet and form relationships could be further nurtured.

Funders interested in helping media learn from research they fund may also find these ideas helpful and worthy of support.

For our part, we are interested in connecting with individual researchers, university centers, civil society groups and others who want to improve journalism and how it serves the whole of our communities. If you are interested in this goal, please contact us at hello@pressinstitute.org.

About the Author

Kevin Loker, Senior Director of Program Operations and Partnerships

Kevin Loker serves as Senior Director of Program Operations and Partnerships at the American Press Institute, where he has spent more than a decade helping local news organizations improve their journalism, business and connection to their community. In this role, Kevin organizes and facilitates programming for the Journalism Programs team, including experiment funds, research and API Local News Summits. He also supports the VP of Journalism Programs and CEO in maintaining and developing partnerships with funders and collaborators to support API's work. For 2023-2024, Kevin was a Visiting Fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. His project built upon work to reimagine local opinion journalism and philanthropy's role in the process.

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- API Local News Summit on Elections, Trust and Democracy (2024)
- API Local News Summit on Rural Journalism, Community and Sustainability (2024)

About API

Our Mission

We support local and community-based media through research, programs and products that foster healthy, responsive and resilient news organizations.

Our Vision

We envision an inclusive democracy and society, where communities have the news and information they need to make decisions and thrive.

Our Strategic Focus

As our industry evolves at a rapid pace, we provide a welcoming and collaborative space for media and journalism leaders to think boldly. We combine our deep industry expertise with a suite of [research, programs and products](#) to ensure news organizations can thrive.

Our Areas of Focus



Civic Discourse & Democracy

We work to ensure all people have the information they need to make decisions and thrive.



Culture & Inclusion

We mentor journalism professionals toward integrating diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in every aspect of their work.



Community Engagement & Trust

We support news organizations as they build trusted relationships with their communities.



Revenue & Resilience

We provide news organizations with the tools and resources they need to think creatively and achieve overall wellness.

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