

KEVIN CULLEN

The future of journalism is on the ground

In an age of corporate media, hyperpartisanship, and alternative facts, the young journalists from Report for America spread into little and middle America to do some old-fashioned shoe leather reporting.

By [Kevin Cullen](#) Globe Columnist, Updated November 30, 2020, 6:55 p.m.



GroundTruth Project founder and editor and Report for America cofounder Charlie Sennott. MICHAEL CASEY/CASEY PHOTOGRAPHY

If it seems like American democracy has been under attack for a while, that's because it has been.

It is no coincidence that the crisis in American democracy has grown exponentially alongside the demise of too many American newsrooms. Not the glitzy broadcast conglomerates that continue to make money hand over fist, but the more modest ones — smaller daily newspapers, alternative weeklies, radio stations — peopled by those who live in the smaller communities they serve.

Charlie Sennott, an accomplished reporter, left the Boston Globe in 2008 to cofound a news site called GlobalPost, aimed at filling the gaps left by the dramatic drop in foreign reporting by American news organizations.

GlobalPost did some great work and won [many awards](#). But something dawned on Sennott and his colleagues.

“We realized the big story wasn’t in Afghanistan,” he said. “It was right here.”

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Eight years ago, Sennott’s Boston-based [GroundTruth Project](#) grew out of GlobalPost, shifting its business model to nonprofit, but keeping its focus squarely on the perilous state of journalism and supporting a new generation of journalists.

In sheer numbers, [the collapse of news organizations](#) and jobs in journalism is akin to the collapse of the coal industry. It was fitting, then, that in 2018, the first three young journalists sent into the field by the GroundTruth Project's [Report for America](#) initiative landed in coal country in West Virginia and Kentucky.

The [Lexington Herald Leader](#) used one of the journalists, [Will Wright](#), to reopen a bureau in eastern Kentucky that had been closed for 10 years. Wright did some extraordinary reporting on the lack of clean drinking water in coal country.

“By the end of 2018,” Sennott said, “we had 11 reporters. By 2019, we had 61. This year, we had 226 reporters in more than 160 newsrooms.”

Last June, some 90 [journalists of color](#) from Report for America arrived in American newsrooms just as racial tension flared nationwide in the wake of [the police killing of George Floyd](#) in Minneapolis.

Another of the young journalists, [Samantha Hogan](#), the Maine Monitor's first full-time reporter, exposed how the state was using [lawyers with criminal records](#) to defend its poorest residents.

The initiative is paid for mostly with foundation money, with the [Knight Foundation](#) being the cornerstone and lead of some 800 donors. Report For America pays for half of the journalist's salary, and helps the newsroom to come up with the other half from local sources.

In the coming year, Report for America will have some 300 reporters embedded in more than 200 newsrooms, according to Kim Kleman, the former editor-in-chief at Consumer Reports who serves as Report for America's national director.

That those numbers keep growing underscores the hunger for solid news coverage in communities across America. In response to a vast majority of the program's applicant

newsrooms, the initiative will also send 20 mid-to-late career journalists into newsrooms, to fill gaps in editing, investigative journalism, and mentoring.

“Our mantra has been the crisis in our democracy has everything to do with the crisis in our newsrooms, local journalism especially,” Sennott said. “Local journalism is how we come together as a community, around basic facts and truth. We know how divided cable news is, way left, way right, so much shouting and everybody goes to their safe corners.”

Report for America is an alternative to alternative facts. It finds young, emerging journalists who are willing to do the grunt work in less-than-glamorous settings, putting the leather back in shoe-leather reporting. Now, it will send some grizzled veterans in to help, too.

It’s an ambitious effort, more than about filling gaps in an industry whose business model has been decimated on the local level. It’s about changing American culture and inspiring a new generation by redefining journalism not as just a job but as public service.

“We’re catching a glimpse into the corners of America that aren’t being covered, hopefully to restore local journalism and our ability to start talking together,” Sennott said.

A tall order. But a noble one worth encouraging.

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