

Inside **Philanthropy**

Democracy Funders Are Forgetting About One of the Biggest Threats to Democracy

Steven Waldman and Lauren McKown, Guest Contributors | February 01, 2022



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It's the most overused quote about journalism and probably should be retired from public life. But desperate times require desperate measures.

Thomas Jefferson: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

The reason to remind us of this is not merely that enemies of democracy are attacking the free press (though they are), but rather that friends of democracy seem to have forgotten the centrality of journalism in preserving the Republic.

In the past few years, the philanthropy world has awakened to the need to strengthen democracy, and [some say 2022 may be one of the most urgent years](#) for democracy giving in recent memory. Democracy funders have done incredibly important work fighting voter suppression, opposing gerrymandering and advancing other political reforms.

But there’s something missing. According to Foundation Center’s database, not a single one of the top 20 recipients of democracy grantmaking from 2019–2021 was a news or journalism organization.

Of the top 100 recipients, only six are news organizations—and only one of the 100 is a local news organization.

Yet we are in the midst of a crisis in local reporting that fundamentally undermines democracy.

There are now 1,800 communities that have no news and thousands more that have “ghost newspapers,” which barely cover the community. One study found that only 17% of the news in local newspapers is actually about the community.

The negative effects on democracy are significant. Several studies have shown that less local news leads to [lower voter turnout](#), [less civic participation](#), [more alienation](#) from civic institutions, less transparency, [more corruption](#), [less accountability](#), and [more waste](#).

And according to the University of North Carolina's U.S. news deserts research, the communities that suffer most from this loss are "poorer, older and less educated than the average American." They're also more likely to live in rural areas.

A new book by professors Danny Hayes and Jenny Lawless—"News Hole: the demise of local journalism and political engagement"—reviewed the research about the declines in local civic participation and concluded that the common explanations for the drop in participation "don't account for the most dramatic change in civic life U.S. communities have experienced in the last 20 years: the decimation of local news media."

Perhaps the most glaring disconnect between the strategy of many democracy funders and the reality on the ground revolves around two topics that are, appropriately, viewed as especially urgent: misinformation and polarization.

The shortage in local news [exacerbates polarization](#). One piece of evidence: Communities that have less local news have more party-line voting than those that have more (after correcting for other factors). The vacuums created by the local news collapse are [filled by national cable TV, talk radio, and social media groups](#), all of which are more partisan. And that greater [reliance on national news sources](#) makes people more likely to spread disinformation.

Further, [polarization also fuels the spread of misinformation](#) because people who demonize those with different political views or cultural backgrounds are more likely to spread falsehoods. And as polarization grows, people trust professional news sources less and conspiracy theories more.

We also know that the local news contraction coincided with the rise of Nextdoor ([233,000 communities](#)) and Facebook local groups. In addition to connecting neighbors for [all sorts of positive purposes](#), they have [become a major spreader of COVID-19 misinformation](#), [QAnon conspiracy theories](#) and [other types of falsehoods](#).

One journalist described how misinformation [spread at his local Nextdoor site](#) in North Carolina. “Commenters admonished neighbors to ‘Do your research!’ and posted dozens of links to viral misinformation sites, sometimes spamming the thread with nearly identical posts. Neighbors attacked other neighbors by name, posted memes pulled from conspiracy sites, called vaccinated people ‘sheeple’ and warned of the end times and the ‘[mark of the beast](#)’.”

Researchers have found the [same problems](#) with [Facebook groups](#); some 75% of Americans said they encountered misinformation on Facebook, [while only 16% said they did in their local newspaper](#). Both [Next Door](#) and Facebook [recently announced steps](#) that they believe will [minimize](#) the odds of misinformation spreading on groups—and Facebook has supported nonprofit news organizations, including Report for America—but they’re going to need a lot of help from actual reporters.

It’s hard to prove that the decline in the number of local reporters is the main driver of misinformation (correlation is not causation). But clearly, one of the most important ways to combat misinformation is with more local reporting.

Local reporters are more trusted in part because they're on the ground and can interact with residents personally and directly. They don't just report; they get seen doing reporting. It's harder to demonize a reporter (or anyone) when you can talk to them.

And despite some early signs that fact-checking websites [backfired](#), the academic research now seems clear that fact-checking [actually helps](#) quite [a lot](#), especially when reporters follow up to [confront public officials](#). We need roughly a zillion more pieces with the tone and thoroughness of [this COVID FAQ](#) by Report for America corps member Annie Berman in Alaska.

So why have too many democracy funders neglected one of the biggest threats to democracy? Some may find it difficult to justify investing in solutions where the impact throughline is difficult to track. Despite these academic studies, it's hard to prove that any given additional reporter leads to greater voter turnout or less gerrymandering (although Media Impact Funders has developed [an excellent resource](#) for how philanthropists can approach this challenge). It may also be that funders have not yet caught up with the severity of the collapse of a function that only recently was well-served by a commercial industry.

There are bright spots to celebrate (and hopefully, emulate). Quadrivium, Kathryn and James Murdoch's new philanthropic venture focused primarily on democracy strategies, recently [made news through an ambitious \\$5 million gift](#) to the American Journalism Project to bolster local news start-ups. And Democracy Fund's [Public Square program](#) has been catalyzing local news ecosystems in North Carolina, New Mexico and elsewhere for years.

At Report for America, partners like the Joyce Foundation have helped us to dramatically expand local coverage of state houses in the Great Lakes region as a

part of its broader democracy strategy. We're also seeing community foundations step up in a big way—Report for America is finding increasing numbers of communities creating dedicated “community news funds” to support local news that strengthens civic life.

But these philanthropic leaders in the democracy space urgently need the company of dozens of their peers to make a true impact on the problem.

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