



A GUIDE TO ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A toolkit to inform grantmaking and collaboration

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SECTION 1: WHAT IS A NEWS ECOSYSTEM?

How Democracy Fund defines a news ecosystem

Democracy Fund defines a news ecosystem as the network of institutions, collaborations, and people that local communities rely on for news, information, and engagement. Healthy news ecosystems are diverse, interconnected, sustainable, and deeply engaged with their communities.

This approach recognizes that where there once was a thriving news industry, dominated by big newspapers and TV stations in most localities, there are now struggling news ecosystems made up of small pieces loosely joined together. The health of a news ecosystem used to be rooted in the stability of a few big newsrooms, but today healthy news ecosystems are more diverse and dynamic. This reflects not only how media has changed, but also how communities get their information from different platforms and outlets.

A news ecosystem, like a natural ecosystem, is made up of networks of interdependent parts. A news ecosystem consists of anchor institutions (newsrooms, universities, libraries, government agencies), infrastructure (ownership, access to broadband, media training), and networks (informal information networks, platforms, people). The boundaries of news ecosystems are not uniform and have to be understood through the lens of people who inhabit them. An ecosystem is not just the collection of these parts but also the connections and relationships between them. When an ecosystem is healthy the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

“Funders considering supporting local news, information, and media can take it as a given that the local news and information needs the investment. Undertaking an assessment to find out if and not how is a waste of time. They can also take it as a given that the public will tell them that they’re not getting what they need, particularly the lowest-income groups and the communities of color who are not getting what they need. In fact, be prepared for communities of color in particular to talk about how much they’ve been harmed by negative and unfair media coverage.”

– MOLLY DE AGUIAR, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

People at the center

An ecosystem approach to local news is fundamentally about putting a place and its people at the center of our thinking. When we begin an ecosystems assessment, we start by asking questions like:

- What kind of news and information do people need to manage their daily lives, make informed decisions as voters, and participate meaningfully in society?
- What kind of information is currently available to them, how do they access it, and how do they make sense of it?
- How does information circulate through the community? What are the networks and relationships that enable or inhibit that information flow?
- What kinds of opportunities are there for people to engage with information through discussion and debate? Or to share their own lived experiences, questions, and insights with others?
- How do the answers to these questions differ according to a resident's income, race, age, and geography?
- Who is part of a community's public conversation and who is not?

A news and information ecosystem is made up of much more than just news outlets. Through church bulletins, neighborhood listservs, art openings, and organizing meetings, community institutions play critical roles in informing the public and in facilitating civic response to information.

While access to technology and to the internet are important factors, technology is not nearly as important as trust. One of the most powerful and most trusted ways to spread information is by word of mouth.

Who do you turn to for information? The answer often depends on who you are, where you live, and what your life is like. Race, class, neighborhood, education, and language all play a role in who we trust and where we turn. These networks of trust may or may not be connected across different cultural communities within the same geographic community.

We can make our local news and information ecosystem stronger by recognizing these networks of trust and linking them together, allowing information to flow more freely between neighborhoods and people affected by an issue and those making policy decisions. Think of each network of trust as a channel converging with others into a mainstream of civic understanding.

"Putting the people first was the most important element to our work. We didn't do this because we thought we could save newspapers or newsrooms. We found it important that people in small towns have access to information to help them become more engaged citizens, so they're able to make more informed decisions and they're connected with the national conversation, the regional conversation, and the local conversation. We felt that if people didn't have access to information, access to solutions-oriented information, it could be harmful to community."

- LAMONTE GUILLORY, LOR
FOUNDATION