



A GUIDE TO ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A toolkit to inform grantmaking and collaboration

By Fiona Morgan

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SECTION 2: START YOUR RESEARCH

Step 1: Know your community

To understand a community’s information needs and assets, you must get a bird’s eye view of that community as a whole. We start here, before digging into news outlets, because the people — not the media — should be at the center of our thinking.

- **Define the geographic area:** Start by defining the area you want to examine: Which cities or counties are included in the scope of your assessment, and why?
- **Note basic characteristics:** The U.S. Census “[QuickFacts](#)” tool offers a great way to produce a snapshot of key demographic and economic characteristics, including population change over time, race and ethnicity, languages spoken, household income, and broadband access. Local universities or policy organizations may have even more fine-grained data, including information about literacy, workforce development, and differences across neighborhoods.
- **Evaluate economic conditions:** What economic conditions is your community facing? Who is bearing the burden of financial struggle? Who funds nonprofits and other civic efforts? Where are those investments going?
- **Find civic institutions:** What are the major civic institutions in your community? Include government, business, nonprofit, educational, and the arts as well as media. How healthy are those institutions? How have they adapted to change? What is the history of innovation and collaboration among civic institutions?
- **Identify leadership:** Who are the major players, the ones with the political or social capital to move things forward? Who are the people behind the scenes? How well does civic leadership represent the diversity of residents?
- **Learn the civic narrative:** What is the dominant narrative about the community? Is that narrative negative or positive? Who’s telling that story? What impact does it have?

The political climate of a state or city affects not just the news that gets reported and the civic narrative about a place (that it’s “corrupt” or, alternatively, “on the rise”). Politics also affects the social sector’s response — philanthropic funding, community organizing, protest culture, and so on.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CENSUS DATA:

You can create tables that compare these characteristics across geography (e.g., U.S. average, state average, specific cities, and countries). We suggest making note of the following variables:

- Population percent change (this is especially enlightening when comparing urban and rural areas)
- Population by age (for instance, comparing percentages of adults over 65 across communities may offer insight about demand for social services)
- Race and Hispanic origin (note that whites and non-Hispanic whites are separate categories; the cultural meaning of this distinction may vary depending on where you are)
- Percent foreign-born
- Owner-occupied housing unit rate (how many people own versus rent their home? Owners and renters have different information needs)
- Languages other than English spoken at home
- Households with a broadband internet subscription
- Total retail sales (this tells you something about the economy and community's attractiveness to advertisers)
- Mean travel time to work (people with long commutes may spend more time listening to the radio and podcasts and may struggle to be connected to civic life in their hometown)
- Median household income (HHI)
- Persons in poverty (adults and children)
- Population per square mile and land area in square miles (how densely populated is this community?)

Note that the smaller a geographical area, the more likely you'll need to use data from the American Community Survey (ACS) to get an accurate picture. Unlike the census itself, the ACS is compiled from survey data collected over five-year periods, so the data may be labeled 2012-2016. Whichever years you use, make sure to be consistent so your comparisons are accurate.

- **Consider the political structures:** Where do decisions get made? Does the mayor effectively run the city, or does the city manager? Can local governments make big decisions, or are they beholden to the state legislature (as is the case in Dillon’s Rule states)?³ Do governments collaborate, or does each operate in a silo? These questions will inform the “need” side of the civic information equation.

As you dive into the specifics of local media, remember to hold this big picture in your mind. Keep the people of your community at the center for your thinking.

Step 2: Determine need and infrastructure

The framework we suggest boils down to two main questions: What is the need? And what is the infrastructure in place that could help meet that need?

WHAT'S THE NEED?

What are the information needs of this community, and how well are they being met?

In 2009, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released a major report, “[Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age](#),” which laid out much of the framework we use to understand local news and information needs.

Information needs are common to all communities, but the specific gaps tend to differ according to geography, history, and particular institutions.

How have local news outlets changed over time? In assessing the gaps between what people need and what they’re getting, you’ll look at the change in local media ownership and make note of the losses in reporting staff or closure of outlets. (See Section 3: A Deep Dive Into the Media Landscape for resources to help you find this information.)

Who has been left out of the public conversation? Even when newspapers were booming, many people in the community weren’t served, or were badly served, especially people of color and low-income neighborhoods.

Which stories aren’t being told? This is the heart of the question about information needs — what don’t we know about what’s happening, who’s affected, and what could change?

³ For a succinct explanation of Dillon’s Rule and Home Rule, see The National League of Cities, “Cities 101: Delegation of Power,” December 13, 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-delegation-of-power>.

CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS

Scholars working for the Federal Communications Commission have defined a community's critical information needs as information necessary for community members "to live safe and healthy lives; have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities; and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose." Based on an extensive review of the literature, they came up with eight categories of essential information that people need "in a timely manner, in an interpretable language, and via media that are reasonably accessible."

Those categories are:

- Emergencies and risks
- Health and welfare
- Education
- Transportation
- Jobs and economic opportunities
- Environment
- Civic information
- Political information

WHAT'S THE INFRASTRUCTURE?

What exists to meet these needs, and how can we build on it?

- Who's working together? A survey of media outlets is part of the picture, but infrastructure is about how the pieces fit together. Look for collaboration among outlets, look for support organizations such as the state press association or philanthropic funders, and see how well those institutions represent the people who live in the community.
- Who's stepping up? The infrastructure is comprised of people, not just institutions. You're looking for leaders, not just in the media but in the community's civic life, people others trust and turn to.
- How well can local news adapt to change? You're also looking for resiliency and innovation: Community capacity depends largely on how well its leaders and institutions respond to change.

Consider these questions:

- What assets are particular to this place and its culture?
- Which institutions and people are collaborating?
- How could you connect existing assets and networks?
- What could you build on?
- Who can you rely on to build with you?

Rural communities may have a particular challenge when it comes to infrastructure, because communities with smaller populations tend to have fewer institutions to work with. In that case, it helps to look at regional institutions or core local institutions that may be willing to work regionally in a thoughtful way. It is also helpful to look at what type of infrastructure rural communities do have. While there may be fewer institutions, there are often informal networks and relationships that you can work with.

Finding the answers: Research methods

We've explored complex questions to ask about your local news ecosystem. To find the answers to these questions, it helps to talk to people with a broad range of perspectives. Here are a variety of methods to choose from based on what seems appropriate to your community.

Feel free to mix and match the research methods that best serve your questions and needs and match your capacity. While this is not an academic exercise, scholarship does offer useful tools. It's up to you how closely you want to hew to scientific standards.

Focus groups offer another way to elicit frank, direct insights from people in your community about their news habits, the sources they trust, and their concerns. Community partners can help recruit focus group participants with whom your organization may not otherwise have relationships. Local News Lab offers a [detailed guide on how to use focus groups](#) to assess local news ecosystems.⁴ Focus groups were a key component of Philip Napoli's News Measures Project, a comparison of local news across three New Jersey communities.⁵ They were also essential to the Lenfest Institute's study of Philadelphia residents' local news habits.⁶

Surveys elicit concrete responses from individuals. If done right, surveys can offer a quantity of responses from a broad enough range of subjects to infer things about the community as a whole. Such data can be valuable to social science and business. That type of survey, however, can be expensive. There may be a local poll or survey already in the field that could provide insight or that would be willing to partner by adding a question directly related to your research.

The Listening Post Collective used surveys, along with interviews, community workshops, and immersive observation, as part of their deep study of the information needs of Latino immigrants in Oakland, California. The surveys were designed to look like greeting cards, so that they were short and easy to fill out. The organization distributed them at public festivals, libraries, a mobile food bank, and local churches, garnering responses from 268 individuals.⁷

Content analysis is a systematic, quantitative way of analyzing text.⁸ The process involves gathering content from a defined time period, having human beings code the content along certain categories, then using technology to analyze the patterns. In this context, content analysis can be a way to look at which outlets produce original local content, how much, and about which topics, among other things.

⁴ Jessica Crowell and Kathleen McCollough, "Conducting Focus Groups to Understand Local News Audiences," Prepared for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Local News Lab, June 20, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://localnewslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LNL-Guide-Focus-Groups-2017June20.pdf>.

⁵ Philip M. Napoli, Sarah Stonbely, Kathleen McCollough, and Bryce Renninger, "Assessing the Health of Local Journalism Ecosystems: A Comparative Analysis of Three New Jersey Communities," Prepared for the Democracy Fund, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, June 2015, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <http://mpii.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/129/2015/06/Assessing-Local-Journalism-Final-Draft-6.23.15.pdf>.

⁶ Michael X. Delli Carpini, Mariela Morales Suárez, and Burt Herman, "Being Informed: A Study of the Information Needs and Habits of Philadelphia Residents," The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, October 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/being-informed/>.

⁷ Madeleine Bair, "Más Información: An Information Needs Assessment of Latino Immigrants in Oakland California," The Listening Post and El Tímpano, Internews, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.internews.org/resource/mas-informacion>.

⁸ For a detailed explanation of content analysis as a research method, see "Content Analysis," Pew Research Center, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/methods/about-content-analysis/>.

All of these methods are potentially complementary. Surveys, for instance, can give you a broad sense of people's attitudes and experiences and draw your attention to specific things you might want to investigate further. You can also include a question in a survey inviting people to volunteer for a focus group or one-on-one interview.

Step 3: Listen and share, early and often

We're smarter when we put our heads together, and that's certainly true when mapping local news ecosystems. Engaging stakeholders early and often can make your assessment richer and pave the way for stronger collaborations when you're ready to act on what you've learned.

Engagement can be as simple as occasional phone calls or coffee dates, keeping people informed about the process you're undertaking. It can mean monthly get-togethers at lunch or after work with a diverse group of colleagues in the field.

Broader community engagement is also a way to gather rich input from the people most directly affected by the quality of local news and information. In this guide, we'll explore ways to do that.

Choose your engagement methods

One of the many benefits of engaging your community is the valuable insight it brings. These practices can be a powerful way of gathering information.

- **World Café:** This method of facilitated discussion is great for exploring common interests and surfacing ideas. A World Café gathering typically requires between two-and-a-half and four hours. The format involves three rounds of small-group discussion, with participants circulating between each round, followed by a full-group report-back. The process is flexible and manageable for large and small groups, and offers an alternative to the panel discussion, as it flattens hierarchies and allows everyone to contribute and feel heard. The News Voices project uses the World Café method to put local community members and journalists on equal footing to discuss the community's information needs.

"When you bring smart, thoughtful people to the table, they're able to collaborate in a very effective way. A lot of times in the funding environment, the community is brought to the table at the end. There's real value in bringing them in early to have community-led dialogue on what's needed."

- LAMONTE GUILLORY, LOR FOUNDATION

- **Story circles:** Storytelling is a powerful way to build community. Jesikah Maria Ross, community engagement strategist for Capitol Public Radio in Sacramento, has used story circles as a way to engage people with diverse experiences in meaningful conversations about social issues. The process Ross uses typically lasts about two-and-a-half-hours, beginning with a mobile story booth to take photos of participants and collect their handwritten accounts of personal experience with the issue at hand.⁹
- **Design thinking workshops:** Gather small, diverse groups of people together and ask them to map the local news and information; you may be surprised at what arises. Local news consultants for Democracy Fund used small, participatory workshops to engage local stakeholders in a process of mapping the local news and information ecosystem in Chicago.
- **Ongoing gatherings:** Community engagement is a cumulative process, and there's much value in providing a consistent opportunity to come together monthly or even once a quarter.

"Beyond the grantmaking, of course, getting people together is one of the most important parts of project like this. That's something we can bring to the table."

– KATIE BRISSON,
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST
MICHIGAN

Conduct interviews

Borrow this tool from journalism. Interviewing key stakeholders is a great way to get a lay of the land and understand what's particular about your community's needs and assets. Interviews were an essential component of my own report on North Carolina's local news ecosystem.¹⁰

CHOOSING WHO TO TALK TO:

Who can help you learn how things work in your community? That's the guiding principle behind stakeholder interviews. To make the best use of this method, gather a wide variety of perspectives. Reach beyond those people already in your social or professional circles.

There's no rule about how many interviews an assessment requires. A good start may be to make a list of eight to 10 people, ask those subjects who else you should be talking to, and then add them to the list. It's likely you'll have a dozen names in no time, and some studies involve two dozen interviews or more.

⁹ Jesikah Maria Ross, "Story Circles: Contact Zones for Deep Listening," Medium, Sept. 2, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/@jesikahmarioross/story-circles-contact-zones-for-deep-listening-b9d1c90be569>.

¹⁰ Fiona Morgan, in consultation with Melanie Sill, "Learning from North Carolina: Exploring the Local News and Information Ecosystem," Report for Democracy Fund, March 18, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/learning-from-north-carolina>.

Expect interviews to last between half an hour to an hour. The key to making the most of this time is to be thoughtful and strategic.

Interview journalists and former journalists, but not just those in print. Talk to management and earlier-career reporters in the field. Talk to folks in newspapers, local TV, public media, online startups, ethnic media, and alternative weeklies. Talk to a freelancer or two, not just those with salaried positions.

Whatever you do, don't speak *only* to journalists. Be sure to include people in civic life who are invested in civic information but aren't part of the news industry. Reach out to the person who runs the active local Facebook group, or the head of the block club. Find grassroots leaders (heads of community-based organizations), especially those who represent racial justice efforts, underserved neighborhoods, or other groups that might have a different perspective from a CEO.

Does your list of interview subjects look like the community? Do you need to hear from more people of color? More young people? More people from certain neighborhoods or sectors? Tap your networks to reach beyond the people you're already in touch with, and feel free to ask your interview subjects to help put you in touch. Time is limited, and no interview list is going to offer comprehensive points of view, but these interviews are an opportunity to reach beyond the usual suspects and bring new people into the conversation.

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS:

In your invitation, ask subjects for 30 minutes to one hour of time, if you both can spare it. Explain the basic scope of what you're trying to find out, and why you've chosen to talk to that person. Let them know what you intend to do with this information — this is an important moment to manage expectations about any grant funding or other commitments by letting people know where you are in the process and what will happen when.

When you speak, ask permission to record, and be clear about the terms of the interview, such as who will see it and what you'll do with the material. (A good way to proceed is to agree that only you and your core team will see the raw interview, and that nothing will be attributed to them in a public way without their approval.)

"We brought journalists and community members together for design thinking workshops, and as part of that we went out and did man-on-the-street interviews....The process, I think, got us out of our journalistic thinking bubbles, and that was helpful."

– MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS,
GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION

DECIDING WHAT TO ASK:

Here are a few sample questions you can use as a starting point. Adapt or add to them as you feel is appropriate.

- When you think about how people in our community get local news and information, what comes to mind?
- How have you been affected by changes in local news?
- Are there any particular sources you trust, or that you think are doing a good job of covering the local community?
- What stories do you think aren't being told that need to be?
- Besides media outlets, what do you think are trusted sources of information for you and other people you know? (Feel free to list examples included in this guide.)
- If you could wave a magic wand and change the local news and information in your community, what would you do?

On a practical note: The most time-consuming part of interviews by far is the transcription. If your budget allows, consider using a transcription service like Rev (\$1/minute) to free up your time.

A view from the field: Scholarship on local news ecosystems

The sort of research we're discussing in this guide is highly practical — it's meant to be acted on. But much of what we've learned about local news ecosystems comes from academic scholarship. Scholars use social science and other methods to expand our understanding of the world, though they usually avoid making practical recommendations. The field of scholarly research on local news ecosystems is rapidly evolving. If you're interested in diving deep, and learning about the foundations of what we know, read on.

Sarah Stonbely, director of research at Montclair State University's Center for Cooperative Media, wrote in the trade publication *Nieman Lab*, "Despite the volume of research currently under way about news ecosystems, there is no gold standard."¹¹ As is often the case with research, there's a tension between depth and breadth, between a highly contextualized knowledge of a specific place and a replicable, scalable approach that allows for comparison across communities.

¹¹ Sarah Stonbely, "There Isn't One Best Way to Map Local News Ecosystems. But Can We Do It Better?" *Nieman Lab*, December 5, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/12/there-isnt-one-best-way-to-map-local-news-ecosystems-but-can-we-do-it-better/>.

Case studies: This method most closely resembles the type of study outlined in this report. Case studies are a highly adaptable method that allows for deep context and exploration of a particular place. An excellent example is Pew Research Center’s 2015 deep-dive into three communities — Denver, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; and Sioux City, Iowa. The study, *Local News in a Digital Age*, provides side-by-side comparisons of three very different communities, blending descriptions of the racial, ethnic, economic, and civic culture of each place with analysis of news habits, news content, and social media use.¹²

Digital ethnography: Michelle Ferrier, dean of the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication at Florida A&M University, has blazed trails in the field with the [Media Deserts Project](#). She defines a “media desert” as a geographic area “lacking access to fresh, local news and information,” a concept distinct from a news desert in that it accounts for “code, conduits, content and geography.”¹³ A key aspect of Ferrier’s approach to mapping media deserts and community information assets is digital ethnography, using tools such as Google Earth (to digitally stroll the streets and see the community’s built environment) and multiple social media monitoring tools to compile feeds from multiple sources (conventional media, government, civic institutions, etc.) to augment in-person engagement, stakeholder mapping, and content analysis.¹⁴

Broad and replicable: Philip Napoli’s [News Measures Research Project](#) at Duke University is developing tools to assess local journalism in three interconnected ways: 1) the nature of journalistic content; 2) assessing the needs, interests, and preferences of local news audiences; and 3) assessing the health and rigor of the local news infrastructures in communities. Napoli’s research began with a comparative analysis of communities in New Jersey that included focus groups, content analysis, and other analytical methods. He adapted this analysis to make it scalable while accounting for complexity. In 2018, his team published an analysis of the robustness of local journalism in 100 communities, investigating the indicators that lead some local communities to receive more journalism that is original and local and that addresses critical information needs.¹⁵

¹² Pew Research Center, “Local News in a Digital Age,” March 2015, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/local-news-in-a-digital-age/>.

¹³ The Media Deserts Project, “About the Project,” Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://mediadeserts.wordpress.com/about/>.

¹⁴ Michelle Ferrier and Fiona Morgan, “Mapping Information Ecosystems to Serve Local News Needs,” Slides from People-Powered Publishing Conference presentation, November 15, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/locallygrownnews/mapping-information-ecosystems-to-serve-local-news-needs>.

Some of the product of Michelle Ferrier’s Media Seeds Project in Southeast Ohio is available at ZipIt.news. See, for example, <http://zipit.staging.communityq.com/stories/adams-count-299>.

¹⁵ Philip M. Napoli, Matthew Weber, Katie McCullough and Qun Wang, “Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News,” August 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Assessing-Local-Journalism_100-Communities.pdf.

What to expect, what to avoid

There are many ways to assess a local news ecosystem. While there's no wrong way to go about it, it may be helpful to consider the lessons others have learned.

It will take more time than you think: Even if you hire someone to conduct the research, know that an assessment will require capacity. Your organization will be most successful if you stay engaged. Budget your time accordingly.

Manage expectations: Be clear and consistent with stakeholders about what you know and don't know about your plans. If you're a grantmaking organization, you're already aware that grantseekers are looking for signals about where you plan to put your resources. Journalists and news organizations in particular may expect this process to lead to investments in specific organizations. Keep your options open and emphasize that the process itself is an opportunity to think collaboratively about what's possible.

Get outside your bubble: When time is scarce, we tend to lean on our most trusted sources. But the process of mapping your news and information ecosystem presents an opportunity to expand your networks and your frame of reference.

Shift your paradigm: Putting the people of your community at the center of your thinking may seem self-evident, but it may also be a very different approach than what you or your organization is used to. Use this process as a chance to reframe your thinking, because this moment demands big, bold changes in thinking.

Use your power: Whatever power your organization has as a convener, a truth teller, a bridge builder, or a trusted leader, use it. Use your power responsibly, recognizing the power dynamics that exist with smaller or less well-resourced organizations and those representing parts of the community that have historically been sidelined.¹⁶

"There is not one solution. As funders, we have to push ourselves to be creative and flexible as we test out ideas."

- MOLLY DE AGUIAR, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

Don't do it alone: There is tremendous value in partnership, especially when taking an ecosystem approach. Reach out to like-minded organizations in your community to partner on an assessment and collaborative plan.

¹⁶ Prudence Brown, a respected leader in place-based philanthropy, has written extensively on how funders can understand power dynamics in doing place-based work. See for instance her paper for Democracy Fund on the roles and practices of national foundations undertaking place-based partnerships: "Effective Place-Based Philanthropy: The Role and Practices of a National Funder," October 17, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: <https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/effective-place-based-philanthropy>.

Step 4: Make sense of it all

You've gathered quite a bit of information. Now, it's time to step back and assess what you've found. Here are some approaches for analyzing that material to look for patterns and opportunities.

Where is the need and where is the infrastructure?

Think back to the original questions. Healthy news ecosystems are resilient, so where do you see resiliency and adaptive responses to change?

What's the story? What story can you tell, based on what you know now? Sketch out that story and share it with key stakeholders to get their feedback. Consider what's specific to this community and what's part of the larger story of local news.

Which questions remain? What are the gaps in your understanding? You won't be able to answer all the questions at once, so make a list of what you don't yet know and consider how the next phase of engagement and feedback can address those questions.

Whose leadership can be developed? Who are the leaders? Who could be in stronger leadership positions? How can the leadership look more like the community? Who needs to be invited to the next round of conversations?

Who will build with you? Which organizations and people have demonstrated a knack for collaboration? What roles could they play? Are they equipped to use an investment or to play a leadership role in ecosystem building? How can you find out?

Are there multiplier effects? Are there hubs in place? How could they be made stronger and more effective? How could hubs outside traditional journalism or media become part of that work? Who and what provides the connective tissue within your ecosystem?

Which models could you try? Projects in other communities may offer inspiration and examples you can adapt to suit your own. Some of these models may be outside the world of media, in the arts or social services. Share these examples with stakeholders and potential collaborators to get their take on how they might play out.

"Don't do your own study. Partner, convene, collaborate, and execute. I think there have been enough studies and reports and pilots. We've entered an environment where foundations can partner with other foundations or organizations doing its work and leverage their funding and knowledge."

- LAMONTE GUILLORY, LOR FOUNDATION.

"Invest in the people who will help you build networks."

- MOLLY DE AGUIAR, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION