



# A GUIDE TO ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A toolkit to inform grantmaking and collaboration

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# SECTION 4: ACT ON WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

Even if you don't yet have a clear course of action in mind, you're ready to begin. The work you've done to map out the ecosystem is of great value to the people you serve, so share it. Invite the people who've helped you so far to reflect on the picture you've assembled, and get their feedback. Extend that invitation further, bringing in stakeholders and new potential partners. Tell the story, even if that story is still unfolding. Move from plans to action, starting with something small that you and your community can learn from.

## Step 1: Get people together

Whether it's a lunch-time meeting, an evening event, or a two-day gathering, a convening is a great way to get feedback, socialize your findings, generate buy-in, and help people brainstorm with you about what to do next and how it could work. It's also a way to get a sense of people's commitment to keep working with you. How they engage in the process illustrates what type of partner they would be.

**Invite feedback:** The people who've taken the time to talk to you in this process are already invested in the outcome. You can honor that investment by keeping them updated and sharing what you've learned with them. Consider bringing them together in a group to thank them, share findings, and ask for their responses. They're likely to find value in the work and in the opportunity to meet with others. This sort of gathering is also an important test-run: If there are adverse reactions, this is the time to find out so you can adjust future communications. This core group may become some of the strongest advocates and ambassadors for the activities that emerge.

**Widen the circle:** The research you've done has likely generated many names of people you want to reach out to but haven't yet been able to engage. By sharing your initial findings, you can invite them into the next stage of the process. Consider using some of the same engagement techniques we touched on earlier — the World Café or design-thinking workshop, for instance — to involve people in thinking through what you've learned and what you might do next. Again, there's value not only in the content but in the opportunity to network with others who care about these ideas.

"We can provide common ground for coming together for the broader ecosystem — to get people thinking about collaboration instead of competition."

— MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS,  
GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION

**Make it public:** Consider throwing the doors wide open and inviting the public to have a conversation about these ideas. A public event could focus the attention of important stakeholders onto these ideas. A listening tour could help you reach people and neighborhoods that you're not otherwise in touch with. This sort of event may be part of a pilot project, as described later when we look at different examples of how foundations have done this work.

## Step 2: Find a center of gravity

Collaboration doesn't happen on its own. You're more likely to move this work forward if someone is thinking about it on a regular basis and keeping the fire burning.

Many ecosystems have found the need for a coordinator or hub organization that doesn't compete with other organizations but instead sees its role as a service to the field with the mission of building a healthy ecosystem.

Consider bringing a coordinator on staff or building that role into the grantmaking. This person could do regular check-ins with key people involved, plan and lead meetings, write blog posts, and scan for opportunities to take action or collaborate. See our case studies for four different examples of people and organizations playing a coordinating role to promote local journalism collaborations.

"Think about who is in charge of making sure the work is connected and cohesive and moving forward. There has to be someone, some entity, charged with doing that, and grant-supported to do it."

— MOLLY DE AGUIAR, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

## Step 3: Share your story

Tell the story of your work as it unfolds — why you did an assessment, how you did it, what you learned from it, and what happens next. Democracy Fund's internal evaluations have found that regular communications and storytelling about the work from this earliest stage is important to building a new vision, getting buy-in, and growing momentum.

The work of sharing your process and story is part of the work of assessing your ecosystem. The storytelling helps reflect the ecosystem back to itself. If done with a sense of openness, it invites feedback that helps you expand your analysis and learn even more.

Be strategic about what you highlight and emphasize. You have the power to lift up people and projects that might not otherwise get attention and to amplify voices that aren't often heard, including media entrepreneurs and juniors in the field. Storytelling allows you to put forward a vision of the ecosystem that centers voices more equitably.

Sharing what you're learning is also a matter of transparency. By telling people what you're doing, why, and how you're doing it, you can help them feel invited to join the conversation and make your work replicable. That transparency will earn trust, and it may inspire others in the community to partner with you.

You can tell your story through blog posts and social media, through in-person gatherings or webinars, or a dedicated website. For example, the [Colorado Media Project](#) has a dedicated website where the Gates Family Foundation and its partners share blog posts and reports.

One of the most popular storytelling methods is an email newsletter that pulls together the work of many people, all within the framework of the ecosystem. A newsletter reminds people that the work goes on, even if there's not a major outcome to trumpet, and it offers a platform where others can share their work. Democracy Fund consultant Melanie Sill uses the [NC Local](#) newsletter to do that in North Carolina.

Newsletters can be time-intensive, but they don't have to be. Weekly is probably too frequent to begin with, so aim for something less ambitious, but do put it on your calendar. Simple platforms like Mail Chimp are an option, but they're not necessary. [The Local Fix](#), Democracy Fund's newsletter on local news, started out as an email with about 20 people in the BCC line. When thinking about the audience for a newsletter, begin with key stakeholders, the 20 to 50 people most likely to be interested, and who you want to bring along in creating a vision for the future. Over time, the audience will grow, and the newsletter will become more of a promotional vehicle for the work it highlights.

## Try something

Now that you know the lay of the land and some potential partners, it's time to try something. What you do first will depend on — and should respond to — what you hear from your community about needs and assets, but some approaches that have worked elsewhere are outlined below. Keep the initial scope of the pilot small and short term, to maximize the chance of success and learn quickly from the experience. Early wins help create momentum for change in a complex system that tends to push back.

"We know we're not going to fix the diversity of all our newsrooms with this amount of money. The [request for proposals] was pretty much like, 'Here's what we care about for these grants; tell us what you want to do.'"

– KATIE BRISSON,  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR  
SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

**Inform, inspire, implement:** Many of the people on the ground in news ecosystems are working so hard just to keep afloat that they don't have time to search out new models, assess what's working, or figure out how to adapt it to their work or community. Guest speakers, social media, curated blog posts, and newsletters are tools to inform and inspire people. Coaching and small grants help adapt ideas to the local context.

"Avoid going all in on a big expensive pilot. Better to start small, be flexible."

– MOLLY DE AGUIAR, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

**Give small grants:** Grants of \$1,000 to \$5,000 can give organizations the chance to try new things, take risks, or catalyze collaborations. These dollar amounts may seem small, but if given with few strings attached, they can free up time and resources and encourage creativity and good will across the ecosystem. Key to this strategy is making sure you can support the organizations to share their learnings with each other and the broader field, so consider having communications capacity and support be part of this early stage.

**Build a cohort:** Whether they're current grantees, new ones or even potential grantees and stakeholders, consider bringing together people with a special stake in local news. Simply giving them the time and space to get together and talk about their work can make an impact. Creating space for people to build relationships around shared concerns and ideas goes a long way toward creating a more connected ecosystem and is often a prerequisite to deeper collaborations in the future.

**Try a collaborative project:** Sometimes the best way to build trust and connection across an ecosystem is through doing the work itself. A collaborative reporting effort can break through the noise to attract people's attention and have an impact. Pick a single relevant topic that many outlets can tackle from different perspectives across different platforms and support that. Examples of this approach include the ["Dirty Little Secrets" collaboration](#) on toxic pollution in New Jersey, the [San Francisco Homeless Project](#), and Resolve Philadelphia's [Broke in Philly](#) project. Make sure one of the grantees is coordinating the collaboration and managing the project. Some organizations, such as the [Center for Investigative Reporting](#) and [Solutions Journalism Network](#), specialize in that coordinating role.

"Every two months, we bring together all the grantees, and they simply share with each other how their projects are progressing. Early on, we tried to program these meetings. We brought in national speakers. Finally, we said, 'Forget that, it's worth it just for them to update each other and make connections.'"

– KATIE BRISSON,  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN