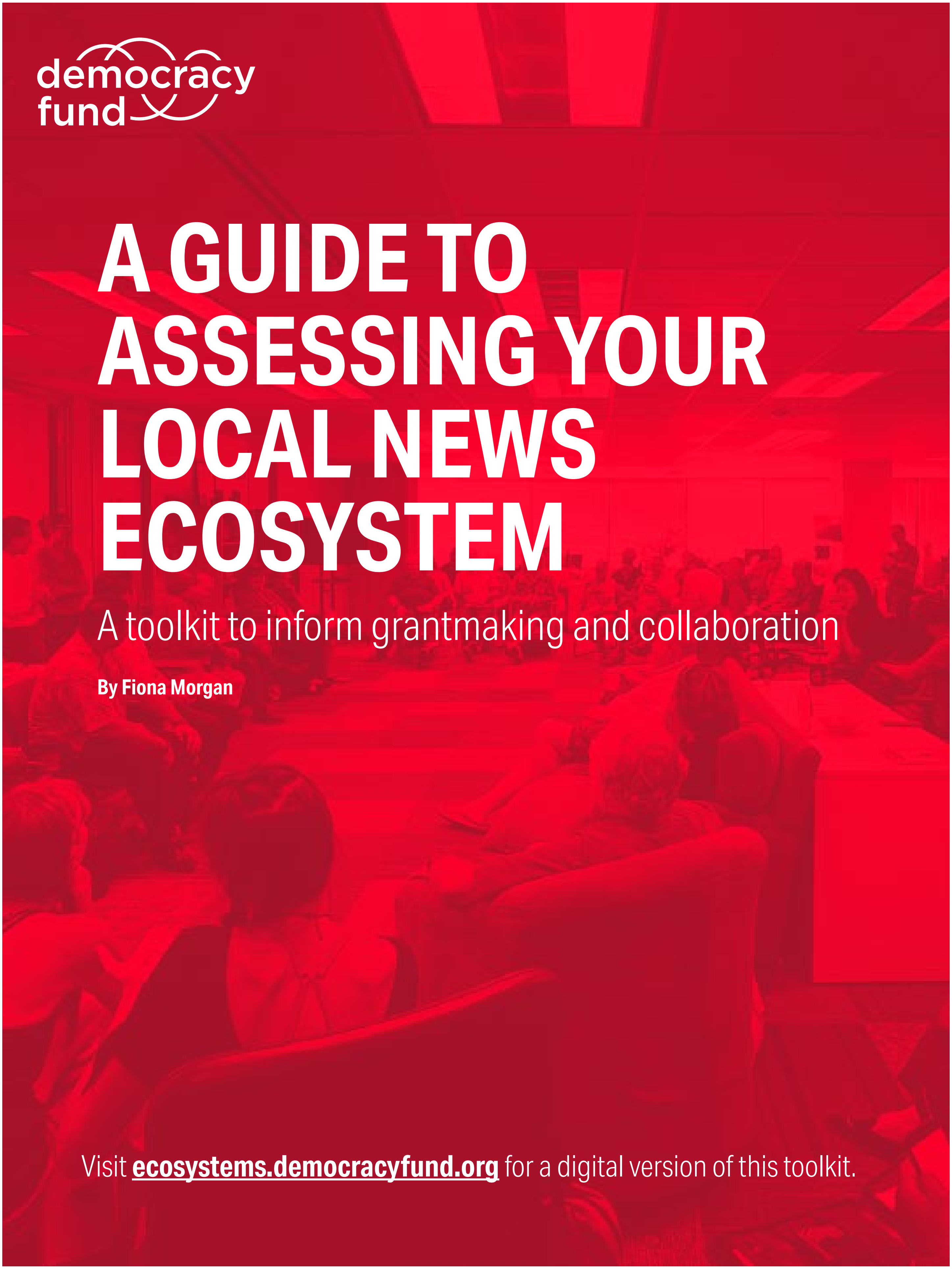

democracy fund

A GUIDE TO ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A toolkit to inform grantmaking and collaboration

By Fiona Morgan

Visit **ecosystems.democracyfund.org** for a digital version of this toolkit.

SECTION 5: RIGHT-SIZE YOUR ASSESSMENT

Much of the work on information ecosystems has been done without a playbook. This guide is an effort to take examples of others' work to create a usable playbook. In this section, we'll synthesize examples into informed, if not fully tested, ways to design your own assessment. (See also the recommended reading for links to examples and tools you can use.)

You may be wondering, how much will this cost? How much time will it take? Who do I need to hire? These are the right questions to be asking, and we've attempted to address them to some extent. But the answers depend on many different factors, and the best approach is to tailor an assessment to both your goals and your capacity. We encourage you to talk to someone who's done similar work before. If you're ready to walk down this road, reach out to Democracy Fund's Local News Lab team, and they can connect you.

You don't have to do everything, and you certainly don't have to do everything at once. It's OK to start small and build over time.

What matters most is finding out what matters most to your community. For that reason, we recommend prioritizing community listening while managing realistic expectations. Be thoughtful about how much time and energy you ask of community members and try to communicate clearly about the outcome they can expect.

We also recommend engaging your organization's leadership in this work, because it's good for them to learn what the work is all about. Leadership's involvement also signals to people that this work is a priority, which may help to open doors. If you're looking for ways to make the case to your board of directors, Democracy Fund can provide guidance and connect you with other foundations, as well.

Be sure to check out the case studies, beginning on page 39, for examples of place-based funders who did scans in partnership with other organizations. Collaborations with other organizations are strongly advised.

> "One of the best things we did early on in our project was to have our foundation president sit in on a convening where the grantees were just sharing about their projects. Our president now has examples of the work she's heard about firsthand and is a big supporter of this in the community with her peers."
>
> – KATIE BRISSON,
> COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Version 1: Fellowship

1. Hire a graduate student or someone with a degree in communications or social sciences, preferably a person with some background in journalism. This person needs to be adept at thinking through complexity.
2. Ask the fellow to read a few of the ecosystem studies and guides, such as this one. A brief annotated bibliography can be useful.
3. Meet and draw up research questions together. Hone your questions and make your goals clear. Talk through the list of stakeholders and the methods they should use.
4. Look at the calendar and make a detailed plan for what you want to have accomplished by the end of the fellowship term. If your plan includes engagement events, schedule them early and offer help for event planning so your fellow can concentrate on the research.
5. Empower your fellow. Offer language to use when setting up meetings and reaching out to stakeholders. Make introductions. Set a realistic goal for the number of stakeholders you ask your fellow to interview or engage with. Insulate them from organizational politics.
6. Make time for multiple drafts and rounds of feedback.
7. Even if you don't plan to release the full report publicly, make sure there is something you can share at the end of the process, for the fellow's sake and yours. This could be a blog post or series of blog posts, or a slide deck.

Financial requirements: Salary, research costs if applicable, convening costs if applicable.

Capacity requirements: Immediate supervisor, staff support for stakeholder outreach, convening, etc.

Version 2: In-house, less than full-time

1. Get up to speed on the state of journalism by reading trade publications such as Nieman Lab, Poynter and Columbia Journalism Review. Attend a conference if possible, such as the Knight Media Forum, to get a lay of the land.
2. Reach out to organizations in the field that can share expertise and point to resources. Those organizations may include Media Impact Funders, Solutions Journalism Network, the Listening Post Collective, and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

3. Remember that you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Determine what research and pilots already exist that you can cite and learn from. What specifically do you need to know about your community to move forward with a good strategy?
4. Find local partners and engage them early and often. Talk candidly about your needs and expectations. Consider a memorandum of understanding (formal or informal) if that helps establish clarity.
5. If you want to employ a research method, such as a survey or focus groups, that's beyond your staff's expertise, engage external help early on.
6. Assemble a committee to stay in touch with throughout the process. Meet to hone your research questions, talk through methods and findings, and troubleshoot.
7. Consider ways to engage stakeholders and the public throughout the process. If you can, share your learnings as you go. This may draw more partners and support.
8. Draft your findings in stages and solicit feedback. Use design to convey concepts visually. Put together slide decks to present to stakeholders.
9. Make a deadline to finish the fact-finding stage and move into strategy and implementation. You'll never know everything.

Financial requirements: Research, convening, and travel costs, if applicable.

Capacity requirements: Some percentage of the lead staffer's time, plus additional staff and leadership support.

Version 3: Outside consultant or grantee

1. Decide what sort of assessment you need: quantitative or qualitative? A comprehensive historical scan of local media, or something more focused on a specific issue, such as representation or digital startups?
2. Find a consultant with the orientation and background that suits those needs. Talk through methods and examples and share them with your leadership team.
3. Determine the deliverables that matter most to you. Get clarity on what you need to make this work actionable.

"This was not a hands-off, make-a-grant project for us. We've been on weekly calls, I've overseen interns. As a place-based foundation, we have to show leadership. It can't just be like, give it to a nonprofit and they'll figure it out. Our president has been willing to use his political credibility to say, 'This is my issue right now.' I really can't say enough about having leadership that is known and respected, sounding the alarm in the community."

– MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS,
GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION

4. Stay engaged. An outside consultant may bring a lot to the table, but they won't be able to leverage your knowledge and relationships unless you take part in the process. Budget time to offer background and share what you know. Make introductions. Check in frequently and make sure there's an open channel for questions.
5. If you plan to engage stakeholders or use focus groups, use your knowledge and relationships to make that process successful. Leverage community partnerships.
6. Budget time for drafts and feedback. Think visually.

Financial requirements: Consulting fees may range from $10,000 to $100,000 or more, depending on the scope of the study. Survey costs vary widely, too, with costs much higher for large-scale studies with statistical significance.

Capacity requirements: The staff lead working with the consultant should budget multiple hours early on and during the drafting and feedback stage, with smaller time commitments in between. Administrative support in the contracting phase.