

Expert Report Syndicate 7: Community trust, media literacy and informational access

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Conventional methodologies for practicing journalism are crucial for helping communities meet their information needs and strengthening democratic processes. However, traditional journalism in the United States has faced significant challenges, particularly following the seismic 2008 market collapse, which led to the closure of numerous local newsrooms and the consolidation of media outlets (McChesney & Pickard, 2011). In the immediate aftermath of this crisis in American journalism, the Knight Commission (2009) produced a comprehensive report to identify prevailing communication needs, outline practical strategies, and urge the pursuit of three imperatives: maximizing access to credible information, strengthening the capacity of individuals to engage with that information, and promoting public participation with civic information and public life in the community. While several notable digital start-ups (e.g., Patch and EveryBlock) and philanthropic efforts (e.g., Free Press and Journalism Funding Partners) seek to address these issues, significant information gaps persist in local communities.

The current demand for credible, relevant, and engaging local news and information has necessitated a thorough examination of the role that community media centers (CMCs), particularly those associated with traditional cable television infrastructure, play in addressing critical societal issues. With civic engagement reportedly declining, social bonds weakening, and government accountability increasingly questioned, CMCs have the potential to serve as vital platforms for community discourse and interaction (Rhinesmith, 2016; Simama, 2022). By leveraging their established frameworks, these centers can promote participatory media practices, enhance public awareness, and facilitate a renewed commitment to civic responsibility among citizens. Such an evaluation could lead to innovative strategies for revitalizing democratic participation and strengthening community ties in an era of intense digital transformation and social fragmentation.

Since the 1970s, communities in the United States have used PEG access channels, funded by fees imposed on cable television services, to share a diverse range of civic information, coverage of community events, and human-interest stories with local audiences. Additionally, CMCs connected to these PEG channels provide various services (such as media production training, access to A/V equipment libraries, and networking opportunities for media professionals) that cultivate the growth of vibrant local media ecologies (Fuentes-Bautista, 2014; Ali, 2014; Chen et al., 2013; Stewart & Shaker, 2018). Recently, due to the challenges faced by local commercial news media, many local news researchers and practitioners have proposed that CMCs offer a unique, participatory foundation for efforts aimed at strengthening and diversifying local journalism ecosystems (Haywood & Pickard, 2021; Crittenden & Haywood, 2020; Holliday, 2021; Neason, 2021; Regan & Jones, 2016). Many CMCs are expanding into community news reporting and the distribution of civic information. During crises such as the COVID-19 shutdowns and wildfires (in California and Hawaii), CMCs provided local communication services that helped residents stay connected and informed (Castillo, 2023; Haywood, Aufderheide, & Sanchez, 2020). Despite CMCs' efforts to remain relevant in the digital age, their traditional funding is diminishing as consumers shift from cable subscriptions to streaming services. These increasing financial threats have led to many losses. Still, several CMCs are forming innovative partnerships that enhance sustainability, demonstrate value, and engage local students, grassroots creators, and information advocates in community-centered journalistic practices.

The **central question** the members of this syndicate will discuss and answer is: **"How can journalism educators, community media practitioners and civic organizers collaborate to develop and teach communication practices that build trust, promote media literacy and enhance informational access?"**

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