

THE PUBLIC'S MEDIA

**The Case for a Democratically
Funded and Locally Rooted News Media
in an Era of Newsroom Closures**

MICHAEL SWERDLOW

**Introduction by
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**CENTER FOR STUDY OF RESPONSIVE LAW
WASHINGTON, DC**

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION BY RALPH NADER	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	13
SECTION 1: FOR-PROFIT NEWS HAS FAILED TO SERVE LOCAL CITIZENS	16
SECTION 2: PUBLIC MEDIA FACE THEIR OWN FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE PRESSURES	21
SECTION 3: PUBLICLY FUNDED MEDIA STAND ON STRONG HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS	25
SECTION 4: PUBLIC MEDIA'S FUNDING MODEL, GOVERNING STRUCTURES, AND SOME OPERATING PRACTICES ARE BARRIERS TO PUBLIC MEDIA'S CORE MISSION	30
SECTION 5: HOW PUBLIC MEDIA'S FINANCING AND GOVERNANCE MODEL AFFECTS NEWS CONTENT	47
SECTION 6: REFORMS TO ENSURE THE MATERIAL SURVIVAL OF THE FREE PRESS AND GROUND PUBLIC NEWSROOMS WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES	62
APPENDICES	78

Introduction

by Ralph Nader

As a public communications medium, radio has had an unabated history of degrading itself from its original inspiration by civic groups and public servants tasked with regulating it during the nineteen twenties and early nineteen thirties. Then Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, reflected the widespread opinion of those days in declaring that radio stations operating over the public airwaves had to be seen as a public trust, operating without commercial advertising as nonprofit entities. For a few years, this public trust view collided with early commercial interests smacking their lips over the profit potential of the new medium. These lobbies also saw the commercial ideologies dominating as well. They prevailed! Unfortunately, the dynamics present in radio's fall repeat themselves throughout public media in its varied mediums.

After some fierce debates and controversial clashes, the forces behind licensing for-profit advertiser-supported radio stations won out, first with the Radio Act of 1927 and later in the more comprehensive Communications Act of 1934. The latter Act created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The requirements for obtaining FCC licenses on the spectrum were formidable for nonprofit groups, and the standards for renewing them every three years were too general and difficult for challengers to invoke. The central provision in the Act visited upon all radio and TV licenses was a general, undefined obligation for programming in the "public interest, convenience and necessity." To this day, that standard has been an ideal unrewarded by FCC enforcement and unprotected from being actively undermined by subsequent FCC actions. These included the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 and the Right of Reply while allowing for massive cross-ownership and concentrating mergers in the radio industry, further facilitated by the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 under President Bill Clinton and an indifferent Anti-trust Division within the Justice Department.

The result has been a world of commercial radio filled with jackhammer, repetitive ads, and music, with some stations offering traffic, weather, sports and business news bytes around the hour, highlighted by three minutes heavy with “violence news” at the top of the hour. There are stations featuring hours of daily talk shows, overwhelmingly dominated by nationally syndicated and local fast-talking right-wing hosts, fueling misinformation and corporatist/militarist ideology. This fits the business model of commercial radio—right-wing hosts attack government regulation because the government doesn’t advertise, while giving businesses, which do advertise, a free ride.

The FCC is so compliant with this model that major, sometimes tumultuous, news events and rare presidential addresses to the nation occur without any suspension of the daily programming by owners seeking maximum ad revenue. This occurred, for example, during the afternoon of January 6, 2021. I flipped through about thirty commercial stations that totally ignored this ongoing assault on the U.S. Capitol. Many of these chain radio stations in small markets don’t even have live staff on duty to make such a news judgment. The giant radio syndicates can own over 1000 stations and are trying to automate as much of their programming as possible, thus endangering the emergency functions of these stations in rural areas.

Year after year, the control of radio stations by corporate conglomerates (such as iHeart Radio and Sinclair Broadcasting Group) and their programming by right-wing ideologists intensified hand in hand with scarcely any challenge or organized criticism from liberals, progressives, or their allies in Congress. It has been an astounding surrender, without a fight, about one of our country’s major communication mediums using free the public airwaves, no less. To make matters worse, corporatist radio, television, and social media are powerful enough to change the course of elections. The unrebutted daily diatribes to blue-collar workers have moved many of them into the category of Republican voters, whether unionized or not.

The unions, with no media presence (unlike the Voice of Labor syndicated radio after World War II), have lost over a third of their rank and file to the virulently anti-union GOP. Many an election has been decided by a smaller margin than this shift of workers, taking in the manipulations and lies of these national super-rich talk show hosts, freeloading on the public’s airwaves, who learned how to reinforce these workers’ deepest anxieties and fears of being left behind.

This surrender of the airwaves has been compounded by the sharp decline in any news media oversight of the radio industry. Cutbacks have included critics in newsrooms and magazines. Digital media have not appreciably filled this vacuum.

It is this vast degradation of the ideals and dreams of conservative Herbert Hoover, who became our 31st president, and the early boosters behind the use of the public airwaves for

the people's enlightenment, for countering the press barons of those times, for giving voice to local activities and the local populace, that provides the context for Michael Swerdlow's report. This examination does not purport to cover the expansive realm of public radio, its contractors, consultants, its many Boards, and the many variations between local stations in covering their communities. Were it to have that pretension and scope, the availability of the necessary data is either withheld from the public or does not exist. Those who know the facts and situations would not, with some exceptions, agree to be interviewed. Expecting a public trust in a public media receiving public funds turned out to be a mirage that quickly vanished when probed by the author. Nonetheless, he persevered and assembled a compelling foundation for assessing the corporatization of this public media and how far it has strayed from the original vision elucidated in the 1967 hearings and embedded in the originating statutes that created NPR and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

In the past fifty-seven years, congressional oversight to measure mission with performance has been nearly non-existent. The focus has been occasional squabbles over keeping or repealing modest taxpayer support for public media.

This lack of funding for public media, at a time when two newsrooms are closing every week in America, animates the urgencies and proposals in Swerdlow's report. He reminds us that George Washington and other leaders insisted that newspapers and pamphlets receive very low postage rates—a crucial subsidy that continued through the centuries and accounted for the proliferation of news, features and editorial content unrivaled by most democracies. Without similar levels of public funding for the public's media, many of our communities have already become news deserts. Additional communities may soon share such a fate.

George Washington's foresight has now been supplanted by the limitless onrush of commercialism, short-term greed and the strip mining of acquired newsrooms and magazines by corporate predators for their immediate profiteering.

With no operating context other than commercial radio, public radio can look pretty good to listeners grasping for content. Indeed, there were leaders in commercial television and radio in the early gestations of PBS and NPR who foresaw these new institutions as useful in getting the federal government and the FCC off their own backs, given the standards of the Communication Act. These public media would assume the burden of meeting the "public interest, convenience and necessity" freeing the corporate media barons to practice their frenzied exploitation of the free public spectrum for the almighty dollars.

Swerdlow chose four areas for his considered recommendations. They are (1) the challenge of adequate and stable funding, (2) the need for representative governance, (3) the necessity of information transparency for continued exposure of what is going on, and (4) the provi-

sion of public deliberations and feedback from the audience. His technical team developed a computer program that can analyze patterns and practices in programming. He has opened windows for further research and evaluations by others who are newly curious about the future of public media. Readers of his analysis may enlist themselves in this noble quest for a more deliberative democratic society.

As a long-time listener of NPR and its affiliates in Washington, D.C., Connecticut and Albany, New York, I wish to convey a few observations—from the beginning. At the origins of public radio, I, along with others in the civic groups in the nation’s capital, took time from our specialized causes to engage in lobbying for the legislation on Capitol Hill, making the case that commercial radio was not up to the information needs of the American people. I too, read or heard the high expectations that public radio’s boosters in Congress had for their creation. I was impressed by the case for public television and public radio at the national level made by the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford Foundation. They were very serious and committed to establishing an alternative radio/TV network beyond an obstinate for-profit commercial electronic media.

In the nineteen seventies, several characteristics emerged from the governors of these public media. First, they were irrevocably fearful that opponents in Congress would cut their budget, interfering with their governance and even their existence. This meant that PBS and NPR feared Republicans far more than the founding Democrats, and catered their programming toward these concessionary directions. Our various civic organizations felt the consequences of this fright. Ironically, the commercial radio networks were more disposed to interview and report on our advocacy and reports than NPR. We were too critical of corporate power for NPR to indulge our newsworthiness. Until the Reagan era of big business *uber alles*, this irony also was reflected by the television networks, where the commercial stations were more interested in our work than the aloof PBS. There were a few exceptions. The Boston PBS station WGBH collaborated with us on full-length features related to a few of our reports. A major originator of content, Boston-based WGBH reporters and producers would sometimes call us for interviews.

It was in the nineteen eighties—the Reagan years—when both commercial and public media began to diminish its coverage of groups such as Public Citizen, Common Cause, the Center for Science in the Public Interest and others that pressed for curbing corporate power over workers, consumers, veterans, and the environment, and exposing the regulatory capture of enforcement agencies and departments. The Phil Donahue Show and the Larry King Show are examples of programs that regularly presented the work of the civic community.

This process of government by “corporate wish lists” became more pronounced as the years passed, and the results were visible to any interested citizen. There were fewer congressional

hearings and legislation, sharply reduced congressional oversight other than to hack away at regulatory agencies, fewer affirmative responses to petitions for regulatory action and fewer decisions curbing corporate crime, fraud, abuse and secrecy by a transformed, reactionary judiciary.

As Washington, D.C. became more and more corporate-occupied territory, NPR was reading the tea leaves. Facing far more threats from its political and ideological detractors than any active counterparts supporting its bolder missions, NPR gradually adopted a “business model.” One has only to read Bill Siemerling’s “National Public Radio Purposes” (1970) to see how far NPR has strayed. Siemerling was one of the organizers of National Public Radio and later its first program director. He wrote, “National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a ‘market’ or in terms of disposable income . . .” As Swerdlow demonstrates, NPR has been obsessed with treating its “audience” as a market, stratifying it with a resolve that could produce envy among its commercial competitors. This commercialization means that public media remains reliant on the satisfaction of corporate donors. Their spokesperson said when announcing that NPR had to cut 10% of its staff last year [in 2023], “to address a \$30 million shortfall in revenues from corporate sponsorship.”¹

Public radio was not even supposed to have advertisements. Now advertising is maddeningly omnipresent throughout the programming. I clocked almost thirty ads “support for this station comes from . . .” in a one-hour period during a weekday morning on WAMC—both ads from NPR and the affiliate. Programs like Kai Ryssdal’s half-hour formulaic, vendor/Federal Reserve focused Marketplace starts with ads—an effrontery to the audience that even the commercial stations have not emulated. The rapid-fire succession of ads hour after hour has irritated many NPR listeners around the country. By way of comparison, a major commercial station in Hartford—WTIC—aired 18 advertisements in that same 8 am hourly slot—granted they were longer and with a harder “sell” than the NPR versions. Promotional static increases when hour after hour listeners are told that “support for NPR comes from this station . . .”

Looking at the internal culture, frustration is part of the job for reporters and editors. Many feel hemmed in by the formats, and hovering taboos, and see their talents diminished. It doesn’t help that the alternative is commercial radio with much worse opportunities for substantive reporting. So, talented, under-challenged anchors and reporters like Scott Simon, David Brancaccio, Ron Elving, Scott Horsley, Lulu Garcia-Navarro and Jack Speer just live with it.

1. McKenna Oxenden, “NPR Cuts 10% of Staff and Halts Production of 4 Podcasts,” New York Times, March 25, 2023, [THE PUBLIC’S MEDIA - 9](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/25/us/npr-layoffs-podcasts.html#:~:text=‘Unfortunately%2C%20NPR%20has%20had%20to,an%20email%20statement%20on%20Saturday.”</p></div><div data-bbox=)

NPR is at its best with its long investigative pieces, including its collaboration with other deep reporting groups such as ProPublica. One piece about worker conditions in Amazon's warehouses was especially memorable. (Amazon is a supporter of NPR).

I've always had questions and ideas for scoops and leads, which I strive to communicate to reporters and editors. It has become harder and harder to get calls returned and emails don't work very well either. NPR and local affiliates are no different in this respect from their commercial counterparts. There are exceptions, to be sure, such as the late Wade Goodwin and some of the above-named journalists.

For example, I wanted to find out why on January 6, 2021, NPR was AWOL—well over an hour late in feeding its affiliates news reports on the insurrection, which started getting reported by CNN around 2:00 pm. There was no response to repeated calls. One WAMC reporter was furious. He told me this wasn't the first time NPR messed up. WAMC pays NPR more than a million dollars a year for its programming, to add to its above average, for its size, production of original content from numerous full-time reporters and anchors in the tri-state area it serves. Word back from some NPR or American Public Radio (APM) staff is that getting calls returned internally is not easy either. The estimable David Brancaccio, with a morning audience for Marketplace Morning Report that reaches over 10 million, admits to not getting his calls returned. The anchors at NPR are siloed and don't seem to communicate with each other. Kai Ryssdal admitted once on the air that he had never talked with a major long-time NPR morning anchor, Steve Inskeep.

There is an omnipresent air of smugness about NPR, such as their constant display of confident ignorance about Congress' constitutional authority and Presidential/Executive Branch lawlessness. This shortcoming was especially troubling during Trump's impeachment trials. I've urged veteran Supreme Court NPR reporter Nina Totenberg, who does return calls, to give tutorials to NPR reporters covering both of these branches of government.

Try finding out why NPR has no working standards to filter out disreputable corporate advertisers. In 2020, the *Corporate Crime Reporter* provided NPR management with a list of legal violations and legal settlements, such as those by the brokerage firm and frequent NPR advertiser Raymond James pursuant to whether management monitored the behavior and products of their advertisers. Then NPR CEO John Lansing, usually incommunicado, basically dismissed the inquiry, saying there is no need for a filter to protect the listeners. He went so far as to tell advertisers that being on NPR enhances their reputation. This is troubling hubris.

Occasionally, over the years I have spoken with NPR's Public Editors. They define their role very strictly and internally. So when you speak about one-sided reporting or vast areas like corporate crime, corporate welfare and corporate coercions being routinely ignored, they

demur. However, one Public Editor did volunteer a few years ago that NPR was giving far more time to conservative evangelical groups than to liberal religious organizations.

There is a deep tilt in NPR coverage toward entertainers and their industries while largely ignoring major revelations, reports, testimonies, and litigation brought by civic organizations, especially against corporate abuses of power. Swerdlow provides a compelling explanation in his discussion of NPR's fundraising and governance strategies.

No civic event illustrated this unspoken journalistic bias by NPR and its local affiliate WAMU more than our 2016 eight-day-long gathering of civic leaders, doers, and thinkers covering the largest number of reforms and redirections ever brought together in American history. It was called Breaking Through Power; the Superbowl of Civic Action, with over 160 presentations mostly at historic Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. (See, breakingthroughpower.org). We heavily advanced this assembly with all the local and national media in Washington, giving special attention to PBS, NPR and WAMU. This outreach included meetings, letters, emails and telephone calls with producers and some anchors and reporters. Nobody showed up. Nor, not surprisingly, did the mainstream media. So astonishing was the exclusion of people who have changed our country for the better and were still doing so that I wrote an analysis of this blackout available at: <https://nader.org/mediablackout>.

NPR and PBS have not treated right-wing conventions in Washington with such wholesale indifference. Partly because such groups display clamorous support from their friends on Capitol Hill. There is another explanation for such exclusion that came to my attention serendipitously.

The public's media, Minnesota and Wisconsin statewide public radio were regularly interested in newsworthy reports and actions by national citizen groups, especially on their venerable talk shows. Producers of these shows would call back or initiate calls about our various organizations' initiatives. Then communication suddenly stopped. After a three or four year hiatus, I sent them inquiries as to why they had lost interest in such consumer, labor, environment and corporate crime subjects. Minnesota Public Radio, politely regretting they had taken so long getting back, advised that they now adjust their programming to react to or expand on "what is in the national conversation." This is now the current practice for most of the NPR affiliates, largely because most stations can't afford to do much else besides play music or rebroadcast NPR and BBC content. Consider the thwarting of public media's essential charge in the originating legislation. It was created to pursue, report and give voice precisely to those human endeavors not in the existing media establishment's narrow and repetitive definition of selected news and syndicated talk shows.

Mimicking commercial radio does not stop at NPR's short top-of-the-hour news briefs that are far shorter than what Walter Cronkite called a "headline service" for his longer thirty-minute

CBS television network daily news program. Imitation and beyond are now the knee-jerk default for NPR. For example, why was tennis star Novak Djokovic's visa problem in Australia at the top of NPR News day after day? Celebrity journalism is why, and it even shapes the morning announcement of birthdays, choice of obituaries (ignoring the passing of former Attorney General and human rights activist Ramsey Clark in favor of a rock star), and what authors and musicians get interviewed. Except, that is, for stories that can be called "plight journalism." In public radio's wide coverage of race and gender reporters locate and profile ordinary victims. Yet, they rarely move into the inequalities of class exploitation by corporate power that feed racial and gender inequalities. Such tracing to causes would lead NPR and affiliates into the realm of the corporate supremacists, from which they seek much of their budgets. The news casualty here is one of not reporting much about structural indiscriminate injustice affecting all the people by avaricious or reckless companies and instead concentrating on the victims of street level discriminatory injustice, or to use an often-repeated NPR phrase "disproportionately affecting."

This report makes strong cases for Congress to hold long-overdue public hearings, conduct surveys and obtain secluded data from the CPB to review the gaps between the original missions of the public broadcasters, exhibit best and worst practices among NPR and its affiliates, assess the comparative production of original content and highlight the desperate lack of adequate funding. Swerdlow's stunning comparison of how much more other democracies spend per capita on their public radio broadcasters should sober citizens in the world's richest country with its gigantic, bloated, military and corporate welfare budgets. Regular congressional oversight would help strengthen mechanisms for public evaluations and heighten expectations of the listening audience. To the cautious who believe that the prudent course is "to let sleeping dogs lie" and not stir up antagonists in the House and Senate, the answer is to check out the overwhelming support everywhere for preserving public media and channel it.

However, such support should not be an excuse for giving NPR and its many affiliate stations a pass simply by comparing them to the mostly dittohead commercial alternatives on the radio dial, which daily spoil the "commons" of our free public airwaves for their profit.

NPR has a long way to go upward. This report offers a variety of special, sustainable funding plans for contemplation by the listening audience, the NPR journalists, staff, and governing bodies in Washington, state governments, and at the local affiliate levels. The founding laws of public broadcasting and their pragmatic visionaries afford a legacy of enablement in their reporting to adopt without further delay.

RN
September 2024

Executive Summary

Democracy in the United States requires an informed citizenry. Factual, verified information and news analysis are its lifeblood. Yet today, many people in the state and local “laboratories of democracy” have no way of knowing what their elected representatives are doing with the power voters gave them, which large companies are polluting in their communities, whether a union organizing drive has come to a county’s assisted living facility, or what efforts are being made by local farmers to obtain better prices from ConAgra, Tyson, and other agribusiness oligopolies.

A mass extinction of local newspapers and local radio news occurred over the last twenty years. In many jurisdictions today, no investigative reporters are making document requests, combing over disclosures and filings, and reporting what their sleuthing turns up. Advertiser-financed local newsrooms have disappeared, leaving thousands of communities without any private, locally-financed news sources. Ownership of private, for-profit media has become more and more concentrated, and the content they distribute is created far away from their listening and reading audiences, often with extreme ideological biases that reflect the views of their billionaire owners. These circumstances reflect failures of the private, for-profit media industry. However, it is unlikely that new regulation or a new business-model will reverse these trends any time soon. In fact, forty years of Republican-led deregulation and the dynamics of digital markets are partially responsible for this collapse.

Public media organizations, such as National Public Radio and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, face financial and governance challenges that leave them unable to fill the void left by the loss of local news reporting in much of the country. This is in large part because Congress has chosen to fund public news media at the lowest rate of any of our peer nations, allocating about as much money to it as the military’s marching bands. To account for the funding deficit, public media’s governing boards consist mainly of representatives from corporate donors. This financing and governance model incentivizes public media to reflect the interests of professional, affluent listeners mainly in coastal urban centers.

Public media’s operating practices compound this problem by allowing a small number of stations in large markets to produce content carried by smaller markets because they lack the resources to produce locally focused programs. As a result, public media has almost no capacity to provide local news to many of the “unserved and underserved” communities that Congress required public media to serve in the Public Broadcasting Act.²

Yet, publicly funded media dates from the founding of the republic. Public tax dollars have financed the distribution of the news since the time of George Washington. Public radio and television stand on strong historical foundations. Journalists and media companies have owed the public an obligation to cover matters of local public significance for a century. Due to this heritage, in many rural parts of the country today, publicly financed media is the only locally staffed news and information source. So, can publicly funded media fill the breach left by private news media? Yes, but not at current funding levels or without increased connection to their communities.

With adequate and stable resources, and the following reforms, public media could live up to its potential, fulfill the founders’ intent, and provide citizens with information and analysis that is necessary for democratic self-governance. Taken together, these recommendations would arrest the financial collapse of the free press and the rapid spread of “news deserts” by publicly funding a thriving press in every county across the country and giving local media outlets the tools to remain connected with the communities that they serve.

1. Adequate and Stable Funding

Historically, congressional Republicans’ opposition and Democrats’ acquiescence have prevented Congress from providing adequate and stable funding for public media through discretionary appropriations. But Congress has other tools that could provide the necessary funding. These monies can be allocated by one Congress and need not be annually reviewed by congressional appropriators. In fact, high estimates for an adequate level of public funding that could finance local news content all across the country would cost at most about as much as one of the United States’ eleven aircraft carriers—about \$10 billion a year, which is roughly 0.1% of the 2021 federal budget.³

2. Representative Governance Boards

The governing bodies of public media should be representative of their public’s

2. “47 U.S. Code § 396—Corporation for Public Broadcasting,” *Legal Information Institute*, n.d. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/396>.

3. Congressional Budget Office, “The Federal Budget in Fiscal Year 2021: An Infographic (Sept. 20, 2022) (online at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58268>). In FY 21, total federal outlays amounted to \$6.8 trillion.

occupational, racial, gender, and geographic diversity and selected in a transparent, merit-based, democratic process. The ability to raise large sums of money should not be a qualification for governing public media organizations. Public media entities should be democratically governed and create content for all members of the public equally, regardless of their ability to fund the system or be seen as “the audience.”

3. Information Transparency

Information about the operation of public media should be available to the public, who should have a freedom of information right to request it. An exception should be made for information that is relevant to the journalistic process. Transcripts of public media news coverage should be available to the public at no cost in a format that would allow audiences not just to consume but also analyze the content.

4. Public Deliberations

Public media should use research of communities’ news and informational needs to help all of our free press better serve the public and help the public better understand how well our publicly funded media are meeting our needs. They should also create spaces for representative samples of Americans to deliberate and provide feedback on their informational needs. Funded outlets should use representative feedback to guide their story selection, editorial direction, and internal policies. Information from polls and deliberations should be made public so that all news media can better serve the public, not be kept secret from the public as “proprietary.”⁴

4. NPR holds its research on Americans’ informational needs as “proprietary” and withholds it from the public or other private news providers.

For-Profit News Media Has Failed to Serve Local Citizens

Democracy requires an informed citizenry. Factual, verified information and news analysis are its lifeblood. When the Nixon Administration sued to stop the *Washington Post* from publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971, documents that showed that the government had systematically lied to the public about the war in Vietnam, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote:

In the absence of the governmental checks and balances present in other areas of our national life, the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the areas of national defense and international affairs may lie in an enlightened citizenry—in an informed and critical public opinion which alone can here protect the values of democratic government.⁵

But cities and towns across America have had the local news and information lifeblood drained out of them. A mass extinction of news outlets has occurred in just the past twenty years. Gone are thousands of local newspapers, circulars, magazines, and broadcast media—along with the journalists who staffed them. Without dedicated news gatherers, communities lose the ability to maintain democratic self-governance.

In 1990 there were around 55,000 reporters employed by newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. More than half are now gone. By 2021 there were around 23,000 working reporters.⁶ Over 1,800 counties that had a daily newspaper in 2004 do not have any today.⁷ There are 3,423 counties in the country.

5. “The Pentagon Papers: Secrets, Lies And Audiotapes,” *National Security Archive—George Washington University*, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB48/supreme.html>.

6. Steve Waldman, “The Journalist Population,” *Report for America* (blog), June 28, 2021, <https://www.reportforamerica.org/2021/06/28/the-journalist-population/>.

7. Tom Stites, “A Quarter of All U.S. Newspapers Have Died in 15 Years, a New UNC News Deserts Study Found,” *Poynter* (blog), June 24, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/locally/2020/unc-news-deserts-report-2020/>.

National news outlets are also experiencing financial disaster. In 2024 the *Los Angeles Times* laid off 20% of newsroom staff and the *Wall Street Journal* laid off nearly half of its Washington bureau.⁸ Before that over 2,600 news media jobs were lost in 2023 including 240 at the *Washington Post* and all of BuzzFeed News.⁹

The reason is money. Americans are spending less, and advertisers are advertising less on traditional news platforms. In 1960, Americans spent 1% of GDP on newspapers (\$232 billion in 2021 dollars). In 2000 they spent 0.6% of GDP on newspapers (\$133 billion in 2021 dollars).¹⁰ Today they spend less than \$20 billion on print and digital newspapers.¹¹

Advertiser financing, which supplemented subscriptions, has largely disappeared in the digital age. In 2000 advertising brought in \$48 billion for newsrooms, but by 2020 Pew Research estimates that number had fallen below \$10 billion.¹² Classified ad revenue accounted for 40% of newspaper revenue in 2000, but by 2014 those ads moved to the internet and accounted for only 14% of newsroom revenue in an industry that was half the size.¹³ With greatly diminished advertiser revenue, most newsrooms have shrunk or been unable to financially sustain themselves.

In part because of this financial pressure, news is now a highly concentrated industry. Ownership of private, for-profit media has fallen into fewer hands and the content they distribute is often created far away from their listening and reading audiences. Increasingly, private news outlets reflect the extreme ideological biases of their billionaire owners. Since the 1990s, a wave of mergers left 90% of media companies owned by six megacorporations.¹⁴ Their CEOs could share a golf cart. iHeartRadio went from owning 40 stations to 1,240.¹⁵ Gannett owns more than 600 newspapers, 262 of them daily newspapers.¹⁶ The Sinclair Broadcasting Group owns 186 stations that cover 40% of American households.¹⁷

8. Sarah Grevy Gotfredsen, "US News Industry Faces Bleak Start to 2024," *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 20, 2024, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/us-news-industry-faces-bleak-start-to-2024.php#:~:text=It's%20an%20old%20story%20by,to%20national%20outlets%20as%20well.

9. Ibid.

10. Robert W McChesney and John Nichols, "To Protect and Extend Democracy, Recreate Local News Media," January 25, 2022, https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2022-03/to_protect_democracy_recreate_local_news_media_final.pdf.

11. Ibid.

12. "Newspapers Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center's Journalism Project (blog), June 29, 2021 <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

13. Jon Reinan, "How Craigslist Killed the Newspapers' Golden Goose," *MinnPost*, February 3, 2014, <https://www.minnpost.com/business/2014/02/how-craigslist-killed-newspapers-golden-goose/>.

14. Ashley Lutz, "These 6 Corporations Control 90% Of The Media In America," *Business Insider*, June 14, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6>.

15. Marissa Moss, "One More Scoop Of Vanilla: A New Proposal Looks To Loosen Radio Ownership Rules," *NPR*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.NPR.org/2019/06/07/730323196/one-more-scoop-of-vanilla-a-new-proposal-looks-to-loosen-radio-ownership-rules>.

16. "The New Media Giants," *The Expanding News Desert*, <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/the-news-landscape-in-2020-transformed-and-diminished/the-new-media-giants/>.

17. Alvin Chang, "Sinclair's Takeover of Local News, in One Striking Map," *Vox*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/6/17202824/sinclair-tribune-map>.

Many billionaire media moguls tend to have distinct ideological preferences. In communities across the U.S., politically charged special-interest groups are able to masquerade as “local news organizations.”¹⁸

Deregulation is also to blame for the decimation of the local news.

Newt Gingrich passed and Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the first major revision of telecommunications laws since 1934. The act significantly reduced industry rules on cross-ownership (one corporation owning many outlets/stations).¹⁹

Consolidation and defunding have reduced by half the number of daily journalists working today as compared to 2000.²⁰ The consequences for local jurisdictions have been severe and costly. In 2011 a report by the FCC predicted that communities that lose newsrooms would see, “More government waste, more local corruption, less effective schools, and other serious community problems.”²¹ More recent studies have confirmed these predictions.

When newsrooms close, the cost of municipal borrowing increases due to greater expected corruption. Specifically, “following the three years after a newspaper closure, municipal bond yields in the secondary market increase by 6.4 basis points, while offering yields increase by 5.5 basis points.”²² The market understands and “prices in” the absence of local journalism, saddling taxpayers with the cost. When newsrooms close, citizens are less able to identify the intentions, alliances, and actions of politicians and prevent or address problems they create.²³ Private sector corruption also increases. When newsrooms close, *detected* federal business violations increase by 1.1%, and overall penalties increase by 15.2%. This means that local newsrooms deter corporate wrong-doing and make communities safer for workers and community members.²⁴

Public health suffers when newsrooms close. Public health officials rely heavily on local newsrooms to identify, understand, and address epidemics and other emergencies. For

18. Adam Gabbatt, “How Local ‘Fake News’ Websites Spread ‘Conservative Propaganda’ in the US,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/19/locality-labs-fake-news-local-sites-newspapers>.

19. Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. LA. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (1996), <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ104/PLAW-104publ104.pdf>.

20. Ken Doctor, “Newsonomics: The Halving of America’s Daily Newsrooms,” *Nieman Lab* (blog), July 28, 2015, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2015/07/newsonomics-the-halving-of-americas-daily-newsrooms/>.

21. Steven Waldman, “The Information Needs of Communities,” Federal Communications Commission, December 14, 2015, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/information-needs-communities>.

22. Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee, Dermot Murphy, “Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance,” *Hutchins Center on Fiscal & Monetary Policy* at Brookings, September, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP44.pdf>.

23. Will Meyer, “The American Experiment Was Built On a Government-Supported Press,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, n.d., <https://www.cjr.org/opinion/government-subsidy-facebook.php>.

24. Jonas Heese, Gerardo Pérez-Cavazos, and Caspar David Peter, “When the Local Newspaper Leaves Town: The Effects of Local Newspaper Closures on Corporate Misconduct,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 145, no. 2, Part B, August 1, 2022: 445–63, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfineco.2021.08.015>.

example, public health officials used local newspaper reports to identify and track the 2009 H1N1 pandemic.²⁵ With most U.S. counties lacking a dedicated news source, some public health experts predict that they will be unable to get quality data from large swaths of the country, exacerbating the length and severity of future crises.²⁶ The Brookings Institution found that in early April 2020, half of the 2,485 counties that reported cases of COVID-19 had either no local newspaper or only one surviving paper. Without local news coverage from these counties, communities lack the information to respond to unfolding pandemics, and we all become less safe as federal officials make decisions based on limited information from much of the country.

In “news deserts” (communities that lack newsrooms), civic engagement decreases and political polarization increases. Even before the rise of news deserts, a study of the 2010 midterm elections found that, “citizens exposed to a lower volume of [local news] coverage are less able to evaluate their member of Congress, less likely to express opinions about the House candidates in their districts, and less likely to vote.”²⁷ More recent studies confirm that in areas where a newsroom closes down, voter turnout declines, split-ticket voting decreases, fewer people run for office, and politicians do less work for their constituents.²⁸

Qualitative interviews in news deserts reveal that newsroom closures harm the social life of communities. Interviewees reported a “negative impact on community members’ sense of community, with participants missing celebrated gatherings and noting increased isolation and diminished pride in their community.”²⁹

News deserts exacerbate inequality. Communities that live in news deserts tend to be poorer, older, and less educated than the average American. Eighteen percent are living in poverty, compared with a national average of 12%. Almost half of the residents living in a county without a newspaper also live in a food desert, “without access to fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthful whole foods.” Many do not have access to high-speed internet in their homes or at work. These residents are less likely to be able to afford news subscriptions, cable, or charitable gifts and are less attractive to advertisers, making the advertiser-driven model unfeasible.³⁰ These dynamics make commercial or philanthropic funding solutions

25. Ibid..

26. Helen Branswell, “When Towns Lose Their Newspapers, Disease Detectives Are Left Flying Blind,” STAT (blog), March 20, 2018, <https://www.statnews.com/2018/03/20/news-deserts-infectious-disease/>.

27. Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, “As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in US House Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 447-462, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/679749>.

28. Josh Stearns and Christine Schmidt, “How We Know Journalism Is Good for Democracy” Local News Lab, June 20, 2018, <https://localnewslib.org/2018/06/20/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy/>.

29. Nick Mathews, “Life in a News Desert: The Perceived Impact of a Newspaper Closure on Community Members,” *Journalism* 23, no. 6 (June 1, 2022): 1250-65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920957885>.

30. Note: Entire paragraph heavily borrows from this citation. “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?” *The Expanding News Desert* (blog), <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/>.

for news deserts, that expect community members to purchase, donate, or consume advertisements to pay for local news, unlikely to succeed.

Public Media Face Their Own Financial and Governance Pressures

Public Media organizations, like National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, face their own economic and political pressures. Since the 1970s public funding for media has declined sharply. In 1967 the federal postal subsidy for periodicals was valued at \$3.5 billion (in 2023 dollars); by 2009 it had fallen to less than one-tenth of its former value—only \$300 million.³¹ Today, only one in five of the 1,100 public media stations produces local journalism.³²

Republican politicians have led the assault on public media's funding. Richard Nixon schemed to defund PBS when the network created the hard-hitting MacNeil-Lehrer Report (now the PBS NewsHour). In the words of Nixon's aides in White House memos, "It was requested that all funds for Public Broadcasting be cut immediately . . . the best alternative would be to take over the management and thereby determine what management decisions are going to be made."³³ Later memos indicated that budget cuts "will enable us to reduce drastically the Corporation for Public Broadcasting funding of the offensive commentators next summer."³⁴ Nixon's efforts culminated with his veto of the CPB's budget in 1972.³⁵ To overcome Nixon's veto, the President and Chairman of the CPB resigned and were replaced by the Nixon administration. In 1972 Nixon also replaced six of nine directors.³⁶ Nixon then approved a spending package that was half the duration of and significantly less than the pre-veto appropriation.³⁷

31. Rahul Nilikantan, "Public Policy and Funding the News—Postal Subsidies," *fundingthenews.org*, July 1, 2015 https://cpb-us-er1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/5/694/files/2015/07/1_Carnegie_PostalSubsidies.pdf.

32. Michael M. Grynbaum, John Koblin, Benjamin Mullin, and Katie Robertson, "The News About the News Business Is Getting Grimmer," *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/business/media/media-industry-layoffs-decline.html>.

33. Steve Behrens and Former Editor, "Nixon Administration Public Broadcasting Papers, Summary of 1972," *Current*, <https://current.org/1979/02/the-nixon-administration-public-broadcasting-papers-summary-of-1972/>.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. James Day, "The Vanishing Vision," <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft7xonb54q;brand=ucpress>.

37. Steve Behrens and Former Editor, "Nixon Administration Public Broadcasting Papers, Summary of 1972," *Current*, <https://current.org/1979/02/the-nixon-administration-public-broadcasting-papers-summary-of-1972/>.

Republican politicians have consistently used Nixon’s tactics and arguments to assert “liberal” bias in public broadcasting, reduce public broadcasting’s independence, and reduce its funding. These actions are out of step with their voters’ stated desires: 83% of voters—including 70% of Trump voters—want Congress to find savings elsewhere as opposed to cutting funding for public broadcasting.³⁸ Among members of the public, there is nothing controversial about funding public media. Opposition is almost entirely contrived by some Republican politicians.

Throughout the 1990s, congressional Republicans continued to argue for zeroing out public funding for public media with Newt Gingrich leading the charge: “I personally would privatize them all.”³⁹ While congressional Republicans’ campaign to privatize public broadcasting never achieved its stated goal, it did provide constant political pressure on public broadcasting and set an anchor position of zero funding which Democrats chose to compromise around. These dynamics left our public broadcasting system with a fraction of the funding public media receives in peer countries.⁴⁰

Republican antagonism to public media cannot be explained away as fiscal conservatism. The proposed federal budget total for 2023 is \$5.8 trillion dollars.⁴¹ The Corporation for Public Broadcasting budget in 2022 was \$465 million.⁴² In other words, it was 0.008% of the federal budget. The U.S. spends about \$50 million more a year on our 136 military marching bands than the entire public broadcasting system.⁴³

Recently, NPR announced that due to falling podcast advertising revenues, they have a \$30 million deficit, must cut 10% of their staff and cut back on new initiatives.⁴⁴ The last time they had such severe cutbacks was the 2008 financial crisis.⁴⁵ NPR was meant to serve as a counter-balance to corporate media, but by forcing it to rely on private fundraising Congress has made it susceptible to many of the same financial pressures as corporate media. When the public has the greatest need for journalism that can explain crises and hold the powerful accountable, public media’s financial model ensures just the opposite.

38. “New National Survey Shows 73 % of Voters—including Most Republicans—Oppose Eliminating Federal Funding for Public Television,” <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/survey-shows-voters-oppose-eliminating-federal-funding/>.

39. “Gingrich Wants to ‘Zero-out’ Federal Funding to CPB | Current,” n.d., <https://current.org/1994/12/gingrich-wants-to-zero-out-federal-funding-to-cpb/>.

40. Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, “Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, December 13, 2021, 1940, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060255>.

41. “President’s Budget 2023—BGOV,” Bloomberg Government (blog), <https://about.bgov.com/presidents-budget-2023/>.

42. “CPB Operating Budget,” CPB.org, n.d., <https://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/budget>.

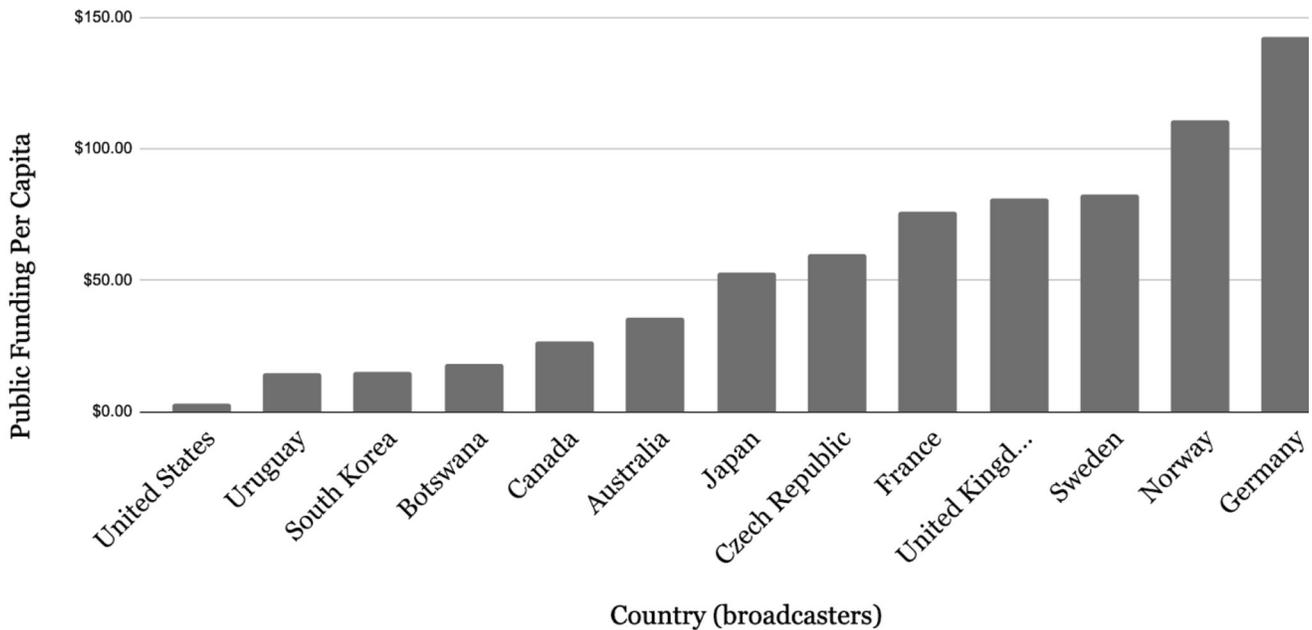
43. Jessica Tuchman Mathews, “America’s Indefensible Defense Budget,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/27/america-s-indefensible-defense-budget-pub-79394>.

44. David Folkenflik, “With Layoffs, NPR Becomes Latest Media Outlet to Cut Jobs,” NPR, February 23, 2023, <https://www.NPR.org/2023/02/22/1158710498/npr-layoffs-2023>.

45. Ibid.

Among 18 peer democracies, the U.S. ranked last in public media spending per person in 2011. The United States spends \$3 per person, New Zealand spends \$21, Canada spends \$33, Australia \$53, Japan spends \$67, the U.K. spends \$97, and Germany spends 41 times more at \$124.⁴⁶ By 2019, the United States was still spending \$3 per person while France was spending \$76. Botswana was spending \$18, Czechia \$60 and Norway \$110.⁴⁷

Public Funding for Media per Capita vs. Country⁴⁸



Deregulation in the Reagan era also deformed the public media system. In 1987 the FCC revoked the Fairness Doctrine, a regulation that required stations to devote some time to controversial matters of public importance and to air contrasting views while arguing that:

The intrusion by government into the content of programming occasioned by the enforcement of [the fairness doctrine] restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters . . . [and] actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists.⁴⁹

46. Peter Hamilton, “Public Television Funding: Comparison Across 18 Western Countries,” Documentary Business (blog), December 10, 2014, <https://documentarytelevision.com/public-television/public-television-funding-compared-across-18-western-countries/>.

47. Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, “Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries,” The International Journal of Press/Politics, December 13, 2021, 1940, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060255>.

48. Data from: Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, “Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries,” The International Journal of Press/Politics, December 13, 2021, 1940, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060255>.

49. John Shu, “Fairness Doctrine,” fedsoc.org (blog), April 13, 2009, <https://fedsoc.org/commentary/publications/fairness-doctrine>.

Fairness Doctrine enforcement could have unintended consequences. For example FCC staffer Martin Firestone wrote a memo to the DNC in 1964 claiming that if the Democrats enforced the fairness doctrine against stations that platformed Klansman, Neonazis, and antisemites without rebuttal then, “many of these stations would consider the broadcasts of these programs bothersome and burdensome (especially if they are ultimately required to give us free time) and would start dropping the programs from their broadcast schedule.”⁵⁰

According to the Washington Post, after the Fairness Doctrine was rescinded:

Almost overnight, the media landscape was transformed. The driving force was talk radio. In 1960, there were only two all-talk radio stations in America; by 1995, there were 1,130 . . .

The public readily responded to the new model [Rush] Limbaugh advanced after the demise of the Fairness Doctrine. By 1994, he had an audience of 20 million Americans tuning in on some 650 stations. “What Rush realizes, and what a lot of listeners don’t,” an Atlanta station manager explained, “is that talk-radio programming is entertainment, it is not journalism.” . . . The end of the Fairness Doctrine had drastically changed the standards of news, the tenor of our politics, and the outcome of critical elections.⁵¹

Whatever the criticisms of the Fairness Doctrine as an enforcement mechanism, the fundamental idea of requiring the presentation of opposing viewpoints to audiences was sound, and the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine led to a more homogeneous media landscape.

50. Fred W. Friendly, *The Good Guys, The Bad Guys and The First Amendment: Free Speech vs. Fairness in Broadcasting*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, Page 42.

51. Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, “How Policy Decisions Spawned Today’s Hyperpolarized Media,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/17/how-policy-decisions-spawned-todays-hyperpolarized-media>.

Publicly Funded Media Stand On Strong Historical Foundations

Public tax dollars have financed the distribution of the news since the time of George Washington. Journalists and media companies have owed the public an obligation to cover matters of local public significance for a century. Due to this heritage, in many rural parts of the country today, publicly financed media is the only locally staffed news and information source.

The United States was founded with the understanding that funding journalism is a democratic necessity. It is commonly understood that the founders enshrined press freedom in the constitution: “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.”⁵² Today this right is seen primarily as a negative right: the right to be free from government interference. Yet, to the founders and for much of American history, this was also seen as a mandate for the government to secure the press’s positive freedom, its right to materially exist.⁵³

To secure this right the founders created a federal postal service to deliver newspapers. George Washington wanted the Postal Service to deliver the news for free: “I need not say how satisfactory it would be, to gratify the useful curiosity of our citizens by conveyance of NewsPapers and periodical Publications in the public vehicles without expense.”⁵⁴ Some papers were indeed delivered for free but most newspapers were delivered up to 100 miles for a penny and beyond for 1.5 cents, a 90 percent discount compared to standard postal fees.⁵⁵

52. U.S. Constitution, amend. 1, sec. 2, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>.

53. Martha Minow, “Saving the News: Why the Constitution Calls for Government Action to Preserve Freedom of Speech,” Oxford University Press, July 01, 2021, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/saving-the-news-9780190948412?cc=us&clang=en&>.

54. “Postage Rates for Periodicals: A Narrative History,” About.Usps.com, <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/periodicals-postage-history.htm>.

55. Will Meyer, “The American Experiment Was Built On a Government-Supported Press,” Columbia Journalism Review, May 7, 2018, <https://www.cjr.org/opinion/government-subsidy-facebook.php>.

Because of public funding for media, when Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the early 1830s, newspapers accounted for 97% of postal weight but still contributed only 15% of U.S. Postal Service revenue.⁵⁶ Tocqueville noted that “nothing is easier than to set up a newspaper, as a small number of subscribers suffices to defray the expenses. In America there is scarcely a hamlet that has not its newspaper.”⁵⁷ By 1840, the United States had more newspapers than any other country in the world.⁵⁸

To the founders, freedom of the press was not secured by a simple lack of government interference. Press freedom required that the public provide funding to secure the press’s positive economic right to gather and effectively present the news to the public. This system made it possible for newspapers to popularize ideas across the country that led to every major democratic advance of the period, including the expansion of voting rights, the abolition of debt prisons, universal education, labor movements, tariff debates, and the abolition of slavery.

As technology changed, so did the nature of public media funding. With the advent of radio, the U.S. began issuing broadcast licenses in 1912.⁵⁹ Any citizen could request and receive a license. Without further government involvement, hundreds of stations popped up and broadcasted over each other, creating rampant interference that threatened their shared business model. As a result, the stations asked Congress to structure their market for them so that they could operate more effectively.

The Radio Act of 1927 reasserted that the airwaves are a public trust, just like our national forests and parks. The federal government began to license the airwaves for short periods of time to operators for free.⁶⁰ The free license would not carry with it a property right and only stations that served the public interest would be eligible to renew the short-term license.⁶¹ According to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) (forerunner to Federal Communications Commission (FCC)), “the station must be operated as if owned by the public . . . It is as if people of a community should own a station and turn it over to the best man in sight with this injunction: ‘Manage this station in our interest . . .’”⁶² The FRC clarified that “Though we may not censor . . . it is our duty to see that broadcast licenses do not afford

56. Kelly B. Olds, “The Challenge To The U.S. Postal Monopoly,” *Cato Journal* 15, 1, 1995, <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/1995/5/cj15n1-1.pdf>.

57. Thomas I. Cook, “Democracy in America. By Alexis de Tocqueville.” *The American Historical Review* 51, 1 October 1, 1945, 131–33, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/51.1.131>.

58. Christopher W. Shaw, “Preserving the People’s Post Office,” *Essential Books*, 2006, Page 63, <https://savethepostoffice.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Shaws-Preserving-Peoples-Post-Office.pdf>.

59. “Act to Regulate Radio Communication,” *Early Radio History*, <https://earlyradiohistory.us/1912act.htm>.

60. Sharon L. Morrison, “Radio Act of 1927,” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1091/radio-act-of-1927>.

61. *Ibid.*

62. David Morris, “The Rise and Fall of Broadcasting as a Commons,” *On The Commons*, April 1, 2013, <https://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/rise-and-fall-broadcasting-commons>.

mere personal organs, and also to see that a standard of refinement fitting our day and generation is maintained.”⁶³

The 1934 Communications Act went further, writing into law the positive right “to all the people of the United States . . . a rapid, efficient, nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges.” The act funded the infrastructure to ensure that all citizens have effective access to airwaves and mandates that the independent stewards of those airwaves operate in the “public interest, convenience and necessity.”⁶⁴

In 1949 the FCC made their public interest mandate more concrete through the Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine required “a reasonable percentage of time to coverage of public issues; and [the] coverage of these issues must be fair in the sense that it provides an opportunity for the presentation of contrasting points of view.”⁶⁵

In 1967, the Public Broadcasting Act (PBA) established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The act empowered the federal government to provide grants for the construction of non-commercial broadcasting facilities and to create the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). These organizations were not intended to serve as networks like ABC or CBS where a central broadcaster provided content to a national network but instead were member organizations comprised of hundreds of independent local stations across the country that each produced and purchased significant amounts of unique and locally responsive content.

NPR and PBS are organizations that stations join as members. The member organizations were created with a mandate to be non-commercial and provide material that is educational, controversial, and distinct from corporate media for this new system.⁶⁶ They are also mandated to represent the diversity of every community across the country. The PBA stated that “it is in the public interest to encourage the development of programming that involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities.”⁶⁷ Bill Siemering, a founding board member, declared in 1969 that, “To allow minority views to be unrepresented or misrepresented is to deny freedom of choice and threaten the life of the democracy. While commercial media have

63. David Morris, “American Voice 2004: Can Radio and TV Devote More Airtime To One National Convention Than Another?,” Institute for Local Self-Reliance, June 1, 2004, <https://ilsr.org/can-radio-and-tv-devote-more-airtime-to-one-national-convention-than-another/>.

64. “U.S.C. Title 47—TELEGRAPHS, TELEPHONES, AND RADIOTELEGRAPHS,” govinfo.gov, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/US-CODE-1994-title47/html/USCODE-1994-title47-chap4-subchapI-sec151.htm>.

65. David Morris, “American Voice 2004: Can Radio and TV Devote More Airtime To One National Convention Than Another?,” Institute for Local Self-Reliance, June 1, 2004, <https://ilsr.org/can-radio-and-tv-devote-more-airtime-to-one-national-convention-than-another/>.

66. Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, Public Law 90-129, November 7, 1967, <https://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act>.

67. Ibid.

ignored the pluralism of society, the future of public broadcasting may be to capitalize on this diversity.”⁶⁸ A year later he wrote NPR’s first mission statement which dedicated the organization to:

Celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness . . . The programs will enable the individual to better understand himself, his government, his institutions, and his natural and social environment so that he can intelligently participate in effecting the process of change . . . National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a “market” or in terms of its disposable income, but as curious, complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning, and joy in the human experience . . . If no government body is holding hearings on an important issue, National Public Radio could sponsor its debate to help define the problem and suggest alternate solutions with the consequences of each explored.⁶⁹

When commercial networks would not air the Watergate hearings because they conflicted with their profitable entertainment programming, PBS did.⁷⁰ The first NPR broadcast covered Senate deliberations on ending the Vietnam War.⁷¹ PBS’s groundbreaking children’s educational program *Sesame Street* has received critical acclaim throughout its fifty-four seasons and studies highlight the impact it has had on improving children’s school readiness and educational performance.⁷² The continued support of public media, in the words of Michael Skoler, president of Louisville Public Media, is an investment in “building community and shared experience . . . it is an investment in us.”⁷³

American Public Media (APM) is the largest station-based public radio organization in the U.S. It is a nonprofit conglomerate that combines multi-regional station operations, national content creation and distribution in one organization. APM produces shows like Marketplace, On Point, and APM Reports. Much like NPR, it then sells this content to public media stations which broadcast it in communities across the country. APM’s ten member board is comprised entirely of corporate leaders—five vice-presidents, three CEOs, one retired president, and a board chairman. Despite having American public in their name, APM refuses to disclose a significant amount of their operating information to

68. Bill Siemerling, “Radio With A Purpose: Bill Siemerling On NPR’s Original Mission Statement,” NPR.org, May 7, 2021, <https://www.NPR.org/2021/05/07/993569986/radio-with-a-purpose-bill-siemering-on-nprs-original-mission-statement>.

69. Ibid.

70. “Covering Watergate: 40 Years Later With MacNeil And Lehrer,” PBS NewsHour, May 16, 2013, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/covering-watergate-40-years-later-with-macneil-and-lehrer>.

71. “The History of Public Broadcasting in the U.S.,” Current, January 2, 2018, <https://current.org/timeline-the-history-of-public-broadcasting-in-the-u-s/>.

72. “Our Impact,” Sesame Workshop, n.d., <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/who-we-are/our-impact>.

73. Michael Skoler, “Who Needs PBS, NPR? Everyone,” The Courier-Journal, April 5, 2017, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2017/04/05/who-needs-pbs-npr-everyone-skoler/100071256/>.

the public. APM did not disclose the degree to which donors can target funding to specific news areas or condition gifts; whether APM produces any sponsored content; whether raising large sums of money is a condition for APM board service; or whether there has ever been a board member who is working class, middle class, or a labor leader.

Today public radio and television are the only news sources in large swaths of the country. According to Celeste Headlee, public radio host, and journalist,

[T]here's regions of the country and cities where their public television and public radio stations are the only source of local news, the only source of accessible, high quality programming, and if they were to cut those funds, NPR would be fine. That station out in Eubanks, Alaska would close down, that station out in the middle of North Dakota would close down. They can't afford to lose that government support . . . public media always was designed to be a crucial part of our democracy in terms of democratizing information and the access to information. And it needs to continue to be.⁷⁴

The United States has a rich history of financially guaranteeing the health and independence of the free press. From creating a national newspaper delivery network at the founding, shaping radio at the turn of the 20th century, and funding our national public media today. Maintaining George Washington's commitment, "to gratify the useful curiosity of our citizens," will require making similar investments today to guarantee the financial health and democratic grounding of our news media.

74. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022

Public Media's Funding Model, Governing Structures, and Some Operating Practices are Barriers to Public Media's Core Mission

Deprived of adequate public funding as a result of Republican antagonism and Democratic acquiescence, America's public media system turned to private funding. According to the CPB, over two-thirds of funds for public broadcasting in 2019 came from private donors. The funding breakdown is as follows: 14.5% from the federal government, 16% from state and local governments, 25% from corporations and foundations, and 32% from private donors.⁷⁵ In that year, the system was funded 31.6% by public funds and 68.4% by private donors.⁷⁶

Donations and underwriting from wealthy individuals, foundations, and corporations are the cornerstones of private giving to public media. To maintain this financing public media must cultivate an audience of wealthy, and predominantly white consumers.⁷⁷ As PBS describes their viewers to their donors: "a premium audience of engaged, affluent, educated, influential consumers."⁷⁸ This creates pressure for the content to remain balanced between the perspectives of Democratic and Republican Party elites and reflect the preferences and concerns of high-net-worth individuals, foundations, and corporations. NPR refused to publish statistics on the sizes of donors' contributions, corporate contributors, or average income of their donors. But in 2013, Current.org reported that PBS donors' "average age is 69, nearly 60% of them are female and most are well-educated and affluent."⁷⁹ No station that we surveyed would provide such information. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which collects stations underwriter revenues annually, refused to make that information public.

75. "Public Broadcasting Revenue Fiscal Year 2019," cpb.org, n.d., <https://www.cpb.org/sites/default/files/reports/revenue/2019PublicBroadcastingRevenue.pdf>.

76. Ibid.

77. Laura Garbes, "Nice white donors: Contending with public radio's listener-member class." Forthcoming.

78. "Audience Insights," Sponsorship Group for Public Television, <https://sgptv.org/pbs-audience-insights/>

79. Ben Mook, "Yet Another Puzzle for Public TV Fundraisers," Current, July 29, 2013, <https://current.org/2013/07/yet-another-puzzle-for-public-tv-fundraisers/>.

The public media audience is older and wealthier than the general public. The NPR News Audience Profile describes the NPR audience as, “educated, business decision makers that are active in their communities.” The document reveals that 18% of the audience is between 18-34 years old and 35% is 35-54. By arithmetic elimination, the percentage above 54 can be estimated to be 47% minus the number of children who listen to NPR News. Nearly 70% have a college degree, while the national average is 38%.⁸⁰ The median household income was \$103,000 and 70% traveled domestically in the past year, while the national median household income is \$70,784. Conspicuously, there was no reporting of the race of NPR News listeners.⁸¹

The private nonprofit corporations of public media are governed by boards of directors. In a sample of nearly 100 small, medium, and large stations, the average representation of corporate leaders on their governing boards was greater than 50%.⁸² The boards of the ten largest stations in the sample had even higher corporate leader representation, greater than 70%. This is significant as the largest stations produce nearly all of the content in our public media system and then the remaining stations primarily rebroadcast large station content as it is too costly for smaller stations to create locally produced content for much of the week.

Public media station board members select the station’s president, oversee its finances, and hold its leadership accountable, and the station leadership in turn reflects the values and perspectives of the majorities on the board. According to NPR pioneer Bill Siemering, “The president’s main job is making the board happy . . . presidents are good at managing up, not necessarily managing down.” Siemering agreed that station presidents share the social, economic, and cultural perspective of the station boards, “The boards hire and fire the president. Their peer group are fellow corporate people. So the programs are what they like. They think it’s all the BBC programs and their peers will tell them ‘oh boy I heard American Masters last night and I really enjoyed that.’ They’re not saying I wish you would have more on changing climate.”⁸³

Big Donors Exert Big Influence

The importance of private funding creates opportunities for corporate elites to drive content in subtle and pervasive ways. For example, in 2014 Texas billionaire John Arnold was

80. US Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data,” Census.gov, February 24, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html>.

81. WHRO, “NPR News Audience Profile” support.whro.org, https://support.whro.org/images/pdf/npr_news_audience_profile_2021.pdf

82. Data Available Upon Request. In this report we define corporate leader as any board member who either themselves is a leader in the business world or has family members who are major business leaders

83. Interview with Bill Siemering June, 2022

able to fund a series on “pension peril” which portrays state pensions as out of control and a primary cause of local governments’ fiscal problems.⁸⁴ At the same time, Arnold was also bankrolling a ballot initiative campaign to roll back California’s public pension system. When this was brought to light, PBS returned the grant and PBS Ombudsman Michael Getler wrote that “It shines a light, once again, on what seems to me to be ethical compromises in funding arrangements and lack of real transparency for viewers caused, in part, by the complicated funding demands needed to support public broadcasting.”⁸⁵

The role of David Koch in public broadcasting is also illuminating. The fossil-fuel billionaire and far-right megadonor gave \$23 million to the system and received board seats on Boston’s public broadcast station (WGBH) and New York’s public television station (WNET), two of the most well-funded and highly influential stations in the system.

In 2012 WNET planned to air a documentary “Park Avenue: Money, Power, and The American Dream.”⁸⁶ The documentary was funded by the Gates Foundation and focused on inequality. The film featured David Koch as a resident of 740 Park Avenue, one of the most expensive apartment buildings in New York. Before airing, the President of WNET Neal Shapiro called David Koch and asked “Do you want to be involved?,” offering Koch the opportunity to provide a written response, which the station could air after the show.⁸⁷ Shapiro noted that in his six-year tenure at the most powerful public television station in America, “I can’t remember doing anything like this—I can’t remember another documentary centered around New York and key people in the city, and such controversial topics.”

Shortly before the film aired a Koch Industries spokesperson shared a two paragraph response calling the film “disappointing and divisive,” asserting that neither the Kochs nor the spokesperson had watched the film, and that their assessment was based on the trailer.⁸⁸ WNET aired the response from Koch immediately after the film. How many working or middle class American have been given the same privilege in the history of public broadcasting? Park Ave received high ratings for a PBS documentary. David Koch canceled a planned large donation shortly after and eventually resigned from the board.⁸⁹

At the same time another documentary examining Koch’s political spending, titled “Citizen Koch,” was in development. Before the “disappointing and divisive” Park Avenue documen-

84. David Sirota, “Sirota: PBS Becoming the Plutocrats Broadcasting Service,” Summit Daily, February 17, 2014, <https://www.summitdaily.com/opinion/columns/sirota-pbs-becoming-the-plutocrats-broadcasting-service/>.

85. Michael Hiltzik, “How PBS Sold Its Soul to a Billionaire Donor,” Los Angeles Times, February 17, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-xpm-2014-feb-17-la-fi-mh-how-pbs-soldr-20140217-story.html>.

86. Jane Mayer, “David Koch vs. PBS,” The New Yorker, May 20, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/27/a-word-from-our-sponsor>.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

tary aired, ITVS, the public broadcasting body that funds and presents independent films across public networks, recommended “Citizen Koch” to receive public funding.⁹⁰ Before “Park Avenue,” the creators were told that senior ITVS staff “wasn’t crazy about the new title, but she wasn’t adamantly opposed to it.” After the airing they were warned that the title Citizen Koch was “extraordinarily problematic” and told by one staffer that “I think you understand why it’s problematic. . . . We live in a world where we have to be aware that people with power have power.”⁹¹ One of the creators of the documentary noted that the staffers he was dealing with are “good people. Our sense was that there was something bigger than them going on. They weren’t being straight with us.”⁹² Finally, ITVS informed the creators that it would not be moving forward with the project after previously making a deal to fund and present it.⁹³

More recently in 2022, Houston Public Media (HPM) “partnered with” Chevron for a series about climate change called “CounterACT.”⁹⁴ The series declared that, “much of the energy sector is working toward a lower carbon future . . . This ten-part series will explore several ways the energy sector can address the climate crisis and help lead the way on a global energy transition.”⁹⁵ On their website they included a resources section that linked to two articles on Chevron’s website about “lower carbon” and “energy transition.”⁹⁶ After being widely panned, the series was taken down and Houston Public Media’s GM Lisa Shumate responded that, “These are not news programs. They air in programming breaks and appear on our digital platforms . . . Chevron sponsored the series but had no editorial oversight of the content.”⁹⁷ Other “community catalyst” programs like Chevron’s included content from the United Way and “major hospital systems.”⁹⁸ *Current Magazine’s* Julian Wylie reported that there was, “no disclosure that the six-minute video of PR-styled messaging was sponsored content.”⁹⁹

CounterACT was not made by regular HPM news staff, but by staff whose sole job is to create “sponsored content with little fact-checking or editorial vetting.”¹⁰⁰ These staff supposedly worked independently from Chevron. But even without direct editorial control, the funders’ talking points dominated this public media report. Houston Public Media is

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. “CounterACT,” Houston Public Media, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20220419181037/>; <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/counteract/>.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Houston Public Media, “An Update from Houston Public Media AVP/GM Lisa Shumate on CounterAct,” Tweet, Twitter, April 21, 2022, <https://twitter.com/HoustonPubMedia/status/1517284568193277953>.

98. Molly Taft, “For Earth Day, Houston Public Media Is Promoting . . . Chevron?,” Gizmodo, April 21, 2022, <https://gizmodo.com/houston-public-media-chevron-partnership-earth-day-1848822428>.

99. Julian Wylie, “Houston Public Media Suspends Chevron Partnership after Backlash over Sponsored Content,” *Current.org*, April 22, 2022, <https://current.org/2022/04/houston-public-media-suspends-chevron-partnership-after-backlash-over-sponsored-content/>.

100. Ibid.

not alone. One of NPR's flagship stations, WBUR Boston, has begun making sponsored podcasts on the same model, hiring a parallel content team. NPR itself has sponsored content. One piece of content, clearly labeled as sponsored content, declares that Chevrolet is "Breaking Down Barriers To Help Make EVs More Accessible" without ever mentioning that Chevrolet waged a multi-decade campaign to delay climate action.^{101,102} The article mimics NPR's style, hearing from Chevrolet employees like they are subjects in a radio story and, in writing, having NPR staff describe Chevrolet employees in the third person as if they were news subjects, not advertisers: "When it comes to innovative driving technologies, Vehicle Chief Engineer Jeremy Short and his team wanted to make sure the Bolt EUV offered consumers a new kind of driving experience."¹⁰³

WBUR's head of partnerships believes that WBUR can make sponsored content "in such a way that it is entirely separate and distinct from the work that we do as a public media institution."¹⁰⁴ But in reality his practice creates a conflict of interest for the news organization. Veteran public media journalist Robert Hennelly commented that, "let's change Chevrolet to Volkswagen. And you find out that you get a tip from a whistleblower about the emission scandal, and Volkswagen very much was involved with that. And yet you have this page of content where you're offering your platform to this sponsor?"¹⁰⁵

In other words, if a news organization releases news-like reports sponsored by corporations, then the public might see this as the news organization selling its legitimacy to the corporation even if the piece is labeled and made by a parallel team of public media staff. This practice is incompatible with NPR's founding mandate to: "not regard its audience as a market." Public media's ability to provide essential trusted information is undermined when stations present information on behalf of sponsoring corporations, even if they hire alternative staff to produce corporate-sponsored content.

Today, NPR's advertising firm National Public Media (NPM) works with podcast hosts in their in-house studio to create messages read by NPR hosts "to bring their [the advertiser's] voice into the spot . . . to tell a story to our audience."¹⁰⁶ Podcast advertisers even send hosts gifts so that the host can personally endorse the product on air. According to "This American Life" host Ira Glass, "My hope is that we can move away from a model of

101. NPR, "From Our Sponsor, Chevrolet," NPR.org, n.d., <https://www.NPR.org/sponsor-content/1098770311/chevy-bolt-euv>.

102. Maxine Joselow, "GM, Ford knew about climate change 50 years ago" E&E News, October 26, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/articles/exclusive-gm-ford-knew-about-climate-change-50-years-ago/#:~:text=The%20findings%20by%20E%26E%20News,Center%20for%20International%20Environmental%20Law>.

103. Ibid.

104. Tyler Falk, "How WBUR is getting into the sponsored podcasts business," Current, December 17, 2021, <https://current.org/2021/12/how-wbur-is-getting-into-the-sponsored-podcasts-business/>.

105. Interview with Robert Hennelly August 15, 2022

106. Elizabeth Shilpa, "Ad Innovations Propel Huge Growth of NPR's Podcast Revenues," WAN-IFRA, June 11, 2021, <https://wan-ifra.org/2021/06/ad-innovations-propel-huge-growth-of-nprs-podcast-revenues/>.

asking listeners for money and join the free market.” He added, “Public radio is ready for capitalism.”¹⁰⁷ This commercialization has led podcasts to be, “more than half of the company’s sponsorship and are almost twice the size of the network radio business,” according to National Public Media COO Bryan Moffat.¹⁰⁸

According to public radio producer Conor Gillies,

what makes these ads troubling is that they don’t *sound* like ads: They sound like public radio. They exploit a special kind of trust listeners reserve for noncommercial educational media—a trust built over decades and deeply connected to the distance producers have maintained from a profit motive—to get listeners to buy things. Advertisements, no matter how relevant or blend-into-the-tone-of-the-show they are, serve only to extract dollars from the listener. Public radio serves a civic good.¹⁰⁹

One former reporter at HPM noted that funding for the station, “has to come from somewhere,” and in Houston, that means raising money from the energy sector.” HPM’s operating budget is around \$20 million dollars a year. The per person cost to the 2.3 million Houston residents of funding HPM would be 72 cents a month, and HPM is one of the few major public radio and TV stations in the country that produces a significant amount of content. But the national trend of state funding for public media is in decline. According to Professor Wick Rowland, PBS’s first research director and CEO emeritus of Colorado Public Television,

the state funding across the country has retreated. And indeed, in many cases entirely collapsed. Here in Colorado, we have no state funding for public media of any kind . . . So the whole structure is forcing the system to go out and ask the public for contributions and to ask the corporations to support the licensees . . . the collapse of the state funding gave more power to the membership notion, and to the private fundraising corporate donation model.¹¹⁰

All traces of the Chevron program have since been removed from Houston Public Media, Google, and YouTube. Houston Public Media has refused to answer specific questions about the matter from reporters at multiple outlets including *Current* and *Gizmodo*.

West Virginia is one of the few states that funds their public broadcasters at a significant

107. Conor Gillies, “Podcasting and the Selling of Public Radio,” *The Awl*, May 12, 2015 <https://www.theawl.com/2015/05/podcasting-and-the-selling-of-public-radio/>.

108. Elizabeth Shilpa, “Ad Innovations Propel Huge Growth of NPR’s Podcast Revenues,” *WAN-IFRA*, June 11, 2021, <https://wan-ifra.org/2021/06/ad-innovations-propel-huge-growth-of-nprs-podcast-revenues/>.

109. Conor Gillies, “Podcasting and the Selling of Public Radio,” *The Awl*, May 12, 2015 <https://www.theawl.com/2015/05/podcasting-and-the-selling-of-public-radio/>.

110. Interview with Wick Rowland August 18, 2022.

level, up to a third of their total funding.¹¹¹ Their model shows us that even with significant public funding, public radio can still be subject to capture so long as that public funding is directly controlled by politicians.¹¹²

Before West Virginia Governor Jim Justice was elected, public media reported aggressively on his business dealings, including that one of his facilities owed \$15 million in unpaid taxes.¹¹³ After his election, Governor Justice cut West Virginia Public Radio's budget by 25%, appointed a new governing board filled with political and business insiders, and inserted his former communications director as the CEO of the station.¹¹⁴

Reporters were warned not to produce stories that would anger the Jim Justice administration and that doing so would risk losing public funding and shuttering the station. The governor's communications office was required to approve all editions of the station's newsletter prior to publication.

Despite these warnings, journalist Amelia Ferrell Knisely reported a series of stories about abuses at state-owned care facilities. Afterwards, she was fired triggering a national outcry.¹¹⁵

We also learned that NPR reporters have been sent on tours with corporate sponsors to host events for them, “[with] underwriting there is a line, a separation, a wall, but the wall can get interesting, like, I did a series [Family Matters] around the country about personal finance, that was funded by TIAA. TIAA just wanted us to be in the room with their customers. The program was created solely for TIAA the corporate underwriter.”¹¹⁶ NPR asserted that TIAA had no control over any of the editorial content related to this series.¹¹⁷ TIAA paid NPR presumably for what NPR calls, “The halo effect”—“the positive association and shared values that NPR listeners attribute to the companies that sponsor us.”¹¹⁸ In their marketing materials NPR even went as far to brag that for an unnamed financial services firm, “The ‘halo effect’ solidified the firm’s reputation as a safe, responsible money manager.”¹¹⁹

Unfortunately for public radio listeners, TIAA turned out to be far from a model financial

111. David Folkenflik, “Reporter’s dismissal exposes political pressures on West Virginia Public Broadcasting,” NPR.org, February 13, 2023, <https://www.NPR.org/2023/02/13/1153590012/west-virginia-public-journalist-dismissed-wvpb-political-interference>.

112. Ibid.

113. Howard Berkes, “Billionaire Gubernatorial Candidate Owes \$15 Million In Taxes And Fines,” NPR.org, October 7, 2016, <https://www.NPR.org/2016/10/07/496696292/billionaire-gubernatorial-candidate-owes-15-million-in-taxes-and-fines>.

114. David Folkenflik, “Reporter’s dismissal exposes political pressures on West Virginia Public Broadcasting,” NPR.org, February 13, 2023, <https://www.NPR.org/2023/02/13/1153590012/west-virginia-public-journalist-dismissed-wvpb-political-interference>.

115. Ibid.

116. Interview with Sonari Ginton on September 8th and 14th, 2023.

117. Email from NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara on 08/12/2024.

118. Susan Leland, “Public Radio & Sponsors: A Win-Win Relationship” NPR, May 9, 2011, <https://www.NPR.org/sections/gofig-ure/2011/05/09/136136378/public-radio-sponsors-a-win-win-relationship>.

119. “This is NPR—A Proven Halo Effect for Sponsors,” *NPR audience insight and research*.

services company. In 2021, the New York Attorney General’s Office and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) secured \$97 million in restitution for tens of thousands of customers whom TIAA fraudulently misled. According to the NY AG’s office, “TIAA Relied on Reputation as a “Trusted Partner” and “Objective” Financial Advisor to Pressure Clients Into Paying Hundreds of Millions in Fees. Victims of Fraud Included Teachers, Public Sector Employees, Medical Professionals, and Others.” A search of NPR.org reveals no report of TIAA defrauding tens of thousands of Americans. That companies can pay public radio to borrow their reporters for events, to improve their reputation, and then use that reputation to defraud the public, shows the failure of public media’s corporate-financing model.

Public Broadcasting is unlikely to arrest its financial decline without increased public funding, but public media’s history shows us that funding must be independent from political and corporate influence to provide audiences the information they need to sustain a democracy.

Governing Boards are Dominated By Big Donors

The governance bodies of public media are dominated by corporate-affiliated elites. In 2015, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) studied the governing boards of the eight most listened to NPR affiliates and concluded that: “Out of the 259 total board members, 194—or 75%—have corporate backgrounds. Many of these board members are executives in banks, investment firms, consulting companies and corporate law firms. Some of the elite corporations include Verizon, Bank of America and Citigroup.”¹²⁰ Their 2014 study concluded that the governing boards of leading public television stations—most of which are PBS affiliates—are stacked with 84% corporate board members overall.¹²¹

According to Professor Rowland, PBS’s first research director and former Colorado 12 station head,

If I run a foundation, and I run a great foundation, that is interested in improving health care in the United States of America, I can offer you as a station manager, grants to have programming about medicine and healthcare issues. And if you’re at all ambitious, and maybe even progressively inclined, you will take that money to do exactly that. However, I have just dictated content to you. You see what I’m saying? . . . both as a board leader and as the CEO I was constantly having to wrestle with that tension of what do I do to increase the revenue stream for this station? Particularly what do I do about board members? Who do I need on the board?¹²²

120. Ibid.

121. Ibid.

122. Interview with Wick Rowland August 18, 2022

About two-thirds of NPR members/licensees are affiliated with a college or university and governed by the board of that university.¹²³ According to NPR Anchor Celeste Headlee,

The board of say WAMU, which is connected to American University, is the board of the university. Which by and large has no understanding of journalism and has no understanding of broadcasting. And so they're making decisions based on the decisions they would make for an educational institution, which is different than the way things were . . . you have to have that firewall and board members in my experience that I've seen it again, and again, do not understand the journalistic firewall, which is a massive failure.¹²⁴

One-third of member stations are independent, governed by a board of directors, and mandated to have a “community board.” Among a sample of 100 stations we were able to find the boards of 88 listed publicly on the station’s website. On average, we estimate that more than 50% of board members in our sample are corporate leaders.¹²⁵

See Appendix 1: Corporate Leaders as a Percentage of Public Media Station Boards

There are significant differences in the composition of boards of large stations. Among ten of the largest stations in our sample, more than 70% of the board members are corporate leaders. For ten of the smallest stations in our sample, we found that their boards were on average around 30% corporate leaders. Among our sample, corporate leaders dominate the boards of stations that produce content and are less present on boards that mostly distribute content.

NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara shared a broad set of competencies that NPR national looks for in their board, including academic expertise, business expertise, marketing expertise, major philanthropy expertise, and journalism expertise. She also shared that, “The Board also values diversity in its many facets, including individual, professional, and demographic diversity.”¹²⁶ Howard Wollner, the Chair of the NPR board committee that is responsible for choosing new board members, explained a key, mandatory requirement for public board members of NPR “A certain level of discretionary philanthropic giving”:

Well, not so much income, that’s not a real concern, the foundation (NPR Foundation) would be concerned about that, because those people have to be capable of gifts of a certain

123. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, Julia Wolfe, Ben Zipperer, Gordon Lafer, and Lola Loustaunau “Unlawful: U.S. Employers Are Charged with Violating Federal Law in 41.5% of All Union Election Campaigns,” Economic Policy Institute, December 11, 2019 <https://www.epi.org/publication/unlawful-employer-opposition-to-union-election-campaigns/>.

124. Interview with Celeste Headlee August 5, 2022

125. All corporate leader figures in this report are estimates and were generated by manually reviewing station websites during the Summer of 2022. We define corporate leaders as any board member who is a leader or family member of a leader of a major corporation.

126. See Email with NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara 06, 13, 2022

size to be on the board, because it's a fundraising board. The public directors of NPR also have a financial commitment. So, they have to have a certain level of discretionary philanthropic giving . . . you do want people that have networks you are hoping that they'll open their networks and identify candidates for cultivation as a donor.¹²⁷

This governance model is distinct from other U.S. public service institutions like public schools, public transportation authorities, or the U.S. Postal Service. In any of those institutions, this governance model would be considered a pay-to-play corruption scandal. There is no other public institution that deems it appropriate to select public board members based on their ability to fundraise for the institution. The consequence of this model is that 99% of the public is not rich or connected enough to be considered for a “public member” position on National Public Radio’s governing board.

Stations that are not affiliated with universities are required to have community boards to guide their programming and operations. NPR host Celeste Headlee said that “most stations don’t even have a community advisory board. . . . [I] think there’s maybe a couple that I’ve heard of that do. And they have absolutely no power, then they’re just seen as a joke, like they don’t do anything.”¹²⁸ The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which requests data on board composition every time a station applies for new grant funding, refused to provide any information on the subject. Instead, CPB’s director of communications told us that, “A hallmark of public media is that stations are locally managed and operated, and the best source of local content and services reports would be the stations themselves.”¹²⁹ We were told this even though the CPB collects these reports from stations on a regular basis.¹³⁰ Of 100 stations we contacted with information requests, 96 did not respond to us or did not share any information beyond what was posted on their websites. This effort shows the limited capacity of the public to access essential information about our public media system, either because of the limited financial capacity of stations to respond to information requests or because of the discretionary information-sharing policy of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

If Ms. Headlee’s understanding is correct, the vast majority of the non-governmental public broadcasting stations are out of compliance with the Public Broadcasting Act which explicitly prohibits funding non-governmental stations that are not guided by community boards. The Act is explicit:

127. See Interview with NPR Board Member Howard Wollner June 27, 2022; In response to question: “Do you guys also look for you know, representativeness in terms of say, you know, income, gender, geography, those kinds of things?”

128. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022

129. Emails available upon request.

130. Ibid.

Funds may not be distributed pursuant to this subpart to any public broadcast station (other than any station which is owned and operated by a State, a political or special purpose subdivision of a State, or a public agency) unless such station establishes a community advisory board. Any such station shall undertake good faith efforts to assure that (i) its advisory board meets at regular intervals; (ii) the members of its advisory board regularly attend the meetings of the advisory board; and (iii) the composition of its advisory board are reasonably representative of the diverse needs and interests of the communities served by such station.¹³¹

The Act also explains the purpose of these boards: “The board shall advise the governing body of the station with respect to whether the programming and other policies of such station are meeting the specialized educational and cultural needs of the communities served by the station, and may make such recommendations as it considers appropriate to meet such needs.” But as Ms. Headlee commented, in fact these boards, “have no power.”¹³²

Most of these boards are selected by the station, and often by the president of the station who is selected by the corporate-dominated governing boards. As a result, the professional backgrounds of the community board do not match the community they serve. For instance, WGBH, which makes much of the public radio/TV content for not only Boston but also the entire country, has a 24-member community board that includes six academics; six business, fundraising, or communications leaders; and five current or former high-ranking government officials. This is in a city where the most common jobs include nursing, retail, and fast food service.¹³³

The operating practices of public media reinforce their unrepresentative character. NPR charges individual stations for news content on a sliding scale, based on their membership revenue (private donations). On stations’ first \$250,000 in membership revenue they charge 33.5%, for stations with revenues over \$4 million, they charge 18.1%¹³⁴ NPR controversially excludes donations of over \$1,000 from their fee collection. Only big, content-producing stations tend to get large donations, so smaller station managers like Gavin Dahl of KDNK (Western Colorado) see this as unfair: “Allowing big, powerful stations not to count \$1,000 gifts is an advantage to larger stations and a disadvantage for smaller stations.”¹³⁵ By removing this cap, NPR could redistribute portions of large gifts to wealthy urban stations to fund journalists to cover issues in news deserts across the country.

131. “47 U.S. Code § 396—Corporation for Public Broadcasting,” Legal Information Institute, n.d. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/396>.

132. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022

133. See NPR Stations Attached Data

134. Ibid.

135. Tyler Falk, “Update to Fee Model Ties NPR’s Income to Station Donor Revenue,” Current, December 12, 2019, <https://current.org/2019/12/update-to-fee-model-ties-nprs-income-to-station-donor-revenue/>.

Public Media’s Financing Model Reinforces Racial Exclusion

In recent years, especially following the murder of George Floyd, public media organizations have been vocal about what they call a “racial reckoning.”

However, Public Media’s reliance on wealthy, white individuals, foundations, and corporations hinders the system’s ability to reflect the diversity of the communities they are meant to serve or provide the journalism that communities of color need. Many public media organizations, particularly their key decision-makers, have a class and racial composition that is out-of-step with the communities they serve. Those decision-makers oversee hiring practices that often require unpaid internships or poorly paid work that only applicants with external financial support can realistically take. The racial and class composition of leadership is reinforced because the board members who select leadership must help finance the station. This requirement excludes the working class and most people of color from the governance body that should be monitoring whether the station is representative of and producing content for all of its region’s communities.

We learned the following from former NPR reporter Sonari Ginton:

The WBEZ Board of Directors . . . an executive of Bain, The president of Adler University, [president of] National Louis University. Principle of Private Family Office, Managing Director and Head of Alternative Private Equity. The chief of communications at BMO Financial, the former Ambassador to Canada. Discover Financial. This is actually scary . . . That ain’t Chicago at all . . . This is as big money as it gets. And there’s not somebody from a real community organization on the board . . . So like, where is the seat for the community on that board? . . . the culture of NPR is not reflective of its community. It wasn’t in Chicago. Chicago, I literally was one of the few people who ever ventured to the Southside of Chicago. Southside of Chicago is two thirds of the landmass of Chicago and half the population.¹³⁶

Mr. Ginton told us that, “if you get any prominence at a local station, you’re going to run into board members, you’re going to be put at the table with them, they’re going to send you notes . . . It doesn’t happen a lot. But you know who the board members are. If you’re at a local station . . . the CEO is chosen by the board and in that way what they [the board] think and who they are directly influences who they choose to be the person who is the head of content.”

¹³⁶. Interview with Sonari Ginton on September 8th and 14th, 2023.

Over the past decade, steps have been taken to address this exclusion. Pipelines and hiring programs have been created to get more people of color into public media roles. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) requires that station employees take bias and harassment training.¹³⁷ According to the CPB there has been a slight increase in racial diversity of their workforce: “The percentage of public media station employees who identify as minorities has increased from 22% in 2012 to 26% in 2022.” The percentage of managers who identify as minorities has increased from 18% to 21% over the same period. As a country, 40% of Americans identify as a race other than white.

Still, veteran public media journalist and host Celeste Headlee reports that:

Most of public media is white, we’re much better than average at getting gender diversity. But in terms of racial and demographic diversity, in terms of a diversity of experience, we are exactly as the rest of the news media is, in that we are, most of our leaders are white males. Most of our employees are white, and they have come from elite institutions. And that limits the stories that you hear, it changes the tone of the stories that you hear. And it’s essentially really affecting access to vital information that people need in order to be good citizens of the United States and to move forward in their own communities and affect change when they need to.¹³⁸

According to Mr. Ginton, “No Black man has ever hosted [All Things Considered, Morning Edition] . . . NPR right now only has one Black man who has a full time report and he’s not even on the air regularly. There is not a Black man who’s covered business. I’m the only one that I’ve known to have covered business. There’s only been two who have ever covered politics. . . . there’s no one there now there’s no Black reporter at NPR who has more than five years of experience [at NPR].”¹³⁹

After hiring, qualitative research suggests that employees of color often face racial bias. According to Professor Laura Garbes’ forthcoming study of people of color working in public radio, “Over half of my interview sample gave examples of concrete resistance they encountered when proposing stories that made white people feel uncentered or uncomfortable.”¹⁴⁰

Professor Garbes also reported that employees of color are expected to perform fundraising “diversity work” even if that is not one of their professional duties: “On the level of direct donor engagement, these employees are expected to participate in pledge drives, donor events, and other interpersonal exchanges with donors, who often match the modal “lis-

137. “Harassment and Bias Prevention Training Program 2023,” cpb.org, March 2023, <https://cpb.org/stations/harassment-prevention-program>.

138. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022.

139. Interview with Sonari Ginton on September 8th and 14th, 2023.

140. Laura Garbes, “Nice white donors: Contending with public radio’s listener-member class.” Forthcoming.

tener member” description. Through these direct interactions, employees of color perform “diversity work” to satisfy donors in ways irrelevant to the content of the programming. Further, in this process they are reminded of ‘who public radio serves.’”¹⁴¹

Mr. Ginton told us that, “as a reporter, which I found icky, I was a car reporter, they would have a big [fundraising] event, and they would sit me next to the biggest car dealer in California, who was on the board . . . to be able to raise money, they have to have those people.”¹⁴²

Other employees reported structuring public radio content around the emotions of the white audience to the detriment of reporting on systemic issues: “The framing has always been so off. It’s always been in the personal, it’s always been in the cultural and it’s always actually about the emotions of the white people who are listening. Nine times out of ten, that’s your driveway moment [public radio phrase to denote a moment too good to leave your car, even though you are already parked]. A moment produced to feel catharsis so that maybe you don’t have to do what you might have to do or give up what you might have to give up.”¹⁴³

In one example, a reporter, Amanda, the only Latina reporter at her station, was told that she needed to meet with a donor who had earmarked a donation for “diversity reporting,” even though she did not cover those issues: “When the donor earmarked their donation for “diversity reporting,” they were expecting to see a return on their contribution. Amanda’s racialized body was then used by those in development as proof of diversity reporting.”¹⁴⁴

The private financing model may also create barriers for employees to report racism or abuse. According to Celeste Headlee, “the vast majority of people who work for public media are mission driven. They believe in the mission of public media. And unfortunately, what that means is they will put up with a lot of abuse, some of it sexist and, and racist abuse, because they don’t want to come forward with these issues out of fear that that would drive the public to stop donating.”¹⁴⁵

Mr. Ginton told us that, “at NPR, often Black men are treated poorly. There’s several lawsuits. I’m always curious about how many millions of dollars NPR has spent on NDAs for Black men. In the last 25 years, the number is definitely in the millions, because they gave me hundreds of thousands of dollars when I left. And I know that to be true of many people . . . That number should be public.”¹⁴⁶

141. Ibid.

142. Interview with Sonari Ginton on September 8th and 14th, 2023.

143. Ibid.

144. Ibid.

145. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022.

146. Interview with Sonari Ginton on September 8th and 14th, 2023.

The CPB requires reporting on each funded station’s “established diversity goal for its workforce, management, and boards, including community advisory boards and governing boards,” “the progress grantees [have] made to increase [their] diversity,” and “the grantee’s diversity plans for the coming year. The statement must be on the station website or available at the station’s central office.”¹⁴⁷

But the details of this information, if it is gathered, are largely kept from the public. In a sample of 100 stations, no station posted a specific annual diversity goal for their management or boards. Most, if they referred to diversity goals for their board at all, merely remarked on vague efforts. This quote is typical: “the board centered on DEI at their annual retreat.”¹⁴⁸ Stations do not face consequences for failing to meet CPB’s diversity requirements. Celeste Headlee said, “if they [stations] don’t have a statement, they don’t lose their funding. If they put the statement out and then don’t follow the guidelines, they still get their funding. Like there is no backlash. There [are] no consequences to not following CPB’s guidelines, or not doing any of the things you promised to do. Zero consequences.”¹⁴⁹

Public media’s funding model creates a need for governance by ultrawealthy, predominantly white, and older Americans. This group shapes public media’s leadership, content priority, and working conditions.

Most Public Media Stations Produce Very Little News. A Few Urban, East Coast Stations Host Most Major News Programs.

The boards of the largest stations tend to have the largest representation from corporate leaders, and those corporate leaders select the presidents of those stations. This is significant because the largest stations tend to produce the bulk of the news shows that smaller stations broadcast.

In our second sample of 94 stations, twenty-five stations listed no locally-produced non-music programs on their schedules; eight listed less than fifteen minutes; thirty-eight listed less than an hour; and seven stations listed more than two hours.¹⁵⁰ Our analysis was unable to distinguish between local news and local talk programs. We were also unable to detect local news inserts in non-local programming or programming not listed in stations’ weekly schedules. It also did not count content that was repeated throughout the day multiple times as distinct pieces of content. A related survey that did count

147. “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,” cpb.org, n.d., <https://cpb.org/diverseaudiences>.

148. “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at KQED: 2022,” kqed.org, n.d., <https://www.kqed.org/about/dei-report-2022>.

149. Interview with Celeste Headlee on August 5, 2022.

150. All Average Daily Local Non-Music Show Hours are estimates and were generated by manually reviewing station websites during the Summer of 2022.

repeated content and included inserts found that of 215 stations, the median amount of self-reported local news was closer to two hours per day.¹⁵¹

Both studies suggest that, when it comes to radio programming, many NPR stations gather and report on a small amount of local news. Instead, they mostly distribute the programming that is produced by a small number of big-city stations. In fact, most major nationally syndicated NPR news shows are based out of Northeastern and Washington, DC stations: All Things Considered (New York City), Morning Edition and Weekend Edition (Washington, DC), Fresh Air (Philadelphia), and 1A (Washington, DC). At the same time, most stations do not have the funding for their own local half hour or hour daily news program, let alone the locally based discussion or debate programming that was core to NPR's mission. It is important to note that while NPR news programming is based out of the above stations, many of these stations work with journalists across the country to produce their broadcasts.

The influence of these corporate-dominated boards extends beyond the station's broadcast area because the news programming produced at these stations is broadcasted across the more than a thousand stations that cannot afford to produce their own local news programs. This extends the influence of the station's corporate-dominated boards across the country: the decisions they make in selecting and overseeing station leadership affects the news received by millions of Americans who tune into hundreds of local stations. At the same time, corporate leaders' presence on these boards may be the decisive factor allowing these stations to gather and produce the news given limited public funding.

Stations typically rebroadcast NPR or BBC content for the majority of their broadcasting hours. While these stations are independent in name and technically able to make their own programming decisions, the financial costs of creating independent, local, programming versus using NPR or PBS programming means that nearly all stations broadcast content primarily made by the national organizations, a few urban stations, or music.

Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB) grantmaking reinforces this dynamic.¹⁵² We found that for FY 2021, the CPB provided \$3.91 per person in total funding to the Northeast and the Washington DC metro area as compared to \$2 per person in the Midwest, \$1.15 to the South, and \$2.13 to the West. That means the CPB gave nearly twice as much funding to the Northeast and DC as compared to the Midwestern and Western states on a per person basis. In Radio and TV programming grants, the disparity is much higher. Overall, the CPB provides 80 cents per person to DC and the Northeast region, 6 cents

151. Thomas E. Patterson, "News Crisis: Can Local Public Radio Help Fill the News Gap Created by the Decline of local Newspapers?" Shorenstein Center, January 25, 2023, <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-crisis-local-public-radio-report/>.

152. "Financial Information: Funding by State", cpb.org, <https://cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/funding>.

per person to the Midwest, 3 cents per person to the South and 30 cents per person to the West.¹⁵³

We also heard from Professor Wick Rowland, PBS's first research director and former head of Colorado PBS 12 on how programming requirements favored incumbent stations: "every time, the so-called Community Service grant program was up for review. There were always restrictions that they were putting on in the funding model that made it harder for the alternative stations to survive."

See Appendix 2: Average Daily Hours of Local Content Per Station

An enormous geographic imbalance exists between stations that produce content and those that primarily distribute content made outside of their communities.

¹⁵³. Ibid.

How Public Media’s Financing and Governance Model Affects News Content

Analysis of the content produced by just a few stations and the national organization but carried by most stations and broadcast to local audiences, reveals biases. Take the case of NPR’s coverage of disinformation. In their 2021 annual report, NPR dedicated an entire section to disinformation, declaring that, “In all that we do, NPR strives to create a more informed public. With the growing reach and influence of misleading information and conspiracy theories, our mission is more vital than ever.”¹⁵⁴

Unfortunately, NPR tends to report on the topic through a narrow filter. NPR’s “Untangling Disinformation” series (examined articles from March 2021 – July 2022), with a laudable stated goal of examining how “widespread the problem of disinformation is, and efforts to overcome it,” demonstrates the point.

Of 57 articles from April 2021 to July 2022, the subject of disinformation in 48 articles is either the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the subsequent January 6 attack on the Capitol or COVID-19 and related health information. More than half of the remaining articles concern Russia or Ukraine. In 75% of the stories, the source of disinformation or the forum that distributed it was restricted to social media, Republican media, activists, or politicians. There were only two stories in which a corporation was discussed as a source of disinformation.

One was about Amazon’s policy on censoring misinformation on its book marketplace. Amazon was not scrutinized for spreading misinformation, though the company has done so. They denied that their employees have had to pee in bottles to keep up with work quotas when multiple investigations have confirmed this practice.¹⁵⁵ Executive Chair Jeff Bezos was

154. “2021 Annual Report,” readymag.com, n.d., <https://readymag.com/p16048864/>.

155. Aimee Picchi “Amazon Apologizes for Denying That Its Drivers Pee in Bottles,” CBS News, April 5, 2021 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amazon-drivers-pee-in-bottles-union-vote-worker-complaints/>.

also caught either misleading or lying under oath to Congress about his company's practice of copying and de-ranking competitors' products on the Amazon marketplace.¹⁵⁶ Neither of these falsehoods have been covered on NPR as disinformation to untangle, even though they are highly relevant to the hundreds of millions of people who work for, use, or sell on Amazon.

NPR did report on a letter that members of Congress sent to Amazon about lying to Congress, but readers were treated to a he said, she said debate between Congress and Amazon's public relations team. NPR did not conduct any independent analysis or investigation that one might expect from an article on disinformation.¹⁵⁷ Instead, Amazon was featured in the disinformation series for allowing books that contain COVID-19 misinformation to be sold on the site. NPR should be commended in both articles for clearly identifying that "Amazon is among NPR's financial supporters."¹⁵⁸

Fairness in Accuracy and Reporting (FAIR) has also commented on NPR's reporting of Amazon's labor practices: "the words "labor," "worker" or "employee" were nowhere to be found in the six-minute report: Christmas packages simply deliver themselves, with the help of brilliant Amazon execs and this mysterious AI technology. If Amazon's marketing department wrote and produced a segment on their AI technology for NPR, it's difficult to see how it would have been any different . . . it's unclear how pointing out that the company you're writing a press release for helped pay for the press release makes it any better."¹⁵⁹

The other corporation mentioned in the series was Facebook. Facebook was not scrutinized for spreading disinformation directly. The only reference to disinformation and the company in the article was that Facebook did not provide disinformation researchers with enough data access. Instead, Facebook was said to merely disagree with scientists about the link between the platform and teenage depression. This is a troubling trend in NPR coverage: disinformation by a corporate source is covered as a he said, she said dispute with little independent analysis.

Luckily for the public, documents from Facebook were leaked a few months after this article was published. It presented that Instagram is harmful to teenage mental health: "Repeatedly, the company's researchers found that Instagram is harmful for a sizable per-

156. Aditya Kalra and Steve Stecklow, "Amazon Copied Products and Rigged Search Results, Documents Show," Reuters, October 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/amazon-india-rigging/>; Brody Ford, "Amazon Referred to the DOJ for Allegedly Lying to Congress," Bloomberg, March 9, 2022, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/antitrust/amazon-referred-to-the-doj-for-allegedly-lying-to-congress>.

157. Alina Selyukh, "House Lawmakers Ask Amazon to Prove Bezos and Other Execs Didn't Lie to Congress," NPR, October 18, 2021, sec. Business, <https://www.NPR.org/2021/10/18/1046994856/house-lawmakers-ask-amazon-to-prove-bezos-and-other-execs-didnt-lie-to-congress>.

158. Ibid.

159. Adam Johnson, "NPR Infomercial for Its Sponsor Amazon Omits Labor and Environmental Criticisms" FAIR, November 24, 2018, <https://fair.org/home/npr-infomercial-for-its-sponsor-amazon-omits-labor-and-environmental-criticisms/>.

centage of them [teenagers], most notably teenage girls . . . Among teens who reported suicidal thoughts, 13% of British users and 6% of American users traced the desire to kill themselves to Instagram.”¹⁶⁰ These research findings contradict Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s statements to Congress: “The research [I have] seen is that using social apps to connect with other people can have positive mental-health benefits.”¹⁶¹

NPR shows covered this data leak. Their reports did not include a discussion of disinformation, Zuckerberg’s false statements, or Facebook’s campaign to mislead the public and Congress about whether their product harms children.¹⁶² NPR should be commended for clearly noting in their article that, “Facebook is among NPR’s financial supporters.”

Beyond disinformation, NPR rarely covers other kinds of corporate crime. We searched the name of every corporation found in Duke/UVA Law Schools’ Corporate Crime Registry from 2016-2022 through ProQuest’s database of top public media shows for those years (NewsHour, All Things Considered, Morning Edition, etc.). We then manually reviewed all potentially covered corporate crimes individually to confirm whether that story actually covered the firm’s crime or a different aspect of their business. We found that NPR reported on less than 40 of the 4354 corporate prosecutions reported in the registry, which amounts to less than half of one percent of prosecuted or settled corporate crimes. This dynamic is also present in searches for corporate crime (30 hits) as compared to crime (27,045 hits) on NPR.org.¹⁶³

A survey of every NPR article during the first half of 2022 found there were just twenty-nine stories about labor organizing. Fourteen of those articles covered coffee shops, mainly Starbucks, and twelve articles covered Amazon. In twenty-six of these stories, NPR was covering companies that were NPR financial supporters. NPR only disclosed this in two of these stories with a label reading: “Amazon is among NPR’s financial supporters and also distributes certain NPR content.” This is out of step with NPR’s Chief of Communications Isabel Lara’s statement that “our newsroom includes disclosure language whenever NPR covers a story about a funder or sponsor.”¹⁶⁴ NPR did not disclose its financial connection to Starbucks in any of these stories.¹⁶⁵ NPR also chose not to disclose that a former Senior Vice-President of Starbucks sits on NPR’s board.

160. WSJ Noted, “How Instagram Is Hurting Teen Girls,” WSJ, September 29, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-instagram-is-hurting-teen-girls-11632940937>.

161. Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,” Wall Street Journal, Sept. 14, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20research%20that%20we%27ve,about%20children%20and%20mental%20health>.

162. See Leila Fadel, Sarah Handel, Mia Venkat, “Facebook’s Own Research Says Its Apps Can Harm Mental Health. Senators Have Questions,” NPR.org, September 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/30/1042008518/facebook-own-research-says-its-apps-can-harm-mental-health-senators-have-questi>.

163. “NPR Search,” PR, n.d., <https://www.NPR.org/search/?query=%22corporate%20crime%22&page=1>. (performed on 09/23/2023).

164. Email From NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara on January 6, 2023.

165. National Public Radio, “NPR Corporate Sponsorships Fiscal Year 2021,” NPR, <https://readymag.website/npr/annualreport2021/corporate/>.

The remaining three articles were about knowledge workers: animators, journalists, and tech workers. In the examined labor organizing stories, we found that information or perspectives from management was presented to the NPR audience 25% more often than information or perspectives from workers or unions. Workers and management were also asked to give their perspectives in different ways. Workers narrowly describe their experience and feelings about working or organizing; but, management was asked for perspectives on not only their experience, but the health of the business and the economy, their values, policies, and even their novel “interpretations” of labor law.

This provided management the opportunity to spread disinformation about the law and union organizing. We counted four separate pieces of disinformation from management, many of which were repeated multiple times throughout NPR’s coverage: (1) that workers’ only choice is to allow their boss to coordinate production or switch jobs; (2) that a coffee shop union is responsible for a 50 cent raise the boss thinks is unaffordable when in reality this raise was standard practice before the union formed; (3) that a union contract regulates how much time the boss could work behind the counter at a shop when the contract does not presently limit their ability to do so in any way; that a company is allowed to offer benefits selectively to non-unionizing stores when this is a violation of the law; and (4) that Starbucks would not prevent an employee from calling the police even though employees report experiencing otherwise.

In addition, we found seven instances where management appeared to violate labor law but NPR failed to communicate to the audience either that management’s actions violated the law or that the general practices described were illegal: (1) closing stores as a response to unionization; (2) operating a work environment where workers cannot go to the bathroom; (3) withholding benefits from unionizing stores; (4) firing workers for organizing, (5) denying workers’ promotions, (6) stripping them of duties, or (7) reducing their hours for engaging in union activity. In all but one instance, Starbucks’ alleged lawbreaking was not even discussed as potentially illegal. In the one instance in which NPR contextualized an action by Starbucks as potentially illegal, they reported violations of the law as a he said, she said dispute, where a worker or union would assert a legal violation and management, would assert that they are following the law, leaving readers unclear both as to what happened and what the law is.

Sometimes NPR’s coverage served to amplify management’s disinformation in a way that likely resulted in more workers’ hearing management’s threat without a clear understanding of whether they have any recourse.

An NPR headline declared “Starbucks says employees getting new benefits, but not at stores

that are unionizing.”¹⁶⁶ While the article does feature the union Workers United’s denunciation of Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz’s statement as “dead wrong,” the piece gives significantly more space to Schultz’s legally baseless claim that “Starbucks is not permitted by law to offer new benefits to a store that voted for a union while they are in the collective bargaining process.”¹⁶⁷ NPR does not proceed to analyze Schultz’s violation of the law, discuss him as a presumed lawbreaker, analyze the economic harm his actions bring to hundreds of thousands of workers throughout the economy, or discuss any possible accountability for his lawbreaking. Instead, NPR platformed other dubious claims from Schultz without scrutiny like “no union contract measures up to what Starbucks already offers,” “outside forces are driving union campaign,” and that “companies throughout the country being assaulted, in many ways, by the threat of unionization.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, NPR editorialized that, “Indeed, the generous benefits and socially progressive culture are a big part of what has drawn many workers to Starbucks.”¹⁶⁹ In this article, management is given 87% more space as compared to unions or workers to set the narrative and normalize Starbucks’ rewriting of labor law. In stories where workers were given more column inches, it was to narrowly describe their experiences.

On five separate occasions, NPR described the employers where workers were organizing as “generous,” usually their sponsors Starbucks and Amazon. It was common for NPR to assert that at Starbucks: “The benefits are generous—health care and retirement, stock options and free college tuition for, you know, part-time and full-time workers.”¹⁷⁰ NPR did not report on how accessible these benefits actually are for Starbucks workers. This is in stark contrast to worker’s perspectives shared on other public radio programs like Robert Hennelly’s StuckNation:

[E]ssentially, without the union, you are left in a position where you are just at the whims of Starbucks, and Starbucks, like historically, has promised people promotions and then never given it to them, has promised people like affordable health care, and like, I just have to reapply. And beforehand when I first started, health care was \$24 a paycheck. And now if I want to keep the same plan, it’s like \$58.¹⁷¹

NPR’s report on Scott Lucey of Milwaukee, included the following language: “an entrepreneur’s long-cherished dream of owning his own café and running it his own way turned dark the day

166. Andrea Hsu, “Starbucks Says Employees Getting New Benefits, but Not at Stores That Are Unionizing,” NPR, May 3, 2022, <https://www.NPR.org/2022/05/03/1095909869/starbucks-union-ceo-howard-schultz-workers-united-labor-benefits>.

167. Ibid.

168. Ibid.

169. Ibid.

170. Andrea Hsu, “More and More Starbucks Stores Are Voting to Unionize,” NPR, April 14, 2022, <https://www.NPR.org/2022/04/14/1092904539/more-and-more-starbucks-stores-are-voting-to-unionize>.

171. Robert Hennelly, “Radio Features, Stuck Nation August 8, 2022,” Stuck Nation, <https://www.stucknation.com/radio-features-2022.html>.

his employees voted yes to a union.”¹⁷² NPR said that Lucey supported most of the contract, even though he had not actually committed to these policies before the union: “One-month schedules posted 10 days in advance. A clause preventing Lucey from firing or disciplining anyone without just cause. A \$20 monthly wellness stipend to cover things like yoga classes and bike share fees.”¹⁷³ NPR then allowed him to define parts of the contract that he did not support: “a 50-cent an hour raise every year. He doesn’t think the business can afford it.” and “The union contract dictates how much time he’s allowed to spend behind the bar in his own café.”

Had NPR fact-checked the coffee shop’s management, they would have heard a different story. According to Kevin Schwerdtfeger of Teamsters Local 344, Lucey can work behind the counter as much as he wants; but if he hires another manager at the store, both of them would only be allowed to work behind the counter 30% of the time, to prevent Lucey from hiring managers to circumvent the union contract. The union contract does not categorically limit his ability to work behind the counter.¹⁷⁴

Schwerdtfeger also would have told NPR that the union was concerned about demanding raises given COVID-19. This fifty-cent raise, which only kicks in for workers after one year, was also common practice at this store before the union was formed. As for the union’s interest in the business’s survival, Mr. Schwerdtfeger said: “We’re not in the business of running companies into the garbage can, right, we exist because members work, you know, because our members are working, not because they’re not working.”¹⁷⁵

NPR’s coverage does not contextualize how unions benefit workers and families outside of covered workplaces. It also fails to contextualize or identify management lawbreaking. These trends reinforce pro-management bias. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), “On average, a worker covered by a union contract earns 13.2% more than a peer with similar education, occupation, and experience in a nonunionized workplace in the same sector.”¹⁷⁶ Correspondingly EPI found that “Employers are charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns.”¹⁷⁷ Unions don’t just benefit their own workers, but all workers: “had union density remained at its 1979 level . . . weekly wages for nonunion men in the private sector without a college education would be 8%, or \$3,016 per year, higher.”¹⁷⁸

172. Andrea Hsu, “One Unionized. The Other Did Not. How 2 Milwaukee Cafés Were Changed by Union Drives,” NPR, July 1, 2022, <https://www.NPR.org/2022/07/01/1105117961/starbucks-union-organizing-labor-teamsters-coffee-workers>.

173. Ibid.

174. Interview with Kevin Schwerdtfeger on August 19, 2022.

175. Ibid.

176. Heidi Shierholz, “Weakened Labor Movement Leads to Rising Economic Inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, January 27, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/blog/weakened-labor-movement-leads-to-rising-economic-inequality/>.

177. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, Julia Wolfe, Ben Zipperer, Gordon Lafer, and Lola Loustaunau, “Unlawful: U.S. Employers Are Charged with Violating Federal Law in 41.5% of All Union Election Campaigns,” Economic Policy Institute, December 11, 2019, <https://www.epi.org/publication/unlawful-employer-opposition-to-union-election-campaigns/>.

178. Jeffrey Pierre and Scott Neuman, “How Decades of Disinformation about Fossil Fuels Halted U.S. Climate Policy,” NPR, October 27, 2021, <https://www.NPR.org/2021/10/27/1047583610/once-again-the-u-s-has-failed-to-take-sweeping-climate-action-heres-why>; “The American Petroleum Institute Exposed:

Occasionally, conflicts between workers and managers erupt into strikes, which have local significance. Still, a search of ProQuest’s database of major NPR programming reveals that only 36% of strikes involving over 1000 workers during the 2016-2022 period were covered by major public media programs in ProQuest’s database. Half of the major strikes that NPR chose to cover were education-related, with many of these stories focusing on the impact of school closures on parents. Only 18% of major strikes overall were education-related.

Another field rife with corporate disinformation is climate. Between the Summer of 2021 and 2022, NPR.org hosted just eight articles that include the words “climate” and “disinformation” or “misinformation,” in close proximity while they hosted close to three hundred articles that include “tennis.”¹⁷⁹ When they do mention climate disinformation, they often characterize the example as a he said, she said dispute. In one article about a congressional hearing on oil industry disinformation, NPR felt the need to describe the industry’s lobbying group, The American Petroleum Institute (API) as a “traditional opponent to climate action [that] has shifted,” even though API still lobbies against climate action.¹⁸⁰ NPR did note at the bottom of the article that, “Exxon Mobil is among NPR’s financial supporters.”¹⁸¹

NPR’s Vice-President Edith Chapin, whose scope of responsibilities extended to “strategic coverage priorities, [including] disinformation and . . . climate change,” told us that she cannot recall the term disinformation or misinformation ever being attributed to a CEO or PR executive at a major American company “I can’t say never, but it’s just not something that rings a bell because it’s just not a very large part of our focus day to day.”¹⁸²

U.S. Military Disinformation

Another consequential area involves war disinformation during armed conflict. In 2019, the *Washington Post* published the Afghanistan Papers, a group of documents that showed that the government had systematically lied to the public about how well the war in Afghanistan was going.¹⁸³ The *Washington Post* concluded that “The Lessons Learned interviews contradict years of public statements by presidents, generals, and diplomats. The interviews make clear that officials issued rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hid unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable. Several of those interviewed described explicit efforts

Their Hypocrisy on Bold Climate Action,” Climate Power, January 26, 2021, <https://climatepower.us/resources/api-exposed-hypocrisy-on-climate-action/>.

179. These figures were arrived at from a search of NPR.org during the Summer of 2022.

180. Ibid.

181. WSJ Noted, “How Instagram Is Hurting Teen Girls,” WSJ, Sept. 29, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-instagram-is-hurting-teen-girls-11632940937>.

182. Interview with Edith Chapin, June, 2022

183. Craig Whitlock, “Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public and a culture of willful ignorance, where bad news and critiques were unwelcome.”¹⁸⁴ NPR.org showed just four pieces that mention the “Afghanistan Papers,” during the following year. The words misinformation or disinformation do not appear in any of the articles. In two articles “misled” makes a single appearance. In our dataset, we could not find any NPR article that labeled the U.S. military as a source of disinformation or lies.

Law-Enforcement Disinformation

In all of the 100+ articles in NPR’s Special Series on the Uvalde shooting, many misstatements of fact served to justify the police’s inaction. Statements by police were never characterized as misinformation or disinformation. Police claimed that the shooter was wearing body armor when he was not; that the police responded and killed the shooter in 40 minutes when the amount of time was nearly twice as long; that the shooter had locked himself in a classroom that did not have working locks; that police ran toward gunfire when video shows them running from it; that a teacher had left a door propped open for the shooter when the door was closed; and that the police had engaged the shooter immediately when they did not.

NPR also routinely reported stated motives from official sources as actual reasons for events, even when the explanations lacked credibility: “City officials have also refused to release more details [about the shooting], reasoning that it would interfere with the ongoing investigation.” Each piece of misinformation served to improve the reasonableness of the police response. NPR has not offered any update or correction to any of the stories involving false police statements. They did however make three corrections about the geographic position of Uvalde, the timing of a local official’s resignation, and the number of times a particular child was shot. All pieces of misinformation serve to exonerate or justify law enforcement actions.

In later articles NPR notes that earlier reporting was incorrect, sharing new reports from police to correct the prior false police reports. NPR described these as “a shortage of facts” and “a shift in a narrative” instead of a campaign of misinformation that legitimized police inaction and protected the police from public scrutiny.¹⁸⁵ In every story that updates a piece of police misinformation, police are assumed to have made mistakes, been disorganized, or

184. Ibid.

185. Jaclyn Diaz and Merrit Kennedy, “The Evolving Narrative of What Happened at Uvalde the Day of the Shooting,” NPR, May 27, 2022, sec. Uvalde elementary school shooting, <https://www.NPR.org/2022/05/27/1101640422/questions-on-timeline-in-ualde>; Bill Chappell and Laura Benshoff, “The Story about How the Uvalde Gunman Entered the School Is Shifting,” NPR, June 1, 2022, sec. Uvalde elementary school shooting, <https://www.NPR.org/2022/06/01/1102355422/uvalde-shooting-teacher-door>.

had a “leadership vacuum.” Little to no consideration is given to the possibility that police in a life-threatening situation could have chosen to prioritize their own safety over their community and may do so in the future.

NPR relied heavily on statements from law enforcement about the Uvalde mass shooting. While law enforcement only represented 16% of total sources quoted in the series, they comprised 69% of quotes describing or commenting on the events or the police response on the day of the shooting.¹⁸⁶ Community members made up 18% of quoted sources, but only 22% of the sources who commented on or described the events or police response on the day of the shooting. Community members were quoted for very different kinds of information: 40% of community member statements were to remember their loved ones, and another 20% were to share their emotions, prayers, or well-wishes to the community.

Funding may play a role in press dependence on the police. It is much less expensive to attend police or government briefings than to find credible sources in communities. Public resources for every American or every community to fund a thriving free press could provide the resources to ensure press independence, even when officials like the police or corporations maintain information monopolies.

Another area NPR rarely covers is police shootings of unarmed Americans. A comparison of the data from Mapping Police Violence’s database of such shootings from 2016-2020 and the major NPR and PBS news content from that period that is available on ProQuest. We found that only 37 of 10,188 were covered as news stories within ProQuest’s database.¹⁸⁷

The public needs objective information about “public safety,” which includes reporting on police misinformation and misconduct. Covering the police as a news subject requires the funding to develop reliable non-police sources on public safety matters and to verify police claims.

Other Examples of Hidden Bias

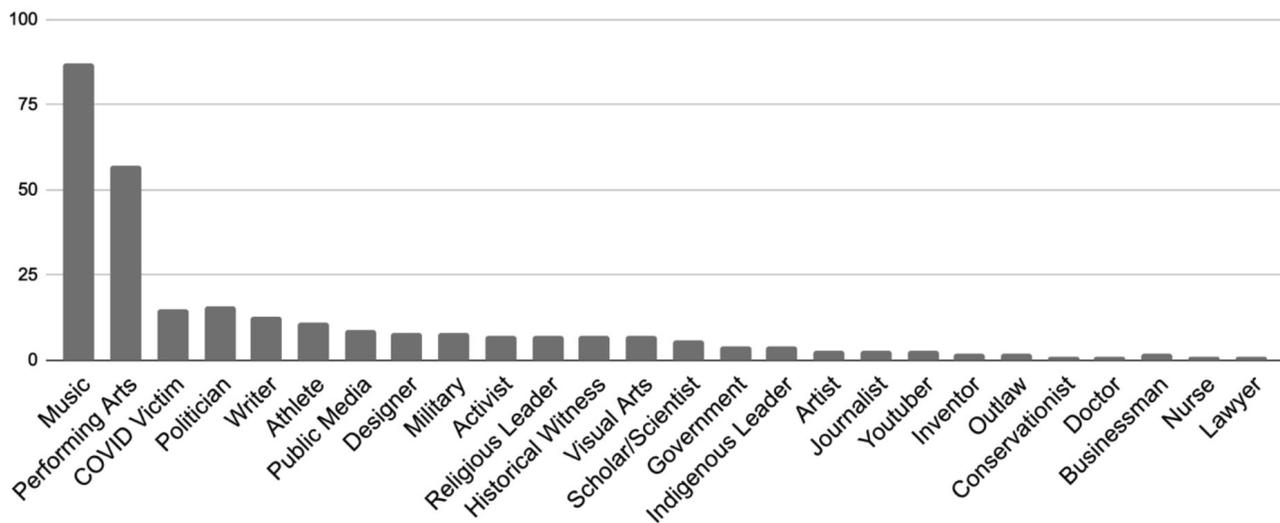
Whose lives count?

Obituaries tell us who and what kind of people society values and remembers. NPR listeners and readers encounter obituaries that remember artists, but that fail to remember progressive historical figures, such as the activist and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Below is an examination of NPR obituaries from June 2021 to July 2022.

¹⁸⁶. Data available upon request.

¹⁸⁷. See Mapping Police Violence Datasheet.

of NPR Obituaries By Profession



Nearly 60% of NPR’s obituaries are for artists (visual, theatrical, musical, etc.). Three percent are for public media employees. The only citizens (not artists, politicians, or celebrities) were COVID victims that NPR profiled as part of a series about their favorite song. Outside of the civil rights field, our sample did not include any progressive or labor leaders but did include several politicians who were praised for “reaching across the aisle” to compromise.

Disproportionate Focus on The Ivy League

NPR’s mentions of educational institutions is skewed toward Ivy League colleges. There are over 12,000 articles that mention Harvard alone, another 12,000 that mention Columbia, and just 1,604 that mention “community college,” 8,346 that mention “state university,” and 51 that mention “trade school”. It is hard to disentangle whether this indicates that the experts that NPR seeks out are disproportionately affiliated with Ivy League schools or whether Ivy League schools are covered more as news subjects than state, community college, and trade schools that make up the vast majority of higher education institutions. Either option suggests a prioritization of elite educational institutions that is out-of-step with NPR’s core mission.

Age

If donors, viewers, and governing boards of public media tend to be older than the general public is NPR coverage skewed toward the topics or perspectives of older Americans as opposed to the general public? Here’s what we found.

We first looked for how many articles contained economic terms relevant for seniors compared to young people:

Search Terms Estimated Most Relevant to Seniors

Search Term	All Time Hits (Taken on (03/26/2023))
Retirement	8,842
Medicare	7,548
Social Security	5,056
Queen Elizabeth	1,067
Alzheimer's	2,058
Arthritis	918
AARP	625
Mortgage	7,476

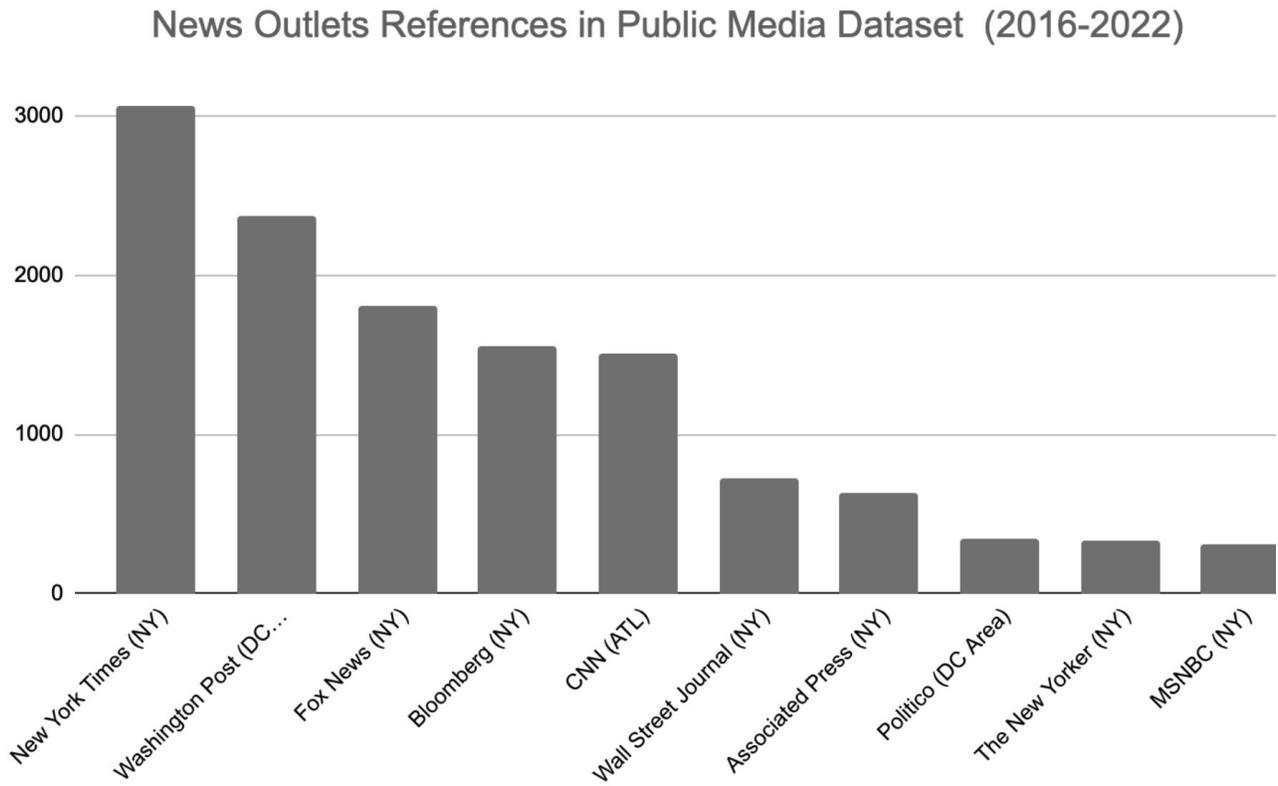
Search Terms Estimated Most Relevant to Younger Americans

Search Term	All Time Hits (Taken on (03/26/2023))
Minimum Wage	2,498
Uninsured	2,334
Police Brutality	1,789
Student Loan	1,154
Unemployment Insurance	907
Student Debt	614
Medical Debt	126
Private Health Insurance	324
Deductible	819
Copay	192
Insurance Premium	100
Labor Union	351

This is a very rough proxy for topic coverage, but since NPR has refused to release the data behind their own topics covered study, a more complex analysis was not possible.¹⁸⁸ Initial searches reveal significantly more coverage of related topics for older Americans than younger Americans. For example, Social Security is covered twice as much as the minimum wage; Medicare is covered more than ten times as often as various search terms related to private health insurance.

Which News Sources Count?

NPR most often cites large news sources, nearly all of which are located in New York or Washington, D.C. Below are the most referenced private news sources from our 2016-2022 dataset.



¹⁸⁸. "Story Topics," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/about-npr/1112347180/our-news-source-tracking>.

News Source	Hits	HQ
New York Times	3,068	New York
Washington Post	2,369	District of Columbia
Fox News	1,804	New York
Bloomberg	1,550	New York
CNN	1,509	Atlanta
Wall Street Journal	722	New York
Associated Press	627	New York
Politico	346	Arlington, VA
The New Yorker	332	New York
MSNBC	305	New York

In this set there is a significant clustering of mentions among the top five most mentioned news sources with a steep drop-off after this. Nearly all sources are headquartered in New York or the Washington, D.C. area. This is likely more indicative of the state of major news media producers than it is of NPR's editorial decisions. Many of these newsrooms, including NPR have correspondents and reporting operations in cities across the country, but at the end of the day the senior newsroom staff decide and shape what becomes news.

Below is a list of organizational mentions in NPR.org all-time search (1970-present). The results reveal that think tanks, generally funded by wealthy donors, are mentioned far more often than labor unions which receive their funding from working people. Top nonprofit organizations receive a similar number of mentions as compared to think tanks.

LABOR UNIONS

Union Membership	Name Searched	NPR.org Mentions	Union Acronym
12,500,000	AFL-CIO	642	AFL-CIO
1,505,100	Service Employees International Union	267	SEIU
828,512	American Federation of Teachers	236	AFT

2,731,419	National Education Association	193	“NEA” “union”
754,978	United Steelworkers	108	United Steelworkers
1,311,548	United Food and Commercial Workersd	98	UFCW
1,459,511	American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees	89	AFSCME
226,975	American Federation of Government Employees	86	AFGE
545,638	Communications Workers of America	49	CWA
286,700	American Postal Workers Union	41	APWU

THINK TANKS

Think Tank Name	NPR.org Mentions
Brookings Institution	3,157
Council on Foreign Relations	1,415
Center for Strategic and International Studies	1,159
American Enterprise Institute	1,120
Carnegie Endowment	821
The Heritage Foundation	606
Cato Institute	502
RAND Corporation	455
Atlantic Council	431
Hoover Institution	336
Institute for Strategic Studies	122

NONPROFITS

Organization	NPR.org Hits
NAACP	2,565
ACLU	2,361
AARP	618
Common Cause	540
Economic Policy Institute	379
Sierra Club	363
Greenpeace	314
Public Citizen	281
Center for Science in the Public Interest	209
National Organization for Women	115
Consumer Federation of America	109

Reforms to Ensure the Material Survival of the Free Press and Ground Public Newsrooms within their Communities

For public media to step into the breach left by for-profit media's collapse, financial and organizational reforms are required. Reform #1 details how the public can fund newsrooms while insulating them from politicians and the ultrawealthy. Reforms #2-4 are organizational reforms to root our publicly funded news media within the communities that they serve.

The funding deficit impeding local reporting is not insurmountable. Some proposals have calculated the cost of filling the gap by multiplying the average salary for a new journalist by the number of new journalists needed. In 2022, Steve Waldman, a long-time advocate for local journalism funding, proposed funding 50,000 new reporters to get us back to the quality of the journalism system that we had in 2004.¹⁸⁹ He determined this by looking at the 41,000 newspaper newsroom staff that the U.S. has lost since 2004 and adjusting for population, growth in government budgets, and new misinformation systems to arrive at 50,000 new journalists to have “a *better* local news system than we had” in 2004.¹⁹⁰ Waldman assumes we should pay each journalist on average \$49,000 plus benefits. Multiplying the two together Waldman estimates the funding deficit for a “better” system to be \$3 billion each year.

This estimate excludes the real-world costs of journalism beyond median salary and benefits including operations, HR, or reporting resources. Dr. Robert McChesney and John Nichols, two pioneers in studying the local journalism crisis, see funding for the reporter gap since 2004 as an insufficient target. According to McChesney and Nichols,

189. Steve Waldman, “Let’s Strengthen Local Reporting by 50,000 New Journalists” Columbia Journalism Review, February 28, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/local_news/lets-strengthen-local-reporting-by-50000-new-journalists.php.

190. Ibid.

[T]he total revenues of U.S. daily newspapers constituted 1 % of GDP as recently as 1960; that would amount to \$232 billion in 2021. In 2000, the total revenues accounted for by daily newspapers was just under 0.6 % of GDP. At that rate, the local journalism income for 2021 would be \$133 billion. By 2021, total daily newspaper income (including digital) was less than \$20 billion, and every year that number continues to plummet . . . the best way to assure that there are sufficient resources for newsrooms across the country would be to set the annual budget at 0.15% of the previous year's GDP. Keeping the budget to this formula would account for economic and population growth, as well as inflation in coming years, and provide stability for planning. So, for 2022, the budget would be just over \$34 billion for local news production.¹⁹¹

Two nonprofits, Sea Change and the Democracy Fund, created the first-ever comprehensive financial model of local journalism. They did so based on interviews with over 20 stakeholders and leaders in the news journalism sector to determine the funding needed to ensure everyone in the United States had access to the information they need. They call this threshold “minimal viable civic news.”¹⁹² They determined that the average organizational expense per editorial staff is \$96,058. This includes salary and “other expenses involved in producing journalism.” They then break down coverage into seven “government focus areas”: Community Services, Criminal Justice, Education, Elections, Environment, Healthcare, and Infrastructure. Using this model, they found that it would cost \$8.5 billion annually to provide one journalist per focus area for every municipal and county government alone.¹⁹³ They also concluded that “Adding journalists by state house, election district, school system, etc. increases this number substantially. Using these fully loaded calculations shows that the cost of running a robust journalism ecosystem is much greater than previously estimated.”

The exact amount of funding needed for a minimal viable civic news system is subject to dispute. But estimates place the total cost (including current spending) to be roughly ten billion dollars a year (.1% of 2021's 6.8 trillion dollar federal budget). Even a \$30 billion McChesney-Nichols system that would bring us into alignment with our peer democracies would amount to 0.4% of federal spending. This level of investment is in line with the total yearly value of the federal postal subsidy to newspapers during the 19th century.¹⁹⁴ In 2023, a single corporation, Apple, repurchased \$90 billion of its own stock.¹⁹⁵

191. Robert W McChesney and John Nichols, “To Protect and Extend Democracy, Recreate Local News Media,” January 25, 2022, https://www.free-press.net/sites/default/files/2022-03/to_protect_democracy_recreate_local_news_media_final.pdf

192. “Journalism Financial Modeling Project,” Democracy Fund, December 2021.

193. Id. ; If we wanted to have one journalist to cover Women and the AAPI, Black/African American, Indigenous, Latinx/Hispanic, and LGBTQIA+ communities it would cost \$15 billion a year.

194. See supra note 186.

195. Apple Newsroom, “Apple reports second quarter results,” apple.com, May 4, 2023, <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2023/05/apple-reports-second-quarter-results/#:-:text=The%20dividend%20is%20payable%20on,of%20the%20Company's%20common%20stock.-->

In addition to adequate financing levels, publicly funded media must adopt several crucial reforms if it is to have the capacity to provide all of the communities it serves with the information needed to maintain democracy.

REFORM #1:

Stable Public Funding

History shows that annual congressional appropriations provide insufficient funding for public media to fill the gap left by the collapse of commercial news media. This is especially true compared to nearly every other peer democracy that spends between 10 and 40 times what the United States does on public media per capita.¹⁹⁶ This financing model leaves U.S. public media unable to meet Americans' informational needs and economically reliant on wealthy interests.

But there are alternative ways of providing stable public funds with less partisanship and industry meddling. There are various funding sources, funding mechanisms, funding qualifications, and oversight options for a stable public funding system to guarantee the continued existence of the free press.

Barring new funding, the public media system can take steps to reallocate existing resources toward news deserts. For example, NPR could remove the fee cap on large donations or CPB could distribute programming grants more equitably with focus on facilitating local journalism production.

Funding Sources

First and simplest, Congress could make funding for journalism part of mandatory spending. Funding could be authorized on an indefinite basis based on a simple population formula in a single piece of legislation passed in one year. This legislation would not be subject to renegotiation every budget cycle. Federal mandatory spending has helped to sustain vital programs, such as Social Security and Medicare from partisan budget cuts. In his recent book, Professor Josh Shepperd, an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, recommends that public broadcasting seek more durable, mandatory funding by reconnecting with public education.¹⁹⁷ Public funds for journalism could become mandatory spending that is allocated through the Department of Educa-

196. Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, "Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, December 13, 2021, 19401612211060256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060255>.

197. Josh Shepperd, "Shadow of the New Deal: The Victory of Public Broadcasting," University of Illinois Press, forthcoming.

tion, which already has a nearly \$300 billion budget.¹⁹⁸ The funding could be required to be passed through in such a way that no political appointee or federal official could affect who receives the funding. Instead, it could be automatically distributed to communities to allocate via citizen deliberations or individually with news coupons.

Instead of a fiscal approach (e.g. Funding through the federal budget), Congress could fund journalism using monetary tools (e.g. authorizing an agency to extend credit, grants, or issue bonds) to insulate the press from political or corporate influence. Monetary tools can be politically expedient since they do not need to be regularly reauthorized and do not show up in the budget as an expenditure. Since these are extensions of public credit, not fiscal spending, this approach will not increase the deficit or national debt. This may insulate the program from bad-faith attacks on “fiscal discipline” grounds or asks to “pay for it” with tax increases or spending cuts. This program is minuscule compared to our \$23+ trillion economy and therefore will have no impact on inflation.

Congressionally authorized transfers from the Federal Reserve already fund agencies like the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to insulate them from capture by corporate interests. Congress could just directly order the Fed or a separate agency to distribute journalism funding. Other monetary approaches could involve a congressionally chartered journalism crisis credit facility. This facility could be authorized to issue direct grants in the amount needed to ensure a minimally viable journalism system, as established by a statute using a funding formula like the proposed Democracy Fund.¹⁹⁹ The facility could either be authorized by Congress to directly extend grants as public credit or to issue bonds that the Federal Reserve would be mandated to purchase at a guaranteed minimum price. Just as the Fed buys debt instruments from corporations and banks and replaces them with liquidity to address financial crises, the Fed could backstop a journalism funding credit facility to end the journalism financial collapse. Another monetary approach would establish a network of local journalism banks across the country that are chartered to distribute funding over a geographic area. This would fall in line with the approach modeled in the Public Banking Act or The Federal Home Loan Banks.

An alternative mixed fiscal-monetary approach would be for Congress to make a one-time allocation of a large sum of money (e.g. \$150 billion) into a journalism credit facility. The facility could provide local communities grants for journalism and the interest on the fund could help it sustain the system over a decade or more without the need for new appropriators. Instead of needing to defend the program in each appropriations cycle, a government that is friendly to journalism funding would only need to infuse it with capital once over

198. “Department of Education (ED),” USASpending.gov, <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-education?fy=2023>, October 9, 2023.

199. “Journalism Financial Modeling Project,” Democracy Fund, December 2021.

the next decade or so to keep it solvent. This added layer of protection could insulate the funding from political interference.

State and local governments could also increase their role in funding local journalism. Local governments could pay for public notices to fund newspapers with paid advertising. Retired newspaper editor David Westphal estimated in *Poynter*²⁰⁰ that these public notices already account for hundreds of millions of dollars a year in funding.²⁰¹ Localities could also vote to authorize a special tax district to fund local journalism. Special tax districts fund a variety of public services across the country including libraries, hospitals, and waste management. Voters could authorize a small fee (e.g. \$5 a year) to fund a local news outlet. At the state level, governments allocate a certain amount of revenue directly to public media or indirectly through contributions to colleges and universities that host public media stations. These approaches could be scaled up significantly to help fund journalism at a sustainable level.

Other nations also offer potential models. In 2021, Australia enacted the News Media Bargaining Code, a regime to force tech giants to bargain with news providers for the news that is distributed on their platforms. In response, Facebook shut off news service on their platform and then chose to shut off service for hospitals, community centers, and other community institutions in the middle of a pandemic.²⁰² Australia then amended the bill to give tech giants more control over what news providers they decide to pay and on what terms they do so. As of May 2022, only 41% of broadcasters had been able to reach agreements with Facebook and major publishers including the Australian public broadcaster SBS had not been given deals.²⁰³ On the whole, these deals have been secret so the public does not know how these publishers are incentivized to make money. It would also be hard to know whether Facebook or Google could retaliate against a media company for publishing an investigative piece about them.

Proponents praise the system as it distributes money directly to newsrooms and allows newsrooms to remain formally independent from direct government funding. They also like that newsrooms are being compensated directly for their work product, maintaining journalism as a “business.” Skeptics worry that the system ties journalism’s profitability to the success and continued support of big tech platforms in a way that could create an unhealthy dependency on either big tech companies or the algorithms that determine newsroom compensation. They

200. “The Poynter Institute is a global nonprofit that strengthens democracy by improving the relevance, ethical practice and value of journalism.” See: <https://www.poynter.org/>

201. Westphal, “Defying Forecasts, Newspapers Have Retained Public Notices (and They’ve Grown Ever More Critical to Small Papers’ Survival),” *Poynter*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2020/defying-forecasts-newspapers-have-retained-public-notice-and-theyve-grown-ever-more-critical-to-small-papers-survival/>.

202. Josh Taylor, “Deliberate Ploy: Whistleblowers Reveal Why Facebook’s Australia News Ban Included Non-News Sites,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/may/29/deliberate-ploy-whistleblowers-reveal-why-facebooks-australia-news-ban-included-non-news-sites>.

203. *Ibid.*

also worry that the payments give more power to big tech by granting platforms direct control to decide who to bargain with, how to structure newsroom compensation, and the potential to weaponize “blackouts” on newsroom funding to veto future legislation. According to Timothy Karr at the nonprofit organization Free Press, this approach locks “in existing power relationships between established news organizations like the Murdochs’ News Corp. and digital platforms like Meta—while doing little to put more reporters on local beats, reverse the spread of news deserts, serve long-neglected communities or support the kinds of news innovation that represent local journalism’s brightest hopes.”²⁰⁴

For Australian broadcasters, the system generated \$150 million in news revenue in its first year.²⁰⁵ If the United States were to establish a program and scale it to our population, the system would provide around \$2 billion a year, around 20% of the funding required for a minimum viable journalism ecosystem.²⁰⁶ Canada passed a similar system and Facebook removed news content from the platform in response. While the system was projected to raise over \$250 million for Canadian news publishers, Google threatened to block news content in Canada and negotiated the cost of the system down to \$74 million.²⁰⁷ By contrast, the U.S. government gave corn farmers \$4 billion in crop insurance subsidies in 2023.²⁰⁸

For public media, replacing most corporate and private donations with dedicated public monies or publicly structured bargaining will also allow other salutary reforms. Stations would save enormous costs they currently incur to fundraise. Typically, fundraising accounts for 10 to 20 percent of the station’s expenses. If funding levels were adequate to enable public media to fill the vacuum left by for-profit media in local news, incumbent public media stations would have significant resources to gather and report on local news. If you assume that public media stations receive 30% of a hypothetical \$10 billion program, they would receive nearly \$3 billion in new revenue per year. This would multiply federal spending on existing public media institutions by six times while also providing fourteen times as much funding to other local journalists that stations could amplify.

Funding Mechanisms

Once a funding source is found, some entity must decide who receives the funding. Traditionally, many journalists in the United States have opposed direct public funding. They are

204. Timothy Karr, “The JCPA: Myths and Realities of a Bad Journalism Bill,” Free Press, December 5, 2022, <https://www.freepress.net/blog/jc-pa-myths-and-realities-bad-journalism-bill>.

205. Mathew Ingram, “Canada Imitates Australia’s News-Bargaining Law, but to What End?,” Columbia Journalism Review, March 16, 2023, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/canada_australia_platforms_news_law.php.

206. Ibid.

207. Max Matza, “Google and Canada reach deal to avert news ban over Online News Act,” November 29, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67571027>.

208. Scott Faber, Bennett Rosenberg, “Do billionaires get farm subsidies?,” Environmental Working Group, December 14, 2023, <https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/news/2023/12/do-billionaires-get-farm-subsidies>.

concerned that politicians will be the deciding group and that they will use their position as funders to unduly influence the free press. Ensuring that any program has a transparent and democratic funding mechanism is essential to maintaining the independence of the press under a public funding model. At the same time, private financing mechanisms have historically catered to wealthy individuals, corporate owners, and advertisers' perspectives, leaving out the unserved and underserved communities that public broadcasting was created to serve. Public distribution of funding has the potential to better align newsrooms' financial interests with serving all communities in their geographic area if the group allocating the funding is the community or a subset of it rather than politicians or wealthy donors.

The public can distribute funds in an open and democratic way that can insulate journalism from political and corporate pressure. First, local stations and newsrooms could submit funding requests to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting or a dedicated local news distribution fund that is required to fulfill requests for funding based on a population formula. Newsrooms could only be allowed to apply for this funding if they commit to operational transparency and maintaining a board that represents the income, geographic, racial, and gender diversity of their community.

Another option is to give every citizen news coupons, the equivalent of a news subscription that they could give to any qualifying newsroom.²⁰⁹ This system turns every member of a community into a paying customer for newsrooms and reduces the ability of politicians to influence which outlets get funding. A news coupon proposal is now being debated by the Council of the District of Columbia.²¹⁰

Funding could also be distributed through local elections such that every two or four years community members would vote on which newsrooms receive public funding.²¹¹ Some worry though that these approaches will leave only a small portion of the community actually spending their coupons or voting and that those people will be more partisan and tend to fund polarizing media. A coupon system could be designed to allocate a set amount of funding regardless of how many coupons are allocated, but the group allocating may still be unrepresentative of the public.²¹² Others argue that these risks are overstated compared to the polarizing pressures that the current algorithm and outrage-driven private news ecosystem creates.

209. Mark Histed, "Local News Dollars," Democracy Policy Network, n.d., <https://democracypolicy.network/agenda/strong-people/strong-communities/local-news-dollars?ref=democracy-policy-network>.

210. Sara Fischer and Cuneyt Dil, "D.C. lawmakers to introduce new bill funding local news via vouchers," October 20, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/20/local-news-vouchers-bill-dc>.

211. Robert W McChesney and John Nichols, "To Protect and Extend Democracy, Recreate Local News Media," January 25, 2022, https://www.free-press.net/sites/default/files/2022-03/to_protect_democracy_recreate_local_news_media_final.pdf

212. In such a system, each voucher would be worth the amount of funding divided by number of vouchers allocated instead of having a preset dollar value.

If policymakers are concerned about unrepresentative groups allocating votes or coupons, then they can entrust the funding to deliberative citizen bodies. Local communities could convene representative samples of randomly selected community members to deliberate on what journalism is missing in their communities and provide funding to outlets to fill those gaps. In the citizen deliberation model, a quasi-representative group of fifty to three hundred citizens would be chosen by lot every few years to deliberate and decide on news funding decisions. They would be selected in the same way that jurors are selected in each community, potentially with controls to ensure the sample is as representative of the community's demographics as possible. The group would deliberate for a few days, decide on what outlets in their communities should receive public funding, and also share their informational needs as citizens for journalists to use as a guidepost.

These bodies could be more representative of their community than the group that would allocate coupons and would not be able to be lobbied before the deliberations, making it impossible for special interests or partisans to mobilize and influence the funding process.

An alternative model would empower an expert board appointed by politicians, university officials, and the prior two groups' appointees to deliberate and distribute grants to fill the community's civic informational needs. The New Jersey Civic Information Consortium already operates on this model.²¹³ Lastly, direct payments could be made to newsrooms similar to both the Australian tech platform bargaining system or a model like Canada's Local Journalism Initiative.²¹⁴ In this model, a group of seven nonprofits distribute funds directly to newsrooms. Some critics have argued that Canada's initiative has funded more legacy and politically connected news media outlets than the small local newsrooms the program was designed to help.²¹⁵

Funding could also be distributed to a network of community-run, "Public Media Centers" including municipal newspapers and multi-media hubs that produce a wide range of news and information.²¹⁶ These centers could be based out of libraries, public media stations, or other educational institutions, but they must be primarily governed by local communities.

Alternatively, funding could be allocated by educational institutions in line with public media's historical and contemporary practice. Funding could be distributed through existing higher-education institutions out of which many stations are based. Funding could also be distributed by the Department of Education to local primary and secondary schools which could make donations to local nonprofit newsrooms or fund their own educational

213. "The Civic Information Consortium," NJ Civic Info, n.d., <https://njcivicinfo.cdn-pi.com/>.

214. Sarah Scire, "In Canada, a Government Program to Support Local News Tries to Determine Who's Most Deserving," Nieman Lab (blog), May 8, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/05/in-canada-a-government-program-to-support-local-news-tries-to-determine-whos-most-deserving/>.

215. Ibid.

216. Victor Pickard, "The local rise of Public Media Centers", Nieman Lab, 2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/12/the-local-rise-of-public-media-centers/>.

content. The infrastructure for this approach already exists, but this approach could give staff of the Department of Education or local schools too much control over the free press. Safeguards would be needed to prevent partisan political interests from unduly influencing journalism funded through educational institutions.

Under any of these models, funding for journalism would be voted on once and then be put in place either for a term of several years or indefinitely. After voting, the funding would be sent to individual community members or groups of community members to decide what journalism their community needs for as long as the funding source remains solvent. Politicians and civil servants would be unable to influence this spending or use it as a lever to influence the press.

Funding Qualifications

If public funds are distributed for journalism, there must be neutral rules to decide who qualifies for funding.

Funding could be limited based on incorporation status. For instance, funding could only be available to outlets that are nonprofit, cooperative, or public entities. There could also be a transition period/on-ramp that would allow for-profit media to convert or adopt certain governance rules to qualify. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) already mandates a public or nonprofit organizational structure to qualify for funding.

Depending on the quantity of public funding, private fundraising could either be regulated, anonymized, or eliminated. This could mean a prohibition on providing donors with any greater access or service than any community member, limiting donations to only individuals, capping the size of donations, or eliminating underwriting, advertising, or paywalls. These requirements could be phased in to be minimally disruptive and structured to be commensurate with the level of public funding provided. Nearly all publicly funded programs are prohibited from private fundraising or giving special treatment to a segment of the population, (e.g. the U.S. Postal Service). Outlets could also be required to live up to some form of public-interest standard like a modernized version of the Fairness Doctrine.

Outlets could be required to have been publishing content regularly for several months to qualify for funding, and to continue to publish regularly (e.g. weekly, three days a week, or daily) to limit fraudulent applications or ventures that are unlikely to last a significant duration.²¹⁷ Outlets could be required to employ a certain percentage of their staff, say at least 50%, from the county or state in which they operate.

217. Robert W McChesney and John Nichols, "To Protect and Extend Democracy, Recreate Local News Media," January 25, 2022, https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2022-03/to_protect_democracy_recreate_local_news_media_final.pdf

Outlets could be required to be formally independent such that they would have no parent company or controlling owner. There could also be waivers given to newsrooms that have already been acquired for a limited period to facilitate replanting these newsrooms back into their communities.²¹⁸ It is important that journalists can work for multiple outlets or freelance in some form, but at the same time, the public may not want to allow publicly funded journalists to receive payments in ways that create conflicts of interest from corporations, dark money groups, or political parties. Publicly funded journalists' secondary sources of income could be regulated, either by public disclosure requirements or with the same kind of conflict of interest rules that apply to government employees.

Outlets could be required to be transparent with their financials, hiring, and board meetings. They could also be required to remove all paywalls or place their content in the public domain after a certain amount of time. Lastly, they could be required to perform internal content analyses and publish them to ensure they are producing coverage that serves all segments of their community.

Larger outlets could be required to have their own governing or advisory boards, or each local area could have a single board. Those boards could be required to represent the diversity of their communities and be responsible for selecting station leadership. Boards could have a limited oversight function like ensuring that outlets are publishing regularly and not engaging in fraud. Boards could also have a role in communicating the informational needs of their communities to outlets. Board members could be citizens or community residents chosen by lot to serve the community for limited terms. The Public Broadcasting Act requires all nonprofit stations to have advisory boards, but these boards could be given more power and democratic selection requirements to ensure that publicly funded media remains accountable to the communities that they serve.

Who Enforces The Rules?

For any public program, some group must enforce rules and secure the rights of the public. This critical role will determine whether the program achieves its intended purposes. Typically, disputes about legislation are handled in the court system. For this type of public funding system you could imagine that, a citizen or public official could sue an outlet for fraud, embezzling public funds, not producing journalism, or failing to file proper disclosures. Such a system may prove prohibitively costly or process disputes too slowly or inflexibly. An alternative would be to empower an independent administrative body at a Federal or State office like the U.S. Postal Service, FCC, or State Auditor's office to hear

218. Steve Waldman, "A Replanting Strategy: Saving Local Newspapers Squeezed by Hedge Funds," Center for Journalism & Liberty, September 18, 2020, <https://www.journalismliberty.org/publications/replanting-strategy-saving-local-newspapers-squeezed-by-hedge-fund>.

complaints and settle disputes. Their decisions could be reviewable by courts, subject to clear standards for appeals. This body could function like the National Labor Relations Board which hears disputes, writes opinions, and makes rules to structure the labor organizing process. The body would still be accountable to courts and all outlets would have the opportunity to appeal any decision against them to a court of law.

An alternative program could be developed with exceptionally clear rules and a process whereby a citizen jury, a randomly chosen group of quasi-representative citizens would meet at regular intervals to perform oversight and settle disputes. The citizen jury could be responsible for dealing with conflicts of interest, making sure that outlets are making proper disclosures or publishing regularly. They could also provide feedback to outlets on ways that they could better serve their communities. Decisions by local citizen juries could be appealable with an exceedingly high threshold to the courts.

Another approach would be to insulate newsrooms from traditional oversight and let the community exercise oversight through voting or with their coupon decisions. This light-touch approach would insulate newsrooms but provide only blunt tools to deal with fraud and misconduct.

Lastly, in any system where outlets are paid by tech companies, newsrooms may be subject directly or indirectly to private governance by the platform. The platform could change compensation to be based on how many clicks, views, or shares an outlet produces, or they could offer them significantly lower payments after a hard-hitting expose on the tech funder. The former is already a reality in a world that lacks a public financing system. Based on inaccurate data, Facebook told publishers in 2017 that pivoting to video content would bring in new viewers and revenues.²¹⁹ Hundreds of journalists were laid off and replaced with video production professionals, only for Facebook to announce an error in their data analysis and shortly after decide to pivot their algorithm away from publisher content including videos and toward posts by friends and family.²²⁰ Transparency and publicly set guardrails would be essential in any system where a private company or even a nonprofit council structures newsroom funding.

219. Condé Nast, “Was the Media’s Big ‘Pivot to Video’ All Based on a Lie?,” *Vanity Fair*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/10/was-the-medias-big-pivot-to-video-all-based-on-a-lie>.

220. Alexis C. Madrigal et al., “How Facebook’s Chaotic Push Into Video Cost Hundreds of Journalists Their Jobs,” *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/facebook-driven-video-push-may-have-cost-483-journalists-their-jobs/573403/>.

REFORM #2:

Ground newsrooms within communities by mandating boards be representative of their communities

Public media boards should be representative of the public's economic, racial, gender, and geographic diversity and selected in a transparent, merit-based or democratic process. A candidate's ability to raise large sums of money should not be considered. The national organizations should enforce this principle as well as local stations.

It is a national embarrassment that our public media institutions are governed like a medieval fiefdom, where the wealthy are given power in exchange for their funding. Accordingly, the public, the member stations, the CPB, and public media's lobby should demand CPB board nominees who are representative of the American public, particularly in economic, age, geographic, gender and racial dimensions. All other public media organizations should follow suit—release estimates comparing the backgrounds of their board members to that of the community as a whole and take steps to ensure their board is reflective of the public.

CPB should use its Community Service Grants as incentives to promote diversity in their stations' governance and community boards. Just as the CPB penalizes stations for underperforming on fundraising, even withdrawing funding if fundraising underperformance is not addressed, the CPB should leverage their grants to achieve diversity and ensure all stations have a standing community board. These boards should be given real power to advise on hiring, governance, and programming that their communities need.

All publicly funded newsrooms should follow the same standards.

REFORM #3:

The public should have a freedom of information right to know about the internal operation of public media

All published stories and transcripts should be publicly available at no charge. No private company should control such information in such a way that limits the public's ability to understand, analyze, and hold the public's media to its founding principles.

The CPB, NPR, and member stations withhold significant information about their audience, operations, funding, internal audits, and investigations. Currently, the CPB, NPR, PBS, and individual stations are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). As long as the government is funding public media, the public should have access to such information about its media with as few restrictions as is practicable. Future publicly funded

media should be subject to FOIA rules, with confidentiality exceptions to protect journalistic integrity and process.

NPR, PBS, and stations should provide demographic/diversity data that they collect about their audience, board members, and employees, and summary statistics for their donors. They currently do not do that. When NPR does publish important statistics such as their report on the demographics of news sources, they refuse to provide any underlying data to allow members of the public to verify it. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) denied requests to make anyone from the CPB or their board available for an interview for this report. The CPB also refused to provide the annual internal surveys they perform containing information on funding, operations, governance, and content for each station. The CPB, an entirely publicly funded entity, also selectively releases data reports to some members of the public while denying them to others on an ad hoc basis.²²¹

Individual public media stations do not routinely respond to informational requests. Of the 100 stations we attempted to survey, only six responded at all, and just four responded to our survey questions and were available for an interview.

Public media should make transcripts of their newscasts available at no charge to the public. Currently, they sell their newscast transcripts to for-profit databases like NewsBank. These services charge thousands of dollars to members of the public who want access to public media transcripts in bulk, which is necessary, for instance, to perform the kind of content analysis contained in this report. PBS NewsHour is one example. They told us that “transcripts are available on the LexisNexis platform.” They told us that they “don’t/won’t allow non-NewsHour employees access to the backend publishing platform for our website, nor will we grant permission to scrape our website for these purposes.” Even paying for access through for-profit platforms like NewsBank does not guarantee access. NewsBank denied our request to possess transcripts, citing licensing agreements with NPR requiring us to have access to them in a virtual environment that they would ultimately control. In an adequately funded public media system there would be no need to privatize and pay-wall public media content from the public. The public should be allowed not just to consume but to analyze the public’s media.

221. See Email with CPB Head of Communications Tracey Briggs 1/05/2023

REFORM #4:

The public media system should convene representative samples of Americans to learn about their informational needs; use these gatherings to guide story selection, editorial direction, and communication; and share these insights with all other news outlets

NPR and PBS and their boards routinely hire consultants for amounts they refused to disclose to the public. Instead of paying tens of thousands of dollars to hire a team of corporate management professionals, public media managers should ask the public directly through deliberative democratic gatherings and then pocket the remaining money to spend on local journalism or other worthy causes.

NPR told us that they already have a robust public engagement system. NPR's Head of Communications Isabel Lara shared that:

NPR maintains a panel of over 13,000 NPR listeners who participate regularly in research to inform our work. Beyond that NPR also invests in nationally representative studies and research to better understand news and information needs of younger racially and ethnically diverse adults. In the past year, NPR fielded over three dozen primary research projects, and several years ago completed an American News Consumer study to develop a comprehensive view of news needs across the United States.²²²

We asked if we could see any of the work products from these studies, but Ms. Lara told us, "No, those are proprietary studies."²²³

These studies could provide the public and other news providers with a treasure trove of information that could help outlets better meet the informational needs of their communities, but because of NPR's business concerns, this information is kept from the public.

Now neither the people that govern, work at, donate to, or consume public media are representative of the public. Accordingly, those who produce and report the news are constantly surrounded by information from groups that are unrepresentative of citizens. To stay connected with the public will and answer key questions of policy, NPR, PBS, CPB, and local stations should start or continue to organize representative citizen deliberations on informational needs. These groups would produce more useful information than current surveys in that they would be representative of the entire community, not just the audience, and they would deliberate together in addition to being individually polled.

222. Email from NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara on 1/06/2023

223. Email from NPR Head of Communications Isabel Lara on 1/06/2023

Representative deliberations, conducted on the model of deliberative polling or citizens assemblies, are distinct from current open meetings that public media organizations host in that they are truly representative of their communities.²²⁴ Only the most engaged, usually middle-class or affluent, and often politically polarized citizens show up to open meetings, providing a skewed and often unhelpful picture of the public. In contrast, these gatherings would involve either quasi-representative or representative groups of several dozen or several hundred people who are selected because they reflect the economic, racial, gender, and geographic characteristics of the broader community. Since these groups are an approximation of the whole of the community, they are much more likely to give an accurate picture of the community's informational needs than an open meeting. These forums provide complementary information to polls because they allow the group to deliberate on the topic and give informed, considered feedback after listening to fellow community members. Examples like the America in One Room deliberative poll saw participants' views grow significantly less polarized after having the opportunity to talk and learn with their peers.²²⁵

We have no way of knowing what NPR's studies asked citizens, but they should consider not only asking their communities about their informational needs but also asking citizens to suggest principles and rules that news organizations can follow to restore public trust. These principles could involve specifics about funding projects that deny climate science and deal with providing program funds more evenly throughout the country. The results could be presented to the public and the various boards of public media institutions to spark debate and reform.

Conclusion

Professor Wick Rowland told us that, "it's easy to beat up on the stations for not being fair. I did . . . It is too easy an attack. It doesn't get into the subtle structural, institutional, and political compromises that had been made that really locked down those realities. That's where the more interested in policy analysis watch."²²⁶ This report sought to make these institutional factors clear. We do so not to disparage the many honorable, hard-working journalists who give our public media life but to help the public understand the artificial scarcity and external pressures that prevent those journalists from delivering on public media's founding mandates and filling in for the disappearing commercial press.

224. "Deliberative Polling[®]," Participedia, n.d., <https://participedia.net/method/147>; "Citizens' Assembly," Participedia, n.d., <https://participedia.net/method/4258>.

225. James Fishkin and Larry Diamond, "This Experiment Has Some Great News for Our Democracy," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/opinion/america-one-room-experiment.html>.

226. Interview with Wick Rowland August 18, 2022.

Today, we not only need publicly funded media that enables, “the individual to better understand himself, his government, his institutions and his natural and social environment so he can intelligently participate in effecting the process of change,”²²⁷ but we need a publicly funded news gathering and distribution system for the thousands of counties across the country that lack newsrooms.

Thousands of public media stations stretch across the country, yet too few of them have the funding, connection to their community, and insulation from corporate and political pressures to provide the local news that communities across the nation need. Our report lays out the paths forward that would provide public media or a new publicly funded media system with the funding and connection to community that it needs to ensure the continued existence of the free press.

For a Congress so used to asking the question “Should we cut funding for public media entirely?” these proposals may seem out of reach. However, if you look beyond our shores you’ll see that nearly every other highly-developed democratic country spends 20 to 40 times what we do on publicly funded media.²²⁸ If you look at our history, you will see that George Washington and the Founding Fathers made comparable investments in a national mail delivery system to create a free press. Today our country is losing two newspapers every week and there is not and will not be a private business model that can reverse this decline.

As tens of millions of Americans have no professional journalists covering their counties, we lose our ability to understand what is going on in our governments, communities, and in the economy. Without professional, local, news gathering, we lose our ability to self-govern. We are left with a polarized, paralyzed, society that is unable to effectively address its own problems. The choice for policymakers is simple: Spend .1% of our budget to maintain a free press and root their institutions within the communities that they serve or watch as our democracy continues to fade away.

227. Bill Siemering, “Radio With A Purpose: Bill Siemering On NPR’s Original Mission Statement,” NPR.org, May 7, 2021, <https://www.NPR.org/2021/05/07/993569986/radio-with-a-purpose-bill-siemering-on-nprs-original-mission-statement>.

228. Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, “Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, December 13, 2021, 19401612211060256.

Appendices

Appendix 1²²⁹

Corporate Leaders as a Percentage of Public Media Station Boards

Station Name	Corporate Leaders (Percentage of Board)
KTZZ-FM	More Than 70%
KGOU	More Than 70%
KNPR	More Than 70%
WKNO	More Than 70%
WNYC-FM	More Than 70%
KUHF	More Than 70%
WBUR-FM	More Than 70%
WUNC	More Than 70%
WAMU	More Than 70%
WHYY-FM	More Than 70%
WBOI	More Than 70%
KEMC	More Than 70%
WVXU	More Than 70%
WBEZ	More Than 70%
MPR	More Than 70%
KRCL	More Than 70%

229. All corporate leader figures in this report are estimates and were generated by manually reviewing station websites during the Summer of 2022. We define corporate leaders as any board member who is a leader or family member of a leader of a major corporation.

Station Name	Corporate Leaders (Percentage of Board)
WJCT-FM	More Than 70%
WLVR	More Than 70%
CPR	More Than 70%
KJZZ	More Than 70%
KTOO	More Than 70%
KUAR	More Than 70%
KUAF	More Than 70%
WMUK-FM	More Than 70%
KCRW	More Than 50%
KERA	More Than 50%
WGBH	More Than 50%
WFPL	More Than 50%
KWMU	More Than 50%
WBHM	More Than 50%
WFWM	More Than 50%
KVPR	More Than 50%
KPCC	More Than 50%
WEKU	More Than 50%
WXXI	More Than 50%
KCUR	More Than 50%
WPLN-FM	More Than 50%
KQED-FM	More Than 50%
KUT	More Than 50%
WLRN	More Than 50%
WFAE	More Than 50%
Michigan Public Radio	More Than 50%
WABE	More Than 50%
WPR	More Than 50%
Texas Public Radio	More Than 50%
WFYI-FM	More Than 50%
KPR	More Than 50%
Wyoming Public Radio	More Than 50%
KNAU	More Than 50%
KUOW-FM	More Than 50%
WPVD	More Than 50%

Station Name	Corporate Leaders (Percentage of Board)
WSHU	More Than 50%
KLCC	More Than 50%
NHPR	More Than 50%
Connecticut Public Radio	More Than 50%
Hawaii Public Radio	More Than 50%
WHRO	More Than 50%
VPM	More Than 50%
Oregon Public Broadcasting	More Than 50%
WMFE	More Than 30%
DPM	More Than 30%
WFCR	More Than 30%
WRKF	More Than 30%
WYPR	More Than 30%
WCVE-FM	More Than 30%
WVPB	More Than 30%
KGPR	More Than 30%
South Dakota Public Broadcasting	More Than 30%
WWNO	More Than 30%
Nebraska Public Media	More Than 30%
KUER-FM	More Than 30%
IPR	More Than 30%
MPBN	More Than 30%
WUOT	Less Than 30%
KCRW	Less Than 30%
KTNA	Less Than 30%
WUWM	Less Than 30%
KRZA	Less Than 30%
KPBS	Less Than 30%
High Plains Public Radio	Less Than 30%
KSKA	Less Than 30%
Spokane Public Radio	Less Than 30%
Prairie Public Broadcasting	Less Than 30%
KUNR	Less Than 30%
Mississippi Public Broadcasting	Less Than 30%
KSUT	Less Than 30%
KOYA	Less Than 30%
KANW	Less Than 30%
WAMC	Less Than 30%

Appendix 2²³⁰

Name	Average Daily Local Non-Music Show Hours
WAMC	More Than Two Hours
KAXE	More Than Two Hours
WNYC-FM	More Than Two Hours
KQED-FM	More Than Two Hours
MPB	More Than Two Hours
WGBH	More Than Two Hours
WPR News	More Than Two Hours
Connecticut Public Radio	Less Than Two Hours
WUIS	Less Than Two Hours
WXXI	Less Than Two Hours
KTOO	Less Than Two Hours
WBUR-FM	Less Than Two Hours
WHYY-FM	Less Than Two Hours
WABE	Less Than Two Hours
Iowa Public Radio	Less Than Two Hours
MPBN Maine Public Broadcasting	Less Than Two Hours
WDET-FM	Less Than Two Hours
KUHF	Less Than Two Hours
WRKF	Less Than Two Hours
KUOW-FM	Less Than Two Hours
Minnesota Public Radio	Less Than Two Hours
KTNA	Less Than Two Hours
WJCT-FM	Less Than An Hour
WYPR (88.1 FM)	Less Than An Hour
WUNC	Less Than An Hour
WUWM	Less Than An Hour
KUAR	Less Than An Hour
South Dakota Public Broadcasting	Less Than An Hour
Michigan Radio	Less Than An Hour
Colorado Public Radio	Less Than An Hour
KERA	Less Than An Hour

²³⁰. All Daily Hours of Locally-Produced Non-Music Shows are estimates and were generated by manually reviewing station websites.

Name	Average Daily Local Non-Music Show Hours
Texas Public Radio (89.1 FM)	Less Than An Hour
VPM Vermont Public Media	Less Than An Hour
WVXU	Less Than An Hour
Oregon Public Broadcasting	Less Than An Hour
Hawaii Public Radio	Less Than An Hour
KPBS-FM	Less Than An Hour
KUT	Less Than An Hour
WFAE	Less Than An Hour
WPLN-FM	Less Than An Hour
KCUR	Less Than An Hour
KUAF	Less Than An Hour
KRZA	Less Than An Hour
WFCR	Less Than An Hour
KJZZ	Less Than An Hour
Prairie Public Broadcasting (FM-1)	Less Than An Hour
WBEZ	Less Than An Hour
KCRW	Less Than An Hour
KWMU	Less Than An Hour
KSKA	Less Than An Hour
KNPR Nevada Public Radio	Less Than An Hour
KANW	Less Than An Hour
WWNO	Less Than An Hour
KLCC	Less Than An Hour
South Carolina Public Radio (89.1 FM)	Less Than An Hour
KLRN	Less Than An Hour
KWGS	Less Than An Hour
KTTZ-FM	Less Than An Hour
WKNO	Less Than An Hour
WFPL	Less Than An Hour
KEMC	Less Than An Hour
KGPR	Less Than 15 Minutes
WVPB	Less Than 15 Minutes
KUNM	Less Than 15 Minutes
KPBX (91.1)	Less Than 15 Minutes
WBOI	Less Than 15 Minutes
KIOS	Less Than 15 Minutes
NHPR	Less Than 15 Minutes
WHRO	Less Than 15 Minutes

Name	Average Daily Local Non-Music Show Hours
KUER-FM	None Scheduled
WMUK-FM	None Scheduled
WFWM	None Scheduled
KPR Kansas Public Radio	None Scheduled
Wyoming Public Radio	None Scheduled
WFYI-FM	None Scheduled
KVPR	None Scheduled
Central Florida Public Media (90.7)	None Scheduled
Rhode Island Public Radio	None Scheduled
WEKU	None Scheduled
WSHU	None Scheduled
WCBE	None Scheduled
KGOU	None Scheduled
KUNR	None Scheduled
WCVE-FM VPM	None Scheduled
WBHM	None Scheduled
WUOT	None Scheduled
WLVR	None Scheduled
KNAU	None Scheduled
WITH	None Scheduled
KSUT	None Scheduled
High Plains Public Radio	None Scheduled
Nebraska Public Media	None Scheduled
KRFA-FM	None Scheduled
WLRH	None Scheduled

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