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Combating Misinformation with Local News: The Case for Government Aid to the Press Without Infringing on the First Amendment

What do the January 6th Insurrection, ‘Pizzagate,’ and the COVID-19 Pandemic have in common? They were all caused - or made worse - by the explosion of disinformation in the United States, allowed to spread freely through cable news and social media, in large part, by the disappearance of local news that has traditionally been relied upon as a trusted source of information in communities across the country. Disinformation, defined as false information that is deliberately spread by a person or entity, is not to be confused with misinformation, which is simply false information that is spread regardless of intent (Kelly). Increasingly in the last several years, bad faith actors have spread disinformation about the United States’ presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, the media, their political enemies, and more. When treated as credible by cable networks, and without local news to rebut it, the disinformation reached vulnerable audiences who then spread it widely across social media. A rising distrust in the media, as well as the decreased funding at local news outlets, are both contributing to the rapid decline of local news in the United States. This is leaving communities across the country without fact-checkers and reliable sources for important information at the local level that larger news entities may not cover. The result is thousands of communities at risk of falling victim to disinformation. Action needs to be taken immediately to address this crisis. Local news needs money to survive and that requires the support and involvement of the Federal Government. Because the absence of local news in a community is a large factor in the spread of disinformation, federal funding of local news will provide vulnerable communities with the resources needed to hire journalists, fact checkers and others that can provide communities needed access to verified information and prevent them from falling victim to harmful disinformation.

Local News is dying, and it has been for years. According to *The Expanding News Desert*, a report published by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the Hussman School of Media and Journalism in 2018, “More than one in five [news]papers has closed over the past decade and a half.” As a result, “[h]alf of the 3,143 counties in the country now have only one newspaper, usually a small weekly [publication] […] Almost 200 counties in the country have no newspaper at all” (Abernathy, 8). Since that report was published, according to a 2020 report by UNC-Chapel Hill’s Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CTAP), “more than 300 [additional] newspapers [have] closed… [and] 6,000 journalists [have been] fired.” (Ardia et. al) These two reports reveal a number of dire truths. One, the Local News Crisis has left many communities in the United States without a local reputable newspaper, which in some cases may be their only news source entirely. Two, this crisis is recent and still-going, and it is not only poaching the newspapers themselves. The papers that are left standing are hemorrhaging journalists, without whom there would not be anyone to report a story for the paper to publish in the first place. Without the journalists to write for it, the paper will have to shut down. Then, that paper will become another casualty of the Local News Crisis. Additionally, while this may seem like a purely economy-driven calamity, the Local News Crisis is not exclusively affecting the less affluent and economically challenged areas of the country. According to the same CTAP report, “[t]he one million residents of Montgomery County, Maryland,… one of the 20 wealthiest counties in the United States, were left without a local newspaper when their last remaining local newspaper, The Sentinel, was shuttered in January 2020. Despite the fact that the Washington Post, headquartered nearby in DC, has reporters that cover Montgomery county, the lack of a local stand-alone paper specifically devoted to that area is alarming. More urban areas have also been affected. Youngstown, Ohio became the first city of any size without a local newspaper after its 150-year-old newspaper shut down in August 2019.” Even Washington, DC, a city many perceive as well-to-do and the gathering place of many media enthusiasts, has lost two of its local papers in the last two years. *The Northwest Current*, a publication of Current Newspapers that covered “several affluent communities in Northwest D.C., including Georgetown, Foggy Bottom, and Dupont” for 52 years, ceased publication immediately after its May 8, 2019 issue due to financial problems (Delgadillo). Another local paper, the Washington Post Express, printed their final edition on September 12th of that same year. The Express was a ‘commuter’ paper published by the Washington Post, meaning it “was designed to be a fast read for public-transit commuters each morning, especially people who didn’t subscribe to The Post.” The paper primarily featured stories of local significance, and often ones that were “underplayed by The Post or ignored by TV newscasts” (Farhi). The Express had been publishing for sixteen years and also closed due to financial strain (though the cover of their last issue seemed to blame “your stinkin’ phones”). Even the *Los Angeles Register*, a daily paper in Los Angeles, California, was forced to shut its doors in 2014 (Abernathy, 2016). All of this goes to say that while the financial aspect of the Local News Crisis means that it affects primarily lower-income and economically struggling areas, as established by a *PBS NewsHour Weekend* episode in 2019, it can - and does - affect anyone and everyone (Sreenivasan and Vilk). The Local News Crisis is real, ongoing, and is taking thousands of newspapers away from readers that desperately need them.

The lack of local news is enabling the disinformation crisis in the United States, which is causing widespread harm. In an interview for this paper, Margaret Sullivan, a leading expert on the Local News Crisis and author of the book *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*, noted that the lack of local news contributes “heavily” to the current disinformation crisis because local news is factually based and gives a community “a shared basis of reality”; but when local news sources dry up and close, people turn to their next closest news sources: facebook, CNN, or Fox News. Some of these sources, Sullivan notes, have a huge integrity problem. For example, “if a newspaper gets something wrong, they have to correct it,” but social media platforms, such as facebook, do not have to. And while any amount of ‘community guidelines’ and self-imposed restrictions can aid (though not solve) that individual problem, a lack of local news will still drive the uninformed to these sources in droves and enable them to spread any disinformation that they see. An interesting phenomenon that Sullivan says is a direct result of the Local News Crisis and lends itself to the disinformation crisis is two-fold: less community and political engagement, and increased polarization. When a local news source dies, she notes, that community loses vital information about the goings-on in their town. Something as simple as a farmers market may see low attendance because there was no local paper to advertise it. (Sullivan, Interview) A article by Poynter notes that “[p]eople who are strongly engaged in their communities and vote locally are more likely to follow local news” (Hare et al). These newspapers make us aware of things that we may sometimes take for granted. Without them, our society and daily life might look much different. In terms of polarization, those larger regional or national sources mentioned earlier (such as facebook, FOX News, and MSNBC) promote content that is politically one-sided. When a community loses its local paper, citizens have only those partisan sources to rely on and will become more partisan themselves. (Sullivan, Interview) As Sullivan says in her book, when local news leaves a community “...citizens are less likely to vote a split ticket, choosing candidates from various political parties. Instead relying on national sources of news, including cable news outlets, they are more likely to retreat into tribal corners, voting along strict party lines." (Sullivan, 22) Subsequently, these national sources will use that polarization to broadcast only what their one-sided viewers will like to gain positive ratings, even if it is not true or lacks meaningful context that may alter how it is received or dealt with. As more and more people flock to these sources, the disinformation they spread reaches larger and larger audiences by the day. To make matters worse, this disinformation, as well as discreditation of reputable media (including local news sources), can also come from higher authorities. Former President Trump spent a large percentage of his term disparaging the media and then subsequently spreading his own lies about many different people and events, namely the Coronavirus and any media that disagreed with him. In fact, he spread so many lies about the Coronavirus itself that the Atlantic compiled all of them into a collection and posted it online (Paz). A report published by Freedom House asserted that, “[n]o U.S. president in recent memory has shown greater contempt for the press than Trump… He has repeatedly ridiculed reporters as… corrupt betrayers of the national interest… [he] has labeled the news media as ‘enemies of the people…’ [and] described journalists as ‘the opposition party.’” (Abramowitz) This and many other attacks on reliable media sources have caused supporters of the former president to only listen to information from sources that they deem valid, which is mostly FOX News, Newsmax, Facebook, OANN, conservative talk radio, and various conservative websites such as the Daily Wire, sources that are notorious for spreading disinformation. Without public trust in all, especially local, media, newspapers and other news sources will lose readership and will be forced to close; this will continue the vicious cycle that is the Local News Crisis and its consequences. In addition, these attacks on the media have contributed to an overall decrease in the public’s trust in traditional news media. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2016, just 32% of the respondents said that they trusted the traditional media, which is down from 54% in 2003. (Gallup) If the public does not trust the media, its networks will suffer from low viewership and be forced to shut down, leaving more areas with no reliable sources. The sources mentioned earlier as those favored by the Former President, in addition to preying on the opinions of like-minded viewers, will often sensationalize their stories in order to bring in more consumers. In a hearing before a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Subcommittee, Emily Bell, the Director of Columbia University’s Tow Center for Digital Media, states that “[t]he 'attention economy' of the advertising-based internet boosts content which is highly engaging… material which appeals to emotions is more likely to garner large audiences or 'go viral' than material which is rational or boring” (Congressional Documents and Publications). Bell asserts that while local news is reliable and rational, it is not as exciting to read and believe as disinformation often is. As a result, sources that spread sensational disinformation, like the conservative ones mentioned above, are able to more easily gain viewership over sources that simply report the truth. Another result of the Local News Crisis that contributes to disinformation, says Sullivan, is the sudden lack of accountability in local communities (Interview). When a community paper has enough staff, it can send journalists to local government meetings and other important administrative events to observe. When the local officials know that a journalist, and therefore the community at large, is watching, they will “behave better” and pass fewer harmful or unnecessary measures. One example of these unnecessary measures would be municipal borrowing (when the city loans money to fund public projects), the rate of which, Sullivan mentioned, has been proven to go up in communities with no local paper. (Sullivan, 2021) An editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times* corroborates Sullivan’s assertion, saying that, “[w]when there are no reporters watching, there may be no exposure of corrupt local officials…” (The Times Editorial Board) Without these local papers to hold the city accountable, city officials and other antagonists are also able to spread disinformation - which can be as simple as falsehoods about their own community needs - without anyone to keep them in check. All of these precursors to the disinformation crisis have tangible results: A study published by the American Association for the Advancement of Sciencein 2018 found that the amount of “false news” (another name for disinformation) has been increasing since 2006, and that it “spikes during key events, like the U.S. presidential elections of 2012 and 2016.” (Vosoughi et al.) During the 2016 election specifically, according to a report published by the Brookings Institution, “the 20 largest fake stories generated 8.7 million shares, reactions, and comments, compared to 7.4 million generated by the top 20 stories from 19 major news sites.” (West) The same report cites several surveys that indicate the difficulty of actually identifying this disinformation, as “fake news headlines fool American adults about 75 percent of the time… [and were] remembered by a significant portion of the electorate and… seen as credible.” (Silverman) To use a current example, according to a piece published by the *Statesman Journal*, “The areas of Oregon with the lowest vaccination rates also tend to have the fewest sources of local news, and the pandemic has accelerated closures of local news outlets” (Schroeder). This is also likely the result of the previously mentioned increased partisanship and distrust in media by those who consider themselves to be politically conservative, which in itself is both a factor and consequence of the Local News Crisis. Without these local news sources, disinformation surrounding the coronavirus has made it into county board meetings, where after hearing from medical professionals, “Herman Baertschiger, Oregon's former Senate Republican leader and now a Josephine County commissioner, told health officials the increase is likely due to migrant and farm workers” (KGW Staff). Such claims have been repeatedly debunked by medical experts, including those who had spoken immediately before him. As a piece by the *Nieman Journalism Lab* described,“the most damaging misinformation narratives started as local rumors, memes, and misleading photos — repackaged and reshared across the country, sometimes in different languages” (Urbani). Without local news sources to curb these rumors when they begin, they fester and turn into dangerous waves of disinformation that spread like wildfire.

Since it can be said that a lack of local news is contributing to the current disinformation crisis, then certainly it can be said that in order to mitigate the disinformation crisis, local news must be revitalized. In shorter terms, if local news is revitalized, disinformation will have a much harder time spreading. In an interview, Tim Franklin, Senior Associate Dean, Professor, and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, noted that having a reputable news source rebutting disinformation at the local level will dramatically reduce the amount that can spread online or via another vessel (Franklin). By properly revitalizing local news outlets, every community will have a team of around-the-clock fact checkers to ensure that the “local rumors” described by the Nieman Lab will remain just rumors, instead of turning into larger dangerous waves of disinformation. A report by the Brookings Institution makes several recommendations to help combat the spread of disinformation, including maintaining “a strong and viable news media that informs citizens about current events and long-term trends” (West). This sentiment is especially applicable to local news, as it is a facet of the news media that seems to be in the most trouble. Referring back to the aforementioned article by the *Statesman Journal* about Oregon’s vaccination rate, Schoeder asserts that by making moves to revitalize and solidify local journalism, “lawmakers can ensure access to accurate information from highly trusted sources for all Oregonians.” When Oregon sees their local news given a boost, their county commissioners will not likely see disinformation about the Coronavirus treated with anything other than a fact check and dismissal. With stronger local journalism, Oregonians will have access to accurate vaccine and health information as well as sources that will warn them against falsehoods being spread around their communities.

The only sustainable solution to revitalize local news at this point in time is through financial aid from the federal or state government in the form of tax breaks. “You need to get these newsrooms funded again, robustly,” and this crisis has reached a stage at which only the government has enough money to fix it, said Margaret Sullivan in her interview. In the United States, “Journalist groups are pressing for a variety of measures to slow the newest round of cuts. The NewsGuild labor union and the advocacy group PEN America have both written to congressional leadership asking for emergency funding to prevent more layoffs. Another advocacy group, Free Press, is lobbying both for direct financial support and for tax credits aimed at maintaining and growing newsroom staff” (Abernathy 2020). Evidently, the news media is aware of the fact that financial assistance from the government at this time is a necessity. In terms of already-forming solutions, a bill has been introduced in the US House of Representatives: the Local Journalism Sustainability Act (LJSA). The LJSA, according to a brief by the News Media Alliance, “provides a non-refundable tax credit for consumers… to incentivize individual subscriptions to local news organizations.” The legislation also provides “a refundable tax credit for local newspapers of up to $25,000 in the first year for each employee or independent contractor who is a qualified journalist, and up to $15,000 in the subsequent four years….” as well as “a non-refundable tax credit for small- to medium-sized businesses to advertise with local newspapers, as well as local radio and television stations” (NMA Staff) Put simply, this bill creates financial incentives for readers, local papers, and small businesses to subscribe to local news, produce local news, and advertise in it respectively. This type of federal aid for public media is not isolated to the United States. In fact, “[g]lobally, models of state media support include tax breaks, direct financial payments, and public-service advertising, among other methods.” For example, “In the U.K., the BBC runs on license fees paid by everyone who watches television. In Germany, every household pays a monthly fee — totaling in 2018 some $8.6 billion annually from 45 million homes — in support of public media” (Buni). Though these figures refer to broadcast news, they still show that, while practically independent from government influence, the media landscape in these countries is successfully funded by it. These examples prove that government funding for public media is not only possible, but that it can successfully sustain networks across the country.

Allowing the government to give money to local news, or any news, however, can be incredibly dangerous. Government involvement and censorship of the news has long been a problem, and allowing them to give money will not only exacerbate that problem but threaten the very notion of the “free press” guaranteed to us by the first amendment, which says, “Congress shall make no law… abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Since those words were written in 1787, the first amendment and its granted freedoms have been cited many times by activists on both sides of the political aisle in all types of situations, namely when it comes to journalism. Government censorship of the free press is a constantly looming danger, and in some cases reality, around the world, as the United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur David Kaye noted “all too many leaders see journalism as the enemy, reporters as rogue actors, tweeps as terrorists, and bloggers as blasphemers” (West). Additionally, in 2017, Freedom House published a damning report on the state of press freedoms around the world. Among the most horrifying facts is that “[g]lobal press freedom declined to its lowest point in 13 years in 2016 amid unprecedented threats to journalists and media outlets in major democracies and new moves by authoritarian states to control the media.” And though the United States has a historically good record with the press, “Several recent presidents have sought to limit their exposure to reporters, aggressively attempted to bypass mainstream news outlets, or made it difficult to access government records under the Freedom of Information Act.” Among the “recent presidents” mentioned in the article are Former Presidents Obama and Trump. The latter’s offenses mark a significant negative change in the United States’ media landscape. The report notes that, “[d]uring campaign rallies and since taking office in 2017, Trump has labeled media outlets that critiqued his performance as ‘dishonest,’ ‘fake news,’ and the ‘enemy of the American people,’ echoing narratives that had been circulating on far-right or ‘alt-right’ websites throughout the election cycle” (Abramowitz). These attacks on the media in the United States, and several damaging statements by the former president and others since then, have resulted in several members of the press being attacked, both physically and verbally, by members of the government, law enforcement, and others who have internalized this harmful rhetoric. Even without government intervention, the press in the US is in danger. The proposition of allowing the government to even have a small hand in funding the news is a surefire way to allow them to censor the free press. As Tim Franklin said, giving the government any ability to control free speech is “a slippery slope” (Interview). Tax breaks are just the beginning. The country must ask itself a variety of “what if” questions to ensure that any government funding will not lead the free media down a slippery slope to full censorship. Government handouts are not the way to revitalize local news, because if that is the route the media takes it has a good chance of backfiring. Suddenly, the news media will no longer be a vessel of free speech.

While government funding the news media may seem like a troubling stab-in-the-back to the very first constitutional amendment, state financial support of the news media has been occurring in the United States for years already. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), whom one may remember from their statements before and after every programming block on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), is “fully funded by the federal government,” and is itself responsible for funding local public media stations, among other things. (CPB) In fact, US taxpayer money has been going to public media for years, even more so since the passing of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which is responsible for the creation of the CPB. In turn, the CPB is responsible for funding some of the most widely viewed and listened to media companies in the country, including National Public Radio (NPR), American Public Media (APM), and PBS. Though, as put by Joshua Darr, Assistant Professor and D. Jensen Holliday Professor at Louisiana State University’s Manship School of Mass Communication, “we [the US government] give very little money to public media” (Interview). The CPB receives $445 million annually and distributes $400 million to its members; the government-allocated amount ($445m) adds up to $1.35 per American per year and is just 0.01% - yes, one one-hundredth of one percent - of the annual federal budget (wfyi). In comparison, “Japan spends over $40 per citizen, the UK about $100, and Norway over $176” (Abernathy, 2020). This funding process does technically mean that the government funds the public media, however the existence of the CBP means that this funding is essentially indirect, much like the current solutions being proposed today. In terms of the newer proposals and solutions, the LJSA, as mentioned before, “would provide a series of tax credits for news consumers, news organizations and local newspaper and broadcast advertisers,” but no funding for public media would come directly from congress (NMA Staff). The fact that the financial aid would be less direct provides a significant barrier between any congressional attempts to control the media, but as Tim Franklin put it, “there needs to be a firewall between government officials” and the free press officially written into the bill or any subsequent measures (Interview). Despite these cautious attitudes, however, journalists across the country are more readily admitting that it is time they received federal financial aid. Even Tim Franklin noted that the Local News Crisis “is so severe that feelings are beginning to change” (Interview). And though Margaret Sullivan was initially opposed to the idea of the government giving money to the press, “[a]t this point,” she says, “I think we’re desperate” (Interview). Not to mention the earlier anecdote from the 2020 News Deserts report about journalist groups asking the government directly for aid (“The NewsGuild labor union and the advocacy group PEN America have both written to congressional leadership asking for emergency funding…”). These journalists and journalist groups, though likely skeptical at first of government aid to the media, have realized recently that local news is in too dire of a situation for them to be able to choose how it is helped. In all, the public should not be concerned that this specific financial aid to local news will hurt the freedom of the press. While attacks on the media from elected officials have put the free media, both local and national, in danger, this has nothing to do with monetary contributions from the government, as the method of this funding would be, and already is, indirect. Even so, US journalists agree: local news is in danger; and at this point, only federal financial aid can really help.

As established, the Local News Crisis is exacerbating the disinformation crisis in the United States today, and the only way to stop it is by indirectly funding local news. Even solely within the past year and a half, this country has seen the devastating effects of both of these crises. Without local reliable sources to combat them, false rumors have festered across the US and become dangerous lies about the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of fact-checking on a local level, millions were led to believe such lies as “the pandemic is fake,” “masks do not work,” and “vaccines make you sick.” Because of this, many refused to obey public health protocols and ended up in the hospital with a disease that they could have prevented themselves from catching; and those hospitals subsequently became overcrowded and lacking the proper supplies to sustain their patients. A good start to revitalizing local news is public awareness of the Local News Crisis, but while other solutions, such as more online news outlets or more local TV stations, may help, local news is in a position where money is the only support that can keep it from total disaster. Federal financial aid to local news will enable local newspapers to stay afloat, produce reliable content, and fact-check false stories before they can spread harmful disinformation to their communities. In turn, disinformation will (slowly, but surely) return to a status of “tabloid rumor” rather than the “dangerous misconception” status that they hold today. Thankfully, when local news benefits, the world benefits. As previously discussed, more money to local news means more journalists employed, it means more civic engagement; imagine how many more people will show up to vote when there’s a local paper to announce an upcoming local election! More money to local news also means less polarization. When the public is properly informed of all of the policies of every candidate in a given election, they will be more likely to vote by their preferred candidate all the way down the ballot, possibly splitting the ticket, rather than just voting along the party line of their favorite candidate at the top. And local news does not just publicize elections; when a local paper is able to advertise community events such as farmers markets, school fundraisers, and other activities, more people will be aware of them and attend. This, in turn, may bring in more revenue to the town and allow it to further financially support itself. Another benefit of a robust local news is accountability: more journalists means more people that are able to cover local government, maintain sources within the government, sit in on official meetings, scrutinize new contracts and land deals, and monitor public officials which in turn will likely reduce the amount of corruption in public office. And the buck does not stop there; when the country is collectively more informed, the country is safer as a whole. When local papers are able to include public service announcements regarding health and safety information and announcements, more of the public is likely to see it; and the more people that are aware of new health information, the more people will know how to protect themselves and others from getting seriously ill. Additionally, when dangerous rumors that turn people against health protocols (such as mask-wearing) are squashed at the local level before anyone can treat them with credibility, more citizens will be likely to follow the health and safety protocols recommended by the aforementioned local newspaper. This is the product of multiple benefits of local news, which will only survive if society is willing to give it the money it deserves. By properly funding local news, the media can ensure that the public is informed, safe, and held accountable. Yes, it will be necessary to write detailed boundaries between the government and the free media into any relevant legislation, but it will be worth the effort. The free press can only exist if there is money to keep it alive, and when our local sources are funded, the public will be infinitely better off because of its ability to fact-check rumors before they become dangerous pieces of disinformation. At the end of the day, disinformation needs to end, local news has the ability to combat it, and they both need robust federal financial aid to do so.

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