Letter from the Editors
Imagining a way forward for local journalism

Jaigris Hodson
Royal Roads University

Asmaa Malik
Ryerson University

In 2016, the world witnessed a dramatic political shift as Brexit in the U.K., followed by the election of President Donald Trump in the U.S., revealed fissures in the modern democratic process. The emergence of social and digital media as a way to produce, consume, and share news was a significant contributing factor to both these events (Postill, 2018). While these platforms give audiences the power to share news widely and rapidly, there are few mechanisms to ensure the veracity and provenance of that information. In other words, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have helped facilitate the spread of what has now been called "fake news" and political propaganda, which may have unduly – and unpredictably – influenced the democratic process. These global events serve as a case study, or perhaps even a warning, about the central role a healthy news ecosystem plays in a functioning democracy. The state of news is under pressure from multiple forces – digital disruption being only one significant factor in an ecosystem struggling with the decline of advertising dollars, increased media concentration and newsroom closures, and an increasingly fragmented audience.

Nowhere are these pressures more keenly felt than in the realm of local and community news. Yet research on local news shows that it plays a vital role in the health of communities around the world. In the United States, for instance, the Knight Commission suggested that local news availability is as important to a well-functioning community as "clean air, safe streets, good schools and public

health" (Knight Commission, 2009). In 2012, the Pew Research Center reported that 72 per cent of Americans follow local news closely, relying mostly on newspapers to stay informed (Andrew and Caumont, 2014). But since 2012, hundreds of newspapers across North America have been closed, moved online, or amalgamated (Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, & Renninger, 2015; Shaker, 2014), making it that much more difficult for citizens to access the news and information they need to effectively and efficiently navigate daily life and participate in the governance of their communities.

Across North America, the availability of news is inconsistent if not scarce. In the U.S., for example, lower-income communities tend to have less access to local news than their higher-income counterparts (Napoli et al., 2015). In Canada, research has shown that news about key election races is available unevenly across the country (Lindgren, Corbett, & Hodson, 2017). Local news plays a critical role in a healthy community public sphere, especially when it comes to charitable giving, increasing turnouts in local elections, sharing community stories to increase social cohesion, and strengthening local civic culture (Knight Commission, 2009; Napoli et al., 2015; Shaker, 2014; Smith, this volume).

Some have suggested that the very digital forces that have brought about transformative business- and attention-related challenges may provide alternative methods to share community news and information. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are thus often seen as effective ways to gather and distribute news as well as reach new audiences. While technology can help to shed light on some of the pressing issues of local news, and can also provide low-cost, high-impact ways for local news outlets to share information, it may be unwise to put too much faith in these technologies. In fact, research shows that only certain types of information spreads far and wide online. Civic reporting such as reports on council meetings or budget briefings are often drowned out by global and national headlines, as well as emotionally-charged and celebrity-driven news. While these preferences reflect previous analog habits to some extent, audiences' increasing reliance on algorithms and recommendations has led to a deluge of such content, effectively drowning out the weaker signals from local news.

So, we ask, what is the way forward? In this special publication, we explore the changing role of local news in our current media reality and beyond. It brings together peer-reviewed papers by academics who gathered in Toronto in June 2017 to attend *Is no local news bad news? Local journalism and its future,* a conference organized by the

[Ryerson Journalism Research Centre](#). The collection explores different facets of local news, and asks how we might begin to move forward in a way that preserves the most crucial parts of traditional news production and distribution models, while building on the best of what we are learning from technological disruption. It considers the role of local news in Canada and around the world, and asks what role policy, financing models, and new technologies might play in forging a new path forward. Above all, it invites the reader to draw their own conclusions. There may be many different ways to get vital civic and community information to the publics that require it, and no one model will work in every instance.

When the editorial team sat down to envision this publication, we wanted to ensure that the research presented here could be widely available, and reach far beyond the walls of the ivory tower. We therefore rejected the idea of paywalls and jargon-laden language accessible to only a limited audience. We also wanted to take advantage of digital tools that allow for storytelling in different formats. The result is an interactive, multimedia publication that is openly available online via multiple channels. In addition to the traditional academic articles, we encouraged multimedia submissions, so in this publication you will find short explanatory videos, an audio podcast, and work that includes links, interactive maps, and infographics. We've also included short documentaries produced by Ryerson School of Journalism students that tell the story of local news in Canadian communities. These stories complement the more traditional academic content by providing street-level examinations of why local news matters.

The contributions in this volume are varied and illuminate different aspects of local journalism and its future. Some invite the reader to reflect on the value of local news or on the changing role of local news outlets. Other contributions probe threats to local news, ranging from market forces to changing audiences. Some papers use technology to raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities in the local news ecosystem, others warn us about relying too much on some technologies, such as social media platforms, as a way to make up for the inadequacies of local news ecosystems.

Local news values

The section that explores the value of local news includes [an article by Ryerson University journalism professor Joyce Smith](#) that illustrates one little-studied aspect of

how local news organizations have traditionally been embedded in their communities. Looking at the ties between local news and charitable giving, Smith shows how this symbiotic relationship can both strengthen community cohesion and act as an effective marketing tool for local news organizations. She asks us to consider what contributions outside of the provision of community information might be lost as local news outlets disappear and their charitable campaigns disappear along with them.

Nagel and Mutual's video submission illustrates the role of local news via a case study in Northern Canada. Coverage of the Crystal Serenity Cruise, the largest cruise ship to travel the Northwest Passage in 2016, was studied using content analysis. Their research showed that Southern media covered this event more extensively than local Northern outlets and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the national public broadcaster, led in amount of coverage. Similarly, Buchanan's study examining several different local news outlets in Cleveland, Ohio, shows that while local news has an important role to play in the sharing of information about local issues, smaller hyperlocal news outlets sometimes fail to meet this challenge. In fact, the three local news outlets she studied mentioned local locations less than half of the time. The independent non-profit, hyperlocal publication published the largest number of locally-relevant mentions, underscoring the need for alternate non-commercial funding models for local journalism.

Local news challenges

Some contributions highlight the ways in which the availability of local news is threatened in different global contexts. Edge suggests Canadian regulators have not done enough to curb anti-competitive behaviour by Canadian newspaper chains and that readers who now have fewer news sources to choose from are paying the price. His research thus encourages us to consider the spectrum of effects business decisions have on promoting or limiting the availability of local news in Canada. Since this kind of anti-competitive phenomenon is not limited to this country alone, the implications of Edge's research have a global reach.

Napoli, Dunham, and Malone analyzed local news infrastructure across all 50 states in the U.S. and revealed significant differences in local news availability in different regions of the country. The Mountain West, a cluster of states in the Northeast, and a cluster of states in the Southeast were found to be less robust than other areas of the country, they concluded. Their analysis suggests that different

communities will require different kinds of support to maintain robust local news ecosystems. While some communities may be able to continue under current models of financing, advertising, and audience availability, others will have to embrace new models to provide for the informational and civic needs of their communities.

Investigating the changing and complex nature of the local news audience, Waschková Císařová, Macek, and Macková deconstruct the myth that a local news audience can be understood simply as a mass of interested and engaged news consumers. Through their study of Czech local news audiences, they discover that in comparison with audiences in the United States or United Kingdom, fewer Czech adults report consuming local news. However, closer examination reveals that the reason for this may in part be related to the availability of local news. In fact, since Czech adults report accessing local news through newspapers, which are in decline, the issue may partly be one of local news availability driving down interest. It may be that an older newspaper audience is shrinking as, for example, a more globally-engaged online audience grows. This research demonstrates the importance of truly understanding not only audiences but the ways they may choose to access local news.

Local news and technology

Several contributions also show how technology can help better understand the disrupted local news landscape. The collection includes two articles that explore the potential of digital mapping as a tool in the toolkit of local news scholars and policy makers. The work of Rinner, Komaromy, and Lindgren illustrates how geographic information systems and news content analysis can be combined to better understand patterns of local news coverage. Lindgren and Corbett's piece on their Local News Map outlines how participatory mapping can be used to track changes to local news outlets but also points to the need for researchers to be transparent about the design and limitations of these sorts of innovative mapping tools. Both cartographic tools illustrate the value of interdisciplinary approaches in journalism scholarship and both are examples of methodologies that could be adapted and adopted in different countries and cultural contexts around the world. The Local News Map is also innovative in that it allows people on the ground in a community to contribute information that is then available to policy makers, activists, and researchers at a national, or even international, level.

Hodson sounds a more a cautionary note about the role of technology with respect to local news. Her audio podcast explores where local news will come from following the shutdown of the local newspaper in the small Vancouver Island community of Nanaimo, British Columbia. In this case study, Hodson examines whether the popular social media platform Twitter can pick up the slack in election coverage when a local newspaper is shut down. Her research shows that the topics that trend on Twitter during an election campaign tend to be national rather than local in scope, and also tend to focus on issues of integrity and leadership rather than other issues that may be important for voters. This research adds to a growing number of studies of social media that suggest that social media cannot by itself make up for declining traditional sources of news.

In the final article in this section, Malik and Adamson share their experiences of conceiving and creating a natural language processing tool that gives news stakeholders, including audiences and journalists, the information they need to assess the quality of the sources quoted in local news stories. This algorithm-driven approach, which aims to calculate an automatic index score that evaluates the power, placement, and frequency of sources quoted in a story, is designed to help people make more informed decisions about the information they read and the organizations they rely on for news on important issues such as race and policing.

A future bound with our own

Taken together, the submissions for this volume paint a picture that is sobering but not without some measure of hope. They illustrate why local news is important, and detail some of the forces that are undermining it. They show the ways in which technology can help strengthen the value and relevance of local news, while still reminding us not to have blind trust in the power of technology to fix what it is at least partially responsible for breaking. Finally, in illuminating some of the challenges besetting local journalism, the reader is left to reimagine a future for local news where some of these challenges, in being named and classified, may be addressed more clearly.

Perhaps new business models, such as entrepreneurship, can offer one way to help fill a gap that has been left by the old-media monopoly model. At Ryerson University, for example, journalism-related startups are in residence at a news incubator to develop innovative tools and services to serve their communities with news through emerging

models. Perhaps such initiatives could play a role in solving the problems identified by Napoli and his colleagues, or by Edge.

With respect to the myth of the local news audience identified by Waschková Císařová, Macek, and Macková, we have learned that it is crucial to understand how audiences change. Local news will not survive if it tries to simply put old wine into new bottles. Instead, local news producers must create news that, in both content and format, resonates with their communities. The crowdsourcing technologies developed by Lindgren and Corbett and the mapping tool created by Rinner, Komaromy, and Lindgren may lead to a new and better understanding of communities that are underserved in terms of news availability and more precise, targeted efforts to address their needs. At the very least, they, along with the research conducted by Hodson, encourage us to think outside the box and remember that the audience needs to be attended to before they are ready to pay attention.

As more and more people consume news powered by algorithms, Malik and Adamson alert us to the need to develop algorithmic tools to help audiences analyze and evaluate the content of what they read. Finally, we must remember that local news can be more meaningful to communities when those who deliver it are part of the fabric of that community. Smith's work on charitable giving showed this, and offers clues as to why news outlets lose touch with their audiences. A local news organization run by a faceless national corporation will perhaps not be able to garner the support of a community the way an embedded community news outlet can. For this reason, we are encouraged to reflect on the right scale for local news. Small may very well be the new big when it comes to ensuring the sustainability of local and community news over time.

This publication is the culmination of countless hours of research, presentations and collaborations, analysis, and generative discussions. We encourage you to continue this discussion. It was deliberately made open-access, and is available under a Creative Commons license to facilitate sharing with attribution. Local news availability impacts each of us in all of our communities. The future of local news is thus tightly bound with our own futures, as we continue to face the political and economic uncertainties of our times.

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