
KNIGHT COMMUNITIES

Healthy News & Information Ecosystems 2023

Summary

Healthy news and information ecosystems are critical to healthy communities. Research and experience have shown that communities that have significant amounts of relevant, quality news and information have greater levels of civic engagement, more community cohesion and greater government accountability. In late 2022 and early 2023, Impact Architects applied the Healthy News and Information Ecosystem assessment framework to eight Knight resident communities. For five of these cities—Charlotte, NC; Detroit, MI; Macon-Bibb County, GA; Miami, FL; and Philadelphia, PA—this was the second application of the framework and we are able to observe change over time from 2020 through 2022. For three communities—Akron, OH; San José, CA; and St. Paul, MN—this application serves as a baselining of the ecosystem.

From 2020 through 2022, the main headline in each Knight community was, unsurprisingly, the ways in which COVID-19 impacted everything from education and local government to health care and the media. COVID-19 strained journalism organizations in many of the same ways it did other institutions—to go fully remote, adapt workflows, etc.—but it also forced journalists to reconsider how they could cover or engage with communities at a time when, paradoxically, reporting was more challenging than ever but the local information was more important than ever. COVID-19 reinforced the media's role as a key feature in any community's ecosystem, sometimes making the difference between life and death.

Information needs assessments, which help understand the presence, relevance and access of local media from the perspective of community members, have been conducted in only three of the Knight communities—Detroit, Macon-Bibb and Philadelphia. These assessments serve as a helpful baseline for identifying gaps and opportunities for news organizations, both existing and startups. There is opportunity for Knight and other partners to support information needs assessments in communities where they have not yet been conducted, particularly communities that are large and diverse and thus have many information needs.

The original report was conducted in the midst of the national racial reckoning in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis (which had a particularly significant impact in the adjacent Knight city of St. Paul). At that point in time, news organizations around the country were motivated to launch or revamp diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, both in reporting and in internal processes within organizations. In this 2023 assessment, we found that, in most cases, it's too early to say whether these commitments are having lasting impacts. For example, in 2020, Gannett daily newspapers committed to having staff

that reflected their communities demographically; however, publications’ leaders said in interviews that it’s proven difficult to diversify staff while also conducting layoffs and buyouts. And with ever-lessening resources, recruitment and retention continue to be a challenge for all news organizations.

In many Knight communities, we heard that access to local news outlets does not mean there is necessarily local coverage and reporting. National newspaper chains have contracted and consolidated to such an extent that even when there is still a local daily paper, the staffs have been reduced and are unable to cover the community to the extent they had historically, let alone provide adequate coverage for communities previously neglected. Similarly, national television stations with local affiliates often don’t have resources to fully cover a community, or an institutional legacy of doing so.

We accessed Alliance for Audited Media data in order to better understand newspaper consumption (print, digital replica and digital nonreplica) in each community. While these data are for the major daily newspapers only, meaning they do not include the reach of broadcast TV or radio or digital news and information, they are helpful in understanding the presence of major dailies in each community. Using these circulation rates and the size of the population and number of households in each city, we calculated the penetration rate of newspapers in each. Among the Knight communities, the average penetration rate for the population was 5.8%, while it was 15.2% for households, with Philadelphia and San José standing out with household penetration rates of 28.4% and 34.7%, respectively, and Detroit and Miami with the lowest rates of 1.5% and 4%. Throughout this report, we’ll refer to household penetration rate.¹

We found that community and ethnic media often serve immigrant and diasporic communities with information about countries of origin, but not necessarily about the local community, particularly in those Knight communities that are large, complex,

	Penetration	Newspaper(s)	Population	Household
Akron (MSA)		The Akron Beacon-Journal	6.5%	15.6%
Charlotte (City)		The Charlotte Observer	6.3%	16.1%
Detroit (MSA)		Detroit Free Press, The Detroit News	1.1%	2.7%
Macon-Bibb County		The Telegraph	5.8%	15.5%
Miami-Dade County		The Miami Herald, El Nuevo Herald	1.4%	4.0%
Philadelphia (City)		The Philadelphia Tribune, The Philadelphia Inquirer	11.6%	28.4%
San José (City)		The Mercury News	11.5%	34.7%
St. Paul (MSA)		St. Paul Pioneer Press	2.4%	5.8%
AVERAGE			5.8%	15.4%

1. The penetration rate for the population and households was calculated by dividing the average daily circulation of print, print replica and nonprint replica, as reported by the Alliance for Audited Media, by the total population and the total number of households in each location, according to the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS).

and diverse ecosystems like San José, Philadelphia and Miami. Furthermore, these media are often not connected to other networks and collaborative efforts that would enable them to share content and sources and report collaboratively. There is opportunity for Knight and other local partners to support these community and ethnic media directly, as well as through collaborative efforts, in order to build stronger relationships across the ecosystem and facilitate more local reporting across diverse sectors of the community.

While some cities have strong collaborative networks throughout the media ecosystem, in others there is little to no collaboration happening. In this ecosystem assessment, as well as in other research, we found the strongest collaboration to be where there are (or were) backbone institutions specifically tasked with maintaining and coordinating the collaborative, such as Macon’s Mercer University’s Center for Collaborative Journalism and the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative or the previous Broke in Philly and Detroit Journalism Collaborative initiatives. There is opportunity for Knight and others to fund backbone institutions that support the whole ecosystem through things like coordination, project management, pooled funding and other resources, and collaborative initiatives in those communities where they have not yet developed.

For each city, we have made a top-line assessment about the strength of the ecosystem with respect to information providers, community, and information providers and community. For the five cities where we observed change over time, we have identified if they remain steady, are improving or are declining for each of the three categories. And for new cities where we set baselines, we have indicated if they are strong, average or have opportunity for growth in each of the three categories. This information is presented in the following table.

- ▲ **STRONG / IMPROVING**
- ▶ **AVERAGE / STEADY**
- ▼ **DECLINING**

	Information Providers		Community		Information Providers and Community	
	Current	Change	Current	Change	Current	Change
Akron	▼	–	▶	–	▶	–
Charlotte	▶	▶	▶	▶	▼	▶
Detroit	▶	▶	▼	▲	▶	▶
Macon-Bibb County	▼	▶	▼	▲	▼	▶
Miami-Dade County	▼	▶	▶	▲	▼	▶
Philadelphia	▲	▶	▶	▲	▶	▶
San José	▼	–	▲	–	▼	–
St. Paul	▶	–	▶	–	▲	–

Overall, the eight Knight communities' news ecosystems are trending in the right direction. For all five that were baselined in 2020, the information providers have remained steady, with some contraction in the commercial sector and some growth in the nonprofit sector. For those communities that were baselined, both the Akron and San José information providers have significant opportunity to grow to better serve these diverse communities—and Knight's investment in the expansion of Signal Ohio to Akron is a step in the right direction. And even while St. Paul has a robust sector of information providers, there is still opportunity to increase collaboration in the ecosystem.

In four of the five original communities, community indicators have improved since 2020, meaning poverty levels have declined and income is on the rise, and the fifth (Charlotte) has remained steady. And for those new communities, their community indicators are on par with the average of the eight Knight resident communities.

Methodology

The Healthy News and Information framework² was developed in 2020, building on research across the social sciences and the journalism industry. This framework centers community news and information needs, as research finds that when these needs are met, there are positive individual, social and political outcomes, including everything from individual physical health to greater community cohesion and less local government corruption. We know that for community members there is often not a hard line between traditional journalism (e.g., newspapers, broadcast television and public radio) and other sources of information, including informal networks. However, because there are not consistent databases or datasets for identifying non-journalistic sources of news and information across communities, we focus on journalistic information providers.

In addition to most of the original indicators, we added two new indicators about information providers: daily average circulation of metro daily newspapers and the penetration rate of metro dailies. Daily average circulation was calculated with Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) data for each of the eight communities. We calculated penetration rates by dividing the average circulation by the total population. The tables do not include information about literacy rate, as the data is inconsistently available

2. "Healthy Local News & Information Ecosystems: A Diagnostic Framework," Impact Architects (March 2021), https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/files.theimpactarchitects.com/ecosystems/full_report.pdf.

city-to-city, and different definitions of literacy prevent apples-to-apples comparisons. Educational attainment (the percentage of the population 25 years of age or older with a high school diploma or equivalent) stands in as a proxy.

The tables in each chapter contain either two or three data columns and a comparison column. The five cities included in the 2020 baseline assessment and updated here contain three columns: A comparison column (either a national average or the average of the 8 Knight cities), a column with baseline data and a column with most recent data. The trend column for these cities measures change from the baseline. It's also important to note that for these communities, not all baseline data corresponds directly to the previous assessment, especially for the count of news organizations, as in some cases we identified additional publications not captured in the previous assessment. The tables for the new cities contain two data columns: A comparison column (either a national or the average of the 9 Knight cities) and a column with baseline data. The trend column is in reference to national or average data. Regardless of the comparison metric, we identify change as either more or less than three percentage points (in the case of percentage metrics, such as percentage of people with a high school education) or more or less than three percent difference (in the case of raw numbers, such as median household income). If a number is +/- three percent or three percentage points, it is represented either as "No change" (in the case of updated cities) or "Average" (in the case of baselined cities).

We conducted interviews with 34 stakeholders in the eight communities, all of whom were recommended by Knight's journalism team and local program directors. Community indicators are mostly pulled from 2021 census data.

We have relied on primary research conducted by others, including Outlier Media and the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

The 2022 media landscape scan was done manually, and we consulted a number of databases, including INN's member index, LION's member index, and the New York Times local news database. We also conducted searches for community and ethnic media in languages where we knew there were sizable immigrant and diasporic communities. However, we know that media landscapes are fluid and often changing, thus the scan is best thought of as a snapshot in time.

The 2019 Pew Research Center Local News Survey has not been updated, so we continue to rely on the 2019 data to understand the relationship between information provider and community in the eight communities. For the five communities included in the original analysis, we have noted any perceived shifts in these relationships based on stakeholder interviews.

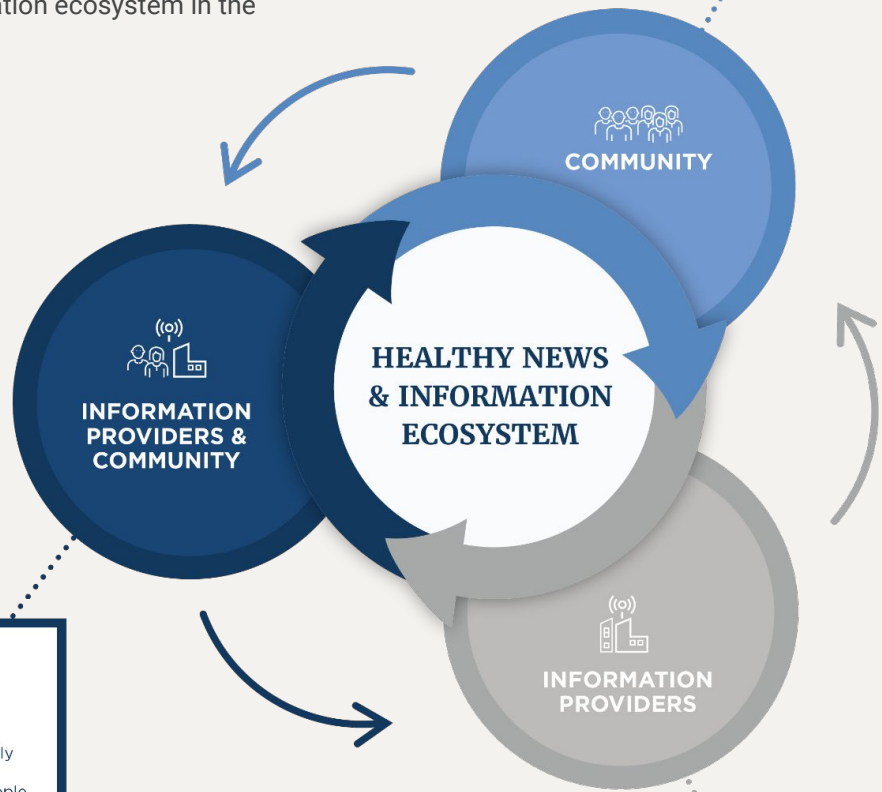
We have included results from the Gallup/Knight survey American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust, Media and Democracy for Charlotte, Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia and St. Paul, although none had enough respondents to be statistically significant and are best considered to be points of information in these communities. We did not include results from Akron, Macon-Bibb or San José because there were insufficient responses from these communities.

For the three new communities, we used the same baselining rubric to determine if information providers, community, and information providers and community display an opportunity for growth, are average or are high when compared with national averages or with the Knight communities' averages. For the five communities where we were attempting to understand change over time, we determined whether each arena was declining, steady or improving by comparing 2020 and 2022 data.

Framework & Analysis

This framework was created based on initial research in 2020 and revised through the reapplication of the framework in eight Knight Communities in 2023. The framework includes 35 indicators across three categories, which together encompass the major generalizable elements of a health news and information ecosystem in the United States.

<p>ECONOMIC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Median Household Income • Per Capita Income • Poverty Rate <p>EDUCATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School Degree • Bachelor's Degree • Literacy Rate 	<p>RESOURCES & INFRASTRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Households with Computer • Broadband Access • Universities • Population per University • Libraries • Population per Library • Community Satisfaction • Voter Turnout 2018 • Prior Information Needs Study • Prior Ecosystem Study
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<p>REPRESENTATION & PROXIMITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % Who say local journalists are in touch with the community • % Who have spoken with a journalist • % Who say their local news source mostly covers the area where they live • % Who say their local news includes people like you in their stories <p>FINANCIAL SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % Who pay for local news in the past year <p>PERCEPTIONS OF INFORMATION PROVIDERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % Who say their local news: Reports news accurately • % Who say their local news: Keeps an eye on local political leaders • % Who say their local news: Provides news that they use daily • % Who say their local news: Covers news stories thoroughly • % Who say their local news: Are transparent about their reporting • % Who say their local news: Deals fairly with all sides
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<p>NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS</p> <p>POPULATION PER ORGANIZATION</p> <p>MEDIUMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspapers • Television Stations • Radio Stations • Digital <p>BUSINESS MODELS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonprofit • Public Media • National Broadcast Chain • National Newspaper Chain • Independent For-profit 	<p>BIPOC MEDIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American / Black • Hispanic / Latino • Asian/Asian American <p>DIVERSITY & COLLABORATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journalist Diversity • Source Diversity • Collaboration <p>JOURNALISM FUNDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philanthropic Dollars since 2009 • Funders • Recipients • Invested Per Capita
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