

# USC Annenberg

School for Communication  
and Journalism

*Center on Communication  
Leadership and Policy*

---

## A Possible Role for Student Journalists and Student Journalism in Providing Communities with Local News

Executive Summary

by Geoffrey Cowan and Owen Foster

---



**USC** University of  
Southern California

## Introduction

The decline in local news has been well documented, as has the practical impact of what are being called “news deserts.” The Local News Initiative at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism estimates that more than half of all the counties in America have one or zero local news outlets.<sup>1</sup> Layoffs at some of the most prominent news outlets have received national attention.<sup>2</sup> The absence of local news has real and often measurable effects. Some studies have shown that communities that lack trustworthy sources of information have a series of problems including lower voter turnout, heavier pollution, more corporate crime, increased municipal borrowing costs, and rampant corruption.<sup>3</sup> They also tend to lose their sense of community and cohesiveness.

Fortunately, there have been some significant private and public efforts to help fill the void. For example, New York State set aside \$90 million to subsidize local news; California created a \$25 million fund for young reporters; the non-profit Lenfest Institute for Journalism helps fund the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other publications; philanthropists have helped to launch online news sources such as the *Texas Tribune*, *Mississippi Today*, and the *Baltimore Banner*; major foundations have created new funds to support local journalism such as the American Journalism Project and Press Forward; organizations such as the National Trust for Local News are trying to find ways to protect community news outlets; groups such as Rebuild Local News are attempting to encourage greater government funding for the news media; and Report for America provides training and funding for young journalists who spend two or three years working in areas where there are “urgent gaps” in news coverage.

This paper highlights another way to support local news that may deserve greater attention: *the use of student publications and student journalists.*

Located in high schools and colleges across America, some student journalists possess intimate knowledge of their communities and the skills necessary to produce high quality reporting. Indeed, in some areas, students and student papers are currently playing an important role by working with existing publications and/or producing news sources of their own.

## The Potential of Student Journalists

Student journalists regularly produce excellent, impactful stories. In 2023, Theo Baker, a freshman writing for the *Stanford Daily* won a George Polk Award for special achievement in journalism; a high school junior in Mississippi won NPR’s student podcast award for her work on the water crisis in Jackson; and Northwestern University fired a revered football coach after the student newspaper uncovered misconduct allegations. In 2024, student journalists covered campus protests, sometimes under the threat of arrest. The Pulitzer Board recognized the work of these reporters.<sup>4</sup>

In some towns, college papers have begun devoting resources to covering their surrounding communities. For example, the *Harvard Crimson* now publishes a Metro Briefing newsletter for the residents of Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> The *Williams Record*, which has reported about Williams College since 1887, now devotes substantial resources to covering surrounding communities in the Berkshires.<sup>6</sup> Journalism students at the University of Kansas staff the *Eudora Times*, providing news coverage for a nearby town. In each of these cases, student journalists have expanded their coverage beyond the traditional campus beat to incorporate more community focused coverage.

One important role for student journalists is in producing what Report for America co-founder Steve Waldman calls cohesion journalism – journalism that helps to forge a sense of community by focusing on local events, business openings, high school sports,

and obituaries. As Waldman explains:

"In addition to the watchdog function, local news — of a different sort — has a community cohesion role. Obituaries, high school sports, school board meetings, the new economic development plan, the amateur theater production, a couple's 50th wedding anniversary — these types of stories teach neighbors about each other, provide basic information on community problems and create a sense of shared interest."<sup>7</sup>

The loss of newspapers has been linked to rising feelings of isolation and reduced community pride.<sup>8</sup> As communications Professor Nikki Usher has found, "Engaging with the community is made easier by a common source of community information."<sup>9</sup> Since they are embedded in the communities they cover, student journalists in both high schools and colleges are particularly well suited and positioned to report on these kinds of stories.

### **Student Journalists in Action**

School News Online (SNO), a web service providing online website hosting services for student newspapers, works with over 2,500 high schools across America.<sup>10</sup> While there is no reliable estimate of the number of college and university papers, SNO has contracted with 406 colleges.<sup>11</sup> A 2013 Pew study estimated there are 1,600 college newspapers.<sup>12</sup> Assuming that there are at least 3–5,000 student publications and/or student journalism programs, there is good reason to believe that student journalists could help to fill the gap in local reporting around the country. Already, at least 14 million Americans receive news from student papers.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, not all of these students and student publications are currently providing or capable of providing reliable, quality local news to their communities. But they may provide a base on which to build important local, state, and regional initiatives.

At the collegiate level, student newspapers have been able to expand their traditional cam-

pus-focused coverage to include stories that matter to their surrounding communities as the *Harvard Crimson* and the *Williams Record* have been able to do over the past few years. While these student publications provide consistent community coverage, targeted accounts can also be impactful. For example, student journalists at Riverside City College, a community college in the Inland Empire in Southern California, produced a longform investigative journalism piece entitled "Fentanyl Empire: The Inland Empire's Latest Drug Crisis."<sup>14</sup> The series explored how the drug enters the region, the effects it has on consumers, and solutions for the Inland Empire.

A college or university with sufficient resources may be able to purchase a threatened local paper and help to staff it with their student journalists. This model has proven successful for the University of Kansas in Eudora and in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, where students at Grady College are writing for the *Oglethorpe Echo*, a local paper that has been a fixture of its community since 1874. Student journalists now provide the denizens of Oglethorpe County with coverage of their city government, high school sports, local businesses, and obituaries.

In another model, some student journalists are producing news for professional news outlets. In Morgantown, West Virginia, for example, the Friday edition of the *Dominion Post* contains a special insert: the entire weekly edition of the *Daily Athenaeum*, West Virginia University's independent student newspaper. Such arrangements can simultaneously serve student journalists, professional news outlets, and the surrounding communities.

High school students can produce first rate local news reports as well. In 2023, when state restrictions on course material in Florida were causing uncertainty, one of the best places to turn to for coverage in Seminole County was the *Blueprint* – Hagerty High School's student newspaper. The *Blueprint* also features non-breaking community coverage such as stories about infrastructure repairs, charity

events, and the opening of local businesses.

Another successful model is the *Boyle Heights Beat* in East LA, where professional journalists serve as advisors, selecting and training students from various high schools in the community and then distributing the publication electronically. Students working for the *Boyle Heights Beat* have produced stories on subjects such as a tamal entrepreneur, a pet goat named Birria, an up-and-coming coffee shop, and public library renovations. The *Boyle Heights Beat* is part of an emerging trend. 'Beat Model' student publications are operating in Sacramento and Contra Costa County in California.

### Creating an Infrastructure to Support Student Journalists

In some cases, high schools and colleges provide the resources and personnel to train and edit outstanding reporters. There are also a range of helpful guides, press associations, legal support groups, and website templates. But much more can be done.

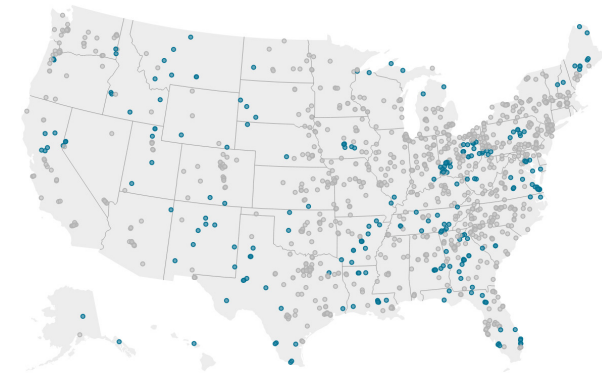
The most important resource for most student journalists is their publication's advisor. Advisors range from English teachers to former executive editors turned journalism professors. Advisors with experience in professional journalism have been the key to success for outstanding student news publications such as the *Oglethorpe Echo* and the *Boyle Heights Beat*. Increasing the funding for advisors from the news industry professionals could be one of the most effective ways to support student journalists.

A "Professional Advisor Model" could pair news industry professionals with student newsrooms where they would serve as teachers, editors, or a first point of contact. For example, a group of retired and former *Wall Street Journal* reporters – who call themselves Pro News Coaches – are now advising local news organizations.

Professionals can also help student outlets format and distribute their work. SNO provides website templates and hosts support services for thousands of student publications. While most of these web presences are designed for student and

### College Campuses & News Deserts

There are 1316 campuses located in or adjacent to counties with **Zero** or **One** news outlet.



County news outlet counts are from the Local News Initiative Database via Medill Local News Initiative's 2023 State of Local News Report. Endowment and enrollment data is from the National Center for Education Statistics. Campuses include 4 year, public or private non-profit colleges with total enrollment over 500.  
Map: UVM Center for Community News • Created with Datawrapper

Map Courtesy of UVM Center for Community News, "Visualizing the Power of Universities: Maps & News" (2023).

campus audiences rather than for the surrounding community, SNO, or other web template providers, could build out new templates designed for the community to access to increase the reach of student reporting. Similarly, student newspapers might want to consider distributing print copies farther into the community and adjusting SEO to reach a larger audience.

As student publications expand beyond the bounds of their educational institution, there are risks of legal issues that could lead school administrators to discourage local news coverage for fear of potential legal action. But there are some potential forms of legal support for students as well. The Student Press Law Center already provides legal trainings and hotlines, and more sources of support may emerge if needed. For example, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which provides non-profit help for professional publications, may be able to step in to provide pro bono legal services on behalf of student journalists.

One of the greatest challenges for news organizations interested in involving student journalists, especially at the high school level, is the resource intensity of training them. The *Boyle Heights Beat* and LAist, a local NPR Los Angeles affiliate, have pioneered a new type of partnership where the news organization can turn to student journalists for insights into their community. By partnering with a

Beat Model training program, professional news organizations are able to utilize student journalists without some of the frequently associated costs. For news organizations that offer internships, increased options to renew interns or establish alumni networks would allow news outlets to benefit further from their time spent training students and would benefit the local news landscape by keeping these talented student journalists in the area. There are, after all, skills that student journalists uniquely possess.

The increasing popularity of social media news posts, news and feature podcasts, and short-form video content like TikToks and Reels, reflects the changing ways that people want to get their news. As digital natives, student journalists are well-positioned to pioneer this kind of journalism in their own communities. More resources may be needed to provide students with equipment, like recording devices or tablets, and to train student journalists on how to take photographs and record videos ethically and skillfully.

Funding for all of these resources and partnerships is, of course, a common obstacle. But there may be special sources of funding for student reporters and their professional mentors. The goals of student journalism training and work overlaps with the goals of private philanthropists and government in funding education, the arts, civics, and media literacy.

For instance in California, funding from Proposition 28 earmarked for arts and music education could be used to purchase video and audio production equipment for journalism programs. Alternatively, corporate partnerships like Apple Learning Coaches – a free resource – can be harnessed to bolster journalism education. In the Downey Unified School District in Southern California, students are provided iPads and technology instruction from educators who have received hands on training from an Apple specialist.<sup>15</sup> With more and more state legislatures passing legislation requiring public school curricula to include civics and media literacy material, journalism classes could represent a way to fulfill this requirement while providing the students, school, and community further benefits.

Students involved in journalism programs find their work rewarding and useful in learning skills

applicable to a wide range of fields. As a Brooklyn Councilmember advocating for more high school journalism noted: “Journalism education doesn’t just train students for a career in the media—it fosters curiosity, critical thinking and the ability to articulate one’s voice. It empowers students to become informed citizens.”<sup>16</sup> There are studies that show students who participate in journalism score higher on standardized tests<sup>17</sup> and are more active in extracurriculars.<sup>18</sup> Investing in student journalism means investing in local news and the students themselves. When this aspect is lost, students report feeling burnt out and taken advantage of. Student journalism is not and should not become a replacement for professional journalism. Instead, we view student journalists as an overlooked swatch of the tapestry of local news.

Through expanded resources like professional advising, web development, computers, audio and photographic equipment, and legal counsel, schools, non-profits, and legislatures can support student journalists as they endeavor to produce more local news coverage.

One of the simplest ways that the public can support student journalists is by recognizing student journalism as *journalism*. As covered in this white paper, student journalists are providing excellent reporting from collegiate news rooms, news-academic partnerships, high school newspapers, and Beat Model publications all across America. The less time spent defending the value of student journalism, the more time there is to focus on the key structures needed for student journalism to serve and reach community readers.

## Conclusion

While students and student publications will never replace the work of professionals, nor will student reporters replace professionals, by focusing their community coverage on local stories — especially those collected under the umbrella of “cohesion journalism” — student journalists can produce important and even impactful stories, provide a real service to their communities, and enhance their own education in the process.

**Endnotes**

- 1 Abernathy, Penelope Muse “The State of Local News 2023: Local News Initiative,” The State of Local News 2023 | Local News Initiative, November 16, 2023, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/localnewslandscape>.
- 2 Grynbaum, Michael M., John Koblin, Benjamin Mullin, and Katie Robertson, “The News about the News Business Is Getting Grimmer,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/business/media/media-industry-layoffs-decline.html>
- 3 Hiltzik, Michael “Column: How the decline of local news exposes the public to lies and corruption,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2023, accessed December 7, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2022-08-29/decline-of-local-news>
- 4 Pulitzer Prize Board, “A Statement From the Pulitzer Prize Board,” The Pulitzer Prizes, May 1, 2024, <https://www.pulitzer.org/news/statement-pulitzer-prize-board-3>
- 5 Sillick, Bob, “The Harvard Crimson student journalists give the Cambridge community the news it wants,” *E&P*, August 16, 2023, <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/the-harvard-crimson-student-journalists-give-the-cambridge-community-the-news-it-wants-with-new,245182?newsletter=245236>
- 6 Jones, Sofie, “Candidates for Williamstown Select Board Gather for On-Campus Debate ahead of May 10 Election,” *The Williams Record*, May 3, 2022, <https://williamsrecord.com/460970/news/candidates-for-williamstown-select-board-gather-for-on-campus-debate-ahead-of-may-10-election/>
- 7 Waldman, Steven “Opinion | How high school sports coverage can save democracy,” *Poynter*, June 5, 2023, [https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2023/high-school-sports-coverage-can-save-democracy/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center](https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2023/high-school-sports-coverage-can-save-democracy/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center)
- 8 Mathews, Nick, “Life in a news desert: The perceived impact of a newspaper closure on community members.” *Journalism*, 23(6), 1250-1265. June, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920957885>
- 9 Usher, Nikki, Joshua P. Darr, Philip M. Napoli, and Michael L. Miller, “Media Policy for an Informed Citizenry: Revisiting the Information Needs of Communities for Democracy in Crisis,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 707(1), 8-20. May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231219550>
- 10 “High Schools | SNO Sites.” n.d. Accessed February 9, 2024. <https://snosites.com/our-customers/high-schools/>
- 11 “College Publishers,” SNO Sites, Accessed February 9, 2024. <https://snosites.com/college-publishers/>
- 12 Vogt, Nancy, “Like Rest of the News Industry, Campus Papers Reach for New Strategies,” Pew Research Center, December 9, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2013/12/09/like-rest-of-the-news-industry-campus-papers-reach-for-new-strategies/>
- 13 “More than 14 Million Views: The Impact of Student Reporting,” The University of Vermont Center for Community News, Accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.uvm.edu/ccn/impact>
- 14 “FENTANYL EMPIRE: THE INLAND EMPIRE’S LATEST DRUG CRISIS,” *Viewpoints Online*, June 25, 2022, <https://viewpointsonline.org/2022/06/25/fentanyl-empire/>
- 15 Vazquez, Tina, “In Southeast L.A. County, working-class Latino students now have a pathway to becoming journalists” *De Los, Los Angeles Times*, Accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/delos/story/2024-05-08/downey-legend-newspaper-journalism-high-school>
- 16 Evelly, Jeanmarie, “City’s Student Journalists Press for More School Newspapers,” *City Limits*, April 18, 2024, <https://citylimits.org/2024/04/18/citys-student-journalists-press-for-more-school-newspapers/#:~:text=at%20its%20schools.->
- 17 “Research Shows that Journalism Students Do Better,” Corsicana ISD, n.d. Accessed May 9, 2024, <https://www.cisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917765/Centricity/Domain/529/journalism-students-do-better-1.pdf>
- 18 “High School Journalism Matters: NAA Foundation’s 2008 Research Study Shows a Positive Link Between High School Journalism and Academic Achievement,” Newspaper Association of America Foundation, n.d. Accessed May 9, 2024, [https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges\\_schools/cic/journalism\\_and\\_mass\\_communications/scholastic\\_organizations/scspa/pdfs/journalism-matters.pdf](https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/journalism_and_mass_communications/scholastic_organizations/scspa/pdfs/journalism-matters.pdf)