

# Thought Leaders

A REPORT BY



USCAnnenberg  
*Center on Communication  
Leadership & Policy*

# About

NPR's mission is to work in partnership with Member Stations to create a more informed public—one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas and cultures.

The USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy (CCLP) unites visionary ideals with impactful scholarship by conducting cutting-edge research and gathering some of the sharpest minds in the field.

# Overview

On November 1, 2018, NPR, with the help of the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, brought together leaders from a range of industries to think creatively about the growing problem of “news deserts” and NPR’s opportunity to address the growing need for local reporting. Seventeen “thought leaders” spent the afternoon discussing the idea of NPR’s Collaborative Journalism Network as one potential method of addressing these issues and explored ways in which the Collaborative Journalism Network might best be developed and brought to scale. What follows is a summary of that discussion.

# In Appreciation

With deep gratitude to the participants of Thought Leaders, who have been so generous with their time, talent and expertise.



# Background

The digital age has created a crisis in local journalism that poses a significant threat to our democracy. Close to one in five of the country's newspapers have vanished in recent years, resulting in a net loss of 1,800 local newspapers since 2004.<sup>1</sup> These numbers represent individuals and communities that now lack a vibrant local press to serve as watchdog, investigator, and communicator. The disappearance of local journalism is devastating to democracy. While local outlets have been disappearing around the country, NPR and its Member Stations remain a strong force in communities that may otherwise lose access to local news. Public radio is in many respects more important than ever.

With more than 2,200 full-time journalists in more than 200 locations across America, public radio has the opportunity to better serve local communities by collaborating more intentionally and efficiently through the **Collaborative Journalism Network**. This initiative aims to knit together the talent and expertise of public radio's 200 newsrooms, while adding key resources, such as editors, data journalists and digital strategists, which stations, with their limited resources, would not be able to afford on their own. Through this work, public radio will significantly strengthen local and regional journalism nationwide.

The November 1, 2018 discussion organized by NPR, with support from the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, surfaced a number of ideas and suggestions for the Collaborative Journalism Network. Some key themes explored during this discussion include:

- 1) The changing media landscape and the growing problem of news deserts
- 2) The structure and function of the Collaborative Journalism Network
- 3) Challenges to implementing the Collaborative Journalism Network
- 4) How to achieve scale

Each theme provoked new ideas, new questions and mandates for further research. Clearly, public radio is at the forefront of reporting stories, from local communities to international scoops. But in the midst of the current attacks on journalism and the shifting media landscape, NPR and local stations have an opportunity to be forward thinking. The Collaborative Journalism Network offers one method of providing new tools for the public radio system, enabling NPR and stations to fulfill their shared responsibility to inform the public. According to a recent major study, NPR, along with public television, is the most trusted American-owned source of news.<sup>2</sup> In an era in which trust in the media has been eroding, NPR is uniquely positioned to serve communities with hard-hitting, fact based journalism.

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, July 30, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> University of Missouri Reynolds Journalism Institute, 2017.

# Key Themes

OF THE THOUGHT LEADERS DISCUSSION

# 1

## The changing media landscape and the growing problem of news deserts

Credible and accessible news and information are key ingredients to a functioning democracy. The founders recognized this when they enshrined freedom of the press in the First Amendment of the Constitution. However, economic and technological shifts have created news deserts—communities that lack access to credible, timely local news. According to a recent study, almost 1,800 newspapers have closed since 2004, leaving between 1,300 and 1,400 communities without a dedicated source of local news coverage.<sup>1</sup> What's more, according to the Pew Research Center, in the past decade, newsroom employment shrunk from 114,000 to 88,000 journalists, with the majority of these losses occurring at newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

**The disappearance of local news poses significant dangers for communities, including lower civic engagement and the loss of a watchdog for public interest.** Moreover, news deserts, especially in middle America, exacerbate today's political environment in which local communities feel ignored or misrepresented by national media. The country's public dialogue would be enriched by a greater understanding of what is happening throughout the entire country—not just what is happening on the coasts.

**Local stations and NPR are perfectly positioned to respond to the crisis of local journalism and news deserts.** During the period in which newspapers and newspaper employment has shrunk, public radio has grown. Since 2011, public radio increased its newsroom employment by 37 percent from 1,377 full-time local journalists to 1,887. And public radio's audience has grown. Today, NPR reaches an audience of more than 100 million people each month across broadcast and digital platforms.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of North Carolina, "The Expanding News Desert," October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, July 30, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> NPR cross-platform audience spring 2018.

# Key Themes

OF THE THOUGHT LEADERS DISCUSSION

## 2

### **The structure and function of the Collaborative Journalism Network**

The Collaborative Journalism Network is designed to connect and empower NPR Member Stations. It will provide new resources and create new opportunities for public radio Member Stations to work together and with NPR. **The public radio network will become more collaborative and efficient, thereby enabling public radio to fill gaps being left as newspapers collapse.** This initiative will foster collaboration by creating:

#### **REGIONAL JOURNALISM HUBS**

Sets of linked public radio newsrooms within a given geographic area that will work to plan reporting together and cover breaking news. This structure will also eliminate redundancy (such as multiple stations sending a reporter to the same press conference), allowing public radio to cover more ground and stretch existing resources further.

Each regional journalism hub will look and work in different ways, depending on the needs and wants of participating Member Stations.

#### **TOPIC-BASED COLLABORATIONS**

The Collaborative Journalism Network will form and expand teams of journalists from NPR and Member Stations with expertise in key areas, such as immigration or veteran's affairs. By sharing expertise and working together, reporters can identify themes and patterns, and uncover bigger stories. These teams will typically include an editor from NPR who helps to shape coverage and provide resources as needed.

#### **SPECIALIZATION**

Journalists with specialized skills, such as investigative editors and data journalists, can elevate reporting. However, most stations cannot afford journalists with these skills on their own. Through the Collaborative Journalism Network, NPR will invest in a team of specialists who will be shared by stations, working on individual projects as needed.

# Key Themes

OF THE THOUGHT LEADERS DISCUSSION

## 3

### Challenges to implementing the Collaborative Journalism Network

The Collaborative Journalism Network promises to address the growing news desert crisis. However, this initiative will require some important innovations in public radio.

Historically, Member Stations worked independently, meeting the needs of their community and relying upon NPR for national and international news. The relationship between NPR and stations tended to be more transactional than collaborative, and stations rarely worked with one another.

**The Collaborative Journalism Network, with its shared decision-making and jointly owned assets, provides an opportunity for unprecedented cooperation and coordination.**

To implement the Collaborative Journalism Network, NPR will:

- Advance public radio's digital infrastructure overall and implement common technologies to maximize efficiency
- Add journalists and editors at the local, regional and national level
- Incentivize collaboration and foster a culture of sharing and mutual obligation
- Raise the philanthropic profile of public radio, encouraging additional investment from individuals and institutional supporters

# Key Themes

OF THE THOUGHT LEADERS DISCUSSION

## 4

### How to achieve scale

A hallmark of public radio has been independent, local ownership of stations, a tradition that should continue. However, in today's media environment, achieving scale has become essential. Media companies are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small group of corporate conglomerates. To effectively compete in today's market, it is important that even the smallest stations are part of a larger network.

Local stations give public radio unparalleled reach into communities nationwide. By finding new ways to work together, NPR and Member Stations have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of scale and solve problems together. The questions become: **How do you incentivize collaboration? How do you reach consensus with more than 200 independent decision-makers? How do you build a transformational project, knowing that it will mean incurring significant new costs for a network already operating at capacity? And how do you sustain it in the long-term?**

If done properly, the Collaborative Journalism Network will make public radio into an even more important source of local and national news, enabling NPR and stations to help address our country's news desert crisis. **The success of this project hinges upon how NPR and Member Stations identify and work through key obstacles.**

# Where do we go from here?

In 2019, NPR will enter a critical phase in the development of the Collaborative Journalism Network, launching the first three regional journalism hubs. These hubs will be located in Texas, California and the central Gulf States (Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama), and will serve as pilots, allowing NPR and stations to test the concept with stations that have very different capabilities and resources.

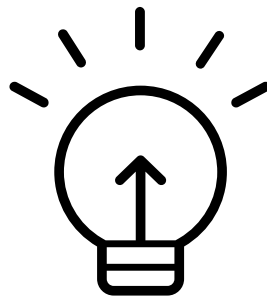
For instance, Texas Member Stations already collaborate on a daily statewide news program, *Texas Standard*, so the regional journalism hub will build upon existing cooperation. The central Gulf State stations, however, have far fewer resources. In fact, many stations do not have the resources to employ staff journalists, and so launching a journalism hub in these areas will require a different kind of investment.

NPR will test different models, workflows and processes at these pilot hubs, carefully documenting the challenges and successes encountered. These tests will inform the launch of future hubs as NPR takes the idea nationwide in 2020 and beyond.

While developing these hubs and seeing them through their first year of operation, NPR will continue seeking counsel of industry leaders in a series of future Thought Leader meetings. The expertise of these leaders will help shape NPR's approach and offer vital insight into how other industries have taken transformational ideas to scale.

With valuable input from their group of Thought Leaders, NPR and Member Stations have the potential to build a powerful local-national news network that serves all communities, ensuring that all Americans have access to the information they need to participate in our society and thrive.





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