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OPINION

The Missing Piece in How Foundations Can Fight Polarization

By *Steven Waldman*

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Many leaders in the philanthropic world have identified the disinformation pandemic — and its cousin, “polarization” — as a massive problem. Given the horrific events of the past few weeks, we all agree this is a threat to democracy. The hard part is: What on earth can be done about this? Ideas include limiting the ability of politicians to shape congressional districts to benefit one party, [expanding national service](#), and promoting greater [religious literacy](#).

But a huge piece of the polarization puzzle has been largely missing from the discussion: the impact of the collapse of local news. When the *New York Times* asked Timothy Snyder, the author of *On Tyranny*, to respond to recent events, he [went to a surprising place](#):

“Truth defends itself particularly poorly when there is not very much of it around, and the era of Trump — like the era of Vladimir Putin in Russia — is one of the decline of local news. Social media is no substitute: It supercharges the mental habits by which we seek emotional stimulation and comfort, which means losing the distinction between what feels true and what actually is true.”

The number of reporters over all has declined by a staggering 60 percent since 2000, and thousands of newspapers have been closed or gutted — a trend that may actually be one of the biggest, and least understood, causes of democracy’s fissures. At first, it might sound a bit counterintuitive that having fewer local journalists could exacerbate division. We journalists are better known for stirring the pot and encouraging conflict. How can more local reporters lead to greater civic harmony?

First, several academic studies have suggested that the collapse of local news causes polarization. For instance, [two studies](#) found that communities with less local news had more party-line voting, while those consuming more local information split their tickets, selecting Republicans for some offices and Democrats for others.

The reason: When local news recedes, residents consume more national media. National cable TV and talk radio emphasize partisan messages and focus on national offices and topics, less about the school board and more about the Supreme Court.

They also serve up villains who are far away and therefore easy to caricature and dehumanize.

As a result, everyone feels less understood. Consider these two testimonials, one from the right and one from the left.

Sen. Mitch McConnell’s former chief of staff, Josh Holmes, last year wrote that the collapse of local news made conservatives feel misunderstood: “You won’t hear a conservative say this often enough but pls support your local media. ... Locals are underfunded and overextended and forced to fall into the clickbait. The result is national media misunderstanding/misinterpreting local politics. If you don’t want someone on the coasts to tell the world what your life is like, what your business does, what you believe or what national policy means for your family, then subscribe to a local outlet.”

Former President Barack Obama wrote in his recent book about the change he saw during his career. “Even as late as 2008, typically when I went into a small town, there’s small-town

newspaper, and the owner or editor is a conservative guy with a crew cut, maybe, and a bow tie, and he's been a Republican for years. He doesn't have a lot of patience for tax-and-spend liberals, but he'll take a meeting with me, and he'll write an editorial that says, 'He's a liberal Chicago lawyer, but he seems like a decent enough guy, and had some good ideas'; and the local TV station will cover me straight. But you go into those communities today and the newspapers are gone. If Fox News isn't on every television in every barbershop and the VFW hall, then it might be a Sinclair-owned station, and the presuppositions that exist there, about who I am and what I believe, are so fundamentally different, have changed so much, that it's difficult to break through."

Powerlessness Makes People Angry

With little local news, the problems people face are ignored. When we feel misunderstood, we feel more powerless. Some 52 percent of those who don't consume much local news said, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," while only 38 percent of those who regularly read a local paper or watched local TV news felt the same way, according to [a major 2020 study by the Knight Foundation and Gallup](#). When we feel more powerless, we feel more angry.

The disintegration of local news has also accelerated the disinformation pandemic. The vacuum has been filled not only by partisan media but by nonjournalistic sources — the websites, social-media feeds, and radio stations that have helped pickle some people in falsehoods and conspiracy theories. The best way to combat misinformation is with accurate information, but thousands of communities are news deserts.

It's not that local topics aren't controversial. But at least local disputes cleave people into different groups than national issues do. This may sound like a small victory, but it matters: Political scientists believe that polarization may dissipate when people feel more "cross pressured" — when friends from one part of their life might have different views than friends from another part. Engagement in local issues creates cross pressures. The person who votes differently than you for president may be on your side when it comes to deciding where the traffic light should go.

Building Trust

You're also more likely to trust "the media" if you see, with your own eyes, one of their ilk sitting at the little table at the school-board meeting until midnight. Fair-minded local journalists — who view local journalism as a public service — are far more likely to detoxify the relationship between the public and the media.

We see this play out in Report for America, which places reporters into more than 200 newsrooms around the country. For instance, we have a talented reporter, Amelia Knisely at the Mountain State Spotlight in West Virginia, covering poverty and government accountability in conservative, rural communities. But she finds that some of the same people who declare "the media" to be enemies of the people nationally praise her work holding local officials accountable for, say, their failure to implement anti-hunger programs.

We need a flood of local reporters — about 20,000 more. [Philanthropic institutions](#), large and small, need to play a much bigger role. There are also public policies that could bolster local news without endangering editorial independence. A coalition of local newsrooms called [Rebuild Local News has put forward a plan](#) that would double the number of local reporters — in part through a \$250 refundable tax credit that Americans could use to buy a local news subscription or donate to a local nonprofit news organization.

It is now becoming clear that the collapse of local news has shredded our civic fabric in far more ways than originally thought. More disinformation, conspiracy theories, polarization, and rage. Less trust, accountability — and community. Ultimately, any person or organization interested in strengthening their communities, or solving critical problems, has to attend to this crisis.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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Steven Waldman is co-founder and president of [Report for America](#), a national service program that places journalists into local newsrooms to report on under-covered topics and communities. It is an initiative of the GroundTruth Project. He is also coordinator of the [Rebuild Local News coalition](#).