

Leonard Downie Jr.

Information Needs of Communities – FCC Arizona Field Event

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I am Leonard Downie Jr., Weil Family Professor of Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School and vice president at large and former executive editor of The Washington Post.

Two years ago, I co-authored a report published by the Columbia University Journalism School – entitled *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*. It made some similar conclusions and recommendations as the Waldman report does.

Since that earlier report, a growing number – but far from all – of local newspapers and television stations have been working to transform themselves into multi-media news operations, to become increasingly interactive with their audiences, and to find new sources of revenue.

But their primary bases of advertising revenue have continued to erode, so they are also still cutting costs – including their reporting staffs and other resources for covering local news.

One way in which some of these news organizations have been trying to make up some of the shortfall is increasing collaboration – both with other for-profit news organizations and with non-profit startups.

For example, the eight largest newspapers in Ohio share all of their coverage of that state. And, just down the street from here, the Arizona Republic, its AZ Central website, and the NBC-affiliated television station – all owned by Gannett – have completely merged their news operations into a single multi-media newsroom.

The Voice of San Diego, a non-profit online startup, shares its coverage of local public affairs with the local NBC-affiliated television station in that city. Another significant non-profit startup, California Watch, distributes its award-winning investigative reporting to dozens of newspapers and broadcast stations throughout the state.

Two of the largest non-profit digital news sites, ProPublica, based in New York, and the Center for Public Integrity, based in Washington, collaborate on investigative reporting with numerous national and local news outlets throughout the country.

With relatively recent funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, groups of public radio stations in seven regions of the country are collaborating with each other and National Public Radio on in-depth coverage of locally important subjects, ranging from education and the environment to economic development and border issues.

Among the most promising news coverage collaborations are those initiated by a still small, but growing number of university journalism schools. There are many examples right here at the Cronkite School.

Cronkite students work as intern reporters covering Phoenix and its suburbs for the Arizona Republic and its website.

At the Cronkite News Service, students working under seasoned professional journalists on the Cronkite faculty in CNS newsrooms here and in Washington provide local, state and national news to about 30 newspapers and broadcast stations throughout Arizona.

Just down the hall from here, in their own state-of-the-art television newsroom and studios, other Cronkite student journalists produce the Cronkite NewsWatch, a half hour local news program broadcast four evenings a week on public television.

Cronkite also is the home of the national News21 student reporting project, funded with grants from the Knight and Carnegie foundations. Each year, students at Cronkite and at journalism schools around the country participate in a teleconferenced spring seminar here to prepare them to carry out an in-depth, multi-media investigative reporting project on a timely subject during the summer at a newsroom here at Cronkite.

Stories from this year's project, a national investigation of American food safety, are being published this week by The Washington Post, MSNBC.com and the iWatch website of the Center for Public Integrity, with wider distribution to begin next week.

Other journalism schools – from Columbia in New York to the University of California at Berkeley – carry out regional News21 reporting projects. They and some other journalism schools also produce local and state news coverage of their own.

The University of Maryland operates news bureaus with student reporters in the Maryland capital of Annapolis and in Washington, which provide coverage for news outlets throughout the state. The Medill School at Northwestern has similar news bureaus in Washington and Chicago. Florida International University collaborates with the Miami Herald, Palm Beach Post and Florida Sun-Sentinel in the South Florida News Service.

The Columbia Journalism School, New York University and the City University of New York each operate student-staffed news bureaus and neighborhood news blogs in the boroughs of New York City. There also are investigative reporting projects involving student journalists at Columbia, Northeastern, Boston, American and Wisconsin universities, among others, which partner with local print and broadcast outlets.

These schools are producing journalism for their communities, in addition to teaching it. Many more could and should be doing so. One next step, recommended by the Waldman report, would be philanthropic funding for “residencies” – like those at university teaching hospitals – for recent journalism graduates to help staff local news and investigative reporting operations run by journalism schools.

Philanthropic foundations, led by the Knight Foundation, have played an important role in helping to underwrite much of this university-produced journalism – in addition to non-profit neighborhood, city and regional digital news sites around the country.

Although foundations have not always engaged in long-term funding, their continued support – especially from the hundreds of community foundations around the country – could be crucial to helping the most viable of these financially fragile startups to achieve mixed-income sustainability.

The possibility of some new kind of government assistance for local news coverage – which was recommended in our Columbia Journalism School report – remains quite controversial. But there are possible models for such assistance in the National Endowments, the National Science Foundation and the FCC’s own redistribution of revenue from telephone surcharges to communications needs of rural areas, schools and libraries.

And more could be done with the current federal funding of public broadcasting.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which channels tax dollars to public radio and television, has begun to encourage more local news coverage by public media with new targeted grants.

But only a small percentage of public radio stations and very few public television stations currently offer their communities meaningful local news coverage. Too many stations give local news too low a priority for their limited resources and are moving too slowly toward cost-sharing collaborations with other local media.

As the Waldman report recommends, the CPB needs more flexibility to help more public stations cover more local news coverage. But perhaps it also is time for the CPB to add some stick to its carrots.

The federal government also should clear up tax rules to make it easier to start, convert to and sustain non-profit news organizations – in the way it already does for other charitable groups that benefit communities.

Two years after publication of *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, I find, as does the Waldman report, encouragement in innovation, entrepreneurial initiative and philanthropic support that could bolster local news coverage in the digital age. But there also are worrying signs of creation sometimes lagging too far behind destruction. The duplication in the Waldman report of so many, so far unfulfilled recommendations in our report shows how much more remains to be done.