

Tow Center for  
Digital Journalism  
A Tow/Knight Report

# **MEDIA MECCA OR NEWS DESERT?**

## **Covering local news in New York City**

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# Introduction

New York City is the media capital of both the United States and the [world](#). It is the base from which journalists frequently cover the rest of the country and the globe. According to a recent [Pew report](#), 12 percent of all US newsroom employees live in New York City, which is more than twice the share that live in Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles. Yet despite its high concentration of reporters, media companies, and booming economy, the city’s local coverage has not been spared the challenges that plague the news industry in less prosperous areas. Severe layoffs at the New York Daily News, a move toward “[less incremental coverage](#)” at The New York Times’s metro desk, the closure of The Wall Street Journal’s “Greater New York” section, and the shuttering of The Village Voice, DNAinfo, and (temporarily) Gothamist are just some of the most prominent recent examples.

The decline of the local news industry in New York City has not gone unreported. A number of [news articles](#), [reports](#), and [studies](#) have traced the reduction of resources at the city’s daily newspapers, the struggles of its upstart digital publications, and the challenges its [ethnic media](#) face in adopting technological innovations and accessing city government advertising. While even these few sample analyses clearly illustrate the breadth of problems for local news, their range also reflects the diversity of the city’s still highly populated media landscape. In 2018, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, along with the New York City Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment and WNYC, convened an off-the-record roundtable discussion on the future of local news in the city. In a [report](#) that summarized the gathering, researchers Sam Ford and Christopher Ali wrote:

The constellation of news sources ... across such a large and diverse city makes understanding the exact state of local journalism hard to properly assess ... The

foundational next step for addressing the challenges to the New York local journalism ecosystem must involve a comprehensive picture of the journalism efforts taking place throughout the city. Solutions must build on what's already in place and address the areas where more support is needed, or where coverage is substantially lacking.

Recent research on the phenomenon of [news deserts](#) has largely focused on communities where the primary news outlets, often newspapers, have either closed or barely still exist. New York City, in contrast, has 90 online news publications, according to a [study](#) by News Revenue Hub, and at least 270 ethnic and community media organizations, per [CUNY's Center for Community and Ethnic Media](#), in addition to (comparatively) still robust legacy broadcast and print media. As the national crisis for local news has gained more visibility in the past year, some of the more mainstream NYC outlets have renewed their focus on local coverage. The New York Times [spotlighted](#) its metro desk in advertising campaigns, and WNYC acquired and relaunched the shuttered [Gothamist](#) site. [The City](#), an online nonprofit news outlet, also launched in the spring of 2019 with 10 million dollars in funding from the Leon Levy Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Charles H. Revson Foundation, among other individual contributors. Addressing what it [classified](#) as a “life-or-death moment for local news in New York City,” the organization focused on filling the increasing void in citywide beat coverage.

But none of these efforts have resolved one of the key issues highlighted at the 2018 Tow event—that hyperlocal and community-level local outlets in New York City are still struggling, and that, subsequently, residents are being deprived of critical information.

Taking this complexity into account, this study seeks to understand the New York City media ecosystem—print, digital, broadcast, mainstream, community, and ethnic—by examining how news organizations prioritize beats and where they see gaps in coverage, rather than counting or mapping publications. To do this, we interviewed journalism professionals at a wide range of news organizations in New York City about how they allocate resources when choosing editorial priorities, the challenges they face, where

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they see the gaps in coverage, and what they wish they could be doing better. These interviews also touched on questions related to the relationships between news outlets and their audiences, as well as with one another.



# Executive Summary

Despite its designation as a global media capital, New York City has in recent years experienced many of the same challenges to its local news sector that smaller communities across the country have faced. Even as the city has seen a flowering in nonprofit news outlets and continues to maintain hundreds of community and ethnic media outlets, shuttered newsrooms, mass layoffs, and ownership consolidation have resulted, according to [some reports](#), in a serious decline in the city's news coverage.

While the situation is hardly analogous to those of communities that find themselves without a single local news source, as journalists, scholars, funders, and policy makers turn their focus to assessing the health of local media in various markets and the development of news deserts, it's worth examining the availability of [credible and comprehensive news](#) across New York City's five boroughs. Could New York City be both a media mecca and a collection of localized, topical news deserts? Are there gaps in coverage at the geographic and hyperlocal level, or are those potential gaps issue-based and citywide?

With these questions in mind, rather than counting or mapping the existence of news organizations throughout New York City as some previous studies on the health of local news have done, this report looks at how the city's local print, digital, broadcast, mainstream, community, and ethnic media outlets allocate diminishing editorial resources. Specifically, we asked dozens of news organizations how they prioritize and define beats, and where they see gaps in coverage. We discussed the challenges these outlets face at the citywide and hyperlocal level, and what changes they would make



with additional financial support. Finally, interviewees assessed the ways in which their different news organizations interact with one another and with their audiences.

The diversity of New York City’s media ecosystem means that the operational realities and needs of the interviewed news organizations varied significantly. On the issue of news deserts, there was disagreement about whether the main problem with local news coverage was the quantity of reporting available to residents, the quality and depth of that reporting, or an inability of increasingly specialized news outlets to reach residents with their reporting. There was, however, some consensus across our interviews that even if the city’s media ecosystem as a whole defies easy classification, there are certain topical gaps in coverage and opportunities for improvement.

## Key Findings

- A consensus emerged from our interviews that healthcare issues and courthouses are going underreported. Several news outlets also mentioned a need for better environmental and climate change reporting. Politics is the most widely-covered (and wide-ranging) beat in the city, but is still not comprehensive.
- For the most part, citywide newsrooms have chosen to focus on thematic beats, such as education or transportation, rather than geographic-specific ones that were once covered by reporters based in particular boroughs or neighborhoods. In contrast, community and ethnic media outlets still mostly allocate resources and divide their reporters based on geography. Some of the best-resourced newsrooms now focus on investigative, “enterprise” journalism that can be shown to deliver impact to audiences and funders alike—for example, exposés of corruption or a failing city agency—in lieu of daily reporting that provides consistent coverage of developments in a particular beat.
- Even within geographic beats, many news outlets acknowledged that some neighborhoods get better coverage than others. In some cases, those limitations are dictated by physical distance, other times by where the subscription and advertising dollars reside.
- Aside from the most widely-covered issues at the core of city life, thematic beats often develop in response to the interests of specific newsrooms and the communities they serve, and are sometimes tailored to fit grants or fellowships.

Many of the interviewed newsrooms also adjust editorial priorities based on coverage by other media outlets in order to find stories uncovered by the competition.

- While all newsrooms would like to hire more reporters and many would like to improve technological capacity, in many of the smaller newsrooms those in charge are simply hoping for a path toward sustainability and profit. In some of these cases, the publications' chief staffers are themselves part-time employees or working from coffee shops or home. Any additional resources, they say, would first go toward covering basic overhead and administrative costs, like office space and full-time salaries.
- In terms of coverage, many community and hyperlocal outlets would like the ability to pursue more in-depth investigative and accountability reporting. Most of the citywide organizations wish they could expand the reach of their reporting and deliver more consistent coverage across the boroughs.
- This previous finding highlights the potential for better and more far-reaching collaboration. While collaboration is flourishing between the better-resourced journalism organizations, particularly in the nonprofit space, there is an opportunity to develop partnerships between these sectors and the community and ethnic media. Some of these community and ethnic media outlets feel they are excluded from the journalism and grantmaking circles necessary to develop these kinds of programs, and while they are eager for more collaboration, also insist that any partnerships would have to be truly equitable.
- As news outlets of all sizes seek to grow their audiences or attract investment, a tension exists between the desire for local stories that “transcend” their context and make greater impact, and the need to double down on and preserve hyperlocal reporting. A similar tension exists for those who emphasize the importance of community and ethnic journalism's role in acting as an agent of community identity and providing “service journalism,” a term applied to reporting that offers an audience with useful, actionable information, and those who solely focus on the need for more local accountability reporting.
- While the better-resourced news organizations, and particularly the nonprofit ones, have carefully designed “community engagement” plans and strategies that often include events, surveys, and engaging audiences in conversations on multiple

platforms, the popular journalism industry term did not resonate with many of the smaller community-based news organizations. These organizations said they didn't have the time or resources to devote to these kinds of initiatives, and were somewhat skeptical of the premise, but said they maintained deep links with their audience by living in the communities they served.

Defining local news is complicated. This question is even less straightforward in New York, a city of international citizens that has always played an important role on the national and global stage. Many of the interviewees discussed the challenges in determining which stories, particularly political ones, were really local, and balancing those with attempts to "localize" hot-button national and international issues. This complexity gets at one of the central difficulties in developing methodologies that scale for an area of study whose subject is intended to be context- and location-specific.

## **Methodology**

This study relied upon a series of interviews with 39 participants from 28 news outlets, one journalism academic center, and a philanthropic foundation. National or international news outlets were not included, unless they had dedicated metro sections. The interview subjects at the journalistic organizations were both publishers and journalists. All are identified by name except one, who wished to remain anonymous. Interviews were sought with as wide a range of news outlets as possible and potential subjects were identified from existing local news outlet databases, as well as by recommendation from industry professionals. Of the interviews conducted, 25 were with print and digital publications (11 of which were digital-only). We spoke with organizations from all five boroughs of New York City and five that publish or broadcast in a language other than English. Only two television networks and one radio station agreed to participate.

# Mapping Deserts and Assessing the Health of Media Ecosystems

The combination of a transformed advertising marketplace and evolving news consumption habits online have decimated the economic model for local news in the 21st century. While this reality has been common knowledge for over a decade, a wave of research in recent years has sought to quantify or comprehensively depict the scale of the problem. One of the most influential frameworks for this area of study has been that of the “news desert.” In 2011, Tom Stiles, editor and founder of the community journalism website The Banyan Project, cited journalist Laura S. Washington by describing news deserts in [Nieman Lab](#) as “places whose economies cannot sustain any established business model for journalism, for-profit or nonprofit . . . and can no longer come close to meeting the information needs of the community and its people.”

The term has been popularized in recent years thanks to an emerging body of media research, in particular the [Expanding News Desert](#) project at the University of North Carolina. In a series of two reports since 2016, UNC researchers tracked the [disappearance](#) of nearly 1,800—or one in five—local newspapers across the United States since 2004. While the majority of Americans [receive](#) their local news from TV, and increasingly online,

newspapers still hold significant agenda-setting power. Studies have shown that local newspapers continue to [produce more and better journalistic output](#) than any other medium, and that their reporting is the [basis](#) for most local stories on broadcast media.

Over time, the UNC project's definition of a news desert has evolved. Originally described as a "community without a newspaper," the report now also [classifies](#) "communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access to the sort of important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy" as news deserts. The researchers noted that many still-existing newspapers had become shells, or "ghosts," of their former selves and were "no longer providing residents in communities large and small with the news they needed to make informed decisions about a range of important issues that could affect their quality of life."

The move to assess the quality, as well as quantity, of information available to residents is at the core of several other studies looking beyond newspapers to measure the health of local news across mediums. Many of these studies have [adopted](#) the environmental concept of an [ecosystem](#) to [describe](#) ways in which information flows in a community through a [network](#) of people, organizations, and institutions (including professional news outlets, but also potentially libraries, social media platforms, community groups, etc.). Healthy news ecosystems, [according to the philanthropic foundation Democracy Fund](#), are "diverse, interconnected, sustainable, and deeply engaged with their communities."

Researchers have developed an array of [methodologies](#) to assess the production and consumption of news, and the extent to which information needs are being met. Categorizing these different approaches, Democracy Fund [identified](#) a "tension between depth and breadth, between a highly contextualized knowledge of a specific place and a replicable, scalable approach that allows for comparison across communities."

[The Media Deserts Project](#), originally based out of Ohio University, [looks](#) not just at available content in rural communities (including newspapers, hyperlocal online news sites, and social media influencers), but also issues that might interfere with its [reach](#), such as broadband access. In New Jersey, researchers in separate studies [interviewed](#) journalists, surveyed residents about their [satisfaction](#) with local media, [quantified](#) the number of news sources available, and analyzed the volume and quality of their journalistic output. Quality

was determined by whether content was truly local, original, and if it met [critical information needs](#) as defined by the Communication Policy Research Network in a study for the Federal Communications Commission.

One track of research has focused on [developing methodologies](#) that can assess the health of local journalism across a large number of communities. Utilizing unprecedented access to Facebook data, researchers [analyzed](#) the quality of content surfaced on the platform's dedicated local news "Today In" feature and found that, for the 400 communities then included in the feature, only 61 percent of the stories aggregated were identified as addressing a critical information need. Notably, Facebook did not include in its launch of "Today In" any communities where it couldn't identify enough regular local reporting on Facebook, which it [defined](#) as places where "in the last 28 days, there has not been a single day where we've been able to find five or more recent news articles directly related to these towns." In the [separate study](#) of available local news content in 100 randomly sampled communities that did not include Facebook data, the percentage of stories that addressed critical information needs was lower—around 56 percent. Other researchers have narrowed their focus to [compare](#) media ecosystems and news consumption in a handful of cities, or to explore specific sectors, such as the ethnic and community media in [New Jersey](#) and [New York](#), or [Latino media](#) across the country.

Many of these studies identified a critical component of news deserts, namely the ways in which they reflect greater societal dynamics of inequality and discrimination. One [study](#) of three New Jersey communities found evidence that suggests "lower-income communities are dramatically underserved relative to wealthier communities . . . [and that] lower-income communities receive the bulk of their news from a smaller range of sources." The [survey](#) of residents in New Jersey found that "people from rural areas and with the lowest household incomes are the least satisfied with their local news, while people from urban and suburban areas with higher household incomes are more satisfied." An [analysis](#) of more than 16,000 news stories across 100 US communities concluded that "the greater the proportion of a community's population that is Hispanic/Latino, the less robust is the journalism in that community." The [study](#) of Facebook's data found evidence that "factors such as population, and some US Census categories (percent white, percent college educated)

increase the likelihood that stories associated with a community will meet a critical information need.”

Viewed together, the emerging body of research on news deserts illustrates the complexity of fully grasping the impact of our changing media landscape. The years of work that have gone into creating methodologies and [databases](#) that can accurately map the number of existing newspapers or news outlets operating in a collection of states (to say nothing of access to [data](#) from social media platforms) suggest the vast amount of research that is still to come. But even a comprehensive, countrywide database of media organizations would not reveal the full manner in which citizens are being deprived of information on local issues.

Analyzing news output and the extent to which it satisfies critical information needs is very helpful in getting us there, but even that misses the nuances of both accountability reporting and community journalism that are at the heart of local news coverage. Are any reporters still regularly attending city council meetings? How many reporters are consistently present during courthouse hearings? Who is informing citizens about changes in government services? Where can residents turn to make sure potholes get fixed and to see photos from Little League games?

These questions are critical to understanding the health of local news ecosystems, be they small rural communities, midsize metro areas, or major media markets like New York City. NYC’s media landscape is hardly analogous to that of less prosperous metro areas or rural communities, but it is in some ways a microcosm of broader local news phenomena. The struggles of the citywide daily papers is similar in nature, if not in scale or severity, to the market failure of newspapers detailed in [The Expanding News Desert](#) project. The rapid acquisition of community papers by the family-owned Schneps Media company, which now [owns](#) at least 33 newspapers as well as dozens of magazines and websites throughout the five boroughs, mirrors concerns about [media consolidation](#) nationwide. After Schneps bought the daily tabloid *amNewYork* in October and [laid off](#) more than half the newsroom, the Gothamist [interviewed](#) former Schneps employees who accused the company of “cozying up to advertisers and local powerbrokers, while muzzling critical coverage of friends and public officials close to the owners.”

At the same time, the city has become a laboratory for the same kinds of business model experimentation that are taking place across the country: the move by public radio station WNYC to resurrect the shuttered Gothamist digital publication, the proliferation of nonprofit news websites like The City and niche education site [Chalkbeat](#), and for-profit digital upstarts like [BKLYNER](#), which started as a network of neighborhood news sites. And as interest in some form of government intervention to rescue the journalism industry grows, the city and state have presented a few proposals of their own. In May, City Hall [issued](#) an executive order mandating that city agencies spend at least half of their annual print and online advertising budgets on community and ethnic media outlets. In October, two New York State Senators presented a [bill](#) that would “require every cable television company and telephone corporation that provides cable television service to carry a local news channel to ensure a source of local information to every community.” New York City may be a unique case study, but the successes and failures of local news here can tell us much about the potential for local news anywhere.

A number of recent [articles](#) and reports have assessed the health of local news in NYC by looking at parts of the city’s media ecosystem. Many have focused on [declining resources](#) at the leading citywide dailies, in particular the shuttering of the once mighty New York *Daily News*’s bureaus outside Manhattan, and the [impact](#) on accountability reporting. An in-depth [CJR](#) piece featured some of the community media and new digital publications that were trying to fill the void left by the dailies, but for the most part [concluded](#) that, with small budgets and staffs, “most would be hard-pressed to pull off investigations of pervasive problems . . . and many lack the resources to support in-depth reporting.” A “[landscape analysis](#)” by News Revenue Hub counted 90 digital news publications in New York City but found that “local news coverage is unevenly distributed across neighborhoods and boroughs . . . There are fewer digital outlets in Manhattan and Staten Island than in The Bronx, Queens, or (especially) Brooklyn.”

While the common perception across these studies is that reporting on issues of public interest had declined in the city, there is little consensus on what that looks like on a granular or hyperlocal level. Building on this work, our study aims to look more closely at what kinds of coverage these news outlets are able to maintain, and choose to prioritize, with increasingly limited resources. We spoke with a wide range of print, digital, broadcast,



mainstream, community, and ethnic organizations throughout the city about how they prioritize beats and areas of coverage, and seek to serve their communities. We also discussed how the digital transformation of the media landscape has changed the ways in which information circulates between news outlets and their audiences, and opportunities for collaboration. And finally, we asked these media organizations what topics and communities are going underreported, and what they would like to be covering if they had additional resources. While our study only provides a snapshot of the city's media landscape and is far from comprehensive, we aim to provide another facet of research to the ongoing efforts to assess the challenges facing the media ecosystem in New York City and the broader crisis for local news.

# Defining “Local” in a Global City

The economics of scale in the internet era, the consolidation of media ownership, and the [dominance of national political news](#) have all contributed to the increasing nationalization of news coverage. For this reason, one of the key indicators [used by researchers](#) to assess the quality of local news has been to measure how much the content is actually about or has taken place within the community where the outlet is based.

Defining local news, however, is complicated. While the importance of serving a “community” is often evoked, what delineates a community? There have long been communities based on shared interests and identities—be they ethnic groups or parent teacher associations, and the media groups that serve them—that both intersect with and surpass geography. In our networked world, digital gathering spaces on forums and social media platforms have further expanded the notion of community. Even if, as for the purposes of this study, we focus on place-based geography, there is still ample room for ambiguity. Should local news be defined by the location of its intended audience? The location of the subject of its coverage? The relevance of the subject to a specifically located audience?

This question is even less straightforward in New York, a city of international citizens that has always played an important role on the national and global stage. The majority of the news outlets interviewed for this report said they solely focus on local NYC-related coverage, with “local” defined by the geographic scope of their intended audience. For the citywide outlets like [WNYC](#) or the cable news channel [NY1](#), that could be anyone based in the city’s five boroughs. For hyperlocal organizations, like the central Bronx community newspaper [Parkchester Times](#), the Lower Manhattan newspaper-turned-website [The Tribeca Trib](#), or the Lower East Side of Manhattan website [The Lo-Down](#), it is as narrowly defined as within the confines of a specific community board (government-appointed volunteer advisory groups that represent each of the city’s 59 community districts on zoning and service delivery issues).

Whether through content from wire services, corporate partner organizations, or their own correspondents, the bigger outlets like *amNewYork*, NY1, and the *New York Daily News* feature national or international coverage to varying degrees. They all insisted in interviews, however, that New York City remains their primary focus. Robert York, editor-in-chief of the *Daily News*, said they look to balance stories that can “scale massively” with national audiences, and those that do not. Ultimately, however, he said their “core mission is to serve the working people of New York.” Bernadine Han, a top executive at NY1, said that the network likes to provide viewers with some international and national news. But principally, “People turn us on when they hear something is going on in New York City.” As a 24/7 news channel, she said, that is a “built-in expectation that we want to always make sure we fulfill.”

In many cases, however, a global story can become a local one. Natural disasters or political upheavals abroad can have a big impact on local immigrant populations, NY1 political journalist Errol Louis pointed out. The importance of the diaspora vote means that in some foreign elections, he said, a key part of the campaigning takes place in New York. At WNYC and the *Gothamist*, content is estimated to be 95 percent locally or regionally focused, according to WNYC acting news director Sean Bowditch. However, “We’re deeply cognizant of where we practice journalism,” he noted. “This is such an internationally and nationally relevant city. I think we try to ensure that our coverage reflects that profile.” As an example, *Gothamist*’s founder and executive editor, Jen Chung,

mentioned efforts to find local angles on important international stories, such as the organization's reporting on clashes between pro-Hong Kong and pro-Mainland China protesters in Chinatown.

*The New York Times*, unlike the other interviewed outlets, considers itself to be foremost a national and increasingly global publication (or as NYT CEO Mark Thompson put it in an [interview](#) with Ken Doctor of Nieman Lab, "We are local for global, if you like"). Metro Editor Clifford Levy has been explicit in his intention to position NYC coverage for a wide audience. "People care about what happens in New York, even if they have never been to New York," he said. "You know, it's the capital of the world." Speaking about recent deep investigations into the exploitation of workers in the city's taxi industry and food delivery app companies, he said, "Both of those got very sizeable audiences in New York, but even bigger audiences outside of New York, because they said something that really resonated widely."

For the city's ethnic media, finding the right balance between the local and the global has been a longtime mission. Some ethnic news outlets see their audience as specifically a local one, while others contend with a wider diaspora. Javier Castaño, the founder and editor of [Queens Latino](#), a Spanish-language news website with a monthly print edition, said that unlike many of his competitors his outlet seldom covers entertainment or sports and instead prioritizes local news and "civic issues affecting Latinos in Queens." At the same time, he said, events in Latin America, such as the political and economic unrest in Venezuela, have a major impact on Latino communities in Queens and require reporting.

In practice, the breakdown of its coverage, he guessed, would be approximately 40 percent Queens-related, 40 percent the rest of New York City, and 20 percent national or international. "We try to get the community to participate in the voting process and understand education and politics and what is going on here . . . [as well as] the repercussions of Latin America here in Queens and in New York and the United States."

Aleksandra Slabisz, a journalist with the Polish website and weekly newspaper [Nowy Dziennik](#), gave a similar estimate, guessing that approximately 40 percent of stories covered

news from Poland, with the rest dedicated to local news, events and developments that affect Polish communities in New York, and, to a lesser degree, the US.

Meanwhile, Vania André, publisher and editor-in-chief of the English-language, Brooklyn-based, online newspaper *The Haitian Times*, said, “I usually don’t refer to us as a local news organization. Instead, I like to say ‘community,’ because . . . we don’t really necessarily cover a specific geographic area, but the whole system, depending on where there are Haitian communities.” While André said the publication’s main audience is members of the Haitian diaspora, it has other readers as well, so she wants the paper to “be positioned as not only an authority on what’s going on in the Haitian diaspora, but also an authority on immigration. Because a lot of the issues that the Haitian community is facing in terms of immigration, other immigrant communities face them as well.”

Carrie Melago, managing editor for local news at the nonprofit education news website Chalkbeat, said she defines local news partially in terms of geographic scope, but also as a commitment to being an active participant in that geographically defined community. “Education is a fundamentally local issue. Our coverage is rooted in the local communities,” she said. Referring to a prominent, national, criminal justice-focused journalism nonprofit, she explained, “We aren’t like ‘The Marshall Project for education.’ We are covering local stories.” So, “It is geography,” she insisted, “but I think it’s also really having an understanding of the communities that we write about, which takes time and is a lot of work. We want to be visible. We want people to feel comfortable reaching out to us and feeling like we’re going to portray them in a responsible way. And, we live here . . . we want to be trusted.”

The issue that perhaps most frequently tests the delineation and definition of local coverage along geographic lines is politics. In a moment in which many of the country’s most prominent political figures—President Trump, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, etc.—are all New Yorkers, the lines between national and local are often blurred. “New Yorkers in general are used to thinking of ourselves as the center of the universe anyway, so we probably would get in trouble if we didn’t [reflect that in our coverage],” joked NY1’s Errol Louis. For Jim Schachter, the former vice president for news at WNYC, “So much of what happens in New York City is a big story for the country,” he said, that distinguishing between local

and national news is often a “false distinction.” (Schachter left WNYC in July shortly after this interview was conducted after seven years in the role.)

Many news outlets have chosen to provide local takes on national issues, and several said they hoped to position themselves as “authoritative sources” for these topics with a national audience. When Mayor Bill de Blasio announced his short-lived presidential campaign, many local news outlets quickly [published guides](#) to his policy [record](#) as mayor. The same [occurred](#) when former Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his presidential candidacy in November. The podcast “[Trump, inc.](#),” a joint reporting effort between WNYC and ProPublica, covers the president through the lens of his NYC-based business operations.

When Ocasio-Cortez endorsed presidential candidate Bernie Sanders at a rally in Queens adjacent to the country’s largest public housing project, local outlets [reported](#) that some residents were [angered](#) the Sanders campaign had not given them sufficient advance notice.

While these citywide publications served up local coverage that might interest a national audience, other hyperlocal publications offered a localized take on national stories for their own communities. In a 2018 interview with Ocasio-Cortez shortly after she defeated Joseph Crowley in the Democratic primary, Castaño of *Queens Latino* [wrote](#) of the then-candidate, “Ocasio-Cortez does not know about some of the local issues affecting Queens County, but she listens and is learning. She often stays quiet for a few seconds because she does not have an appropriate response, and answers in general terms, as she did when she was asked about the future of Roosevelt Avenue, displacement and gentrification.” (Speaking now of Ocasio-Cortez, Castaño said, “She’s very smart. And I have the feeling that in the media outlets in this country, especially Latino media outlets . . . we need to implement that kind of dynamic that she brought to politics.”)

The community weekly *Queens Ledger* took a similar tack when reporting on this year’s widely-covered Democratic primary for Queens County District Attorney. While many news outlets wrote about candidate Tiffany Cabán’s significance for the progressive wing of the national Democratic Party, the paper focused on how “Queens might be different depending upon who won,” according to the paper’s publisher, Walter Sanchez.

While both the congressional and DA races clearly held local significance, some journalists warned against the lure of trying to localize all big national stories in pursuit of audience, at the expense of more relevant community issues. Michael Hinman, editor of the Northwest Bronx weekly *The Riverdale Press*, said he thinks local news outlets should strive to find a “balance between localizing and local.” He added, “There’s a need for localization, but how much do you do it? How do you make sure you don’t sidestep local stories to do it? Because there’s big issues and everybody’s talking about it, so it’s sexy. You might be able to localize the anti-vaccination [movement] . . . but the Mueller hearings probably isn’t something we can really localize.”

Roberto Lacayo, news director of [NY1 Noticias](#), the Spanish-language sister channel to NY1, warned of a similar dynamic in television. Nearly all the major networks, he said, chase after a local angle on the leading national story of the day. Instead, he wants his reporters to be focused on service journalism—a term that generally refers to reporting that provides an audience with useful, actionable information. Other networks might find these “practical” stories, which frequently focus on the inner workings of city government agencies or policies, “too small,” Lacayo said. “Well, they’re not too small for me.” Lacayo and his team wrote a “NY1 noticias manifesto,” where they declared their intent to go “deep into neighborhoods,” including having reporters live in the neighborhoods they are covering. By living there, he said:

They get a better sense of what’s going on in those neighborhoods. And also you put some skin in the game. You can’t just go there and disrespect the community. You know, throw somebody under the bus and come back maybe a year after to cover another crime. No. You live there, so they can see you. So you better be fair to them. You better be accurate.

Lacayo felt it was editorially and strategically unwise for NY1 Noticias to compete with bigger networks on stories that were getting widely covered, and so made the choice to turn to “smaller,” “practical” stories. While television may be uncomparable to other mediums, his newsroom was undoubtedly one of the best resourced of all the outlets interviewed for this study. Throughout the media ecosystem, editors have had to make similar tough editorial choices under greater financial duress.

# Prioritizing Beats and Areas of Coverage

## Geographic versus thematic beats

While there was no overwhelming consensus among news outlets regarding the allocation of editorial resources, some telling commonalities and patterns emerged. At the news organizations that maintain citywide coverage, the majority of newsrooms have none or significantly reduced geographic beats in favor of thematic ones. Despite the likely financial imperative behind these decisions, some editors presented the move as an opportunity to tap more deeply into reporters' expertise and draw connections between "intersectional" beats in a way that benefited the audience. "We have far fewer geographically based beats . . . than we used to," said New York Daily News Editor-in-Chief, Robert York. Instead, he said, the daily has a "much more topic-based structure because that is—I believe that's what the audience wants and must have." (He did say that crime coverage continued to be a geographic beat because "you have to have people in certain places. Otherwise it takes too long in New York to get from one place to another if you're not already there when something happens.")

Polly Higgins, the former digital editor-in-chief of *amNewYork*, who was interviewed before the paper's sale to Schneps Media and her subsequent [removal](#), questioned the idea of beats altogether. "I think in the digital space, it's less and less about traditional beats,"



she said. She described a more ad-hoc system of following areas of interest, like the rise of activism since the 2016 election, which she said might fall under the traditional category of politics, or could be considered a “micro-beat” by itself.

Meanwhile, at the community level, it’s more common to see reporters divided among geographic beats. When you have limited resources, often “you’re managing schedules, as opposed to what somebody’s expertise is,” said Shane Miller, managing editor of the *Queens Ledger*. Even within geographic beats, many news outlets acknowledged that some neighborhoods get better coverage than others. In some cases, those limitations are dictated by physical distance. “There are plenty of things that happen on Governor’s Island that I just can’t get to,” lamented Carl Glassman, editor of the Tribeca Trib. In other cases, these constraints reflect unfortunate economic realities. “It’s the same communities that go underreported everywhere,” said Ned Berke, editorial director of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper. “[It’s those] people where there is no money, no ad base, no potential for subscriptions.”

Liena Zagare, editor and publisher of the daily Brooklyn-wide news website [BKLYNER](#), said, “We try the best we can” to cover the whole borough and the “stories that absolutely have to be told.” But she acknowledged, “The richest areas have better coverage, because . . . the areas where we have subscribers and advertisers get more consistent coverage than the areas where we don’t. There are stories everywhere. There’s just not money.”

At the hyperlocal level, the resources and staff members generally weren’t sufficient for a specific beat allocation. “It’s so small, we all [cover] a little bit of everything,” said Brett Yates, a reporter with the South Brooklyn monthly community newspaper *Red Hook Star-Review*. “It’s not terribly systematic,” he said, echoing the comments of many of the other hyperlocal outlets.

One notable exception is The City, a nonprofit local news website launched in April 2019 with a staff of nearly 20, thanks to 10 million dollars in funding from several leading philanthropic foundations and individual contributors. The news outlet was created with the mission of filling the void in consistent, citywide beat coverage left by the retreat of the daily newspapers and the 2017 closure of the neighborhood news online newspaper, DNAinfo. The website follows both geographic and thematic beats, according to

Editor-in-Chief Jere Hester, a *Daily News* veteran. The newsroom has a reporter in each borough, along with a handful of thematic beats like transportation and City Hall. An additional reporter covers juvenile justice issues in the Bronx as part of a Report for America fellowship. The South Bronx, according to the Report for America [website](#), is “the poorest congressional district in the country, [and] is home to Horizon Juvenile Center, which . . . made headlines recently amid outbreaks of violence.”

Of the topic-based beats that news outlets said they cover, the clear winner was politics, which not only gets reported on to varying degrees by the citywide, borough-level, community and hyperlocal press, but is also the sole focus of a number of both commercial and nonprofit news outlets like [City & State](#), [POLITICO NY](#), [Gotham Gazette](#), [Kings County Politics/Queens County Politics](#), and others. Following politics in prevalence were education, transportation, criminal justice, and public housing/city planning and development. A handful of news outlets mentioned immigration as an important beat in the Trump era.

Within these broadly defined beats exist a plethora of topics, each of which is being covered in different ways. Political reporting for the *Gotham Gazette*, a digital news outlet published by the government watchdog group Citizens Union Foundation, is mostly in-depth coverage of City Hall and down the ballot local elections, according to Executive Editor Ben Max. For the small for-profit websites *Kings County Politics* and *Queens County Politics*, the mission is “to cover hyperlocal news from a political lens, and cover it from the ground up, rather than the marble halls down,” and starting at the granular level of local political clubs, said Publisher and Editor-in-Chief Stephen Witt.

The community and hyperlocal organizations mostly said they cover criminal justice in the mold of the traditional crime or police beat. But at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, according to Berke, they are now looking to cover criminal justice “by looking at the systems at play.” Berke, who was [hired](#) as editorial director in April by the more than century-old paper as part of a “deepening investment in digital local news product,” said that part of the daily’s new strategy was: “We don’t cover individual crimes for the most part. We cover things that are revealing something broader about the system.”

WNYC has taken the opposite tack, choosing to marshal its efforts toward narrowly focused investigative beats like immigrations courts, as well as surveillance, privacy, and community relations issues within the NYPD, according to Jim Schachter, the former vice president for news. Editorial priorities are determined by a “process of engaging as many people in the newsroom as we can to discuss topics and issues that we should be covering,” he said, and then deploying resources to where there is “consensus of what’s important and how we can make an impact.” Schachter acknowledged that, “You can begin to imagine the vast swath of policing and criminal justice and civil justice systems that we’re not covering at all.” However, he said, “We kind of have a strategy of picking our spots and going deep on the things that we do realize.”

On the education beat, many of the news outlets interviewed said the quality of coverage has been greatly elevated thanks to the New York City bureau of the nonprofit news website Chalkbeat, which allows its reporting to be republished free of charge. Chalkbeat separates its beats into as highly specialized areas as integration and desegregation efforts, special education, English-language learners, state politics, pre-K, and early education,” according to Carrie Melago, managing editor for local news.

While the community and ethnic media tackles many of these same issues, they prioritize additional beats unique to their audience. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which is based out of the historic Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, for example, considers landmark preservation to be one of its primary beats, according to its publisher, Dozier Hasty. Rong Xiaoqing, a journalist in the New York bureau of the Chinese-language newspaper *Sing Tao Daily*, said that in the past, the daily had two separate beats devoted to community organizations, one for those with ties to Taiwan and another for those loyal to mainland China. Now that the paper has fewer resources, she said, they get covered as one beat.

## **Neighborhood watchdog or community champion?**

Interviewees from ethnic media also described a more explicit focus on service journalism. As Lacayo of NY1 Noticias described it, “We take an issue . . . and we’ll explain it to you. We will go through the process. How do you have your child

transferred to a new, better school? How do you apply for the housing lottery? How do you get the municipal ID? We go through the whole thing.”

Aleksandra Slabisz, a journalist with the Polish website and weekly newspaper *Nowy Dziennik*, noted that the evolving needs of immigrant communities can affect an outlet’s editorial direction. She said that when she joined *Nowy Dziennik* in 2006, the paper “provided advice, a lot of it. Like legal, immigration, financial . . . people relied on the paper a lot in terms of how to navigate the United States. Now, a lot of those people have settled in, so they don’t necessarily need the guidance.” Slabisz said many members of the Polish-speaking community who came to the US in the 70s, 80s, or 90s have now returned to Poland. They “relied heavily on our paper,” she said, but “their kids speak English.” Now, she sees the role of the paper as “providing analysis on current events, a little bit of history . . . and information on what is happening in the Polish-American community,” even if they no longer live in the same neighborhoods.

While less specialized than those of the ethnic media, the community media also said it responds to the needs of their audience. Both the *Queens Ledger* and the [West Side Rag](#), an online newspaper/blog that covers the Upper West Side of Manhattan, said much of their content comes in response to queries from readers, be it demanding to know why a pothole hasn’t been fixed, or when a bike lane is going to be built.

“I think a lot of what local news can be for is just being useful to people,” said a journalist with the *West Side Rag* who wished to remain anonymous. “Here are 10 free events this weekend. Let’s check them out. I think people really appreciate that.” The *West Side Rag* has written important stories, like one, the journalist said, that [contributed](#) to a state law forbidding the [building of separate entrances](#) for the lower-income residents by new developments that receive tax or zoning breaks in return for affordable housing. But, the journalist said, “I think that a lot of local news is actually the mundane stuff . . . And I think that kind of stuff is important . . . It doesn’t have to start with Watergate. It’s just telling people how to get involved, especially at a time when . . . people feel demoralized by the national political conversation.”

Michael Hinman, editor of *The Riverdale Press*, agreed that finding a balance between local journalism's watchdog role and that of community champion, was key:

You're going to have the stuff that people want you to know and then there's going to be this stuff no one wants you to know—and you have to have both . . . It's less glamorous to be the reporter that covers the community board, or goes to the elementary school and covers pajama day. But our role is to tell stories, not pick and choose what kind of community we want to depict. The dream newsroom is to be able to cover all of those things—have people to do investigative work . . . to attend every [community board] meeting, and to just walk the streets.

Hinman's vision of the dream community newsroom resonated with some of the other interviewed news outlets, but in reality, choices have to be made. Liena Zagare, the editor and publisher of the BKLYNER, said, "We don't have that many of the bigger enterprise stories at the moment . . . because they take time and we have people that we have. But, I think we are incredibly good at bringing communities together, and showing the different faces of the communities, which is not necessarily something that I think other outlets think or feel is important . . . I guess I approach local news coverage from the perspective of a resident."

Zagare has been particularly frank about the kinds of sacrifices local news outlets have to make. In the September 16 edition of BKLYNER's daily newsletter, in-between a selection of the day's top stories, she wrote, "I hoped to have the John Dewey High School story ready this morning but had to make an unexpected stop by the pediatrician, and so it will be up tomorrow, along with our next installment on stories about homelessness." In November, as part of a plea for subscriptions, Zagare wrote a long [article](#) that explained her perspective on the state of local news in Brooklyn:

Brooklyn has the population to be the 4th largest city in America, and yet we only have a dozen or two reporters across all the outlets combined . . . We may all purport to cover all of Brooklyn, but in reality, all of us combined don't do it justice . . .

THE CITY does great stories that have an impact—but have limited reach—something new outlets struggle with, but it seems a particular challenge for non-profit news, with the focus on just the biggest impact. It's also the mission of these nonprofits to focus pretty exclusively on tough accountability stories, which is a good thing—but there is more to local news and living in our communities that is

worth writing about, rooting for and celebrating. If you write just about the crime, and not about the good things taking place in the community it is easy to distort reality. I want a bit of candy with my kale. I want balance.

David Cruz, editor-in-chief of the bi-weekly nonprofit community newspaper in the northwest Bronx, the *Norwood News*, echoed some of Zagare's comments when speaking about coverage of the Bronx in the city's legacy news outlets. He praised many of the big investigations written by *The New York Times*, for example, but mentioned they sometimes amounted to isolated "parachute reporting" that only focused on crime-related or other kinds of "serious stories, hard news." In comparison, he said, as a community publication, the *Norwood News* covers "the entire aspect of this borough. We cover the good. We cover the bad."

When it comes to "enterprise" reporting, the only news outlets that said they regularly conducted or prioritized investigative pieces were either the specialized nonprofit outlets or the best-resourced newsrooms. Both Levy of *The Times* and Schachter, formerly of WNYC, said their news outlets had moved to focus on investigations in lieu of daily reporting. Levy said that the Metro desk was unique in comparison to other local news outlets in that its main challenge was finding "where does metro fit in a global news organization like *The New York Times*?" "There is limited space on our home screen," he said, "and so we have to be even more nimble and even better, because we're competing against the latest Trump news or the latest news out of Paris or London or Beijing." The Metro desk's hard-hitting [series](#) on the taxi medallion industry, for example, had [spun off](#) from the paper's reporting on President Trump's now incarcerated former lawyer, Michael Cohen.

While *The Times*'s competition may be mostly internal, most of the news organizations were frank that their editorial priorities are occasionally decided with other outlets in mind. Unsurprisingly, many of the interviewees said they look to differentiate themselves by finding stories their competitors aren't covering. "Is someone else doing it?," said Berke of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, when asked how he prioritizes beats. "Can we own it? That's really it." Jarrett Murphy, executive editor of the city's oldest investigative journalism nonprofit, [City Limits](#), explained how the city's changing media ecosystem has impacted

his organization: “Recently, we have sort of narrowed our editorial focus,” he said, “because, frankly, we have some more competition in the nonprofit sphere . . . We’re not changing our brand, so much as trying to sharpen it, so we have an easier story to tell. So, we’ve basically kicked a couple of beloved editorial buckets to the side.”

Murphy said that rather than compete with well-funded nonprofits like The Marshall Project or ProPublica or The City on criminal justice, or Chalkbeat on education, City Limits has chosen to focus on other areas. The first is housing, which it has long covered. The second is “aging in the city,” for which he said they have a particular grant. A third is “climate change and its impact on New York and local resiliency efforts . . . because I’ve been surprised that has not been spoken for.” And lastly, election coverage of local races, which he said, despite the number of outlets covering politics, still goes underreported. York, from the *Daily News*, also mentioned increased competition from the nonprofit sector in the context of difficulties with “staff retention,” and the loss of well-sourced veteran reporters with deep institutional knowledge. Three former *Daily News* reporters left to work for The City.

Initially, Murphy said, City Limits’ pitch to funders was “no one’s doing investigative work. You’ve got to fund this.” While enterprise reporting is still rare in the wider NYC media ecosystem, within the ever-growing field of nonprofit journalism “that has changed to a great degree,” he said. Speaking of the daily beat reporting that used to be central to newspaper coverage, he said, “It’s the sort of day-to-day stuff that is falling by the wayside.” Explaining the importance of this kind of coverage, a [report](#) by Tony Proscio for the Revson Foundation described it as the “routine explanatory reporting that makes it possible to portray the day-to-day reality of local life, and also makes it far easier to identify an opportunity for investigative or enterprise reporting when it arises.”

# Chasing Daily Beats versus Looking for Impact

The City, while itself a nonprofit news outlet, would like to fill that void of day-to-day reporting. Describing the organization's mission, Editor-in-Chief Jere Hester said:

We have no grand illusions that we are going to get granularity of coverage with one person covering all of Queens. And certainly not what DNAinfo was able to do in terms of volume of stories and the Daily News and others back in the day. But the way we're deploying those reporters is really with a kind of mission. We set a high bar, to find borough stories that transcend the neighborhood. So that it is not just a story about a broken traffic signal on one block in Brooklyn. It is a bigger story about Vision Zero [a City Hall program seeking to end traffic-related deaths and injuries in the city] and other issues that folks may be having elsewhere. Something that's going to resonate, we hope, with a good number of folks and say something about what it means to be a New Yorker today. I think another really big important function of the reporters in the boroughs is that we can use them to connect the dots, right? So if we're seeing something that's happening in the Bronx that's similar to something that's happening in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, etc., this really gives us a chance to get out ahead on bigger stories.

This mission to find stories that “transcend” a specific community came up repeatedly in interviews with news outlets of varying sizes, and gets at a tension that is at the heart of editorial decision making for local newsroom in an era of limited resources. When is a local story *too* local, and to what audience exactly is a news organization trying to speak? This



challenge was highlighted to comical effect in a [statement](#) outlining the editorial strategy for *amNewYork* after its sale to Schneps Media: the “approach is to make it a local paper, but not too micro-local.”

Speaking of the changes that have occurred at the *Daily News* in recent years, Editor-in-Chief Robert York said, “This newspaper was trying desperately to be all things to all people. Which is just, regardless of how big your newsroom is, or how small it is, that’s a very difficult thing.” The mission of the *Daily News* now, he said, was defined by “scope control.” And, he added, “We expect our reporters to be very entrepreneurial,” which he explained as being “willing to do a variety of different things, as opposed to ‘I just cover the Queen’s DA. That’s all I do.’” If reporters want to get away from the daily work to focus on a longer story, he said, “as entrepreneurs, sometimes you’ve got to sell that idea [to your editor]. But, if it’s a good idea, it’s going to sell . . . a lot of this falls on the reporters to be able to pitch ideas.”

For York, who has to answer to bosses in the executive suites at Tribune Publishing (and now the much-reviled hedge fund Alden Global Capital, which [bought a 32 percent stake](#) in Tribune in November), the guiding principle for allocating editorial resources may be “scope control.” But for editors at Chalkbeat, who have to answer to philanthropic funders, the answer is “impact.” Journalists have always been proud when their reporting has led to demonstrable consequences, be it for individuals or in the policy realm. In the era of nonprofit journalism, that is an imperative, from both a mission and a funding perspective.

Carrie Melago, Chalkbeat’s managing editor for local news, said the organization considers it “really important to pick stories where a policy might get changed.” The outlet uses a framework called [MORI](#)—Measures of Our Reporting’s Influence—which, Melago said, tracks things like “how many people picked up this story? Did we appear on the radio to talk about it? Did a council person include it in their city council testimony? Is it mentioned in a lawsuit?” In late 2019, Chalkbeat also issued a five-year “[strategic plan](#)” that outlined the organization’s plans to grow from seven to 18 local bureaus by 2025. The outlet said it would simultaneously be looking to: “Deepen our impact. Across our seven bureaus, we are learning what type of work has the biggest impact. It’s a mix of the mundane (showing up where no one else does) and the lofty (identifying important lessons

learned, bringing transgressions and challenges to light, and offering sharp analysis that fosters understanding).”

Chalkbeat may be unique in its applied measurement framework, but most of the journalism organizations interviewed, in both the for- and nonprofit sectors, highlighted community impact as a guiding principle when prioritizing coverage. Trying to determine that impact is essential, they nearly all said, when deciding whether to field reporters to attend community board meetings or observe courthouse proceedings. For Zagare of BKLYNER, like many of the other interviewees, channeling resources toward impact means identifying the community board meeting, for example, that “no one’s going to be covering, where something’s going to be happening. Or if there’s a story [we’ve been covering], where there’s likely to be a big development.”

Coverage of community board meetings varies widely across the media ecosystem. At the hyperlocal level, a handful of outlets like the *Norwood News* and The Tribeca Trib make the effort to attend regularly, despite limited resources. Carl Glassman, editor and sole editorial employee of The Tribeca Trib, said that on average he attends around six community board meetings per month. In the many years he’s been attending these meetings, he’s seen the presence of reporters ebb and flow. After watching the number of journalists in attendance decline in the 21st century, he said, there was a brief uptick at the peak of DNAinfo and the hyperlocal news platform Patch’s influence. “At a certain point a few years ago, there could be up to five reporters,” he said. “Now it’s gone back to the way it was before, which is . . . a lot of times it’s just me again.”

The medium-sized community news outlets said they might attend meetings on a monthly basis, prioritized certain more dynamic community boards over others, or chose to attend based on the importance of items on the agenda. Many of the news outlets said they would never have time to attend most meetings, but at the same time saw them as important places for story generation and to cultivate sources. “It takes a lot of determination to really keep going to community board meetings,” said Traven Rice, co-founder and publisher of The Lo-Down. “But that’s where you get everything. All the info that you can possibly need to lead you down the road to do different stories.”

Hester said some of the The City’s scoops have come from “just being there” at meetings. He highlighted a series the outlet published about dubious use of public funds by community boards on things like an [SUV](#) and [branded swag](#), which led to the city council [placing limits](#) on how community boards can spend funds. At the same time, he said, he couldn’t expect his one Brooklyn reporter to cover the borough’s 18 community boards *and* have time to report bigger stories. “I want those daily beat stories,” he said. “But I want the good ones that can lead to the great ones three weeks away, and then the one shaking the city to its very core that’s three months away. As long as we’ve got people working on these tracks all the time, I think that’s where we’re gonna find our balance.”

While several of the outlets interviewed shared stories in which a reporter’s presence at a random meeting led to a scoop, it’s the meetings that don’t get covered that haunted them most. In her subscription-appeal [article](#), Zagare of BKLYNER gave a specific example:

Just this week, we did not have the resources to cover an important traffic safety meeting about Coney Island Avenue—something we and I in particular care and have written a lot about over the almost 12 years of covering the area. But—I was exhausted, and some of our advertisers were taking their sweet time to pay, and I had no extra money to hire someone to cover a meeting that would take hours to attend and report on. So we did not. And as far as I know—no news outlet did, though it was an important meeting.

In fact—we only had someone at 1/4 of the community meetings we wanted to cover this week. Community boards, police precincts, community education councils—places where decisions get made about land use, policing and school rezoning efforts. Community groups and grassroots organizations, charity work by neighbors. You probably don’t know they ever took place. And if we failed to cover your event—this is why.

# Finding the gaps in coverage

A central “part of the problem of the decline of local news,” according to Jim Schachter, formerly of WNYC, is that “we don’t know what we don’t know.” Nonetheless, there was a rough consensus between the interviewed news outlets about the topics that are going underreported in the New York City’s current media landscape. Reports by former *Newsday* journalist Paul Moses and former *Daily News* editor Arthur Browne have both [noted](#) the [disappearance](#) of consistent beat coverage from “outer-borough” courthouses in the wake of the closure of the dailies’ borough bureaus. This was confirmed by our interviewees, all of whom said that outside of a handful of the city’s most prominent federal courthouses—such as the one that hosted the trial of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, where dozens of reporters [camped outside](#) overnight to earn a spot inside—none of the courts are now routinely covered by assigned beat reporters.

“The courts in New York City have been woefully under covered,” said Hester of *The City*. He mentioned not just the criminal courts, but also “civil court, which really speaks to people’s challenges.” David Cruz, editor-in-chief of the *Norwood News*, also singled out the dearth of courthouse reporting, as well as wider criminal justice issues like “bail reform and alternative methods to incarceration.”

The second most mentioned topic was healthcare, broadly speaking, with a few interviewees mentioning the municipal hospital system in particular. “If I had an extra reporter, I would have somebody covering health and and the municipal hospital system,”

said Joel Siegel, managing editor at NY1 News. “It bothers me as a New Yorker, and as a journalist, that that system is not covered.”

Third was the environment and climate change, particularly follow-up on the city’s environmental resilience efforts post-Hurricane Sandy. Environment and resiliency efforts need to be a “proper beat,” according to Zagare of BKLYNER. “We are living on an island . . . and there is no plan still. There is no resiliency.” The fourth was real estate. “Real estate is really the biggest issue facing the city,” said Michael Hinman of *The Riverdale Press*. “It’s so expensive to live in this city . . . and there’s so many [related] issues . . . [that need to be] cracked open.”

“Certain agencies get perfectly fine coverage,” according to NY1’s Errol Louis. Coverage of the Department of Education and the NYPD, for example, may be imperfect, he said. “But people are diligent, and important stories tend to not get missed. And more importantly, the agency knows that they are being watched by a group of reporters who can’t be swatted away or bullshitted.” But generally speaking, Louis said, echoing many of the other interviewees:

We’re not covering the agencies the way we should . . . We’re not covering the courts. Until recently, we weren’t covering public housing at all. Public housing is 400,000 people, it’s the size of Atlanta, and there was no beat reporter. Greg Smith [formerly of the Daily News and now with The City] kind of named himself the beat reporter for public housing and Monica Morales over at [television station] PIX11. But that took years and was entrepreneurial and self-directed, rather than a decision made by the news organizations. It’s better than nothing, but, you know, that’s not the way it’s supposed to go . . . Health and hospitals is basically not covered, even though it is essentially bankrupt. It’s in serious financial straits, which has all kinds of implications for the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of New Yorkers, and somehow nobody can post up a reporter to keep track of what is going on in these 11 hospitals.

In October, several months after Louis was interviewed, the city’s public health and hospital system [announced](#) that it had closed the fiscal year on budget and with a

surplus of 36 million dollars, a major achievement after nearly not being able to meet payroll in 2017. While search functionality was limited for some websites, our research found no coverage of this development in any of the interviewed English-language news outlets.

Fellowship programs like [Report for America](#) have attempted to fill some of these gaps, placing reporters on narrowly targeted beats at a handful of news outlets, such as juvenile justice in the Bronx at The City, or mental health issues in western New York State at NY1's sister channel in upstate New York, [Spectrum News Buffalo](#). Among the announced [2020–2021 cohort](#) are fellows who will cover Brooklyn's Haitian community and Miami's Little Haiti ("especially climate change gentrification and immigration") for The Haitian Times, and one who will report on bus commuters in Brooklyn for the Daily Eagle. But these initiatives, which rely on one young reporter for a limited time period, cannot be expected to fill these gaps in coverage on their own.

At the geographic level, Lacayo of NY1 Noticias said he wishes there was more coverage of Staten Island, which is consistently identified as the most undercovered area in the city. According to the News Revenue Hub [study](#), "Staten Island has only one other borough-level outlet and no neighborhood-level outlets, making it the most poorly-served borough in the city. Bobby Digi, the founder and editorial director of Island Voice, a community organization serving the African, African American and Caribbean Communities of Staten Island, agreed. He said he founded his organization "out of necessity" because there was nothing "addressing the needs of underserved communities."

The dearth of coverage of Staten Island speaks to a wider problem, according to Siegel of NY1 News. "I think it's frustrating for people when they don't see their own communities covered . . . I think that's probably been a problem for a long time," he said. "Our challenge, as journalists, is to find out what is happening in those communities. It's not just geographic. It's racial. It's political." Journalists, as he pointed out, are not immune from broader, systemic societal divisions. "We all live in bubbles," he said.



# Imagining a Newsroom With More Resources

While the interviewed news outlets expressed a range of opinions on beat priorities and gaps in coverage, on the question of what additional resources they could use, the consensus was resounding: “Money, number one. Money, number two, and money, number three,” said Sheikh Musa Drammeh, founder and publisher of the Parkchester Times.

While the general desired use for that money was additional reporting and administrative resources, the specific needs ranged from covering basic existing overhead costs, to dreams of wide-scale newsroom expansion.

“You know, even myself, I’m not technically an employee of the company,” Vania André, publisher and editor-in-chief of *The Haitian Times*, said in an aside during her interview. “We’re all basically 1099 independent contractors. I have a full-time job,” she said. “I’m on my lunch break right now.”

Stephen Witt, publisher and editor-in-chief of Kings County Politics and Queens County Politics, gestured to the surroundings of the coffee shop where his interview took place and called it his “away office.” His primary office, he said, is his home’s basement.



For these smaller outlets, many of whom are scraping by while hoping to find a path to financial sustainability, any additional resources would be first put to cover essential costs, like office space. They also mentioned difficulties in hiring and retaining reporters and how they would use higher salaries to attract better talent and flesh out administrative support and infrastructure. Traven Rice of The Lo-Down mentioned the need for a dedicated marketing team. Ben Max of the Gotham Gazette said he could use a deputy editor to help him manage his team of reporters and interns, and a dedicated staff member to work on audience and revenue growth. Carl Glassman of The Tribeca Trib said it would be a relief to have just one other reporter to relieve him of some of his duties as the sole editorial staff member.

Glassman also said that he wished he could return to covering “the community journalism aspect” of the publication that he lost when The Trib shuttered its print operations. Glassman, who is also a photographer, said he used to photograph Little League and children’s soccer games and that “while it may sound silly . . . that was really important to people.” “People still tell me, ‘We have little Jack’s picture that you ran years ago. He’s now a lawyer. But the picture’s still on the refrigerator,’” he said. “I always felt that that was part of our mandate as a community publication.”

Many news outlets, irrespective of size, expressed a desire to advance the technological capacities of their newsroom. Polly Higgins, the former digital editor-in-chief of amNew York, said when interviewed that she would like more video training for her staff. The journalist with the West Side Rag mentioned better data reporting skills. York of the Daily News said he would like to expand the paper’s data visualization and interactive capabilities. Schachter, formerly of WNYC, highlighted the need to “keep money in a sandbox where you can experiment . . . with modes of storytelling.”

According to City Limits Executive Editor Jarrett Murphy, “There’s a two million-dollar plan, and there’s a 20 million-dollar plan . . . If I had one extra reporter, I would put them on the climate [beat]. If I had a bunch of reporters,” he said, he would expand City Limits’ investigative work into hyperlocal borough coverage. (In early December 2019, Report for America [announced](#) it would place a fellow at City Limits

to cover climate change and its implications for New York City as part of its 2020–2021 cohort.) Ben Max of the Gotham Gazette also dreamed of expanding into borough-based accountability and public policy reporting, particularly in the Bronx, as well as hiring a City Council reporter.

Murphy and Max’s wishes indirectly alluded to a distinction that emerged between newsrooms of different means: Many of the community and hyperlocal outlets dreamed of having the ability to pursue more in-depth investigative and accountability reporting, while many of the citywide organizations spoke of wanting to deliver more consistent coverage across the boroughs. Max of the Gotham Gazette spoke of the need to have more opportunities for collaboration between outlets that served different audiences, particularly with the ethnic and foreign-language media. “How do we get a better sense of what that ecosystem looks like?” he said. “Are there ways to work together better?”

Michael Hinman of The Riverdale Press said he would love to hire bilingual reporters for his own publication to cover ethnic communities. But in a particularly pragmatic note, he also stressed the need, in the case of a hypothetical financial windfall, to “create a rainy day fund.” Hinman said he worried about the long-term financial sustainability of new organizations like The City, because he’d seen what happens when media owners “dump a bunch of money and they spend it all . . . And then the whole thing kind of collapses on itself.” In an interview, The City’s publisher John Wotowicz stressed that the outlet was being run on a very lean budget, with an eye toward long-term sustainability. At the time of its launch, the publication had [enough money](#) to last until 2022. In November, The City conducted a membership campaign that sought to raise funds from 2,000 readers and succeeded in collecting 147,694 dollars (including a 20,000-dollar NewsMatch Grant) from 1,084 new members, according to Wotowicz. The publication also completed a corporate sponsorship pilot program that raised 300,000 dollars and will launch a more expansive corporate sponsorship initiative this year, he said.

## Engaging with the Community

Stephen Witt of Kings County Politics and Queens County Politics also dreamed of expanding his political websites into the other boroughs, but he said he feared the tight-knit world of grantmaking was closed off to people who weren't in the right circles. He wasn't the only person with this concern. A fair number of the other interviewed news outlets grumbled and were incredulous about the decision to pour so much money into the launch of The City, rather than disperse it to existing organizations.

Beyond the founding of The City by major philanthropic foundations, Witt watched as publications such as City Limits, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, the New York Daily News, and NY1 have received grants from places like the [Facebook Journalism Project Community Network](#), WordPress's [Newspack project](#), the [Poynter-Koch Media & Journalism Fellowship](#), and [Report for America](#). Despite feeling excluded, he wasn't giving up, however. "My pitch [to funders] would be I'm fiercely independent," he said, "I'm an outlier." "I believe in training reporters from the community," he added. "I'm not that interested in their degrees . . . I like people that work side jobs. I like people that live life . . . I think the best way to cover the community, ideally, is to get someone living in the community and train them." He said he saw his mission as inspiring more civic engagement in local communities. "You can blame the politicians and you can blame the Board of Elections, but the media's not doing something right when only 10 percent of Queens' voters turn out," he said. "The media should take some responsibility for NYC's low voter turnout."

While the better-resourced nonprofit news organizations like The City and WNYC have carefully designed "community engagement" plans and strategies, and well-resourced for-profit outlets like The New York Times and NY1 are in constant digital communication with their audiences, the popular journalism industry term did not resonate with many of the smaller community-based news organizations. "It's a luxury of time and resources again, I think, to a degree," said Zagare of BKLYNER. "Do we hold coffee hour? No, because nobody has the time for that," she said. "I think often

times people don't quite appreciate how hard small outlets work, and how little time people have . . . [ But] we live in the communities we cover. We're not, foreigners. We're not strangers."

Glassman of The Tribeca Trib agreed: "I can't do any more than I'm already doing . . . and I got into this because I'm a journalist. [Reporting] is what I do." But as a member of the community that he covers, he said, he has a fair amount of interaction with and feedback from readers just by walking down the street. Rice echoed this sentiment when asked if the Lo-Down was involved in community engagement initiatives: "We walk down the street, because we live here."

In response to The City's initiative to hold a series of open meetings with communities in public libraries throughout Brooklyn, Witt said:

I'm a little skeptical of it but it's interesting . . . they always talk about community policing where cops are actually walking the beats. You know, don't go to the library, fan out. Tell them, "These next two weeks we're going to be in Bed-Stuy." All the reporters are going to be there, walking around. They're going to go in the stores, into the barber shops . . . You walk in, you eat the food, you get a haircut, it's the only way. The library idea just seems too, kind of, white and academic. I mean, maybe it'll work . . . It's a nice try. I'm not dissing it.

Hester said that before launching The City, the borough-based reporters did significant outreach in their communities and that reporters "are going out during the day and weekends in the parks and just talking to people."

## Enriching the Media Ecosystem

While some media outlets may see The City as competition, the news organization and its funders view its role as "first and foremost, hopefully, a catalyst for local news in New York City overall," said publisher John Wotowicz. "We can achieve success if others grow their news gathering and reporting capabilities, either directly or indirectly,

as a result of the fact that the broader local news arena has been energized.” Besides injecting some constructive competitive spirit into the media market, one element of that plan has been encouraging media outlets to republish The City’s work. Hester said that, as of late October 2019, outlets ranging from community newspaper the Queens Courier to WNYC had republished their stories 768 times since The City’s launch in April. The publication has also collaborated on reporting with others nonprofit news outlets like Chalkbeat and [The Trace](#), as well as New York Magazine, which [provided](#) The City’s content management system and initial design and tech support.

For the Revson Foundation, a key funder of The City, as well as WNYC and other local media organizations, this is a critical part of the foundation’s long-term move to fortify the NYC media ecosystem. The foundation’s president, Julie Sandorf, [wrote](#) of their investment strategy:

Investigative journalism is essential but content must be amplified by distributors who can reach as wide an audience as possible. Nothing can replace experienced and expert journalists—investment in expanding the number of high quality journalists is essential. And, without the distribution “megaphones” that are not only authoritative, but also wide-reaching, great content will not achieve its intended impact.

Schachter and Louis said that featuring journalists from other outlets on WNYC and NY1 programming to discuss their reporting, was a crucial part of the “megaphone” role. The daily and community newspapers, Louis said, are “basically our assignment pages on some level. We do a fair amount of enterprise [reporting], but we’re always looking at their stuff.” Bob Hardt, the political director of NY1, said Louis makes an effort to include members of the community and ethnic media as part of the “reporters’ round table” on his TV program “Inside City Hall” whenever possible. “They are trying to get my attention,” Louis said. “I know that they know that I’m one of their primary audiences . . . and I’m relying on them . . . I feel like I have a whole team behind me that doesn’t work here, but that are going to do what we’re supposed to do collectively as an industry, which is hold these folks accountable.”

Besides the role of broadcast outlets in elevating local reporting, many of the interviewed news organizations believed wider collaboration was necessary. Both Roberto Lacayo of NY1 Noticias and Bernadine Han of NY1 said they hoped the Spectrum channels might be able to directly collaborate on reporting projects with community newspapers in the future. NY1 could help them with more advanced storytelling technologies, Han said, while the newspapers would have direct access to reporting in local communities. The major obstacle to doing so, she said, was a lack of resources on both sides, but particularly for the understaffed publications. Managing “these partnerships takes work,” she said. Jehangir Khattak, co-director of CUNY’s Center for Community and Ethnic Media (CCEM), said that while traditionally local community and ethnic media had been excluded from the burgeoning field of journalism collaborations, he viewed a recent joint reporting [project](#) between The New York Times and the El Paso Times as a sign that times were changing. “If there was ever a time that was ripe for these types of collaborations,” he said, it “is now.”

A number of journalists expressed a desire to explore collaboration between English-language news organizations and the ethnic media. CCEM has played a critical role as a hub of research, training, and professional support for community and ethnic publications. Many were dismayed earlier this year when the center closed its “Voices of New York” publication, which curated and translated content from community and ethnic news organizations. The project and its archive have been taken over by City Limits, which previously had some content available in Spanish. Rong Xiaoqing of the Chinese-language newspaper Sing Tao Daily said these collaborations are crucial for the ethnic media. Accountability reporting doesn’t have any impact until it appears in English, she wrote in a critical [article](#) for Poynter about The New York Times’s investigation into the New York nail salon industry, which she said lacked nuance. The weekly Spanish-language publication El Correo, the only Schneps Media publication we were able to interview, is doing the opposite. Its publisher, Silvana Diaz, said that while she was eager to be able to hire a journalist to conduct original reporting, for now the paper only translates relevant content from other Schneps publications into Spanish.

These collaborations are not, however, without potential pitfalls. It's important that the bigger publications not act "snobbish" toward the ethnic outlets, Rong said in an interview. And some community outlets wondered what implications these collaborations might have on their local credibility or identity. Bobby Digi of Island Voices said that some outlets had reached out to his organization as a source for stories about communities of color in Staten Island. But "we're more grassroots," he said. Local residents have disliked coverage of their community in the mainstream press in the past, he said, and so, "there's a trust issue."

The journalist from The West Side Rag wasn't sure how collaboration might "expand our mission," saying, "It's a pretty niche product. Local doesn't scale as easily," even though there are companies that are trying to do so. But what's great, he argued, about NYC hyperlocal websites, is that they are "real and cool because they're all so different. They look different . . . The voice is different," the journalist said. "So, it has a little bit of an edgy quality and, I think, that's why people in the neighborhoods like it. Because it's not trying to be everything to everybody."

# Is New York City a News Desert?

When the interviewed news outlets were asked if they considered New York City to be a news desert, the answer was mostly: It's complicated. On one hand, Bob Hardt of NY1 said, "When there are cities and areas that just have almost nothing, it's not fair to say that New York City is a news desert." His own newsroom was well resourced and anecdotally, he said, there were neighborhoods like the Rockaways in Queens that were still supporting several community newspapers. Touching on some of the questions explored in the previously discussed field of "ecosystem studies," he suggested it would be helpful to have research that assessed whether the health of community newspapers is related to the economic demographics of the neighborhoods in which they are based.

On the other hand, Julie Sandorf of the Revson Foundation said it was unreasonable to use the same frame of reference to compare New York City with a "town in North Carolina." She said there were clear content gaps in the media ecosystem, one of them being authoritative, borough-wide beat accountability reporting, which The City had been founded to address.

NY1's Joel Siegel took the middle ground: "I don't think you can make a blanket statement that nobody is covering local news, or even that it's just a shell of what it was. I don't know how to quantify it," he said. "I think it's robust. I don't think it's as robust as it was, or as ideally as it should be, in a city of eight-and-a-half million people."



Jehangir Khattak, co-director of CUNY's Center for Community and Ethnic Media (CCEM), suggested that in addition to the geographic/financial sustainability versus content/coverage gap dichotomy, there was another framework through which to understand news deserts. He described this as a “disconnect” between smaller news organizations and the mainstream, in which “information is not going where it is supposed to,” even if it is a “high impact story.” “Why,” he said ethnic journalists often asked him, “are we sharing our stories, but they are not reaching beyond our own communities?”

Graciela Mochkofsky, executive director of CCEM, also pointed out that news deserts can be linguistic, as well as geographic and content-based. She said it frustrated her that the economic distress faced by ethnic media, most recently the [Spanish-language media](#), has not been as widely covered as the collapse of local newspapers. Past research by CCEM has shown the different financial circumstances under which many ethnic media outlets operate, particularly a continued vibrancy for print media and advertising revenue. But several of the interviewees worried that ethnic media (and community media as well) are ill-suited to withstand a financial paradigm shift from advertising to majority reader-revenue support, and saw upheaval on the horizon. “When a community gets their news in a different language and the main news source they have disappears, it is way more dramatic,” Mochkofsky said. “They can’t go to another outlet . . . there’s no one else there.”

There was some consensus in our interviews that while even if the city’s media ecosystem as a whole defies easy classification, there are certain, specific topical news deserts (courts, healthcare, and the municipal hospital system) and geographic ones (Staten Island). That said, even in its heyday, there were always gaps in NYC local coverage that reflected wider societal, economic, and racial inequities. Discussing the history of City Limits, which originally founded to do in-depth reporting on housing, and later expanded to cover other civic and policy issues, Executive Editor Jarrett Murphy said:

This idea that New York City has this very rich media environment, and yet there are still things that go uncovered is kind of the rationale behind our founding, which was back in the mid-70s when, frankly, there was a lot more healthy metro

coverage and everybody had, you know, five reporters, or more, at City Hall . . . Even back then the feeling was that outer borough neighborhoods were not getting covered. Even though you had this level of local coverage doing good work on City Hall, and keeping the mayor accountable, and covering local politics, and courts, and cops, really important stories were falling by the wayside. Either because of the geography, or the demographics, or the nature of the story . . . So, City Limits was set up really to kind of fill that gap.

As the media ecosystem has changed, the quantity of information available may not directly correspond to its reach. While acknowledging that there's "probably generally less" of it, "there's a lot of accountability reporting [still] happening," said Schachter, formerly of WNYC. "It's just more specialized." To some, the media-centric news desert question was the wrong one to be asking. The problem, according to Zagare of BKLYNER, was not on the supply side, but on that of the consumer:

Everyone seems to be so focused on what the outlets are doing, as opposed to how people are getting the news. Ultimately, I think the big problem that we have as a society is a lack of a common conversation about what's going on . . . When there are big issues, it's not that those issues haven't been written about by somebody. It's that nobody knows that they were written . . . And most people do not get their news about education from Chalkbeat, or from niche publications that are doing excellent work . . . What's the point of filling [gaps] haphazardly, or even with niche publications, if there is no common conversation and there is no way of them rising to a [certain] level?

The rise and unexpected primary win of Ocasio-Cortez, for example, has frequently been cited as a blindsight of NYC media outlets and a glaring gap in coverage. Six of the news outlets interviewed, however, proudly mentioned their early coverage of candidate Ocasio-Cortez, suggesting that she may not have been entirely unknown, so much as unknown within certain parts of the media ecosystem and its corresponding audience.

Murphy of City Limits, echoing many of the other specialized, niche websites, acknowledged that the outlet "has always aspired to be kind of the media voice for low

income and the working class in New York. But, our readers tend to be very elite . . . [those who] work in nonprofits or in city offices.” Mentioning efforts like acquiring “Voices of New York” and City Limits’ Spanish-language reporting, he said he views reaching those communities as key to both audience growth and also essential for “accountability” to the people they write about.

Errol Louis agreed that “what is missing is a feedback loop from the public.” “We should probably be a little bit less backward-facing about, ‘Gee, why can’t we reproduce the old metro section of The New York Times?’” he said, “and more forward-looking in saying, ‘What do people care about and what have they proved that they care about?’” From his perspective, the indicator of that preference would come from whatever kind of news delivery or content people were willing to pay for. “Let’s figure out what they are paying for and see if we can offer them more, and maybe they will help explain to us what we are not doing right.”

Clifford Levy believes the salvation for local news lies with service journalism. “At the end of the day, we have to find a profit-driven business model,” he said. Elsewhere, the successful model for news has proven to be, he said, that “if you can very intensely cover a particular sector and make yourself an indispensable read, you can get people to pay for it. But no one yet has shown, ‘Oh, we’re going to become an indispensable read for people who live in a particular place.’” The general bundle of local accountability news that The City represents, he said, while vitally important, “is much harder to get people to pay for. You need a publication that really addresses all needs, and that means [in addition to accountability news]—weather, traffic, [subway delays], where to go out, what to eat—something that brings that all under one place and says, ‘Hey, for 5, 7, 10 dollars a month, we’re going to give you the news that you need, but we’re also going to give you all these things to ensure that you live a better life.’ That’s what people will pay for.”

Whether a successful financial model for their work exists or not, many of the community and ethnic outlets already view their roles as performing a form of service journalism. Service journalism is at the core of what most ethnic media do, according to Khattak of CCEM, in addition to a more lofty goal of “preparing their audience [of

immigrant communities] to engage more actively at the civic level.” Besides providing daily, useful information, many hyperlocal organizations said they were most proud of their reporting during moments of crisis. When recalling the work of The Tribeca Trib in covering the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy, Carl Glassman said that he thinks about “how hard it was to do what we did with the limited resources that we had, and just how exhausting it was to do what we did.” But as a result, he said, the community ended up with something that was not only valuable, practical information to residents at the time, “but [it] creates a record. You know they say journalism is the first draft of history, but it’s also history,” he said. “We can look back on” coverage in The Tribeca Trib of these events “and say, ‘Well, this is really what happened.’”



# Conclusion

While its size and diversity make it challenging to classify the New York City media ecosystem as a whole, a rough consensus emerged between the dozens of media outlets interviewed for this study on two points: First, that there are specific areas where there are clear gaps in coverage (healthcare and hospitals, and courthouses). And second, that the city's media ecosystem is not what it once was, or what most of the interview subjects would like it to be. But the severity and exact nature of that change is still up for debate. While the daily newspapers provide significantly less borough-wide, political beat reporting than before, for example, there are a number of new, niche and community political publications providing in-depth coverage. Some question, however, whether that reporting can have the desired impact if a fractured media ecosystem means it's not reaching the intended audience, or being picked up on by citywide outlets. News deserts, to some degree, are in the eye of the beholder.

Future quantitative and qualitative methodologies of both producers and consumers of news will likely be necessary to help determine the exact nature of what has occurred in the New York City media ecosystem. While it will never be possible to fully reveal the extent of “we don't know what we don't know,” these studies will be critical to inform the debate as policy and philanthropy sectors become increasingly interested in “correcting the market failure” for local news. As with most issues related to local news, potential solutions are likely to be heavily context-specific and resistant to scale. The economic or editorial model that works for a Queens newspaper dependent on revenue from printed legal notices, for example, is unlikely to be helpful for a digital ethnic media outlet trying to build an audience in New York and among a wider diaspora movement.

Better and more far-reaching collaboration is likely to play an important role in fortifying the media ecosystem. There is an opportunity to develop partnerships between the sectors that are already actively collaborating, and the community and ethnic media, which are often excluded from these initiatives. While these smaller organizations are eager for more collaboration that results in reaching wider audiences and having more impact, they also recognize the pitfalls of asymmetric power relations, and insist that any partnerships would have to be truly equitable. Institutions like the CUNY Center for Community and Ethnic Media and Montclair State's Center for Cooperative Media might be particularly well poised to play a key role in convening, capacity building, and resource gathering.

It remains to be seen what the future holds for new publications like *The City*, upon whose editorial and financial nonprofit model so much hope rests. As ambitious as its newsroom and funders may be, no one outlet—particularly one with 20 reporters—can fill the void left by the cessation of both DNAinfo's community-based coverage and the *Daily News*'s aggressive, borough-wide accountability reporting. But if its vision of consistent beat reporting that reaches a diverse audience is realized along with a path to long-term financial sustainability, it will be an important accomplishment. Any ecosystem's health relies on that of all its organisms, and so every media organization—and residents in the city—should have a vested interest in its survival. If the world's media capital cannot succeed in doing so, the implications will be grave for the future of local news far beyond the five boroughs.

*Tow Center research fellow Efrat Nechushtai contributed reporting to this project.*