

SOCIAL SCIENCIES

LOCAL NEWS UNDER PRESSURE: PARALLEL CHALLENGES IN GEORGIAN AND AMERICAN REGIONAL JOURNALISM

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the contemporary challenges facing regional journalism in Georgia and the United States. Using a qualitative, literature-based methodology, it examines economic constraints, declining public trust, political interference, and the rapid evolution of digital technologies as critical issues affecting the sustainability of local news ecosystems in both countries. Despite their distinct historical, political, and media development trajectories, both Georgia and the United States demonstrate strikingly parallel vulnerabilities in the regional journalism sector. The article employs qualitative, literature-based comparative analysis. The findings underscore the urgent need for financial improvement, supportive policy frameworks, and adaptive professional practices to sustain the democratic role of regional journalism.

Keywords: Regional Journalism, Local News, Georgia, United States, Media Challenges

Introduction

In both, established and emerging democracies, regional journalism plays a pivotal role in ensuring civic engagement, government accountability, and access to community-based information. With the rise of technological advances and the growing impact of social networks, traditional media remains a powerful tool in fostering democratic development. It remains essential in shaping societal dynamics and addressing local community concerns, especially in remote areas where it ensures all voices are heard. Some scholars suggest that watchdog or accountability journalism holds government officials to legal and ethical standards of public service and ensures that business and professional leaders remain answerable to society (1). This article synthesizes insights from diverse sources regarding the multifaceted challenges confronting media and local journalism in the United States and Georgia. It also explores potential avenues for advancement and innovation within this domain.

In Georgia, a country with a three-decade history of democratic governance, one of the pressing challenges is the maintenance and enhancement of these institutions. Without an empowered "fourth estate" exercising its oversight functions, government entities tend to align themselves with narrow clan interests, particularly in remote areas. Also, Georgian citizens often express distrust toward media entities. This skepticism is particularly pronounced in peripheral regions. Despite numerous media organizations' commendable efforts to highlight regional challenges, fundamental problems persist. In the United States journalism exemplifies a more robust and influential model, where the media is widely regarded as the "fourth branch of government." The U.S. has a rich history in journalism, with significant investments in media, making it a global leader. It has also assisted nations like Georgia in modernizing its media institutions. While the United States and Georgia represent vastly different media environments

in terms of size, political history, and institutional maturity, local journalism in both countries faces strikingly similar challenges. These include financial instability, technological changes, declining public trust, and increasing political or economic pressure—factors that collectively threaten the sustainability and independence of local media outlets. In the US, the collapse of traditional revenue models has contributed to the proliferation of "news deserts," with entire communities losing access to credible, locally-relevant news. In Georgia, regional media struggle with underdeveloped advertising markets and limited access to funding.

The study is grounded in a qualitative methodology, drawing upon literature reviews to highlight both common vulnerabilities and country-specific responses. Regarding terms, while "local news" is more commonly used in the American context, "regional media" is the more accurate term for the Georgian reality. By examining the similarities and differences across these two media environments, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary for sustaining regional journalism in both countries. This article is derived from the author's ongoing doctoral research at the International Black Sea University, titled "Impact of the United States on Georgian Regional Media Issues (Comparative Analysis)."

Contemporary experts increasingly examine the complex challenges facing "regional media" or "local news." Scholars have sounded the alarm over the ongoing crisis in local journalism, producing a wide range of articles, studies, and books that address its causes and consequences. They underscore the far-reaching implications of the decline of local news for democratic engagement, community cohesion, and public accountability. These challenges are largely driven by economic hardship and rapid technological change, both of which have reshaped news consumption habits, eroded public trust in media institutions, and fueled the spread

of misinformation. Additional contributing factors include the monopolization of communication channels, shifting patterns of media ownership, and the steady disappearance of locally-focused news content. Often, these issues are deeply interconnected, compounding the pressures faced by regional media outlets. This study focuses on three main directions: 1. economic constraints and media ownership, 2. the impact of technological change, 3. public trust and political pressure, and 4. suggests potential solutions and preventive measures for media integrity.

1. Economic Factors, News Deserts and Media Ownership

A significant factor affecting American and Georgian regional media is financial constraints, leading to a struggle for survival. In the U.S., "news deserts" refer to areas with little or no local news coverage, limiting access to essential community information. The term, coined in the 2000s, highlights the decline of local news outlets due to digital transformation and the 2008 global economic crisis (2). The report "News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers" defines a news desert as a community with limited access to credible and comprehensive news that sustains grassroots democracy (3). This situation can stem from a variety of factors, including the closure of local news outlets and economic challenges. The News Desert Project from UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media highlights areas in the U.S. identified as "news deserts." Their findings reveal that 225 of 3,234 counties lack a local newspaper, and 1,528 counties have only one publication, typically a weekly. Since 2004, the U.S. has lost nearly a quarter of its local newspapers, and many remaining ones have become "ghosts" of their former selves, often owned by hedge funds and private equity firms that implement aggressive cost-cutting measures, reducing the quality of local news (4). The report "The State of Local News (2023)" from the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University reveals significant challenges in local journalism across the U.S. Over half of U.S. counties lack a reliable local news source, with 204 counties having none and 1,562 relying on a single outlet, mostly weekly newspapers. Of these, 228 counties are flagged as high risk for losing their last news source, particularly in high-poverty areas with substantial Black, Hispanic, or Native American populations. Since 2005, nearly 2,900 newspapers have closed, and the journalism workforce has shrunk by about 43,000 journalists. Many remaining newspapers are owned by large media chains that have drastically cut staff. Alternative local news outlets, such as digital-only sites and ethnic media organizations, face unique challenges, particularly in securing subscribers and funding for sustainability (5). The MacArthur Foundation reports that the U.S. has lost over a quarter of its newspapers since 2005, with projections indicating one-third may be gone by 2025. Since 2008, the news industry has cut 30,000 jobs, particularly affecting the South and Southeast, where reduced access to reliable news worsens income inequality (6). The report "News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?" highlights how the recent pandemic has accelerated the decline of local news - in 2020, many journalists experienced layoffs,

pay cuts, and furloughs, leading to the closure of numerous newspapers, with the risk of further shutdowns looming (3).

The Washington Post opinion piece, "The Crisis in Local Journalism has Become a Crisis of Democracy" (2018), highlights the significant challenges faced by community journalism, noting drastic layoffs and a decline in newspaper employment from 456,300 in 1990 to around 183,000 by 2016. In "The Decline of Local News and its Effect on Polarization," Stanley D. Taylor (2019) examines how local news decline has contributed to increased polarization in the United States. He highlights that political tensions are at their highest since the Civil War, evident in public spaces and social media. Taylor asserts that data analysis supports his claim that the reduction of local news correlates with rising polarization. The MacArthur Foundation also highlights the vital connection between the decline of local news and challenges to American democracy, noting that issues like low voter turnout, declining civic engagement, and increasing partisanship are tied to the disappearance of local news (6).

Leonard Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson in "The Reconstruction of American Journalism" (2009) highlight that accountability journalism is threatened by the closure of many newspapers, as local news reporting largely relies on them. The decline of metropolitan daily newspapers negatively impacts news shared across television, radio, and the Internet. Nonprofit news organizations face significant challenges in securing funding, as obtaining support from foundations and donors requires considerable effort, and advertising revenue provides only a limited financial foundation. Gregory J. Martin and Joshua McCrain (2019) discuss a troubling trend in the U.S. news media: a decrease in resources for local political coverage, paired with a rise in audience engagement with national news. Their research reveals that this shift is largely driven by supply-side factors due to changing ownership of media outlets. Key outcomes include increased coverage of national politics at the cost of local issues, a right-leaning bias in reporting, and a slight decline in viewership compared to other local programs. These changes adversely impact local accountability and contribute to mass polarization, as consolidated media often aligns its content with the owners' financial and political interests (7). According to Reporters Without Borders, although mainstream media in the U.S. is largely free from government interference, media ownership is highly concentrated, with companies often prioritizing profits over public interest journalism. Local news has significantly declined, with about one-third of newspapers operating in 2005 closing since then. Economic constraints have impacted journalists, as highlighted in the organization's 2024 analysis. While some public media outlets have adapted through online subscriptions and donations, the industry faced significant layoffs in 2023, affecting both local newsrooms and major outlets like the Washington Post and NBC News. Over 3,000 jobs were lost in 2023, the highest since 2020 (8). Report for America (RFA) emphasizes that the decline of local journalism has created a democratic crisis, leaving residents without essential information

to address community issues and hold officials accountable. This problem requires something dramatically different, says RFA (9).

In recent years, regional media in Georgia has encountered significant challenges impacting its sustainability and relevance. The Media Landscapes project, created by the European Journalism Centre and the Dutch Ministry of Education, evaluates Georgia a transitional democracy with government interference and political parallelism, alongside strong activism for media freedom, professionalism, and public service broadcasting. (10). The analysis of Georgian media indicates that press freedom became a significant issue before the 2012 Parliamentary Elections due to government control over major television stations, which created an uneven playing field. In reaction to this pressure, the government amended laws to improve media access. The Georgian Dream administration initially enhanced media freedom by completing the digital switchover and removing licensing requirements. However, as the 2016 elections approached, government control over the media reemerged. Most national television stations are politically tied, leading to a polarized media environment. According to the Media Landscapes, regional media outlets in Georgia face business challenges, struggling with small audiences and limited advertising revenue (10). Reporters Without Borders' 2024 report highlights that, despite laws against political parties owning media in Georgia, many networks still push the interests of their politically connected owners. Additionally, the declining advertising market severely affects privately owned media, which are mainly funded by foreign donors, while state-owned media enjoy heavy subsidies, distorting competition (11). Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2022" report indicates that Georgia has a diverse but partisan media environment, where free expression is generally permitted, yet the government has grown increasingly hostile toward journalists (12).

The book "Regional Media Map of Georgia" identifies key issues in the region's media landscape, including limited funding, inadequate technical equipment, and a shortage of qualified personnel. Economic sustainability is a major concern due to an underdeveloped advertising market. Media organizations, especially in smaller municipalities, face challenges such as inefficiency and insufficient event coverage. The level of technical resources typically corresponds to financial health and geographical factors, with organizations receiving international aid generally having superior equipment. A survey highlighted financial constraints and personnel emigration as major challenges for journalists, emphasizing the importance of donor assistance for the sustainability and growth of Georgian regional media (13). The article from MediaChecker discusses the decline of Georgian regional media, noting that over ten newspapers were published in Kutaisi during the early 2000s, but print media has since dwindled. Local media organizations are attempting to improve employee training, but many professionals still seek opportunities elsewhere (14).

2. Distrust and Political Pressure

Throughout history, the attempts to control mass information channels have progressed, often reflecting the influence of dominant ideological groups. In democracies like the United States, major media outlets tend to align with specific political perspectives, whether supporting the Democratic Party's liberal stance or the Republican Party's conservative views. As a result, public opinion polls indicate a significant crisis of confidence in the credibility of media institutions in both America and Georgia.

Gallup reports that Americans' trust in media remains near record lows. An October 2022 poll found only 34% of Americans confident in mass media's ability to provide news accurately and fairly—just two points above the lowest level recorded in 2016. Only 7% express "a great deal" of trust, while 27% have "a fair amount." In contrast, 28% have very little confidence, and 38% have no trust at all in newspapers, TV, and radio (15). According to the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, 46% of respondents view the media as a divisive force in society, while only 35% see it as a unifying entity that fosters cohesion (16). According to Felix Salmon's article on Axios: "Media trust hits a new low", the Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that trust in traditional media in the US has fallen to an all-time low, with social media trust dropping to just 27%. The study found that 56% of respondents believe journalists intentionally mislead the public, and 58% think news organizations prioritize ideology over informing the public (17). Reporters Without Borders' 2024 analysis says that the U.S. faces unprecedented distrust in the media, fueled by disinformation and a rise in partisan media. This environment has significantly eroded public confidence in journalistic objectivity (8). The Democracy Fund highlights that reliable information is crucial for daily life, but its scarcity leads to less informed voters and poses threats to democracy. In "The Crisis in Local Journalism Has Become a Crisis of Democracy," Waldman and Sennott (2018) note that journalism faces significant challenges, with declining trust in the press and Americans increasingly turning to partisan sources (18). Reporters Without Borders' report highlights harassment, intimidation, and physical assaults against journalists, citing the tragic stabbing of Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter Jeff German in September 2022 and the shooting of Spectrum News 13 reporter Dylan Lyons in February 2023. Journalists covering protests have also faced attacks and arrests. (8).

The public opinion polls in Georgia mirror similar challenges. Since the Soviet era, those in power have monopolized mass media, aligning major organizations with political figures. Despite operating in a democratic context, Georgian media struggles for independence, making it susceptible to manipulation by both government and opposition factions. This has led to a decline in public trust, with an April 2019 NDI survey revealing that 72% of respondents view the media as divisive, while only 14% see it as a unifying force (19). A September 2022 poll shows a significant increase in respondents viewing Georgian media as a divisive force. Polarization is seen as a major challenge, with 87%

blaming politicians, 79% pointing to leaders, 83% citing Russia, and 82% mentioning the media, alongside an 80% concern about the economic system (20). Additional surveys have highlighted a notable sense of distrust among Georgian citizens towards mass media organizations. In March 2018, 68% of respondents believed that Georgian TV stations often spread disinformation, while only 4% trusted the Georgian Public Broadcaster for accurate information on politics. Additionally, 56% noted disinformation in online media, and 51% viewed print media as sources of disinformation (21). These insights reveal a global atmosphere of skepticism and distrust towards media and government, highlighting systemic challenges in contemporary society.

Regional journalists face significant challenges from political pressure, especially in rural areas where limited resources make them vulnerable to influence and pre-election manipulation. Despite having a comprehensive legislative framework, these journalists often encounter blackmail and threats, hindering their ability to work effectively. Instances of verbal abuse and harassment against Georgian regional journalists are prevalent, as highlighted in reports from NGOs. Transparency International Georgia's 2012 report, "Georgia's Regional Media - Local Watchdogs Under Pressure," notes that journalists from independent local media face difficulties accessing officials and information. Physical assaults have occurred, including one journalist in Kutaisi who was attacked twice and another who was beaten by police in Tianeti (22).

Access to public information in Georgia has significantly worsened, as highlighted in IDFI's 2022 monitoring report. The response rate from public institutions dropped to 58%, the lowest since 2010, compared to the established norm of 80% since 2013. Compliance with legislative requirements is notably poor; only about 12% of journalists received complete information on time. Approximately 50% of requests either went unanswered or were not satisfied, with an average response time of 16 days for those that were answered. Administrative complaints were rarely resolved satisfactorily, but 40% of cases yielded complete information despite unresolved complaints, taking an average of 35 days. Public information disputes typically took around 2.5 years to resolve, and the number of lawsuits filed by IDFI in the first instance court within 7 months was nearly double the total for all of 2021 in Georgia (23).

3. Impact of Technological Progress

In the USA and Georgia local journalism faces significant challenges due to rapid technological advancements. Traditional media outlets like print, radio, and television struggle to compete with online platforms, as people now have immediate access to information via their mobile phones. The global online network's expansion has made the future of traditional journalism unpredictable. Social media has become crucial for daily journalistic practices, prompting television to move some content online to boost ratings. Major media organizations now showcase a variety of journalistic products on social media platforms. The

World Wide Web features millions of blogs where developers can quickly share text, photos, audio, and video. While traditional media like print, radio, and television are unlikely to be entirely replaced, consumers value the competition (24). In "Local News," Reader (2008) notes that online formats, unprofessional news sites, and blogs enable individuals to document local news often overlooked by traditional media. They can break news before newspapers and offer "micro-local news." Reader states, "the Internet showed the potential to overtake newspapers as the dominant source of local news in America" (25). Scholars argue that the Internet has significantly improved access to public information and news from government agencies, along with various data analysis and research tools. Documents that once required visits or Freedom of Information Act requests can now be easily accessed online. C.W. Anderson, in *The Sociology of the Professions and the Problem of Journalism Education*, argues that the news industry's crisis stems from a sharp decline in advertising revenues due to the digital era. This shift has weakened newspapers' pricing power and highlighted the ineffectiveness of traditional advertising. Concurrently, ordinary citizens have started to take on roles traditionally held by journalists, such as reporting events and sharing expert opinions (26). The BBC reports that the U.S. has over 1,000 daily newspapers, mainly catering to local audiences, but they have suffered due to online competition (27). Taylor (2019) discusses the decline of local news coverage in the USA, highlighting that weekly and Sunday newspaper circulation has decreased for decades. According to Pew Research, many regions have limited to no local news reporting. Historically, local newspapers provided essential updates on weather, events, and politics, but their coverage has reached historic lows. The rise of the internet has adversely affected the journalism industry, as readers shifted to digital platforms, prompting advertisers to withdraw their support. This shift led to a significant 68% drop in newspaper ad revenue from 2008 to 2018 (28). Daniel Tovrov notes in "Dropshipping Journalism" that journalism faces an identity crisis as Google, Facebook, and Apple News take more profits, forcing reporters to write for algorithms than readers (29).

The situation is similar in Georgia, as regional and community radio stations face funding challenges, while print media readership is declining and online news is increasing, according to Reporters Without Borders' 2024 report on press freedom (11). It is challenging for low-income regional media outlets to survive in this era of intensified Internet competition. In Georgia, public opinion surveys also indicate a significant rise in internet usage at the national level (30).

4. Potentials for Local Journalism

Rather than solely emphasizing challenges, this study adopts a constructive approach, positioning current global and local changes as potential opportunities for advancement.

Despite financial challenges, American local media organizations receive support from strong local foundations and volunteers who recognize their importance in democracy. Scholars, including Downie

and Schudson (2009), propose that community foundations should lead in funding local media. With significant assets and contributions—\$2.4 billion from the twenty-five largest foundations in 2007 alone—if they dedicated just one percent of their giving to local news, it would match the total funding provided by all foundations in recent years. These foundations are well-positioned to partner with local news organizations. A number of national foundations—led by Knight and including Carnegie, Ford, Hewlett, MacArthur, Open Society Institute, Pew, and Rockefeller, among others—have made grants to a variety of nonprofit reporting ventures. A study by the Knight-funded J-Lab at American University in Washington estimated that, altogether, national and local foundations provided \$128 million to news nonprofits from 2005 into 2009 (1). Waldman and Sennott (2018) call for a larger role of the nonprofit sector in local journalism. In 2012, foundations provided \$2.1 billion to arts and culture but only \$36.1 million to investigative reporting. They argue that local donors and the community must see journalism as essential as libraries, museums, and hospitals, emphasizing the need for more reporters to support America's democracy (18).

Recent years have seen several organizations gaining recognition for their support of community journalism. The Knight Foundation, founded by John S. and James L. Knight, has shifted its focus from journalism education to funding technological innovation and sustainable models for local news. In 2019, Knight committed \$300 million over five years to support scalable organizations in local communities. In September 2023, they announced an additional \$150 million over five years for the Press Forward initiative, aimed at strengthening local news organizations nationwide, building on over \$632 million invested since 2005 to enhance American news ecosystems (31). The MacArthur Foundation aims to enhance local journalism through its Media and Journalism programs, focusing on revitalizing local news and strengthening democracy. Their Press Forward initiative collaborates with funders to support local newsrooms by providing funding, training, and improving business practices. The foundation also promotes diversity in journalism and advocates for public policies that increase access to local news and civic information (6). The Democracy Fund believes that changing the ownership and leadership of local news organizations can enhance access to information in communities. They invest in organizations that prioritize accurate information as essential for justice and democracy. Traditional journalism in the U.S. has often favored profits, leading to an unsustainable model. However, innovative news models, such as nonprofit newsrooms and regional networks, have emerged. The Democracy Fund's News and Information Ecosystems Initiative aims to transform journalism by amplifying community voices and customizing efforts to address unique local needs (32). The American Journalism Project (AJP) aims to enhance local journalism in the U.S. by boosting resources for digital newsrooms. They invest in business capacity, offer coaching, and provide training on best practices to help

media serve local audiences effectively (33). The organization supports local journalism by providing free tools, resources, and grant funding to help news leaders develop sustainable strategies. Focused on enhancing local news in Philadelphia and nationwide, it offers training, grants, and best practices. In 2023, it committed \$13.5 million in grants with support from over 3,000 donors and connects more than 3,000 news professionals globally (34). Report for America, an initiative from The GroundTruth Project, places emerging journalists in local newsrooms to cover under-reported issues. The program includes competitions for news organizations to identify coverage gaps and for journalists to apply for positions. It funds about half of each corps member's salary, with the rest covered by local news organizations and donors. Corps members receive extensive training and usually commit to a two-year term, with an option for a third year. Since 2017, the program has placed 658 journalists in newsrooms, supported 371 news organizations, and raised \$30 million locally (9). The Poynter Institute strengthens democracy by enhancing journalism quality and impact. For over 50 years, it has developed programs for journalists, particularly in local news. Poynter trained thousands of local journalists, helping newsrooms grow digital audiences, increase revenue, and promote diversity and ethical leadership (35). Several funds, including The Ford Foundation and the San Diego Foundation, support local journalism in the U.S. Over the past decade, an estimated \$300 million has been awarded to U.S. journalists and media organizations, with donations tripling in that time. "There's a growing recognition of the need to support local and regional news in particular, as more newsrooms shrink or disappear," says News/Media Alliance (36).

In Georgian context, local media is greatly dependent on international donor organizations' finances. Khaburdzania (2011) highlights the role of independent media in Georgia's regional areas, linking its growth to civil sector development. She emphasizes the importance of NGOs in enhancing local governance, especially through partnerships with central organizations. Collaborations between regional television and NGOs are crucial for countering government and business pressures. Additionally, international NGOs see electronic media as essential for safeguarding freedom of expression, with foreign donor support being vital for advancing regional broadcasting (37).

Regarding challenges posed by digital transformation, it should be admitted that the advancement of modern technologies and social media has also led to positive changes. The internet and social networks have created new opportunities for those with limited financial resources to adapt to modern dynamics. It's crucial to leverage these opportunities wisely. Modern technologies offer significant advantages for preparing and sharing journalistic content, especially through social media, which is the fastest and most cost-effective means of dissemination. Unlike traditional media, which involves extensive costs and equipment, solo journalism allows individuals to independently create and share audio, video, and written content online. Downie and Schudson (2009) in "The Reconstruction

of American Journalism” argue that newspapers, by cutting staff and coverage to survive, reduce their value to readers and communities. This leads to many trained journalists entering the job market, allowing new local news organizations, especially online, to emerge. The Internet enables a diverse range of news distribution from surviving newspapers and commercial television to start-up online outlets, nonprofit projects, public broadcasting, university services, community news sites, and blogs. Even government and activist groups contribute, resulting in a broader variety of independent reporting and evolving definitions of news (1)

One key advantage of the internet is its ability to facilitate immediate audience feedback. Before online journalism, gathering public opinion required specialized surveys. Nowadays social media offers real-time insights, allowing journalists to gauge what captivates the public and understand their perceptions of news content. This feedback loop enables journalists to engage more effectively with their audience. Downie and Schudson (2009) highlight that digital technology and innovation are opening new reporting avenues, granting contemporary reporters access to diverse research tools that allow for continuous updates, deeper exploration of topics, and easier verification of information.

In the USA, some funds support local media in adapting to new technologies. The Knight Foundation, for instance, focuses on areas like using artificial intelligence to improve journalism, recognizing the importance of visuals in storytelling, and leveraging data for impactful narratives. They emphasize that local journalism must embrace and integrate new technologies to keep pace with rapid innovation (31). Various NGOs in Georgia are actively working to assist local media organizations in upgrading their equipment and enhancing journalistic skills.

Conclusion

When comparing journalism in the USA and Georgia, it's evident that both face similar challenges despite differing circumstances. The literature highlights the role of local foundations and philanthropic initiatives in supporting local news and addressing financial issues. American local media organizations benefit from strong local support and volunteers who value journalism's democratic role. To combat the decline in local news resources, initiatives like the MacArthur Foundation focus on funding and developing sustainable business models.

In summary, as challenges arise, American experts, alongside various organizations and funding entities, are actively engaged in assessing the landscape of local news. Their efforts are focused on identifying effective strategies and allocating necessary financial resources to combat the vulnerabilities faced by this sector. These findings from the American model highlight the necessity for a comparable understanding of the challenges faced in Georgia, a country with limited advertising revenue in its regions. This multi-faceted support is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of local news outlets, which play an indispensable role in fostering informed, engaged, and democratic community.

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