

DETROIT JOURNALISM LANDSCAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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The newly created Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund aims to “increase the quality, outcomes, and reach of the region’s journalism, with an emphasis on engagement, innovation, and the equitable recovery of Detroit.” The first step toward this goal was retaining seasoned journalist Debra Adams Simmons to conduct a scan of area media. This document is an executive summary of that scan. It condenses and amplifies Simmons’ findings and, based on the report, suggests opportunities that might be supported by the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund.

- ✓ ENGAGEMENT
- ✓ INNOVATION
- ✓ EQUITABLE RECOVERY

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1. Introduction

Scan data was collected in interviews with more than 60 local and regional stakeholders, including Detroit-area news leaders, local civic leaders, corporate executives, regional thought leaders, clergy, citizens, entrepreneurs, and national journalism experts. Additional data was gathered from published reports, journalism organizations, journalism educators, and at journalism conferences.

Summary findings are presented here in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (S/W/O/T) format.

2. Journalism in the Detroit Area: Snapshot 2017

Detroit-area media have a rich history—including numerous Pulitzer Prizes and many other recognitions. Yet, local media are struggling to find sustainable business models for journalism broadly, and for legacy newspapers specifically. *The Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News*, while still prominent in the community, work with staffs a fraction of their former sizes, cuts largely due to steep declines in advertising revenue. *The Detroit Free Press*, for instance, went from a staff of 350 in 1995 to 300 in 2005; it now employs just 120 journalists. Both newspapers have reduced home delivery to three days per week (including a combined Sunday edition).



As news moves online, it changes, and not always for the better. While Detroit newspapers have adapted to the digital-first approach, that adaptation has often come at a cost: repurposing print content, aggregating stories from other local outlets, and publishing superficial writing to optimize web traffic are all often prioritized over deeper reporting. This shift, reflective of what's happening in traditional newsrooms around the country, has created a void for public-affairs reporting and in-depth journalism and has left legacy news organizations

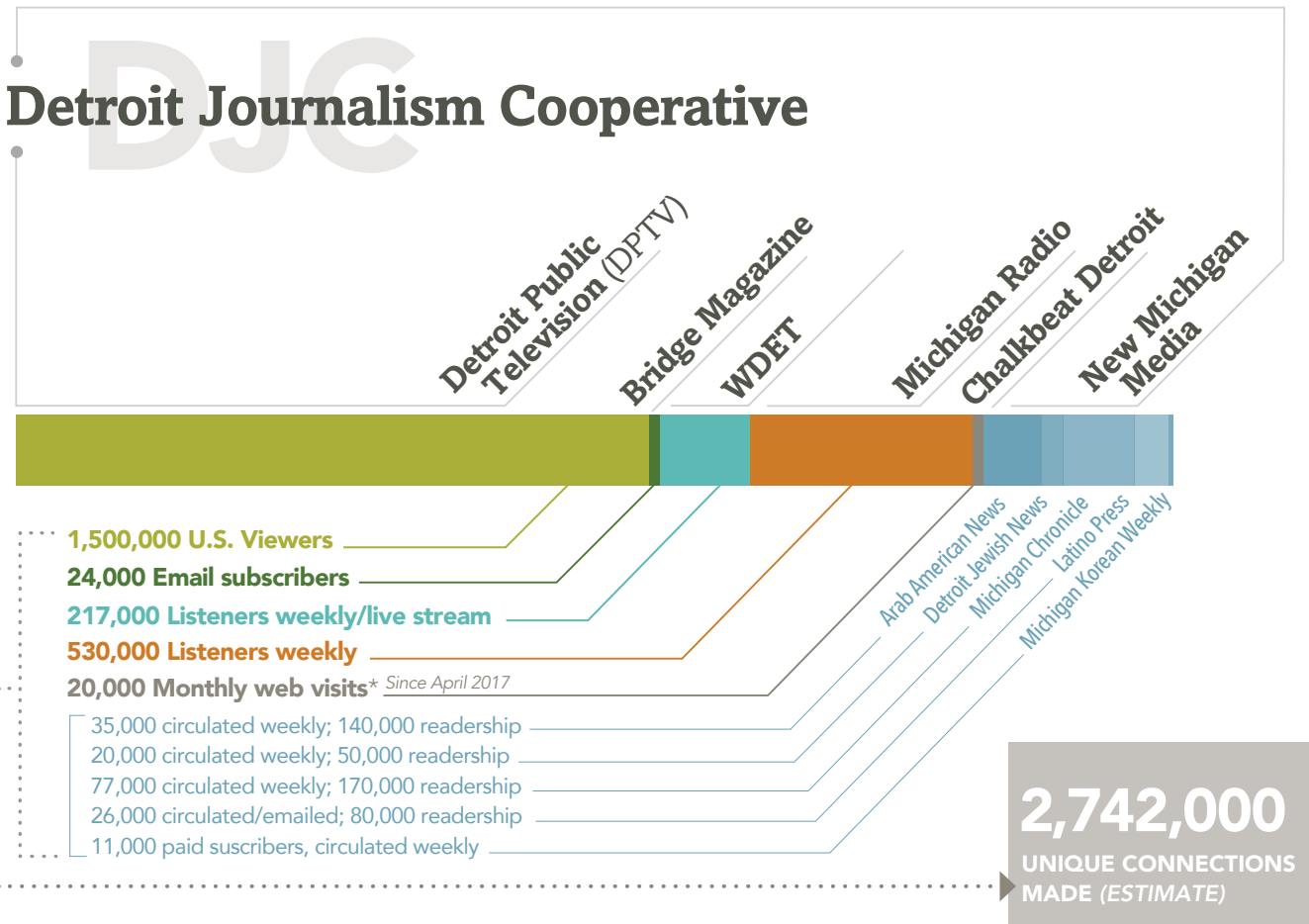
somewhat devoid of the institutional memory that comes with a deep roster of senior staff. Mainstream news outlets have also narrowed their sights to news stories that will generate wider audiences, a decision that sidelines in-depth, slow-cooked accountability stories; disincentivizes steady cultivation of localized beats; and marginalizes segments of the population.

New digital-first media outlets and alternative news models are stepping into this landscape; they are often enthusiastic if not well-positioned to fill the gap created by the shift in legacy news production and consumption. These outlets tend to tell deeper, richer stories; notable examples include *Bridge Magazine*, *Motor City Muckraker*, and *Deadline Detroit*, all run by veteran journalists and all working to elevate the quality and volume of accountability journalism. The reality they face is still challenging, though: These news outlets depend on digital ad rates, which are much lower than print rates; philanthropy, which can be hard to predict; and competition for both eyeballs and ad dollars, which puts them up against online behemoths such as Facebook.

The Detroit area has an important tradition of robust ethnic and community news providers

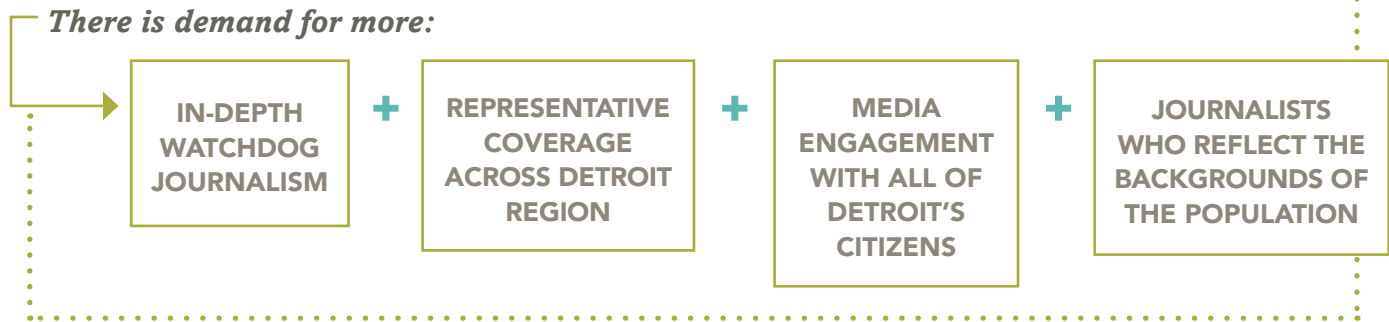
The Detroit area has an important tradition of robust ethnic and community news providers, which are justifiably celebrated for deep connection to their readers and communities, and for providing stories and perspectives often lacking in general-audience media. Among them are *The Michigan Chronicle* (African-American), *Latino Press*, *The Detroit Jewish News*, *Arab American News*, and *Michigan Korean Weekly*, which have created a working consortium known as New Michigan Media (NMM). It should be noted that for these outlets, too, financial capacity, staff resources, and/or technological advancement have been and remain challenging.

NMM, along with newcomer *Chalkbeat Detroit*, which focuses on education issues, is part of a larger consortium known as the **Detroit Journalism Cooperative (DJC)**, a unique partnership that also includes The Center for Michigan’s *Bridge Magazine*, Detroit Public Television (DPTV), Michigan Radio, and WDET. The DJC, with funding from the Knight and Ford Foundations, initially came together in 2013 to report on the effects of the bankruptcy and its aftermath in Detroit, and has continued its collaboration.



Across platforms—whether print, digital, television, or radio—**there was reported a sense that Detroit’s most critical news stories are under-covered. There was concern that most Detroit narratives are not being told**—that coverage disproportionately skews toward the revitalization of midtown and downtown Detroit at the expense of the rest of the city and of the full diversity of its population, especially the African-American community.

Local Content, Local Accountability:
SERVING A DIVERSE DETROIT



3. Community Engagement: What It Is & Why It Matters

The Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund seeks to increase the quality, outcomes, and reach of journalism in the region, with an emphasis on engagement, innovation, and the equitable recovery of Detroit. The Fund, through its grantmaking program, will seek to advance quality journalism while reflecting the perspectives of diverse constituencies including people of color, women and low-income communities. Key to this purpose is bolstering engagement: the relationship between news producers and news consumers. Technology has leveled the playing field and made journalists more accessible than ever to their consumers; as such, sophisticated audiences are eager to give feedback and expect a greater role in the development of news stories.

- ✓ QUALITY
- ✓ OUTCOMES
- ✓ REACH

ENGAGEMENT in journalism has an evolving definition. It includes:

- * Events (but not at the expense of journalists' reporting duties)
- * Deep listening and two-way conversations
- * The creation of digital spaces for meaningful conversations
- * The expansion of journalists' discovery (digital and human interaction) to inform the work
- * The use of digital tools to hunt and gather information
- * Inclusive journalism that reflects the communities represented



ENGAGEMENT can yield higher quality journalism and higher quality relationships between journalists and the citizens they serve.

ENGAGEMENT can be done in numerous ways:

ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM—Watchdog reporting that involves investigating claims and analyzing data deepens reader trust.

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM—Focusing on potential solutions to a community problem, using evidence and data, without advocating for any one idea.

COMMUNITY EVENTS—Events to develop meaningful relationships between reporters and community members, enhance reporters’ awareness and allow people the opportunity to be heard.

CITIZEN JOURNALISTS—Training community members to participate in news creation and bolster the journalist-citizen relationship.

LOCALLY, ENGAGEMENT HAS MANIFESTED IN NUMEROUS WAYS ALREADY. Public radio station WDET experiments with digital journalism engagement tools, creates online-specific content, launches interactive websites, develops podcasts, and explores innovative ways to connect with its audience.

Detroit’s ethnic media outlets, by virtue of their commitments to specific communities, are also deeply engaged with their audiences, often going so far as to connect them to needed services. With the recent hiring of a Community Engagement Editor, supported for two years by the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund, the New Michigan Media partners have a new opportunity to increase and improve their targeted engagement efforts.

Gannett, parent company of the *Detroit Free Press*, has made engagement a top newsroom priority across its titles, with every newsroom having an engagement director; however, this has not yet necessarily translated into satisfactory legacy-media engagement to Detroit news consumers.

Bridge Magazine’s reputation for important accountability journalism springs from the magazine’s leveraging of its reporters’ interactions with citizens to inform reporting. As *Bridge* plays an important role in shaping public policy, having that citizen perspective is critical.

4. Detroit Media Landscape: S/W/O/T Analysis

- Strengths:
- Talent
- Innovation
- Collaboration

S/W/O/T: STRENGTHS

A media-rich region with an illustrious journalism history, the Detroit area enters this commitment to engaged journalism with many advantages. One of its greatest assets is talent. In the past decade alone, local journalists have won two Pulitzer prizes, two Edward R. Murrow awards, and four Emmys, along with numerous other national and regional awards. Despite shrinkages at the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*, Detroit still

maintains two major newspapers—one of only 12 cities nationally to do so. The *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* combined employ approximately 200 journalists, a sharp drop from their heydays but still the largest concentration of journalists in Michigan. Even those staff reductions belie a strength: Several veteran journalists who previously worked in the market now freelance in the region, often for national publications, and are a pool of available

DETROIT-AREA JOURNALISTS:

- PULITZER PRIZES
- EDWARD R. MURROW AWARDS
- EMMYS
- NUMEROUS OTHER AWARDS

talent and knowledge for innovative local journalism initiatives. The overall quality of Detroit's journalists speaks to a high capacity for the type of public affairs reporting that consumers seek and a deep understanding of the area and its issues.

Nationally, engagement initiatives include cooperatives, collaborations, and partnerships among and/or between news organizations, universities, and nonprofits. Further, collaborations are emerging nationally as a key way to produce quality content—such as the accountability, public-affairs reporting that consumers report to desire—under staff and time constraints. The Detroit media landscape is an early adopter of news innovations and collaborations.

The media outlets of Detroit Journalism Cooperative have partnered on major investigative projects, developed joint news stories, and coordinated coverage on important issues. The Detroit community would like to see more, and more inclusive content, and there is some belief—among civic leaders and even DJC leaders—that larger news organizations with larger reach, such as the *Detroit Free Press*, must play a role in any Detroit-area news cooperative.

Newer outlets like *Bridge Magazine* and *Chalkbeat Detroit* provide solid coverage developed by veteran journalists, and Detroit is seen as a market for local news experimentation. *Chalkbeat* co-founder Elizabeth Green recently said she selected Detroit as the independent nonprofit news organization's most recent location not just because of its need for better education coverage but also because of the market's perceived willingness to embrace and support the work and the philanthropic community's commitment to non-profit journalism in Detroit.

✓ ATTRACTION:

The market's perceived willingness to embrace and support the work and the philanthropic community's commitment to non-profit journalism in Detroit is one reason Chalkbeat chose the region as it's newest location.

Weaknesses:

- **Distrust**
- **Dissatisfaction**
- **Lack of Diversity**

S/W/O/T: WEAKNESSES

Community engagement and public-affairs journalism both require journalistic relationships with the community, but **many Detroit news consumers do not see themselves reflected in the news**—or, often, in the newsrooms that create it. Fewer journalists have relationships with people across the city as once did, due in part to staff cuts and the digital shift. People in Detroit's neighborhoods report that they feel they've been left behind by a media that favors the "hipster narrative" of midtown

and downtown Detroit. There is deep concern from both consumers and media leaders about the lack of attention paid to African-American businesses' role in Detroit's recovery, despite the city's volume of such businesses.

While Detroit used to set the industry standard for newsroom diversity, today the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* newsrooms are, respectively, 16 percent and 17 percent minority-staffed. (Diversity is a serious problem in newsrooms nationwide, with an average 12 percent minority staff, far from proportional representation.)

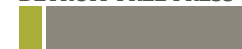
Further, shifts and contractions in the journalism industry often leave media outlets without institutional memory or critical expertise. Organizations struggle to work with restricted resources and diminished capacity, which also makes it difficult to attract and/or retain talent. Smaller emerging news outlets, if they have the desire to make a narrative impact, often lack the reach to do so.

The region's thought leaders empathize with journalists' requirements to go digital but believe the shift has led to a "dumbing down" of news. There is dissatisfaction

staff diversity breakdown

2017

DETROIT FREE PRESS¹



16% MINORITY

THE DETROIT NEWS²



17% MINORITY

2005

DETROIT NEWS/FREE PRESS NEWSROOM AVERAGE³



28% MINORITY

1. Interview with Detroit Free Press 2. Interview with The Detroit News 3. Knight Foundation Newsroom Diversity Report, 2005

among thought leaders regarding the quality, quantity, sophistication, and depth of current news reporting in the region—and a deep concern that Detroit lacks the capacity to provide hard-hitting investigative reporting or in-depth news enterprise stories.

The most important stories are believed to be under-covered. Some examples of topics reported as deserving of deeper reporting include: Detroit's recovery (including its triumphs), the distribution of Grand Bargain funds, public school spending, the strength of the region's schools, the success of its businesses, the effectiveness of its elected leadership, and the return of talented people who are coming home to participate in Detroit's renaissance.

There is a lack of trust between many Detroit citizens and the media institutions that cover, or fail to cover, them. Indeed, this lack of trust was described across racial and ethnic lines as an even greater barrier than the need for enhanced resources.

<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talent• Institutions• Engagement	<p>S/W/O/T: OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>The changing landscape of Detroit media offers new and different opportunities for growth and improvement. Emerging media websites often focus on lifestyle and entertainment or operate on the fringes of journalism. The opportunity exists to grow mutually beneficial partnerships with legacy media, giving the latter access to the new media's highly engaged audiences.</p>
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Detroit's journalism community has already proven adept at such innovative thinking, as evidenced by its early adoption of collaborative and digital-first journalism.

There is also an opportunity to call on the talent Detroit already has. Detroit has active local chapters of national media organizations that often focus on training and development. These include the Online News Association, the Asian American Journalists Association, and National Association of Black Journalists, which will hold its 2018 conference in Detroit. Likewise, the opportunity exists to tap into the region's network of freelance and independent journalists—including newsroom veterans; young upstarts; and locally based writers, who cover Detroit for a national audience—using their experience reporting on social movements, listening, and engaging communities to bolster engagement efforts.

Detroit can also capitalize on young talent—much of which is already being cultivated in area high schools and colleges—to tell Detroit's stories. For 30 years, the Detroit Free Press High School Apprenticeship program has trained some of the industry's most talented journalists. The opportunity exists to support diversity initiatives, innovative engagement initiatives, content ideas, and/or staffing opportunities by exploring institutional partners like Wayne State University's Journalism Institute for Media and Michigan State University, which participates in several high school journalism programs and is home to the state's largest collegiate journalism program.

✓ Journalists could play a key role in bringing a divided Detroit together. Opportunities include working with professional development organizations on strategies for engaging citizens who have felt excluded and increasing emphasis on hyperlocal journalism outlets, of which Detroit already has a vast network. These outlets are seen as the launch pads for news of the future, and have been identified as the type of local news organization best-equipped to weather industry challenges.

Threats:

- **Changing Preferences**
- **Generational Shifts**
- **Relevance**

S/W/O/T: THREATS

Industry changes have resulted in several serious threats to Detroit-area journalism. Both veteran and new publications have ceased reporting and publishing in recent years, and many that have survived their industry's hardships thus far have dramatically reduced their staffs. Citizens now wonder about the relevance and even the necessity of local news organizations. There is a growing doubt about whether media can be

trusted to deliver accountability journalism (which also speaks to the necessity of access to media literacy and the role of newsgathering in a democracy). Community members also worry about the future of local publications, both small publications and larger legacy ones like the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*.

While news organizations bring expertise, objectivity, and credibility to reporting, anxiety exists about the future role of journalists. The way people get their information has shifted. As people rely more on social media channels like Twitter and Facebook for their news, the influence of legacy media shrinks. As private companies strengthen their own storytelling capabilities through social media, the perceived value of journalism weakens. And though new media outlets have emerged in this digital space, the scan finds that not enough Detroiters know about or are connected to these outlets and their work. Though contracting, legacy outlets like the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* are still the primary providers of news and information in the region, which presents a threat to area journalism if consumers move away from these legacy news outlets without moving toward emerging and/or alternative news outlets.

Moreover, as veteran journalistic talent retires or is downsized, new talent is not necessarily taking its place. Newer journalists are discouraged by low pay, uncertainty about the long-term viability of their positions, and new job responsibilities. Some news leaders have had difficulty hiring young reporters because the pay barely meets the region's cost-of-living standards. **This is a problem not just of talent but of inclusion and diversity:** When younger voices, including younger minority voices, are not accounted for, their unique narratives are not shared.

NEW TALENT IS DISCOURAGED BY:

LOW PAY

JOB INSECURITY

INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES

5. Conclusion

Detroit has a robust, award-winning multimedia landscape that offers national models of experimentation, innovation, and collaboration. However, the industry is shrinking and changing, and Detroit citizens are frustrated by the declining numbers of journalists in Southeast Michigan and their capacity to provide relevant, contextual coverage of the metro area at the quality that citizens have come to expect given Detroit's illustrious journalistic history. The perception of media has changed, as has the way people get their information. There is distrust of the media among citizens who do not feel that they are being reflected and/or that their stories are being told.

Detroit can harness its greatest journalistic asset, talent, to elevate the quantity and depth of the news and strengthen the local news ecosystem and to engage the community. Journalists can cast a wider net to offer a more complete narrative of the entire area and its diversity, and Detroit news organizations are eager to take advantage of the products and services that will enhance their engagement efforts. These include new digital engagement tools, reporting projects, and pipeline development programs.

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Debra Adams Simmons is a 30-year news veteran and career journalist, who has held reporter and editor positions with a number of newspapers, including ten years reporting and editing for the *Detroit Free Press*. She was recently named Executive Editor for Culture at *National Geographic* where she will oversee coverage of the lived experiences of people around the globe. Debra serves as a consultant to the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan for the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund.

Current supporters of the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund include:

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For more information about the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund, go to:

[CFSEM.org/Journalism](https://www.cfsem.org/Journalism)