

# Rebuilding Local Journalism at Scale: A Field-Level Analysis of Infrastructure Needs

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**Rebuilding Local Journalism at Scale:**  
A Field-Level Analysis of Infrastructure Needs

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Published by Media Impact Funders  
Research prepared with support from Arnold Ventures

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Over the past two decades, nonprofit local journalism has expanded rapidly in response to the collapse of commercial local news. Philanthropy has played a central role in this transition, supporting new outlets, experiments, and intermediary organizations. As the field matures, however, its most binding constraints are increasingly ecosystem-level rather than organization-specific. Across workforce development, collaboration, audience connection, revenue systems, publishing infrastructure, and civic data access, missing shared capacity raises the marginal cost of producing reliable local journalism and limits the durability of local information ecosystems. It also constrains the field's ability to concentrate innovation in ways that generate visible, replicable models others can adopt.

The Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call, closed in late 2024, offers a uniquely broad dataset for understanding how practitioners diagnose these constraints. The resulting pool of 559 proposals was analyzed using a grounded, problem-centered taxonomy developed from the submissions themselves. Eleven major problem domains emerged, spanning representation and equity, collaboration and field infrastructure, audience and platform gaps, workforce and capacity, revenue and sustainability, trust and information disorder, distribution and publishing, civic information and community needs, freedom and accountability, geography and access, and AI and emerging technology. Each proposal was systematically coded, enabling both qualitative synthesis and quantitative pattern recognition.

Several findings stand out. The largest concentrations of identified need appear in Representation & Equity, Collaboration & Field Infrastructure, Audience & Platform Gaps, and Workforce & Capacity. Together, these domains


reflect a field grappling with depleted human capital, fragmented audience relationships, and persistent inequities in who produces journalism and who is consistently served by it. Capacity loss emerges as a central driver of many other problems, constraining revenue generation, engagement, and accountability reporting. In response, many proposals emphasize place-based and regional collaboration as a practical adaptation to fragmentation and scarcity, shifting away from isolated organizational models toward shared infrastructure that can pool resources and restore coverage capacity at scale, even as fragmentation remains a defining feature of the field.

The analysis surfaces several cross-cutting dynamics that shape how infrastructure is defined and prioritized across the field. First, “infrastructure” is not a stable or uniformly applied concept. In a high-need environment, applicants stretch the term to include both shared systems and organization-specific operating capacity, framed as structural constraints. This elasticity is itself diagnostic: it reflects genuine demand for shared services while also signaling scarcity pressures that push urgent staffing and survival needs into infrastructure funding categories. A central field-level challenge is therefore distinguishing between investments that primarily stabilize individual organizations and those that materially reduce duplicated burdens and generate compounding benefits across ecosystems.

Together, these patterns reflect what this report describes as a fragmentation paradox: a field whose decentralized growth has enabled experimentation and local responsiveness while simultaneously raising costs and diffusing the shared capacity required for durability at scale.

More broadly, the proposal pool suggests that infrastructure leverage varies substantially depending on how risk, cost, and capacity are distributed across organizations and geographies. Many of the most persistent challenges surfaced by applicants—capacity loss, accountability threats, revenue fragility, and inequitable access to information—are not problems that individual outlets can resolve on their own. They are shaped by collective exposure to risk, thin leadership and technical capacity, and the absence of coordinating systems that allow scarce resources to be pooled rather than duplicated. As a result, the effectiveness of infrastructure investments often depends less on the specific tool or service funded than on whether it meaningfully changes how burden and risk are shared across the ecosystem over time, rather than reassigning long-term maintenance and support costs back to individual organizations.

**Finally, the proposal pool surfaces structural tensions that shape the field’s operating environment. Equity concerns appear both as real and persistent constraints and as a dominant framing lens shaped by funder priorities.**



In parallel, many proposals implicitly assume philanthropic support as a stable long-term backdrop, even as the scale of field need far exceeds available grant capital and as reliance on philanthropy raises unresolved questions about long-term sustainability and independence, particularly for accountability-driven journalism. Taken together, these dynamics reinforce the report’s central analytic conclusion: the long-term health of local journalism depends on whether the field can lower the marginal cost of producing reliable civic information at scale. In practice, this challenge is inseparable from revenue design, business and leadership capacity, and the field’s ability to align products with real sources of demand rather than relying primarily on philanthropic substitution.

The field is already experimenting in that direction; the remaining constraint is whether funding strategies can support infrastructure that is shared, long-term, coordinated, and system-oriented, rather than episodic and project-bound.

# Acknowledgements



This analysis was commissioned by Arnold Ventures, which supported the research and enabled access to the Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call proposal pool. Arnold Ventures also encouraged the publication of this work for broader field learning. The findings and interpretations presented here are solely those of the author.

Press Forward granted access to the Infrastructure Open Call proposals and supported the use of the dataset for independent field-level analysis. Staff involved in the Open Call were generous with context and were open to the analytical aims of this work. The analysis does not evaluate the design or outcomes of the Press Forward initiative itself, and inclusion here should not be read as an endorsement of the findings.

I am grateful to Jake Shapiro, Nicco Mele, Lauren Feeney, and Richard Gingras for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. Their feedback helped sharpen the analysis and clarify its implications, though responsibility for any remaining errors or interpretations rests entirely with the author.

**MIF's partnership has made it possible to share this analysis broadly with funders, intermediaries and field leaders, and to situate the report within ongoing conversations about local journalism infrastructure.**

# Introduction

The last two decades have seen a flowering of innovation in the nonprofit journalism field, particularly in local journalism. As traditional commercial sources of local news have atrophied, a wide variety of new models and support organizations have emerged to keep local news and information flowing to communities. Supported by institutional philanthropy and local giving, many of these experiments have now had time to mature and, in some cases, to grow.

The Press Forward donor collaborative and pooled fund, which was conceived in 2023 and launched in 2024, is, in many ways, the culmination of this evolution: a concerted effort to direct significant new local and national resources into local journalism. The 2024 Infrastructure Open Call reflects a recognition that the field now requires a higher level of coordination and shared capacity. By supporting models, methods, and interventions that can serve more than a single news organization, infrastructure funding has the potential to generate catalytic, field-wide impact.

**The proposal pool offers a rare field-level diagnostic lens.** The grant proposal pool submitted to the Press Forward infrastructure initiatives constitutes a novel dataset that offers insight into both the breadth of organizations working in local journalism and the range of ideas being advanced to strengthen the infrastructures that support it. This pool provides a rare opportunity to assess where the field has matured, where it continues to struggle, and what kinds of efforts might strengthen not just individual organizations but entire ecosystems. As such, it offers valuable perspective for strategic grantmaking and for sharpening the focus of field-level support organizations.

**This analysis adopts a problem-centered, rather than solution-evaluative, approach.** This project adopted an analytic approach centered on developing a comprehensive problem typology that would exhaustively capture the infrastructure challenges represented across

the proposal pool, rather than evaluating the feasibility or effectiveness of proposed solutions. This focus was important for two reasons. First, a problem-centered lens illuminates the strategic challenges and structural obstacles facing the field. Second, philanthropic resources are most often organized around problems rather than specific interventions.

The types of solutions proposed, from training programs and technology tools to data platforms, are generally familiar to grantmakers. But the full landscape of underlying problems is often far harder to see, particularly for funders either focused on a targeted part of the journalism ecosystem or funders who are new to journalism. Accordingly, proposed interventions are treated here not as objects of evaluation, but as signals of how applicants diagnose their most binding constraints under current funding conditions.



**It is my hope that this problem-focused analysis supports journalism funders in increasing the strategic precision of both their individual and collective grantmaking.**

— Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro

# Project and Methodology Overview



## **This analysis was designed as a field-level diagnostic for funders and intermediaries.**

It was commissioned by Arnold Ventures to examine the structural conditions shaping contemporary local journalism, using the Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call as a field-level diagnostic dataset. While originally undertaken to inform one funder's learning, the analysis is intentionally framed to be useful to a broad set of funders, intermediaries, and field leaders grappling with similar infrastructure questions. The focus was intentionally broad, encompassing barriers, enabling factors, and promising innovations across the local journalism field, with the aim of developing a clear, field-level view of where investment could have the greatest long-term impact.

## **A structured qualitative process produced a comprehensive problem taxonomy.**

To do this, I reviewed the full pool of Open Call proposals, generating structured summaries for each and examining them for recurring patterns, gaps, and opportunities. I then conducted multiple rounds of qualitative analysis, including open thematic review, clustering, refinement, and the development of a comprehensive problem-domain framework. This process produced a taxonomy designed to accurately reflect the field's most urgent challenges and emerging solution spaces. A full methodological appendix appears at the back of this report.

The resulting taxonomy, grounded in and built directly from the proposal pool, consists of 11 problem domains, each with its own set of specific sub-problem areas. This framework was then applied systematically to every proposal, enabling quantification of patterns across the pool and identification of cross-cutting needs that constrain local journalism. The findings presented in the summary below are derived directly from this coded analysis.

# Analytic Scope and Boundary Conditions

The proposal pool reflects a bounded but analytically meaningful segment of the field. It is important to note that the proposal pool reflects a bounded but revealing segment of the journalism field.

Eligibility for the Infrastructure Open Call required applicants to be nonprofit organizations or commercial entities operating with fiscal sponsors, and the pool therefore does not capture the full range of journalism business models operating outside philanthropic funding channels. However, this constraint is itself analytically meaningful. At present, philanthropic capital represents the primary source of new, flexible investment flowing into local journalism, even as commercial investment, private equity, and traditional advertising markets continue to contract.

**Philanthropic eligibility constraints mirror broader field conditions.** The prevalence of nonprofit and philanthropy-seeking organizations in the pool thus reflects not merely applicant selection. It reflects the broader reality that many journalism organizations (including legacy commercial outlets) are increasingly turning toward nonprofit conversion, hybrid structures, or philanthropic support in response to weak market conditions.

This analysis does not assess the design, priorities, or effectiveness of the Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call itself; it examines how infrastructure constraints surface across the field within the context of a real, high-stakes funding environment rather than an abstract or experimental research setting.

## Use of Large Language Models

**The analysis used large language models as supervised analytic support, not autonomous agents.** This analysis was conducted through a deliberately structured collaboration between the researcher and a large language model, with clear division of labor and sustained human judgment throughout. The model was

used as an analytic support tool to assist with tasks that are difficult or inefficient for a single human researcher at this scale. These included summarizing large volumes of text, generating candidate classifications, applying consistent coding rules across hundreds of records, and stress-testing category boundaries against large batches of proposals.

At no point did the model operate autonomously. All analytical frameworks, problem-domain definitions, sub-problem taxonomies, boundary rules, and consolidation decisions were initiated, reviewed, revised, and ultimately approved by the researcher. The model's outputs were treated as provisional analytic material, subject to critique, correction, and rejection, rather than as authoritative classifications.

**The methodological contribution lies in augmentation rather than automation.** Crucially, the work described here could not have been completed by either a human or a machine alone. The model cannot independently determine analytic intent, adjudicate conceptual tradeoffs, or decide when simplicity should override granularity; those judgments required sustained human expertise in journalism ecosystems, philanthropy, and qualitative research.

Conversely, a human researcher alone could not reliably apply evolving, multi-domain coding frameworks across hundreds of complex proposals while repeatedly testing boundary conditions, revising taxonomies, and maintaining auditability. The methodological contribution of this approach lies not in automation, but in augmentation: the model functioned as a high-capacity analytic workbench, enabling iterative sensemaking, large-scale pattern detection, and disciplined consistency, while the researcher retained full control over theory-building, interpretive judgment, and final classification decisions.

**Full workflow and quality controls are documented separately.** A detailed account of the analytic workflow, quality assurance procedures, and human-machine division of labor appears in the Methodological Appendix.

**Part 1**

# **FINDINGS**

# 01 Overview of the Findings

The proposal pool contained 559 submissions, organized under the four categories specified in the Press Forward Infrastructure call: People (170 proposals), Audience (205 proposals), Operations (108 proposals), and Revenue (76 proposals). Using a grounded taxonomy derived from the proposals, each submission was coded into one of eleven problem domains. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of each domain across the pool.

**Table #1: Count of Proposals by Problem Domain**

Problem Domain	Count
Representation & Equity	90
Collaboration & Field Infrastructure	78
Audience & Platform Gaps	75
Workforce & Capacity	75
Revenue & Sustainability	68
Trust & Information Disorder	40
Distribution & Publishing Infrastructure	36
Civic Information & Community Needs	35
Freedom & Accountability	29
Geography & Access	26
AI & Emerging Tech	7

Four domains account for the largest share of identified need: **Representation & Equity (90 proposals)**, **Collaboration & Field Infrastructure (78)**, **Audience & Platform Gaps (75)**, and **Workforce & Capacity (75)**. Together, these concentrations point to a field constrained less by isolated technical challenges than by structural conditions, including depleted human capital, fragmented audience relationships, and persistent inequities in who produces journalism and who is consistently served by it.

A second tier of domains highlights additional systemic pressures. **Revenue & Sustainability (68)** and **Distribution & Publishing Infrastructure (36)** reflect both ongoing business-model fragility and persistent gaps in shared publishing and distribution systems. **Trust & Information Disorder (40)**, **Civic Information &**

**Community Needs (35)**, and **Freedom & Accountability (29)** underscore widening challenges in credibility, civic access to usable public information, and the legal, governmental, and safety conditions required for watchdog reporting. **Geography & Access (26)** reflects continued place-based news deserts and ecosystem collapse. **AI & Emerging Technology (7)** appears least frequently as a standalone problem domain, but AI-enabled approaches surface across multiple other domains, suggesting an emerging transition rather than a fully articulated infrastructure category at present.

The sections that follow provide a deeper synthesis of each domain and then highlight the frequency of recurring sub-problems that appear across multiple geographies and organizational types.

## 02 The Problem Domains

The Representation and Equity category, encompassing 90 proposals, reveals systemic failures across journalism’s workforce, institutions, and coverage that limit whose voices are represented and whose information needs are prioritized. The most prevalent challenge is **Equity Barriers in Journalism Pipelines (37)**, with proposals emphasizing structural, financial, and institutional obstacles that prevent people from marginalized communities from entering, remaining in, or advancing within journalism careers. A second major concentration appears in **Underinvestment in BIPOC, Immigrant, and Community Led Outlets (15)**, highlighting chronic funding and resource disparities that weaken the sustainability and civic impact of outlets rooted in historically underserved communities. Proposals also surface significant **Linguistic Exclusion and Multilingual Access Gaps (12)**, where the absence of multilingual and culturally competent reporting leaves non-English-speaking communities without timely and

trusted information. Less frequently but consistently, submissions point to **Equity Gaps in Staffing and Leadership (9)**, describing limited diversity in newsroom decision making roles, alongside **Identity Based News Deserts (9)**, where entire cultural or identity defined communities lack dedicated news coverage. Finally, **Inequitable Coverage and Cultural Competency Failures (8)** reflect ongoing harms caused by misrepresentation, neglect, or culturally insensitive reporting practices.

### The Collaboration and Field Infrastructure category

comprising 78 proposals, highlights systemic weaknesses in the shared systems and coordinating structures that support local journalism ecosystems. The most frequently cited sub-problem is **Place-Based Collaboration (25)**, with proposals describing the absence of durable local or statewide mechanisms that allow multiple outlets to coordinate reporting, share editorial resources, engage communities jointly, and sustain coverage across a defined geography. Closely related are **Place-Based Shared Operational and Back-Office Infrastructure gaps (18)**, where applicants point to the lack of shared administrative, financial, technological, HR, and revenue systems, resulting in costly duplication and operational fragility when each newsroom operates independently. A comparable number of proposals address **Cross-Sector Expertise and Research Infrastructure (18)**, emphasizing limited access to scientific, technical, legal, academic, and policy expertise that newsrooms cannot realistically build in-house and must instead access through structured partnerships. Smaller but notable clusters highlight **Topic and Beat Coverage Gaps (9)**, where complex or resource-intensive issues go underreported due to insufficient specialization, and **Field-Wide Professional Standards, Leadership, and Practice Infrastructure (8)**, reflecting the absence of shared frameworks, leadership development pathways, and field-level practice norms. Together, these proposals frame collaboration as essential infrastructure rather than optional coordination.

### The Audience and Platform Gaps category

comprising 75 proposals, surfaces a set of audience facing failures that are primarily relational and experiential rather than purely technical. The most frequently cited issue is **Community Engagement Gaps (21)**, with proposals describing weak or inconsistent relationships between news organizations and the communities they serve, resulting in low participation, diminished trust, and limited civic impact. Closely following is **Platform and Format Mismatch (18)**, which reflects widespread misalignment between content formats, distribution channels, and audience media habits, often leading to poor usability, low discoverability, and reduced relevance. Submissions also point to persistent **Audience Insight and Data Gaps (16)**, as many organizations lack the analytics, research capacity, or interpretive tools needed to understand audience behaviors and inform strategic decisions. Less frequently but still significantly represented are **Audience Access and Equity Gaps (11)**, highlighting structural, linguistic, cultural, and geographic barriers that prevent marginalized communities from accessing relevant news. Finally, **Audience Reach and Growth Failure (9)** appears as the least common but still notable sub problem, indicating ongoing challenges with distribution strategy and audience acquisition.

### The Workforce and Capacity category

comprising 75 proposals, reflects pervasive human-capital constraints that undermine both journalistic production and organizational stability. The most frequently cited

issue is **Talent Pipeline Breakdown (26)**, with proposals describing weakened or inaccessible pathways into journalism, resulting in too few new entrants entering and remaining in the field. A closely related concentration appears in **Skills and Training Gaps (19)**, where applicants emphasize insufficient access to ongoing professional development needed to meet evolving technical, editorial, and community-engagement demands. Proposals also surface persistent **Editorial Capacity Shortfalls (7)**, highlighting understaffed newsrooms that lack the bandwidth to sustain consistent, high-quality coverage. **Leadership and Management Capacity Gaps (6)** point to thin executive and operational leadership, limited strategic and business planning capacity, and weak management systems that constrain organizational effectiveness. Smaller but significant clusters address **Hiring and Retention Failures (8)**, where organizations struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff at sustainable compensation levels, alongside **Burnout, Turnover, and Safety Risks (5)** and **Freelance and Independent Worker Precarity (4)**, which together underscore the personal and structural fragility of the journalism workforce. Collectively, these proposals depict a field whose capacity challenges are rooted not only in skills, but in sustainability, support, and scale.

## The Revenue and Sustainability category

comprising 68 proposals, reflects persistent financial fragility across local news organizations and highlights structural barriers to long-term viability. The most frequently cited challenge is **Unrealized Advertising Opportunities (15)**, with proposals describing difficulties accessing and monetizing advertising and sponsorship revenue due to market fragmentation, limited scale, and underdeveloped sales, product, and ad technology infrastructure. This is followed by **Revenue Capacity Shortfalls (12)**, which point to a lack of staffing, systems, and business expertise needed to develop, execute and sustain diversified revenue strategies. A significant share of proposals also emphasize **Philanthropy and Donor Infrastructure (10)**, underscoring gaps in fundraising talent, donor pipelines, and institutional systems required to grow philanthropic support. Smaller but meaningful clusters identify **General Sustainability Challenges (8)**

and **Audience Revenue Weakness (7)**, reflecting ongoing struggles to stabilize business models and convert audience engagement into reliable financial support. Proposals further surface **Equity Gaps in Revenue Access (7)**, highlighting structural disadvantages faced by BIPOC led, immigrant led, rural, and other marginalized outlets in securing capital, donors, and advertising. Less frequently, submissions cite **Shared Services and Back Office Infrastructure (6)** and **Ownership Capital and Financing (3)**, pointing to unmet needs around cost reduction, financial resilience, and ownership transitions.

## The Trust and Information Disorder category

comprising 40 proposals, captures growing instability in the information ecosystem that undermines public confidence in journalism and weakens shared civic understanding. The most frequently cited issue is **Trust and Credibility Gaps (14)**, with proposals pointing to audience skepticism driven by perceived bias, limited transparency, and insufficient accountability practices. Closely following are **Misinformation and Disinformation Threats (13)**, as false or intentionally harmful information spreads rapidly through local and digital ecosystems, overwhelming credible reporting and distorting civic discourse. A smaller but notable cluster highlights **Polarization and Divisive Information Environments (6)**, where media dynamics amplify conflict and partisanship, eroding shared factual baselines. Fewer proposals address **Verification and Authenticity Infrastructure (4)**, reflecting gaps in tools and standards to authenticate content and establish provenance across platforms, while **Media Literacy (3)** appears least frequently, signaling limited but persistent concern about the public's capacity to navigate complex information environments.

## The Distribution and Publishing Infrastructure category

encompassing 36 proposals, highlights foundational technical and logistical weaknesses that limit the reach, durability, and accessibility of journalism. The most frequently cited challenge is **CMS and Core Publishing System Limitations (10)**, with proposals describing outdated or insufficient platforms that constrain

newsroom workflows, product development, and effective multi platform publishing. Closely following are **Content Sharing and Syndication (9)** and **Multi Platform and Alternative Distribution Channels (9)**, both of which point to gaps in the systems needed to distribute journalism beyond single outlets and adapt content to evolving audience behaviors across digital, audio, messaging, and community based channels. A smaller but significant group of proposals focuses on **Print and Physical Distribution Infrastructure Collapse (6)**, reflecting the continued erosion of print delivery systems in communities that still depend on physical access to news. Finally, **Archiving, Preservation, and Digitization Infrastructure (2)** appears least frequently but raises critical concerns about the long-term safeguarding of journalism as a public record.

### The Civic Information and Community Needs category

comprising 35 proposals, highlights persistent failures in the production and accessibility of essential local information that supports civic participation and daily decision making. The most frequently cited challenge is **Civic Data Infrastructure and Access Gaps (20)**, with proposals emphasizing the absence of shared, structured data platforms and tools that would enable journalists, community members, and decision makers to access, interpret, and use public information effectively. Closely related are **Civic Information Production Gaps (15)**, which describe the inability of local information ecosystems to consistently generate, sustain, and distribute critical civic news, alerts, and service oriented reporting due to limited capacity and weak infrastructure.

### The Freedom and Accountability category

comprising 29 proposals, reflects mounting structural and legal pressures that constrain journalism's watchdog function and weaken public oversight. The most frequently cited challenge is **Legal Threats and Retaliatory Litigation (9)**, with proposals detailing the chilling effects of SLAPPs, defamation claims, and other forms of legal intimidation, often compounded by limited access to legal expertise and institutional defense. Closely following are **Public Records, FOIA, and Government Transparency Barriers (7)** and **Data and Investigative Field Infra-**

**structure Gaps (7)**, which together underscore systemic obstacles to accountability reporting, including restricted access to public information and the absence of shared investigative tools, data capacity, and collaborative reporting structures. A smaller but significant cluster highlights **Journalist Safety and Harassment (6)**, pointing to physical risks, digital threats, surveillance, and intimidation faced by reporters and sources, alongside insufficient protective infrastructure within news organizations.

### The Geography and Access Problems category

comprising 26 proposals, highlights place based inequities that leave entire regions without reliable and relevant local news. The most frequently cited issue is **Rural and Remote News Deserts (13)**, with proposals describing chronic underinvestment and geographic isolation that result in little to no consistent news coverage for rural, remote, and low density communities. A significant secondary concentration appears in **Regional Ecosystem Collapse and Restoration (9)**, reflecting the loss of multiple newsrooms across broad geographic areas and the need for coordinated, multi county strategies to rebuild local information ecosystems. Less frequently but notably, submissions identify **Urban or City Level Coverage Gaps (4)**, where major population centers lack sufficiently resourced and consistent local reporting.

### The AI and Emerging Tech Challenges category

comprising 7 proposals, reflects early but significant gaps in the field's ability to responsibly adopt and govern new technologies. All proposals in this category point to **AI Readiness and Capacity Gaps (7)**, highlighting the absence of skills, internal policies, technical infrastructure, and governance frameworks needed to integrate AI into editorial, operational, and revenue workflows. While smaller in volume than other problem domains, the concentration of proposals in this sub problem suggests growing awareness that without proactive investment in capacity and safeguards, emerging technologies risk exacerbating existing inequities and operational weaknesses rather than strengthening journalism's sustainability and impact.

# 03 Most Common Sub-Problems

As described above, the analytic framework divides problem areas into sets of sub-problems that capture the breadth of a given area. Looking just at the sub-problem level, several areas were raised repeatedly across the country, signaling systemic constraints that affect the overall feasibility and quality of investigative and accountability reporting.

**Equity Barriers in Journalism Pipelines (37)** reflects a pervasive structural failure in how people enter, advance within, and remain in journalism, particularly individuals from historically marginalized, underrepresented, or excluded communities. Proposals in this area consistently identify the absence of accessible, paid, and culturally competent pathways into journalism as a core driver of persistent inequities in newsroom representation and coverage. These gaps span early exposure, training, mentorship, newsroom placement, and long-term career advancement.

These barriers are especially acute for Black, Indigenous, Latino, AAPI, immigrant, Muslim, LGBTQIA+, working-class, rural, incarcerated, and veteran communities. These barriers exist as well for youth and students in under-resourced schools, community colleges, and HBCUs. Collectively, the proposals emphasize that without intentional and well-resourced pipelines, the field continues to reproduce exclusionary labor practices, lose emerging talent to burnout or attrition, and fail to reflect or serve the communities most affected by news and information gaps. These pipelines are often built through fellowships, community-rooted training models, newsroom partnerships, and wraparound support.

The second most common sub-problem in the proposal pool relates to **Talent Pipeline Breakdowns (26)**. Across submissions, these breakdowns are framed as a systemic collapse of entry points into journalism rather than a failure at any single stage. Proposals describe declining student interest, the disappearance of early-career opportunities, and chronic understaffing in local and rural newsrooms as mutually reinforcing conditions that weaken the field's capacity over time.

Many proposals focus on rebuilding pre-career and early-career pathways through structured partnerships among schools, universities, and newsrooms, using paid internships, fellowships, and teaching-hospital models to translate training into durable reporting capacity. Others emphasize earlier interventions, including engagement with high school students and teens in underserved communities, to seed longer-term pipelines. A significant subset addresses access barriers by funding paid placements, creating alternatives to degree-based hiring, and opening pathways for community-rooted and subject-matter experts. Collectively, these proposals position pipeline repair as essential infrastructure for restoring newsroom capacity, diversifying the workforce, and sustaining local journalism ecosystems.

Across the proposal pool, the need for **Place-Based Collaboration (25)** emerges as a critical response to the fragmentation, duplication, and capacity loss that now define many local and regional news ecosystems. Applicants consistently describe geographies where outlets operate in isolation, lack shared editorial and engagement infrastructure, and are unable to sustain enterprise or accountability reporting at the scale their communities require. In response, proposals advance collaborative hubs, regional and statewide networks, and community-anchored partnerships that coordinate reporting, share talent and resources, align engagement and listening practices, and strengthen distribution across defined places. These efforts reflect a shared diagnosis that rebuilding local news capacity increasingly depends on durable, place rooted structures that enable cooperation across outlets, institutions, and communities rather than isolated organizational growth.

## From Findings to Analysis



The findings above describe the distribution of infrastructure problems surfaced by the proposal pool and summarize how applicants frame those constraints within each domain. The analysis section that follows interprets those patterns as evidence of broader field dynamics, including how scarcity shapes definitions of infrastructure, how capacity loss propagates across domains, and where shared systems generate compounding effects. This interpretive lens is not intended to privilege particular interventions or funder strategies. Instead, it aims to clarify the underlying structural conditions that repeatedly reappear across domains and geographies, and to surface cross-cutting tensions that are not visible when proposals are read one at a time.

**Part 2**

# **ANALYSIS**

# 01 Interpreting "Infrastructure" in a High-Need Field

Systemic cost and execution constraints dominate the field. Across the proposal pool, the dominant constraint is not a lack of ideas or demand in the abstract, but a set of systemic conditions that make those ideas economically and operationally difficult to execute. Most notably, applicants repeatedly surface the high marginal cost of producing local journalism in fragmented, under-resourced environments. These are conditions that recur across geographies and organizational types regardless of mission or editorial focus.

**“Infrastructure” functions as a flexible category under resource scarcity.** A central analytic signal in the proposal pool is that “infrastructure” itself is not a stable or uniformly applied concept across the field. In an ecosystem where need dramatically outstrips available resources, applicants stretch the term to encompass responses ranging from shared systems and multi-organization platforms to organization-specific general operating support framed as structural necessity. This conceptual elasticity is diagnostically important. It reflects both genuine demand for infrastructure interventions that can operate across organizations and a persistent scarcity dynamic that pushes urgent staffing and survival needs into whatever funding category appears most viable.

**Infrastructure is better understood as a continuum of intervention levels.** At the highest level, this pattern suggests that infrastructure is best understood not as a single solution type, but as a continuum of responses, ranging from ecosystem-level shared systems to institution-level capacity investments. Where an

intervention sits on that continuum matters, because leverage varies substantially by level. This definitional spread also exposes a prioritization challenge for journalism support: it is not enough to catalog needs. The field increasingly requires a coherent way to distinguish between investments that address systemic constraints by reducing duplicated burdens and those that primarily stabilize individual organizations without altering the underlying cost structure of producing local journalism.

**Organization-level stabilization and system-level change serve distinct roles.** The proposal pool makes clear that both forms of response are real and necessary, but they function differently. Organization-level capacity investments can prevent collapse under systemic pressure. Shared infrastructure investments can change the system’s efficiency and reach. Treating these as interchangeable risks misallocating scarce resources and obscuring which interventions are most likely to generate compounding benefits across local journalism ecosystems.

# 02 Workforce Constraint and the Limits of “People-First” Solutions

**Workforce depletion operates as a field-wide constraint rather than an organizational anomaly.** Another pattern is the extent to which systemic human capital depletion shapes nearly every other problem domain. Proposals repeatedly document weakened pipelines, chronic understaffing, leadership thinness, and operational overload. These conditions surface across organizational types and geographies, indicating that workforce strain is not an isolated issue but a field-wide constraint. The pool makes clear that in practice, day-to-day challenges are experienced primarily as labor constraints, making staffing the most immediate bottleneck to publishing, fundraising, audience engagement, and collaboration. It is understandable that organizations ask for people before they ask for systems.

**People-first requests reflect immediacy, but collide with durability limits.** Labor-centered interventions, while often necessary in the short term, may have limited durability when the systemic conditions that strain the workforce remain unaddressed. Adding personnel into environments without adequate tooling, shared services, operational scaffolding, and collaborative structures can produce diminishing returns, particularly when new capacity is absorbed by fragmented workflows and duplicated overhead.

**Pipeline health and system health are mutually reinforcing.** Talent pipeline erosion appears in the analysis both as an input to ecosystem decline and as an outcome of it. As institutional capacity weakens, the field becomes less able to train, retain, and sustain workers, further reducing productive capacity. The proposals collectively imply that long-term workforce health depends not only on recruiting additional people, but on infrastructure investments that make journalism feasible and sustainable at scale.

**Business and leadership thinness emerges as a core structural bottleneck.** A more fundamental tension concerns business and leadership capacity. Across the pool, the thinness of business, operations, and management talent appears not as a peripheral weakness, but as a

core constraint on the field’s ability to stabilize, grow, and adapt. Many proposals respond to this gap through training, coaching, and professional development, reflecting a belief that skills acquisition is the primary bottleneck. While these interventions address real needs, the analysis suggests they confront only part of the problem. In many cases, the constraint is not the absence of skills, but the field’s limited ability to attract, compensate, and retain experienced business and leadership talent. Chronic undercapitalization suppresses pay scales, narrows career pathways, and produces a cycle in which organizations struggle to sustain capable leadership as strategic, financial, and operational demands increase.

**Training addresses skill gaps but not talent retention or affordability.** Funding training alone risks increasing mobility rather than durability by equipping individuals with marketable skills the ecosystem cannot afford to retain. The analytic implication is that leadership capacity is inseparable from infrastructure and business model design. Without models that materially expand organizations’ ability to support senior business and management roles through shared services, consolidated functions, or other infrastructure responses, talent development efforts are unlikely to translate into durable, field-wide capacity.

**Workforce strain reflects a deeper process of professional de-institutionalization.** Reviewers highlighted a deeper concern underlying many workforce and training proposals: the gradual de-professionalization of journalism itself. As systemic capacity has eroded, journalism is increasingly framed as a set of skills to be trained rather than as a profession supported by stable organizations, clear norms, and sustainable career paths. This dynamic contributes to adverse talent selection. Experienced talent exits the field across roles, while fewer mechanisms remain to retain or attract new entrants. Thus skills training alone cannot substitute for the structural conditions of adequate compensation, institutional stability, and professional legitimacy that make journalism a viable long-term career.

# 03 Philanthropy, De-Commercialization, and the Sustainability Constraint

Philanthropic funding is widely assumed to be a stable, long-term foundation. A further systemic pattern surfaced by the proposal pool concerns the degree to which assumptions about the future of local journalism have coalesced around philanthropic support and the permanent de-commercialization of news. Many proposals implicitly treat long-term grant funding as a stable backdrop rather than as a finite and competitive resource. This assumption is understandable given the role philanthropy has played in stabilizing local journalism over the past decade. At the same time, it functions as a structural condition shaping the field's trajectory and expectations.

**Aggregate operating needs far exceed realistic philanthropic supply.** The scale mismatch is analytically clarifying. A simple aggregation of the annual operating budgets represented in the applicant pool exceeds \$500 million, which is roughly equivalent to the total amount Press Forward has pledged to invest over five years.<sup>1</sup> This comparison does not diminish the significance of that commitment. Rather, it highlights a systemic capital constraint: even at unprecedented scale, philanthropic funding alone is insufficient to sustain the field's current operating footprint. When grant funding is implicitly treated as permanent replacement revenue rather than as catalytic or transitional capital, the field risks normalizing chronic undercapitalization instead of confronting it.

**Philanthropy alone cannot sustain a de-commercialized field at scale.** The analytic implication is not that philanthropy is misaligned with the future of journalism, but that philanthropy alone cannot bear the full cost of producing local news at scale. In a de-commercialized environment, this reality increases the importance of

shared infrastructure strategies that reduce the marginal cost of production. When earned revenue is insufficient relative to the scale of operational need, the most durable path to greater capacity lies in shared systems, consolidated services, and operational efficiencies that individual organizations cannot achieve independently.

**Grant dependence can stabilize organizations without enabling resilience.** Absent such infrastructure responses, philanthropic support can unintentionally stabilize a fragile equilibrium. Organizations remain alive but under-resourced, dependent on recurring grants to maintain basic operations, and unable to accumulate the capacity required for long-term resilience. In this equilibrium, grants function as life support rather than as capital for transformation, and the system as a whole struggles to evolve beyond subsistence.

**Assumptions of permanent subsidy narrow strategic and infrastructure experimentation.** Unexamined assumptions about permanent subsidy also carry a secondary risk. Persistent grant dependence can constrain

<sup>1</sup> Removing universities and journalism-adjacent organizations such as community development corporations from the dataset, the combined annual operating budgets of the remaining organizations in the pool was approximately \$2.7B.

experimentation with hybrid models, diversified revenue strategies, and infrastructure designs intended to function under capital-constrained conditions. When philanthropic funding is assumed to be durable and central, incentives to design systems that can withstand volatility, integrate earned revenue, or operate efficiently across many organizations are weakened. Over time, this dynamic narrows the field's strategic horizon and limits the range of viable futures for local journalism.

**Strategic conservatism reflects rational adaptation to sustained scarcity.** In this context, the apparent narrowing of strategic imagination in the field is best understood as a rational response to sustained scarcity, rather than as a failure of creativity or ambition. Operating under conditions of high relative cost, elevated

risk, and thin leadership capacity, organizations prioritize continuity and risk avoidance. These pressures reinforce path dependence, even when existing models are underperforming. These dynamics reflect predictable adaptations to systemic constraint, not isolated organizational shortcomings.

**Sustainability is ultimately a system-design problem under capital constraint.** Seen this way, the sustainability challenge facing local journalism is not simply a matter of revenue replacement, but of system design. The field's long-term viability depends on whether its infrastructure can mature quickly enough to reduce costs, share risk, and enable production at scale within the bounds of realistically available capital, whether philanthropic or otherwise.

## 04 Organizational Fragmentation, Talent Scarcity, and the Case for Integration

This section surfaces a recurring dynamic that sits beneath many domains: fragmentation can enable local responsiveness and experimentation, while simultaneously raising costs and diffusing scarce leadership and operational capacity at the ecosystem level.

**Organizational form is a central but underexamined sustainability variable.** How news organizations are structured has profound implications for cost, leadership capacity, and long-term viability. But these implications receive relatively little sustained attention in field-level strategy discussions. One of the more striking absences in the proposal pool is the relative scarcity of merger, consolidation, or formal integration strategies. This is despite widespread acknowledgment of chronic undercapitalization, duplicated effort, and acute shortages of experienced leadership and operational talent.

**Fragmentation directly amplifies leadership and**

**talent scarcity.** This absence is analytically notable because the connection between organizational fragmentation and talent scarcity is especially strong. Many local news organizations operate at a scale that makes it difficult or impossible to attract, retain, and adequately support experienced executives, technical leaders, financial managers, and operational staff. Leadership thinness is not simply a pipeline issue; it is a systemic outcome of maintaining a large number of small, standalone entities operating below efficient scale, each bearing the full burden of governance, management, compliance, and core operations.

**Integration concentrates scarce leadership capacity and reduces duplicated burden.** In this context, consolidation and shared ownership models represent one of the few plausible pathways to concentrate scarce leadership capacity, reduce duplicative management load, and create roles that are both professionally sustainable and institutionally durable.

**The meaning and mechanics of consolidation vary sharply by organizational scale.** Importantly, what consolidation entails varies significantly by organizational scale. For small local outlets, consolidation does not imply staff reductions, editorial centralization, or cost cutting within already stretched organizations. Rather, it most often means accessing shared infrastructure functions that individual outlets do not currently possess at all. These could include shared advertising sales capacity, fractional financial management, legal support, or specialized business expertise. By contrast, for large journalism support organizations, public media systems, and national intermediaries, consolidation more often concerns reducing duplicative back-office operations, overlapping service provision, or parallel governance structures. Yet the scarcity of integration-oriented proposals suggests that recognizing these benefits is not sufficient to make integration feasible or attractive in practice.

## Why Integration Is Rare, and When It Works

**Fragmentation is especially pronounced among journalism support intermediaries.** Indeed, the consolidation challenge appears particularly acute among journalism support organizations themselves. The proposal pool also suggests substantial overlap in skills training, coaching, convening, research, and technical assistance models, often delivered through parallel organizations with similar or partially overlapping mandates. This overlap appears less as intentional duplication than as a byproduct of fragmented funding, diffuse field priorities, and limited coordination among intermediaries.

**The issue is not the existence of intermediaries, but coordination and differentiation.** This pattern does not negate the value of intermediaries. Rather, it points to a need for differentiation and coordination. On the funding side, it suggests fewer, more efficient, low-margin entities that function primarily as pass-through and coordination layers between large funders and many small outlets. In parallel, it highlights the need for stronger coordination of


research, convening, and field-building efforts so that learning is cumulative rather than fragmented across overlapping initiatives.

**Nonprofit structures suppress incentives for integration and consolidation.** The scarcity of consolidation-oriented proposals is partly an artifact of the nonprofit organizational form. Unlike commercial sectors, nonprofit journalism lacks market incentives that naturally reward integration, acquisition, or shared ownership. Nonprofit mergers are often experienced as mission loss, leadership displacement, reputational risk, or organizational failure rather than as strategies for scale and resilience. Even when integration could materially reduce costs or strengthen capacity, mergers are rarely framed as a path to durability. Where incentives for consolidation do exist, they are largely external to the organizations themselves. Philanthropy is often the only actor positioned to absorb the transaction costs, transitional risk, and short-term disruption associated with integration.

**Consolidation reduces fragility only under specific capital and design conditions.** At the same time, the proposal pool cautions against treating consolidation as a universal remedy. Integration can compound fragility if it merely aggregates under-resourced organizations without addressing underlying cost structures or capacity gaps. Consolidation reduces costs and leadership strain only when paired with sufficient capitalization, a clear integration strategy, and meaningful reductions in duplicated systems and processes. Cultural integration, in particular, often proves to be the greatest barrier to success.

**Shared services outperform bespoke systems for non-differentiating functions.** In this light, the classic economic distinction between “make” versus “buy” becomes instructive. Many functions that local news organizations continue to perform independently are not sources of editorial differentiation. These include content management systems, human resources, finance, legal services, and core technology. Such functions offer little strategic or editorial advantage when built and maintained in-house. As the proposal pool makes clear, the field has moved beyond the point at which bespoke, organization-by-organization infrastructure development is efficient or realistic given available talent and capital. Yet the limited presence of consolidation-oriented proposals suggests that while the need for shared systems is widely recognized, the organizational configurations most capable of supporting them remain underexplored.

# 05 Infrastructure Prioritization: Publishing Systems, the Role of Print, and AI Transition



Publishing and distribution systems emerge as high-leverage infrastructure priorities. The proposals point toward a clear concentration of need in publishing and distribution. A substantial share of submissions focus on core production systems, including content management platforms, publishing workflows, distribution channels, and content sharing and syndication. These areas consistently emerge as high-leverage candidates for infrastructure investment. Shared systems can reduce duplicated technical burdens, lower barriers to entry for emerging outlets, and accelerate operational maturity for hyperlocal and startup organizations.

**Modern platforms remain constrained by thin implementation and support capacity.** At the same time, the pool surfaces a persistent systemic constraint that complicates these priorities. While significant investment has already been made in modern digital publishing platforms, many organizations still lack the internal technical capacity, operational bandwidth, and access to collective support needed to fully adopt, maintain, and upgrade shared systems. This gap is driven in part by thin technical and leadership capacity and by the chronic under-resourcing of shared implementation and support efforts. As a result, publishing modernization appears not as a one-time upgrade problem, but as an ongoing challenge shaped by systemic capacity limitations.

**Publishing infrastructure requires both incremental modernization and transition planning.** Taken together, these conditions suggest that publishing

infrastructure requires two distinct but interrelated approaches. On one track, incremental modernization focuses on adoption support, shared tooling, and operational consistency within existing platforms. On another track, transition planning anticipates more fundamental shifts in how journalism is produced, distributed, and governed over time, including new formats and emerging AI-enabled workflows.

**Standardization and shared platforms raise unavoidable coordination tradeoffs for funders.** For funders, this duality raises difficult questions about whether, and how, to encourage standardization and interoperability across the field. In some cases, selective infrastructure investment in shared platforms (a de facto “picking winners” strategy) may be necessary to avoid perpetuating a fragmented, under-supported technical landscape.

# 06 Preservation versus Expansion Logics in Publishing Infrastructure

Infrastructure investments differ in whether they preserve continuity or expand capacity. From a field-level perspective, this tension reflects a broader infrastructure distinction that recurs across the proposal pool. Some infrastructure responses primarily function to preserve access and continuity in fragile ecosystems. These approaches mitigate further loss under conditions of decline. Other approaches aim to alter the underlying cost and capacity dynamics of producing and distributing local journalism. Distinguishing between preservation-oriented and expansion-oriented infrastructure can help clarify why different publishing investments behave differently and why they should be evaluated on different terms.

**Print infrastructure primarily functions to preserve access and continuity.** Print and physical distribution proposals sit squarely within a preservation logic. In many communities, print systems continue to serve as the primary means of access to local information, particularly for older residents, rural populations, and places with limited broadband connectivity. In these contexts, print infrastructure sustains continuity, prevents further erosion of access, and stabilizes information flow in ecosystems that would otherwise risk becoming news deserts.

**Continued reliance on print reflects transition constraints rather than resistance.** At the same time,

the pool suggests that continued reliance on print is shaped less by resistance to change than by systemic transition constraints. Limited technical capacity, capital, and organizational bandwidth make large-scale platform shifts risky to execute in practice, especially in rural communities. In many cases, outlets maintain print products not because digital transformation is seen as undesirable, but because transition requires expertise, investment, and organizational change that are not readily available. As a result, the incentives to preserve existing print access (and the costs of doing so) are often highest in the same places where modernization is hardest to execute.

# 07 Revenue, Grant Dependence, and the Case for Scaled Service Models

Unrealized advertising demand signals systemic revenue constraints. One of the more notable signals in the proposal pool is the frequency with which applicants emphasize unrealized advertising and sponsorship opportunities, often framed as contingent on building or sustaining products and distribution capable of supporting advertiser demand. This pattern is striking not simply as a revenue observation, but as an indicator of deeper systemic constraints shaping how revenue potential is realized in practice.

**Revenue fragility reflects organizational scale and infrastructure limits.** Across domains, proposals suggest that revenue fragility is less a function of abstract demand conditions than of organizational and system-level limitations. Many of the unrealized advertising and earned-revenue opportunities described by applicants are constrained by thin business and management capacity, limited organizational scale, and the absence of shared systems that make experimentation, learning, and iteration feasible. Fragmentation and high marginal operating costs raise the threshold for revenue generation. As a result, organizations become more reliant on philanthropic support even where some forms of market demand may exist. In this sense, revenue challenges appear less as failures to identify the “right” business model and more as structural outcomes of undercapitalization and underdeveloped infrastructure.

**Grant-dependent interventions expose escalating system-wide financial risk.** Systemic constraints surrounding revenue generation help explain why many interventions described in the proposal pool are operationally useful but financially fragile. Programs that require indefinite philanthropic renewal without a path to institutionalization, earned revenue, or meaningful cost reduction signal escalating field-wide risk. This is not a critique of philanthropy itself, but a warning about grant dependence under current system constraints.

**Workforce and pipeline programs are especially**

**vulnerable to permanent grant dependence.** This risk is particularly salient in workforce and pipeline proposals: fellowships, training programs, and placement models can rebuild capacity in the short term, but if they remain permanently grant-dependent without parallel infrastructure changes that reduce the system’s operating load, they risk becoming a precarious foundation for long-term field health.

**By contrast, subsidy can function as durable infrastructure when it reduces shared costs.** At the same time, the proposals in the pool can be distinguished between grant dependence as fragility and subsidy as a rational infrastructure support strategy. Scaled service models that consolidate operational costs, provide shared tooling, or deliver subsidized fee-for-service functions may warrant sustained philanthropic support. In these cases, the subsidy can be distributed across many outlets rather than absorbed by a single organization. Smartly allocated infrastructure grant dollars can lower the effective cost of producing journalism. Implicitly, these proposals invite a philanthropic assessment logic centered on reach and cost-efficiency rather than organizational survival alone.

For example, funders could assess the impact of an intervention relative to grant dollars invested; measure success in outlets served, geographies reached, and journalists supported; or assess the degree to which their giving reduces duplicated overhead rather than merely financing it.

# 08 Audience and Platform Gaps as Structural Failure

Audience and platform gaps recur as system-wide alignment failures. Across the proposal pool, audience and platform challenges appear less as isolated tactical problems than as a persistent systemic failure in how local journalism organizations align production and distribution with audience needs. Learning and adaptation are often constrained as a result. While these challenges are often framed at the organizational level as engagement deficits, skills gaps, or technology limitations, their recurrence across geographies and outlet types points to reinforcing constraints that are not solvable at the organizational margin.

**Weak feedback loops limit learning and audience responsiveness.** Many proposals describe weak or inconsistent community engagement, platform mismatch, and limited audience insight as barriers to relevance and sustainability. Taken together, these patterns suggest a systemic breakdown in feedback loops. News organizations struggle to understand who their audiences are, how journalism is used, and what kinds of products generate durable support. In practice, engagement is frequently treated as a discrete program rather than as a core organizational function through which audience signals are continuously surfaced, tested, and incorporated into editorial and business decisions.

**Philanthropic incentives partially displace audience signals.** The nonprofit funding environment appears to compound these systemic dynamics. Because philanthropic funding often requires significant time and organizational attention to secure and maintain, it can weaken the role of audience response as a primary signal shaping newsroom priorities. Success can become partially measured by alignment with funder interests, narrative frameworks, and reporting categories rather than by sustained audience use or support. This does not eliminate

concern for audience needs, but it introduces competing incentives that dilute the strength of market and community feedback mechanisms.

**Professional norms constrain adaptation to audience behavior.** Professional norms within journalism further reinforce these constraints. The field has long maintained implicit hierarchies of journalistic value in which investigative and accountability reporting is privileged, while service-oriented or audience-responsive journalism is often treated as secondary. While these norms reflect essential democratic commitments, they can also limit organizations' ability to adapt products, formats, and distribution strategies in response to audience behavior. This is true particularly when such adaptations challenge traditional notions of editorial authority or gatekeeping.

**Platform volatility raises learning costs beyond organizational capacity.** Rapid and ongoing shifts in digital platforms have intensified these pressures. Platform volatility has undermined distribution stability, while the technical and analytical capacity required to adapt has remained unevenly distributed across the field. As a result, many organizations experience persistent

audience misalignment not because they fail to value engagement, but because they operate within systemic conditions marked by high learning costs, limited slack, and fragmented access to data and expertise.

**Audience misalignment reflects compounded systemic constraints, not execution error.** Viewed through this lens, audience and platform gaps are not simply execution failures. They reflect a compounded condition in which weak feedback mechanisms, misaligned

incentives, professional norms, and platform instability combine to produce chronic product–audience misfit. Addressing these gaps therefore requires more than training or standalone tools; it calls for infrastructure responses that restore continuous learning, experimentation, and alignment between journalism production and audience use at ecosystem scale through shared systems, services, and coordination mechanisms.

## 09 Trust, Information Disorder, and AI as Structural Amplifiers

Trust, information disorder, and AI challenges are largely exogenous to newsrooms. Proposals addressing trust, information disorder, and emerging technologies surface a distinct class of challenges that differ in kind from most other infrastructure needs identified in the pool. These problems are shaped primarily by platform dynamics, technological change, and broader information ecosystems rather than by newsroom practices alone. As a result, they are difficult to address through isolated organizational interventions.

**These forces amplify existing audience and platform weaknesses.** At the same time, the proposal pool suggests that these challenges function as amplifiers of existing structural weaknesses, particularly those related to audience connection and platform alignment. As news consumption becomes increasingly mediated through algorithmic feeds and third-party platforms, weak feedback loops, limited audience insight, and format misalignment intensify the effects of misinformation, polarization, and trust erosion. These dynamics reinforce one another across local and digital ecosystems. In this context, trust deficits often appear less as discrete credibility failures and more as outcomes of fragmented distribution, limited attribution, and diminished audience relationships.

**AI intensifies verification and governance gaps rooted in infrastructure limits.** The emergence of AI-enabled content generation and manipulation further compounds these dynamics. While the volume of AI-focused proposals remains modest, they consistently point to gaps in readiness, governance, and verification capacity that mirror broader infrastructure deficits. Taken together, the trust, information disorder, and AI proposals indicate that the field’s vulnerability in this domain is less about intent or journalistic values than about the absence of shared systems capable of supporting verification, authentication, audience understanding, and coordinated response at ecosystem scale.

# 10 Civic Information as Foundational Infrastructure in an AI-Enabled Era

Civic information deficits represent a foundational infrastructure gap. The proposal pool reinforces civic information and civic data as infrastructure needs, particularly at the hyperlocal level, where transparency failures and governance lapses can have outsized consequences for trust and participation.

**AI lowers production costs but requires shared implementation to matter.** Applicants describe communities where baseline public information is difficult to access, interpret, and distribute, leaving residents with limited visibility into local government functions and services. The proposals point to an opening created by emerging technologies. AI-enabled workflows can reduce the marginal cost of high-volume civic information tasks, including monitoring local governance, summarizing public records, translating updates into accessible formats, and producing reporting from structured public data. Without shared implementation and service models, however, these opportunities risk remaining underutilized or unevenly adopted.

**Tools alone do not translate into usable civic capacity.** The proposal pool makes clear that tool availability does not equate to effective use. While many civic data and AI-enabled reporting tools already exist, the capacity of small and under-resourced organizations to adopt, govern, and integrate them varies widely. As in other infrastructure domains, talent, technical fluency,

and operational bandwidth determine whether these tools function as true capacity multipliers or remain underutilized. Without parallel investment in implementation support, shared services, and organizational capacity, civic data infrastructure risks reproducing uneven uptake rather than reducing information gaps.

**Baseline civic intelligibility enables, rather than replaces, enterprise reporting.** Importantly, the civic information proposals do not substitute for enterprise reporting. Instead, they frame baseline civic intelligibility as a prerequisite for a functioning local information ecosystem. A minimally informed public is materially better than a news desert, and lowering the cost of producing reliable civic information basics can help rebuild the floor beneath accountability work. The takeaway is that civic data access and civic information production are enabling infrastructure whose impact depends on whether systems, skills, and governance are aligned to make them usable at scale over time.

# 11 Freedom, Accountability, and the Coordination Problem

Accountability and safety risks are collective rather than organizational. Proposals addressing legal threats, public records barriers, investigative infrastructure, and journalist safety surface a distinct category of infrastructure challenge in which risk is inherently collective. In this domain, legal attacks, access restrictions, and intimidation aimed at individual outlets or reporters have spillover effects that weaken the credibility, confidence, and reporting capacity of the field as a whole. Unlike other infrastructure areas where fragmentation may limit efficiency without threatening viability, failures in accountability infrastructure impose system-wide costs and concentrate risk in ways that no single organization can absorb or mitigate alone.<sup>2</sup>


**Organizational density creates a coordination and alignment problem.** At the same time, the proposal pool indicates that this space is organizationally dense, with multiple overlapping providers, initiatives, and service models operating in parallel. That density signals urgency and investment, but it also creates an alignment challenge. Without deliberate alignment, the field risks duplicative efforts, fragmented coverage, uneven access to

protection and expertise, and inconsistent quality of support. Taken together, the proposals point to a dual infrastructure need in the accountability domain: strengthened legal, investigative, and safety capacity, and coordination mechanisms that reduce redundancy, improve interoperability, and ensure that protections and tools are accessible across geographies and organizational types over time.

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<sup>2</sup> While the proposal pool does not explicitly frame funder risk aversion as a primary constraint, the accountability domain raises a distinct financing challenge tied to risk concentration rather than scale alone. Investigative and adversarial reporting exposes outlets and those who financially support them to legal, reputational, and political risk that is difficult for any single organization or funder to absorb in isolation over long time horizons. As a result, even in well-resourced philanthropic environments, sustaining hard-hitting accountability journalism often depends on whether risk can be distributed through collective infrastructure or anchored in institutions capable of absorbing volatility.

# 12 The Shift from Competition to Collaboration



Regional collaboration is emerging as an adaptive response to fragmentation. Perhaps the most encouraging signal in the pool is the scale of interest in regional and place-based collaboration. Across states and multi-county regions, applicants describe an active shift away from isolated organizational models toward collaborative hubs, shared editorial capacity, coordinated engagement, and cross-outlet distribution strategies. This appears as a practical response to fragmentation and capacity loss: in many geographies, collaboration is becoming the practical pathway to restore reporting depth, reduce duplication, and sustain coverage that no single outlet can support alone.

**Collaboration is driven by fiscal constraint as much as cultural change.** The proposals also suggest a structural reason this shift will continue. In many places, the level of organization-by-organization operating support required to sustain a diverse ecosystem is simply too large relative to available local philanthropic capacity. The pool therefore frames collaboration not only as a positive cultural evolution, but as a fiscal and infrastructure necessity under current capital constraints.

The field is experimenting with collaborative forms because local news remains expensive to produce relative to the supply of grant dollars, and shared infrastructure is one of the few mechanisms that plausibly changes the ratio between cost and capacity at ecosystem scale. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that infrastructure leverage depends not only on problem domain, but critically on organizational form.

# 13 Geography and Access as a Constraint on Feasible Infrastructure

Geography determines whether journalism models are viable at all. The Geography and Access proposals surface a structural constraint that differs from most other domains: place is not merely a setting in which infrastructure operates, but a determinant of whether journalism models are viable in the first place. Rural and remote news deserts, multi-county ecosystem collapse, and even urban coverage gaps are framed as outcomes of the same underlying condition. In these communities, the economics of consistent reporting break down because audience density, institutional capacity, and distribution channels do not reach an efficient scale. In these contexts, the infrastructure problem is not simply missing tools or staffing, but the absence of connective tissue that makes journalism logistically and financially feasible across distance.

**Philanthropic capital is geographically misaligned with information needs.** Recent mappings of field activity reinforce this diagnosis. New nonprofit outlets have clustered disproportionately in major metropolitan areas that are themselves philanthropic centers. This pattern reflects a rational response to funding availability, but it produces a structural inversion: the communities most likely to require ongoing subsidy to sustain local news are often the least likely to have access to philanthropic capital, institutional donors, or dense nonprofit ecosystems. As a result, geographic inequity in journalism provision is reinforced rather than mitigated by reliance on place-bound philanthropy.

**High marginal costs make organizational stabilization insufficient in low-density regions.** This dynamic helps explain why Geography and Access problems persist even as overall philanthropic investment in local journalism has grown. In low-density regions, the marginal cost of covering schools, local government, and

public safety is high relative to both earned revenue potential and locally accessible philanthropic support. Travel time, limited workforce supply, weak broadband infrastructure, and thin civic institutions compound the challenge. Stabilizing individual outlets in these contexts is often insufficient to restore coverage at scale; the binding constraint is regional capacity rather than organizational survival.

**Regional “coverage utilities” emerge as the only scalable access solution.** Accordingly, many proposals in this domain implicitly advance regional and statewide approaches as the only viable pathway to restoring baseline civic information. These models function as place-based “coverage utilities,” pooling reporting, editing, engagement, and distribution capacity across jurisdictions to materially lower the per-community cost of producing accountability and service journalism. In this sense, Geography and Access proposals reinforce a central analytic distinction in the report: preservation

infrastructure may be necessary to prevent further loss in fragile places, but restoration requires shared systems that materially alter the cost structure of producing local news across a region.

**Geography must be treated as a first-order infrastructure variable.** The analytic implication is that geography must be treated as a first-order variable in infrastructure strategy, not a secondary equity consideration. Where philanthropic capital and population density

are misaligned with information need, durable access to local news depends on supra-local infrastructure. This can take the form of statewide collaboratives, regional service models, and shared distribution systems capable of reaching communities that cannot independently sustain news provision. Without such approaches, geographic inequality in civic robustness and accountability is likely to persist or widen, regardless of aggregate investment levels.

## 14 Institutions and the Future Shape of Local News Infrastructure

Institutional anchoring is an open strategic question for the field. What will be the role of institutions, particularly public media and higher education, in shaping the future of local news infrastructure? The submissions raise a fundamental analytic question for the field: Is the next phase of local journalism infrastructure more likely to be anchored by large institutions, by networks of small and independent outlets, or by new civic actors operating adjacent to traditional journalism? The proposals do not converge on a single answer, but they surface clear tradeoffs among these models that shape how infrastructure leverage operates across organizational forms.

**The field's recent history favors entrepreneurial, anti-institutional forms.** Over the past two decades, the local news field, especially at the hyperlocal level, has developed a pronounced entrepreneurial and often anti-institutionalist orientation. The growth of small nonprofit outlets and startups has been driven largely by resource scarcity, requiring founders to operate with limited capital and minimal staffing. Many of the most active local collaboratives described in the pool originate from independent outlets rather than from established institutions. This history matters because it shapes how

infrastructure needs are articulated and where shared systems can generate the greatest marginal gains.

**Shared infrastructure yields high leverage in decentralized networks of outlets.** From a leverage perspective, networks of small outlets appear to benefit most directly from shared systems. Because these organizations operate below efficient scale and lack internal capacity for specialized functions, region-wide or statewide service infrastructure can reduce duplicated effort and materially increase productive capacity across many outlets simultaneously. This is especially true for

shared operations, technology, content sharing, and engagement. In ecosystems where no single organization dominates, shared infrastructure can function as a multiplier by raising baseline performance without privileging any one institution.

**Large institutions face coordination and governance constraints more than tooling gaps.** At the same time, the proposal pool shows a growing number of universities and public media organizations positioning themselves as anchors for local journalism infrastructure and, increasingly, as producers of local journalism content. These institutions bring advantages of scale, brand recognition, and audience access.

However, the pool also highlights that institutions tend to benefit less from additional systems and more from coordination discipline. Their primary infrastructure challenge is not the absence of tools, but the complexity of aligning governance, incentives, and decision-making across large, multi-mission organizations over time. Without clear coordination mechanisms, institutional journalism initiatives are vulnerable to decision-making latency, resource waste, mission drift, dependence on soft money, and abrupt changes driven by leadership turnover.

Institutional infrastructure leverage is realized less through building new systems and more through structures that enforce alignment, continuity, and interoperability.

**New civic actors suggest an alternative infrastructure path.** The emergence of unexpected actors proposing new information infrastructure roles points to a third and potentially transformative leverage pathway. Regional community development organizations, libraries, and other civic intermediaries appear in a number of submissions, often advancing models that reconceptualize information provision as a public good embedded within trusted community institutions. Rather than scaling traditional newsroom functions, these actors may redefine what counts as journalism infrastructure by integrating information access into service delivery, civic engagement, and place-based problem solving. While many of these efforts remain early-stage, they represent some of the most innovative experiments in the pool and suggest that future infrastructure may not simply support journalism as it currently exists, but expand the ecosystem's boundaries.

## 15 Equity as Signal, Frame, and Structural Constraint

Equity operates simultaneously as a real constraint and a dominant framing lens. One additional pattern in the proposal pool warrants careful consideration: the prominence of representation and equity as both a problem area and a dominant framing lens. The volume of proposals addressing equity-related challenges reflects real and persistent structural inequities in journalism that cannot be dismissed or treated as peripheral. At the same time, the prevalence of this framing also appears shaped by broader field dynamics. Over the past several years, many funders have elevated

equity and representation as central organizing principles for their giving and sensemaking, and applicants have understandably articulated needs in ways that align with those priorities.

**Equity-framed problems often reflect broader systemic infrastructure failures.** This dual reality creates a strategic tension for the field. On one hand, equity challenges are genuine and acute, especially for outlets and communities that have been historically under-resourced or excluded. On the other hand, many of the problems described under equity frames are also systemic constraints: capacity loss, staffing shortages, fragile revenue models, weak distribution systems, and limited access to shared tools. These dynamics affect outlets across community type, geography, and identity, though their impacts are unevenly distributed. Thus equity challenges in local journalism are not separate from infrastructure failures; they are the most visible and consequential expressions of them.

**Infrastructure investments can function as equity multipliers when designed well.** The analytic implication is not that equity concerns should be deprioritized, but that they should be understood in relation to underlying infrastructure conditions. Funders with explicit commitments to representation and equity will find substantial opportunity to support targeted infrastructure that addresses inequitable pipelines, investment patterns, and access gaps directly.

At the same time, a broader field-level view suggests that well-designed investments in core services, shared technologies, and collaborative infrastructure can produce equity-enhancing effects precisely because they reduce structural burdens across the ecosystem. When foundational infrastructure is strengthened, its benefits tend to accrue most meaningfully to those outlets and communities operating with the least margin for error.

**Part 3**

# **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

**The proposal pool depicts a field constrained by infrastructure rather than ideas.** Taken together, the Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call submissions show a field under sustained strain but actively experimenting with system-level responses. Across problem domains, the most consistent signal is that local journalism's binding constraints are increasingly infrastructural rather than purely organizational. Capacity loss, fragmented systems, thin leadership, and missing shared services recur regardless of geography, outlet type, or editorial mission, shaping what is feasible for individual organizations and entire ecosystems alike.

**Long-term viability depends on lowering the marginal cost of civic information.** The analytic throughline of this report is that the long-term health of local journalism depends on whether the field can lower the marginal cost of producing reliable civic information at scale. Achieving that outcome will require more than replenishing depleted pipelines or stabilizing individual institutions. It requires shared systems that reduce duplicated operational burdens and concentrate scarce leadership and technical capacity. It also requires stronger adoption and interoperability of core publishing and distribution infrastructure, as well as improved coordination in high-risk domains such as accountability and legal defense.

**The field is experimenting, but key strategic tensions remain unresolved.** The proposal pool suggests that the field is already moving in this direction, particularly through place-based and statewide collaboration, shared publishing and distribution systems, and scaled service models. At the same time, it surfaces unresolved strategic tensions that infrastructure investment alone cannot sidestep. These include the limits of philanthropic substitution in a de-commercialized environment, the sustainability risks of chronic organizational fragmentation, and the uneven incentives that shape whether consolidation, shared ownership, or deeper integration are even imaginable within nonprofit journalism.

**Fragmentation enables experimentation while raising systemic costs.** This tension can be understood as a fragmentation paradox. The proliferation of small, mission-driven outlets has enabled responsiveness, experimentation, and community-rooted journalism in places long underserved by commercial news. At the

same time, fragmentation raises the marginal cost of production at scale and diffuses scarce leadership and operational capacity. Fragmentation also makes it harder to sustain shared systems, build durable revenue models, and manage systemic risk. The proposals suggest that many of the field's most persistent infrastructure challenges stem not from fragmentation alone, but from the absence of integrative structures capable of capturing its benefits while mitigating its costs.

**Geography intensifies infrastructure constraints and equity implications.** Geography sharpens these constraints further. New nonprofit outlets have clustered disproportionately in metropolitan philanthropic centers, producing a structural inversion in which the communities most likely to require subsidy to sustain local news are often the least likely to have access to it. Thus statewide and regional infrastructure becomes not only an efficiency strategy, but a precondition for geographic equity in civic robustness and accountability.

**Funders face tradeoffs between stabilization and structural change.** For funders, the implication is not a single preferred strategy, but a sharper set of strategic questions. Which investments stabilize fragile ecosystems, and which change the underlying economics of journalism production? Where does shared infrastructure meaningfully reduce duplicated effort, and where does it redistribute scarcity? And how can funding approaches align across institutions, collaboratives, and geographies to support infrastructure that is long-term, interoperable, and system-oriented rather than project-bound?

**The taxonomy functions as shared analytic infrastructure for the field.** A final contribution of this work is the taxonomy itself. Because it was derived directly from a large and diverse proposal pool and designed to capture problems rather than interventions, the typology is intended to be durable across organizations, geographies, and grantmaking strategies. Used consistently, it can function as shared analytic infrastructure for the field, enabling funders and intermediaries to assess like against like, understand portfolio composition and gaps, and track how patterns of investment shape ecosystem-level capacity over time. This report aims not only to describe the field's infrastructure needs, but to strengthen the field's collective ability to reason about them.

# About the author

**Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro, PhD**, is an applied researcher, educator, and former nonprofit news executive whose work focuses on journalism sustainability, institutional strategy, and field-level infrastructure. She is the co-founder and former CEO of the National Trust for Local News, which was an applicant to the Press Forward Infrastructure call.

She has led or contributed to field-shaping research and strategy work with organizations including the Shorenstein Center, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. Her work bridges academic research and on-the-ground leadership to inform philanthropic investment, policy, and the design of durable journalism institutions. She holds a PhD in Organizational Behavior from Harvard University and lives in Lexington, Massachusetts.

# About the publisher

**Media Impact Funders** is a national network of philanthropic organizations that support public interest media. Through research, convening and coordinated learning, MIF helps funders navigate a complex and evolving media ecosystem and advance more effective, system-level strategies.

# APPENDIX

# Appendix A

## Problem Typology & Proposal Counts

This typology organizes proposals by the primary systemic problem they identify, rather than by proposed solutions or organizational characteristics. Each proposal was assigned to exactly one top-level problem domain and one subcategory to ensure a mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive classification. Domain counts reflect the number of proposals whose core problem framing aligns with that category, not the scale, quality, or effectiveness of the proposed intervention. Subcategories provide finer-grained distinctions within domains and should be read as analytically discrete, even where real-world problems overlap. The typology is intended as a diagnostic lens for understanding field-level patterns of constraint, not as an evaluative ranking or funding recommendation.

### 1. Representation & Equity (90)

News ecosystems systematically fail to reflect, serve, and empower the full diversity of their communities, resulting in inequities across staffing, coverage, access, and influence.

#### **Equity Barriers in Journalism Pipelines (37)**

Structural, financial, and institutional barriers prevent people from marginalized communities from entering or advancing within journalism career pathways.

**Underinvestment in BIPOC-, Immigrant-, & Community-Led Outlets (15)** These outlets face chronic disparities in funding, staffing, and resources that undermine their sustainability and civic impact.

#### **Linguistic Exclusion & Multilingual Access Gaps (12)**

Communities that speak languages other than English, including immigrant, migrant, rural, and other place-based linguistic groups, lack equitable access to news because content, reporting practices, and distribution systems are not multilingual or culturally competent. These gaps leave people without timely, relevant, and trusted information in the languages they rely on to navigate daily life and civic systems.

**Equity Gaps in Staffing & Leadership (9)** Newsrooms lack diverse staff and leaders, limiting perspectives, decision-making, and the cultural relevance of their journalism.

**Identity-Based News Deserts (9)** Certain cultural, ethnic, or identity-defined communities lack dedicated and relevant news sources, resulting in gaps in representation and access to essential information.

**Inequitable Coverage & Cultural Competency Failures (8)** Coverage misrepresents, neglects, or harms underrepresented communities due to limited cultural competency, incomplete sourcing, or harmful narrative practices.

## 2. Collaboration & Field Infrastructure (78)

Local news ecosystems lack the shared systems, networks, expertise, and operational infrastructure needed to produce reliable and sustainable journalism. When outlets operate in isolation without coordinated reporting capacity, shared knowledge, place-based collaboration, or field-wide standards, civic information weakens, duplication increases, and innovation stalls. This domain addresses systemic challenges that no single newsroom can solve alone and that require multi-organizational or field-level collaboration.

**Place-Based Collaboration (25)** Local or statewide ecosystems lack the coordinating structures, shared editorial processes, convening bodies, or connective infrastructure needed for multiple outlets to work together, share reporting, engage communities, and produce stronger civic information.

**Place-Based Shared Operational & Back-Office Infrastructure (18)** Local outlets lack the administrative, financial, technological, human resources, or revenue infrastructure required for sustainable operations. Because these functions are resource-intensive and duplicative when handled independently by each newsroom, they require shared-service models or centralized operational hubs.

**Cross-Sector Expertise & Research Infrastructure (18)** Journalists lack access to scientific, technical, policy, legal, academic, or other external knowledge systems essential for accurate reporting. Because this expertise lies outside journalism, newsrooms cannot build it internally and therefore require structured collaborations with universities, researchers, data scientists, policy experts, and related partners.

**Topic & Beat Coverage Gaps (9)** Important issues or beats go underreported because individual newsrooms lack the staff, specialization, data access, or mandate to cover them. Collaborative or shared approaches are required to ensure communities receive essential coverage of complex or resource-intensive topics.

**Field-Wide Professional Standards, Leadership & Practice Infrastructure (8)** The journalism field lacks shared professional standards, leadership development pathways, frameworks for participatory or community-driven journalism, innovation infrastructure, or organizational playbooks. These are field-level practice and capacity challenges that transcend geography and require national or multi-regional coordination.

## 3. Audience & Platform Gaps (75)

News organizations struggle to effectively reach, understand, and engage the audiences they aim to serve due to breakdowns in access, relevance, insight, and platform alignment.

**Community Engagement Gaps (21)** News organizations fail to build strong, reciprocal relationships with communities, resulting in weak trust, low participation, and limited civic impact.

**Platform & Format Mismatch (18)** Content, products, or delivery channels do not align with audience preferences or platform behaviors, leading to low usability, discoverability, or relevance.

**Audience Insight & Data Gaps (16)** Organizations lack the data, analytics, or research needed to understand audience behaviors, needs, and motivations, hindering effective decision-making.

**Audience Access & Equity Gaps (11)** Communities that are marginalized or historically excluded lack equitable access to relevant news due to structural, linguistic, cultural, or geographic barriers.

**Audience Reach & Growth Failure (9)** Outlets are unable to build or expand audiences because distribution, visibility, or audience acquisition strategies are ineffective or underdeveloped.

## 4. Workforce & Capacity (75)

News organizations face chronic shortages of skilled, supported, and sustainably compensated workers, undermining their ability to produce quality journalism and operate effectively.

**Talent Pipeline Breakdown (26)** Pathways into journalism are weakened or inaccessible, resulting in too few new entrants joining the field, particularly from underrepresented communities.

**Hiring & Retention Failures (8)** Organizations struggle to recruit, afford, and retain qualified staff due to limited resources, competitive pressures, or inadequate employment practices.

**Skills & Training Gaps (19)** Journalists and newsroom staff lack access to training, upskilling, or professional development needed to meet evolving technical, editorial, or community engagement demands.

**Freelance & Independent Worker Precarity (4)** Independent journalists face unstable income, weak protections, and limited institutional support, diminishing their ability to contribute reliably to the news ecosystem.

**Burnout, Turnover & Safety Risks (5)** High stress, overwork, harassment, and physical or digital safety threats lead to burnout, turnover, and reduced wellbeing across the journalism workforce.

**Editorial Capacity Shortfalls (7)** Newsrooms lack sufficient editorial staff or operational capacity to consistently produce, edit, or maintain high-quality and comprehensive coverage.

**Leadership & Management Capacity Gaps (6)** Organizations lack leadership skills, management systems, or strategic planning capacity, limiting effectiveness and long-term stability.

## 5. Revenue & Sustainability (68)

News organizations struggle to generate, diversify, and maintain the financial and operational resources required for long-term viability, limiting their ability to serve communities and adapt to changing markets.

### Unrealized Advertising Opportunities (15)

Organizations cannot access, sell, or optimize advertising and sponsorship revenue due to market fragmentation, lack of scale, insufficient advertising technology, or weak sales infrastructure.

**Revenue Capacity Shortfalls (12)** Organizations lack the staffing, operational systems, strategic frameworks, or business expertise required to implement and manage revenue-generating activities.

**Philanthropy & Donor Infrastructure (10)** Organizations lack the systems, pipelines, fundraising talent, tools, or connections necessary to secure and grow donor and foundation revenue.

**General Sustainability Challenges (8)** Outlets face broad and multifaceted revenue and business model pressures that threaten long-term financial stability.

**Audience Revenue Weakness (7)** Membership, subscription, and individual contributions underperform due to weak conversion funnels, underdeveloped products, poor engagement, or insufficient reader revenue strategy.

**Equity Gaps in Revenue Access (7)** BIPOC-led, immigrant-led, rural, tribal, or otherwise marginalized outlets face structural disadvantages in accessing donors, advertisers, capital, or markets.

**Shared Services and Back-Office Infrastructure (6)** Organizations lack access to affordable administrative, financial, human resources, legal, and technical services that reduce operating costs and improve sustainability.

**Ownership Capital & Financing (3)** Organizations cannot sustain operations or transition ownership due to weak ownership structures, lack of credit, insufficient capital, or financing gaps.

## 6. Trust & Information Disorder (40)

The information environment is increasingly polluted, fragmented, and contested, undermining the public's ability to trust, discern, and rely on credible journalism.

**Trust & Credibility Gaps (14)** Audiences doubt the legitimacy, fairness, or accuracy of news organizations due to perceived bias, weak transparency, or failures in accountability.

**Misinformation & Disinformation Threats (13)** False, deceptive, or intentionally harmful information spreads rapidly and widely, overwhelming local ecosystems and eroding informed civic participation.

**Polarization & Divisive Information Environments (6)** Media and social systems amplify conflict-oriented or partisan narratives that fracture shared understanding and deepen social and political divides.

**Verification & Authenticity Infrastructure (4)** Journalism lacks the tools, systems, or standards needed to verify content, establish provenance, and authenticate information in real time across platforms.

**Media Literacy (3)** The public lacks the skills, tools, or support needed to evaluate information quality, detect manipulation, and navigate complex media ecosystems with confidence.

## 7. Distribution & Publishing Infrastructure (36)

News organizations lack the technical systems, distribution channels, and preservation infrastructure needed to reliably publish, circulate, and maintain journalism across platforms and communities.

**CMS & Core Publishing System Limitations (10)** Outdated or inadequate content management and publishing systems constrain workflow efficiency, product innovation, and multi-platform delivery.

**Content Sharing & Syndication (9)** Newsrooms lack effective mechanisms to share, exchange, or distribute content across outlets, limiting reach, collaboration, and ecosystem-wide impact.

**Multi-Platform & Alternative Distribution Channels (9)** Organizations are unable to adapt content for emerging or diverse platforms, such as messaging apps, audio, newsletters, or community channels, reducing accessibility and audience reach.

**Print & Physical Distribution Infrastructure Collapse (6)** The decline of print production and delivery systems undermines news access in communities that continue to rely on physical distribution.

**Archiving, Preservation, and Digitization Infrastructure (2)** News content is at risk because organizations lack the systems needed to archive, preserve, and digitize journalism for long-term public access.

## 8. Civic Information & Community Needs (35)

Communities lack consistent access to the essential civic information and public service reporting needed to understand local conditions, participate in problem-solving, and navigate daily civic life.

**Civic Information Production Gaps (15)** Local information ecosystems cannot reliably produce, sustain, or distribute the civic news, alerts, and service resources communities depend on due to insufficient capacity, weak systems, or missing infrastructure.

**Civic Data Infrastructure & Access Gaps (20)** Local ecosystems lack the shared and structured civic data platforms and tools needed to make public information accessible and usable for journalists, community members, and decision-makers.

## 9. Freedom & Accountability (29)

Legal, governmental, and safety barriers undermine journalists' ability to report freely, protect sources, and hold power to account. When access is blocked, when legal threats suppress reporting, or when investigative capacity erodes, communities lose the transparency and oversight required for a healthy civic information system.

**Legal Threats & Retaliatory Litigation (9)** News organizations confront SLAPPs, defamation suits, retaliatory litigation, cease-and-desist intimidation, or other legal pressure designed to silence critical coverage. Many also lack the legal expertise, representation, or institutional protections needed to defend press freedom.

**Public Records, FOIA & Government Transparency Barriers (7)** Journalists face delays, denials, high fees, or opaque processes that restrict access to public records and hinder government accountability reporting.

**Data & Investigative Field Infrastructure Gaps (7)** Local and national ecosystems lack the shared investigative infrastructure, data tools, research capacity, AI-assisted systems, collaborative investigative teams, leak-support platforms, or place-based investigative hubs required for complex and resource-intensive accountability reporting.

**Journalist Safety & Harassment (6)** Reporters and sources face physical danger, digital harassment, surveillance, doxxing, intimidation, and insecure communication channels. Newsrooms also lack the safety protocols, secure technologies, and protective infrastructure needed to safeguard whistleblowers and vulnerable journalists.

**Geography & Access Problems (26)** Place-based inequities leave entire regions, cities, and rural or migrant communities without consistent, relevant, or culturally accessible news and information.

**Rural & Remote News Deserts (13)** Rural, remote, and low-density regions have little to no reliable news provision due to geographic isolation, economic barriers, or chronic underinvestment.

**Regional Ecosystem Collapse & Restoration (9)** Large geographic areas experience systemic newsroom loss or collapse, requiring coordinated and multi-county strategies to rebuild local information ecosystems.

**Urban or City-Level Coverage Gaps (4)** Cities lack dedicated, consistent, or sufficiently resourced local reporting, leaving major population centers with fragmented or insufficient civic information.

## 10. AI & Emerging Tech Challenges (7)

News organizations lack the readiness, capacity, and safeguards needed to effectively adopt, govern, and benefit from rapidly evolving AI and emerging technologies.

**AI Readiness & Capacity Gaps (7)** Organizations lack the skills, policies, tools, or infrastructure required to responsibly integrate AI into editorial, operational, or revenue workflows.

# Appendix B

## Methods



### **ANALYTIC FRAMING AND UNIT OF ANALYSIS**

This analysis treats proposals submitted to the Press Forward Infrastructure Open Call as a field-level diagnostic dataset. Each proposal is interpreted not only as a funding request, but as evidence of a perceived structural problem in the local journalism ecosystem. The unit of analysis is therefore the problem framing articulated by applicants, rather than the proposed intervention itself.

From the outset, it adopted a closed-world classification constraint: each proposal must be assigned to exactly one primary problem domain and, subsequently, exactly one sub-problem within that domain. This constraint was essential to produce a mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive (MECE) taxonomy capable of supporting quantitative analysis, cross-domain comparison, and funder-facing synthesis.

#### **Development of the Problem Taxonomy**

The analytical process began with the construction of a multi-domain problem taxonomy reflecting the major categories of infrastructure needs surfaced in the proposal pool. Initial top-level domains were refined iteratively through close reading of proposal narratives, with an emphasis on identifying root causes rather than solution types or implementation strategies.

Each top-level domain was then decomposed into sub-problems using a MECE framework. Sub-problem development followed three principles:

1. Each sub-problem represents a distinct causal mechanism or structural failure.
2. Sub-problems within a domain do not overlap.
3. The full set of sub-problems exhausts the types of problems observed in the data.

Sub-problem definitions were accompanied by explicit boundary rules and “distinct from” language to reduce ambiguity and coder drift during application.

## Proposal-Level Coding and Operationalization

Once sub-problem codebooks were established, proposals were coded in batches at the proposal level. Initial code assignments and short rationales were generated with analytic support from the model under the established codebook and boundary rules, then reviewed, corrected, and finalized by the researcher. Coding decisions prioritized the Common Challenge section of each proposal, with organizational context and proposed activities used only to clarify the underlying problem diagnosis.

For each proposal, the analysis assigned:

- one top-level problem domain, and
- one sub-problem within that domain.

Coding outputs were returned in structured, machine-ingestible formats (CSV or semicolon-delimited tables) with stable identifiers (e.g., proposal IDs) to enable reintegration into the master dataset and facilitate auditability.

Short rationales were generated for each assignment, typically constrained to one or two sentences explicitly stating:

- the exact problem being addressed, and
- how the proposed intervention responds to that problem.

These rationales serve as an audit trail for classification decisions and support transparency in later synthesis.

## Boundary Testing and Cross-Domain Validation

A central methodological component of the analysis was systematic boundary testing across adjacent domains. As coding progressed, recurring ambiguities surfaced where proposals plausibly fit multiple domains (e.g., workforce vs. equity, audience engagement vs. trust, civic information vs. collaboration).

Rather than resolving these on a case-by-case basis, the analysis formalized decision rules grounded in root-cause diagnostics. Examples include:

- distinguishing identity-based structural inequity from general workforce or revenue capacity problems;

- separating audience engagement mechanics from misinformation, credibility, or polarization harms;
- differentiating civic information system failures from topical or beat-specific reporting gaps.

Boundary testing was conducted empirically by reviewing full proposal batches and stress-testing category definitions against real proposal language. Where necessary, proposals were reclassified, and in some cases sub-problem structures were revised to improve conceptual clarity.

## Taxonomy Consolidation and Parsimony Decisions

As coding and boundary testing progressed, proposal frequency counts and qualitative pattern analysis were used to assess whether certain sub-problems were over-fragmented or underpopulated. When categories exhibited very low counts or persistent overlap without distinct causal mechanisms, consolidation decisions were made to improve parsimony.

These decisions prioritized analytical clarity and usability over maximal differentiation. Examples include

collapsing participatory journalism sub-codes into pipeline equity categories, consolidating linguistic access issues under a single equity-driven sub-problem, and simplifying civic information sub-problems after empirical clustering.

All consolidation decisions were grounded in proposal-level evidence and accompanied by revised definitions to preserve analytic intent.

## Quality Assurance and Domain-Level Audits

After the taxonomy was finalized, the analysis conducted systematic quality assurance (QA) passes for each top-level domain. QA involved reviewing all proposals assigned to a domain to confirm:

- correct domain-level placement,
- correct sub-problem assignment, and
- alignment between proposal rationales and finalized codebook definitions.

Where misclassifications were identified, targeted reassignments were made using the established boundary rules. Domains were considered “locked” only after they demonstrated internal coherence, stable sub-problem usage, and clean separation from adjacent domains.

## Data Hygiene, Tooling Alignment, and Auditability

Throughout the process, attention was given to data hygiene and tooling constraints. Taxonomy labels were normalized for use in Airtable and tabular outputs, unused category options were identified and removed, and formatting standards were enforced to ensure reliable data ingestion.

Where manual reclassification occurred, audit trails were reconstructed using identifier comparisons to preserve transparency about proposal movement across domains.

## Editorial Refinement and Documentation

In the final phase, the taxonomy underwent editorial refinement to improve readability and usability without altering analytic meaning. Sub-problem headers were shortened to reduce redundancy and improve scanability in tables and visual summaries. Definitions were reviewed for internal consistency, and misplaced or missing categories were corrected.

The finalized taxonomy and proposal-level coding outputs were then translated into narrative findings and recommendations for the main report, ensuring that all interpretive claims were grounded in the underlying classification system.

## From Coded Data to Narrative Findings

**Coding outputs were aggregated and treated as diagnostic signals rather than conclusions.** Once proposal-level coding was complete and the taxonomy finalized, the analysis shifted from classification to synthesis. Proposal counts were aggregated across all finalized problem domains and sub-problems, producing a descriptive, cross-domain dataset of 559 proposals. These

frequency distributions served as the empirical foundation for the Findings section. Importantly, this stage treated counts as signals rather than conclusions: higher-frequency domains were interpreted as indicators of concentrated structural stress, while lower-frequency domains were understood as more specialized, emergent, or bounded areas of need.

**Narrative description translated frequency patterns into funder-facing language.** The initial narrative interpretation of these distributions was drafted by the researcher, translating tables into plain-language descriptions appropriate for funders and field readers, and situating the results within broader dynamics shaping local journalism (e.g., de-commercialization, fragmentation, collaboration, and digital adaptation). The language model's role at this stage was limited to editorial refinement (improving clarity, precision, and internal consistency) without introducing new interpretive claims or altering the underlying analytical framing.

**Higher-order analysis required interpretive judgment beyond classification.** The Analysis section required a qualitatively different form of work and relied on human judgment. Moving beyond description, the researcher articulated a set of second-order interpretive questions about what the proposal pool reveals about the field's underlying constraints and investment dynamics. These analytic moves were introduced by the researcher

and iteratively developed across sections. They include the marginal-cost framing of infrastructure, the distinction between preservation and expansion investments, the treatment of talent scarcity as a structural capacity problem, and the diagnosis of fragmentation and organizational form as hidden cost drivers.

**The language model supported drafting and consistency, not analytic origination.** The language model functioned as a drafting and testing partner, helping translate these insights into coherent prose, stress-testing causal claims for overreach, and maintaining consistency across sections, but did not originate the analytic arguments themselves. Throughout this phase, the researcher repeatedly evaluated whether sections were merely descriptive or whether they advanced a clear "so what" for funders, revising accordingly. This division of labor ensured that narrative synthesis remained grounded in the coded data, while higher-order interpretation, prioritization, and strategic judgment remained firmly human-led.

# **This research report is dedicated to John Thornton, founder of The Texas Tribune and co-founder of the American Journalism Project.**

Colleague, intellectual sparring partner, shaper of the field.

His influence on these ideas and on the field more broadly endures, even as his absence is deeply felt.

*May his memory be a blessing.*