

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

How to Bring Back Local News

Eli Lehrer

ON APRIL 30, 1995, THE INTERNET slipped its academic confines. The National Science Foundation opened it up to commercial use, setting off a transformation that would reshape how the world trades, talks, and thinks. But in Elmira, New York—a faded industrial city in the Southern Tier—the *Star-Gazette* rolled off the presses that Sunday as it always had.

That day's paper ran 107 broadsheet pages, not counting department-store circulars and grocery coupons. Its stories were granular and local: a pancake breakfast, the community college's new president, lighting upgrades for the minor-league ballpark. There was a front-page item on a local murder, a wire story about the Oklahoma City bombing, and not a single mention of the tectonic shift unfolding in cyberspace. The world was changing, but the civic infrastructure of places like Elmira had not yet begun to unravel.

The founding link in the national empire of the USA Today Company, the *Star-Gazette* was a fully realized civic product of its time, tightly woven into the life of its town. Like so many local papers of the late 20th century, it was both mirror and glue. Today, the *Star-Gazette* prints just six days a week and lists only two reporters on its website. Its daily print circulation is under 7,000 copies. A 100-page edition is unthinkable. And its decline is hardly unique.

More than 3,500 American newspapers, including more than 500 dailies, have closed since 2005. Weekday newspaper readership has fallen by half since 1940, even as the population has nearly tripled. Newspaper newsroom employment has dropped by more than 50% since 2008. And the digital outlets that have made the most money—from Fox News to major Substacks like *The Bulwark* and *The Free Press*—focus

ELI LEHRER is president and co-founder of the R Street Institute.

overwhelmingly on national and ideological content. From 2024 onward, traffic to many traditional news sites declined sharply even as independent publishing platforms and other newsletter services expanded rapidly. This does not mean Americans are less informed about the wider world: National and international news is now covered more richly and in greater detail than at any point in history. What has eroded is knowledge of what is happening in city hall.

The near collapse of local journalism signals the unwinding of a historically contingent structure. A restorationist approach—focused on reviving legacy institutions—risks reinforcing the very dynamics that produced the collapse. What the nation needs instead is a structural realignment: one that treats journalism as a civic function and enables pluralistic, decentralized, legally protected experimentation.

FROM LEGACY TO COLLAPSE

The decline of local news is usually framed as the slow erosion of a democratic institution; it may be better understood as the end of an industrial-era accident. The *Star-Gazette*, like most of its peers, was never sustained by reader demand or subscription revenue alone. It was a profitable artifact of geography, legal privilege, industrial printing, and captive advertising markets. What vanished was the civic functions those papers performed, often as a byproduct of structural happenstance.

Newspapers had weathered technological shifts before. Radio and television shuttered many afternoon papers and reduced competition, but they did not dismantle the industry. In some ways, consolidation made newspapers stronger. Monopoly papers were often corporate and bland, but they also had the resources to invest in enterprise reporting and civic projects. By the late 20th century, most cities had become one-newspaper towns, and the surviving outlets held near-monopoly control over local print advertising. Through the 1990s, chains like the USA Today Company (called Gannett until 2025) and Knight Ridder regularly posted margins of 15% to 30%—returns more typical of pharmaceuticals than public service.

Those profits rested on two pillars. The first was technological and capital intensive: printing presses, delivery fleets, and circulation monopolies that made newspapers nearly impossible to challenge. The second was regulatory: postal subsidies, mandatory public-notice laws, antitrust exemptions like joint-operating agreements, cross-ownership

rules, and other policies that shielded incumbents from competition. In many cities, the newspaper was not merely the loudest voice, but the only one with institutional standing.

Eventually, both pillars gave way. Classifieds and help-wanted ads migrated to Craigslist, then to Monster.com, then to LinkedIn. Retail advertising withered as big-box stores and e-commerce displaced traditional department stores. Public notices moved online. Younger readers never acquired their parents' habits. The local newspaper, once the civic chronicle of record, became a skeletal content wrapper with a masthead.

One influential academic framework describes journalism as having three core functions: surveillance, by tracking the routine workings of power; correlation, by turning scattered facts into coherent narratives; and cultural transmission, by preserving the values, rituals, conflicts, and celebrations that make a place feel like a community rather than a set of lines on a map. These functions were often carried out imperfectly, but they nevertheless helped communities understand themselves. What vanished, then, was not simply a business model, but a structure for deciding what counted as public life.

Too often, the response was to assume modernization would suffice: a website, a better content-management system, podcasts, videos, leaner newsrooms, diversified revenue streams. Even the most capable non-profit successors — *ProPublica*, the *Texas Tribune*, *Spotlight PA* — remain at least partly tethered to the old institutional blueprint. They do serious work and deserve continued support. But they are not a full reinvention.

Decades of research suggest that the collapse of local journalism has had serious consequences. Communities with little or no local news experience higher rates of corruption, lower civic engagement, and — according to one study — higher municipal borrowing costs. The decline of journalism's correlation function has coincided with rising misinformation and growing distrust, while overreliance on national media has contributed to increased political polarization. More intangibly but perhaps most profoundly, the loss of cultural transmission weakens civic identity. As NPR and others have found, communities without local news lose shared memory and social cohesion. Taken together, these patterns raise the possibility that local journalism's decline may constitute a form of market failure, at least in some contexts and under some definitions.

But that is almost beside the point. At a minimum, the collapse of local news is a genuine civic loss. The answer, however, is not to preserve its legacy form. The future will not, and should not, look like a refurbished version of the past. Policymakers should reject restorationist strategies and instead focus on cultivating a polycentric civic-information ecosystem that supports a diversity of actors, formats, and accountability mechanisms suited to present realities. The goal should be to create the conditions under which new institutions can assume what were local papers' functions for centuries.

THE RESTORATIONIST TEMPTATION

In response to the near collapse of local journalism, a growing number of policy proposals—especially on the political left—would support news organizations through mandates, subsidies, or tax preferences.

These ideas include federal and state-level “link tax” legislation, often presented as mandatory bargaining codes modeled on laws in Australia and Canada and under consideration elsewhere; direct grants to newsrooms; and tax credits tied to civic content. Many are well intentioned, but they rest on a faulty premise: that legacy institutions should be rescued rather than replaced. Some interventions—especially those aimed at reviving traditional structures—risk entrenching and worsening the conditions that led to collapse by reducing innovation, centralizing control, and deepening dependence on unstable or politically contingent revenue streams. Skeptics across the ideological spectrum worry that such measures could produce serious unintended consequences. They are not wrong.

Among the most misguided proposals are those that would compel digital platforms to pay news publishers for linking to or summarizing their content. Framed as a correction to market imbalance, these schemes disproportionately benefit large national outlets while doing little for new or local journalism. Worse, they would invite governments to define the terms of hyperlinking, turning the open web into a system of transactional permissions.

The federal Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (JCPA), California's AB 886, and similar measures in Australia, Canada, and Europe all rest on this logic. Their effects have been troubling. In Canada, Meta blocked news links altogether. In Australia, the bargaining code mainly benefited large national brands rather than small local

outlets. Even if such policies succeeded on their own terms, they would still establish a dangerous precedent. Once links become billable, governments gain a pretext to regulate which links are permitted, taxed, or prioritized. That opens the door to censorship, regulatory capture, and platform behavior shaped more by compliance than by market demand.

While not as structurally corrosive as link taxes, direct government subsidies to news organizations also raise serious concerns—especially in a system that relies on the press to monitor those in power. At bottom, such subsidies risk weakening journalism’s surveillance function by turning watchdogs into clients.

Of course, some entanglements are inevitable. News organizations already interact with the state in ways that are imperfect but manageable. Some still earn meaningful revenue from publishing legally required notices. Government agencies place advertisements for all kinds of purposes, and directing more of that spending toward local media may well be sound policy so long as it does not become a primary revenue source.

But subsidies go further: They institutionalize dependence. California’s 2026 state budget includes \$20 million in grants to news organizations (matched by a commitment from Google) that are independently administered by the James B. McClatchy Foundation. But the money ultimately flows through the Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development, which reports directly to the governor itself. Even if it succeeds in maintaining independence in the first instance, the mere proximity to the state’s chief executive raises worrying long-term questions of economic capture. (What’s to prevent future governors from picking new administrators controlled by their political cronies?)

That said, not all grants pose this problem. Private philanthropy can play an important role in supporting a diverse and independent press and may prove necessary to a healthy journalistic infrastructure over the long term. Freestanding newsrooms like *ProPublica* rely heavily on philanthropy, and smaller publications are increasingly attracting foundation support as well. One promising example is Press Forward, a \$500 million initiative led by the MacArthur and Knight foundations that supports small newsrooms, builds local fundraising hubs, and promotes journalism as a civic priority. Still in its early stages, Press Forward suggests how philanthropic support—unlike government funding—can strengthen local journalism without compromising editorial independence. More efforts like it may be needed.

If government is to provide financial support to journalism directly, tax credits may be the least harmful approach. Unlike direct grants or link taxes, they can be structured to avoid political discretion, preserve content neutrality, and support journalism indirectly by incentivizing activity rather than underwriting institutions. But they are far from simple. What's more, their aims may be defensible—preserving investigative capacity, sustaining media plurality—but their mechanisms risk counterproductive entanglements. Each major form of credit—subscriptions, advertising, and reporter hiring—comes with its own tradeoffs, implementation problems, and unanswered empirical questions.

Of the three, subscription credits—offering individuals a tax benefit for supporting journalism—are perhaps the most intuitive. The most prominent federal proposal, the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, would create a non-refundable tax credit of up to \$250 per return, covering 80% of subscription costs in the first year and 50% for four years thereafter.

But scale quickly becomes a problem. If every tax filer who owes federal income tax claimed the full amount, the credit would cost more than \$43 billion—well above total U.S. newspaper revenue, which stands at less than \$21 billion and continues to decline. Even at far lower uptake—which is more likely—the credit could soon account for the overwhelming majority of subscription revenue for local newspapers. With print and digital newspaper-ad revenue at a combined \$10 billion and falling, the credit risks becoming the financial backbone of local journalism rather than a supplement.

The consequences would be troubling. A subsidy on this scale would concentrate support around one business model—paid subscriptions—and tie the viability of local outlets to the continued existence of a large federal benefit. Once entrenched, it would be politically difficult to modify or repeal while giving officials significant leverage over the revenue stream sustaining independent journalism.

There is also remarkably little empirical evidence about what such a credit would do. Would it produce new subscribers, or broaden readership, or increase engagement? Or would it mostly subsidize behavior that would have happened anyway? These are testable questions, but they remain unanswered.

That uncertainty creates an opportunity. Because subscription-credit experiments could be run at modest cost and small scale, philanthropy could help generate real evidence. A trial in a midsize

city—say, giving every adult in Hartford, Connecticut, a \$50 voucher for local news—could yield useful data on consumer behavior, civic engagement, and ecosystem effects. Such a plan would cost no more than \$5 million in Hartford—well within the reach of major foundations. Under some circumstances, and with some results, there might be a public-policy case for a credit. Until then, national or even statewide implementation with public dollars seems premature.

Another approach would offer tax credits to businesses that advertise in qualifying local media outlets. Several states, including New York and New Jersey, have implemented versions of this idea, often aimed at small businesses and limited to non-partisan local publishers.

The appeal is obvious: Such methods would support journalism indirectly by stimulating demand for ad space. But the model rests on a weak foundation. Print advertising has collapsed, digital ad markets are dominated by large platforms, and newspapers are poorly positioned to compete for digital dollars on their own. Historically, a local newspaper's ad revenue came from department stores, national brands, and classified listings—sources that are respectively economically marginal and have shifted strongly away from print advertising or are wholly online. Even if credits increased local advertising, they would likely do little more than slow the decline of a failing model.

Design problems also abound. Defining “local media” is difficult in a world of mixed local and national content, multi-state ownership, and ideological outlets. Requiring “non-partisanship” would invite political abuse and allow politicians to decide that media sources they opposed were “partisan.” And like subscription credits, advertising credits may simply reward behavior that would have occurred anyway.

Tax credits for hiring or retaining reporters may offer the clearest link between financial support and civic benefit. Structured as payroll-tax offsets or refundable credits per employee, such proposals would lower the cost of employing local journalists and could shift newsroom incentives toward more coverage of city halls, school boards, and other civic institutions.

The alignment here is much stronger. Hiring credits tie the benefit to the very activity policymakers want: local newsgathering. Definitions still matter, but it is relatively easy to craft a rule around “local news reporters,” especially compared with defining eligible media outlets. And the relevant data can be verified through payroll systems and tax filings.

Maribel Pérez Wadsworth, president of the Knight Foundation and former publisher of *USA Today*, has said that tax-credit proposals would both preserve jobs and give newsrooms the resources to rebuild. She may be right. Among the major credit proposals, this one comes closest to serving a clearly defined public goal. It incentivizes a specific, measurable civic function. It is less likely to distort markets or entrench legacy institutions. And it is best suited to experimentation at the state level, where outcomes can be observed and evaluated.

Hiring credits are not a slam dunk, of course. Any direct government involvement with the media should be treated with skepticism. But it is the least-bad idea currently on offer and may represent a worthwhile step toward rebuilding some of the civic capacity lost in the collapse of local news.

STRUCTURAL REFORM IN PRACTICE

Even the best-designed tax credits still operate largely within a logic of restoration. They try to sustain a fundamentally broken model and cannot, by themselves, fix it. But the crisis in local news is largely rooted in institutional exclusion, not public apathy. The problem is not simply a lack of demand, but a lack of access—access to legal standing, financial capital, and public legitimacy.

Tax credits and even grants may buy time and may even spark useful experiments. But they do not, by themselves, change market structure. A more promising approach begins with a different question: how to enable journalism's core civic functions to thrive in newer, more pluralistic forms. That shift begins by recognizing journalism as a public function—something communities can perform in many voices and formats. The task, then, is to build legal and institutional frameworks that reduce friction, expand access, and permit experimentation.

The first step is to update the tax code. The United States currently recognizes non-profit categories under Section 501(c), including categories for fraternal lodges, cemetery companies, and even “cooperative organizations to finance crop operations.” Journalism, by contrast, is typically squeezed awkwardly into Section 501(c)(3), where the requirement to be “educational” and the prohibition on partisan politics forbid endorsements and often force local outlets into strained legal contortions.

A new designation—501(c)(30)—could offer a better fit for civic journalism outlets: organizations that publish regularly on non-national

public affairs and reinvest revenue in that purpose. Such outlets would not have to dodge political coverage, refrain from endorsing candidates, or rely on charitable donations (which would not be tax deductible if they sought them) to preserve their status. They would explicitly enjoy the same First Amendment protections as any other media outlet—something 501(c)(3)s do not have.

The precedent already exists. Houses of worship automatically qualify as 501(c)(3) non-profits without prior IRS approval, on the theory that the state should not judge the legitimacy of belief. The IRS does not care whether your congregation worships the God of Abraham or the Pillsbury Doughboy. A new tax status for civic journalism would simply extend that same logic to a different institution.

Eligibility for a new non-profit status could be based on simple, neutral criteria: regular publication and coverage of local civic affairs. Some financial information—though not donor or subscriber lists—would become public record. Most importantly, organizations would not need permission to operate. Instead, they could claim the status simply by filing accordingly, whether they were newly formed or converting from another status.

The point is not to subsidize the press, but to remove legal friction so that journalism, like faith, can flourish freely. If the availability of this status led some creators focused on pop culture or even, say, insurance to begin covering a modicum of local news, that would be a feature, not a bug.

If 501(c)(30) status lowers barriers to entry, another reform could lower barriers to survival. The best precedent here is the 1970 Newspaper Preservation Act. That law embodied an important insight: In local news, preserving multiple editorial voices may matter more than competition in every back-office function. This allowed newspapers to combine advertising sales, circulation, and other business operations through Joint Operating Agreements, so long as they maintained separate editorial and reporting staffs. At its peak, nearly 30 cities had papers operating under JOAs. The last one ended in December.

The statute's fundamentals were not wrong, but it was built for an industrial world that no longer exists. It applies only to publications printed on newsprint, requires that one party be at serious risk of failure, and makes cooperation legally cumbersome by requiring formal approval from the attorney general. Digital-native outlets, non-profit

startups, and hybrid civic media cannot benefit from it, even when the underlying rationale applies just as strongly.

Rather than stretching the old statute beyond recognition, Congress should replace it with a new law — call it the Civic Media Freedom Act — that preserves the original logic while adapting it to modern conditions. Such a law would allow local news organizations to self-certify limited forms of cooperation in business and technical infrastructure, so long as they maintain independent editorial control. Outlets could share advertising operations, software tools, records-processing systems, AI-assisted research infrastructure, web services, and other back-end functions without fear of antitrust liability. The point would not be to mandate any particular business model, but to permit as much experimentation as possible.

Access to government institutions and public records must also reflect how journalism is actually practiced. Press credentials remain essential for some kinds of newsgathering but are often distributed on the basis of professional affiliation rather than demonstrated reporting. That leaves freelancers, non-profit startups, and civic entrepreneurs at a disadvantage. A modest reform, whether by statute or executive order, could require public institutions to offer credentials to individuals based on reporting activity regardless of organizational status.

Journalist-run credentialing organizations, like the House and Senate press galleries in Washington, should do the same. The aim should be to expand who can participate in journalism: working parents, gig workers, retirees, high-school students. Civic journalism should become something a community does, not just something it receives.

There is good reason to believe this barrier-removal approach can work, because versions of it already have elsewhere. Beginning in the late 2010s, Hollywood studios, publishers, and major brands began giving internet influencers the same — and often greater — access than the mainstream press. By 2024, the global influencer economy and the U.S. local newspaper industry were about the same size — roughly \$24 billion versus less than \$21 billion — and the former continues to grow as the latter shrinks. Giving those with a stake in local news the same kind of access that pop-culture and commercial influencers enjoy could fuel a similar renaissance in civic life.

Because civic reporting involves politics and potentially much higher stakes, legal protection matters in a way it often does not for

pop-culture influencers. Many states have shield laws and statutes that protect reporters from compelled disclosure of sources or frivolous lawsuits, formally known as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). But these protections vary widely, and in many jurisdictions, they are reserved, either explicitly or implicitly, for journalists affiliated with recognized media organizations. That leaves independent and non-traditional reporters exposed.

A national shield law could close this gap by extending protection to anyone engaged in civic reporting. Likewise, the “actual malice” standard for defamation liability — which protects journalists from lawsuits over good-faith errors involving public figures — could be extended to all reporting intended for public consumption. People covering school boards, development disputes, or local law enforcement should not face financial ruin simply because their work angers someone with the resources to sue, even if that person does not qualify as a public figure.

At the outer edge of reform, defamation and related torts like false light could even cease to exist as freestanding causes of action. In a global internet environment, many reputational harms are easier to rebut than when those doctrines first developed. Truly harmful falsehoods that cause provable losses could still be pursued through fraud, tortious interference, privacy law, or sector-specific rules such as securities law.

The shuttering of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) may also create an opening. Local public-media outlets would have less money, but also fewer federal mandates and a weaker connection to government. That could make them more attractive as bases for non-profit experimentation. CPB’s budget — \$535 million — was tiny compared with overall philanthropy revenue. In a post-CPB world, roughly 1,500 local radio and television operations would have strong incentives to experiment through collaborations, acquisitions, original reporting, or support for broader civic and cultural work. As linear television watching declines and production of video content becomes possible to anyone with a phone, localities might rethink Public, Educational, and Governmental (PEG) fees on television bills (which generally support public-access cable) to broaden their base and distribute the money differently. The fees — which are collected by TV providers and passed directly onto local affiliates — might be applied to all broadband subscriptions, and a portion of them might support some of these outlets or, perhaps, successors in the local news business.

Private platforms can play a role as well. Companies like Meta and Google already offer some support for journalism, often through voluntary or politically driven initiatives. Congress could create a narrow antitrust and tort-law safe harbor allowing platforms to cooperate voluntarily on shared infrastructure for civic media. That might include pooled funds, technical tools, and open eligibility standards, ideally managed by a neutral third party. The point would not be to compel participation, but to remove legal barriers to coordination and allow platforms to support journalism without relying on state mandates or subsidies.

Finally, copyright law should better reflect journalism's civic role. One of journalism's central functions is cultural transmission: helping communities interpret events, recall shared histories, and preserve institutional memory. Yet journalists often lack clear legal protection when reusing past reporting, public footage, or campaign materials. A broader fair-use safe harbor could allow civic-minded journalists and the AI tools they employ to reinterpret such material without fear of liability, so long as the use is transformative and in the public interest. Much of this content has little or no commercial value. But the ability to reference and reframe it is essential to journalism's democratic function.

There is precedent here, too. The rise of the influencer economy was enabled in part by relatively clear fair-use standards and a permissive approach to pop-cultural copyright, which allowed creators to transform, comment on, and repackage material freely. Local journalists—especially those outside traditional institutions—deserve the same freedom to reflect on and reinterpret civic information. What helped democratize cultural commentary could also help revive local public life.

Even now, as the old business model has collapsed, real pluralism is emerging in its place. In Ashburn, Virginia, a suburban boomtown with no daily paper of its own, *The Burn* is bringing reportorial smarts to local business coverage and community matters while steering clear of politics. In Los Angeles, *L.A. Taco*—once devoted to covering tacos—has broken stories about ICE raids. On Chicago's South Side, *City Bureau* trains neighborhood residents to serve as documenters at public meetings. These efforts do not share a format, an ideology, or a funding model. But they do share a function: They help communities where local newspapers are scarce or gone altogether understand themselves.

Taken together, these reforms would not impose a centralized model, new federal spending, or targeted tax advantages. They are structural

adjustments—legal and institutional realignments that lower barriers, expand access, and allow civic journalism to evolve as other forms of media already have. They would make it far more possible for communities to build what they need.

CIVIC JOURNALISM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What, then, might a healthy post-industrial civic-information system look like?

Imagine a plausible future in a fictional town where journalism still mattered: Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, in 2036. There, local journalism survives, even thrives, without subsidies, real legacy infrastructure, or billion-dollar bailouts.

At the center of town, occupying half a floor in a building that still bears its name, the *Times-Sentinel* still publishes in print twice a week—Sundays and Wednesdays—for 1,500 loyal subscribers. It has two full-time reporters, one of whom also serves as editor-publisher; a podcast producer; two part-timers; and an ad salesperson who doubles as a membership organizer. The newspaper uses Lede AI, trained on Gopher Prairie's public records and the full archive of the *Times-Sentinel* dating back to 1894, to handle the print layout, design web pages, edit stories, check facts, and generate first-pass summaries of school-board meetings, city-council committee meetings, and civic events. Still, a human always clicks “publish.”

The paper had once relied on the Minnesota Reporter Credit, a state tax benefit, and later on a grant from MNCivix, the local arm of a national tech-backed journalism consortium. The tax credit expired in 2032 and MNCivix's commitments to more established outlets have declined as new ventures have bloomed across the state. Newer revenue streams—memberships, sponsored election guides, a lecture series, obituaries and local-business sponsorship bundles—have more than filled the gap.

Gopher Prairie's other legacy-media descendant, PrairieAccess-9 News, is also still running out of the broadcast studios that once housed the local NBC station's newsroom (closed when most linear broadcasting ended in the early 2030s). Created by a merger of the remnants of the local news team and the town's public-access cable studio, it's funded in part from the expanded broadband PEG fees as well as advertising and charity dollars. The lean operation employs one full-time

reporter/producer, an IT coordinator, and a station manager. It makes professional AI tools, professional-grade photography equipment, and its publishing platform available to any resident who wants to contribute and take part in a training course. New community content supplemented by deeper, professionally produced pieces appears daily and gets compiled into a local newscast and web page hosted by the conspicuously camera-ready video avatars Alex and Laticia.

Confluence Public Media (the merger of the states' various public broadcasting entities) also gets some funding from PEG fees and stations a reporter in town who produces a regular podcast as well as Gopher Prairie updates for the statewide Prairie and Pine Substack.

Startups also play a bigger role in Gopher Prairie. One of the most successful competitors to the legacy media is the *Prairie Current*, launched by former HVAC technician Marco Salazar. His libertarian-leaning Substack grew into an operation supported by subscriptions, local ads, and memberships. It has three regular freelancers (one a local college student) and one full-time staff reporter. Much of its content comes from his use of FourthBase, an open-source AI toolkit that lacks Lede's polish but works well enough. The *Current* is fast, factual, and often beats the *Sentinel*—though its coverage clearly reflects Salazar's politics.

Then there's *GP Culture Feed*, Gopher Prairie's irreverent guide to restaurants, concerts, and theatrical mishaps. Started by Alyssa Thorne—a dental hygienist, sometimes chef, and former community-theater regular—it began as a Facebook page reviewing local restaurants and later expanded into gallery openings and community theater. In 2031, it received a three-year grant from the local Freestone Foundation. By 2033, Alyssa had four modestly paid contributors and enough ad and membership revenue to keep the site running while cleaning teeth part time.

Formal outlets, moreover, are only part of the story in Gopher Prairie. Much civic reporting comes from local creators who never incorporated. They have press credentials based on reporting, not affiliation, and can apply for grants from MNCivix. Verification is handled by the local library foundation. Freelancers, podcasters, and even middle-school students can qualify if they engage in public-facing reporting.

A few have formed loose cooperatives that publish regular updates on the Civicmesh platform spun off from Nextdoor in 2031. Some of these tend toward polarized politics that get the community arguing.

But they also fill holes that the more professional outlets don't: For every story presenting sidewalk repair as instances of settler-colonial violence, there's a useful nugget that keeps the community better informed. An eighth grader got a scoop about a new low-cost housing development mentioned elliptically during a public meeting but missed by the Sentinel's AI. Influencer @graceincommittee offers wry commentary on city-council meetings combined with videos of her four-year-old playing with pasta.

This ecosystem works because it is allowed to exist. First, thanks to the new 501(c)(30) status, small outlets can incorporate and seek grants without having to engage in legal gymnastics. After they start operations, strong anti-SLAPP laws, limitations on defamation suits, and highly permissive fair-use standards for journalists and AI tools let them operate without fear of being dragged into court. Just as important, after Congress passed the Civic Media Freedom Act in the late 2020s, dozens of small outlets across Minnesota began sharing back-office systems through the North Star Civic Media Cooperative, based in Minneapolis. The cooperative handles things no single tiny operation could afford on its own: software licenses, public-records-scraping tools, transcription engines, bulk web hosting, shared legal templates, and group negotiations with ad exchanges and payment processors. The outlets still compete fiercely for scoops; they simply share plumbing.

Gopher Prairie's news ecosystem is messy, uneven, and sometimes late. Reporters still don't get paid enough to stick around more than a few years, and the North Star's tech stack gets lots of complaints. While it allows coverage of even obscure city-council subcommittee meetings, AI tools give all content a civic uniformity. But in 2036, civic knowledge in Gopher Prairie is local again. People can find out what is happening. Memory lives in newsletters, blogs, podcasts, public-records threads, and old-fashioned scoops. The small city has become legible to itself. In this era, that is no small thing.