

Foundations in Pittsburgh and across the country are turning up their support of nonprofit journalism to fill gaps in coverage created by newspapers' decline and to protect democracy. by Rob Taylor Jr.

THE GROWING | IMPACT OF NONPROFIT JOURNALISM

News hasn't been good for the local newspaper business, and the future doesn't look any brighter.

At the New York Daily News, for example, half the newsroom staff members lost their jobs in 2018. Since 2004, 1,800 U.S. newspapers have closed outright, according to a report on “news deserts” by the University of North Carolina’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media. Pittsburgh’s main metropolitan daily, the 235-year-old Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, only prints its publication on Thursdays and Sundays, having moved the majority of its news online, and has developed a reputation for buying out veteran journalists rather than expanding staff.

Those of a certain, seasoned generation still appreciate and want to get their news from a hard-copy, print publication. But a Pew Research Center survey of American adults conducted Aug. 31 to Sept. 7, 2020, revealed that only 5 percent of adults prefer to get their news this way, while 52 percent of respondents said they preferred their news via digital platforms. Overall, the study found that more than eight in 10 Americans get news from digital devices often or at least sometimes.

However, gaining increasing traction and influence in the journalism business is an ambitious, determined group of nonprofit, digital-based news organizations that are dedicated to informing the public with fact-based, independent journalism. Many of them are backed by foundations and other philanthropic organizations that share a common goal of wanting impactful, accountability journalism to continue—and thrive.

There are foundations that support nonprofits and public media on a national level, such as the MacArthur and Knight foundations. Others focus their investments locally or statewide, such as The Heinz Endowments, the Hillman Family Foundations, and the Allegheny, Richard King Mellon and Pittsburgh foundations, all based in Pittsburgh.

According to “Foundation Maps for Media Funding,” 3,106 funders have given \$1.7 billion in journalism-related grants since 2009, which includes \$306 million that went to the Newseum, an interactive museum exploring free expression and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution that closed at the end of 2019. The data visualization tool, which is updated regularly, was developed by the data and technology organization Candid

for the nonprofit Media Impact Funders, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wyncote Foundation. All signs point to foundations being in it for the long haul in keeping these nonprofit news organizations afloat.

“We have seen the erosion of the traditional structure of journalism in American society, and it’s a threat for democracy,” Heinz Endowments President Grant Oliphant said. “When people can’t get reasonably objective, independent information, they revert into echo chambers . . . and they start getting news from sources that are driven by an agenda or a conspiracy theory. So, what we’re hoping with these investments is that we will shore up the system of journalism that helps society make good choices.”

Revenue losses = newspaper decline

The newspaper business has been cyclical historically and took its first big hit with the advent of television as a rival for daily news coverage, according to newspaper observers and historians. But the steepest downward spiral can be traced to the loss of advertising experienced by newspapers across the country, first because of the online classified advertising website Craigslist and later because of other internet

platforms that siphoned off readers as well as advertising revenue.

As more and more people started getting their news primarily online, the number of print newspapers being sold everywhere plummeted, with many finding themselves dying a slow death as digital behemoths Facebook and Google sold advertisements at a fraction of the cost of print ads.

Facebook and Google also were able to target their clients’ ads to particular audiences that the clients wanted to reach so that their access to potential customers would be more convenient. By providing this advertising edge, Facebook and Google combined made up 60 percent of all digital ad revenue in 2018, or roughly \$65 billion, according to emarketer.com.

While traditional newspapers have added websites where their content is available—with an increasing number adding paywalls to restrict access to only subscribers—the revenue from the online subscriptions is not enough to offset the huge losses in traditional print advertising, which had sustained the newspaper print model for generations. U.S. newspaper ad revenue in 2008 was more than \$37.8 billion. The Pew Research Center has found that by 2018, the revenue had decreased precipitously to \$14.3 billion.

With closures or reductions in print production to a few days per week has come job layoffs and the elimination of newsroom positions. Newspapers’ newsroom staffs nationwide were cut by more than half between 2008 and 2019, when jobs declined from 71,000 to 35,000, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

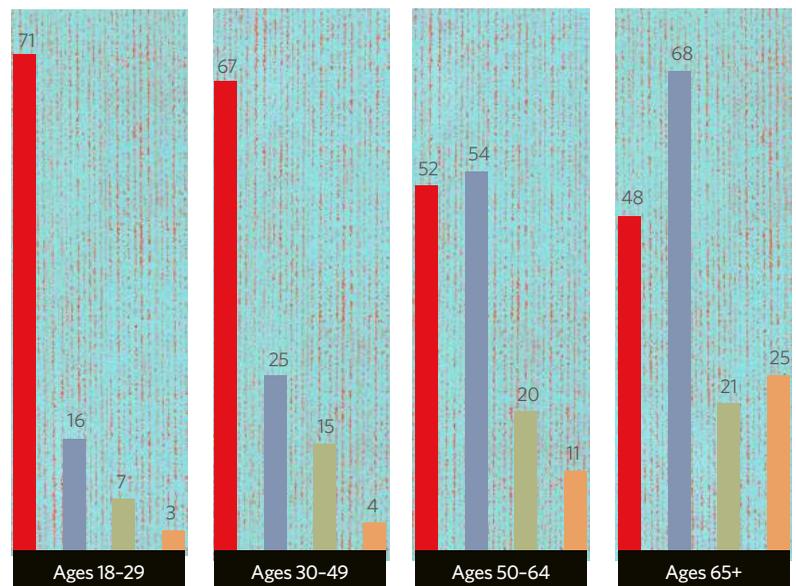
And as most legacy print news operations lost the large numbers of newsroom staff they once had, gaping holes emerged in local news coverage, affecting everything from city council meetings to school board sessions. This has meant public officials are held less accountable for issues such as government finances, public safety concerns and environmental risks.

The coronavirus pandemic only made things worse.

The Press & Journal, a weekly publication that had been providing its readership in Middletown, Pa., and surrounding Central Pennsylvania communities with a print newspaper for 166 years, printed its last edition on July 1, 2020. Publishers Joseph and Louise Sukle wrote their own newspaper’s “obituary” on its website, telling its faithful readers that local advertising decreased by more than 80 percent when Pennsylvania shut down due to the pandemic.

DIGITAL AGE(S)

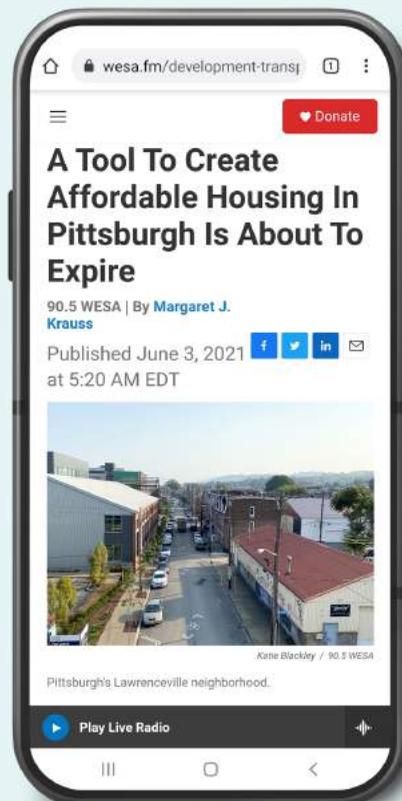
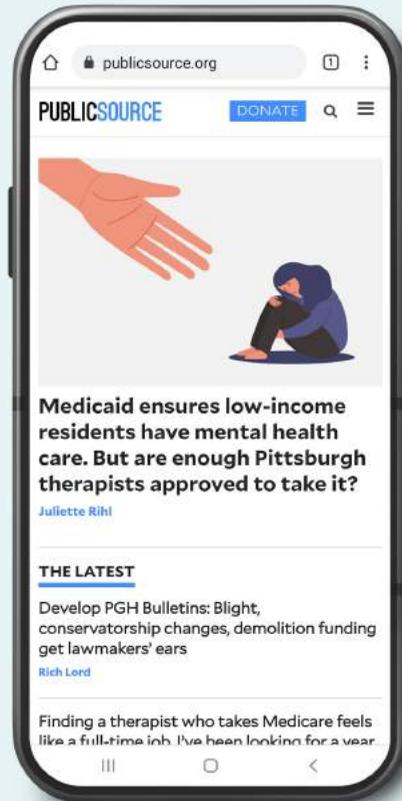
A Pew Research Center survey showing where percentages of adults get their news reveals how different generations have different preferences for news sources. But the strong use of digital devices across the board—even among older groups who watch television news more—and the substantially lower preference for print publications, including among those 65 and older, explain why newspapers in particular are struggling. The survey allowed respondents to pick more than one preference from the options of smartphone, computer or tablet; television; radio; and print publications.



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020, Pew Research Center.

WELL-INFORMED

Nonprofit, often digitally based journalism outlets are trying to connect with local communities and cover issues that are important to residents. Among the nonprofit outlets receiving support from The Heinz Endowments are, clockwise from top left, PublicSource, Environmental Health News, Spotlight PA and WESA 90.5 FM.



“The money just ran out,” Louise Sukle said in an interview published June 24, 2020, on the news website PennLive. “There was nothing more to take its place. We had to make the decision very quickly. ... It’s the hardest thing we ever had to do.”

Pittsburgh Catholic, which was the official weekly publication of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh since 1844, ceased its print editions in March 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic began, terminating nearly a dozen employees.

Foundations stepping up and stepping in

One of the largest philanthropies trying to keep local as well as national news coverage alive across the country is the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

“Questions about police accountability and discipline of police officers is something that also has been driven by PublicSource reporting because people are asking questions, bringing our articles to the Pittsburgh City Council meetings and talking about it.”

Mila Sanina
executive director, PublicSource



President Alberto Iburgüen said the foundation is committed to funding nonprofit journalism throughout the U.S. because “it is absolutely essential for an effective democracy that you have an informed citizenry and an engaged community. ... You need constant, constant awareness on the part of citizens, and that awareness begins with consistently reliable information so the citizens are informed when they make their choices.”

In 2019, the Knight Foundation announced a \$300 million commitment to independent journalism over the subsequent five years, looking to fund national organizations that also work on the local level. For example, the foundation provided the group Report for America with \$5 million to help place journalists in underserved local newsrooms across the country.

A growing number of nonprofit news outlets have joined the Institute for Nonprofit News, which now boasts more than 300 member-organizations in North America. Some nonprofit news organizations have received acclaim and readership on a national level, including regional outlets, such as The Texas Tribune and the Voice of San Diego, and those offering more extensive national news coverage like ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity and the Center for Investigative Reporting.

Within the last decade, more and more regional foundations have been supporting nonprofit journalism organizations with the goal of holding local government officials accountable while elevating the voices of community residents.

David Roger, president of the Hillman Family Foundations in Pittsburgh, acknowledged that initially he didn’t see the place for foundations to participate in supporting nonprofit journalism, “but over time, it became clear to us that we did have a role to educate both the public and the next generation of newspeople and journalists.”

“It wasn’t long before we began to see where we thought we could play a part in helping preserve journalism and news coverage at the community level,” he said. “It’s a pretty straightforward proposition: We have to have an educated public, an educated electorate, in order to have good policy at the community



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Terry O’Reilly
president and CEO,
Pittsburgh Community Broadcasting Corp.

level. We believe as much as anybody does that if we’re going to have a vibrant democracy, there’s no question, we have to have accountability.”

Among the nonprofit news outlets that the Hillman Family Foundations, the Endowments and other philanthropies in the Pittsburgh region support is PublicSource. The independent, online news organization covers topics that include education, the environment, mental health and social justice, and is committed to public service journalism.

“I think the work that PublicSource is doing is vitally important in terms of its investigative function and how it provides in-depth coverage of local issues, in discipline-specific and community-based ways,” said Janet Sarbaugh, the Endowments’ vice president of Creativity, one of the grantmaking areas that provides a large percentage of the foundation’s nonprofit journalism funding.

Support from the Endowments helped PublicSource establish a development and planning beat, and Ms. Sarbaugh said she has

been impressed with PublicSource reporters' tenacity in covering public meetings and a wide range of neighborhood development issues.

Mila Sanina, PublicSource's executive director, said that the organization's impact on the community has been growing. She cited a series of reports done over the past year by staff writer Juliette Rihl that have focused on inmate treatment at the Allegheny County Jail.

"Questions about police accountability and discipline of police officers is something that also has been driven by PublicSource reporting," Ms. Sanina said, "because people are asking questions, bringing our articles to the Pittsburgh City Council meetings and talking about it."

Another nonprofit news outlet receiving considerable philanthropic support in the Pittsburgh region is public radio station WESA-FM (90.5), a National Public Radio affiliate.

All of the major foundations in Pittsburgh support local public radio, according to Terry O'Reilly, president and CEO of Pittsburgh Community Broadcasting Corp., WESA's parent company.

"The big foundations in town, I think, share a very broad vision for the importance of journalism—the fact that journalism is vital to a thriving and growing community," he said.

In addition to supporting WESA's news coverage broadly, the Endowments' grant-making has helped to fund The Allegheny Front, an independent organization that focuses on local environmental issues and hosts an eponymously named weekly radio show on WESA. The Endowments' support is part of the foundation's efforts to promote a cleaner and healthier environment in the region.

Pittsburgh has its share of environmental issues, such as threats to the air and water quality and high levels of lead and radon in buildings, explained Philip Johnson, the Endowments' senior program director of Environment & Health for the Endowments. Supporting "The Allegheny Front" show on WESA "fits into a strategy where information, awareness and education is an important feature of understanding why environment and health matter in the region," he said.

WESA wants to lead the way in Pittsburgh for high-quality, high-impact local journalism,

especially on its digital platforms, a move that became more pressing as the Post-Gazette scaled back its print editions, Mr. O'Reilly said. He added that the future of good, fact-based, day-to-day journalism in the region looks bleak unless other organizations are filling the void.

"We've decided that we want to step up," he said.

As local foundations also have stepped up, they have been strategic in their support of nonprofit journalism so that it can have the greatest impact.

For example, in addition to supporting The Allegheny Front to bring attention to environmental issues in the Pittsburgh region, the Endowments provides funding for Environmental Health News, an online media platform that covers environmental news across the country and opened its first regional reporting bureau in Pittsburgh in 2018. EHN is a publication of Environmental Health Sciences, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on promoting science in public forums on environmental health issues.

Encouraging media collaborations has been another way the Endowments and other foundations are strategically advancing journalism in the face of dwindling media resources. This philanthropic support has helped launch online platforms like Spotlight PA, a nonprofit organization that provides investigative journalism about Pennsylvania government and then partners with both commercial and nonprofit media to distribute the reporting across the state.

Also receiving foundation funding is the Pittsburgh Media Partnership, an initiative of the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University. The partnership is a collective of 23 local media organizations that collaborate at different times to produce stories on particular issues affecting residents in the Pittsburgh region.

"Someone once said to me that sunlight is the best disinfectant," Endowments Sustainability Vice President Andrew McElwaine said. "Having an active media, keeping our region informed and keeping people honest and pointing to persons or problems in the community is extremely valuable to having a healthy society." **h**



Photos courtesy of Pittsburgh Black Media Federation

One way that foundations like The Heinz Endowments have supported journalism has been by funding initiatives to help increase diversity and inclusion in the field. Among such programs is the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation's Frank Bolden Urban Multimedia Workshop, which has provided journalism training to Black high school students, like those in the top photo, for nearly four decades. Television and radio talk show host Chris Moore, center, is a co-founder and co-director of the workshop. Workshop volunteer instructors include career professionals like KDKA-TV photojournalist Aaron Sledge, bottom left.

DIVERSIFYING TALENT IN MEDIA

HEINZ ENDOWMENTS SUPPORT OF LOCAL JOURNALISM INCLUDES FUNDING PROJECTS THAT PROMOTE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN MEDIA. BY CHRISTIANA DILLARD

Last year, Pittsburgh was the focus of national attention when then-Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter Alexis Johnson and photojournalist Michael Santiago, both Black, were barred by the newspaper from covering the city's anti-police brutality protests. Ms. Johnson had posted a tweet that jokingly connected the upheaval created by Kenny Chesney fans after a concert to complaints of looting during some of the demonstrations against police killings of unarmed Black people. Mr. Santiago had tweeted support of his colleague's perspective.

Although the Post-Gazette received backlash for its discipline decision and eventually made leadership changes, it also lost the two staff members. Mr. Santiago now works as a photojournalist with Getty Images in New York City, and Ms. Johnson moved on to Vice News as a Washington, D.C.-based correspondent.

Such treatment of Black journalists and Black perspectives in Pittsburgh is not new. In 2019, Letrell Crittenden, a Tow Center for Digital Journalism fellow, published a report on Pittsburgh media's challenges with diversity and inclusion, "The Pittsburgh Problem: Race, Media and Everyday Life in the Steel City."

After interviewing 20 journalists who worked in Pittsburgh newsrooms, 16 of whom were of color, he found that although Pittsburgh is often cited as one of the country's most livable cities, most of its Black journalists felt they lacked opportunities for mentorship and acceptance inside and outside their newsrooms.

"When we're talking about building up diversity and inclusion inside of newsrooms or any other industry, that should also factor in the overall livability of the community where people are residing," Dr. Crittenden said.

Heinz Endowments-funded research published in 2011 and 2020 examined local news coverage of Black people in Pittsburgh. The studies found that the majority of the depictions of Black boys and men were related to sports and crime, and the overall

coverage of Black men, women and children remains low when compared to their white counterparts. The 2020 report "Portrayal and Perception II: Content Analysis of Pittsburgh Media Coverage of African Americans" also recommended that local media organizations learn from African American media outlets, such as the weekly New Pittsburgh Courier newspaper, about the different types of narratives that could be told about Black people.

"The fact that that representation doesn't exist means there are communities that are not going to have their stories told and certainly not with the kind of objectivity and, I think, with the same kind of voice that otherwise may be the case," said Stanley Thompson, the Endowments' senior program director for Education, one of the foundation's grantmaking areas that has supported efforts to expand such inclusion in media.

Among the initiatives that have received Endowments funding are various media projects for Black youth sponsored by the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation (PBMF), the primary professional support organization for journalists of color in the region. One of PBMF's most impactful efforts is the long-running Frank Bolden Urban Multimedia Workshop, a free, seven-day intensive program for high school students interested in news writing, broadcast journalism, photojournalism and digital media.

The Endowments' relationship with the federation over the years has been an example of philanthropic investment in journalism diversity and inclusion that is appreciated by Olga George and Chris Moore, co-directors of the workshop. Ms. George noted that the financial and in-kind support was a way of recognizing that Black youth need opportunities to make mistakes and grow, a privilege that is not often afforded to them.

"The foundation [support] gives us an opportunity to change that picture, not just in the kids' minds but also in the community's mind," Ms. George said. "And not just the Black community but the community at large."

Mr. Moore agreed.

"The funding has been wide and varied but all with that goal of increasing diversity," he said. "I think [our program] works because I can point to students all over the nation who are making the places where they work a little bit more diverse."

Alumni of the workshop have gone on to successful careers in Pittsburgh, such as WPXI-TV reporter Sarafina James, and across the country, such as Washington Post reporter Keith L. Alexander, who was part of the Post team that was awarded a 2016 Pulitzer Prize for documenting fatal police shootings of civilians across the nation.

"If you want communities, especially communities of color, to have the kind of asset-framing in the things that are being done, and you want to make sure that that story is told in a way that can be empowering and in a way that can also provide a different kind of narrative, then you'd want to create your own pipeline to that profession," Dr. Thompson said.

Endowments-funded research and other studies showing underrepresentation of Black journalists in newsrooms across the country also led the foundation to recently award \$320,000 to the social justice artist and activist collective IHood Media to launch BlackPittsburgh.com this year. The online media platform will focus on providing in-depth journalistic coverage of issues affecting Black communities in the Pittsburgh region.

BlackPittsburgh.com joins the ranks of Black-run media that have historically championed the issues of Black people across the country. Among them is the New Pittsburgh Courier, which traces its roots back to 1910 and was cited several times in the "Portrayal and Perception II" study for the breadth of issues it covered in the region's Black community.

Rob Taylor Jr., the Courier's managing editor, contends that having a Black-led publication with Black staff has enabled the newspaper to publish work that is "powerful, impactful, and really pushes the envelope." But he asserted that making any impact possible starts with supporting Black journalists.

"I always say that a real true sign of diversity is hiring more African Americans and creating more wealth for them and their families," Mr. Taylor said. "That's how you really create diversity. Because once you hire them, they can have their voices heard and they can help you make decisions that truly increase diversity. It just can't be an entirely white staff trying to cover African American issues."

Christiana Dillard is a freelance writer. Her last story for *h* was published in Issue 1, 2019, and looked at the #MeTooPA initiative that provides a hotline for survivors of sexual assault and harassment who need legal and counseling advice.