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How Can We Emerge Out of the Pandemic with the Journalism We Need?

By Peggy Holman

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Connecting people and communities for the common good is an emerging mission for journalism. A growing movement is helping lead the way.

Disruption liberates us from the status quo. It sparks innovation. Pick your system: education, health care, politics, you name it. Disruption is everywhere. Coronavirus puts disruption on steroids. Journalism, a system of cultural nonfiction storytelling, helps make sense of upheaval. Yet it, too, is in the midst of a revolution.

Students of ecosystems know that [when a species dies, it opens the space for a different animal to move into the niche](#).^[1] When a keystone species dies, like elephants or newspapers, it opens the way for total collapse or for something novel to emerge.

The [Two Loops](#)^[2] theory of change in the picture below offers a view into how disruption transforms systems. A paradigm is a set of ideas that shape structures. Our current paradigm has peaked and is declining. Meanwhile, innovators experiment. New ideas emerge that shape novel, often more inclusive structures. Ultimately, bridges provide paths for people to cross the chasms.

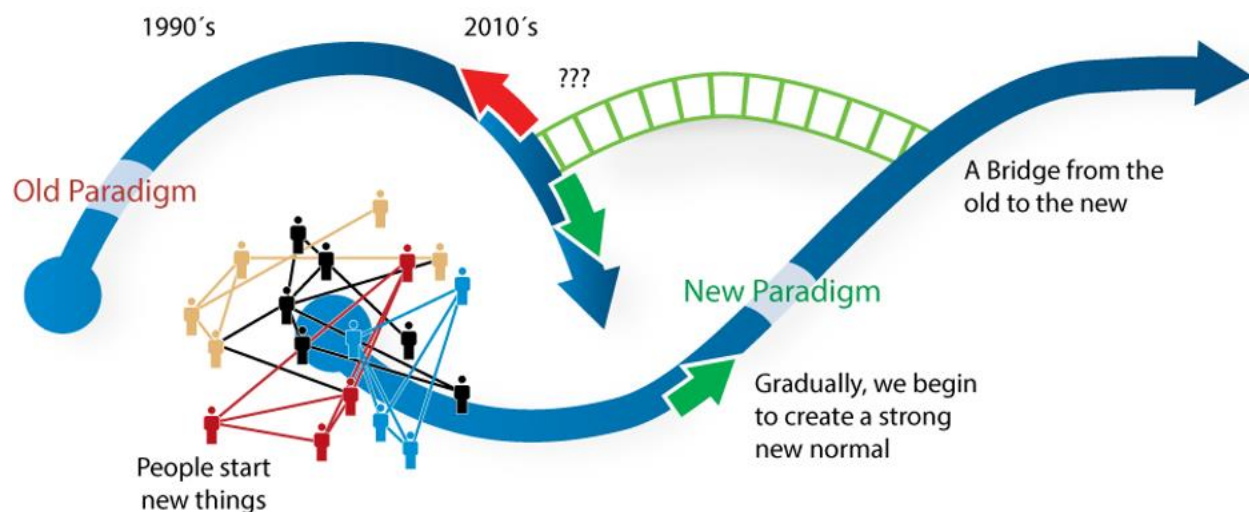


Figure 1. Two Loops theory of change, Berkana Institute²

This pattern describes what is happening in journalism. It offers a story of hope and possibility even as local and regional newspapers implode. An implosion hastened by the novel Coronavirus from lost ad revenues. Intrepid adventurers, mostly working locally or regionally, are reinventing journalism that serves the needs of an inclusive society.

The table below highlights *shifts* underway in local and regional journalism. It reflects the changing assumptions from an old to a new paradigm. Many see the First Amendment as a de facto charter for journalism’s role in civil society. It provides a framework for understanding the new paradigm. A 21st century interpretation of First Amendment freedoms -- religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition – mirror these trends. The implication: journalism is moving towards an expanded role. It is fostering participation in civic life.

Table1. Framework for Civic Journalism

1st Amendment Freedoms with a 21st Century Perspective	Traditional	Possible Future	Trend in Journalism	Action/ Outcome
Religion <i>Freedom to express who we are holds responsibility to encourage a spirit of belonging</i>	Monocultural	Multicultural	Community first	Include/ Belonging
Speech <i>Freedom to speak brings the responsibility to connect and listen deeply</i>	Lecturing	Listening	Relational	Connect/ Compassion & Trust
Press <i>Freedom to tell our stories brings the responsibility to be constructive, to inspire by illuminating possibilities</i>	Problems	Possibilities	Constructive	Inspire/ Holistic cultural narrative
Assembly <i>The right to assemble can be used to engage in dialogue across difference, activating the public</i>	Debate	Dialogue	Engaged	Activate/ Innovation
Petition <i>When things aren’t working, it is the right – and responsibility – of the people to adapt the system to their needs for a more perfect union. To strive for E pluribus unum – out of many, one.</i>	Go alone	Come Together	Collaborative	Adapt/ Individual freedom & common good

Elements of these shifts in journalism are already in motion, introduced by such intermediaries as [Hearken](#), [Solutions Journalism Network](#), [SpaceShip Media](#), and [Journalism That Matters](#). The emergent paradigm resulting from these efforts is changing how journalists listen, tell stories, engage, and support their communities in imagining a better future. Of course, there remains the matter of money. No one has cracked the code on a viable business model for local journalism. But in the interim, philanthropy, which has already moved in this direction, can provide a vital bridge to support the emergence of the journalism we need today.

Of course, even as this new paradigm emerges, it is clearly not dominant yet. Indeed, at present, we are experiencing fragmentation, conflict, and the noise of too much information and misinformation. Yet the global pandemic has made clear that we're all in this together. Journalism's transformation is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. But it is possible. We can accelerate the creative, courageous work of people who are liberating journalism. It can spark a renaissance which liberates people to engage in civic life.

In revolutionary times, the opportunity for new ideas to take root is high. What better way to invest our energies than to accelerate the reinvention of journalism of, by, and for the people?

The shifts

The description of each shift starts with words of the First Amendment and a modern interpretation. A question, discussion, and examples follow.

Community first: from monocultural to multicultural.

What if journalism supported a widespread sense of belonging, not because we conform, but because we bring our uniqueness of being?

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;

Why was religion included in the First Amendment? It seems different from rest of the First Amendment freedoms –speech, press, assembly, and petition. These freedoms seem like acts of citizenship. How does religious practice fit? Our government was designed by and for white, land-owning men. It is homogenous

by today's standards. Could religion be how the framers thought about diversity and inclusion? What if they were protecting diverse participation in civic life?

The [American Society of News Editors](#) has tracked newsroom diversity since 1978. In that year, the workforce in daily print news was 96-percent white. Today, diversity remains a challenge: 78 percent of the daily print and online-only news workforce is white, while 37 percent of the U.S. population are people of color. It's not surprising that most news organizations miss stories that accurately reflect and matter to communities of color. Not to mention helping white people understand what those stories mean to them.

KPCC, a public radio station based in southern California, is discovering how to be a multicultural news organization. Ashley Alvarado, KPCC's Director of Engagement, led them to create an [award-winning engagement portfolio](#) with activities like "Feeding the Conversation" and the "Human Vote Guide."

Alvarado draws a useful distinction between audiences and communities. Audiences are the people who already interact with a news organization. Communities are the larger bodies that make up the geographic or interest area served. Most communities are more diverse than the audience reached. To change that, Alvarado, with managing producer of live events, Jon Cohn, conceived [Unheard LA](#), a live storytelling show. Real people share stories of struggles, survival, hope and fears, of the unexpected and the unbelievable.

Unheard LA is turning community members into audience. Journalists are developing a more nuanced understanding of their communities. Community members are celebrated for who they are and affirmed in belonging to their community.

Journalism as relational: from lecturing to listening

How do journalists and the larger culture hear our diversity of voices in ways that generate understanding, compassion, and trust?

...or abridging the freedom of speech,

Before the First Amendment, free speech could be punished at the whim of the British overlords. Today, hate speech and vitriol in public discourse are rampant. Journalism that increases listening fosters connection, compassion, and trust. They shift relationships among journalists and audience. By lecturing less and listening more, community can take a more central place in the journalism.

Selecting stories, diversifying sources, offering new forms of storytelling and distribution that connect us.

Traditionally, information was scarce and hard to find. News organizations were a center for information, so they lectured. They told us what is going on and how experts interpreted events. Today, the Internet makes information more readily accessible. We get news from friends through social media. No longer does a single authoritative voice speak for all of us.

In a cacophony of voices, journalism can be an effective community connector and curator. By listening and fostering listening among the public, deeper relationships bolster understanding, connection, and trust. Journalism can move beyond amplifying the views of top-down gatekeepers or highlighting battles between sides. It can support understanding arising from community conversations. By lifting up many voices, including those of ordinary people, we all become grounded in a more holistic understanding of what's happening.

Founded in 2015, [City Bureau](#) is a nonprofit civic journalism lab based on the South Side of Chicago. It brings journalists and communities together to produce media that is impactful, equitable and responsive to the public. They are breaking traditional definitions of who is a journalist with their award-winning [Documenters project](#). Documenters are intergenerational and diverse, reflecting their communities. City Bureau recruits, trains and pays this group of engaged citizens to be the ears of their communities. They monitor local government and contribute to a communal pool of knowledge. The [award-winning](#) model is being shared in other locations. They are democratizing local news and information, particularly in communities of color.

Two other organizations revolutionizing how journalists relate to their audiences are [Hearken](#) and [GroundSource](#). These platforms support newsrooms in listening. If your local news organization has posed a question and invited a public response, chances are they are using Hearken. If they connect with you by text message, there's a good chance Groundsource is behind it.

Journalism as constructive: from problems to possibilities

How can journalism inspire us to step in, not opt out?

...or of the press;

A free press was pivotal to the revolution. The need to be informed sparked a literacy movement that enabled self-governance to grow across a continent. The

pamphleteers of old were fiercely partisan. Today, constructive approaches to journalism inspire the public to get involved.

When news organizations tell stories without meaningful context, some, often people of color, are misrepresented or rendered invisible. By reporting mostly problems, people check out. Constructive journalism doesn't shy away from problems. It puts them in perspective. It tells stories within a situational context. It paints a nuanced picture of what happened and what's possible. "News fasts" – avoiding the news for mental health – become irrelevant.

[The Evergrey](#), an online news organization in Seattle, develops stories about complex topics starting with listening to its audience. They foster civic engagement. They take on tough subjects, like homelessness. They also offer fun to the thousands of millennials moving to the city. Their events help people meet others and get involved in civic life. Their brilliant mix of highlighting people and places, providing context about the city to the many newcomers, and offering ways to get involved integrates them into the community. They're also willing to experiment. Following the 2016 presidential election, they invited readers on [bus trip](#) to rural Oregon for an in-person conversation across political divides.

Two leaders in bringing constructive journalism to newsrooms are the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) in the U.S. and the [Constructive Journalism Network](#) in Europe. Find out who is trying something constructive in your geography from their websites. Encourage your local newsroom to learn about their work.

Journalism as Engagement: From debate to dialogue

How can journalism foster understanding across differences?

...or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,

We tend to think of assembly in terms of protest. Yet it is also essential for dialogue. Democracy requires us to talk with each other.^[3] Reading words on a page or a screen are individual acts. We create through our interactions. In dialogue, differences spark curiosity and connection. It can activate people to create together. Through "engagement editors," some journalism organizations are inviting the public into dialogue.

Convening community dialogue – as many media, like [Capital Public Radio](#) in Sacramento, have done – goes beyond journalism's traditional role of providing

information people need. Some engagement editors are hosting community conversations. These conversations connect people with others who care about an issue. It can activate the public to get involved in complex issues like homelessness or the opioid crisis.

[Spaceship Media](#), working with the Alabama Media Group, provided an online space for dialogue shortly after the 2016 election. They [brought together women from Alabama who voted for Trump and women from California who voted for Clinton](#) in a Facebook group for two months. The journalists listening contributed stories in response to questions raised by the group. For example, in discussing the Affordable Care Act, the women wondered why progressive women loved it and conservative women hated it. Journalists reported on how different the implementations were. In Alabama, costs went up and options went down. It was just the opposite in California. At the end of project, the women chose to keep meeting. Their meetings didn't change minds. That wasn't the point. They did change attitudes. And fostered new relationships.

Spaceship Media continues to be a platform for bridging divides, supporting news organizations in hosting conversations on guns, agriculture, education, immigration, and more.

Journalism is Collaborative: From going alone to coming together

How does journalism play its role in a system of civic engagement for our common good?

...and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

What a brilliant catchall! If something isn't working, the people have the right to petition for change. What better way to ensure an active, engaged public than to craft the expectation into a founding document? The shifts in journalism are fostering a more inclusive, constructive, and engaged civic ecosystem. The more journalism helps us weave our communities together, the more we rediscover the power of our national motto. E Pluribus Unum: out of many, one.

Journalists often pride themselves on being independent, objective observers. But increasingly, stories, like the Panama papers, have succeeded through collaborative efforts. Many news organizations are partnering with other types of organizations to host meaningful conversations, community storytelling, and even arts events. These innovations connect them in an interdependent web of civic engagement that supports communities and civic life to thrive. They help develop the capacity for discovering

common good. They can help us dream together about the futures we want and generate widely embraced responses to collective challenges and opportunities.

News organizations are partnering with libraries, civic organizations, and others to take on issues like homelessness. [Journalism That Matters](#) worked with Impact Hub, a social innovation incubator, The Evergrey, and Seattle's street paper, Real Change to host [Mobilizing creativity, compassion, and community to address homelessness](#). Arts/media organization collaborations also cultivate a more cohesive community. For example, The Center for Investigative Reporting has used theatre to deal with deadly serious subjects like [rape in the fields](#) in US agriculture. WETS in Jonesborough Tennessee hosts a radio program, [Story Town Radio Show \(formerly Yarn Exchange\)](#) using a storytelling practice called [StoryBridgeto](#) to create a monthly radio play. The community provides real-life stories and forms the cast. The plays strengthen community, compassion, and trust.

We are in the early days of discovering the power of such collaborations to reweave the fabric of our communities. They seem to renew our structures of civic life so that a diverse populace feels their uniqueness matters and they belong. Early signs are the collaborations grow commitment to a shared sense of the common good.

Together, the shifts underway could bring about a more inclusive, just, compassionate, and engaged society.

What supports this good work?

In a word, philanthropy. National and international organizations, like the New York Times, or the Wall Street Journal, have the reach to succeed commercially. Local or regional journalism don't have the scale to support their work. Mark Glaser, executive editor of MediaShift, documents [five emerging financial models](#): cooperatives, nonprofits, government support, mergers between public media and digital startups, and state-level ecosystem support. My take: as journalism assumes a new shape, with more constructive storytelling and engagement for multicultural communities, unexpected revenue models emerge. Until then, national and community foundations have a critical role to play in funding a revolution in journalism for vibrant civic life.

Just over 230 years ago, the founders of the U.S. embarked on a risky and uncertain experiment in self-government made possible in part by the invention and growth of

newspapers. Today's revolution, equally uncertain, has the potential to midwife a more inclusive, just, compassionate, and engaged society.

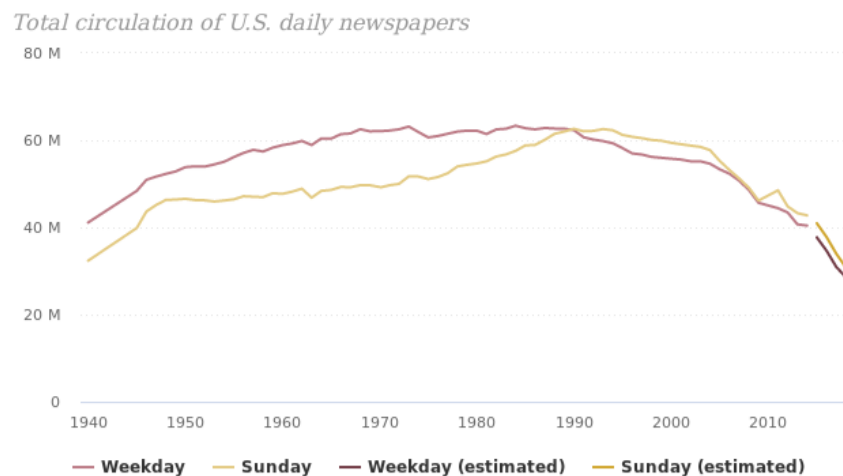
Sidebar: The death of newspapers

The numbers are stark. A 2018 UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability study, [The Expanding News Dessert](#), lays bare the reality. Dropping from 9,000 to 7,200, about 20 percent of metro and community newspapers disappeared between 2004 and 2018. Many of those left are shells of their former selves.

The loss of journalists at newspapers is particularly troubling. They have historically been the plankton of the ecosystem by feeding original content to online aggregators, TV news, and other media.

What caused the decline?

While many journalists blame technology, it has been underway since 1984. Ten years before the World Wide Web was born. That year, daily newspapers reached 74% of households. In 2018, the number was 24%. In 1968, the number of daily papers exceeded the number of households.^[4] Digital news sources have not come close to replacing the content or reach once provided by newspapers.



Pew research Center Fact Sheet, 2019^[5]

Blaming technology misses the deeper question of why audiences leave. For many, particularly people of color, their news and information needs were never well met by

traditional news organizations. They just didn't have an alternative until the Internet freed publishing. As Tonya Mosley, a host at NPR put it, "when a newsroom diversifies, news will look and sound different...Centering other voices and perspectives takes real work; it's hard and messy."^[6]

Stories of, by, and for the dominant culture leave an increasing part of the population unseen or misrepresented. Further, news strikes some audience as so relentlessly negative that health professionals recommend media fasts. Is it any wonder that people are turning away and taking ad revenue with them?

Numerous studies have linked the loss of local news with declines in community well-being. Among the findings: civic engagement drops, fewer people vote, voting becomes more partisan, local government's borrowing costs rise, Congress people work less for their constituencies, government corruption increases, companies are less likely to attend to their pollution. Plus, multiple studies detail the loss of connection and empathy among community members.^{[7],[8],[9]}

The challenge of broadening the mix of journalists, sources and audiences is daunting. It is just part of the challenge. Since anyone can publish and no one is necessarily bound by a code of ethics, as most journalism organizations are, we live in an era of multiple truths. Every identity group can offer their version of the story without loyalty to agreed-upon facts. Media has fragmented. We have gone from a single dominant truth dictated by the editors and publishers of daily newspapers, mainly white men, to a dizzying array of views with little clarity of who speaks truth. The resulting cacophony of voices leaves many confused about who and what to believe.

How do we find our way out of the noise?

So much of journalism today is designed for stable times. The approach can fragment perspectives as journalists specialize in education, health care, transportation, sports, politics, or other beats. Innovations cut across specialties. They can fall between the cracks. In revolutionary times, journalism innovators bring a spirit of discovery to boundary spanning experiments. I'm betting on the ones that support belonging, connection, inspiration, innovation, and resilience.



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