



The Community Impact of Independent Journalism

Research by Danny Hayes for The Statewide News Collective

Executive summary

The struggles of the local journalism industry in recent decades are well documented. The financial crisis in the newspaper business, brought about by the rise of the internet and social media, has hollowed out newsrooms, left many communities without reliable sources of local news, and reduced Americans' engagement with state and local politics. "The loss of local news," one report [noted](#), "is having an insidious effect on our democracy."

But as the newspaper industry has foundered, a countervailing force has emerged. In the last two decades, hundreds of digital state and local news organizations have [launched](#), seeking to fill the void left by the decline of legacy outlets. Many are nonprofits and have joined the ranks of existing independent media to provide coverage of communities where local news has grown scarce.

By some measures, these local journalism outlets have already had a major impact. Mississippi Today [won](#) a Pulitzer Prize after revealing a multi-million-dollar state government welfare scandal. Arizona Luminaria's [reporting](#) on deaths at a Pima County jail led to calls for a special legislative session. Wisconsin Watch's [coverage](#) of a local tool maker prompted Walmart to stop selling gloves allegedly being made with forced prison labor. Examples of this kind of accountability reporting abound.

But the broader impact of these independent journalism outlets on the communities they cover is less clear. To what extent do they serve as trusted sources of information for state and local residents? Do they help news consumers become more informed about pressing issues? Does their journalism encourage residents to participate in the civic life of their communities? Generally speaking, what kind of community impact do they have?

One reason we know less about community impact is that it is often hard to observe. Unlike policy changes or legislative action that result from investigative reporting, community impact occurs over the long term, at the individual level, and out of sight of newsrooms. Consequently, we lack evidence about the ways that independent local outlets inform their users and mobilize civic participation. But identifying and measuring community impact is crucial to gauging the contribution these organizations make to the democratic process in an era of declining local news.

This report summarizes the results of a research project designed to measure the community impact of three independent news organizations: New Hampshire Public Radio (NHPR), Bridge Michigan, and Montana Free Press (MFTP). Each is part of The Lenfest Institute for Journalism's Statewide News Collective (SNC), a community of news organizations serving statewide audiences. Statewide news outlets represent an important link between citizens and the state institutions that make policy affecting virtually every facet of residents' lives. The impact of these news organizations is especially important given the [decline](#) in full-time state government reporting over the last decade.

The centerpiece of the research is a survey in each state that gauged residents' news habits, views of important issues, and levels of civic engagement. We also conducted a content analysis to analyze the contribution that each outlet makes to its state's information environment.

The findings show that independent news organizations are having a significant impact on their communities by serving as trusted sources of information, keeping their audiences informed about major issues and stories, and encouraging civic engagement. This constitutes a bright spot in a challenging media environment and underscores the importance of vibrant state and local news for promoting civic and political engagement in local communities.

Some of the report's key findings:

- **SNC outlets get high marks for trustworthiness and addressing key issues.** The SNC outlets are viewed as trustworthy sources of news by many users, the overwhelming majority of whom say the outlets effectively cover important issues in their state. For example, up to 90% of SNC consumers express trust in the information they get from the outlet. On average, SNC outlets are rated more highly on these dimensions than are other state and local news sources.

- **SNC outlets contribute in a big way to their states' information environments.** In particular, they devote substantial coverage to issues that most residents identify as important: politics and government, the environment, health care, and education. In some cases, this coverage has an impact beyond their core audiences — even residents who do not regularly get news from SNC outlets express familiarity with their major stories. One reason is that 52% of SNC outlet consumers regularly share their content with friends and family.
- **SNC users are better informed about state and local issues and more likely to engage in civic activity than those who get news from other sources.** Across numerous measures, they are more engaged with their communities and more likely to participate in state and local politics. For instance, SNC consumers are 22 percentage points more likely to feel informed about state issues than users of other outlets.
- **SNC coverage impacts users in various ways.** In a qualitative portion of the research, many SNC users could recall a story that made an impact on them. They explained how this coverage prompted them to learn more about important topics, to become more emotionally invested in issues, and to take action to solve civic problems.

Part I: Overview of statewide surveys

The three news outlets that are the focus of this research were selected as part of an application process open to all SNC members. NHPR, Bridge Michigan, and MTFP share a commitment to public interest journalism but differ in terms of geography, market size, and organization size and maturity.

NHPR is a public media organization founded in 1981 and covers New Hampshire and other parts of New England, delivering its coverage on the radio, podcasts, and its website. Bridge Michigan launched in 2006 in a large Midwestern state, publishing primarily on its website and through newsletters. MTFP, based in a small Mountain West state, started up in 2016 and distributes its content through its website and republication in other outlets. This diversity allows us to study community impact in a range of different contexts.

We conducted surveys in each state in April, May, and June 2024, partnering with the firm Qualtrics. Respondents were adult (18+) residents of each state and were recruited from Qualtrics' research panel. The samples were generally representative of each state's demographics, and we follow standard practice by weighting the data to more precisely approximate the state population. Details appear in the methodological appendix.

The surveys differ in at least two ways from audience surveys conducted by many news organizations. First, we interviewed both users and non-users of SNC outlets. This allows us to compare the groups to one another and analyze the impact that exposure to SNC outlet coverage has on various attitudes and behaviors. Second, the surveys included multiple questions about different types of civic engagement, providing an opportunity to examine the relationship between news habits and community involvement.

To gauge exposure to the SNC outlets' journalism, we asked respondents a number of questions about their news consumption habits. One question asked how frequently they got news and information from several state and local media sources, including the SNC outlet in their state. For each, respondents could say "often," "sometimes," "rarely," or "never."

In each state, significant portions of residents said they got news regularly (either "often" or "sometimes") from the SNC outlet. In New Hampshire, 35% of respondents said they got news from NHPR. In Michigan, 18% got news from Bridge Michigan. In Montana, 24% got news from MTFP. Throughout this report, these are the individuals we refer to as SNC outlet users.

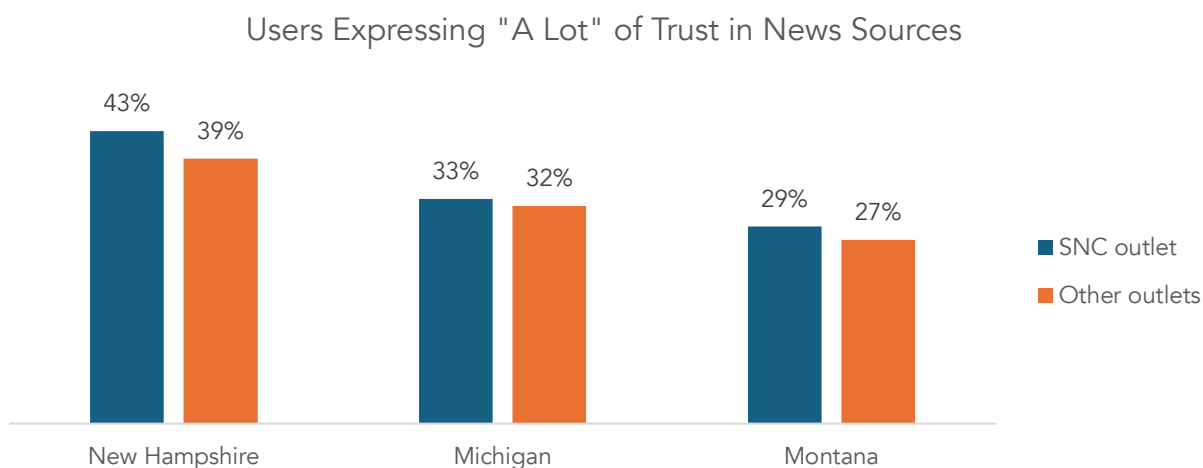
Part II: How users see SNC outlets and their coverage

One way that news organizations make an impact on their community is by producing journalism that consumers trust and that addresses their most important concerns. This is especially important at a time when trust in the media, including local news outlets, has been [declining](#).

In the survey, we asked residents of each state about the trustworthiness of the information they received from the state and local news outlets they used. The

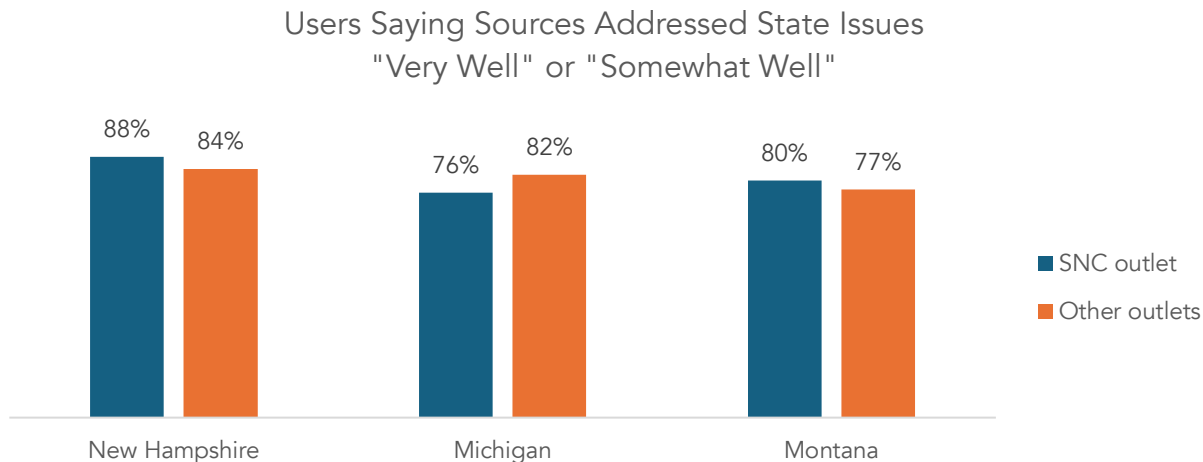
graph below shows the percentage of SNC outlet users in each state who said they had “a lot” of trust in the organization. For comparison, the graph also shows the average for users of other news outlets in each state.

For instance, 43% of NHPR readers and listeners expressed “a lot” of trust in NHPR’s content, while 39% of users of other outlets in the state said the same. Bridge Michigan and MTFP also received higher trust ratings than other news organizations in their state, although the differences are smaller. If we combine those who said they had “a lot” and “some” trust, the total for the SNC outlet in each state is between 79% and 90%. In other words, the overwhelming majority of users expressed some degree of trust in SNC outlets.



Note: Respondents were asked, “How much trust would you say you have in the information from the following news outlets? A lot, some, not too much, none at all, or don’t know?” They were then given list of state and local news sources. The graph displays the percentage of users of the relevant news outlets choosing “a lot.”

We also asked respondents how well they thought the outlets they used addressed the most important issues facing their state. This is one indicator of whether consumers believe a news outlet is adequately covering the topics that matter most.



Note: Respondents were asked, “How well do you think these news outlets address the most important issues facing [state name]? Very well, somewhat well, not too well, not well at all, or don’t know?” The graph displays the percentage of users of each news source choosing “very well” or “somewhat well.”

Once again, SNC outlets stack up well against other news sources in their states. Users of NHPR and MTFP were more likely than users of other outlets to say that they addressed issues facing the state “very well” or “quite well.” Bridge Michigan received slightly lower marks than other state outlets, but three-quarters of readers still said the site was effectively addressing key issues. When we asked respondents about how well news sources were addressing issues facing their specific local community, the patterns were very similar.

These results indicate that audiences for the SNC outlets in New Hampshire, Michigan, and Montana view their journalism favorably. Respondents expressed levels of trust and confidence in their coverage that are comparable to, or even slightly higher than, other news sources in their states.

Part III: SNC outlets’ contribution to the information environment

Another important form of community impact is the contribution that a news outlet makes to its state’s information environment. That is, how does a news outlet’s coverage enhance access to information about issues that community members find relevant to their lives?

Most news organizations have a general sense of how much attention they devote to their key areas of coverage. But quantifying this coverage in a systematic way can help demonstrate the contributions that a news outlet makes to its community’s information environment. This can then be paired with survey data to elaborate on how well a news outlet is addressing its community’s concerns.

To estimate the attention that each SNC outlet devoted to different areas of coverage, we conducted a content analysis from data provided by each outlet on every story they published in 2023. This allowed us to determine how much coverage the outlets devoted to a group of issues that constitute the core of their reporting. Details about the content analysis appear in the methodological appendix.

The table below presents the total number of stories published by each outlet in 2023 that dealt with four major areas – politics and government, the environment, health care, and education.¹

SNC outlets’ coverage of key topics in 2023

| | NHPR | Bridge Michigan | MTFP |
|-------------------------|------|-----------------|------|
| Politics and government | 656 | 576 | 773 |
| Environment | 365 | 265 | 153 |
| Health care | 299 | 200 | 327 |
| Education | 162 | 316 | 115 |

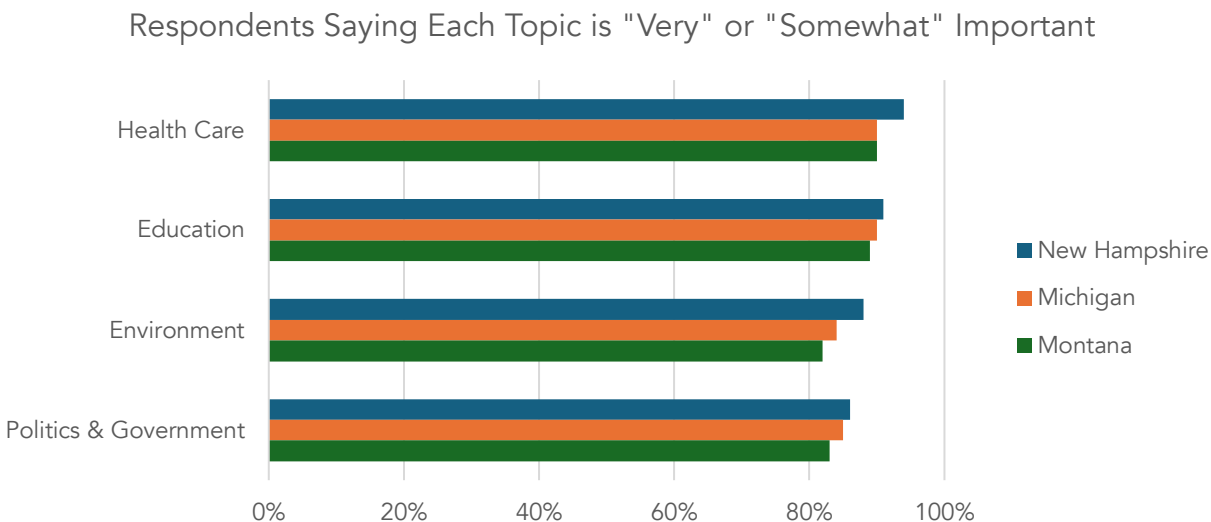
Note: Table displays the number of 2023 stories for each outlet coded as dealing with four issue areas, based on a content analysis. Stories could be coded as addressing more than one issue. Details on the content analysis appear in the methodological appendix.

¹ Because some stories do not fall into one of these four categories, the coding does not reflect SNC outlets’ reporting on other issues, such as crime, arts and culture, or the economy (unless they also dealt with one of the coded categories).

For every outlet, politics and government was the most common topic. In 2023, each SNC outlet published on average more than one story about government per day – and in the case of MTFP, it was more than two per day. The frequency of politics coverage reflects two realities. First, covering state and local government is a centerpiece of each organization’s mission, given the importance of independent reporting that holds elected officials accountable. Second, our coding scheme accounts for the fact that stories often address multiple topics, many of which intersect with government and politics in some capacity.²

At the same time, SNC outlets were also reporting about one story per week on each of the environment, health care, and education. In an era of declining coverage of state and local public affairs, these are significant contributions to the information environment.

Given this profile of each outlet’s coverage, we were able to use the survey to examine how state residents assess the importance of each coverage area. We presented all respondents – regardless of whether they were consumers of the SNC outlet – with a large list of issue categories, several of which reflect each outlet’s key coverage areas. Respondents then rated how important they thought it was for state and local news organizations to cover each.



² For instance, we coded a January 2023 Bridge Michigan piece about a new health commissioner in Ottawa County with a history of promoting unfounded claims about covid as both a health and a politics and government story.

Note: Respondents were asked, “How important would you say it is for state and local news outlets to cover the following topics in [state name]? Very important, somewhat important, not too important, not important at all, don’t know?” The graph displays the percentage of respondents in each state choosing “very important” or “somewhat important.”

The key finding is that residents generally see the topics that are the focus of each SNC outlet as important. For instance, more than 90% of respondents in each state said it was “very” or “somewhat” important to cover the health care system, a major area of focus for each SNC outlet. Large majorities also said the same about education, the environment, and politics and government.

Another way that sustained reporting on key issues can produce an impact is by reaching consumers who aren’t part of an outlet’s core audience. In some cases, residents may learn about a news organization’s coverage through other channels, such as republication or syndication. In other cases, competing news outlets may pick up on a story and follow up with their own reporting. Consumers may also be exposed to coverage through word of mouth or online sharing of stories from friends, family, or coworkers who do read MTFP. Indeed, in our surveys, an average of 52% of users of the SNC outlets said they regularly (“often” or “sometimes”) shared the outlet’s stories with others.³

That may be one reason many survey respondents who were not SNC outlet users were nonetheless familiar with some of their major stories. In the survey, we gave respondents short summaries of some of the SNC outlets’ big recent stories and asked respondents how much they had heard about each.

For the three most well-known stories for each outlet, an average of 53% of state residents said they had heard “a lot” or “some” about those stories. For instance, in Michigan, 59% of respondents said they had heard at least some about the state’s declining population and education crisis, which Bridge Michigan has reported on extensively. This is despite the fact that fewer than two in 10 Michigan residents are regular Bridge Michigan readers.

In New Hampshire, 53% of respondents said they had heard about NHPR’s reporting on questionable claims about an immigration border crisis in the state. In Montana, 49% of residents were familiar with MTFP’s reporting on Native American children in the state’s foster care system. These numbers are significantly larger than NHPR and MTFP’s core audiences.

³ In New Hampshire, the share was 52%. In Michigan, it was 59%. And in Montana, it was 44%.

To be sure, some respondents likely learned about these developments elsewhere, either through their own personal networks or in independent reporting by other news sources. But the SNC outlets' coverage likely contributed to the diffusion of knowledge, indicating important downstream impacts well beyond their regular audiences.

These analyses indicate that independent news organizations are making major contributions to their state's information environment. SNC outlets are addressing issues that state residents see as important. And that coverage is reaching not only its own audiences, but also residents who don't regularly get news from the outlet. This suggests a wider and perhaps underappreciated way that independent news outlets' coverage have an impact on the communities they serve.

Part IV: SNC outlets' impact on knowledge and engagement

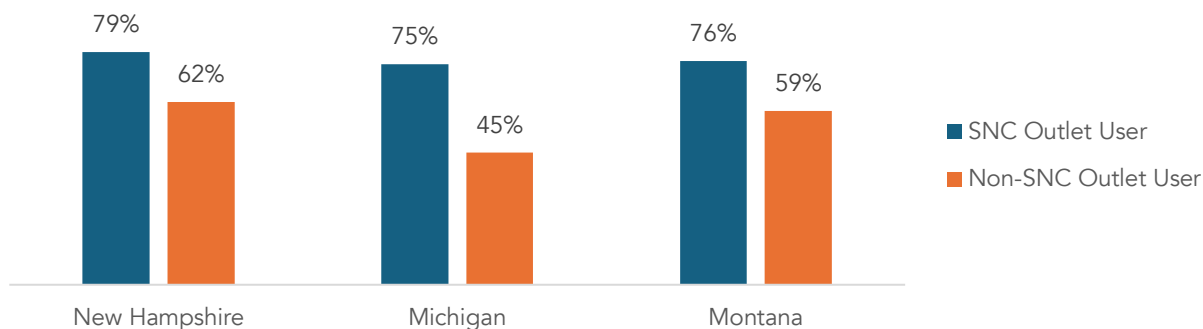
SNC outlets' journalism covers a range of important topics, is viewed favorably by their users, and addresses many of the key issues facing their states. But to what extent do they contribute to users' knowledge of state and local issues and their levels of civic engagement?

We asked respondents a variety of questions about their familiarity with major issues and the ways they participate in their communities. Our main approach to gauging the SNC outlets' impact is to examine whether SNC outlet users differ on these questions from non-users.

Impact on state and local knowledge

We began by asking respondents to tell us how well informed they feel about issues facing their state and their community. The graph below displays the percentage of respondents in each state who said they feel "very" or "somewhat" well informed about issues facing their state.

Respondents Saying They Feel "Very" or "Somewhat" Informed about State Issues



Note: Respondents were asked, “How well informed do you feel about issues facing [state name]? Very well informed, somewhat well informed, not too well informed, not well informed at all, or don’t know?” The graph displays the percentage of users choosing “very well informed” or “somewhat well informed,” broken down by SNC outlet use.

Averaging across the three states, 77% respondents who regularly get news from an SNC outlet felt well informed, while that number was just 55% for non-SNC outlet users. The gap is at least double-digits in each state, including a sizeable 30-point difference in Michigan. When we asked respondents whether they felt well informed about issues facing their community, we found a similar split – 77% of SNC outlet users said they did, compared to 61% of non-SNC outlet users.

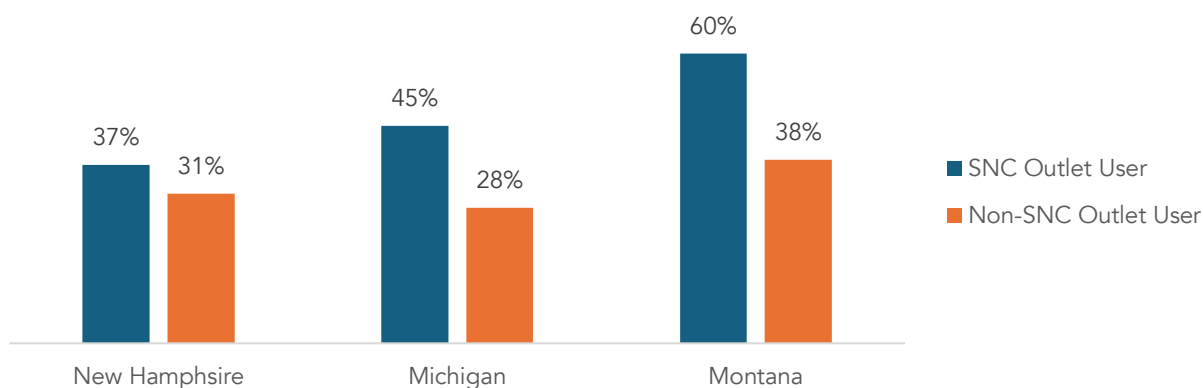
This difference was not confined to people’s subjective self-assessments, as we also asked respondents if they knew the names of various elected officials. These questions serve as a proxy for how much respondents know about state and local government. Prior research has found that respondents are better able to identify government officials when they are exposed to high-quality coverage of state and local politics.⁴

The graph below shows the percentage of residents in each state who could name their representative in the state House of Representatives (or, in the case of some New Hampshire residents, at least one representative from a multi-member district). The numbers vary by state, but in every case, a larger share of SNC outlet users could do so than non-users. We found similar results when we asked about state

⁴ Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2021. *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

senators and their local mayor (for respondents who lived in a community with a mayor).

Respondents Able to Name Their State House Representative



Note: In Michigan and Montana, respondents were asked if they could name “the person who represents your district in the [Michigan/Montana] State House of Representatives.” In New Hampshire, which has multi-member legislative districts, respondents were asked if they could name “any of the people who represent your district in the New Hampshire State House of Representatives.” The graph displays the percentage of respondents who could name their representative, broken down by SNC outlet use.

The size of these differences is in line with what previous research has found when looking at newspaper readers and non-readers.⁵ One implication is that a new generation of independent outlets may help keep community members informed in the way that local newspapers traditionally have.

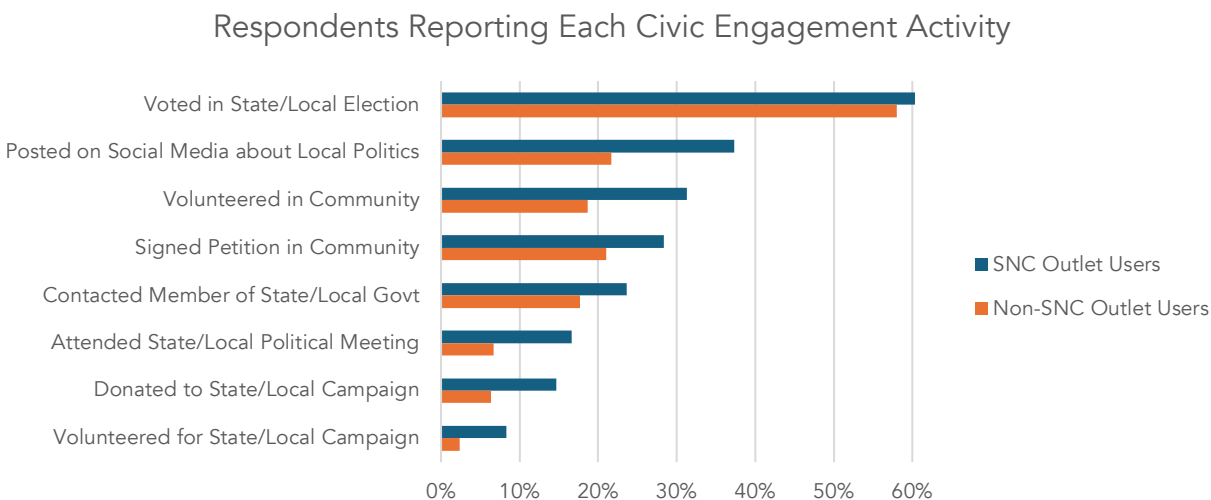
Impact on civic engagement

Another form of impact is encouraging citizens to participate in the civic life of their communities. To examine the role that SNC outlets play in promoting civic engagement, we included several measures in our surveys.

We first asked respondents whether they had taken a series of actions related to their state or local community within the last year. This included voting in a state or local election, donating to local organizations, signing a petition in the community, contacting elected officials, and other forms of civic participation.

⁵ Peterson, Erik. 2021. “Not Dead Yet: Political Learning from Newspapers in a Changing Media Landscape.” *Political Behavior* 43, 339-361.

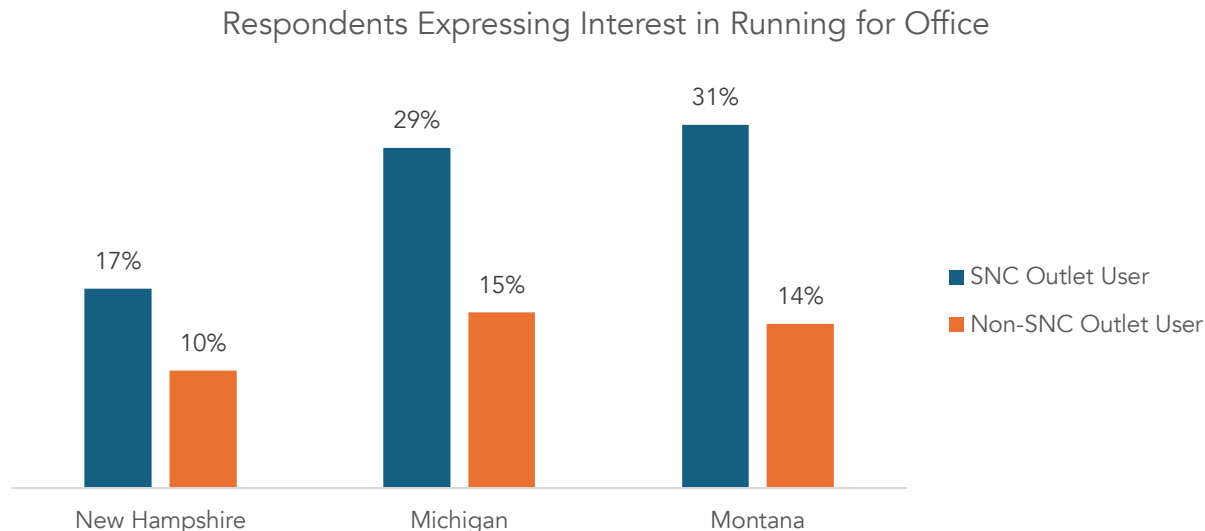
In the graph below, we present the average share of respondents in the three states who reported engaging in the eight specific activities. For each, SNC consumers were significantly more likely to report having taken the action than non-users. The differences are evident on explicitly political activities, such as voting or contacting a member of the state or local government. But SNC outlets also contribute to more general civic participation, including whether residents volunteer in the community.



Note: Respondents were asked “In the last year, which of the following have you done? Check all that apply.” The graph displays the percentage of respondents who said they had engaged in each activity, broken down by SNC outlet use.

Some of these differences are large. For instance, SNC users were 13 percentage points more likely to volunteer in the community and 10 percentage points – or twice as likely – to attend a state or local political meeting. Across the three states, SNC users reported participating in 2.5 activities in the last year on average, while non-SNC users engaged in just 1.7 – 32% fewer.

We also asked people about an especially intense form of political activity – running for office. Once again, SNC outlet users expressed more engagement, with 26% saying they had already run for office, seriously considered it, or at least entertained the idea. Among non-SNC outlet users, that number was half, or 13%. The graph below shows the breakdown for each state.



Note: Respondents were asked, “Have you ever thought about running for political office?” They could answer “I have already run for elective office,” “Yes, I have seriously considered running for office,” “Yes, running for office has crossed my mind,” or “No, I have not thought about running for office.” The graph displays the percentage of respondents who gave one of the affirmative responses, broken down by SNC outlet use.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the substantial community impact of exposure to SNC outlets’ journalism. Compared to residents who don’t regularly get news from an SNC site, users are more likely to participate in their community’s civic life, to engage in political action, and even to consider running for office themselves.

Qualitative evidence of impact

To gain a better sense of what this impact looks like in practice, we also gathered qualitative data. We first asked SNC users whether they could, on the spot, name an SNC outlet story that had made an impact on them. In each state, a significant portion did – 39% in Michigan, 31% in New Hampshire, and 25% in Montana. We then asked what the stories were about, and how those stories had affected them.

Several themes emerged. One was that users simply felt more informed by keeping up with SNC outlets’ coverage of key issues. In Michigan, several respondents mentioned Bridge Michigan’s coverage of the Flint water crisis, with one noting that the ongoing coverage “raised my awareness about the continuing severity of the issue.” One New Hampshire respondent praised NHPR’s covid pandemic reporting, with the station having “some the most up to date coverage” that “came across as [bipartisan] so I could have an informed take.”

Another theme was the emotional impact of coverage. In Montana, several respondents highlighted MTFP's reporting on indigenous affairs, including investigations of the foster care system and the problem of homelessness. "Makes you want to help," one reader said. One Bridge Michigan reader said that the site's in-depth reporting about Michigan's unemployment problem "made me feel sad for the state."

The coverage wasn't always focused on challenging or controversial issues, however. Discussing MTFP's attention to indigenous communities, one reader said that "any story relating to our indigenous roots hits home for me" and that they "appreciate light being show[n] on our culture." A New Hampshire respondent said NHPR's reporting on efforts to increase housing in New Hampshire "made me feel some relief from the anxiety of increasing housing rents." Another described how some of NHPR's nature and outdoors coverage was a reminder that "it was nice to have a good story for a change" and it "brought me some peace."

For some, the concerns raised by SNC outlets' coverage prompted them to take action. One Bridge Michigan reader said that after learning about the possible closing of a petroleum tunnel, he immediately reached out to his member of Congress. Several New Hampshire respondents cited NHPR's reporting on climate change and the environment. "I started making more environmentally conscious decisions," one said. Another said they had begun giving money to a local New Hampshire environmental group, consistent with the earlier finding that getting news from an SNC outlet encourages people to donate to community organizations. Finally, MTFP's coverage of environmental protection appeared to have a very immediate and concrete impact on one reader – "I will never litter again," they said.

These descriptions indicate a range of impacts that are reflected in the quantitative evidence from the survey. SNC outlets' journalism informs its readers, generates emotional investment, and sometimes leads them to action.

A causal impact?

Our surveys provide clear evidence that SNC users are more informed and more engaged than other residents of their states. But an important question in research of this sort – surveys that interview respondents at a single moment in time – is whether we should interpret these relationships as evidence of causal impact. That

is, does exposure to SNC outlets' coverage actually lead users to higher levels of civic involvement?

It's possible, of course, that SNC outlet users are simply more interested in state and local affairs and more engaged in their communities in the first place. They gravitate to SNC news organizations because of their substantive coverage. In that telling, it may not be that these outlets are causing their audience to become more knowledgeable and involved. Instead, they're merely reaching a more engaged group of people.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to think that SNC outlets do in fact cause users to become more engaged. First, scholarly research shows that when even news outlets reach people who are already interested and engaged, those consumers subsequently become *more* interested and engaged.⁶ This feedback loop helps build a highly invested group of citizens that play a critical role in their communities' civic life.

Second, that conclusion is bolstered by more complex investigation of the data from our surveys. Using a statistical technique called regression analysis, we are able to account for pre-existing differences between SNC users and non-users, such as demographic characteristics or a tendency to seek out news from other sources. This allows us to then isolate the independent effect being an SNC outlet consumer. Another way to describe this is to “control” for various other factors that could explain people's different levels of knowledge and engagement.

The key finding from this analysis, presented in the methodological appendix, is that being an SNC outlet user – even taking into account these other factors – remains a strong predictor of political engagement. This suggests that independent journalism's impact is not simply a function of having a more engaged audience to begin with. Residents who regularly get news from an SNC outlet appear to become more engaged as a result.

⁶ Barabas, Jason and Jennifer Jerit. 2009. “Estimating the Causal Effects of Media Coverage on Policy-Specific Knowledge.” *American Journal of Political Science* 53(1): 73-89; Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2015. “As Local News Goes, So Goes Civic Engagement: Media Knowledge, and Participation in U.S. House Elections.” *Journal of Politics* 77(2): 447-462.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a great deal of gloom surrounding local news. And for good reason. Times have been tough, and the legacy media outlets that have constituted the backbone of the local news industry face an uncertain future.

But the emergence of a more vibrant independent state and local news ecosystem is a bright spot. Many of these outlets are champions of the watchdog reporting that is essential for democracy to work. Their impact on government accountability is already evident.

But this report demonstrates that independent journalism also has a community impact. Independent news outlets – whether long established, like NHPR, or newer publications, like Bridge Michigan and MTFP – have become trusted sources of information for a significant portion of their states' residents. They cover topics that consumers see as critical to their state and communities. And they help inform their users and spur participation in the civic life of their communities.

One implication is that state and local news outlets can and should seek to measure not just their legislative or policy impact, but also the effects on their community. Doing so can help demonstrate to subscribers, donors, and other stakeholders the value that local journalism provides to a community. Perhaps just as importantly, identifying community impact is one way to show the democratic importance of an independent press, an urgent imperative in a rapidly changing media environment.

Methodological appendix

Statewide surveys

We conducted surveys in Michigan, Montana, and New Hampshire with adult (18+) residents of each state. The dates and sample size of each survey are shown in the table below. The firm Qualtrics conducted the surveys, with respondents recruited from Qualtrics' research panel.

| State | Dates of survey | Sample size |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Michigan | April 24-30, 2024 | 2,020 |
| Montana | May 8-16, 2024 | 650 |
| New Hampshire | June 10-26, 2024 | 655 |

Although the samples were generally representative of each state's demographics on most dimensions, the data was weighted by U.S. Census estimates for age, gender, race, and education to more precisely approximate each state's population. This follows standard practice in opinion polling. All results cited in this report are based on the weighted data.

Each survey began with a series of questions about respondents' demographics and background. Respondents then answered questions about their news habits, including where they got state and local news. In a third section of the survey, we asked about their views of various news sources and their coverage. The final part of the survey focused on respondents' knowledge of issues, their views of state and local affairs, and civic engagement. The survey took about 12 minutes to complete.

In the table below, we present a series of regression analyses that more rigorously test claims about the relationship between SNC outlet use and civic engagement. As noted in the report, one possibility is that SNC outlet users are simply already more engaged than others, perhaps by virtue of their demographics or other news habits. In this analysis, we account for those various factors as a way of isolating the effect of being an SNC user.

Each set of columns in the table displays a regression analysis for one of the key measures of engagement in the survey – whether a respondent feels informed about state affairs, whether they can name their state House representative, and an index of civic engagement based on the number of state and local activities they participated in. We show the results separately for each state.

Selected regression analyses

| | Feel informed | | | Know state house rep | | | Engagement index | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| | MI | MT | NH | MI | MT | NH | MI | MT | NH |
| Uses SNC outlet | .87* (.14) | .46* (.22) | .66* (.20) | .82* (.14) | .62* (.20) | .28 (.18) | .55* (.08) | .69* (.12) | .51* (.11) |
| Uses other state/local outlet | 1.30* (.18) | 1.37* (.25) | 1.63* (.25) | .55* (.20) | 1.09* (.28) | .93* (.30) | .39* (.09) | .26 (.13) | .23 (.14) |
| Age | -.01 (.01) | .01 (.01) | .02* (.01) | .02* (.01) | .01 (.01) | .02* (.01) | -.01 (.01) | .01 (.01) | .01 (.01) |
| Education | .06 (.04) | .24* (.07) | .17* (.07) | .26* (.04) | .18* (.07) | .13 (.07) | .17* (.02) | .14* (.04) | .18* (.04) |
| Income | .02 (.02) | .07* (.03) | .03 (.03) | .05* (.02) | .08* (.03) | .03 (.03) | .04* (.01) | .03 (.02) | .05* (.02) |
| White | -.43* (.12) | .35 (.25) | .22 (.32) | -.21 (.13) | -.04 (.25) | -.03 (.32) | -.15* (.07) | -.28* (.14) | .22 (.18) |
| Woman | -.46* (.10) | -.73* (.19) | -.47* (.20) | -.11 (.11) | -.25 (.18) | -.06 (.18) | -.13* (.06) | -.03 (.10) | -.14 (.11) |
| Constant | -.92* (.26) | -1.83* (.46) | 2.32* (.47) | 3.29* (.30) | -2.97* (.48) | 3.28 (.51) | .89* (.14) | .73* (.25) | .14 (.25) |
| Pseudo/Adj. R ² | .06 | .11 | .13 | .07 | .08 | .06 | .10 | .11 | .13 |
| Observations | 2,009 | 650 | 655 | 2,009 | 650 | 654 | 2,010 | 650 | 655 |

*p<.05. Table presents logistic regression coefficients for Feel Informed and Know State House Rep, and ordinary least squares regressions coefficients for Participation Index. Standard errors are in parentheses.

The takeaway from the analysis is that even controlling for various demographic factors and respondents' other state and local media consumption, getting news from an SNC outlet remains a statistically significant predictor of each variable. In only one case – naming a state House representative in New Hampshire – does that variable narrowly miss conventional levels of statistical significance. The overall pattern suggests that even though SNC outlet users are somewhat demographically different than others, exposure to SNC coverage is still associated with a higher level of information and engagement. That is consistent with the interpretation that SNC outlets are causing their users to learn more about local affairs and become more engaged.

Content analysis

To estimate the attention that each SNC outlet devotes to different areas of coverage, we analyzed data provide by each organization's staff on all of the stories it published in 2023. Each outlet provided a spreadsheet from its internal content management system that included a list of stories and each story's associated "tags" or topic headings designating the issues that the story dealt with.

Using these data, we collapsed each tag and topic heading into a smaller set of broad categories – politics and government, environment, health care, and education. Each story was then coded for whether it addressed one of these issues. Because many stories touch on multiple topics, articles could be coded as addressing more than one issue. For instance, a March 2023 NHPR story about state lawmakers giving initial approval to the expansion of a school choice program was coded as both an education and politics story. This approach allows for a comprehensive account of the extent to which each outlet's coverage addresses these key issue areas.