

# Newspaper Decline and the Effect on Local Government Coverage

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# Key Findings

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Staffing cuts to local newspapers have been severe over the past 20 years. On average, newspapers have cut nearly half of their staff since the early 2000's.

Data analysis shows communities covered by newspapers with the most drastic staffing cuts have seen undesirable effects in local election competition and turnout.

Interviews show that staffing cuts and a shift to online publishing have dramatically changed the reporting model of local newspapers. These changes prompted a reduction in press attention to local government activities and led to a more reactive press that is less able to set the agenda in communities.

Journalists note that there are likely important political consequences to changes in coverage. Corruption, mismanagement, lower turnout, and incumbency advantages are all thought to possible outcomes from changes to local government coverage.

The changing landscape of local journalism is spurring innovation. The gaps left by declining newsrooms, however, still remain.

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# Introduction

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We have all read the stories about the decline of local newspapers. Each week seems to bring on more news of cutbacks. Newspapers have been cutting staff for over a decade, and the consolidations and closings have not slowed in recent years. We wanted to know what effects these cuts have had on these shrinking newsrooms' communities and, more specifically, the local governments and elections that hold power over these communities.

In a recently published [article](#) in *Urban Affairs Review (UAR)*, we looked at the effects of newspaper staffing levels across 11 California newspapers and 46 cities within their coverage areas. **We found that, over a 20-year period, a decline in newspaper staff was associated with less competitive mayoral races and more incumbent-only mayoral races. We also found suggestive evidence that the decline in newspaper staffing reduced voter turnout.**

This study, while backed by theory and evidence from previous research, relied heavily on the correlation between staffing levels and our measures of political competition and engagement. However, we wanted to better understand the mechanisms that connect staffing levels at newspapers to political outcomes in the localities they cover. We had our quantitative findings, but we wanted to talk to working newspaper journalists to get their take on the staffing cuts and effects on the communities these newspapers cover.

What we uncovered in these interviews both confirms and adds to the theories and mechanisms we discussed in our *UAR* article. We also discovered that these staffing cuts are affecting local communities in ways we had not expected. While we see plenty of evidence of dedicated reporters and editors adapting and evolving to the changing news environment, the changes described by the journalists are largely negative.

In this white paper, we will first describe the size and scope of staffing cuts, both in the U.S. and in the California newspapers we focused on in the article. We will then briefly describe the method and findings of our quantitative research study published in *UAR* before discussing the reasons for and the process of interviewing reporters and editors at the newspapers studied in the article. Next, we will discuss the findings from the interviews and four themes that arose in the interviews relating to the cuts in staffing levels and local government coverage. The themes discussed are: how newsrooms have changed drastically and are continually adjusting, how newspapers have shifted from an agenda-setting role to a more reactive one, how these changes have political consequences, and journalists' thoughts on the future of local journalism. We will describe these four themes, including quotes from our interviewees, before providing our concluding thoughts on the changing state of local journalism.

Decline in newspaper staff was associated with less competitive mayoral races and more incumbent-only mayoral races

# Context

By looking at data from surveys conducted by the American Society of News Editors, we can see that the average newsroom in the U.S. shrank from nearly 50 staff at its peak in the early 2000s to about half that size by 2013. Figure 1 below graphs the change in the average newsroom over the years of 1994–2016. As seen in the graph, the drop-off in staffing levels begins just before the recession of 2007–2009, but it is during—and just after the recession (in 2008–2010) that we see the largest drop in newsroom staffing.

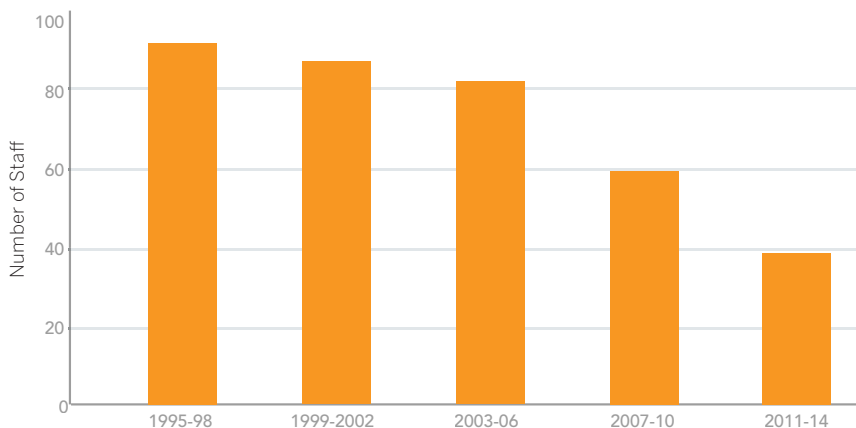
We see similar size cuts when we look just at the 11 newsrooms in California that we studied in our *UAR* article.<sup>1</sup> These newsrooms had an average staff size of 91.7 from 1995–1998 and dropped to 38.4 by 2011–2014. **In 20 years, the size of these newsrooms were cut by over half.** Figure 2 depicts the average staffing change in four-year segments from 1994–2016.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that the newsrooms covered by our study—and across the U.S.—have been significantly reshaped in the past decade. This white paper is devoted to the consequences of these changes in the coverage of local government.

**Figure 1. Average Newspaper Staffing in the United States, 1994–2016**



In 20 years, the size of these newsrooms were cut by over half.

**Figure 2. Average Staff of 11 California Newspapers in Study**



<sup>1</sup> The papers in the study are: *Chico Enterprise-Record*, *Merced Sun-Star*, *The Mercury News* (San Jose), *Santa Maria Times*, *The Californian* (Salinas), *The Fresno Bee*, *The Modesto Bee*, *The Napa Valley Register*, *The Record* (Stockton), *The Sacramento Bee*, and *The Vallejo Times-Herald*.

<sup>2</sup> As ASNE does not get reports from all 11 newsrooms each year, it was important to create four-year averages to better represent the size of newsrooms over time

# Our previous research

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Our research began with an understanding that local newspapers in many countries have long served a critical role in democracy, often providing the only regular and reliable source of information on local elections, policy making, and other local government activities. However, in recent decades, these important institutions have declined as a result of shrinking revenues from circulation and advertising. In response, many newspapers have slashed their staffing levels or folded entirely. Newspapers operating with leaner staff levels have had to adjust the way they cover local government and politics, while also shifting to online delivery of news content.

The prolonged and ongoing struggle of city newspapers to stay afloat and maintain full newsrooms made us curious about the potential fallout for local politics. Newsrooms with fewer reporters and resources have shifted focus away from their traditional government watchdog role and toward stories that attract more reader attention and clicks on their websites. Our *UAR* article argued that the decline in staffing, resources, and dedication to local government coverage made it more difficult for citizens to stay informed about local public affairs and therefore produced negative outcomes for citizen engagement and political competition in cities.

To test our theory, **we analyzed the relationship between newsroom staffing levels at 11 daily newspapers and the outcomes of 246 mayoral elections in the 46 cities served by these newspapers.** The period of study was 1994–2014. We hypothesized that newspapers with larger cuts in staffing would reduce local government coverage, and as a consequence, the cities they serve would experience larger drop-offs in voter turnout for local elections and reduced competition in mayoral races.

Our analysis of the data suggested that as newsroom staffing declined, the competitiveness of city political races did indeed suffer. We found that when newspapers cut more staff, the mayoral races that followed included fewer candidates, resulted in larger victory margins for winners, and more regularly featured unchallenged incumbents. It appears that local political competition suffers when newspapers decimate their newsrooms. Results for voter turnout suggested that staff cuts also led to decreased voter engagement. Overall, our analysis found that political competition and engagement waned when newsroom staffing declined.

We believe these findings have important implications. Newspapers provide a means of fostering citizen engagement, and this study showed evidence of the importance of this link. If key electoral outcomes suffer because of the decline of newspapers, we might expect additional troubling consequences. First, turnout decline could lead to concerns about reduced representation among the voting public. Meanwhile, reduced competition in mayoral races may worsen declining citizen engagement, further diminishing voter turnout and other forms of political participation by citizens, such as contacting officials and contributing to political campaigns. In addition, if sitting mayors are more easily able to keep their seats, they may feel less accountability to voters and more freedom to act in their own interests or those of their supporters. In summary, **our results suggest that if we want strong local democracy, our society requires new local information sources. This means renewing local newspapers or innovations in online news operation.**

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# New qualitative research: interviews with journalists

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To support our published quantitative research, we designed a qualitative study that relied upon interviews with reporters and editors who currently or formerly worked for the newspapers in our previous study. We designed an interview protocol that sought the journalists' impressions of changes in newsroom staffing and the effects on workload and coverage, especially of local government affairs and politics.

We reached out to 30 journalists from the 11 newspapers and were able to interview 11 people representing 8 of the newspapers in our original study. These newspapers all serve metropolitan areas that are relatively small or medium-sized. **Those interviewed were mostly seasoned reporters and editors of various ranks, as well as newer reporters who have entered the business since the end of the period of our original study.** Most of the reporters and editors we spoke to cover—or manage people who cover—communities, governments, and politics. We also spoke to several people who were currently or formerly top editors of the newspapers, to get a sense of organizational priorities and strategies.

We do not identify the journalists who were interviewed here and make every effort to avoid including information that might reveal their identities. We do this to protect those interviewed from any potential harm.

At the start of the interviews, we told the journalists about our research question: Have changes in local newspaper staffing over the years affected local politics and elections? However, we did not reveal our original findings until later in the interviews. Instead, we asked the interviewees to describe their work in journalism and changes in staffing during their tenure, as well as associated changes in work distribution and coverage of beats and stories. We asked whether they thought staffing cuts might have had any effects on local government itself or the connection between residents and their local governments. Finally, we revealed the findings of the previous study and asked the journalists whether the findings made sense to them.<sup>3</sup>

Most interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, although some went on for over an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for analysis of themes across the interviews and for inclusion of quotes in this paper.

Those interviewed were mostly seasoned reporters and editors of various ranks, as well as newer reporters.

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<sup>3</sup> This research was approved by the Institutional Research Board of the University of Texas at Austin.

# Theme 1: Journalists describe the changing local newsroom

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All of the reporters and editors interviewed noted deep staffing cuts over the years. Even newer reporters were very familiar with the changes in staffing levels prior to, as well as since, their hiring. The journalists' descriptions of the staffing cuts closely mirrored the data obtained from ASNE and presented above. Cuts were severe and prolonged and occurred through various means, including attrition, buyouts, and layoffs. Some interviewees noted that staffing had leveled off in very recent years or even rebounded a bit, but others indicated that staffing levels continue to decline. One editor noted that just in the past four years, the newspaper had cut roughly 50–60% of newsroom staff. Another editor said that over about 20 years, there had never been a single year in which full-time employee counts increased. "It always went down," the editor said.

Some journalists had been laid off from various newspapers over the years, moving to others and seeing continued cuts by their new employers. One interviewee who had been in the business for more than 30 years described the full, bustling newsrooms of 1990 with a sense of nostalgia and longing. **"In terms of walking into our newsroom, it's unrecognizable from what it was back when I started here," the journalist said. "It's shocking."**

Several journalists said it was difficult to disentangle the effects of the staffing cuts from changes in the business driven by technology and the demands of online content delivery. However, many said that the dramatic cuts in staffing had forced shifts in workload across newsrooms. Reporters who formerly covered a single beat, such as city hall, ended up covering additional beats, like county government and suburban governments, too. One local government reporter who used to focus primarily on city government for the main city in the coverage area noted that declining staffing had caused a piling on of local government coverage responsibilities.

"Over the years, I've kind of absorbed more and more. So, basically, I cover all of the towns and the county's government as well. And there's not very many [reporters], so I also pick up courts reporting, crime reporting, projects, and that sort of thing as they come up."

Others said beat assignment had been restructured so that, rather than covering a school district or public safety or a single local government, a reporter would cover all of these things and any other news coming out of a particular community.

Additionally, as photographers were cut from newsrooms, reporters' roles expanded to include more tasks, several interviewees noted. While many of the journalists indicated that reporters were adjusting well to the new environment and job demands, several also indicated that there were real losses to a reporter's ability to focus and dig into assignments. In the old days of newspaper journalism, said one editor, "[I]t was paper and pen, and you go out and interview, and you come back, you have one deadline. And now, we need video; you gotta come back, you've gotta write or phone something in, you gotta get something posted, you're writing—reporters are so taxed right now, they're doing so many things."

**"In terms of walking into our newsroom, it's unrecognizable from what it was back when I started here. It's shocking."**

Another editor said this juggling act is bound to reduce reporters' ability to do every aspect of their job well, at least at times. **"It's just hard because when you're at assignments, you're—if you're trying to do reporting for print, taking photos, and getting video, invariably one or all of those suffers to a degree because you're not a human octopus,"** the editor said.

However, some journalists said their newspapers had worked hard to protect local political reporting from the chopping block. While features departments had been gutted or basically eliminated at several of the newspapers in the study, local government and "accountability" reporting remained a priority. Another interviewee, a top editor, said that while beats and coverage strategies had been changed around local government, management strove to dedicate scarce resources to this area.

"We have been very careful not to make huge cuts to how we cover local government because if we don't do this type of coverage, no one else is gonna do it. I am [as] convinced of that today as I was five years ago. And so, our responsibility is to shed light on that, and then tell stories about how local government does impact people's lives, and then shine a light on things that need to be explained."

Still, most of the reporters, even newer reporters, suggested that while newsrooms are learning new strategies to maximize the impact and efficiency of their government reporting, something has been lost due to the magnitude of staffing cuts.

In addition to noting changes in the workload of journalists focused on local government and politics, interviewees also linked staffing cuts to the refocusing of news content on the central or main city of the newspaper and a handful of more populous or high-readership neighboring communities. Coverage in outlying suburban or rural areas has been largely dropped or limited to very important breaking news, such as murders or disasters. Several journalists noted that suburban and regional news bureaus had been closed.

All of the interviewees said coverage of local government had declined over the years in various ways. Some were optimistic about this, suggesting that the demands of digital-first news coverage with reduced staffing has forced the industry to rethink coverage of local public affairs in ways that have produced higher-impact, better-read stories. However, many of those we interviewed noted that this improvement does not completely make up for the loss of more exhaustive coverage of local government that was possible with larger newsrooms.

And readers have noticed. Outlying communities feel ignored, and local residents in more central communities have seen a reduction in coverage too, most interviewees said. One reporter recalled being chastised by local government officials for not having attended particular meetings where officials believed something important had happened. This lack of coverage has strained community–newspaper relations, leading to animosity and disrespect toward the newspapers in some cases. This situation clearly frustrated some interviewees as much as the cuts themselves.

One reporter said these resident attitudes were further tainted by negative attitudes about national mainstream media outlets. "You know, we're not CNN; we're not Fox News; we're not MSNBC ... we're your neighbors. We want to do good by you, but we can't do that if you hate us or you think that we're out to get you or you think that we're out there with an agenda. We're not and I don't—sometimes I just don't know how to get that across to people who vehemently believe otherwise."

**"If you're trying to do reporting for print, taking photos, and getting video, invariably one or all of those suffers to a degree because you're not a human octopus."**



## Theme 2: A more reactive press

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When speaking to journalists about how the beats, assignments, and coverage of local government has changed in the past decade, a common theme that emerged was how journalists have had to change the type of coverage they provide with respect to local government. In the past, newspapers devoted much attention to the process of local governance. While, as many of the journalists noted, this focus led to many articles simply reporting the mundane events of council or planning meetings, it also gave the journalists a chance to highlight important policy changes that were in the pipeline at various levels of local government.

This coverage provided an agenda-setting role for the newspaper. People who were too busy to attend every council meeting could instead count on their local paper to let them know if there were important changes coming, giving them a chance to get involved in the process while the proposed policy was still in its infancy.

What has happened in recent years, due to staffing cuts and a focus on article-level readership metrics (clicks), is that local government coverage has focused more on happenings within local government that will immediately or have already begun affecting citizens. While this shift may seem subtle, we see this as an important and potentially dangerous change in local government coverage, as do many of the journalists we spoke to. The press, instead of influencing the interactions between representatives and the represented, are simply covering the effects the representatives are having on those they represent.

“That’s the big difference. We just didn’t have enough people to set the agenda.”

As one former editor said: **“Now, the newspaper reacts to news in the community and what people are doing. So, instead of setting an agenda for what the community is talking about, by necessity the newspaper would have to write about what people are talking about after the fact. That’s the big difference. We just didn’t have enough people to set the agenda.”**

We found this shift to a reactive press was caused by two factors. The first—and, we think, the primary—factor is shrinking staff levels. With staff levels so low, it is simply impossible for reporters to consistently write stories about the process of local government. It is not always possible for them to attend council meetings or planning-board meetings, and so potentially important coverage simply falls through the cracks.

As one local government reporter said, “I always think we were gonna do better with more people in the room ... it always feels like we are behind—like we can’t get to everything.” These cuts mean that journalists cannot be at every meeting and thus tend to write the stories after a decision is made.

As one current editor put it: “In the past, our reporters would basically—let’s say if they’re covering the city council, and there’s a city council meeting that day, they would write one story, and they would go to this council meeting, they’d soak it up, and they’d then sit down and write the story, and it would’ve appeared in the next day’s printed newspaper. That’s not how we operate today. If there’s a big issue before the city council, we’ll be there, and once they make the decision, we immediately write the story and post something.”

A former editor sees this approach as problematic. To explain why, the editor gave an example of a subdivision going up for approval. When the press sets the agenda, it can publish an article listing proposed zoning changes. This information may not be widely interesting, but to the neighbors who may have a new subdivision in their backyard, this information is very important and can affect how they choose to interact with their local government.

The former editor believes this type of information, previously provided by newspapers, has now disappeared, saying: “People wouldn’t get advance notice in the newspaper about a subdivision going on over their back-fence line until it got to that final level of approval at the city council level. That’s a real shame, if you’re an active citizen trying to stay involved in what’s going on in your city. You would not be able to get it from the newspaper. You would have to pay attention to planning commission agendas and architectural review board agendas and all these things that nobody in the world except for a newspaper reporter pays any attention to.”

A current editor, however, notes that this change to a reactive press is not just due to the size of a newspaper’s staff. This editor notes: “I’m not really sure it’s all lined up on cuts. It’s also because of how we communicate today is very different, and how we distribute our content is very different than it was 15 or 20 years ago.” The move to digital publishing places new demands and incentives on reporting. When each story is judged based on the number of clicks it gets, it incentivizes running stories that will be interesting to a large group of people.

This shift marks a difference in how newspapers judge their success. In the past, the paper as it was printed and distributed daily was the product. Each article contributed to the success of the paper, but not every story needed to appeal to everyone in order for customers to find the paper valuable. Today, each individual article is judged on the number of people who read it. If an article does not get a certain number of clicks, it is not considered worth writing. As one reporter puts it, **“Online is king, and you need clicks. The city council stuff by and large is not really the most effective use of limited reporting time if you’re just trying to get clicks.”**

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clicks.”

A confluence of factors appears to be reducing the amount and depth of local government reporting. When clicks are the metric, reporters must write the stories that get the clicks to drive revenue for the paper. If newspapers had adequate staff, this click-based incentive structure might not be a negative. Reporters would have time to write the high-traffic stories and still keep track of government processes. As it stands now, reporters are forced to use their limited time on the traffic-generating articles, and this focus leads to a reactive press. A story about what just happened or how people are reacting to something that just happened is both easier to write and more interesting than articles about the “turning of the screw,” as two different journalist we interviewed put it.

## Theme 3: Perspectives on political consequences

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The journalists we spoke with had various ideas about why newsroom staff cuts might lead to consequences for local politics. With respect to voter engagement and turnout, several journalists echoed the causal story mapped out in the UAR article: when staffing declines, newspapers offer less coverage of local government, leading to an electorate that is less informed on matters of local policy and politics. Several journalists mentioned that their newspapers are the only media outlets in the area that have ever given significant attention to local government affairs, policy, and politics. Thus, as newsroom staff levels dropped and fewer reporters were able to focus exclusively on this area of coverage, levels of political information among voters likely dropped, too. As one top editor said: **“It certainly would depress voter turnout because if you don’t even know that there’s an election or you don’t know what’s at stake with the election or don’t know anything about the people running, why would you bother to vote?”**

The combination of reduced staffing and quicker turnaround requirements to get print stories to the press (which are more often off-site) means that reporters covering politics and policy have to be more selective about the stories they cover and faster in writing about breaking news such as election results, one reporter said. The reporter recalled having to write and submit an election results story in under 10 minutes to make a deadline for print. Over the years, election guides for residents have become less exhaustive or even disappeared. Newspapers used to host debates for candidates or do polling on important local races. However, as resources have declined, these aspects of political coverage have mostly disappeared, some interviewees noted.

One top editor argued that the local-government reporting style of today, which focuses on impacts of local government rather than processes and meetings, produces higher-quality information for voters. Still, the editor said, far fewer people are doing the reporting now. If a larger staff were providing new, more innovative local-government coverage, it would likely improve the quality of local politics. “I think it would lead to greater recognition of some of the issues that are in a community,” the editor said. “Would that translate to more people voting? I don’t know. Probably. But I do think that that would have an impact.”

On the question of why newsroom staffing might affect local political competition, explanations were more varied. Some journalists suggested the causal linkage we identified in our article: when people know less about what’s going on in local government, they are less likely to be motivated to run for office themselves or to vote for a challenger rather than an incumbent.

A lack of information among the electorate benefits incumbents, partly because voters do not have any information that might look bad for the incumbent, one reporter said. “People will always stick with what they’re familiar with, what’s comfortable, what is working. And if you don’t have a newspaper staff who points out when things aren’t working, there is no impetus behind trying to put somebody new in, right?”

**“If you don’t even know that there’s an election or you don’t know what’s at stake with the election or don’t know anything about the people running, why would you bother to vote?”**

Another reporter echoed this point: “I think the public in general, when you have a story about ‘this mayor’s doing this thing,’ I think more people might be outraged and one of those folks is maybe a potential challenger kind of a thing or those groups might lobby somebody to run. And so, if they’re unaware of maybe a particular policy that’s marginalizing people by race or by gender or whatever, like pay gaps for women in city hall ... people might not be motivated to run.”

Another reporter said that with the reduced coverage capacity of newspapers, unknown challengers have lost a platform that used to provide abundant and relatively equal space to all local race candidates. In addition, social media makes it easier for sitting officials to control the stories, craft their own narratives, and sometimes, just ignore the newspaper altogether. There is an attitude that the politicians no longer need the newspaper to get their messages out, another reporter said. Under these conditions, people are more likely to get information directly from the officials and the government rather than the traditional watchdog reporter focused on balance and independence.

This trend toward less information is likely to negatively affect not only engagement and competition, but also the behavior of public officials, numerous interviewees said. When officials feel less watched by local press and less likely to be challenged by competitor candidates in the next election, they may behave differently—and likely not in ways that are better for the taxpayers. “When the cats away, you know ...” one reporter said. **“I think it would be much easier now to get away with corruption and just things that shouldn’t be happening because [officials] know no one is really watching. Or not watching as closely as they used to.”**

“No one  
is really  
watching.”

Another reporter noted that a lack of attention to local policy and political matters had inspired a sense of boldness among public officials to act in ways that may not always be good for the public they are meant to serve. Several journalists suggested this lack of attention could be leading to an increase in intentional and devious mishandling of taxpayers’ money and other aspects of local government. One journalist noted that a mayor who felt unwatched by the newspaper might hand off public contracts to personal friends and political supporters without following proper bidding procedures. Also, since fewer meetings are covered by reporters and more outlying local governments are not covered at all, reporters are less often present to prevent or call out bad behavior by officials, whether that behavior is intentional or unintentional.

Thus, while many of the journalists we spoke to agreed that shifts in attention to more “news you can use” coverage has been helpful to readers in some ways, several of them said that the move away from process-based stories and meetings coverage could have important negative effects on local politics and government performance.

## Theme 4: The realities of future local government coverage

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Many of the current journalists we spoke to were optimistic about the industry's ability to cover local government better in the future. Several of the interviewees subscribed to the position of: "We're figuring it out." Newspaper journalists are constantly innovating to provide good coverage of local government with fewer resources and more demands for mixed-media and social-media products that satisfy and directly benefit readers. One editor said: "[W]e just have to be smarter. I mean, we really have to pick and choose and make better choices, and that's what we've been trying to do. You know, when you have all these resources, you can kind of cover everything, whether people want to read about it or not."

Journalists are learning how to budget their time by focusing their investigative efforts and public-information requests during times when there tends to be a lull in the news cycle. Balancing the changing demands of the job while maintaining a commitment to "accountability journalism" is an important part of building and maintaining loyal readership, as two interviewees said. Newspapers will continue to work toward impactful local government stories that serve readers, but they will have to be more selective in which stories they cover.

One reporter noted: "I think people still crave accountability journalism, so: 'Is this city staffer doing back-door negotiations with this construction company' or 'Is the city lying to me ...?' I think accountability journalism, we've seen, at least in our newsroom, is a really high driver for subscriptions."

A newer reporter noted that some senior colleagues pine for the days of a full newsroom with reporters committed to narrower beats and more investigative and long-term, project-based work. "As great and as wonderful as it would be to have that, that's never happening again," the reporter said. **"That is not the future of journalism, and we need to get used to most of us being general-assignment reporters, most of us having way too much on our plates, most of us having to play videographer and photographer and reporter and editors... there's not gonna be some magic solution to the problems of journalism."**

Some interviewees suggested that independent news operations and start-ups focused on hyper-local news might be able to fill in the gaps created by smaller, overstretched newspaper staffs. Several journalists named particular news start-ups that they believe are doing a good job of providing high-quality, hyper-local coverage of particular communities. Others worried that these additional news providers, particularly citizen journalists, might come with their own problems, such as a lack of name recognition, more biased reporting, and a lack of professional training. Some named particular start-up news operations that were clearly biased and may be doing more harm than good in their communities.

However, some journalists said that existing newspapers could try to leverage foundation funding and other types of carefully selected partnerships that would create opportunities to add staffing and other resources to their operations. As one former editor noted: "Newspapers are in such desperate straits right now that the only—or one of the few—positives that can come out of that is the necessity and the ability to think differently, to consider everything, to not say a quick 'no' to things you would never have considered previously. If a foundation or a local owner wants to talk to a locally owned newspaper, I think that could be a savior."

# Conclusion

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The cuts to newspaper staff have been drastic in the past 10–12 years. Typical newsrooms have been cut in half. Our research shows that these cuts have affected how newsrooms cover local government, and in turn, affected local government. Through looking at 11 newspapers in California and 46 cities within their coverage areas, we outlined the effects of staffing cuts both through the data we collected and the interviews we conducted. These cuts to newsroom staff have caused a drastic reorganization of newsrooms' operations and local-government coverage. **The time crunch reporters work under as they are forced to cover multiple beats, along with the emphasis placed on writing articles that drive clicks, has diminished the agenda-setting role of newspapers and made them more reactive to both the local government and the public.**

While some view these changes as a positive—newspapers are becoming more responsive to their customers—we see these shifts as particularly dangerous for local government coverage. The press connects the public to its representatives by reporting on their activities, including those that might not be obviously important to most citizens. Historically, this process-based coverage has created a record of behavior for public officials and ensured that local government is monitored by relatively independent, well-trained journalists. If this connection does not occur until after the policy process has been completed, the public becomes less empowered and less able to influence public policy.

In our quantitative analysis, we found that these changes in staffing and local government coverage are associated with negative political consequences. In cities where the newspaper staffing cuts have been the most severe, we found evidence of lower electoral competition for mayoral races in the form of more incumbent-only races, fewer candidates running for office, and larger victory margins. We also found suggestive evidence of lower voter turnout in cities with the most drastic newsroom staffing cuts.

While many of the journalists we spoke to were adamant that the old days of large newsrooms were never coming back, many believed that innovation, new funding models, and increased efficiency could lead to better coverage of local government in the future. We hope they are right, and we are encouraged by some of the innovative strategies they discussed in the interviews. However, without attention to the daily grind of politics and policy making, we worry that these new tactics will help in only some aspects of local politics, leaving others in continued decline.

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