



THE VIEW FROM JOURNALISM'S POST-CRISIS GENERATION

NAVIGATING PRECARIETY AND OPPORTUNITY
IN PHILADELPHIA AND CINCINNATI

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About MIC



The Media, Inequality & Change (MIC) Center is a collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School and Rutgers University's School of Communication and Information. The Center explores the intersections between media, democracy, technology, policy, and social justice. MIC produces engaged research and analysis while collaborating with community leaders to help support activist initiatives and policy interventions. The Center's objective is to develop a local-to-national strategy that focuses on communication issues important to local communities and social movements in the region, while also addressing how these local issues intersect with national and international policy challenges.

About the Center for Media at Risk



We are in uncharted waters. Political intimidation threatens media practitioners worldwide, and disinformation campaigns destabilize public trust. The Center for Media at Risk at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication offers the chance to strategize in response to threatening political conditions. Knowing how media practitioners work under authoritarian regimes and circumstances of creeping authoritarianism can help free/defend/empower/protect/save the media.

About the Authors

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About the Report

This report examines the relationship between the health of a local news ecosystem and the precarity felt by individual news workers. We followed a two-fold analysis. First, we map out the media markets in Philadelphia and Cincinnati, two post-industrial cities with comparable histories of deindustrialization and population decline that have seen civic resources invested in technology and culture sectors, aimed at attracting young, college-educated people back into the cities. We identify trends in each market, as well as the major media institutions with the goal of identifying the specific opportunities and conditions our interview respondents navigate. Second, we interview early career journalists in both cities, who have worked in Cincinnati or Philadelphia for between two and 10 years, what we call the "post-crisis" generation. They came from a mix of organizations: legacy newspapers, radio, and television stations, public and commercial media, as well as a range of digital startups funded with both private and philanthropic dollars. The interviews illustrate the ways in which individuals make sense of the conditions that surround them, the strategies they use to navigate those conditions, and the decisions they make, or, in many cases, feel like they have no choice but to make. The report concludes with recommendations, tangible and specific, for funders, the news industry, journalism schools, and students and early-career journalists.

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Executive Summary

For the past decade, narratives of crisis, decline, and precarity have circulated around the American journalism industry. News deserts have proliferated, jobs have disappeared, corporate consolidation has spread through the industry, and legacy outlets only provide some of the quality coverage they once could. Amid this despair, there have also been seeds of hope: philanthropic funders focusing on local media projects, digital startups experimenting with new business models, and a generation of new reporters undaunted by the state of the industry.

This report focuses on this generation of reporters, looking at how they understand and navigate the economic conditions that surround them. Focusing on two similar, but distinct media markets, Cincinnati and Philadelphia, the following analysis maps out the state of local journalism in these two cities. This mapping provides a crucial context for understanding the conditions confronted by individuals who choose to enter journalism jobs in these cities. We then conducted interviews with journalists who have worked in these markets for fewer than ten years, comprising what we call the “post-crisis generation.” These exploratory interviews reveal a class of media workers fully cognizant of the conditions that surround them, with a keen understanding of how the journalism organizations they work for could better serve their communities, despite lingering echoes of economic decline. Regardless of the differences between Cincinnati and Philadelphia, the respondents speak of similar conditions they face: disparities between expectation and reality, a lack of management and mentorship, few mid-career opportunities, and increasing financial pressure to leave the news industry.

Taking the perspectives and experiences of these journalists into account, we offer the following suggestions for individual and institutional actors in journalism:

For journalism students and young journalists

- We encourage support for unionization, but beyond that, encourage any formal and informal means to build collective solidarity.
- Because insular and informal personal networks drive much of the hiring, we encourage individuals to remain aware of this dynamic and help others navigate.
- We encourage the development of tools that give individual workers more bargaining power and agency in the market, especially job clearinghouses and salary transparency tools.

For news organizations

- Because much of the burnout of young journalists is driven by exploitative practices, we encourage organizations to rethink management practices and retrain managers in modes of productive mentorship.
- Analytics and metrics are often used indiscriminately and place an undue burden on meaningless engagement. We encourage organizations to develop and utilize alternative measures of success, particularly those that reinforce a commitment to quality among young journalists.

For philanthropists and funders

- Because philanthropic gifts can exert unexpected influence over the culture of an organization, we encourage funders to be cognizant of their expectations and how these expectations can be unnecessarily disruptive.
- We encourage funders to give general operating support, trusting organizations to make their own decisions about how best to meet challenges.
- To deal with an exodus of experience and talent, we encourage funders to endow long-term jobs, especially at the mid-career level, so that organizations can reap the benefit of experience.

For journalism schools

- We encourage journalism schools to develop curricula that pushes beyond rote skills training and a pedagogical philosophy that prepares students for a wide variety of careers.
- Because schools have moral and cultural cachet in the industry, we encourage them to actively push back against industry trends that both make journalism more precarious and diminish its public value.
- Finally, we encourage schools to utilize their resources in developing bridge career programs.

Each of these suggestions is offered with the intention of promoting greater security in the industry, and dampening the market's impact on journalism's public values and its young workforce. That said, none of these suggestions obviate the need for more robust, systemic solutions, especially increased public funding for journalism. Failing that, these suggestions do offer a glimpse into how those in the industry and adjacent to it may more humanely navigate the conditions they find themselves in.

Introduction: News Crises and Journalistic Precarity

As commercially-funded local journalism has declined in recent years, the labor landscape for journalists has grown ever more precarious. Many digital-first startups have risen and fallen on the promise to revive local news, often in ways that precipitate continued career inequality. And although foundations and nonprofits have launched initiatives to fill this funding gap, these projects tend to only mildly alleviate precarity for workers located in cities and regions fortunate to have media-focused benefactors.¹

The following report turns to the careers of young journalists to interrogate how they understand and navigate changing labor conditions in two very different post-industrial media markets: Cincinnati and Philadelphia. After decades of industrial disinvestment, both of these cities are facing their own forms of tech-industry and creative class driven economic renewal. At the same time, major media institutions in both cities have faced layoffs and declining revenues, though news startups and news nonprofits offer some opportunities. For young journalists aspiring to have a public impact, this creates a career landscape that is not always easy to navigate, nor does it offer much promise of a future.

Yet, persist they do, fully aware of the situation that surrounds them. As Nicole Cohen suggests, much of contemporary media work is marked by precarity, and contemporary media workers ambivalently navigate said precarity fueled by an abiding focus on the public importance of their work.² This is a labor condition felt in multiple industries, a fact very apparent in the two post-industrial cities that are the focus of this study. As Srnicek notes, the “long downturn” in manufacturing has been supplanted by a digital economy, relying on lean business models and flexible lower-wage labor,

a condition that is felt even more acutely as many cities and regions seek to mimic the success of Silicon Valley.³ In the news industry, as Google and Facebook eat the majority of the advertising revenue and hedge-fund media ownership makes drastic cuts in quality in pursuit of profitability, once healthy regional media markets struggle to meet both the information needs of the public and the financial needs of the local journalism workforce.⁴

Of news deserts and market failures

The twin impacts of digital media and hyper-commercialism (including consolidation and aggressive cost-reduction to achieve high targets for profit margins) have resulted in sharp declines in circulation and the cutting of staff.⁵ In short, our era can be characterized by the rise of “News Deserts,” suburban and rural communities that are no longer served by a daily, and in many cases weekly, newspaper, as well as major metropolitan areas served by “ghost papers,” news organizations that still exist, but no longer have adequate reporting resources to serve their communities.⁶

1 Martin Scott, Mel Bunce, and Kate Wright, 2019, “Foundation funding and the boundaries of journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 20(14): 2034-2052.

2 Nicole Cohen, *Writer's Rights: Freelance Journalism in the Digital Age*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016.

3 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. Malden, MA: Wiley, 2017, p. 36.

4 Victor Pickard, *Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

5 Penelope Muse Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*. Chapel Hill, NC: The Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism, The University of North Carolina, 2018. https://www.cislm.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Expanding-News-Desert-10_14-Web.pdf

6 Penelope Muse Abernathy, *The Rise of the New Media Baron and the Emerging Threats of News Deserts*. Chapel Hill, NC: The Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism, The University of North Carolina, 2016. https://www.cislm.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Abernathy_full.pdf

As the past decade has seen dramatic declines across the news industry—in revenue, in outlets, and in jobs—local journalism has been hit hardest. A 2018 report on the growth of news deserts from the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina frames the reality in stark terms:

More than one in five papers has closed over the past decade and a half, leaving thousands of our communities at risk of becoming news deserts...Almost 200 counties in the country have no newspaper at all. The people with the least access to local news are often the most vulnerable – the poorest, least educated and most isolated.⁷

As the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports, the number of news reporter, correspondent and news analyst jobs has declined from 65,930 jobs in 2000 to 44,490 in May of 2017, while the American Society of Newspaper Editors traces a sharper decline from 56,200 newspaper jobs in 2000 to 39,200 jobs in 2015.⁸ These numbers are worrisome on their own, but they also portend significant challenges to the broader ecologies of media and governance in regions where cuts have been felt hardest. As Shaker shows, the decline and closure of a major news outlet in a city tends to correlate with reduced civic engagement.⁹

Critics of media consolidation have long argued that corporate ownership places untenable demands on the press, and that as conglomerates move to extract value, they do so at a cost of civic health.¹⁰ As Pickard argues, ignoring the gap between journalism's public

mission and corporate pressure constitutes a major market failure in the American journalism industry, as closing newsrooms beget communities that have fewer mechanisms for accountability and self-governance.¹¹ These strains are felt unequally, though, and communities that continue to have a robust journalism ecosystem tend to possess an economic base that exists independent of a major metropolitan area, are generally upper-class, and have local access to major universities.¹²

The health of a local media system tends to correlate with the presence of other strong, local institutions, and a corporatization strategy that seeks to capture value at scale actively undermines the continued health of local news organizations. Recent years have seen hedge funds, like Digital First Media, report record profits by buying up distressed media properties and laying off reporters.¹³ Indicative of a type of "vulture capitalism" that strips value from reasonably healthy properties, such strategies of media ownership further imperil news organizations that have weathered digital disruptions, stripping companies for profit with little regard for civic health.¹⁴ Furthermore, digital changes in news and media industries have furthered "winner-take-all effects," where digital modes of distribution have led to a higher concentration of news and media jobs in

7 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

8 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, Reporters and Correspondents, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes273022.htm>; American Society of Newspaper Editors, Minority Employment in Daily Newspaper, <https://www.asne.org/content.asp?contentid=129>

9 Lee Shaker, 2014, "Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement," *Political Communication* 31(1): 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817>

10 Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, New York: Beacon Press, 2014.; Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, New York: The New Press, 2000.

11 Victor Pickard, 2014, "The great evasion: Confronting market failure in American media policy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31(2): 153-159.

12 Philip M. Napoli, Matthew Weber, Katie McCollough, and Qun Wang, *Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News*, Durham, NC: Dewitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, Duke University, 2018. <https://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Assessing-Local-Journalism-100-Communities.pdf>

13 Joe Nocera, "Imagine if Gordon Gecko bought news empires," *Bloomberg* March 28, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-03-26/alden-global-capital-s-business-model-destroys-news-papers-for-little-gain>

14 Julie Reynolds, "Meet the vulture capitalist who savaged the Denver Post," *The Nation*, April 13, 2018. <https://www.thenation.com/article/meet-the-vulture-capitalists-who-savaged-the-denver-post/>.; Will Bunch, "This obscure company is doing more to destroy a free press in America than Trump," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 15, 2019. <http://www.philly.com/news/columnists/digital-first-media-alden-gannett-hostile-takeover-hurts-democracy-20190115.html>

coastal cities that correlate with a broader decline in jobs and investment capital elsewhere.¹⁵ These are trends painted with a broad brush, and show few signs of abating.

Yet, because these changes are distributed unequally, it is important to attend to the dynamics that characterize a particular market, region, city, and community. Major metro dailies remain the most imperiled, but in some parts of the country, healthy advertising markets persist, and creative changes in revenue generation strategy have allowed certain papers to avoid the calamity that has befallen others.¹⁶ Given the focus of this report, accounting for the conditions of particular media market—existing actors, potential economic base, and the perceptions of those within the industry—offers an opportunity to identify strategies of survival in the face of ongoing crisis.¹⁷ For some, the rise of the nonprofit news sector offers a bright spot among journalism's woes, sustaining public interest journalism in communities that can afford it.¹⁸ Others point out

that the rise of nonprofit news may only be a solution available to communities with access to foundation resources, and that that the rise of foundation-funded journalism also marks a reliance on elite beneficence in order to sustain news.¹⁹ Foundation funding has led to subtle shifts in news agendas, and their financial and discursive capital often push organizations to adopt market-centric values in the pursuit of "innovation" and "sustainability."²⁰ In the absence of a national policy or strategy that foregrounds journalism as a public good, foundations make interventions in local and regional economies, with varying impacts.²¹ Taken in total, the miasma of policy failure, financial collapse, cash-flush foundations interested in journalism, and the varying resilience of local markets creates disparate geographies of precarity and opportunity for news workers and news organizations to navigate.²²

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- 15 Josh Benton, "The game of concentration: The Internet is pushing the American news business to New York and the coasts," *Nieman Reports* 70(2) Spring 2016: 54-56.; Richard Florida, Charlotte Melander, and Karen M. King, *Winner-Take-All Cities*. Toronto, CA: Rotman School of Business, University of Toronto, 2017. http://martinprosperity.org/media/2017-MPIWP-002_Winner-Take-All-Cities_Florida-Mellander-King.pdf
- 16 Christopher Ali, Thomas R. Schmidt, Damian Radcliffe, and Rosalind Donald, 2018, "The digital life of American newspapers," *Digital Journalism*, Online ahead of print. DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2018.1513810](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1513810)
- 17 Christopher Ali, Damian Radcliffe, Thomas R. Schmidt, and Rosalind Donald, 2018, "Searching for Sheboygans: On the future of small-market newspapers," *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism*, Online ahead of print. DOI: [10.1177%2F1464884917749667](https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464884917749667)
- 18 Magda Konieczna, *Journalism Without Profit*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.; Charles Lewis, "The

nonprofit road," *Columbia Journalism Review* September/October 2007: 33-36.

- 19 Rodney Benson, 2017, "Can foundations solve the journalism crisis?" *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* 19(8): 1059-1077. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464884917724612>
- 20 Martin Scott, Mel Bunce, and Kate Wright, "Foundation funding and the boundaries of journalism," *Journalism Studies*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1556321>; Brian Creech and Anthony Nadler, "Post-industrial fog: Reconsidering innovation in visions of journalism's future," *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* 19(2): 182-199. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464884916689573>
- 21 Victor Pickard, Josh Stearns, and Craig Aaron, *Saving the News: Toward a National Journalism Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: Free Press, 2009. https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/legacy-policy/saving_the_news.pdf
- 22 Nikki Usher, 2015, "Newsroom moves and the newspaper crisis evaluated: space, place, and cultural meaning," *Media, Culture, and Society* 37(7): 1005-1021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715591668>

Method

To get at the relationship between the health of a local news ecosystem and the precarity felt by individual news workers, we followed a two-fold analysis. First, we mapped out the media markets in Philadelphia and Cincinnati, two post-industrial cities with comparable histories of deindustrialization and population decline that have seen civic resources invested in technology, business, and culture sectors, aimed at attracting young, college educated people back into the cities. We identified trends in each market, as well as the major media institutions with the goal of mapping out the specific opportunities and conditions our interview respondents navigate.

Then, we interviewed early career journalists in both cities. Respondents had all worked in Cincinnati or Philadelphia for between two and ten years and comprise what we call the “post-crisis” generation. They came from a mix of organizations: legacy newspapers, radio, and television stations, public and commercial media, as well as a range of digital startups funded by both private and philanthropic dollars. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, focused on getting at the ways in which individuals made sense of the conditions that surrounded them, the strategies they used to navigate those conditions, and the decisions they made, or, in many cases, felt like they had no choice but to make. Respondents were offered anonymity so that they could be candid and were given the option to pull their participation after the fact. Responses from six interviewees from Cincinnati and eight from Philadelphia are included in this report. Respondents came from a diverse range of ethnic and class backgrounds in both cities, with an even split between genders represented in the sample.

Mapping News Ecologies in Cincinnati and Philadelphia

Cincinnati’s deserts and ghosts

Cincinnati, with a population of 301,301 and a metropolitan population of 2,137,406, is served by only one regional daily newspaper, the historically politically conservative *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a morning daily newspaper published by the Gannett Company. On December 31st, 2007, the only rival paper, the blue-collar *Cincinnati Post* owned by the media conglomerate E. W. Scripps, founded in 1881, was closed and replaced with what some characterize as “hyperlocal” coverage focused on affluent suburbs. For example *Fort Thomas Matters*, an online only publication, covers the exclusive Northern Kentucky suburb that lies just outside Cincinnati.²³ This site also happens to be a mini-syndicate of magazines owned by private publisher Mark Collier, which serves other affluent suburbs in the area, including Fort Mitchell, Indian Hill, Hyde Park, and Wyoming.

Cincinnati, located in Hamilton County, has five weekly papers and one daily, the aforementioned Gannett-owned *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Of the weeklies, *Cincinnati Citybeat* –a local arts and issues publication owned by Euclid Media Group, has the second largest readership to *The Enquirer*. Other smaller publications include *Cincinnati Herald*—an African American newspaper owned by Sesh Communications, the *Forest Hills Journal*—owned by Gannett, *Harrison News Harold*—owned by Schloss Media, Inc., and *Harrison Press*—owned by Delphos Harris, Inc. Additionally, *The American Israelite* located in Cincinnati, is the oldest English-language Jewish weekly newspaper in the US, founded in 1854. *The Catholic Telegraph*, established in 1831, is a monthly newspaper published by Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Currently, Cincinnati

23 Yemile Bucay, Victoria Elliott, Jennie Kamin, and Andrea Park, “America’s growing news deserts,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Spring 2017. https://www.cjr.org/local_news/american-news-deserts-donuts-local.php

does not have any online news organizations to fill the void left by the *Post*.

A macroview of newspaper ownership in Ohio suggests a pattern of private equity firms moving in to purchase papers that are bankrupt, closing, or struggling. In 2011 Versa Capital Management purchased 44 papers from Cincinnati-based Brown Publishing, a 90-year-old private, family-owned chain of small dailies and weeklies.²⁴ In 2014 Versa merged its holdings to become Civitas, which now owns papers in 22 counties in Ohio, thirteen of which are in economically struggling counties with unemployment and poverty rates well above both the state and national rates.²⁵ Presently, Gannett continues to dominate the Cincinnati market, however, according to Abernathy's recent interactive database project, "The Expanding News Desert," no news organization has stepped in to fill the void of local public-interest reporting.²⁶ One larger regional entity is *Journal-News* – a daily newspaper published by Cox Media Group located in adjacent Butler County, Ohio. *Journal-News* resulted from a merger between two papers in Butler and Warren counties, which provides minimal coverage of Cincinnati, but nevertheless competes with the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in the fast-growing northern suburbs of the region. However, with Gatehouse merging with Gannett, most of the newspapers in Ohio will soon be held by one owner.²⁷

Although this study primarily focuses on print journalism, TV and radio news broadcasting plays a large role in the region, with Cincinnati ranking 36th largest local television audience size, according to Nielson's demographic market rankings of 2017.²⁸ There are four full-time local news operations: ABC affiliate WCPO, NBC affiliate WLWT, CBS affiliate WKRC, and Fox affiliate WXIX. And Cincinnati has the 30th largest radio market in the U.S., according to Radio Online

(2016) with WVXU broadcasting the region's NPR public radio station in addition to one low power community radio station, WVQC-LP.

In the Cincinnati market, several models may be pursued to incentivize, subsidize and/or otherwise fund public service print journalism at the local level, including private investment in new initiatives to fund efforts in local coverage; non profit organizations and corporate foundations with support from philanthropic organizations, mainly the Scripps Howard Foundation and TheGroundTruthProject. Another model of community coverage is provided by *Cincy Stories*, a small organization that does long form investigative pieces in short documentary and podcast formats (<https://www.cincystories.net/>). Compared to legacy media, these efforts are small and focus on metropolitan areas, and are primarily online, leaving people who are economically struggling in rural counties and who lack broadband or wireless access, high and dry.

Seeds of hope in Philadelphia

Compared to Cincinnati, everything in Philadelphia is bigger: more outlets, more audiences, more ownership drama, more decline, and more poverty. Philadelphia, with a population of 1.6 million and a metro population of nearly 6 million, is the United States' fourth largest media market and its poorest big city.²⁹ In *Rebuilding the News*, Anderson traced the digital changes that rippled through the Philadelphia local news ecosystem in the early 21st century, and the following paragraphs pick up where he left off, with particular attention to the changes at the main legacy newspapers, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Philadelphia Daily News*, their parent company Philadelphia Media Network, and an influx of philanthropic dollars structure the landscape for news workers.³⁰

24 Abernathy, *The Rise of the New Media Baron and the Emerging Threats of News Deserts*.

25 Ibid.

26 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

27 Talil Arbel, "GateHouse Media Buying Gannett, Bringing Most Ohio Newspapers Under One Owner" *WOSU Public Media*. August 5, 2019. <https://radio.wosu.org/post/gatehouse-media-buying-gannett-bringing-most-ohio-newspapers-under-one-owner#stream/0>

28 The Nielsen Company, "Local Television Market Universe Estimates, 2018-2019," September 22, 2018, <https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/public%20factsheets/tv/2018-19-dma-ranker.pdf>

29 The Nielsen Company, "Local Television Market Universe Estimates, 2018-2019," September 22, 2018, <https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/public%20factsheets/tv/2018-19-dma-ranker.pdf>; Darryl C. Murphy, "Poverty still plaguing Philadelphia, poorest big city in the country," *WHYY*, September 14, 2018, <https://whyy.org/articles/poverty-still-plaguing-philadelphia-poorest-big-city-in-the-country/>; United States Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2017," September 12, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.html>

30 C.W. Anderson, 2013, *Rebuilding the News: Metropolitan*

Decline at the *Inquirer* and *Daily News* is perhaps the longest running (and most significant) headline in Philadelphia media, with ownership changes heavily documented in the local and national press.³¹ In January of 2016, the Philadelphia Media Network's owner Gerry Lenfest donated the entirety of PMN, along with \$20 million of his own fortune, to the nonprofit Institute for New Media and Journalism, part of the Philadelphia Foundation and created specifically to accommodate the donation of the media company.³² The mission of the Institute was to find a path toward sustainability for the *Inquirer*, *Daily News*, and *Philly.com*, by taking short-term profit pressure off the newsroom.³³ In 2017, the Institute for New Media and Journalism was renamed the Lenfest Institute. Lenfest passed away in August of 2018, and outside donations continued to flow into the institute to supplement his initial \$20 million.³⁴ The shift to a nonprofit owner meant journalists from the *Inquirer*, *Daily News*, and *Philly.com* would all be working in the same newsroom, and that they all would have to apply for their jobs, covering new beats and performing new service roles.³⁵

Journalism in the Digital Age, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- 31 Joel Mathis, "The long fall of Philly newspapers," *Philadelphia Magazine*. August 11, 2014. <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/08/11/financial-decline-philadelphia-newspapers-inquirer-daily-news/>; Joel Mathis, "The last days of the Philadelphia Inquirer?" *Philadelphia Magazine*, June 12, 2014. <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/06/12/philadelphia-inquirer-last-days/>; Charles Levinson, "Philadelphia Inquirer co-owner Lewis Katz killed in plane crash," *Wall Street Journal*. June 1, 2014. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/philadelphia-inquirer-co-owner-lewis-katz-killed-in-plane-crash-1401631440>.
- 32 Fred Barbash, "Struggling Philadelphia Inquirer is donated to nonprofit in groundbreaking deal," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/01/12/struggling-philadelphia-inquirer-officially-is-donated-to-a-nonprofit-in-groundbreaking-media-deal/?utm_term=.8f43f6234bc7.
- 33 Andrew Lapin, "As Philadelphia newspapers turn to nonprofits, who is 'public media'?" *Current: News for People in Public Media*. April 20, 2016, https://current.org/2016/04/as-philadelphia-newspapers-turn-to-nonprofits-who-is-public-media/?wallit_nosession=1.
- 34 Ruth McCambridge, "Journalism philanthropist Gerry Lenfest dies," *Nonprofit Quarterly*. August 6, 2018, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/08/06/journalism-philanthropist-gerry-lenfest-dies/>
- 35 Kristen Hare, "In Philadelphia, 3 newsrooms had to become 1. Now they're taking on a whole

Though PMN commands the most attention in the Philadelphia market, other legacy organizations persist. CBS affiliate KYW, ABC affiliate WPVI, NBC affiliate WCAU, and Fox affiliate WTXF all boast long running nightly local news broadcasts. However, when CBS decided to sell many of its radio properties in Philadelphia, layoffs in radio news quickly followed.³⁶ In 2017, *Philadelphia Magazine*, the only glossy monthly publication in the city, cut staff and scaled back news, politics, and sports coverage.³⁷ Further attrition in journalism has also been acutely felt among the city's various newswEEKlies, with the *Philadelphia City Paper* closing in October of 2015 after it was bought by Broad Street Media, which owns the competing *Philadelphia Weekly*.³⁸ Broad Street Media, which had 275 employees across 35 publications centered in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, entered into Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2017.³⁹

new kind of challenge." Poynter. May 18, 2017, <https://www.poynter.org/tech-tools/2017/in-philadelphia-3-newsrooms-had-to-transform-into-one-now-theyre-beginning-a-whole-new-kind-of-change/>;

Jared Brey, "Behind the digital curve, Philadelphia Media Network tries to straighten out its brand," *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 17, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/inquirer-daily-news-paywall-philly.php; Bob Fernandez, "Inquirer, Daily News staffers offered buyouts while newsroom plans to hire others," *Philadelphia Inquirer* October 9, 2017. https://www.philly.com/philly/business/inquirer-daily-news-staffers-offered-buyouts-face-layoffs-20171009.html?utm_campaign=Inquirer+Twitter+Account&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=social&cid=Inquirer+Twitter+Account

- 36 Jeff Blumenthal, "WIP, KYW, WOGL, other CBS Radio stations up for sale," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, May 15, 2016. https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/morning_roundup/2016/03/wip-kyw-wogl-other-cbs-radio-stations-up-for-sale.html
- 37 Erin Arvedlund and Nick Vadala, "Philadelphia Magazine announces layoffs, shuts down popular Eagles section of website." *Philly.com*. January 12, 2017, <https://www.philly.com/philly/business/Philadelphia-Magazine-announces-layoffs-shuts-down-popular-Eagles-section-of-website.html>
- 38 Valerie Vande Panne, "After Philadelphia City Paper closes, a campaign springs up to keep its archives public," *Columbia Journalism Review*. October 8, 2015. https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/philadelphia-city-paper-closed-archives.php
- 39 Jeff Blumenthal, "Local newspaper group files for bankruptcy," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/news/2016/09/06/broad-street-media-philly-weekly-bankruptcy-donnel.html>

In 2018, a local entrepreneur bought 12 of Newspaper Media Groups Philadelphia-area community news publications, with the intent of strengthening their financial position and improving the editorial product.⁴⁰ In the suburbs surrounding Philadelphia, Gatehouse Media laid off a significant, but undisclosed, number of journalists after the company was purchased by hedge fund New Media Investment Group.⁴¹ Alongside these community outlets, reasonably healthy ethnic media outlets *Al Dia*, which serves the Hispanic community, predominantly African-American outlets WURD-FM and *The Philadelphia Tribune*, and the Chinese language newspaper *Metro Chinese Weekly*, enjoy relative stability despite their comparatively smaller budgets.⁴²

Some national and local commentators have celebrated the potential for startups to fill the void left by local news' decline, with Lenfest Institute money earmarked specifically for funding "innovation" and "new business models."⁴³ Like elsewhere in the U.S., news startups have come and gone, most notably *AXIS Philly*, a data journalism-focused news website that burned through a \$2.4 million grant from the William Penn Foundation over a period of two years.⁴⁴ Other startups have found

longer-term success, such as *BillyPenn.com*, a news site focused on developing millennial audiences across social media.⁴⁵ In 2016, Gannett invested in *BillyPenn*, driving speculation that the site had found a way to monetize millennial attention in a way that made local news sustainable, eventually expanding to Pittsburgh and Denver.⁴⁶ The company became Spirited Media, and layoffs followed in late-2017.⁴⁷ Philadelphia's public media organization, WHYY, bought *BillyPenn.com* from Spirited Media in April 2019, folding its five staff into its own operations.⁴⁸

Two other digital local news startups—*Philadelphia Citizen* and *Philly Voice*—have received much less buzz and attention than *BillyPenn.com*, but also show signs of better financial health. *Philadelphia Voice* boasts an editorial staff of around 16, and a stable rotation of freelancers, sustaining itself through content marketing, native advertising, and other forms of digital advertising.⁴⁹ The *Philadelphia Citizen*, a nonprofit,

40 Jeff Blumenthal, "Philadelphia Weekly changes ownership hands for the second time in three years," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/news/2018/12/10/philadelphia-weekly-changes-ownership-hands-for.html>

41 Benamin Goggin, "Local newspaper giant GateHouse Media laid off at least 60 journalists across the US after a \$30 million acquisition," *Business Insider*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/gatehouse-media-lays-off-sports-and-photo-staff-after-30-million-deal-new-media2019-2>

42 *Al Dia* <http://aldianews.com/>; WURD Radio, <https://wurd-radio.com/>; *Philadelphia Tribune* <https://www.phillytrib.com/>; *Metro Chinese Weekly*, <http://www.nmspress.com/metro-chinese-weekly.html>

43 Jeff Jarvis, "Jeff Jarvis: New Business Models for News," Columbia Business School, 2010, <https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/video/videos/jeff-jarvis-new-business-models-news>; Kristen Hare, "Lenfest institute announces \$26.5 million initiative to fund local news innovation," *Poynter*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.poynter.org/tech-tools/2017/lenfest-institute-announces-26-5-million-to-fund-local-news-innovation/>; Burt Herman, "How and why the Lenfest Institute funds innovation," January 30, 2019, <https://medium.com/lenfest-institute-for-journalism/how-and-why-the-lenfest-institute-funds-innovation-8fcfecc6ac51>

44 Jeff Blumenthal, "Temple pulls plug on *Axis Philly* web-

site," *Philadelphia Business Journal*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/news/2014/06/06/temple-pulls-the-plug-on-axisphilly-news-website.html>, Susan Snyder, "Temple pulls plug on *AxisPhilly* news site," *Philadelphia Inquirer* June 6, 2014, https://www.philly.com/philly/news/local/20140607_After_two_years_Temple_pulls_the_cord_on_AxisPhilly_news_site.html

45 Simon Van Zuylen-Wood, "Jim Brady Profile: The Billy Pulpit," *Philadelphia Magazine*, September 25, 2014, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/09/25/jim-brady-profile-billy-pulpit/>

46 Thomas Heath, "Former Post editor gets Gannett investment in Philadelphia news website," *Washington Post*, March 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/former-post-editor-gets-gannett-investment-in-philadelphia-news-website/2016/03/22/7d351986-f058-11e5-85a6-2132cf446d0a_story.html

47 Corey Hutchins, "'A shitty week!' Spirited Media seeks new revenue streams after layoffs," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November 3, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/united-states_project/denverite-billy-penn-incline-layoffs.php; Ricardo Bilton, "Spirited Media lays off staff, capping off a rough week for local news," *Nieman Lab*, November 6, 2017, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/11/spirited-media-lays-off-staff-capping-off-a-rough-week-for-local-news/>

48 Avi Wolfman-Arent, "WHYY acquires local news site Billy Penn," *WHYY.org*, April 15, 2019, <https://whyy.org/articles/whyy-acquires-local-news-site-billy-penn/>

49 Joel Mathis, "PhillyVoice.com unveils star-studded list of contributors," *Philadelphia Magazine*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2015/01/05/philly-voice-com-unveils-star-studded-list-contributors/>; Victor Fiorillo, "George Norcross back in journalism with the

member and donor-supported startup which pitches itself as a “one-stop shop for civic engagement” boasts a reasonably healthy staff of four editors and nine reporters.⁵⁰ A fourth digital news company rounds out major outlets in Philadelphia, the technology news site *Technical.ly*, which started as *Technical.ly Philly* in 200 to provide reporting on technology and business communities, expanded to include a social impact news site *Generocity.org*.⁵¹ The company claims to employ about 20 people full-time, with one lead reporter for each of its main sites: *Technical.ly Philly*, *Technical.ly Baltimore*, *Technical.ly Delaware*, and *Generocity*.⁵²

Stability, scale, and public mission may ultimately reside in Philadelphia’s nonprofit and public media. The city is home to WHYY, the National Public Radio and PBS station that is home to “Fresh Air with Terry Gross,” and boasts 930,000 unique television viewers 350,000 radio listeners per week, along with 119,833 monthly unique visitors to WHYY.org.⁵³ The station reports net increases in revenue every year since 2009⁵⁴, the peak of the Great Recession and the year the broader crisis in news became readily apparent.⁵⁵ With an annual budget of \$48 million, WHYY is a significant media employer, and previously absorbed other startup local journalism projects like *PlanPhilly.com* and the aforementioned *BillyPenn.com*.⁵⁶ WHYY employees face their own

struggles, with both diversity in the organization and lower wages than comparable outlets, though staff recently voted to unionize.⁵⁷

Over the past several years, the nonprofit Resolve Philadelphia has worked to build collaborative projects between various organizations in the city, leveraging editorial resources behind annual solutions journalism projects anchored around themes like prisoner reentry, poverty, and income inequality.⁵⁸ Funded by foundation grants, and pulling together staff from more than 20 newsrooms across the city, commentators and awards-granting bodies often cite Resolve as a hopeful example of the impact of philanthropic journalism can have.

Any mapping of Philadelphia would be incomplete without accounting for that philanthropy. Aside from the investments made by the Lenfest Institute noted above, the Knight Foundation also recently announced that it would be spending \$19 million on supporting arts and journalism organizations in Philadelphia.⁵⁹ Leveraging their resources, Knight and Lenfest also collaborate on the Knight-Lenfest Newsroom initiative, a national program that invests in digital transformation

Philly Voice,” *Philadelphia Magazine*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/11/06/george-norcross-returning-journalism-philly-voice/>; Philly Voice staff, *Philly Voice*, <https://www.phillyvoice.com/staff-contributors/>

50 About, *Philadelphia Citizen*, <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/about/>; Masthead, *Philadelphia Citizen*, <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/about/the-philadelphia-citizen-masthead/>

51 About, Technically Media, <http://technicallymedia.com/>

52 Daniel Denvir, “Technically Philly: Detailed coverage of the Philadelphia tech scene,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2, 2011, https://www.cjr.org/news_startups_guide/2011/05/technically-philly.php/

53 WHYY Community Report, WHYY, <https://why.org/about/why-community-report/>

54 Ibid.

55 Leonard Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson, “The reconstruction of American Journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Spring 2009, https://archives.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php

56 Financial statements, WHYY, 2018, <https://why.org/financial-statements/>; Chris Krewson, “NewsWorks added PlanPhilly, then Chris Satullo was suddenly gone,” *Billy Penn*, September 11, 2015, <https://billypenn.com/2015/09/11/newsworks-added-planphilly-then-chris-satullo-was-suddenly-gone/>; Michael Depp, “Could WHYY redefine public media’s role?” *Net News Check*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.netnewscheck.com/article/12112/could-why-redefine-public-medias-role/>; Robb Tonroe, “WHYY says goodbye to NewsWorks website,” *Philly.com*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/why-newsworks-tonight-digital-philadelphia-news-20171009.html>

[com/2015/09/11/newsworks-added-planphilly-then-chris-satullo-was-suddenly-gone/](https://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/why-newsworks-tonight-digital-philadelphia-news-20171009.html); Michael Depp, “Could WHYY redefine public media’s role?” *Net News Check*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.netnewscheck.com/article/12112/could-why-redefine-public-medias-role/>; Robb Tonroe, “WHYY says goodbye to NewsWorks website,” *Philly.com*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/why-newsworks-tonight-digital-philadelphia-news-20171009.html>

57 Juliana Felicianon Reyes, “WHYY union: Workers at Philly’s public radio station are voting today,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. October 30, 2019. <https://www.inquirer.com/business/why-union-election-vote-sag-aftra-philadelphia-20191030.html>

58 Projects, Resolve Philadelphia, <https://resolvephilly.org/projects/>; Christine Schmidt, “How the Broke in Philly collaboration is focusing local media’s attention on poverty and economic mobility,” *Nieman Lab*, September 19, 2018, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/09/how-the-broke-in-philly-collaboration-is-focusing-local-medias-attention-on-poverty-and-economic-mobility/>

59 Innovation Grants, Lenfest Institute, 2019, <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/innovation-grants/>; Knight Foundation, “Knight Foundation invests \$19 million in Philadelphia arts, journalism, and communities,” September 16, 2018, <https://knightfoundation.org/press/releases/knight-foundation-invests-19-million-in-philadelphia-journalism-arts-and-community>

in metropolitan newsrooms across the country, with the Philadelphia Media Network a perennial beneficiary of this funding.⁶⁰ This funding marks a significant material investment in journalism in Philadelphia,⁶¹ but it does not mean jobs are more secure. In May 2019, PMN announced buyouts and layoffs, which the News Guild

of Greater Philadelphia said was the “devastating result of continued mismanagement and poor leadership.”⁶²

While a macro-level view reveals markets that are beset by challenges, with a few reasons to remain positive, a more granular perspective helps reveal both how young journalists live among these conditions, as well as how any reasons for optimism may be more tenuous than they actually appear.

60 Lenfest Institute, “Knight-Lenfest Newsroom Initiative,” <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/knight-lenfest-newsroom-initiative/>

61 Joel Mathis, “Is the William Penn Foundation stifling journalism in Philadelphia?” *Philadelphia Magazine*, August 13, 2013, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2013/08/13/william-penn-foundation-stifling-journalism-philadelphia/>; Michael X. Delli Carpini, Mariella Morales Suarez, and Burt Herman, *Being Informed: A Study of the Information Needs and Habits of Philadelphia Residents*, Philadelphia: Lenfest Institute for Journalism; October 2018, <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Being-Informed.-Information-Needs-of-Philadelphia-Residents.-Delli-Carpini-Morales-Sua%CC%81rez-and-Herman-final.pdf>

62 Danya Henninger, “Journalism job cuts: Philly Inquirer plans buyouts to reduce newsroom staff.” *Billy Penn*, May 23, 2019. <https://billypenn.com/2019/05/23/journalism-job-cuts-philly-inquirer-plans-buyouts-to-reduce-newsroom-staff/>

The View from Early-career Journalists

Though the media ecosystem mapping shows significant differences in scale between Cincinnati and Philadelphia, interview responses reveal a remarkably similar range of experiences. For example, many respondents in Philadelphia noted that the hiring market and journalism culture felt very insular, and that a preference for existing interpersonal networks colored many of the career decisions people made and the ways money seemed to move around the city. In Cincinnati, the hiring market was similarly insular, but with local TV news dominating the landscape. In both cities, career trajectories and professional networks all continue to orbit around the market gravity of legacy organizations.

We found that participants' career experiences fell within four distinct phases: transitioning from school to career, finding mentorship inside the industry, wrestling with a lack of future opportunities, and deciding whether or not to leave the profession. Each moment acts as a locus of personal reflection, where the dynamics of a given market are most apparent. In the sections that follow, we try to illustrate how these moments provide a crucial lens for understanding the relationship between the health of a given media market, the precarity felt by individuals in that market, and the strategies they use to navigate those conditions.

The disjunction between education expectations and career realities

For many respondents, especially those in more secure staff jobs, an intuitive understanding of how competitive journalism jobs had become characterized their time as students. As they took classes and developed skills, one eye seemed to always be fixed on the future, driving decisions. One recent graduate captures a sentiment shared by nearly all respondents: "I had very, very high expectations going into the career once I graduated. I had secured internships all throughout college that I thought would land me a job, but it hasn't." Another reporter, who found success early and has moved between stable jobs at legacy institutions succinctly

describes the anxiety felt by journalism students: "I always felt that if I am not doing an internship, freelancing, and filling my class load completely, creating a lot of clips and producing as much content as I can, then I'm not going to get a job." Such decisions were driven by intuited understanding of how precarious the news profession had become over the past decade: "I am entering into a market where you hear, every single day, about how it is failing and how there are no jobs, essentially."

This anxiety is borne out by reality. One journalist, who had been in the Philadelphia market for the better part of a decade said, "Ten years ago, getting an entry-level position in journalism, in Philly, was really hard. There were no under-30 positions at *The Inquirer*." Others resign themselves to living with persistent job insecurity. One journalist who spent the better part of eight years in the city said, when asked what kind of narrative characterized their career so far: "Narrative? I don't know, maybe instability....Almost half of the employers that I've worked for are gone."

Grim prospects turned many toward entrepreneurial opportunities, either starting their own projects to develop skills and generate revenue, or to break into freelancing opportunities and full-time jobs: "I took an entrepreneurial journalism class and that was the first time I found something that I knew I wanted to do. I learned a lot, and it completely built my career." These decisions are often driven by a practical understanding of the market, and respondents demonstrated a competitive rationality that often lent itself to eventual optimism: "Once you find something, you can definitely make it your own and work your way up through the ladder, create a job opportunity for yourself."

Many individuals argued that there was a benefit to persistence. Over time, though, optimism fades as other aspects of the industry begin to control their daily lives. Take the words of a young reporter, who struggled to adapt to a newsroom where news quality mattered less than page views: "It would have been helpful to get some sort of primer/warning on how the sausage is made in the industry...You will have to do stuff you don't want

to do because of page views. The company you work for may not actually care about the community it's in." Implicit in this statement is a larger acknowledgement that the way market demands manifest really impact both the amount of satisfaction a journalist takes from the job and the quality of work they feel supported to do.

Similarly, in Cincinnati, one person who really wanted a job in public radio had landed a job as a digital producer and editor at a Scripps-owned TV affiliate, had "ended up posting cat videos to [the station's] Facebook because that's what my boss wanted." A deeply painful disjunction is the professional frustration of not being able to do meaningful work, an impulse that is most frequently stymied by the production model of local television news: "The model that focuses on crime, interstate crashes, weather, snow days became very formulaic, writing the same stories about the same issues every day and I got into journalism to, you know, dig deep."

As a corollary to the previous statement, a journalist working at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that after the publication's ownership structure changed, profit motives shifted and the demands placed on newsroom workers changed as well. News stories and multimedia packages were now evaluated on a suite of metrics that tracked engagement over simple page views, reflecting an overall shift in the journalist's work life, "If it wasn't for that kind of funding, I don't know if the team I am on or the role that I have would even exist." Practically speaking, a relief from daily profit pressure means journalists have the time and space necessary to get better at their job: "I am able to learn new skill sets... If I didn't have that freedom or had to constantly crank out content because we need clicks, we need page views, we need the ad revenue, then I don't think I'd be developing as a journalist."

The transition from graduation to employment is the toughest challenge for most, and individuals often vacillate between blaming themselves for being unprepared and blaming their journalism schools for failing to prepare them. One recent graduate, who did find work pretty quickly, but now commutes far outside of Cincinnati, suggested that it would be helpful if there was "maybe something at the university level to help graduates get that job right out of college." One J-school graduate who after a year hasn't found work as

a reporter and now substitute teaches while freelancing on the side, suggests that perhaps she erred by not developing multi-media skills. But perhaps she should have been warned: "I feel like they need to be more realistic with you –[advising you that] 'you need to change the classes you are taking – print journalism is dead...you have to do online journalism.'"

In many respects, respondents held up college internships as something meant to provide experience of what the job would be like, although this wasn't always the case: "I don't think any of my internships have been helpful at all...This sounds really negative, but all of my hard work in college and all the money that I put into college did not get me anywhere." Although most interviewees pursued paid internships, the internships that seemed to be best connected to employment were largely unpaid. A Cincinnati reporter unhappy with their current job posits, "I could have done more internships, but I can't do unpaid because I need to make that money... seems like it helped people who had big [unpaid] internships get jobs right out of college."

For many respondents, the opportunity costs of going into journalism are well known, and they try to balance their expectations with a realistic understanding of the market and their own financial needs. For those that make it into the career, though, they are often surprised to find that there is little support once they arrive at an organization.

Of mentorship and management

After landing a job, young journalists' career experiences are further structured by informal mentorship relationships and formal management decisions. These two areas are deeply imbricated with each other, but our interviews also show that an absence of mentorship and inscrutable management decisions not only damage individual morale, but contribute to an overall ecosystem where young journalists have little sense of where their careers are going. The state of leadership in Philadelphia newsrooms is best captured in the words of a reporter who had worked for several organizations around the city:

The editorial class is what has really hollowed out the most. So, it's a bunch of reporters who are essentially running these shops with a bunch of second- or third-rate editors who are just, well, whoever was willing to take these garbage mid-level roles. They wind up managing stuff and managing reporters who are probably similar to any generation of reporters. They are enthusiastic, they've got ideas, they want to do quality reporting and all that stuff, but they need guidance.

The same journalist notes that it is not a problem at just one organization but a condition that afflicts the entire Philadelphia market: "You see the erosion, you see the lack of expertise...Reporters nowadays, we send stories to each other to simulate the old process of where you had multiple people looking at your stuff. That doesn't happen anymore." One Cincinnati reporter describes the effects of hollowing out the editorial class at their paper, due to a lack of resources, career stagnation, and better opportunities outside of print journalism: "We just lost a reporter we've had for over 20 years. Our editor got a PR job, another went with Gannett. Now I'm the oldest - longest running reporter now and I've only been there a year."

The general lack of mentorship and leadership makes it especially notable when a young reporter has a positive experience with a manager who sees the value in professional development. One reporter identified their first boss as a foundational presence in their career, despite that boss's tendency to find themselves in conflict with executive management: "I learned the difference between having a boss that has your back and believes in you, and then not having that. Not every team there had someone who would say, 'This is someone I want to keep on my team and we should let them do cool things.'" For many, interpersonal support and a desire to help a young journalist navigate the vagaries of a new job are what is often lacking in their workplace culture. For these journalists, it is dispiriting when the market can't financially support organizations in ways that produce these kinds of relationships.

Lessons learned from good mentors tended to translate into more opportunity later, either through demonstrated competence or professional connections. One person noted that their best mentor "taught me how to maintain connections with people." For some, these models of

mentorship prove crucial to helping new journalists integrate into the profession: "Most of us at the time didn't understand office politics and how, when you want to do something, how long it may take to get it done, or how to say certain things without seeming like the lazy millennial."

Mentorship, especially the kind that helps individuals develop over time, is rarely a function of management. A Cincinnati journalist discovered the professional vulnerability inherent in tying her fate to the word of an editor for whom she worked as a stringer for six months. They had promised her a full-time job, but the opportunity "just fizzled out when [the editor] retired."

Among Philadelphia journalists, *The Inquirer's* resources loom large in such discussions, evidence of a palpable sense of inequality between the journalists who tend to come to *The Inquirer* from somewhere else and the local talent working their way up through neighboring organizations. One reporter noted how insularity at *The Inquirer* meant their resources felt unavailable for anyone with a history at other Philadelphia outlets: "*The Inquirer* doesn't seem to take people seriously unless it has invested in them already...For everyone else in the city, there is this sense of 'Why won't you invest in the homegrown talent?'"

Faced with a hollowed-out editorial class and disinterested ownership, there is a growing feeling of neglect among young reporters. Aware of a gap between ambition and skill, the lack of mentorship and close training alongside an experienced editor translates to a feeling of lost opportunity for some:

If I had been somewhere like *The Inquirer*, there would have been so much more editorial support to turn you into someone who is better at the thing you are doing...I don't know if I ever had an editor over the course of time make me a better reporter overall. I never felt like I was mentored in a way that was helpful. Which sucks.

Among respondents, there is the feeling that opportunity and precarity compound over time, depending upon the informal networks a person has access to. Those with less social capital and professional resources express a sense of material and professional loss for advantages they cannot regain.

Limited mid-career options and a lack of next steps

A stark awareness of limited opportunities for advancement characterizes many of the responses gathered for this study. In Philadelphia, there is a sense that news organizations have been hiring for “jobs, not careers,” and that an influx of philanthropic money around journalism has led to a plethora of one-year positions and one-off projects. These temporary jobs and the cycles of grant funding, though, have not replicated stability. One reporter who has worked a series of one-year fellowships in a range of newsrooms said, “There are very few job openings for people whose job it is to write and report the news solely. When those jobs do come along, they are among this very narrow set of employers.”

Limited job opportunities draw further attention to power imbalances between young workers and hiring managers, as captured in the following statement: “We are in this moment now where we are either hiring young reporters to do work that they should get paid more for, or we are not hiring them at all because people in their late 20s or early 30s are looking for jobs. There aren’t many and they don’t pay that well.” Reflecting on an almost decade-long career spent jumping from funding opportunity to funding opportunity, one reporter captured the situation in Philadelphia in stark terms: “I just wish there were more jobs...Setting aside the idea of funding specific projects or stories, it doesn’t feel like there’s enough jobs going around to create the type of atmosphere that would make people feel like there is long-term opportunity.”

In the face of such limited opportunity, others reflexively note that a lack of agency has been the defining factor of their career: “How has it affected my career? Choices get made for you.” In Cincinnati there is also a common experience of downsizing and subsequent consolidation of labor and wage stagnation, both in print and TV news: “I’m competing with journalists that have been in the game for 25, 30 years... [Editors] don’t want to hire someone new to train when you can have someone with more experience that could maybe do two jobs instead of one.” Those that have felt relative security can find that security taken away very quickly: “In 2018 [the TV-news station] gave pink slips to our entire team of eight people; they gave us an opportunity to come back

to a new revised position which was called a real-time editor...it was basically more responsibilities for a very tiny bump in pay, and still just understaffed.”

The tightly insular nature of the journalism job market further justifies a sense of frustration among several journalists, especially as they consider the relative value of their labor and expertise in a market that has few jobs to offer. Statements like, “You have to be happy with what you have because there are a lot of talented people out there who could also have your job,” characterize much of the attitude among young journalists, crystallizing into the common-sense knowledge that trying to improve one’s career is incredibly risky. Take the words of a journalist who, working at *The Inquirer*, has one of the better and more secure jobs in the city, as an example: “I think that the lack of options makes it much easier to say ‘I have a good job in journalism, I don’t want to rock the boat by trying to get something else that might not work out.’” Feelings of personal stability lead another to state that, “Given how many newsrooms are going through layoffs, do I want to move somewhere only to have it not work out in two years? Not really.”

Stasis sets in, and, if a reporter has a secure and prominent enough job, then the insularity of the market provides its own sense of quasi-security: “There is just one big cycle. It is relatively easy to get a job somewhere else, as long as you have a well-known enough byline.” Yet, for those who have yet to land a secure staff job, or who feel as if they have not yet broken through hiring managers’ personal networks, early optimism becomes palpable frustration. One young reporter held several prestigious year-long reporting fellowships, but turned to freelancing when those fellowships failed to translate into permanent work, despite genuine efforts at networking:

I was always at different events dealing with journalism...I’m meeting with folks, I’m sitting down with them, I’m talking to them about whatever comes up...I feel like it’s all about connections, it is all about who you know. I know some people. I know some journalists, I know some editors, but I just haven’t made THAT connection.

And yet, instead of expressing anger at conditions in the market or habits of hiring managers, the reporter intuits their own economic precarity as a personal failing: “I always hear you have to have confidence, but how do you just go to a director or the top editor at a publication and say ‘I need a job? Can I get hired?’” One Cincinnati reporter acknowledges that there are less opportunities for journalists in the city and responds by accepting the limitations of the local market and internalizing the challenges in a language shot through with market logic: “You have to constantly try to expand your own market. The key is to diversify so you do not have to rely on one market or media source...I think the biggest challenges are distribution of my work on a national and international scale.”

The need to constantly reposition oneself forces career journalists to not only second guess their career, but recreate it constantly. As Cohen argues, journalists forced to navigate a contingent labor market are often pushed to internalize and personalize market conditions as reflections of their own skills and value.⁶³ Yet, as the next section shows, these personal valuations also lead young journalists to reconsider the value in sticking with journalism as a career.

Deciding when and whether to leave the profession

Many of the journalists interviewed for this study considered, in one way or another, what would ultimately lead them to leave the industry. One reporter who’d seen a fair bit of change over six years said: “Every time I lose a job, I have to ask, ‘do I want to move and look for a job, or do I not want to move, try to freelance, take unemployment, and hope that another staff job comes up?’” Now working a staff job, with health insurance and a sense of long-term security, that same reporter finally feels free enough to make other life decisions—they are buying a house with their partner, but also weighing that decision against getting married or buying a car. A staff job allowed them to move out of the place they’d been sharing with roommates and begin to make longer-term life commitments, but they are still cognizant of the delays and sacrifices it took to keep practicing journalism:

This is the first time that I have had any job security at all and making something close to decent wages, but that’s 5 or 6 months during a 6-year career. I couldn’t continue to put off getting married or having kids...When I started off doing it, it was more like ‘wow, this is way better than working some shitty job,’ and now it is something where you have to start making larger sacrifices, potentially, to keep doing it.

Ultimately the affordability of one’s lifestyle can keep a person in a job longer, especially if there are not surprise expenses and the promise of a regular pay check. Take the words of a young producer: “For the first time in my life, I am financially stable, but because of Philly’s living situation, that has made it that much more comfortable...I can’t think of living anywhere else in the U.S. where I can have the luxuries that I have had in this current location.” And yet, the future lingers, with the acknowledgement that the current situation can only last so long: “Definitely don’t want to be here in 5-10 years, though, maybe, having saved up money...I’d be able to buy a property or live somewhere else.”

Compare these responses to those of a reporter who had to buy a car to cover suburban news, has no family financial support, and for whom a handful of car repair bills have made staying in the career a fraught decision: “Trying to make it work all on my own is not really happening right now. Months where I don’t have a car thing happen, I can put some money away, but because of all the car stuff that has happened, I’m putting money...toward my credit card debt...It’s not how I want to live.” For others, the compounding hardship makes it clear that the local market would never welcome them. Consider the words of a reporter who spent years freelancing for between \$100 and \$200 per story, but could never get an editor to take their pleas for a job seriously:

Respondent: I was talking to another journalist, I was interviewing her [for a piece] and she was saying how she doesn’t feel welcomed here, really, as a journalist, and it took me, maybe a few minutes to respond and realize that I don’t really feel welcome here as a journalist either, here, in Philadelphia.

63 Nicole Cohen, 2019, “At work in the digital news room,” *Digital Journalism* 7(5): 571-591.

Interviewer: But you are from Philly.

Respondent: Exactly.

Similarly, in Cincinnati, the fatigue of precarity weighs on individuals: "I'm tired of packing up and moving. I'm taking what the market is giving me."

Others, though, leave when the quality of the work and publication no longer justify the sacrifice. For one person, who had quickly risen to the ranks of editor, pressure to produce numbers in lieu of quality reporting ultimately pushed them out the door:

Morale was low, because we had gone through layoffs, and it's hard to feel good about the work ...It got to a place where, aside from no longer enjoying what I was doing, was no longer proud of what I was doing...I just needed to get away and focus on the work I like and am good at, without all of the questions like: Will I get laid off in two years? Will this company still be here? Will everyone else that I know that is really good at their job be laid off in two years?

Sadly, in Cincinnati, many respondents either felt the need to move, commute far outside the city to work for a small rural paper, change careers, or reskill in graduate school. Regardless of the personal decisions made, the outcome and net loss is the same: people are being pushed out of the profession. Although it is clearly a loss for the individuals affected, it must also be recognized as a loss to the community and to the civic health of the city: "I will probably have to move out of Ohio and

go somewhere bigger—L.A., N.Y., Chicago—It's really unfortunate because I love *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. My dream was to work for them and then move up."

While personal uncertainty characterizes many experiences within both Philadelphia and Cincinnati, individual reporters demonstrate a broader understanding of the dynamics at play, and their words link personal experience to the conditions they are enmeshed within. As a way of implicating funders, manager, publishers, and the institutions whose decisions produce the precarity felt by individual journalists, consider the words of the following reporter who, when reflecting on their career thus far, notes that for local journalism to retain any semblance of quality, long-term financial stability is a necessary condition:

It sucks to have to think about the business model, or where funding is coming from instead of focusing on the reporting. The funding model of 'here's a year of funding, go do something,' that's really at the heart of it. If you're going to look at that and say this is a model that we are going to use to try and strengthen local journalism, that's not sustainable. You have to buy out people's careers. You can't tell people, 'we'll give you a year and we'll see if we'll re-up it or whatever.' Nobody is going to stick with that into their forties. You have to give people the knowledge that we want to invest in you to helm this operation, and we want you to stick around to build...institutional cachet.

Recommendations

In very stark and deeply personal terms, the interviews conducted for this study show that young journalists demonstrate a keen understanding of the market dynamics and broader conditions they are enmeshed within. Building from their perspectives and an analysis of the news ecologies that surround them, we offer the following recommendations that are not specific to Philadelphia or Cincinnati, but would hold for any metro, with the understanding that opportunities and funding in journalism demonstrate a wide regional disparity.⁶⁴ The following suggestions are aimed at specific actors (students and young news workers; news organizations; funders; and journalism schools), with attention to the particular kinds of agency those actors possess within broader media systems.

Journalism students and young news workers

It is untenable and unfair to expect individual students and news workers to come up with solutions for entire organizations and media markets on their own. That said, there are certain tactics individuals can take in order to claim greater agency amid tenuous market conditions.

First, and perhaps most importantly, we encourage news workers to support unionization and other forms of collective action in their organizations. The few respondents we talked to who had union representation felt a sense of security that helped them focus on getting better at their own jobs, as well as a sense of collective power in the face of industry change. Unions secured affordable health care, severance packages, regular pay increases, and grievance procedures that made capricious managers think twice before exploiting young reporters. Unions could not stop job loss, but when buyouts did come, they were managed in predictable ways, and bought individuals time for transition. Furthermore, job protections made firing journalists a less expedient means for cost savings, encouraging

management to pursue revenue generation strategies and savings in distribution and technology costs in lieu of job cuts. As Errol Salamon has shown, labor organizing has proven to mitigate precarious conditions among some of the most contingent laborers in digital journalism, and is a strategy that all news workers should pursue.⁶⁵

In keeping with collective action, we also suggest young workers practice the kinds of informal solidarity that help others navigate opportunities that might be tightly held within interpersonal networks. Teaching others to navigate these networks, and becoming aware of the ways in which a person may act as an unconscious gatekeeper, can help create more equitable conditions. We also encourage individuals to work together to find creative and collective ways to circumvent capricious gatekeepers within hiring networks.

To that end, one respondent suggested developing regional and market-specific clearing houses for jobs. This is a tool that would help individuals know what opportunities actually exist, become aware of potential mobility within the market, and provide at least some labor agency. Furthermore, that respondent suggested a jobs clearinghouse be paired with salary transparency tools, so that anyone who either has a job, or is looking for a job, may better know what they could negotiate for at a given organization. Furthermore, with greater unionization, news workers across a given market can negotiate for salary parity between organizations.

News organizations

News institutions have a primary obligation to improve mentorship and managerial relationships, especially as young journalists continue to decide whether staying in news is worth the opportunity costs. Bad management and an absence of mentorship drive good journalists

64 Nikki Usher, 2019, "Putting 'place' in the center of journalism research: A way forward to understand challenges to trust and knowledge in news." *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 21(2): 84-146.

65 Errol Salamon, 2018, "Precarious E-Lancers: Freelance Journalists' Rights, Contracts, Labor Organizing, and Digital Resistance." In *The Routledge Handbook of Developments in Digital Journalism Studies*, edited by Scott A. Eldridge II and Bob Franklin. New York: Routledge.: pp. 186-197.

out of the industry, and it is incumbent upon news leaders to pay attention to organizational culture. It is also critically important to fill the mentorship gap and provide a continuity of training, professional development, and support.

News organizations may not be able to keep up with the kinds of salary demands that come with rising costs of living, but they would do well to try. More importantly, they should structure jobs so that burn-out is not as common. Many respondents noted that managers often treat entry-level journalists as if they are replaceable, placing increasing job burdens and skills demands on new hires, but also rarely offering the necessary resources to meet editorial demands. The situation is unsustainable.

We also encourage organizations to not peg careers to metrics, but if metrics are unavoidable, then to develop a robust metrics suite that incentivizes audience engagement with news content over time, as opposed to page views or other metrics that are overtly connected to advertising demand.

Funders and philanthropists

As philanthropy becomes a larger part of journalism's funding structure, there is increasing attention being paid to the ways in which funders wield influence. Taking a cue from other sectors that rely on tax deductible donations, there are a few things journalism funders can start doing to promote stability in the industry.

First, funding and gifts should respect the autonomy of an organization, its ability to identify the best ways to spend money. Funding specific projects or initiatives for a limited term is a growing trend among foundations, but these kinds of projects can bring unforeseen disruptions, pushing newsrooms to reorganize and redistribute resources in order to appease funders and meet grant oversight and reporting requirements. Therefore, it is important for funders to understand how their demands may impact organizational routines, and to develop giving strategies that maintain fiduciary oversight, but do not disrupt established and effective structures and workflows. Giving unrestricted funds can help organizations cover ongoing operational costs and develop agile strategies that respond to changing market conditions.

Funders also have an opportunity to draw attention to a local brain drain in journalism, and should put money into endowing mid-career jobs over longer terms, perhaps three years or more. These kinds of gifts should not be pegged to any particular project, but should reflect a commitment to an organization's overall mission.

Another opportunity funders can provide would be to develop more programs that specifically bridge the graduation-to-work gap for entry-level journalists, perhaps endowed residencies. Report for America offers a useful example, but as research shows, it has been criticized for relying on a non-local labor force working on limited term contracts.⁶⁶ However, responses from Report for America's leadership to empirical research highlighting shortcomings in their model indicate that once a sustainable financing structure is in place, adapting reporting strategies that meet local needs can happen productively as long program leaders are genuinely responsive to feedback.⁶⁷

Finally, giving large, endowed gifts that reliably spin off operating funds provides the kind of resources that not only grant financial security, but give journalists the space and time necessary to get better at what they do.

Journalism schools

Journalism schools occupy a usefully ambiguous position in relation to the journalism industry. As such, they can both advocate for certain changes within the field, while preparing students for economically sobering realities.

It is imperative for programs to be clear that precarity is baked into their career path, while not developing curricula that reinforce contingency as an expected norm in the industry.⁶⁸ It is also important for programs to realize that skills training alone, even in

66 Andrea Wenzel, Sam Ford, Elfrat Nechustai, 2019, "Report for America, Report about Communities: Local News Capacity and Community Trust," *Journalism Studies*. Online ahead of print. DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2019.1641428](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1641428).

67 The Editors, "Letters to the editor, re: Report for America's progress," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 19, 2019, Accessed from: <https://www.cjr.org/mailbox/report-for-america-waldman-response.php>

68 Max Bebris and Caitlin Petre, 2019, "Professionalizing contingency: How journalism schools adapt to deprofessionalization," *Social Forces*. Online ahead of print. DOI: [10.1093.soz94](https://doi.org/10.1093.soz94)

new technologies and practices, will not bring career stability in an industry where insecurity is accepted as common.⁶⁹ Therefore, faculty and administrators should push back against the notion that updated skillsets that chase after economic, technological, social, and cultural change in the industry should be the sole focus of journalism curricula.

Skills training is important for staying current and competitive in the industry, but as many respondents for this study indicate, pursuing advanced skills is not enough insulation from a capricious market. Therefore, journalism programs should think of themselves as teaching a set of core competencies that might help students “navigate opportunities,” such as soft skills, critical analysis, communication, and decision making. A journalism education should be thought of as something that grants a wide variety of options, for it

is only through accessing options that individuals may express their agency within an increasingly precarious system.

Journalism schools also possess cultural capital that should be leveraged to encourage more inclusive networking within local markets, actively pushing organizations to search for talented and underrepresented candidates whom hiring managers might otherwise overlook.

Finally, universities can be unique community conveners, leveraging resources and pursuing grants to establish journalism projects, if administrative structures are set up to support such activity. University departments and resources can then be used to establish fellowships and other forms of bridge employment by funding recent graduates to work in local nonprofit, low profit, and public media newsrooms. Such projects tap into the logistical capacity of universities while bridging educational and public outreach missions.

69 Brian Creech and Andrew Mendelson, 2015, “Imagining the journalist of the future: Technological visions of journalism education and newswork.” *The Communication Review* 18(2): 142-165.

Conclusion

Though there are reasons to be optimistic, we also feel it is important to be frank. The above recommendations may read like palliative solutions to a dire situation, offering a way to humanely ease the pain of decline. However, for those who have entered the industry in just the past decade, there is little nostalgia for the way the news industry was. Instead, the early-career journalists we talked to all possessed an abiding focus on the ways the news industry *should be*. For us, this clear focus on the relationship between journalism's economic peril and its normative shortcomings reveals a generation duly equipped to envision a media system that better serves journalism's public ideals.

What remains to be seen, though, is whether or not institutions and actors in and around journalism will extend to this generation of journalists the financial and organizational security needed to make their visions real. So, we end with a larger, final recommendation, that those reading this report clearly intuit and respond to the ongoing market failure that imperils American journalism, pushing for modes of public financing and support that can protect journalism as a public good. As concern about America's expanding news deserts only grows, and the young journalists who entered the field full of optimism burn out and leave, public financing of journalism is the kind of structural response meant to stave off the cruelties of the market and foster the security needed to let a new generation of journalists take root and flourish.