

RESEARCH MEMO · ISSUE MEDIA GROUP · MICHIGAN SURVEY

Local Identity & Solutions

Does connection to place shape how audiences respond to solutions journalism?

FROM Joshua P. Darr, Local NExT Lab · Syracuse University
FIELDWORK Cohort 1 · 2026

The question

Issue Media Group (IMG) regularly produces solutions-oriented reporting on statewide issues, including early childhood education, for its regional outlets. The newsroom wanted to understand how that approach interacts with readers' connection to place and whether a local source changes how audiences respond.

- Do readers respond differently to solutions-oriented and conventional coverage?
- Does a story appearing in a local source change that response?
- Does a reader's existing connection to their community shape how solutions journalism lands?

What we did

597

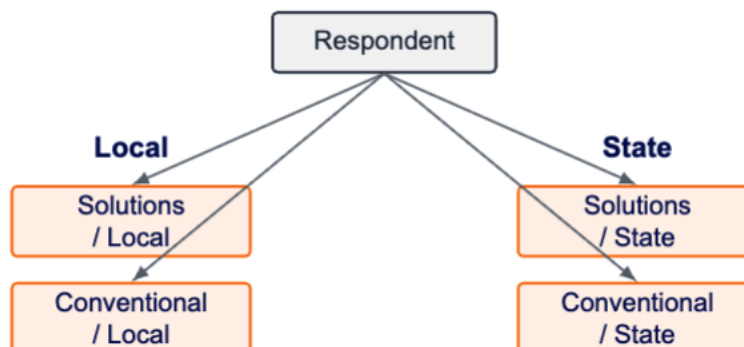
Michigan adults surveyed (YouGov)

4

Story versions readers saw

83

Counties in Michigan

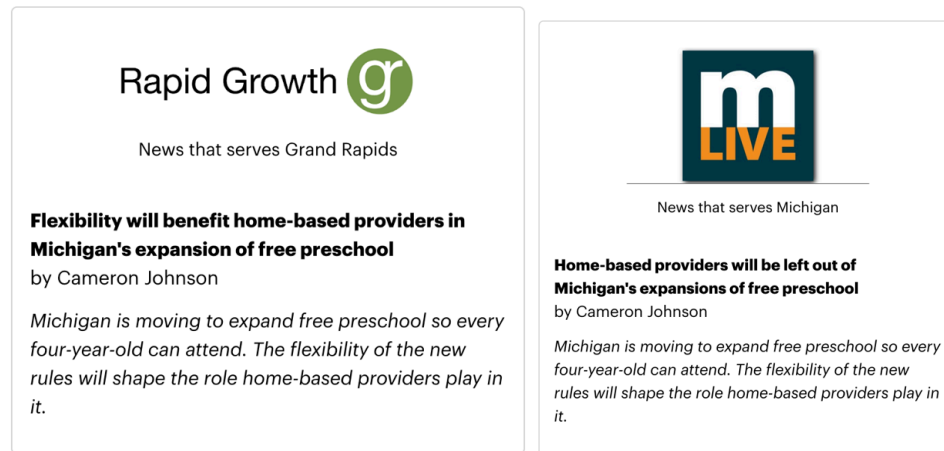


The treatments

HOW WE DID THIS

We showed 597 Michigan adults, recruited through YouGov, one of four versions of the same story. Only the headline framing and geographic focus changed. This memo focuses on two results:

- Whether readers prefer solutions or conventional journalism, and
- Whether source locality interacts with local identity to shape attitudes



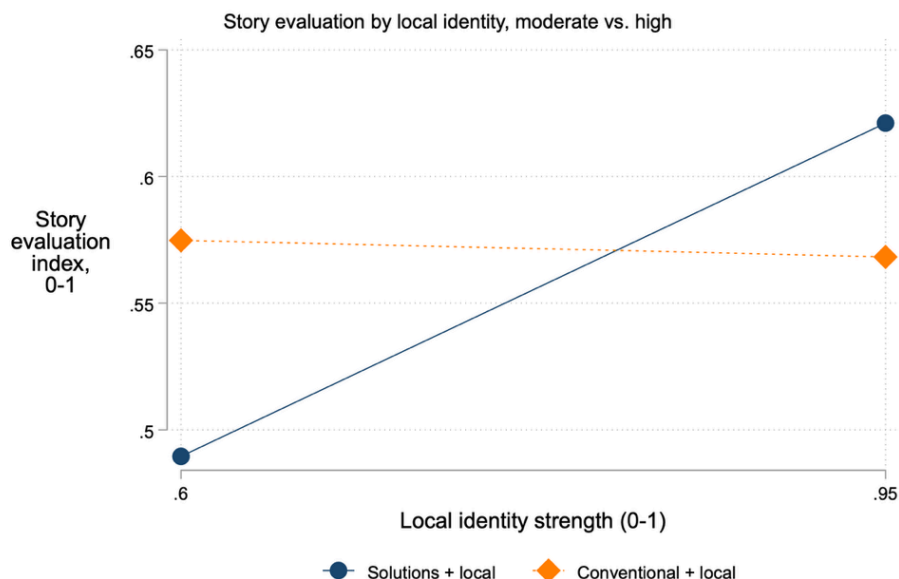
Pictured: solutions/local treatment (for local IMG news source in Kent County), left, and conventional statewide (MLive) treatment, right.

What we found

KEY FINDING

- Readers who feel less attached to their local community rated the Conventional + Local version of the story noticeably higher than the Solutions + Local version.
- That gap closes as readers' sense of local attachment increases; among the most locally attached readers, Solutions + Local is viewed somewhat more favorably.
- This pattern only showed up for the Local versions; readers' local attachment didn't change how they responded to either State version.

Finding 1: How attached someone feels to their community changes which version lands best



Applying the findings

These results suggest that audiences' existing relationship to their community may interact with how journalism is interpreted. They also raise questions about how different combinations of local and solutions-oriented coverage can produce different findings, suggesting directions for future research following these exploratory findings.

- Audiences are rooted in places. How does connection to that place change how approaches to journalism resonate?
- Solutions to local problems. What is the mechanism that connects higher local identity to more positive impressions of solutions journalism? Should local problem-solvers lean into local identity in their communications?
- Test more specific localization. Swapping in the reader's specific town or city name could help us see whether the effect strengthens as locality increases.
- Stronger data. Run this again with a check that readers were familiar with the outlet beforehand and whether they noticed the framing difference.
- Support learning about audiences. These findings show the value of assessing relationship to place when measuring impacts of local journalism. Building that learning into journalism investments can generate insights that travel across outlets and communities.

Questions about this study or the Local NExT Lab's work with Issue Media Group? Reach out at jpdarr@syr.edu.

About Local NExT Lab

Local NExT Lab, part of the Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship (IDJC) at Syracuse University, connects innovative local newsrooms trying to change how news is collected, framed, and delivered; funders interested in assessing and improving investments; and academic researchers who can design, implement, and interpret experiments to generate scientific knowledge that can help the entire local news industry.

A NOTE ON SCOPE

Results here came from planned but secondary analysis, not this study's headline hypotheses. Finding 2's broader four-way comparison didn't reach the usual bar for statistical confidence, even though the specific comparison we highlight did. We also could not check whether readers noticed the framing difference between versions, since the versions differed only in headline and outlet name, with identical story text, so we can't fully rule out that some readers didn't register which version they saw.

The numbers: Conventional + Local vs. Solutions + Local among less-attached readers, $b = 0.345$, $p = 0.003$; local attachment's own effect, $b = 0.422$, $p < 0.001$; the closing gap, $b = -0.441$, $p = 0.003$. Gap closes around the upper quarter of the local-attachment scale. Both State versions: $p > 0.15$.

This study is conducted under Syracuse University IRB Protocol #26-072, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF). De-identified data will be posted to Harvard Dataverse.