

YEAR 1 INSIGHTS

# FROM QUESTIONS TO EVIDENCE

Bridging academia and local journalism to test evidence-based strategies for stronger journalism and greater community impact.



JOSHUA P. DARR, DIRECTOR, LOCAL NExT LAB



**Syracuse University**  
Institute for Democracy,  
Journalism & Citizenship

**Local NExT Lab**

## Local NExT Lab

The Local News Experimental Testing Lab (Local NExT Lab) at Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship (IDJC) was launched in 2025 to empower local news organizations to test and implement evidence-based strategies strengthening journalism and community impact. Through collaborative research, newsroom experimentation, and executive education, the Lab, led by IDJC senior researcher and Newhouse School Associate Professor Joshua Darr, is connecting academic research with real-world newsroom innovation to advance a more sustainable future for local news.



The Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship, a joint project of Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, develops evidence-based solutions to today's most pressing challenges in the information ecosystem while helping communities access trusted, independent journalism.



The Newhouse School is a nationally recognized leader in communications education. Through innovative teaching, research, and industry partnerships, Newhouse prepares students to lead across journalism, advertising, public relations, media, and emerging technologies while advancing the future of communications in a rapidly evolving media landscape.



W.K.  
KELLOGG  
FOUNDATION®

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), founded in 1930 as an independent, private foundation by breakfast cereal innovator and entrepreneur Will Keith Kellogg, is among the largest philanthropic foundations in the United States. Guided by the belief that all children should have an equal opportunity to thrive, WKKF works with communities to create conditions for vulnerable children so they can realize their full potential in school, work and life.

The Kellogg Foundation is based in Battle Creek, Michigan, and works throughout the United States and internationally, as well as with sovereign tribes. Special attention is paid to priority places where there are high concentrations of poverty and where children face significant barriers to success. WKKF priority places in the U.S. are in Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico and New Orleans; and internationally, are in Mexico and Haiti. For more information, visit [www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org).

# FOREWORD



**F**rom the earliest days of our work at the American Journalism Project, Joshua Darr's research has shaped how we understand what the loss of local news costs communities, and what strong local journalism can make possible.

His work on local news and political polarization helped illuminate one consequence of the erosion of local journalism: as communities lose trusted sources of information about the places they live, our politics can become more nationalized and more polarized. In his 2021 book, *Home Style Opinion*, written with Johanna Dunaway and Matthew Hitt, Josh offered another important insight: locally focused journalism can help pull us in the other direction.

That body of work has informed both our thinking at the American Journalism Project and the broader effort to rebuild local news. Increasingly, Josh and his collaborators are also making rigorous research more useful to the people doing this work every day. The Local News Research Hub, developed with Rebuild Local News, gives journalists, funders and policymakers easier access to evidence they can use to make decisions, test assumptions and strengthen the case for local news. Local NExT Lab takes that work a step further by partnering directly with newsrooms to test ideas and generate actionable evidence about how local news organizations can better reach and serve their communities.

We saw the value of that approach firsthand this spring at AJPalooza, the American Journalism Project's annual gathering of newsrooms, supporters and partners from across the field. Josh shared the results of an experiment with the Pulitzer Prize-winning newsroom, *Mississippi Today*, one of the organizations in our portfolio, which found that readers viewed investigative journalism more positively when it appeared alongside positive, community-focused stories. It was exactly the kind of insight newsroom leaders can put into practice, and the conversation it sparked showed just how hungry the field is for more evidence like this.

That's why we're excited to partner with Josh and Local NExT Lab for its next cohort, supporting experiments across four organizations in the AJP portfolio. We're eager to see what we can learn together and how this work can help build a stronger culture of experimentation and learning across local news.

— **Sarabeth Berman**  
CEO, American Journalism Project

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local NExT Lab started in 2025, a time of intense investment and experimentation in local news, with a goal of connecting rigor and analysis in a way that can measurably benefit journalism. The Lab seeks to address the disconnect between academics publishing paywalled, jargon-filled articles and journalists innovating without assessing those ideas rigorously. That means listening to journalists, testing their ideas, and connecting them with research and impact assessment practices.

Cohort 1, supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, includes four local news partners: Deep South Today, Issue Media Group, Mississippi Today and Gulf States Newsroom. Newsrooms sought practical, actionable questions about social media practices, homepage organization, localizing solutions and how to feature reporters. We started with conversations about what makes their news products distinctive and how they are innovating, translated those into experimental designs with causal estimates as results, and shared insights back with the newsrooms in summer 2026.

In 2026-27, Local NExT Lab will partner with seven newsrooms, with continued support from the Kellogg Foundation and an exciting new collaboration with the American Journalism Project. Local NExT Lab also will broaden our reach into policymaking through the Local News Research Hub. Managing timelines of experimental design and IRB approvals, analyzing current experiments and planning future research are among the priorities heading into Year 2.

## KEY FINDINGS

1

Featuring community content next to investigative reporting makes those investigations more credible and trustworthy for readers.



2

Reporter-focused social media posts can drive interest and engagement, but for follows, profiles that look like traditional news brands hold an advantage.



3

Video posts can make issues seem more important to audiences, relative to slideshows.



4

Audiences with higher levels of local identity appreciate solutions journalism more.



# LOCAL NExT LAB BY THE NUMBERS

## COHORT 1 EXPERIMENTS OVERVIEW

4

PARTICIPATING NEWSROOMS



4

STATES REPRESENTED



- ▶ MISSISSIPPI
- ▶ LOUISIANA
- ▶ MICHIGAN
- ▶ ARKANSAS

10

EXPERIMENTS COMPLETED



- ▶ FOUR STATEWIDE SURVEYS
- ▶ SIX NATIONAL PILOTS

### EXPERIMENT TOPICS

- ▶ SOCIAL MEDIA FORMAT
- ▶ REPORTERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
- ▶ COMMUNITY IDENTITY
- ▶ INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING
- ▶ AI DATA CENTERS
- ▶ SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

## OUR METHODOLOGY



## HOW A NEWSROOM QUESTION BECOMES A TEST

Engagement data can't tell you what caused audiences to engage, settle a hunch, or isolate your contribution. Randomization can: when the only difference between two groups of readers is the thing we changed, differences in responses can be attributed to that change. Cohort 1 changed four such things: the stories around a story, the visual focus, the medium used, and the locality of the outlet a story appears in. For example, in one test, the same reporting ran as a video for some readers and as a slideshow of text and photos for others, with nothing else altered. These types of questions started with newsrooms in Cohort 1, and Local NExT Lab designed and fielded these survey experiments both nationally and in each newsroom's market. By co-designing these tests, academics can benefit from real-world newsroom questions, and newsrooms can see their innovations and ideas represented in causal estimates they can act on. While these experiments can't measure over-time relationship building or repeated exposure to a news product, they can help newsrooms demonstrate impact, test their intuition, and adjust course based on rigorous research. Local NExT Lab can help with design, analysis, and understanding the results.

# MEET THE YEAR ONE NEWSROOM PARTNERS



**Mississippi Today** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan newsroom dedicated to serving people in Mississippi through in-depth reporting on government, education, justice, health, and public policy. As the state's largest nonprofit newsroom, it provides accountable journalism that informs communities and drives civic engagement.

REACHES  
**36%**  
OF MISSISSIPPI  
RESIDENTS

---

SELF-REPORTED  
**4.5M**  
SITE VIEWS IN 2024



**Gulf States Newsroom** is a public media collaboration that serves audiences across Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Through investigative and enterprise reporting, it covers the issues shaping the Gulf South, including education, health, climate, criminal justice, and economic opportunity, with stories distributed through partner public radio stations and digital platforms.

MORE THAN  
**30%**  
OF THE GULF STATES  
NEWSROOM'S STORIES  
AIR NATIONALLY ON NPR



**Deep South Today** is a nonprofit network of local news organizations working to strengthen independent journalism across the Deep South, including Mississippi Today, Verite News (New Orleans), The Current (Lafayette), and The Garrison Project. By supporting collaboration, shared resources, and investigative reporting, the network expands the reach and sustainability of local news while helping communities access trusted, impactful journalism throughout Mississippi and Louisiana.



2023 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER  
FOR LOCAL REPORTING



**Issue Media Group** is an independent media company that produces locally focused, solutions-oriented journalism in more than 40 communities across North America. Its publications highlight economic development, entrepreneurship, neighborhood revitalization, and civic innovation, connecting residents with stories that inspire engagement and community growth.

REPORTS REACH  
MORE THAN  
**3M**  
READERS ANNUALLY  
ACROSS ITS NETWORK  
OF PUBLICATIONS



Photo provided by Gulf States Newsroom.

# YEAR ONE: EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

## MISSISSIPPI TODAY

Mississippi Today wanted to know more about the relationship between their coverage of “what makes Mississippi unique” and their Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporting. Would coverage that emphasizes local identity make readers more receptive to investigative reporting, or prove to be a distraction?

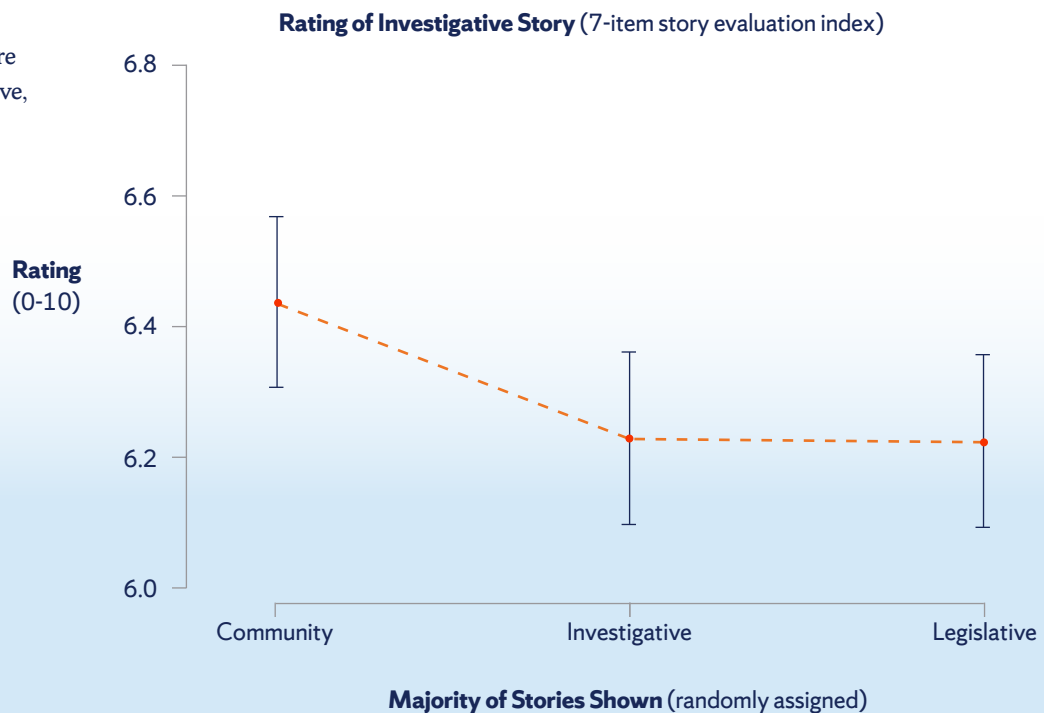
### OUR EXPERIMENT:

Respondents were randomly assigned to a collection of 5 stories, organized as seen to the right. All respondents then evaluated the same investigative story.



### WHAT WE LEARNED:

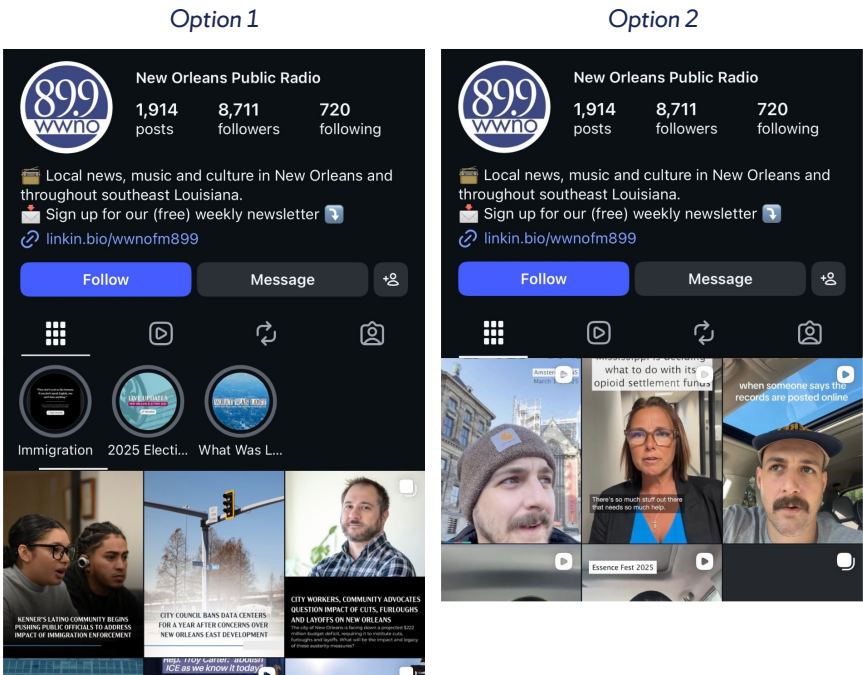
Investigative stories are evaluated more positively when surrounded by positive, community-focused content.



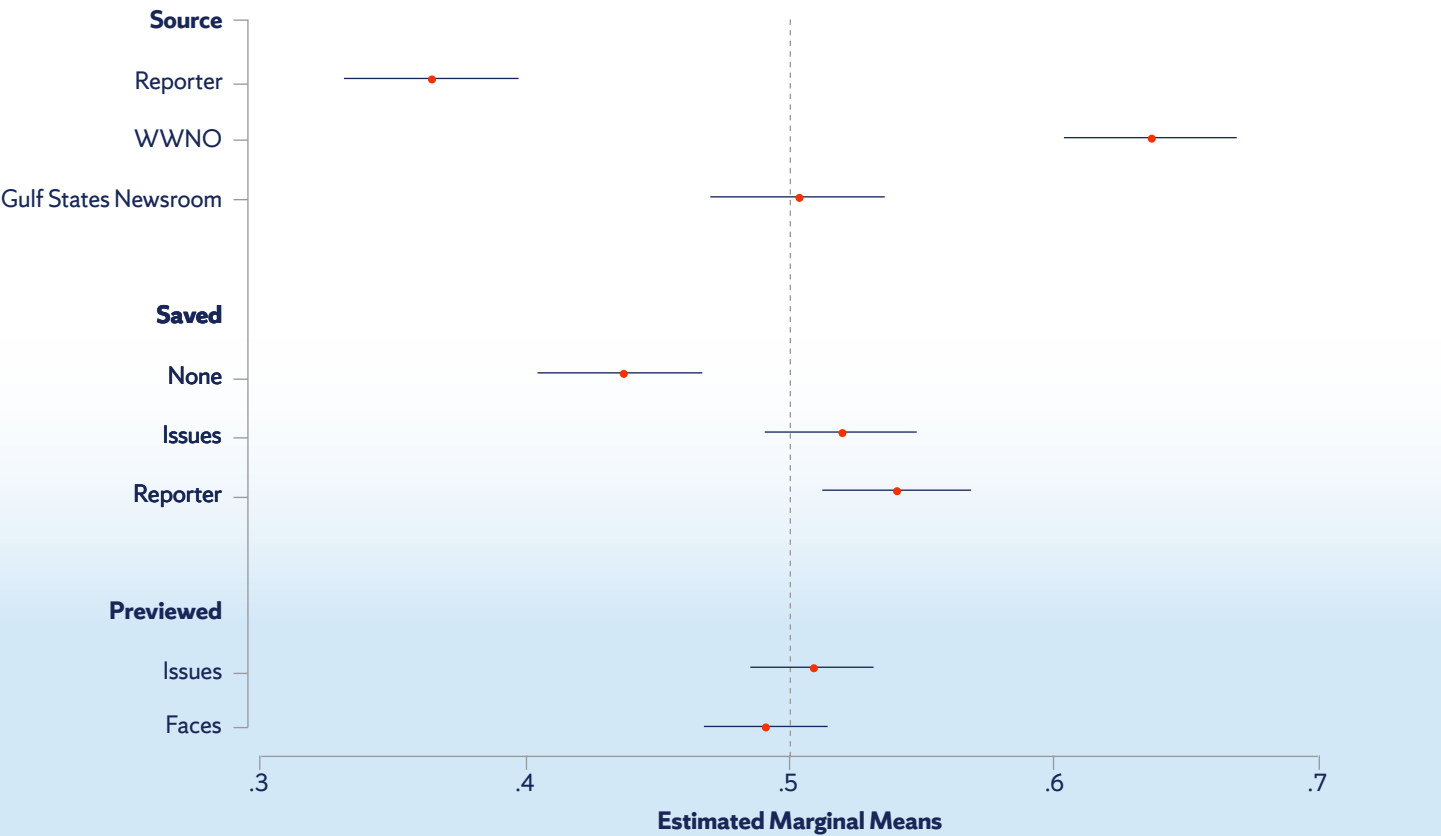
GULF STATES NEWSROOM

Gulf States Newsroom prioritizes their reporters in social media posts, encouraging them to talk directly to camera and use their personal handle. They wanted to know: is this strategy effective at increasing followers and engagement, compared to more traditional news techniques of emphasizing the outlet name and using images that illustrate the story?

**OUR EXPERIMENT:** Respondents saw two choices consisting of randomized combinations across three categories (outlet name, saved stories, post previews). Based on their choices of which they'd prefer to follow, we can determine which profile attributes mattered.



**WHAT WE LEARNED:** Respondents prefer to follow newsrooms with recognizable brand names, but in the Reels experiment, reporters' faces and names are the highest source of engagement.

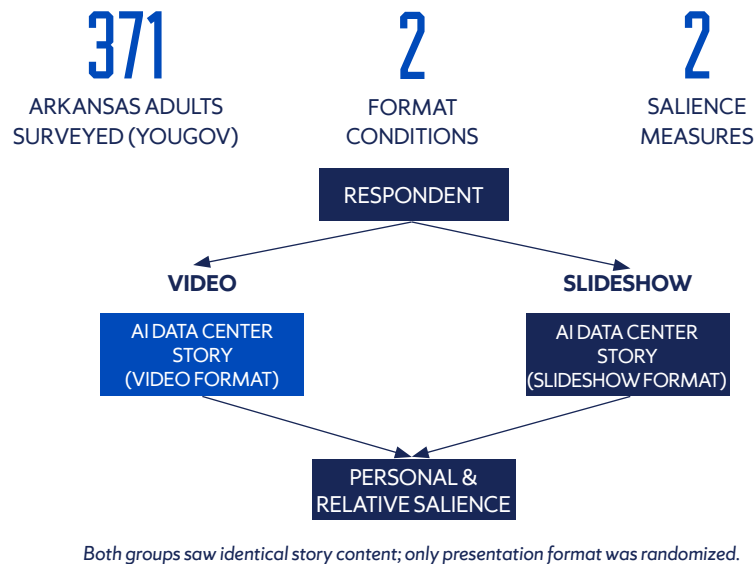


DEEP SOUTH TODAY

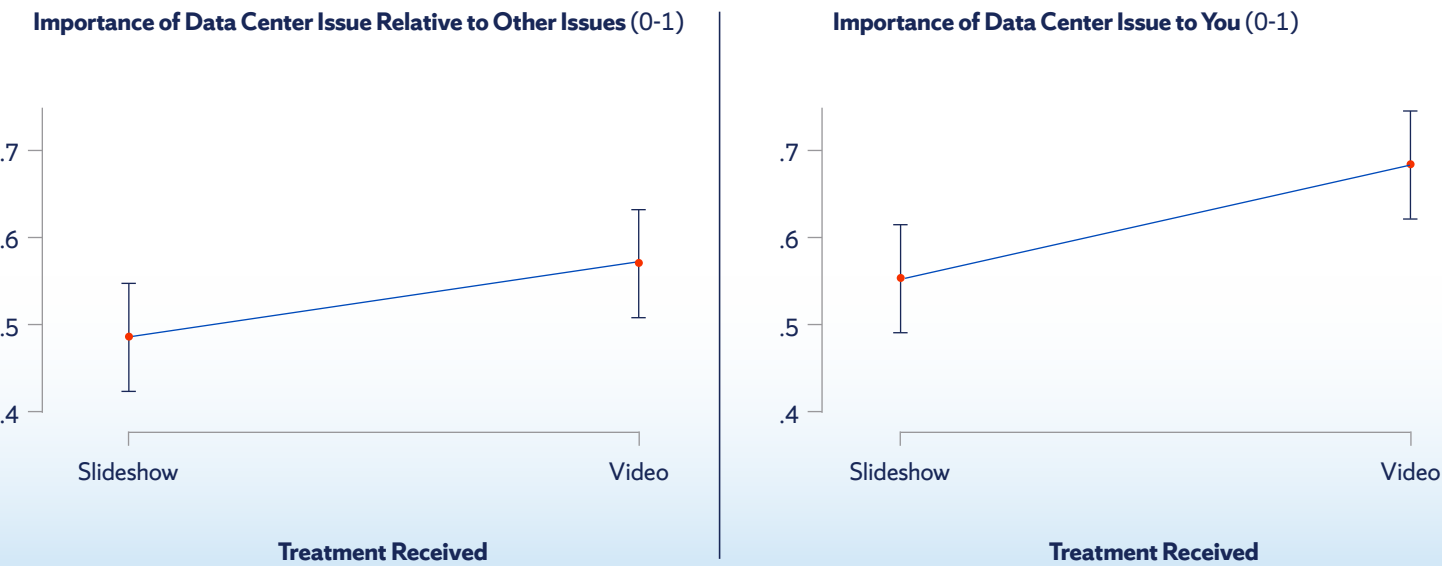
Deep South Today wanted to grow their social media video department but needed to better understand how audiences interpret video posts compared to a slideshow of text and photos. How do audiences respond to vertical content when it’s presented in video or slideshow format, and does format change how audiences interpret the issue being covered?

OUR EXPERIMENT:

Respondents were randomly assigned to identical content in video or slideshow format, then rated the issue’s importance on two measures.



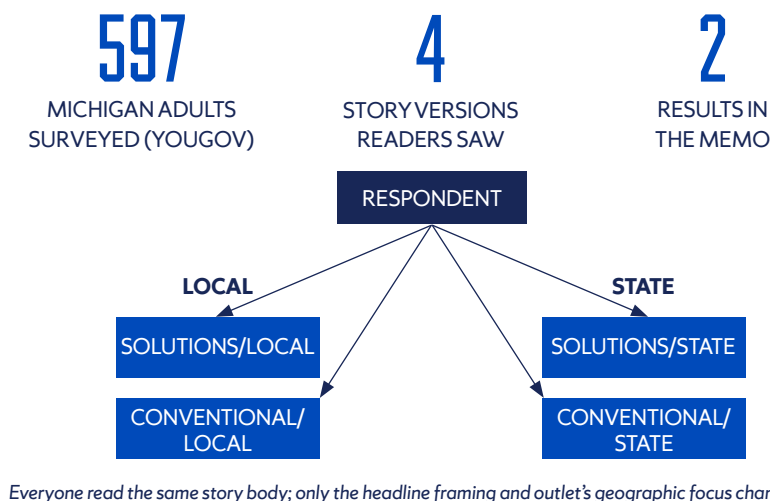
**WHAT WE LEARNED:** Those who saw the video about AI data centers were significantly more likely to find that issue important, both to themselves and compared to other issues facing their state.



## ISSUE MEDIA GROUP

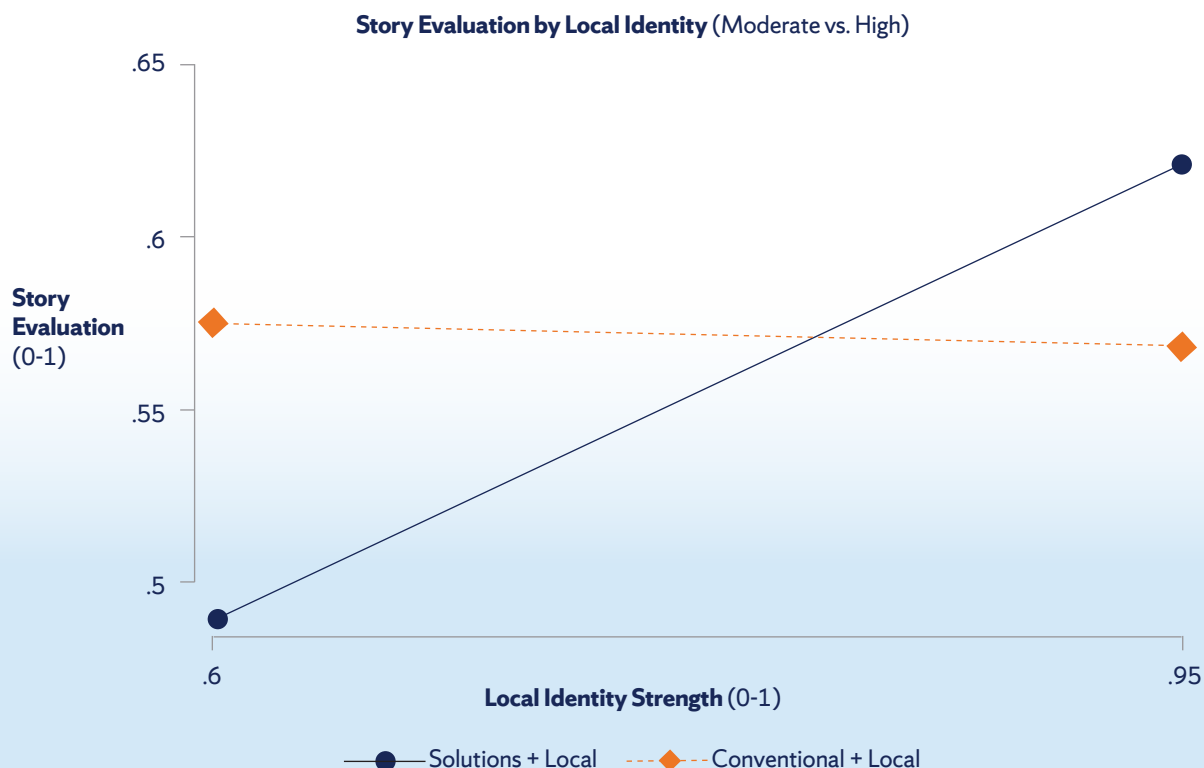
Issue Media Group has regional newsrooms across the state of Michigan, each of which covers some common, solutions-journalism-framed stories about issues they investigated more deeply, such as Michigan's universal pre-K policy. Do audiences respond differently when solutions-based stories appear in more localized outlets, compared to statewide?

**OUR EXPERIMENT:** Readers were randomly shown one of four versions of the same story, varying only in framing (solutions-oriented vs. conventional) and geographic focus (local vs. state).



## WHAT WE LEARNED:

Audiences with higher levels of local identity are more receptive to solutions-framed stories.



# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF LOCAL NEWS

## FOR NEWSROOMS

Test assumptions rather than trusting intuition about what a newsroom's audience wants. Build randomization into a test before rolling out a new strategy. That's what allows newsrooms to isolate the effect of a single change as causing a result, rather than relying on a hunch or an anecdote after the fact.

Taken together, our findings point toward a path forward for our newsroom partners and others. We show that quality, civically valuable journalism does not land in a vacuum: audiences experience it through connection to their community, the newsroom's commitment to cover that community, and the faces and formats they encounter on social media. These presentation and production choices can influence audiences' impressions of the journalism newsrooms produce and the issues they cover in measurable ways.

## SOME SPECIFIC FINDINGS



**MISSISSIPPI TODAY'S** experiment shows that the overall balance of content matters. Investigative reporting was received more positively when placed alongside community-focused stories, not run in isolation.

**GULF STATES NEWSROOM'S** results are a reminder that audience behavior isn't one-dimensional. What drives engagement with a post (a reporter's face on camera) isn't necessarily what drives someone to follow an account long-term (recognizable, established news branding).

**DEEP SOUTH TODAY'S** video-versus-slideshow test shows format itself can shape how important an issue seems to an audience, not just how much they engage with it.

**ISSUE MEDIA GROUP'S** finding that local identity moderates how solutions-framed stories land is a reminder that the same approach to a story, even an admirable one like solutions, can perform differently depending on who's reading it.



## FOR FUNDERS

Year 1 suggests that relatively small investments in experimentation can help newsrooms answer practical questions they often lack the time, research capacity or resources to test on their own. Just as important, funding shared learning beyond individual experiments can turn newsroom-specific findings into knowledge that benefits the broader field. Cohort 2 will test that premise further by expanding the number of newsroom partners and building peer learning into the model from the start.

## FOR RESEARCHERS

Each Year 1 experiment raised questions worth pursuing further. Does Deep South Today's video effect hold for issues beyond AI data centers, or was that result specific to a topic already primed for concern? Where are the boundaries of Issue Media Group's local identity effect and does local identity moderate reception of content beyond solutions journalism? Gulf States Newsroom's split between engagement and follows raises a long-term question about newsroom tradeoffs when reporters build personal, portable followings under their own name.

## FOR JOURNALISM SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

We welcome additional foundations and support organizations to join in this work, whether sharing findings, growing the research database, funding more newsroom partnerships, developing educational materials and programming or supporting capacity expansion.

# THE LEARNING CYCLE

## THE PROBLEM

Academic research on the civic impact of local journalism exists, but it is hard to find and disconnected from the practices of actual newsrooms, which make decisions on tradition and intuition instead of causal evidence. This disconnect makes it more difficult for journalists to show impact to funders, audiences, and policymakers whose help they need to adapt and thrive in the rapidly changing local news environment. As an interdisciplinary field, local news needs a shared evidence base and shared language for describing and demonstrating its value.

## OUR AUDIENCE

Newsrooms are our primary audience, starting with smaller cohorts of direct partners and eventually reaching the broader field. Funders and journalism students are an audience for the materials the Lab produces, and policymakers are a downstream audience we hope to influence by collecting and translating our growing evidence base.

## WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE

Local news is practiced as evidence-based civic infrastructure, sustained by newsrooms routinely using causally validated tactics that sustain their audiences and revenue portfolios and demonstrate civic value with robust evidence. This process is fueled by a field-wide culture of experimentation that drives policies aimed at sustaining local news' demonstrated, positive impact on communities.

## HOW WE GET THERE: THE LEARNING CYCLE

We run experiments with partner newsrooms that test specific tactics for reaching and growing audiences, feeding an evidence library of findings that we generate ourselves. These are distinct from and build on existing academic research, which can also be advanced by others who draw from the literature contained in the Local News Research Hub.

A Community of Practice takes those findings and determines what newsrooms need to adopt those tactics: convincing them to try something new, determining what funders would like to see, and how to frame academic findings so they resonate.

That dialogue shapes a practitioner-facing resource (website, eventually book) synthesizing what's been learned, which we publish and send to as many newsrooms as possible with an ask that they tell us if they use it.

This feedback closes the loop, feeding back into the next round of experiments and growing our academic research base. Each time we go through the cycle, the approach reaches more newsrooms and produces more evidence.

## WHAT WE'VE ALREADY DONE

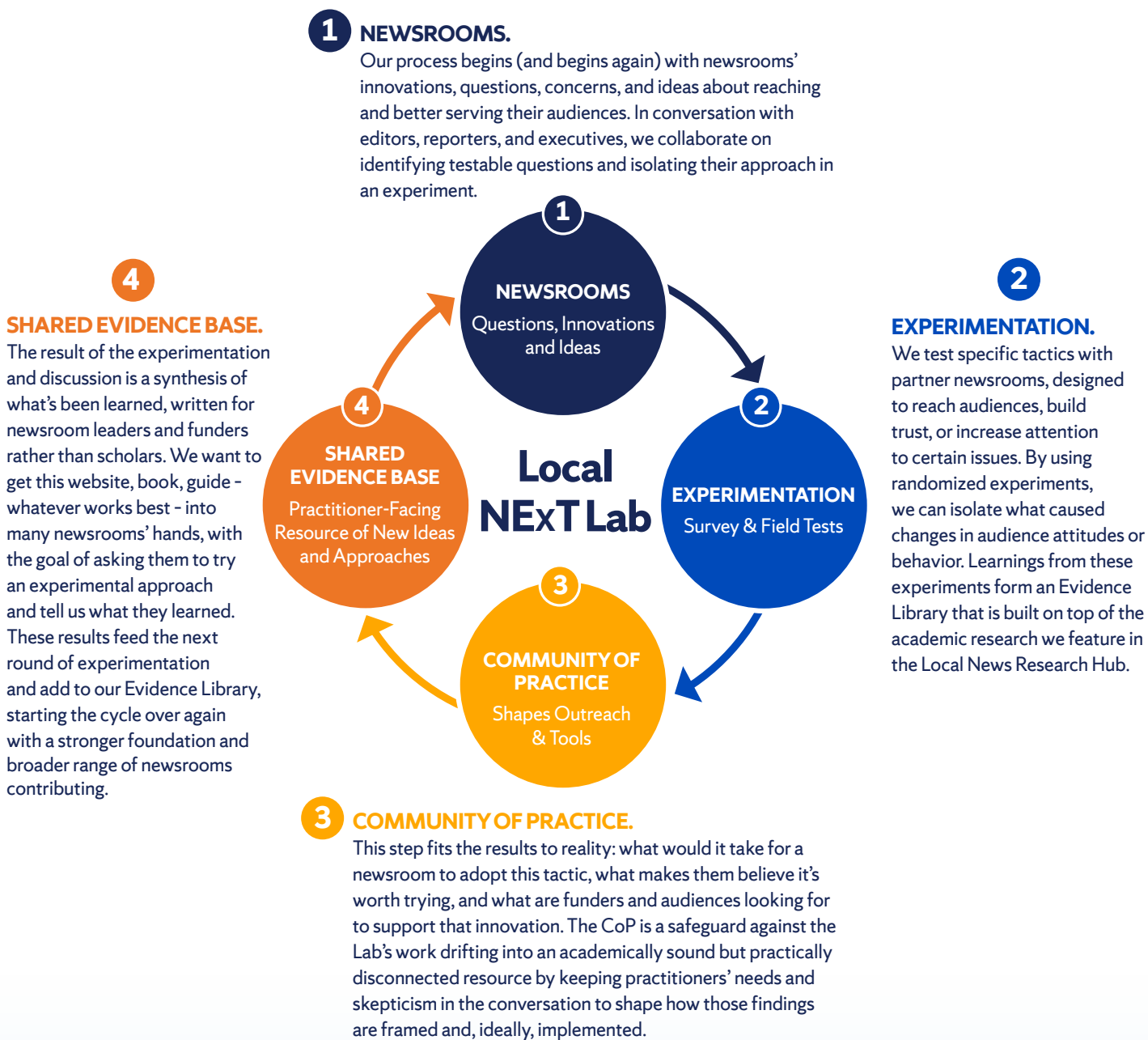
In Year 1, we built the basis for this cycle: the Local News Research Hub, the Cohort 1 partnerships, and the beginnings of an Evidence Library. Year 2 will build the Community of Practice and incorporate the results of tests with seven new newsrooms, pushing the cycle forward into its most fragile part: ensuring that newsrooms who learn from these experiments will adopt an experimental mindset, leading to a field-wide culture shift.

## WHAT COULD GET IN THE WAY

This work depends on funders' willingness to invest in learning cycles before field-wide outcomes set in, as a multi-year bet; newsrooms' capacity to experiment and interest in changing their assessment culture; and building a Community of Practice that is based on what newsrooms need from academic research, rather than maintaining the gap we set out to bridge.

# THE LEARNING CYCLE

The Local NExT Lab learning cycle turns academic evidence into newsroom practice, and newsroom practice into evidence.



## YEAR 1

Represented the beginning of this cycle: we built the Local News Research Hub and completed experiments based in the newsroom partnerships that form the beginnings of the Evidence Library.

## YEAR 2

Will see the beginnings of a Community of Practice with the addition of seven new newsrooms, an early version of the practitioner-facing resource, and the beginnings of field-wide cultural change as we communicate our findings and recommendations.

## GROWTH TO ACCELERATE

Once we've built the mechanics of this cycle, we expect its growth to accelerate: each time through brings in more newsrooms, builds more evidence, and makes the resource more valuable. Several years from now, we hope the learning cycle is running across a broad array of newsrooms and is a manifestation of our goal of cultural change, producing a living reference that practitioners use and trust.

# LESSONS FROM YEAR 1

YEAR 1 SURFACED THREE OPERATIONAL LESSONS THAT WILL SHAPE HOW THE LAB RUNS COHORT 2.

## CAPACITY

Cohort 1 tested managing four simultaneous partnerships — design conversations, IRB approval, fielding, and payments — largely through the Lab director. Expansion plans include adding a project manager, research assistance and other infrastructure to allow the Lab to add news partners.

## CONNECTING NEWSROOMS AS WE GO

Cohort 1 was built around conversations with individual newsrooms, not to connect participating newsrooms to learn from each other while experiments were still in progress, but that's exactly the kind of real-time peer learning we want to build into Cohort 2, with participating newsrooms launching on a shared timeline and with more opportunities to collaborate on questions.

## CO-DESIGN

By collaborating and connecting newsrooms as a cohort, we hope to improve the co-design process to strengthen questions, notice areas of common intention, and design experiments that can more powerfully address the areas of our partners' interest.



---

“Local NExT Lab is proof that rigorous research and newsroom practice don’t have to live on separate tracks. By testing open questions from real newsrooms with randomized experiments — and putting the findings directly into their hands — the Lab is closing the gap between what academics know and what practitioners can use, while building the evidence-based culture that local journalism needs to survive and flourish.”

— **Johanna Dunaway**

*Research Director, Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship*

# CONNECTING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Every crisis presents an opportunity, and the decline of local news across the United States starting around 2006 made it easier for scholars to study its effects. As the number and strength of local news outlets declined unevenly across the country, peer-reviewed academic research showed many effects of weakened local news, from declining knowledge of candidates to fewer candidates running for office, increased business violations, more party-line voting by representatives, higher polarization, weakened municipal finances, higher mortgage lending discrimination, and many others.

Like much academic research, however, these articles are often stuck behind journal paywalls and written in jargon that can make the implications difficult to understand or implement for the journalists, funders, and others who want to make local news better. We knew that academic research can help make that case, and set out to make it more accessible.

In May 2026, we unveiled the Local News Research Hub, in partnership with Rebuild Local News, an organization advocating policy solutions to the local news crisis. This searchable database of 168 articles, books, working papers, and reports is keyword searchable by discipline or topic. Each article comes with a three-bullet-point summary that clarifies what the authors did and why it matters. It puts academic findings at practitioners' fingertips and can help evidence-based arguments reach more newsrooms, readers, funders, and policymakers, showing the immense civic value of local news.

**LOCAL NEWS**  
RESEARCH HUB

**REBUILD**  
**LOCAL**  
**NEWS**

---

## BUILDING A SHARED KNOWLEDGE BASE: PARTNERSHIP WITH REBUILD LOCAL NEWS



“To move the needle on policy, we need more than just anecdotes; we need data and evidence that demonstrates the specific needs and measurable impact of local reporting. The Local News Research Hub provides that essential evidence, showing policymakers exactly how a lack of local news leads to higher taxes, increased corruption, and lower civic engagement. By identifying these gaps, we can help craft targeted solutions that ensure every community has the information it needs to thrive.”

— **Steven Waldman**

*Founder and President of Rebuild Local News*

## RESEARCH HUB HIGHLIGHTS

- # studies included: 168
- Topics covered: Community connection, economic impact, government accountability, polarization, public health, voter turnout & engagement, trust & credibility
- Suggested questions:
  - o What is the economic impact of local news?
  - o What do we know about the relationship between the local news crisis and community connection and polarization?
  - o How does local news make government more accountable?
- 2,000+ active users since launch (Google Analytics)

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE-BASED INNOVATION

Academic research is too often “siloeed” in the discipline where it was published: economists don’t read political science, communications doesn’t read sociology, and so on. We built the Hub to be an interdisciplinary resource for practitioners to make stronger evidence-based arguments, but also to serve as a starting point for literature reviews and original scholarship from those studying local news.

We hope this starts a virtuous cycle around local news’ civic value: research informs experiments, experiments generate knowledge, findings are shared across our field.



## Here’s a new database for local news research, from Syracuse University and Rebuild Local News

The Local News Research Hub aims to make academic research more accessible to audiences including policymakers, funders, and journalists.

By **SOPHIE CULPEPPER** @speppered May 18, 2026, 9:45 a.m.

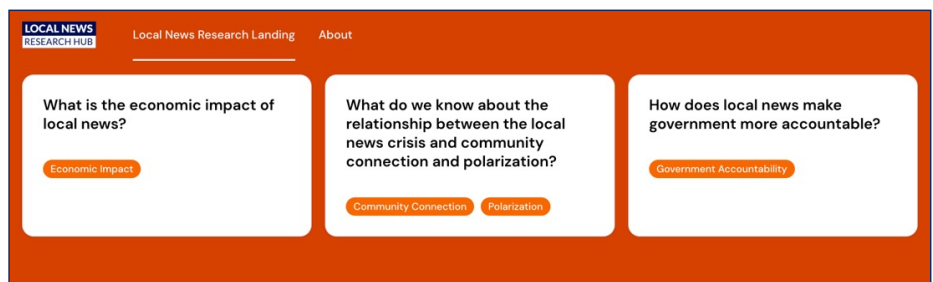
in

twitter

f

If you’re trying to get a handle on evidence from academic research about the state of local news, it’s hard to know where to start. The research is scattered — across disciplines from political science to economics to computer science; across universities; across paywalled journals. To some extent, it’s part of the academic job description to overcome those siloes. But they’re major practical barriers for other audiences — policymakers, funders, working journalists — interested in building an evidenced-based case about the local news crisis and potential solutions.

To solve this problem, Syracuse University and Rebuild Local News teamed up last fall to build a curated, accessible local news database. Their [Local News Research Hub](#) formally launches this Thursday, May 21. “Our collective purpose is to provide a central, reliable home for data-driven insights into the changing media landscape,” the team [states](#).



## DEAR FRIENDS,



I am so grateful to have the opportunity to lead the work of the Local NExT Lab and share our progress with you. Year 1 meant building from scratch, but we accomplished a lot and laid down a strong foundation for the future.

I was encouraged to see the central role of community in our findings. My prior work on local news shows the importance of offering an alternative to the polarized, divisive, and ever-dominant sphere of national politics: a place where people can identify solutions to problems, celebrate what makes their area unique, and learn about new and evolving local issues that affect their lives directly.

When I spoke with audiences at events like AJPalooza in Fort Worth and American Press Institute's impact evaluation workshop in Pittsburgh, there was a palpable excitement in the room for discovery and experimentation. The news industry is ready for what we're offering, and we're building a Lab capable of delivering it.

We hope to continue building our community over the next year, through Cohort 2. I am immensely grateful for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's continued support, and excited to welcome new support from the amazing team at the American Journalism Project. These partners, and the newsrooms we work with, will help us expand our reach across the country and our impact in the news industry. I can't wait for what's next!

— **Joshua Darr**, IDJC Senior Researcher and Associate Professor in the  
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

“At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we believe strong local journalism is essential to building communities where every child and family can thrive. At a time when news organizations are navigating profound changes in how people access information, whom they trust and how local journalism is sustained, we saw an opportunity to invest in learning — not just for individual newsrooms, but for the field. The Local NExT Lab gives newsroom leaders the space, resources and peer community to test new ideas, learn from one another and generate practical evidence about what works.”

— **Alyson Curro**  
Communications Officer, W.K. Kellogg Foundation



# FROM LEADERSHIP

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

Over the past year, I have watched the Local NExT Lab grow from an ambitious idea into an important source of innovation for local journalism. Under Professor Joshua Darr's leadership, the Lab is demonstrating what can be accomplished when research, education, and industry come together around a shared purpose: strengthening journalism and the communities it serves.

At the Newhouse School, the integration of scholarship and practice has long been central to our mission. It shapes how we educate students, pursue consequential research, and work alongside industry to address the challenges facing the field. The Local NExT Lab reflects that commitment by partnering directly with news organizations to test ideas, evaluate outcomes, and translate rigorous research into practical strategies.

The significance of that work is already evident. In its first year, the Lab established partnerships with newsrooms across four states, completed a series of experiments focused on audience trust, engagement, content strategy, and community connection, and produced findings that news organizations can put into practice. It also launched the Local News Research Hub, making a substantial body of academic research more accessible to journalists, funders, researchers, and policymakers.

Together, these efforts make a compelling case for moving beyond instinct and anecdote. By helping newsrooms test assumptions and better understand what works, the Local NExT Lab is advancing a stronger culture of evidence-based decision-making across local journalism.

The Lab also creates meaningful opportunities for students to engage in work with real consequences. Through these experiences, they gain the judgment, adaptability, and practical understanding needed to help shape the future of media.

As you read this inaugural report, I believe you will see both the significance of what the Local NExT Lab accomplished in its first year and the promise of what lies ahead. As the Lab expands its newsroom partnerships, deepens its relationships with industry and philanthropic organizations, and builds a broader Community of Practice, it is well positioned to extend its reach and influence.

Sincerely,

— Mark J. Lodato

*Dean, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications*



# LOOKING AHEAD - YEAR 2 PRIORITIES



**Joshua Darr speaks at AJPalooza 2026 in Fort Worth, TX.** (*Cash Anglin for the American Journalism Project*)

Cohort 2 (2026-27) will grow from four newsrooms to seven, with continued support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and a new partnership with the American Journalism Project, which will support four of their portfolio newsrooms alongside our returning partners. More partners mean more questions worth testing, and a stronger base for the kind of evidence the field needs. As for Cohorts 3 and beyond? That will depend on many things, including how we communicate to the field and how funders respond. 2026-27 will put us in position to succeed on those fronts.

We learned from what could go better, in addition to what went well. We didn't build much connective tissue between Cohort 1 newsrooms while their experiments were running. In September, we're bringing all four Cohort 1 partners together for the first time to talk through what they learned and what they'd want from each other going forward. That conversation will shape how we build a real Community of Practice into Cohort 2 from day one, with newsrooms starting on the same timeline.

Since launching the Local News Research Hub in May, we've seen real engagement: more than 2,000 active users over the Hub's first few months. Year 2 is about building on that early traction with a more robust communications strategy, ongoing updates and a stronger push into policy circles. We hope to accomplish this through engagement with the News Futures collaborative and the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation in the Ash Center at the Harvard Kennedy School, where Josh will be a non-resident fellow in 2026-27.

Each Cohort 1 experiment left us with more questions, as good research should do. Does the video format effect we saw with Deep South Today hold for issues beyond AI data centers? How far does the local identity effect from Issue Media Group extend beyond solutions journalism? And what should newsrooms make of the gap Gulf States Newsroom found between what drives engagement and what drives long-term following? We can't wait to build on these questions and see what our new partners are interested in exploring through experimentation.

All of these pieces come together to give the Lab a clear sense of purpose going forward, and solid directions to pursue. More partners give us more to test. A stronger Community of Practice helps newsrooms learn from each other instead of just from us. A growing Research Hub means that rigorous findings reach people who can act on them. And better research questions keep the whole cycle useful. Year 1 gave us the pieces; Year 2 is about putting them together.

## PREREGISTRATIONS

 **MISSISSIPPI TODAY**



<https://osf.io/bgdxt/overview>



<https://osf.io/9c4r7/overview>

**Deep  
South  
Today**



<https://osf.io/a28ru/overview>

**Issue  
Media**  
G R O U P



<https://osf.io/vfsu4/overview>

 To see detailed memos about each experimental design and results,  
please visit <https://idjc.syracuse.edu/local-next-lab/>