

# Assessing the impact of non-profit local news

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**Danny Hayes** 

George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

## Abstract

Research on the local news crisis in the United States has largely focused on how the loss of state and local reporting has affected communities. But we know little about the extent to which a new cohort of non-profit news outlets has successfully filled the gaps left by the decline of legacy media. In this paper, I examine the impact of non-profit journalism in the era of the local news crisis. I report the results of surveys in three states with established statewide non-profit news outlets – New Hampshire, Michigan, and Montana. I find that the reach of non-profit outlets in each state varies, but that their audiences are modest in size and made up of residents highly interested in public affairs. Consumers' views of non-profit outlets are at least as favorable as other outlets in their states. And I find evidence consistent with the argument that exposure to non-profit journalism makes consumers better informed and more engaged in their communities. One implication is that non-profit outlets have the potential to make up for some of what has been lost in the local news crisis, but their ability to do so on a large scale depends on expanding their audiences.

## Keywords

Local journalism, non-profit news, impact

The decline of local journalism has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The catastrophic loss of state and local reporting over the last few decades has spawned descriptions of a “local news crisis” and its negative consequences for American society and democracy (e.g., [Darr et al., 2018](#); [Hayes and Lawless, 2021](#); [Rubado and Jennings, 2020](#)). Perhaps not surprisingly, the vast majority of research on changes to the local media environment has focused on the scope of the problem and the dangers it poses for

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## Corresponding author:

Danny Hayes, Department of Political Science, George Washington University, 440 Monroe Hall, 2115 G St NW, Washington, DC 20052, USA.

Email: [dwh@gwu.edu](mailto:dwh@gwu.edu)

self-governance at the state and local level (Abernathy, 2022; Hayes, 2025; Moskowitz, 2021; Waldman, 2011).

But the trajectory of local news has not been entirely downward. Even as traditional outlets have sputtered along (or out entirely), a new cohort of independent news organizations has emerged in communities across the country. Most of these outlets are digital-only news sites, and many are non-profits. Their journalistic approaches vary, but a large number were launched to fill gaps left by legacy news outlets or to cover communities that have traditionally been neglected by commercial media.

The emergence of non-profit local news has produced mixed reactions. Some scholars have expressed reservations about non-profits' civic potential, noting that funding pressures may compromise journalistic autonomy or reinforce existing inequalities in access to information (e.g., Scott et al., 2019). Others have been more optimistic, with both philanthropic organizations and researchers hopeful that non-profits will help usher in a local news renaissance. "This relatively new form of alternatively funded journalism," Boehmer et al. (2018: 383) write, "can potentially fill the void left by dwindling traditional local journalism."

But the extent to which local non-profits are succeeding in filling the local news void is unclear. In this paper, I consider the impact that non-profit news organizations have on residents' civic knowledge and engagement in the era of the local news crisis. To do so, I report the results of surveys in three states with established statewide non-profit outlets – New Hampshire, Michigan, and Montana. I find that the reach of non-profit outlets in each state varies, but that their audiences are modest in size and made up of residents highly interested in public affairs. Consumers' views of non-profit outlets are at least as favorable as other outlets in their states. And I find evidence consistent with the argument that exposure to non-profit journalism makes consumers better informed and more engaged in their communities. One implication is that non-profit outlets have the potential to make up for some of what has been lost in the local news crisis, but their ability to do so on a large scale depends on expanding their audiences.

## The local news crisis and the rise of non-profits

The outlines of the local news crisis in the United States are fairly well known.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the explosion of media options for consumers – thanks to cable television and the internet – began to erode the audiences for traditional outlets like local newspapers. At the same time, advertising dollars started migrating to the internet and away from print publications, undercutting most local news outlets' basic business model. With shrinking audiences and declining revenue, local newsrooms cut staff, cut coverage, and – for thousands of unfortunate publications – cut the lights one last time as they closed up shop for good (e.g., Abernathy, 2022).

In addition to the disappearance of weekly papers from many communities, there has been a dramatic decline in reporting resources at still-standing state and local dailies across the country (e.g., Peterson, 2021). As the level of local political reporting has declined, interest and participation in local politics has fallen (Hayes and Lawless, 2021), partisanship has increased (Darr et al., 2018), and governance has suffered (Gao et al., 2020).

By and large, other news outlets like local television have not stepped in to meet the information needs of communities (Martin and McCrain, 2019).

A countervailing trend, however, has been the emergence of a group of new digital news providers. In the last decade, hundreds of local start-ups have launched, with much of the energy driven by founders of non-profits (e.g., Ferrucci, 2020), which tend to be the largest and best funded organizations. “Nonprofit newsrooms,” writes Lincoln (2024: 2) “are growing both in numbers and in prominence to become an influential subsector of the American journalism industry.”

The rise of digital non-profits at the state and local level has added to the existing ranks of non-profit newsrooms in the United States. Non-profit journalism comes in several forms, including public media (such as National Public Radio and its local affiliates) and national investigative journalism organizations (such as ProPublica). Non-profit outlets of course vary in their funding sources, organizational structure, and reporting capacity. Consequently, we should exercise some caution in treating them as a single category. My approach is to focus on non-profits whose mission is to serve the public interest broadly and who follow editorial practices that tend to be less concerned with audience demand than at commercial media. This definition includes many recent digital start-ups as well as public media.

The ability of non-profits to fund themselves without relying exclusively on advertising – through donations, subscriptions, sponsored events, and other sources – has been viewed by some as a crucial factor in their ability to serve the public interest. Since market demand for public affairs content is weak, for-profit news outlets sometimes sacrifice substantive “hard news” or political coverage in an effort to make their content more entertaining (Hamilton, 2003) – a shift that can reduce state and local government reporting. Because market pressures are often not as strong for non-profit outlets, they may be free to devote more attention to topics that are important for political accountability and democratic governance (e.g., Knight Foundation, 2015).

Nonetheless, there is no scholarly consensus on whether the rise of non-profits has improved the quality of state and local journalism. For instance, early signs of a re-emergence of statehouse reporting, fueled in part by non-profits, may reinforce existing inequalities in citizen access to information and fail to broadly serve the public interest (Powers et al., 2025). And the influence of private donors on the priorities of non-profit journalism outlets is not necessarily beneficial or benign, since philanthropic support may cause news organizations to produce content that align with donors’ particular agendas (e.g., Benson, 2018; Scott et al., 2019).

But empirical research has emphasized non-profits’ public service orientation and its consequences for the way they cover their communities. In a review of non-profit outlets’ mission statements, Konieczna and Robinson (2014) found that many have an explicitly community-focused approach whose chief goal is to serve the public interest. Konieczna’s (2013) case study of MinnPost also suggests that non-profit outlets may place a great deal of value on loyalty to the community, although the way that this norm is put into practice continues to evolve. Several studies also confirm that non-profits address public affairs topics that may go uncovered by traditional news organizations (Boehmer et al., 2018; Clegg and Kennedy, 2024) and publish more “public-spirited” content than for-profit

outlets, although there is variation depending on various features of the sites (Chadha and Harlow, 2019; Harlow and Chadha, 2021). Non-profits may also help reduce public corruption (Usher and Kim-Leffingwell, 2023).

## Indicators of non-profits' impact

Little research, however, has gone beyond the content of non-profit outlets' reporting. In particular, there has been no systematic study of how well non-profits fill the gaps in citizen knowledge or participation left by the decline of traditional news providers. To be sure, prior work finds that journalists, including those at non-profits, often view themselves as contributing to their audience's awareness of important issues, shaping public opinion on major developments, and promoting community cohesion (Konieczna and Powers, 2016; Powers, 2018; Schiffrin et al., 2023). Here, I build on those understandings and consider three ways to gauge non-profits' potential impact on residents of the communities they cover.

First, an important aspect of a news outlet's impact is how far it reaches into the community it serves. Although observers have been enthusiastic about non-profits' potential contributions, their audiences are unlikely to rival the size of the audiences of more well-established and popular media sources, such as local television. In addition, because non-profits are often heavily focused on public affairs, their audience may be limited to the relatively small share of consumers who are drawn to such coverage. The upshot is that non-profit consumers may disproportionately be highly educated and highly interested in news and public affairs.

A second indicator of a news outlet's potential impact is its ability to become a trusted source of information that addresses a community's most important concerns. Given many non-profits' community-oriented mission and emphasis on public service, they may be well-positioned to establish high levels of trust and credibility. At the same time, it is not clear we would expect residents to have significantly more favorable attitudes about non-profits than other news outlets. For one thing, levels of trust in the media are generally modest (e.g., Archer and Peterson, 2025), which may limit even non-profit outlets' ability to garner favorable evaluations from consumers.

Third, because existing research suggests that non-profits tend to devote more attention to public affairs than for-profit outlets, exposure to non-profit coverage should lead consumers to higher levels of knowledge and engagement in their community (e.g., Soroka et al., 2013). To the extent that U.S. non-profits provide their consumers with high-quality coverage of state and local government, this may lead to relatively high levels of information and community involvement.

## Studying statewide non-profits

To analyze the impact of non-profit news, I conducted public opinion surveys in the spring and summer of 2024 in three states with a major statewide non-profit news outlet. I focus on statewide outlets for three reasons. First, traditional news organizations have cut back significantly on coverage of state politics, especially in state capitals (e.g., Powers et al., 2025).

This is thus an area where the expansion of non-profit journalism may have a measurable impact. Second, coverage of state politics is substantively important, and arguably increasingly so, as state governments have significant power over law enforcement, abortion rights, and other policy areas. A third reason is practical. Although non-profit outlets have sprung up in many cities and neighborhoods, gauging the impact of journalism in smaller communities presents methodological challenges. For instance, conducting reliable survey research in a small area served by a hyperlocal non-profit can be prohibitively expensive and can limit the generalizability of conclusions.

The study focuses on statewide non-profits in New Hampshire, Michigan, and Montana. New Hampshire Public Radio was established in 1981 and devotes significant resources to covering state government, describing itself as the state's "primary source for accountability reporting on government and private institutions."<sup>2</sup> Bridge Michigan launched in 2011 and covers the state "with major emphasis on how the politics and policies coming from the state capitol directly impact statewide residents' lives."<sup>3</sup> Montana Free Press was founded in 2016 and has a mission to produce "in-depth public-service journalism that creates positive change."<sup>4</sup> All of the outlets distribute their content for free, and do not require memberships or subscriptions to access it.<sup>5</sup> The full-time editorial staff for each newsroom ranges from 13 to 17.

While these outlets are similar in reporting capacity and the public-service orientation that is typical of non-profits across the country, they also differ in important ways. NHPR is significantly older than the other two and has developed an established statewide brand. NHPR also delivers its content both over the radio and through its digital channels (web site, newsletters, and social media). The three outlets also cover states in different regions of the country and have populations that vary in their demographic makeup and political orientation. To the extent that I find similarities in their impact, it would suggest some broadly generalizable conclusions about the role played by non-profits. But future research should also seek to identify ways that different types of newsrooms in different contexts may have different levels of impact.

The surveys in each state were conducted between April and June 2024. Respondents were adult (18+) residents of each state and were recruited from the survey firm Qualtrics' research panel. Previous research has shown Qualtrics samples to be the most demographically and politically representative of common opt-in survey platforms (Boas et al., 2020). The sample sizes were 650 in New Hampshire, 2020 in Michigan, and 655 in Montana. The differences in sample sizes are due to the varying sizes of each state's population.

The sampling frame was designed to generate samples that were closely representative of each state's demographics. As noted in the [Appendix](#), the samples were closely matched to each state's population on race and education. Following standard practice, the results I present reflect data that has been weighted on a variety of demographic characteristics to more precisely approximate each state's population. Details appear in the [Appendix](#).

Each survey was divided into three parts. In the first, respondents answered questions about how often they got news from various state and local news sources, including the major non-profit statewide news outlet in their state. The second part of the survey contained questions measuring respondents' attitudes about those same sources. The final

part gauged respondents' familiarity with key issues and developments in their state, as well as measures of civic engagement, such as voting and other forms of political participation.

Of course, surveys of this type have limitations. They cannot provide in-depth explanations of the mechanics underlying the effects of news exposure. Nor can they easily explore variation among sub-groups and provide qualitative assessments of how citizens relate to news sources. But they serve as a useful and systematic starting point for assessing the role that non-profit news outlets may play in encouraging civic engagement.

## Whom do non-profit news outlets reach?

I begin by characterizing the reach of these non-profit news outlets. In each survey, respondents were asked how frequently they got news and information from several different sources in their state. The particular outlets varied from state to state, but the list included many of the most common sources of state and local news – newspapers, radio, and television. For each source, respondents could say that they got news from that source “often,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never.”<sup>6</sup>

Table 1 displays the percentage of respondents who said they got news from the non-profit news site in their state either “often” or “sometimes.” Throughout this paper, these are the consumers I describe as regular users of the non-profit sites. For comparison, the table also presents the percentage of respondents who said they “often” or “sometimes” got news from some other state or local news source.

As expected, the reach of the non-profit sites is modest. On the high end, more than one-third of New Hampshire residents said they got news from NHPR. This is perhaps not surprising, as NHPR is the oldest and most well-established of the three non-profit outlets in this study. On the low end, fewer than two in 10 Michigan residents reported regularly reading Bridge Michigan. These differences underscore that the reach of non-profits may vary considerably by how well-established they are.

By comparison, close to nine in 10 residents got news from at least one other community news source, like a local or state newspaper or radio station. Across all three surveys, local television was the most popular source, mirroring patterns found in national surveys.<sup>7</sup> In New Hampshire, for instance, 80% of respondents said they at least sometimes got news from the state's major TV station, WMUR.

Consumers appear to use non-profit outlets as supplements to more traditional news outlets, not replacements. For example, almost every respondent who said they regularly

**Table 1.** Respondents regularly getting news from state and local media sources.

	New Hampshire	Michigan	Montana
Non-profit news outlet	35%	18%	24%
Other state/Local outlet	85%	88%	85%

Entries represent the share of respondents who said they “often” or “sometimes” got news from the source. Entries sum to more than 100% since respondents could use multiple outlets.

got news from the non-profit outlet also reported using at least one other state and local news source. Those figures were 93% in New Hampshire, 98% in Michigan, and 97% in Montana. Few consumers are abandoning legacy news outlets for non-profit sites. Instead, non-profit sites have become an additional source of news for some people who still also consume traditional news outlets.

To be sure, caution is needed in drawing precise conclusions from self-reported media exposure, given the various sources of measurement error inherent in that approach (e.g., [Prior, 2009](#)). But these figures are consistent with the modest audiences for digital or non-profit public affairs outlets reported in other research (e.g., [Hindman, 2018](#)). Overall, they suggest that these non-profit organizations have established themselves as a source of news for a small but meaningful share of these states' residents.

What explains who get news from non-profits? [Table 2](#) displays linear regression models predicting how frequently a respondent reported getting news from NHPR, Bridge Michigan, or Montana Free Press. The scale ranges from 1 (never) to 4 (often). The models include variables for various demographic factors, a respondent's general interest in the news, and a measure of partisanship. The 7-point party identification scale is scaled from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7).

In two states (New Hampshire and Montana), respondents with more education were more likely to get news from a non-profit outlet than were less educated respondents. For instance, in Montana, 31% of respondents with a bachelor's degree reported being regular Montana Free Press readers, while just 20% of respondents without a bachelor's degree said the same. At the same time, education has no effect in Michigan, suggesting that non-profit news outlets will not universally draw their audience disproportionately from highly educated residents.

Across all three states, younger respondents were more likely to get news from non-profits than were older residents. In some cases, this age gap was fairly large. For instance, the

**Table 2.** Predictors of non-profit news consumption.

	New Hampshire	Michigan	Montana
Education	.10* (.03)	-.01 (.02)	.07* (.03)
Age	-.01* (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.01* (.00)
Woman	-.16 (.08)	-.07 (.05)	-.14 (.08)
White	.08 (.13)	-.21* (.06)	-.16 (.12)
Income	-.01 (.02)	-.02 (.01)	.01 (.02)
Party identification	-.03 (.02)	-.02 (.01)	-.05* (.02)
News interest	.26* (.04)	.23* (.02)	.25* (.04)
Constant	1.51* (.21)	1.90* (.12)	1.70* (.20)
Observations	655	2009	641
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.12	.15

\* $p < .05$ . Cells are ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable is how often a respondent got news from the statewide non-profit, with higher values indicating more frequent use.

average age of a reader of Bridge Michigan was 44, while the average age of a non-reader was 52. One explanation is that younger consumers are more comfortable with digital outlets than are older consumers, who continue to prefer traditional media like newspapers and television.

By far the strongest predictor of non-profit use was a respondent's general interest in the news. The survey included a question that asked respondents, "How much would you say you follow the news?" Respondents who indicated more interest in the news in general were significantly more likely to say they regularly got news from a non-profit site. Given the public affairs focus of most non-profit sites (and all the ones in my study), this is not surprising. That finding indicates that these sites tend to attract respondents who are already highly engaged with the news.

Finally, I find that partisanship has only an inconsistent effect. In Montana, readership of Montana Free Press is less likely among Republicans (as indicated by the negative sign). And while the variable is also negative in New Hampshire and Michigan, it is not statistically significant. These results suggest that partisanship may play a role in shaping non-profit news use, but the strength of the relationship may be contingent and vary across contexts.

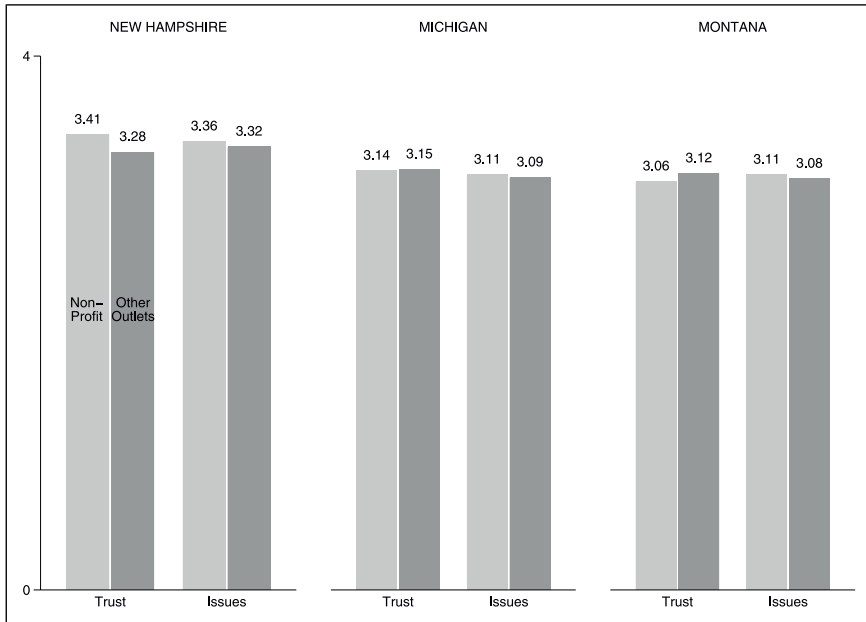
## Attitudes about non-profit outlets

To measure respondents' attitudes about non-profits' journalism, I first asked users how much trust they had in the information they got from particular state and local news sources. They could answer "none at all," "not too much," "some," or "a lot." I converted those into a numerical scale, ranging from 1 (none at all) to 4 (a lot). In [Figure 1](#), I display the average trust score for each non-profit outlet compared with the average for other outlets we asked about in the state. The averages reflect responses only for respondents who said they regularly used an outlet.

In absolute terms, non-profit outlets receive favorable trust ratings. On average, scores between 3 and 4 reflect ratings between "some" and "a lot." Non-profit outlets were also rated very similarly to other outlets in the state. In New Hampshire, NHPR scored slightly higher on average than did other state outlets. Bridge Michigan and Montana Free Press received slightly lower scores than other outlets in their states. These differences suggest that residents may view long-established public media outlets, like public radio affiliates, more favorably than newer digital startups, highlighting an important distinction among non-profits of different types. The main pattern, however, is that in no state are there large differences in trust between the non-profits and other outlets – they are all in the same range.

The same story emerges when respondents were asked about how well each outlet addressed the most important issues facing the state on a scale "not well at all" to "very well." Again, I converted those responses to a 1-4 scale. The darker column in [Figure 1](#) shows that NHPR and Montana Free Press received higher ratings than other outlets in the state. But once again the differences are not large or substantively meaningful. On average, the difference between non-profits and for-profit sites is 0.03 points on the 4-point scale.

Ultimately, non-profit sites are viewed similarly as more traditional outlets. On one hand, non-profit advocates might find this disappointing, since some have hoped that these outlets would transform the way users feel about journalism. On the other, this suggests that non-profits – even those, like Bridge Michigan and Montana Free Press,



**Figure 1.** Average ratings for trust and issue coverage for non-profits and other outlets. *Note:* Figure displays ratings of how much consumers trust the information they get from news outlets and how well the outlets address the most important issues facing their state. Scales range from 1 to 4.

which have been around for less than two decades – have established themselves as sources of information that are no less credible than other state and local options for news.

## Do non-profit news outlets increase political engagement?

A crucial question is whether non-profit news outlets are contributing to their users' civic engagement. Two key aspects of engagement are how much people know about the issues facing their state and communities and how much they participate in civic life.

### *Information levels*

I use several measures to determine how well-informed respondents are, and to examine whether there are differences between non-profit users and non-users. As an initial test, I looked at how informed people feel about the major issues facing their state and community. Subjective evaluations have limitations, in that they do not tell us how much respondents actually know. But they can provide some sense of whether consumers believe their informational needs are being met.

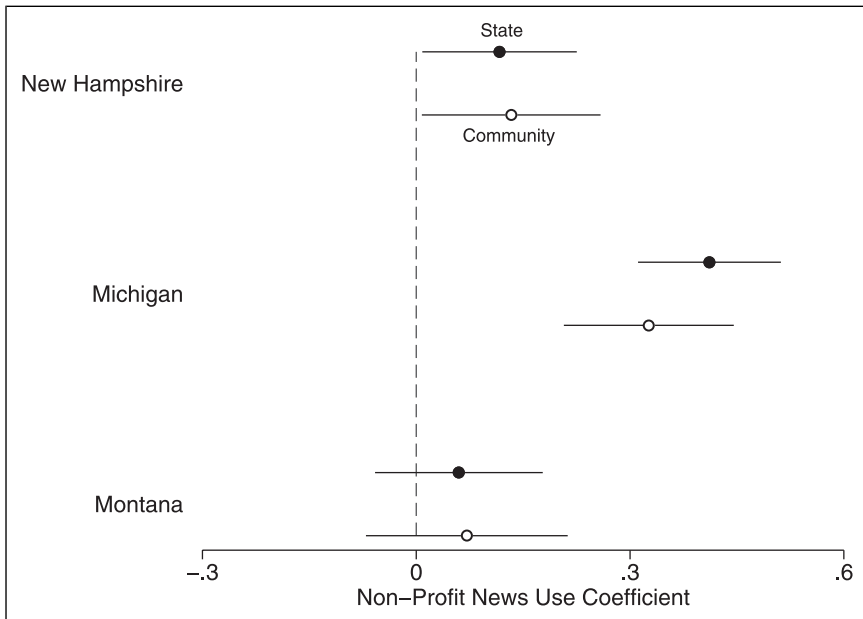
To determine the relationship between non-profit news use and feeling informed, I specify regression models predicting how well informed a respondent said they felt about their state and their community.<sup>8</sup> The key independent variable is whether a respondent

was a regular user of the non-profit outlet in their state. The models control for a respondent's use of other state and local news outlets, general interest in the news, and the demographic variables that appear in the [Table 2](#) models.<sup>9</sup>

In [Figure 2](#), I plot the coefficients on non-profit news use, which represents the difference in how well informed a non-profit news consumer feels compared to a person who doesn't get news from a non-profit site. The point estimates in the figure are coefficients, and the horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Confidence intervals that don't overlap the vertical zero-line indicate statistically significant differences.

In both New Hampshire and Michigan, consumers of NHPR and Bridge Michigan are significantly more likely to say they feel informed than those who don't use the sites, controlling for other factors. Although the coefficients for reading Montana Free Press are positive, there is substantial uncertainty around the estimates, indicating no significant effect. Thus, there is suggestive evidence that non-profit outlets may increase how well informed their users feel. But the fact that the results are not the same across the board implies that there may be place-specific or other factors that moderate the influence of non-profit news on how well-informed residents feel they are.

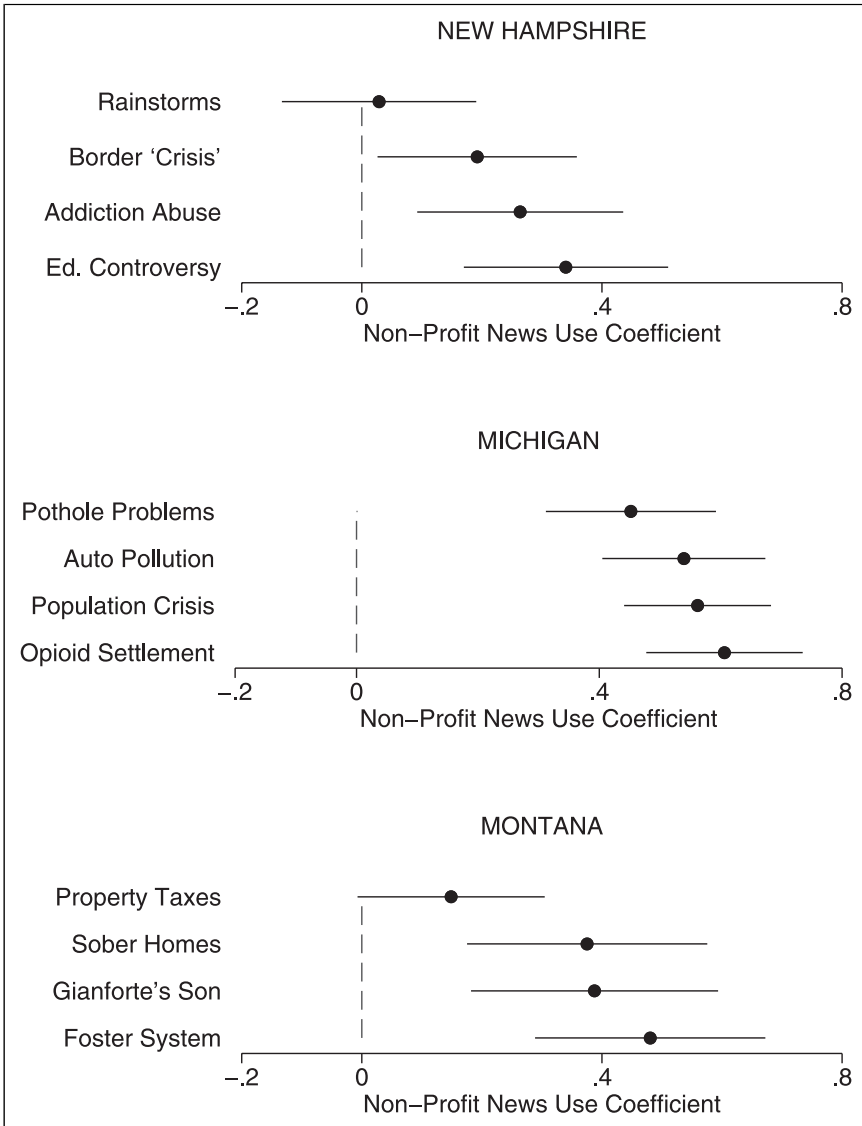
To gauge information levels in a second way, I gave respondents short descriptions of several major stories that each non-profit outlet had published over the past year. I then asked how much they had heard about these developments. This is a fairly basic test. But if non-profits make their



**Figure 2.** Non-profit news use and feeling informed about state and community issues. Note: Point estimates represent linear regression coefficients from models in [Appendix Table A.1](#). Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

users more aware of major state and local developments, then consumers of these outlets should express more familiarity with these stories than non-users.

Figure 3 plots the coefficients from models predicting how much respondents said they had heard about the four most well-known stories in each state.<sup>10</sup> The dependent variable



**Figure 3.** Non-profit news use and familiarity with major stories. *Note:* Point estimates represent linear regression coefficients from models in Appendix Tables A2-A4. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Descriptions of the stories presented to respondents appear in the Appendix.

is a 4-point scale ranging from “none at all” to “a lot.” The models again control for the same factors included in the previous analyses.<sup>11</sup>

In almost every instance, consumers who get news from a non-profit outlet are more familiar with these major stories. The top panel displays the findings for New Hampshire. Although NHPR use does not increase the odds that respondents will be familiar with the first story – about major rainstorms in 2023 – there is a significant effect for stories about a purported immigration “crisis” on New Hampshire’s Canadian border, an investigation about abuse in state addiction treatment facilities, and controversy involving the state’s education commissioner.

In Michigan and Montana, the results are more definitive. Bridge Michigan readers were significantly more likely than non-readers to know about each of the four major developments. And in Montana, only the news about property tax increases was narrowly insignificant – with a *p*-value of .07. For the other three stories, readers of the Montana Free Press were more likely to say they knew about the developments.<sup>12</sup> Across the board, residents who got news from a statewide non-profit were more informed about major stories than people who did not.

### *Civic engagement*

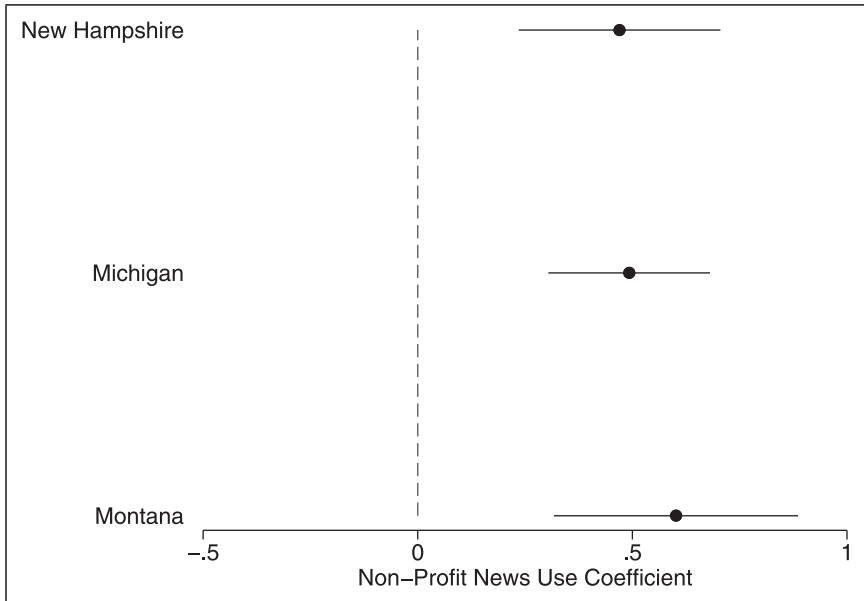
To consider whether non-profit use is related to whether people participate in their communities’ civic life, I asked respondents whether they had engaged in a series of different activities in the previous year. These included non-political actions, such as volunteering in the community, as well as several explicitly political activities – voting in a state or local election, donating to a state or local political campaign, or attending a local political meeting.

I first use these items to create an index of civic engagement, summing up the number of actions a respondent said they engaged in. For instance, if a respondent said they donated to a state or local campaign, attended a community meeting, and signed a petition, they would receive a score of three. Across the states, the average number of activities ranged from 1.65 to 1.77.<sup>13</sup>

In [Figure 4](#), I plot the coefficients from regression models that show the relationship between non-profit news use and the civic engagement index. As before, the point estimates represent the difference between respondents who do and do not get news from a non-profit outlet. The models again control for other state and local media use, general news interest, and demographic variables.<sup>14</sup>

Non-profit news use is a strong predictor of a respondent’s score on the engagement index. Descriptively, these differences are quite large. For instance, in Montana, readers of Montana Free Press averaged 2.69 civic activities, while non-readers averaged just 1.78. That difference of nearly one full activity represents a 50% increase for non-profit news consumers. The differences in New Hampshire and Michigan are slightly smaller but substantial.<sup>15</sup>

We can gain a better sense of which activities non-profit use is associated with by disaggregating the index and looking at responses to each question separately. In [Figure 5](#), I plot coefficients from a series of logistic regression models predicting whether a

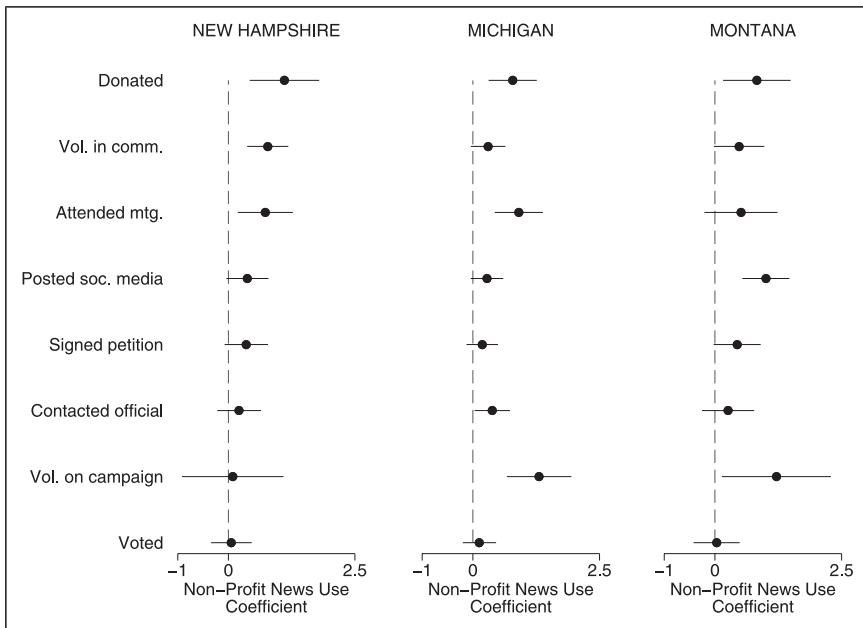


**Figure 4.** Non-profit news use and the civic engagement index. *Note:* Point estimates represent linear regression coefficients from models in [Appendix Table A5](#). Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

respondent said they had engaged in each of the eight civic engagement activities. Again, the coefficients represent the difference between consumers of the non-profit outlet and non-consumers. The top row, for instance, displays the coefficients from models predicting whether a respondent reported donating to a state or local political campaign in the past year.<sup>16</sup>

I find a consistent relationship between non-profit news consumption and several civic behaviors across the states. In all three, non-profit news consumers were more likely to donate to a state or local campaign, volunteer in their community, and post on social media about a local issue.<sup>17</sup> In New Hampshire and Michigan, non-profit news use was also related to attending a local political meeting and volunteering on a state or local campaign. There are smaller, inconsistent, or null effects on signing a local petition, contacting a local official, and voting in a state or local election.

One interpretation of these different findings across activities is that non-profit news use has its strongest relationship with civic behaviors that require a significant expenditure of time or money. For instance, I find in at least two of three states that non-profit news use is associated with donating, volunteering in the community, and attending a community meeting. The effects are somewhat smaller or less consistent for activities people can undertake from home (posting on social media, signing a petition, or contacting an elected official). I also find a consistently null effect on



**Figure 5.** Non-profit news use and various civic engagement activities. Note: Point estimates represent logistic regression coefficients from models in [Appendix Tables A6-A8](#). Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

voting, whose cost is often subsidized by a saturated information environment and pressure from within social networks. Exposure to non-profit news may pay its largest civic dividends in activities that people may be less inclined to participate in without strong external motivation.

## Conclusion

The rise of non-profit state and local news has generated both concern and hope among scholars and journalism advocates. The findings in this paper suggest reasons to be cautiously optimistic. In the three states I study – New Hampshire, Michigan, and Montana – consumers who reported getting news from non-profits felt better informed about their state and community, were more familiar with major news developments, and were more civically engaged. The public service focus of many non-profits may indeed help fill in gaps left by the disappearance and decline of traditional local outlets like newspapers.

At the same time, the findings also indicate ongoing challenges. Even as many non-profits are community-focused, they are not consistently viewed as more trustworthy or attentive to key issues than are other news outlets. To be sure, the fact that even relatively young non-profits like Bridge Michigan and Montana Free Press have

achieved similar levels of credibility as many legacy organizations is notable. But Americans' jaundiced view of the media may make it difficult for non-profits to initiate the kind of renaissance in news trust that some of their most ardent backers have hoped for.

Likewise, non-profits' audiences remain modest. This should not be surprising. News outlets that focus on substantive public affairs reporting are likely to face market limitations given the relatively weak consumer demand for that kind of journalism. But this reality should at least temper observers' hopes for the extent to which non-profits can reshape the state and local media landscape. The breadth of non-profits' civic contributions will depend on these outlets' ability to reach consumers who thus far have not been part of their core audience.

The findings also raise a number of questions. First, under what circumstances are non-profits likely to have their most significant impact? There is variation across the three states I studied. For example, consumers reported more positive views of NHPR than did readers of *Bridge Michigan* or *Montana Free Press*. Is that a function of NHPR's longer tenure as a statewide news outlet? Is it because NHPR delivers its content both over the air and through its digital channels? Identifying the reasons that some non-profits have established more credibility with consumers than others may offer guidance for how outlets may build stronger connections with their audiences.

Second, how strong is the causal association between non-profit news consumption and civic engagement? The analyses in this paper are largely correlational. They provide a useful point of departure in establishing a potential relationship between non-profit news exposure and people's familiarity with key issues and likelihood of participating in community life. But a more rigorous assessment needs a research design that can distinguish selection effects – engaged consumers seeking out non-profit news – from causal ones. Such research can help more precisely demonstrate the contributions that non-profit outlets are making to their communities.

Third, to what extent do these findings extend to other contexts? Studying these three statewide non-profits has considerable value, because they represent common characteristics of the larger universe of non-profit journalism organizations. But the differences I find in audience size and trust ratings for NHPR compared to the two newer digital outlets also suggest that variation in non-profit type might affect their impact on the community. Further investigation could also determine whether non-profits' impact might be different at the city or neighborhood level.

Over the last decade, scholars have devoted a growing amount of attention to the profound changes taking place in local media ecosystems all over the world. This work has shined critical light on the nature and scope of the local information crisis and its potential consequences for democracy. But we know far less about how the rise of new forms of journalism are affecting communities. Non-profits are one of the most important, and more research on the way they emerge, cover their communities, and contribute to residents' engagement will improve our understanding of their impact on democratic life.

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## ORCID iD

Danny Hayes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1950-1617>

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. <https://www.nhpr.org/about-nhpr>.
2. <https://www.bridgemi.com/about>.
3. <https://montanafreepress.org/about-mtfp/>.
4. These outlets were chosen as part of a research collaboration involving the Lenfest Institute for Journalism. The three outlets are part of Lenfest's Statewide News Collective, a group of independent news organizations serving statewide audiences.
5. In New Hampshire and Montana, respondents were given a list of individual local news outlets, including the relevant non-profit. In Michigan, respondents were asked specifically about Bridge Michigan and given a list of broader categories of sources (e.g., local newspapers) rather than other individual outlets. Because the patterns of news use and attitudes toward news outlets are very similar among all three states, it does not appear that this difference in question wording has any substantive effect on the results.
6. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/26/friends-family-and-neighbors-are-americans-most-common-source-of-local-news/>.
7. The dependent variable is a scale ranging from "not very well informed" (1) to "very well informed" (4).
8. Full model results appear in [Appendix Table A1](#).
9. Respondents in each state were asked about different numbers of stories, but I limit the analysis to the four most well-known for each state for comparability.
10. Full results appear in [Appendix Tables A2-4](#).
11. Descriptions of the stories presented to survey respondents appear in the [Appendix](#).
12. In New Hampshire, the mean number of activities was 1.65. In Michigan, it was 1.77. In Montana, it was 1.67.
13. Full results appear in [Appendix Table A5](#).
14. In New Hampshire, NHPR users averaged 2.09 activities compared to 1.41 for non-users. In Michigan, Bridge Michigan readers averaged 2.28 activities compared to 1.65 for non-readers.

15. Full model results appear in [Appendix Tables A6-8](#).
16. In the post on social media models, the  $p$ -values in New Hampshire (.08) and Michigan (.09) do not quite reach conventional levels of significance.

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## Author biography

Danny Hayes is professor of political science at George Washington University. His research and teaching focus on the media, public opinion, and elections. He is an author of three books and a winner of the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center. His work, which has appeared in numerous academic journals, has been supported by the National Science Foundation.