

Local Journalism is a Public Good...

A Roundtable Discussion

June 6, 2024

A roundtable discussion at the Office of the D.C. Auditor

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

WAMU shuts down local news site DCist, lays off reporters

CNN Business

News industry off to brutal 2024 start as mass layoffs devastate publishers, raising questions about the future of journalism

The New York Times

The News About the News Business Is Getting Grimmer

WAMU 88.5
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO

'It's a part of our lives:' What DCist meant to its readers and former staffers

The Washington Post

After budget slashing, more newspaper journalists plan one-day strikes



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This report is an edited transcript from a roundtable discussion on strategies to sustain and enhance local news coverage in D.C. held at the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor on April 10, 2024, with a member of the D.C. Council, journalists past and present, and local news advocates.

PANELISTS:

Janeese Lewis George, *Councilmember, Council of the District of Columbia*
Cheryl W. Thompson, *National Public Radio and George Washington University*
Harry Jaffe, *Spotlight DC*
Anna Brugmann, *Rebuild Local News*
Chris Kain, *DC Line*

MODERATOR:

Kathy Patterson, *Auditor of the District of Columbia*

MS. PATTERSON: I want to welcome everyone. Thank you for agreeing to have this conversation. Our topic is strategies to sustain and enhance local news coverage in Washington, D.C. And each person around this table is here because you have a particular role already in that issue.

And so, by way of introduction, I would like everyone to what it is that you're doing to contribute to journalism in the District of Columbia, and I will start! I'm an ex-newspaper reporter, but the Office of the D.C. Auditor does work very much like a team of investigative reporters. We are in the accountability business. But in addition, we contract with individuals for projects. We're currently contracting with Jason Cherkis, whom a lot of you know, and he is doing a project for us on suicide prevention in D.C. schools—policy and practice.



KATHY PATTERSON

We had a journalist in residence, a long-time investigative reporter. Chuck Babcock was with us for about a year working with audit teams to help us bring journalism practices into our work. And when I speak to the journalism class in Washington from Northwestern, we talk about the similarities in the work. And then when I end my talk, I say good luck with your journalism career, but again if you're having a tough time getting a job, come see me! Chris, why don't you share what you're up to, and how you're contributing.

“ With DCist closing, and the reduced staffing from the Washington Post last fall, we're seeing a clear reduction in the amount of coverage.”

CHRIS KAIN

MR. KAIN: Sure, I'm the founder and editor of The DC Line, which is a non-profit news site focused on local D.C. news. Our fiscal sponsor is Day Eight, an arts organization based in Ward 4. We have a combination—we have a daily newsletter that I compile called District Links. In addition to the original work that we're doing, we post what's ended up a lot of local commentary. As the Washington Post phased local opinions out, we have one of the relatively few local columns focused on D.C. politics.

When it comes to the newsletter, I'm looking at most of the local news sources and compiling that. We've seen ebbs and flows over the years. With DCist closing and the reduced staffing at the Washington Post last fall, we're seeing a clear reduction in the amount of coverage. Particularly, I noticed it yesterday that the only story that had more than two or three outlets reporting on it was the RAMMY nominations for restaurants. It's an interesting story, and I'm sure people want to read that, but I'm not sure that was the most important story of the day...That's one of the few areas, and probably right now crime and violence I think is another, [where you can get multiple stories on the same subject]. This week when the Mayor and law enforcement officials announced the launch of the Real Time Crime Center, that was also a story that got a lot of attention, particularly on TV. But there are clear gaps in the infrastructure right now.

MS. PATTERSON: Thank you. Harry, want to talk about the birth of Spotlight DC?

MR. JAFFE: Like Chris, in a town full of journalists, there are ten of us who report on local news, maybe 20, who have devoted our careers to reporting on local Washington. I worked for Washingtonian Magazine for decades, wrote Dream City with Tom Sherwood, and rewrote it again 10 years ago. It became clear to me

back in 2017, 2018, that local journalism and coverage of things that I had devoted my career to were not happening anymore; were happening less. So, we started Spotlight DC, a simple organization, and a simple mission. A simple organization: we raise funds, ask for proposals, evaluate them and award funds. And no newsroom; we wanted to promote and support what has become accountability journalism in Washington, D.C. So, no restaurant reviews, no features. We support accountability journalism. We've been relatively successful. Josh Kaplan who, I think is going to win a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Supreme Court¹—we supported his investigation of fraud in the D.C. eviction system, which won an Institute for Nonprofit News Investigative Award back in 2020, when we launched. Hola Cultura which is a Latino nonprofit, we supported their environmental journalism, and they won an Edward R. Murrow Award with WAMU. So, we've had some success, and we need money! Thank you for putting this together, and thank you Councilmember Lewis George for your legislation, which hopefully will help.

“ It became clear to me back in 2017 that local journalism and coverage of things I devoted my career to were not happening anymore.”

HARRY JAFFE

MS. PATTERSON: Thank you. Cheryl?

MS. THOMPSON: Hi, everybody. I'm Cheryl W. Thompson and I'm a senior editor for member station investigations for NPR, which translated means I work with our member stations around the country to do local journalism, investigative journalism. Before I came to NPR I spent 22 years at the Washington Post, which is how I know Kathy. She was a Councilmember, and she was also head of the judiciary committee when I covered the D.C. Police Department. I spent half of my time with the Post, on the investigations team, and the other part covering D.C. Police and Justice Department. At NPR I have worked with WAMU. On one piece I worked with a young woman so she could produce a piece on overtime in D.C. police, it ran...

MR. JAFFE: (interrupting) Supported by Spotlight DC

MS. THOMPSON: You had your turn! And I'm working with another reporter at WAMU on a project as well. I do believe that most news starts out as local. So, I'm a big believer in local journalism.

MS. PATTERSON: And you're helping train journalists at George Washington University.

MR. JAFFE: I'm sorry for butting in again, and she's a board member of Spotlight D.C.

MS. THOMPSON: That's right, I'm an associate professor. I teach investigative journalism and advanced news writing at George Washington, I've been there for 11 years, and I started a chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists back in 2014. And I try to bring my students along. When I was at the Post, my editor at the time was kind enough to let me hire a student or two and pay them to work on pieces.

MS. PATTERSON: Great. Ms. Brugmann?

¹ On May 6, 2024, Josh Kaplan's ProPublica team won the Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism.

MS. BRUGMANN: I'm the director of policy at Rebuild Local News. We're a non-partisan, non-profit that works to advance public policies to revitalize community journalism and sustain democracy. I'm a former local journalist, we work on national projects primarily, at the federal, state, and local level, but I am a D.C. resident. I care very deeply about public policy in D.C. and also about sustaining a vibrant local news ecosystem in D.C., public policy being of course one essential pillar to that. Business model innovation and community innovation are also essential parts. So, my main work is public policy, but I have an interest in many of the other topics we've already brought up.

MS. PATTERSON: Councilmember?

“ ...I'm here because we introduced the Local News Funding Act in 2023 to create a source of ongoing public funding to support local news which we've seen dwindling away”

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: I'm Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, the Ward 4 Councilmember. Usually, I would be nervous in front of journalists, but this is okay! I think that investigative journalism is so important, and accountability journalism is so important right now, here in D.C. You can talk about just yesterday and the story about the mayor's crime center rolling out, but an equally important story on forensic scientists walking away from the practices that are happening at the DFS [Department of Forensic Sciences] Crime Lab, which is an essential part of our ecosystem, and whether we are going to move ahead to be able to solve and prosecute crimes. And when you don't have local news sources, you can get the story about the crime center but if we don't get our crime lab operating we're going to find ourselves back in the same space.

That's just one example of what local news stories get you, versus focusing on the good news but not the accountability. There are so many areas in this city where we have some very serious gaps in accountability. I don't need to tell a room full of journalists this.

I think journalism has a stronger role in accountability sometimes than a Councilmember does. When a story comes out it moves the needle and makes change in a way that needs to happen in various parts of our government.

The way I see it is that local news, local journalism, is a public good. And if it's a public good, then we fund it like other public goods. Education is a public good, we agree, we fund it because it's a public good. We fund different things like libraries because we know there is a public good there. Well, I fundamentally believe local journalism is a public good not only the accountability piece, but just giving information to people is an opportunity to reach all types of people and everybody has access to this important information.

And if we believe that value statement, that local journalism is a public good, then how do we fund it? I think we have an opportunity where we could fund local journalism as a public good. And so, I'm here because we introduced the Local News Funding Act in 2023 in October to create a source of ongoing public funding to support local news here in our city, which we have seen dwindling away. And that's to our peril, honestly.

MS. PATTERSON: What are the prospects for the bill? Where are you politically?

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: We have support from several colleagues. As we have seen the closing of so many of our local news stations, at first some of my colleagues were skeptical, but now people are saying okay, how do we make this work? It's been jointly referred to the Committee on Economic Development, and the Committee of the Whole. Chairman Mendelson has said he is willing to give this a hearing at some point, though it will obviously be after budget. We're hoping to have a hearing in the fall, to be able to start the conversation.



JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

MS. PATTERSON: And do you see it as a discussion draft, or do you think as a practical matter this method of funding can work? And then let's have other folks jump in on that point as well.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: I think that is an excellent question. I think one of the frustrating parts of everyone being on edge about this budget, which is a \$21 billion budget. People are like, "Well you're talking about funding local journalism, and we're in a tight budget year."

“ People are like, “Well you’re talking about funding local journalism, and we’re in a tight budget year.”

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

And again, I go back to my point that this is a public good, and so we should be funding it as it's a public good. And it contributes and helps the work that we need to do with the city to make the improvements we need to make. So, I don't think it should be just a conversation piece. This needs to really be on the table, and as quickly as possible we need to get this done.

MS. BRUGMANN: I've read dozens of journalism bills and it's a very good one, and should absolutely not be a discussion draft, it should be a really viable option. It's really smart. There are certain elements that at Rebuild Local News we look for when we vet public policies to support local journalism.

One of the things that we look for is does this maintain the essential editorial independence of local journalism? What are the firewalls? What's the accountability; what's the transparency?

This bill creates a quasi-independent board that's as independent as you could make it in D.C., given some of our quirks around independent bodies. And it creates an incentive, and a system in which folks who may ordinarily want to either support their local journalism outlets more or can't support them at all based on what their local finances are, to support local journalism. From a policy perspective, there's two ways to think about it. You give a hard value to the news coupon, or you give a proportional value. The way that Council Member Lewis George introduced it, is it guarantees money will get to local news outlets in the District. This needs to really be on the table, and as quickly as possible we need to do it, we need to get this done.

“ The way that Council Member Lewis George introduced it, is it guarantees money will get to local news outlets in the District.”

ANNA BRUGMANN

And at this point our theory is not that we don't have enough people working hard enough. There are a lot of people working very hard, the Washington Informer is incredibly dedicated to its community El Tiempo Latino is. Chris, Harry, lots of folks here are incredibly dedicated to their communities.

The problem is we don't have the money at this point. And this bill really thinks about that in a smart way. Personally, I think it also solves a problem that we've had a really hard time solving as we look at these approaches in other jurisdictions. We've found ways to subsidize the newsroom hiring and retention of journalists.

We've found ways to encourage advertising in local media. It's been a lot harder to find ways to incentivize folks to subscribe, to donate to local news because our tax system is set up so, it's easy for those who itemize to get a benefit. It's easy for folks who are below a certain income to get benefits.

But it's hard to get anybody in the middle. And this is the solution to that; it democratizes the way in which the D.C. government could support local journalism. And so, I think in answer to your original question, we should talk about how we're going to support journalism in the District. It's not just about journalists having jobs, which is a valid issue in and of itself. But it's about the health of our communities. Not only does local journalism contribute to a better functioning government, it contributes to a community that knows itself, that feels connected to one other, that knows its neighbors. It's not just about accountability, it's about "I saw my kid's sports scores...I live in Ward 6, I know Mott's Market is opening up." Those sorts of things create this connection to your community, and it's a lot harder to do that kind of journalism now, with fewer people stretched incredibly thin. I applaud Councilmember Lewis George, and Council Member Nadeau for introducing it, and I think it's a very good bill.

“ *As the Washington Post phased local opinions out, we have one of the relatively few local columns focused on D.C. politics.*”

CHRIS KAIN

MS. PATTERSON: Would this help DC Line?

MR. KAIN: Sure, I mean, I think so. We're a small operation with limited resources. So, something like this would certainly accommodate or facilitate expansion. Because of the tough budget environment, I wonder whether there are interim steps or alternatives that are also worth discussion in terms of how you could facilitate growth in a local news ecosystem.

MS. PATTERSON: Like what?

MR. KAIN: We have to expect that with reporters and former reporters. I think because of D.C.'s uniqueness, we have so much reporting being nationally focused. Many of the reporters, and many of the readers, that's what they're focused on. And then maybe from time to time they tune in to [matters such as] crime and violence, and probably that's one reason that can get outsized attention and become the only thing that's discussed

I think a lot of that broad infrastructure is missing now. We don't have the number of reporters we need in the city. I know that we've mentioned the City Paper, and I've seen suggestions that it's self-supporting now,

which is good, but that is at a diminished level from what they were, certainly when they were in print. And then even when they had more reporters.

A way of developing the local also helps build the community that you were talking about ... I used to be at The Current Newspapers, the Northwest Current, which after I left then went defunct. I'm not in that community, but I still hear people appreciate it. I think it did have a role in bringing the community together. We had a lot of that good news and coverage of community events.

MS. BRUGMANN: And with the closing of DCist, City Paper is probably the biggest general interest news outlet in the District. And it was intended to be the alt press?

MR. KAIN: Post local. But WAMU is still probably one of the bigger, even though they have cut back.

MS. BRUGMANN: We're breaking at so many points of the ecosystem. You're talking about hyper-local, local, neighborhood specific, community specific, print which is important in building that kind of sense of identity in a larger city. And if we're talking about general interests in the District, the transportation beat was cut, for example. And the way that the Post is framing it is those beats were national in scope, and so the reporters just went into the national team, but we diminished local coverage.

MR. KAIN: And the Post has a local transportation page that I think has had only one story since February.

MS. BRUGMANN: When DCist closed, the transportation union said this is a loss to us. And I think that speaks to the value of local journalism, so not just like obviously we care about it. But also, unions, and libraries, they find local journalism essential to do their jobs as well, and that was really evident I think in the hours after DCist closed.

“ We support accountability journalism. If you go to the general funding community, they just don't see journalism as a public good. Feeding programs, affordable housing, yes, but journalism? What are you doing at the table?”

HARRY JAFFE

MS. PATTERSON: And do Harry or Cheryl have thoughts on the legislation?

MS. THOMPSON: As a working journalist, no.

Mr. JAFFE: I have a few, not just one. So, about the D.C. budget, come on, that doesn't even show up in \$20 billion dollars. And it would mean so much to small, non-profit news organizations. It doesn't take much to run Spotlight DC, but we're running out of money at the same time. So, one of the things that the Councilmember said that I think is important in thinking of fund raising is public good.

For you, it kind of rolls off your tongue because it makes sense. But if you go to the general funding community, the foundations of Washington, D.C., and you say we're journalists, we're a non-profit, we're a 501c3, how about it? They just don't see journalism as a public good. Feeding programs, affordable housing, yes, but journalism—come on, what are you people doing here at the table?

And so, we have to change the sensibility, and I think it is changing. There are communities that are starting to see, thanks to the Councilmember's legislation, and just the sensibility of what Chris was saying. It's the importance of holding a community together. And I will say that's what the Washington Informer does. It is kind of the last local newspaper that defines a community, that informs a community.

Mr. JAFFE: They do some very good reporting, and we've supported some of their investigations. But I think that changing the public's mind about public good is important. And I think that if your legislation is successful, it will change the dynamic of the thinking about that.

MS. PATTERSON: Did you want to jump in, Cheryl?

MS. THOMPSON: I wanted to ask the Councilmember, you mentioned earlier, unless I misunderstood, that your hearing will happen after the budget. Because if it happens after the budget, then that means you don't get any money.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: Now, the other thing I could do is try to get a subtitle in the Budget Support Act, but the question is whether you do a BSA subtitle without having a hearing. Some people feel fundamentally you should have a hearing before doing a BSA subtitle. just based on the practice that I would want to have a hearing before putting it in a BSA subtitle.

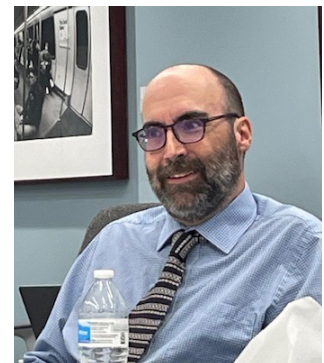
MS. PATTERSON: But the problem's not going to go away, and it'll still be with us for the FY 2026 budget even if it was a hearing later this year.

MS. THOMPSON: But that's a year that you don't get funding.

MR. KAIN: In a year that you just hang on if the infrastructure stays as it is. And that's why I mentioned interim--are there interim ideas? I know from some of the work that's gone on in Philadelphia, a lot of it is changing the mindset. You could think back 10 years ago, or 15 years ago at the emergence of a lot of the non-profit news ecosystem nationally, and that was kind of far out, or not something that people were familiar with.

And I think for public funding too, which for journalists—and working journalists—traditionally there have been concerns about intrusion, and after a piece comes out, does all the funding disappear when whoever is funding it doesn't like what's happened? And then I think you also have an issue, working journalists are probably not willing to take the lead, or are not comfortable taking the lead, in pushing public funding. And then it becomes even more important to sell it as a public good, or to share the idea as a public good, so that it's building the broader interest. I think that exists, but the journalists may not be willing to push for funding at the same time you're covering people who are making the decisions.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: That's why we put as many safeguards as we possibly could, because we just realize that that would be considered. I think part of the problem is journalism in the District is already being influenced by the powers that be in a way that has led to a lack of accountability and oversight. And that's just the pattern that I'm seeing as far as the coverage of the executive branch is concerned. But



CHRIS KAIN

that's my opinion. And people being afraid and not asking the hard questions so they can continue to have access, which I think has led to a huge issue.

And so, the way I see it is we've created safeguards, it's why we chose the coupon method, why we left the coupon in the hands of the public. And that was based on Seattle, and thank you, Seattle, for having the first amendment fight that I hope to not have with the democracy vouchers. But that was a safeguard we put in place. And we also put a first amendment exclusion in there so that way every news outlet is not going to be my favorite on an ideological level. I think putting the vouchers in the hands of the people is a safeguard, and I think also having sort of a board, a quasi-independent board there will help with the separation that's necessary.

“ *...putting the vouchers in the hands of the people is a safeguard (and) having a quasi-independent board there will help with the separation that's necessary.*

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

MS. BRUGMANN: When we think about how newsrooms can be funded, of course we want a diversity of revenue streams, because any money is a potential compromise, whether that's advertising money, grant dollars, reader revenue. I worked for an advertising-based news outlet, and we only distributed where we had advertisers. So, that's a pretty screwed up incentive. And so, you're always trying to counter the potential compromises that your funding allows. So, a diverse stream, including some public money, I think is handled well. It's transparent, it's monitored, all the pillars that Rebuild looks for, where evaluating the public policy can actually include plurality. To your point about interim, I think there's two interims to think about, private interim, which I think would be philanthropy, or public programs, or better organization around the D.C. press corps.

There's a lot of things that can be done in the interim, and there's a lot of ecosystems. You mentioned Philly, I'd add North Carolina, Colorado, New York City, Chicago as different jurisdictions to look at for inspiration. And then of course there's public dollars as well. And I think we're going to get to different things that different jurisdictions are doing.

MS. PATTERSON: Can you provide examples?

MS. BRUGMANN: Philly has a foundation there called the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, and it's organized a lot of ecosystem-level interventions, including cohorts that have done training and they do a lot of general operating giving. There's Resolve Philly. Those are mostly private interventions, but they've done a really good job at thinking about what all Philadelphians need in terms of civic information, in terms of community information, and of course no community is perfect. There's no ecosystem that got everything right. But Philly is doing a lot of interesting stuff with philanthropy, and cooperative models for journalism. In they have the North Carolina Local News Fund, the North Carolina Local News Workshop. They also have a cooperative in Charlotte where most Charlotte local news outlets work together on a regular basis. WFAE [public radio] in Charlotte has also molded itself as a community venue, not so much as a news venue. They hold community events, town halls, or just a venue for a community organization.

MS. BRUGMANN: New York City allocated a portion of government advertising dollars to local news outlets, which is a budget neutral intervention, just throwing that out there. And it's complicated to implement, but it is budget neutral. It's not exaggerating to say that that policy saved community journalism in New York City during 2020. It resulted in millions of dollars for local news, especially small, community specific, language specific news outlets in the city. It's continuing, not that the program doesn't have any room for improvement, but it's certainly a model to look at.

The Center for Community Media at CUNY (City University of New York), which Rebuild Local News partners with on this policy, implemented it intentionally, which I think is essential especially to a government advertising policy, that you need a lot of transparency around how those decisions are being made. But they acted as a kind of convener, and implementer, and they raised the high-water mark for a lot of small news outlets while implementing this policy. So, to pull out the trends, local philanthropy is obviously essential in talking about journalism. Not in terms of historic philanthropy, like here is your education bucket, here is your environmental bucket, here is your transportation bucket. But talking about local journalism as a horizontal investment that supports quality education, that supports good transportation.

“ This needs to really be on the table and as quickly as possible. We need to get this done.”

ANNA BRUGMANN

MS. PATTERSON: And you mentioned Lenfest, and I know that's one of the foundations that's come together on the national level to support journalism. Is there any evidence of that sort of national level effort here in the District? Any District participation?

MS. BRUGMANN: Press Forward was launched last year with a promise of \$500 million for local news over five years. That's being led by the Knight Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation. Lenfest is involved, as are about a dozen or so other large foundations. And what Press Forward is trying to do is not just create a national effort but localize it. So, there's been about a dozen local chapters already launched. Kansas, North Carolina, Colorado, New Mexico. But I think there's huge potential for that in D.C. There is a massive amount of philanthropy in the District.

We have not talked about journalism as a horizontal good. Part of that is because journalism thought about itself in this very specific way, we're journalists, we're independent, we do this on our own. We were part of the attention economy for many, many years, and now we're reorienting ourselves towards the service economy, and so that's a different way of talking about what it is journalism is trying to do, not just tell people stuff, but also engage folks in the process of creating that journalism, engage communities, make actionable journalism, and being innovative with our business models whether that a cooperative, or a non-profit, or a public benefit corporation. So, I think there's a huge potential for it in D.C.; there's more education that needs to be done.

MS. BRUGMANN: The Community Foundation for Greater Washington is a great place to start, I think there's sympathetic people there who would listen. I don't know if we're going to get a Press Forward D.C. immediately, but that I think should be one of the interim interventions that should be on offer. We as journalism stakeholders need to do a whole lot more education with local philanthropy along those lines.

MS. PATTERSON: The other resource that I see is the academic community. But I wonder if there's more of a resource in our universities in the District of Columbia. There are so many good journalism programs, Cheryl teaches in one, has one, Georgetown, Howard, a lot of the universities do.... And the Northwestern program here has student journalists writing for publications around the country. I wonder if this is something that we should look at as a model that could be considered here, could Cheryl's classroom, and others produce journalists who could be a newsroom for DC Line for example. Cheryl sent a bunch of her students to me in my first couple of years in this job, year by year, to do a profile. And so, like, maybe four profiles, and I never saw them, I'm sure they were incredibly informative.

MS. THOMPSON: They all got As on their profiles of you.

“ ...most news starts out as local.”
CHERYL THOMPSON

MS. PATTERSON: I'm just saying there's good work being done in your classroom, and in other classrooms, and is that a resource that universities could come together to create a newsroom of student journalists, sort of like the Northwestern DC newsroom?

MS. THOMPSON: One of the things I do in my advanced news writing class is the students have to have a local D.C. beat, not Maryland, not Virginia, but D.C. I came here (to The Washington Post) to cover D.C. And you'd be surprised that few of them know anything about the city. Who the mayor is, who is on the Council, but they quickly learn, and they have beats from which to choose. They can cover the Council, they can cover police, they can cover courts, education. And by the end of the semester, they must go out and report timely stories, not something that happened a year ago, but what's happening now. Like they would report on your bill, right? And they hopefully would talk to you, even though sometimes the students can't get past staff members on the Council. So, if you've got any clout, you might want to ask the Council staff to help when my students come calling! I watch from the beginning when they pick their beats, until the end of the semester. And I can see how they've grown, and how they've learned about the city, and how it functions, and how it works from covering beats. And so, it is a staple, and has been a staple all these years. And it serves them well, because then they go back home, and they say, I could cover this in my community, I could be a local reporter in my community. One of the things that I've noticed on another campus, and I think they still do it at the University of Missouri, the *Missourian* is the campus paper, but it's also the town's paper.



CHERYL THOMPSON

MS. PATTERSON: So, how do we go from here to there in the District of Columbia?

MS. BRUGMANN: But AU has a practicum model, but I think the practicum model should be scaled.

MS. BRUGMANN: Just doing a baseline on what do we need in D.C., could be useful. I know the Democracy Fund is already working on something like that. But imagine if, like we could have like an embedded practicum at DC Line or at the Informer, and they see there, and they do professional journalism, and they are nurtured by professional editors with the oversight of a professor.

MS. THOMPSON: So, give us more work.

MS. BRUGMANN: There are also professional papers, general interest papers that are run by students. There's one in Kansas called The Eudora Times. There's one in Georgia called The Echo. Two struggling weeklies were recently bought by the University of Iowa and will be run by students. The Columbia Missourian is a nonprofit that's associated with the university and staffed by students.

MS. THOMPSON: They do a really good job; I can't say enough. I have toured there, it is amazing, the local journalism that they do. I mean, a totally professional shop there.

“ I have toured there, it is amazing, the local journalism that they do. I mean, a totally professional shop there. [Cheryl on The Daily Missourian, a newspaper owned by the University of Missouri and staffed by students]”

CHERYL THOMPSON

Mr. JAFFE So, Wes [Lowery] isn't here, so I'm going to speak for him. He took over for Chuck Lewis at American University's IRW, Investigative Reporting Workshop, and Wes, specifically wants to redirect IRW to local reporting. And so, Wes came to Spotlight DC before he became a board member, which he is now, to fund an investigation of the District's automated traffic camera system. And our board just last week agreed to fund it. So, I think that IRW is moving that way. I think one of the things that we lack as a community is an organizational way of bringing together the news outlets, DC Line, Informer, and the universities, and frankly, I think Spotlight DC—we must work with the board on this, but we see ourselves as potentially helping, to convene that ecosystem. That will result also in Press Forward seeing Washington, D.C., as a place that could help the whole system.

MS. PATTERSON: Does the [Consortium of Universities](#) have subgroups, like is there a journalism subgroup within the consortium?

MS. BRUGMANN: Can I call on the audience? Is that allowed?

MS. PATTERSON: Yes, we are among friends, we are very informal.

MS. BRUGMANN: Okay. On partnerships, and we're talking about university collaboration, and the world of student journalists, what do you feel like the universe of possibility is for interventions that sound interesting or feasible or both? (Speaking to audience member)

MS. PATTERSON: And please introduce yourself.

MR. FALQUERO: Sure. I am Eric Falquero, previously at DCist and Street Sense Media. Before that, for WAMU, I was their partnerships editor, so working with local newsrooms, as well as universities. And in terms of higher ed, and you all laughed at this earlier, and there's a lot of interest in doing things that are beneficial for the student body.

But there's a lot of hesitation. For instance, whenever I would broach potential projects that we might work on with another university, the first question was, well, could we do this with you?

MS. THOMPSON: You never came to me; I'd have been happy to meet with you. Either at NPR, or at the university. We should talk!

MR. FALQUERO: Thank you. I appreciate that. So, to your point, this is the first I'm hearing of the consortium of universities, great idea, if there is an entity that can give everyone an equal seat at the table, I think that's the best way to be able to get different programs working together. You brought up [IRW](#), I think they are interested in working with whatever newsroom is available....They also have the [Howard Center for Investigative Journalism](#) that's doing more expansive work. We have these pockets where we have news services, it's a means of getting people to talk to one another so that we're not all chasing the same story, right? Or if you're chasing one angle of it, another story on the same topic is chasing another side of it. So, in the end, instead of working in parallel, you could build a more collaborative body of work.

When Chris talked earlier about there's only one news story on this day on any given topic, except the normal denominations, right? Usually, you'd see excerpts from different news outlets, across the Post, and Washingtonian, and DCist when we were still around, you got a full picture. So, one example I'd give is for years we would collaborate on homelessness in the city. I recruited local outlets to all report on the topic. The way that was structured was to have everyone just putting in a spreadsheet, this is what we're working on. So being on the same topic, but we're catching different angles –

“ *When a story comes out it moves the needle and makes change in a way that needs to happen in various parts of our government.*”

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

MS. PATTERSON: Who had the spreadsheet?

MR. FALQUERO: I launched that while at Street Sense Media, copying San Francisco, but we launched it as a neutral platform. That spreadsheet was available to everyone who signed up, and we had a website, separate from Street Sense Media entirely, that was [an index of everyone's stories](#), and it was just a headline photo, and a link out to the original story. That's getting back to the core concept here, you need a neutral ground convener that has no real skin in the game other than they want the information out there, that can then look at the individual priorities, needs, size, capacity, all those things of the various partners, and plug them in in ways that are manageable.

MS. BRUGMANN: And the great thing about students is that there's a lot of them in the District. The bad thing is that they're only here for a certain amount of time.

MS. BRUGMANN: I think it's important that any sort of student intervention is paired with a professional entity. Because one, just for mentorship that a student is going to get, we want to be building the capacity so that there is that kind of oversight, and education, this is supposed to be an education tool so that any sort of institutional knowledge, whether that's about a process, or story, a source, doesn't go away if that reporter stays there. The Missourian for a long time was seen as the student paper because the bylines left, and they didn't stay, whereas the Columbia Daily Tribune used to be family-run, now owned by Gannett, was the Columbia paper, because the reporters hung around for 17 years. Now we get two or three years, but that's a whole other story. So, I think that's always going to be the tension there, but it's absolutely something that should be discussed.

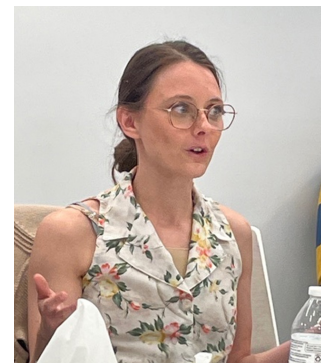
MS. THOMPSON: I think there's something to be said for bringing in students into local journalism. I know with my students that do come in kicking and screaming when they must cover a beat, it's like oh my God. But then I watch, and they become more and more invested, and maybe midway through or so they come and tell me what's going on in the community. Right, where I would have to tell them, now they were coming to me, oh, professor, I went to this board meeting at WMATA and blah, blah, blah happened. And one kid came in one day with a graphic, and I was so impressed. But they don't know what they don't know. And once you introduce them to local news, and they pick a beat, and I let them choose something they think they might be interested in, then they just of run with it, and they have a good time with it, and before you know it, they're all into it, so that makes me happy.

MS. PATTERSON: You mentioned Street Sense, and I wanted to just mention that we had a partnership with Street Sense on a case study, [Lessons on the Life and Death of Alice Carter](#). It was a very well received report that we did in partnership. And I mention that because as we think in terms of potential interim solutions, entities like my office are ongoing. And we can do partnerships, and I've thought about sharing with other audit offices this kind of partnership with local journalism something else to go into the basket of possibilities.

“ *My students come in kicking and screaming when they must cover a beat... then I watch, and they become more and more invested, and they come and tell me what's going on in the community!*”

CHERYL THOMPSON

MS. BRUGMANN: All of these partnerships are so important, but we here in D.C. are facing a moment where we might not have anybody to partner with in five years or so. And that's not to undermine the dedicated folks who do this. We have people who are working hard-- Street Sense, the Informer, Washingtonian, City Paper, we've mentioned like a half dozen folks just in this conversation. But what they need is general operating revenue. We should keep talking about the interventions, but I don't want us to lose track of what we need is general operating dollars.



ANNA BRUGMANN

MS. PATTERSON: It was mentioned that maybe we would want to bring in the audience on the issue of what's happening with what used to be DCist, and other ideas that are out there percolating. Are there other things to sort of throw onto the table in terms of things that are percolating locally?

MS. POORE: Hi, I'm Maddie Poore. I was the membership director at DCist, and I left in 2021 and was never replaced. So, I always took issue with them saying DCist is not financially sustainable, they never gave it the chance to be. But I am here with Eric because we are [working with a group of past WAMU, DCist reporters to try and launch a cooperatively owned local worker-led newsroom](#). We're in the initial stages of understanding what information needs there are around the city, how we can best fill that, and what the financial liability is, because so many of the troubles in journalism are a labor issue. The cost of doing good journalism is paying the journalists. And we're seeing it supplemented with contracting and freelancing,

but it's not giving people the opportunity to dig in, and know the city, and do the best sort of enterprise investigative reporting that we see as most impactful.

MR. FALQUERO: Our focus is on community engagement, and as we build this we're first focusing on talking with residents about what they need first. And there's a natural tension there, because we want to be covering the D.C. budget right now, but we also want to be structuring the organization to do that well, and to prioritize those things.

MS. PATTERSON: And what do you hear from those you ask?

MR. FALQUERO: Well, folks will have the opportunity to weigh in our name that will be our first sort of public engagement. But then the first phase of our growth is going to be doing that outreach.

MS. POORE: We're not just stuffing D.C. local journalism back into the bottle. Its imagining what D.C. local journalism could become in an era where local journalism is more oriented to service, and meeting specific needs, and providing community information. We should all operate under the assumption that where we were was not a good place for everybody and come into it with that kind of humility to listen to folks, and to create a D.C. local news system that meets folks' community needs.

MR. FALQUERO: And I'd just underscore too, the pivot that happened in this conversation, there's a lot of potential for working with students, and scaling up in that way. But to your point, you do need professional mentorship to do that, and there needs to be someone to partner with. And if students were going to solve the journalism problem, we would have done that already. We've worked with students for a long time, so I think there's a lot more to be done there, but that's not what's going to fill the gaps, and fix the issues.

MS. BRUGMANN: And it can be easy to get either overwhelmed by the big problem, which is the money problem, or really fixated on some of the smaller problems, because we are facing so many challenges in local journalism. Some of those challenges can be faced on the policy, a lot of them cannot. And some can be faced through innovation, and some others, but I think it's very easy to get overwhelmed with the amount and breadth of the challenges that local journalism is facing, but as Eric and Maddie just described, it also presents an opportunity to reimagine what local journalism could be. And Chris very much did that as well by launching a non-profit, which would have been heretical 15 years ago. So, we've already come so far, and have so many more opportunities to capitalize on.

“ *The way I see it is that local news, local journalism, is a public good.*

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: And I have been hearing from other people, elected officials, they're like get this started so we can do this. And people are really looking at this as an opportunity to show that this is viable, and this can work. Which the District has done in other areas. We talk about the Pay Equity Fund, and we're fighting right now, but we were the first to launch a Pay Equity Fund, and other jurisdictions are trying to do it. I think D.C. is the best place to pilot this as an example for other jurisdictions to follow.

MS. PATTERSON: And what does it take to get it off the ground in terms of funding.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: We have a \$21 billion budget, and there is a way to find funds in this budget. I'll be looking for funds this go around. I firmly believe that if I can get the Chairman on board, that I can move this through. So, really, I think I do need some journalists to start putting some pressure on the Chairman, asking him where he is. I think this is an area where it would be a huge win for the Council, and also, obviously for local journalism, but I do think we could emphasize there to make that happen.

MR. KELLY: Can I ask a question?

MS. PATTERSON: Sure, and identify yourself, please.

MR. KELLY: Brian Kelly, the chairman of Spotlight DC I work for Harry. I've been the editor in chief of U.S. News & World Report, but also worked for Washington Post, and I've been here a long time. I was catching up with this, and I wasn't clear how would the money be allocated?

“ *There are so many areas in this city where we have some very serious gaps in accountability. I don't need to tell a room full of journalists this.”*

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: Each registered voter would get five coupons, and they get to choose which outlet they want to give their coupons to. And each outlet gets however many coupons are allocated to them. We'll have the local journalism that's created through this legislation, which also would provide grants for technical assistance, and other assistance needs as well, that people can apply for. There will be a seven-member board to be appointed by the Mayor, the Commission on Arts and Humanities, the District Attorney General, the State Board of Education, these entities will get one member to be on that seven-member community journalism board to allocate those funds.

MS. BRUGMANN: The qualifying criteria are content neutral in terms of what is defined as a news outlet. It has a lot to do with transparency of funding, transparency of ownership, based in D.C., those are the criteria. And then the benefit to newsroom is on a proportional basis, which from a policy perspective, I think is smart. It guarantees that this money winds up in local news. It's not that every coupon is worth \$25, it's every coupon has a weight. So, if you get ten percent of coupons in any given quarter, then you get ten percent of the available funds. So, if we have initially low participation, that doesn't impact on the amount of money that winds up in the hands of D.C. local newsrooms. And I know that is very wonky, but from a policy perspective, it's really smart.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: There's a portal.

MR. KELLY: Somebody says to me you now have these vouchers, and you go to the portal and essentially vote, right?

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: Correct.

MS. BRUGMANN: Yeah, where D.C. local news outlets have to say the scope of their work, what they do, transparency of ownership, all those sorts of criteria so it's transparent, so folks now exactly who they're giving their money to. And then that portal facilitates the transaction.

MR. KELLY: And the board would determine which of the institutions would be in that portal?

MS. BRUGMANN: The criteria would dictate which of the institutions would be in that portal. There is an appeals process, which I think is always important in these things. Because when you're creating criteria, obviously you're operating under a very rigid frame, and it's always important to create some sort of appeals process. But it's new enough that it's not going to overload the board, and wide enough that if anybody, if a news outlet is launched and is somehow not winding up as an option, there is somebody to make that judgment.

“ It’s not just about journalists having jobs...it’s about the health of our communities.”

ANNA BRUGMANN

MR. JAFFE: So, I have a question for Cheryl as a working journalist: What do you think about this, does it give you any pause?

MS. THOMPSON: No.

MR. JAFFE: You can't even comment on the whole idea of it?

MS. THOMPSON: I'm not going to. You understand.

MR. JAFFE: I do.

MS. BRUGMANN: Cheryl, as a working journalist, is not going to want to comment, but if you're looking for feedback from working journalists, a union is a really great place to go for that.

MS. PATTERSON: And in the District of Columbia, where there is a hearing, there are probably thousands of retired journalists who would be happy to give you their opinion on all of these issues, right?

MS. THOMPSON: That is correct. I can say that, yes, that's correct.

Mr. JAFFE While we're on the subject, how do we get the Washington Post to not gobble up all of these funds? Is Spotlight DC on a level playing field with the Washington Post?

MR. KELLY: So, you're leaving it in the hands of the...

MS. PATTERSON: Of the voters, of the residents, yes.

MS. BRUGMANN: There are different ways that Seattle is thinking about it, in terms of like should we create a cap, so you're only ever able to get 20% but that kind of whittles away the consumer choice magic of it. There is merit to it, but the trade-off is that it's not actually consumer choice, we're saying that the Washington Post only deserves this much, 20 percent, whatever. The benefit of that is it does tip the scale in favor of the small. So, there's always going to be attention to these issues, and policies, but I think it's a conversation worth having.



HARRY JAFFE

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: I was going to mention Seattle, because with their democracy vouchers to fund campaigns, they had \$25 vouchers and people received four \$25 vouchers, and then they were able to assign that publicly funded contributions to participating political campaigns. I will let you all speak to it, but how that breakdown ended up shaking out with the democracy voucher.

MS. BRUGMANN: The other smart thing that Council Member Lewis George talked about on the qualifying factors, it's not based on business model, right? Like it's not just nonprofits, or just commercial. I'm so encouraged by the innovation of non-profits, but there are a lot of legacy outlets that have been dedicated to certain communities that have no desire to become non-profits. And many of those are Spanish speaking communities, or Black communities, and serve language specific communities other than Spanish speaking communities, and they don't want to be non-profit, they want to be on the commercial model. And I think that business model, that tax status neutrality is wise. In D.C., most of the folks who are commercial either have a fiscal sponsor, or some sort of membership program that's less of an issue in D.C., but they still, three or four outlets that are community specific that are commercial.

MS. PATTERSON: We have a few more minutes, and I just wanted to give you each a chance, if there's anything more you want to throw into the dialogue, ask each other a question.

“ *Not only does local journalism contribute to a better functioning government, it contributes to a community that knows itself, that feels connected to one other, that knows its neighbors.*”

ANNA BRUGMANN

MS. BRUGMANN: I think that the greater DMV question, like when we talk about what we do in the District, and that is yes, there's the hard line of where the District stops and starts, but when it comes to who lives in the District, that works in the District, that's a much fuzzier question. And especially when you get to like who does the general interest news outlet need to serve, and how do we think of the retrenchment from the suburb? And so, even as we're talking about higher ed collaboration, I think there needs to be collaboration among regional philanthropy and regional governments. There is the Hyattsville Life & Times, that just hired its first full-timer after about 35 years of existing, which is great. And Greenbelt, and I think it's called Intersection Magazine in PG County, and Bowie Sun in Bowie, and all these kinds of upstart, smart news outlets.

Mr. JAFFE: Arlington Now.

MS. BRUGMANN: I just wanted to plant that flag. We're talking about how we support local news in the District, the District is so many things to so many people. And jurisdictionally it ends at the District line, but practically it doesn't always.

MS. PATTERSON: Although, if there was something innovative like with legislation that went forward in the District of Columbia, it's something that could be shared. Not beyond the borders, but those other jurisdictions.

MS. BRUGMANN: Yeah, and we're working fingers crossed, at the Maryland state level in the coming session. So, we'll hopefully have other models to share both with the District, and Virginia in the coming session as well.

MS. PATTERSON: Any other closing thoughts?

Mr. JAFFE: As an old school journalist, I would kill to get a story and beat the competition, and clearly, we're not there anymore. So, collaboration is where we are, and what we have to do. And I think that the chairman of our board, and board members can hear from me, because I'm the president of Spotlight DC, but I think we're in a decent position to be a convener of District journalism outlets and potential funders, because I think that that would have a salutary effect on so many things. You know, the collaboration between the universities, and the news outlets, funding, Press Forward, they're looking for a local entity of some kind, and we get together, we can then go to the community foundation and talk about the public good. It's anathema to a journalist to, A, collaborate, and B cooperate with another outlet. And it kind of cuts against so many grains that I came up with, but I think it's survival mode; I think it's necessary. And I want to say hurrah for the Councilmember. What you have put together is groundbreaking and would be great if it would come through. For practical purposes, we're running out of dough.

“ *...working journalists are probably not comfortable taking the lead in pushing public funding* ”

CHRIS KAIN

MR. KAIN: I agree. I think the idea of trying to form that kind of collaboration is something that, whether it evolves into a new chapter of Press Forward or just organizing some of that. I think a worker-led DCist, for lack of better phrasing—could come at an opportune time to help shape some of that.. Maybe that's an opportune thing. I do think—just to push back a bit on what we were talking about, the universities and the national versus the local. The university clusters and journalism programs are good opportunities. I know that when I was as a student at American University, the courses were generally focused on national issues, and so not all professors have a local background. I think it's great when they do, and I think it's a great opportunity to try to encourage, and maybe to start a collaboration that could help facilitate that and show that there are positives to that. But I just think it's a roadblock that is going to have to be overcome.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: I think this political time has served as the greatest example that D.C. now is national news, because D.C. is now being used as a pawn nationally between the two parties. I mean, can you imagine the feeling of the President tweeting about the D.C. Council, it's like what is going on, why is the president tweeting about us? And I have people calling from all over, like, why is the President upset with the Council? I'm like, I don't know.

MS. BRUGMANN: It speaks of the importance of local journalism and the Black Press was founded on the notion that the only time that the Black community was in the news was when something bad happened, and they wanted to plead their own case. And that ethic of a community being able to tell its own story instead of being used in these partisan ways on both sides, being tossed back and forth. And Councilmember Parker tweeted when DCist closed, that this is a canary in the coal mine, the closure of DCist is a threat to home rule itself. And the stakes are so much higher in D.C. for that reason because if we cannot plead our own case, if we cannot tell our own stories, then our story is going to be told for us, and it's not going to reflect us.

“ *Journalism in the District is already being influenced by the powers that be in a way that has led to a lack of accountability and oversight.*

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

MR. KAIN: When local D.C. news becomes national news, that’s also when the press corps seems to suddenly explode in size. Because a portion of the national outlets are assigning reporters to cover D.C., and so all of a sudden you’re getting an explosion of national coverage on issues that I consider to be local.

COUNCILMEMBER LEWIS GEORGE: And I don’t think it will be just crime, but for reproductive rights, all of these things. I mean, everything that is now going to be in the D.C. budget is now going to be a conversation, or something for the Republican Party to use. And I think this is a moment in time where DC local news, is national news in a very different way than it has been before. So, this is a moment for that.

But people have been ringing the alarms forever about, hey, local news is dwindling, local news is dwindling. And now we’re seeing the Post with less local news, and DCist, I think this is a dire time. This bill was not meant to be symbolic, or a conversation starter legislation, it is meant to actually make it through this process and become a model for other localities to be able to use. And so, I want to be clear that—that this is a real effort here because we have to, because the circumstances are that dire.

MS. PATTERSON: Well, that’s a good closing note. Thanks to all of our participants!



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