



From news deserts to civic media

Some 2,500 newspapers have closed in the U.S since 2005, leaving entire communities without a source for local news, as well as with limited means to keep their government officials accountable. What if there was a way to fill the news desert, with an entirely new approach to informing the public? Host Jenna Spinelle discusses the relevance of civic information with Mike Rispoli of Free Press, and then uncovers how that can be put into practice with Richard Young, founder of CivicLex, a non-profit that is bridging the gap between news and news consumers in Kentucky

Jenna Spinelle: My first job out of college was as a reporter at an evening newspaper – The Lancaster New Era in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a city of about 60,000. The day started at 6:30 a.m. We would make the first pot of coffee for the office, catch up on the latest news, and figure out the plan for that day’s paper.

For me, it often meant following up on a local government meeting from the night before, or going out to cover an early morning accident or fire. It was a mad rush between 8 or 9 and when our stories were due by 11:00. The paper came out at 12:30. For the rest of the day, we’d report longer-term stories and update the paper’s website, a task that often fell to me as the youngest person in the newsroom.

In those days—it was 2007 and 2008—the website was an afterthought. Which is why it might not surprise you to learn that the New Era shut down just one year later, in 2009. By then, I was already back at Penn State trying to figure out what to do next in my career, because I could see that print journalism was going through some massive changes.

Things worked out for me, but the rest of the news industry? Not so much. This is from PBS in 2020:

PBS NewsHour Clip:

Across the country, there are deserts of news. Local newspapers print fewer pages less frequently, and in some cases collapse entirely. Recent studies paint a grim picture of the decline in local newspapers and the impact that is having on our politics.

Spinelle: Since 2005, 2,500 newspapers have closed in the U.S. That’s left entire communities, often smaller towns or rural areas, without a source for local news. In 2023, online news is how the majority of Americans stay informed. But even if a community has an online newspaper, meager budgets sometimes mean the staff is smaller, and coverage is not as robust as it was a generation ago. Because of this, news in smaller communities has dwindled, leaving local democracy in those places in a vulnerable position.

I'm Jenna Spinelle, and this is When The People Decide. A show about how everyday people are shaping democracy.

In this episode, I want to talk about local news, its importance to democracy, and new models of getting information to a local community.

Mike Rispoli is someone who has thought a lot about the evolution of local news over the course of his career.

Mike Rispoli: I'm the Senior Director of Journalism and Civic Information at Free Press.

Spinelle: Free Press is a national nonprofit that aims to improve the news ecosystem around the country. The group advocates for new models of local journalism, but also speaks out about internet access, net neutrality, freedom of the press, and other issues that affect the media landscape. Mike will help me explain: what have the changes in the newspaper industry meant for civic engagement?

Before the Internet, newspapers were one of the only ways to stay on top of what was happening in your community. And all of the information you might want—news from city hall, reports about the local economy, stories about a sports team, and features about residents in your town—were found in your local paper.

Rispoli: People got that information because they were buying a newspaper that was then bundled with other types of information that was very attractive to advertisers. Things like sports and weather and stocks and whatever else it might be.

Spinelle: All that advertising money allowed newspapers to keep large staffs and teams of reporters covering everything from local schools to local politics.

Rispoli: With the advent of each communication technology, first radio, then TV, then cable TV, then the internet those advertising dollars that were just concentrated in that information bundle in local newspapers—it began to get dispersed. The public good of what we call civic information was really exposed that it, it was in fact never actually commercially viable. It was only commercially viable because it was packaged with this other, these other types of information.

Spinelle: Without the advertising dollars, newspapers couldn't sustain these large staffs. The lack of resources began to reorient coverage priorities for the newspapers that were trying to survive. Mike saw this when he worked for local newspapers in New Jersey.

Rispoli: I worked as a web editor, so I really learned about what types of stories drive clicks and eyeballs and which ones don't. When I began to see what types of stories were leading the homepage, which types of stories were being pushed on social media, and those stories were effectively crime stories. When I began to see how the types of stories that were being prioritized, were, because they were making money, and they were not actually providing any sort of helpful or relevant information to people...it actually kind of showed me what I didn't want to do in journalism and I wound up leaving.

Spinelle: He left his job at a newspaper, and eventually landed at Free Press, where he and his colleagues work to re-create models for sharing important information with people in a city or town.

- Rispoli: And so when we're thinking about solutions to the local news crisis, it's not necessarily to fix the revenue model, and it's not even necessarily, how do you then bundle all the information back together again? It's how do you actually support the production of the public good, which we call civic information.
- Spinelle: When he first joined Free Press in 2015, one of the first projects he worked on was called News Voices in New Jersey:
- Mike: The purpose of that project was organizing communities to find ways that they could get better news coverage of where they lived. And so in some cases, that was helping them collaborate with local journalists. In other ways that was giving them media making skills and getting them resources from local foundations to help them start their own media outlets. In some cases, it was holding newsrooms accountable for their coverage.
- Spinelle: He and his colleagues then replicated this model in other places, including North Carolina, Colorado and Philadelphia.
- Rispoli: A lot of communities were not getting the coverage that they really needed to participate in their community. So not just coverage of local government, which was missing for sure, but people also didn't know what was going on in their schools, what was going on with local businesses. They didn't feel connected to their neighbors. One of the main reasons why that was, was because local news was disappearing in a lot of places in many communities. If you look at all the studies that track communities that have deficient local news coverage or local news coverage has completely disappeared, you see the real harmful impacts on the civic health of that community. Fewer people vote. Fewer people volunteer. Fewer people run for public office. Government spending increases. Corruption increases. Fewer federal dollars go to communities that don't have a strong local news presence.
- Spinelle: So it became obvious that these smaller cities and towns that were losing their news coverage needed something else to replace it.
- Rispoli: How do we change this? How do we reverse this trend? How do we restore civic health in our communities? We have a lot of choices in front of us and with the demise of local commercial media, we've also seen a huge explosion of investment and expansion in non-commercial media or kind of hybrid revenue models that are addressing that loss.
- Spinelle: While he is in favor of these new, non-profit journalism organizations, Mike says anyone starting a venture like this should be careful to not re-create the old model of local journalism.
- Rispoli: Different people will give you different answers about whether or not commercial, local news ever adequately served people's information needs. I would argue that it did not. I think that in many cases it produced great journalism. What I'll share is not to denigrate that work. I think if anything, it's that journalism has been done in spite of the commercial model that it had to be produced within.
- Spinelle: That's because commercial local news wasn't always serving everyone.
- Rispoli: It's important to recognize the centuries of harm that media has created, especially in Black communities. Slave traders sold ads in local newspapers. There have been callous

examples of newspapers stoking racism, upholding white supremacy, promoting extremist views—historically and till this current day as well. Things like mugshot galleries, sensationalist crime reporting... So, I mean, there's historical examples and there's present day examples of that.

Spinelle: So Mike and his colleagues at Free Press aren't trying to restore local news as it was in those halcyon days of print newspapers. But to create something more inclusive. In fact, rather than calling it news, Mike and others who work in this field call it civic information.

Rispoli: Civic information is trusted, verifiable, news and information that helps communities coordinate action, hold the power to account, to help them feel connected to their neighbors.

Spinelle: He says a lot of people mistake civic information to specifically mean information about elections. Instead...

Mike: It's information that helps people feel connected to one another in their community, helps them solve problems, to help them know what's going on in their schools, to help them know when the parade is on Saturday. I mean, whatever it might be. So when thinking about solutions to the loss of local news, it's our perspective that we should not be focused on how we save the local news business, but instead, how do we ensure that civic information is abundant in communities to help them thrive.

Spinelle: Ok, so what does that actually mean? What does that actually look like? I found one of these new models of local news in Lexington, Kentucky.

Richard Young: My name is Richard Young and I'm the executive director of Civic Lex.

Spinelle: Civic Lex is a non-profit based in Lexington. The goal of the organization is to help the 320,000 residents of Lexington stay informed on local government. The group posts weekly updates about what's happening at City Hall to its website, along with explainers on current events in Lexington, and how the local government works. Richard started Civic Lex in 2017. He had been attending City Council meetings as part of his job in community development.

Young: I remember very specifically, I was in a city council meeting when a big change to our city zoning ordinance was going through. And I noticed there weren't that many members of the public that weren't there in a professional capacity, right? There were city workers, there were attorneys, realtors... that sort of crowd. But there wasn't there really anyone there in sort of a resident capacity. And the more and more time I spent in City Hall, the more and more I realized that there were just some really considerable opportunities to get the public more engaged in governance.

Spinelle: He thought if it was easier to follow along with the local government, maybe more people would get involved. Richard is a tenth generation Kentuckian, and grew up in Lexington. So as he looked around that city council meeting and saw no members of the general public offering feedback, he saw a future of his city that he didn't want.

Young: When the public isn't there, what can happen is the decisions are being made by our local government are getting input from whomever they can, and they often get input from the people that show up. And the people that show up are generally people that have a really

direct and clear stake in that professionally in the outcomes and not often members of the everyday public. And so when you have that happen, a lot of times the decisions can be counter to what maybe the general public wants or maybe the general public doesn't fully understand it. And so because people aren't there and they see this process that's very opaque and hard to understand happen and those decisions aren't often what people feel are in their best interests, they become more disinvested and disengaged with local government and they start to become suspicious of it.

Spinelle: One of the services Civic Lex provides is detailed coverage of all happenings in the local government. They post weekly updates on news from City Hall to the Civic Lex website, and create explainers for every big issue being discussed by elected officials. Richard says their detailed articles often fill in gaps that the local newspaper, the Herald Leader, has in its coverage.

Young: And so we really saw that as an opportunity to cover these sort of local events in a little bit more detail, right? So that people had an understanding of what was happening before the decisions get to the main, you know, big council meetings when the newspaper is there to report it.

Spinelle: But unlike a traditional newspaper, Civic Lex doesn't cover an issue after it goes through City Hall. And that's where Richard says the newspaper picks the coverage backup.

Richard: They fill a role in the ecosystem that we don't fill. We're not an investigative journalism organization. And so in a lot of ways, I think we are building a really complementary media landscape here where Civic Lex provides this baseline that the Herald Leader and other, you know, television news and our local NPR affiliates and, and radio news, they rely on that baseline to sort of build this understanding and build this amount of sort of energy and capacity around understanding local government that benefits them.

Spinelle: In fact, Civic Lex partners with some of these local news organizations. The local NPR station, WUKY, has a segment called CivicLex Chat.

WUKY Clip: We are starting a new series where we will be checking in with Civic Lex on a weekly basis to catch you up on what's going on in city government...

Spinelle: This kind of collaboration between Civic Lex and traditional news organizations in Lexington played out in the city's redistricting process in 2022.

Young: We reported on every local redistricting subcommittee meeting for six months, seven months. And then when it came time for that to be adopted, we of course provided an update. But the Herald Leader provided a really robust report on how those district changes would impact current council members. How they would impact communities and the sort of political nature of our city. And so we can sort of see a sort of pattern in which we provide all of this pre-information to give people the sort of nitty gritty of the daily things that are happening in local government, and then investigative journalists and longer form explanatory journalists can pick that up and run with it.

Spinelle: Unlike the traditional model around local news, Civic Lex relies on donations and philanthropy to operate. One of Richard's jobs as Executive Director is to do this fundraising. And he says it can often be challenging to convince major donors to invest in

more rural places like Kentucky. He says he comes up against misconceptions about what communities, residents, and even politicians are like in his state.

Young: Half of my conversations with folks in the philanthropy world are just dispelling all of those myths as sort of aggressively as I possibly can. Because I think that a lot of the preconceived notions that philanthropy comes into funding this work with is part of the problem where we see this incredible disparity in where philanthropic investment goes.

Spinelle: He says part of this work talking to foundations is convincing them that their investments can be really transformative in rural communities. That there are people doing the work, and that the money goes a long way.

Young: I was just at a national conference pretty recently and someone made a joke to be like oh do you all ride carriages everywhere there? And it's just like, I know it's a joke, but yeah, it's like, incredibly insulting. And so it is a real obstacle. If there is anyone in that sector listening, I would just say that these places, these folks that live here are incredibly important. And a \$200,000 investment in a major city may not be a huge impact, but a \$200,000 investment in a place like this, or even, especially in even more rural places like this, is a disproportionately large impact.

Spinelle: Richard started Civic Lex when he identified an opportunity for Lexington residents to be more engaged in local politics. He felt that the government wasn't engaging residents enough, and the newspaper wasn't covering everyday decisions being made in City Hall in very much detail. But as he's spent more time working alongside those two groups, local journalists and city government officials, he's come to see it as more nuanced than that.

Young: I think that is maybe the thing that has been the most humbling, or I think revelatory maybe over the course of our time, right, is just how many people inside local government are trying to do interesting, innovative work that engages the public. But the problem is like with any bureaucracy, with any sort of system, that inevitably sort of atrophies because there is not enough bandwidth inside the city or inside the government. There are roadblocks along the way in the chain of command. There are not enough hours in the day. There are not enough staff in the offices, right? And so a lot of times these sort of folks inside local government that are really trying to push for really interesting, meaningful work, just don't have the capacity to really execute it in the way that they want to.

Spinelle: He's shifted his thinking to see Civic Lex as a necessary complement to the work of government and local media. For Mike Rispoli of Free Press, talking about "civic health" is about more than just saving local news outlets. It's about asking folks how they want to get their information. So journalists are just a part of that bigger goal.

Rispoli: I think one of the things that makes civic media distinct from the older system of local news or how we conceive what local news is, is that it doesn't view itself as being walled off from the community. It's very much a part of the fabric of a community. Just like how a library or a firehouse or school is a part of the civic fabric of a community. So civic media practitioners by being so embedded in their community, they're of their community, they've listened to them, they collaborate with them, they begin to better understand what their needs actually are.

- Spinelle: As Civic Lex grew, so did the mission of what it looks like to disseminate civic information. In addition to covering city government, the organization also hosts a lot of events in the community.
- Young: What we're really interested in are the people that either have gotten engaged with local government before but aren't anymore because it didn't work, it didn't go well for them. Folks that are directly impacted by local government, right, who are, who have a disproportionate likelihood to be impacted by these decisions that are made in local government.
- Spinelle: One event they hosted was a paint and sip night. This was during the redistricting process in 2021, and Richard and the Civic Lex wanted to engage Lexington residents on a topic that might generally be seen as boring or hard to understand.
- Young: So we made these maps of the city that had sort of pre-drawn clusters that are similar to what the redistricting commission used to make their maps. And we asked people: come hang out, have a beer, draw your own districts and see if you can build a little puzzle out of that. It was fun, you know, people are just like having a good time and drawing these lines and stuff. But the sort of key that we think is really helpful is that we actually had members of the redistricting commission there, right? So we had people that were making these decisions present, and present in a way that didn't necessarily elevate their expertise, but provided them as another voice in the room, right?
- Spinelle: These events connect the people of Lexington to each other, and to their elected leaders.
- Young: I grew up my entire life hearing, "If you wanna make something for yourself, if you wanna really have a career, you've gotta leave." Folks that come from more rural contexts really hear that and to leave means to go to Lexington. Growing up in Lexington, you heard that a lot, and if you really wanna make an impact, you've got to go to Louisville, you have to go to Chicago. That's pretty messed up.
- Spinelle: And so the next venture for Civic Lex is to bring their education to younger Lexington residents.
- Young: People should be able to stay in their communities in order to have a successful life and a successful career. And so a big part of this push for us, for youth civic education, and particularly this intergenerational approach, right, where we're bringing together adults that are learning and kids that are learning, and so that they're learning the same things and can sort of speak to each other, is because we want to both build the relational ties that keep people in place, but also the idea that if folks know how to make change in their communities and they see that their community is changing to reflect them and their priorities—that they're gonna wanna stay, they'll have a vested interest in staying here.
- Spinelle: Mike says on a larger scale, this work is about so much more than helping residents of a city or town know what's going on in their community, it's about creating better relationships within that community as well.
- Rispoli: When we're remaking local news we need to be thinking about how are we centering race and equity in those conversations? How are we centering harm and seeking repair, and how are we helping people get news and information that doesn't fan those flames of

extremism or polarization, but instead help them navigate those tricky conversations with their neighbors so that those types of disagreements don't then lead to civic fracture.

Spinelle: I only worked in local news for a short time, but I consider it to be my most formative professional experience. I've followed the changes to the local news landscape ever since I left the Lancaster New Era fifteen years ago. Learning about these new civic information models makes me thankful that people are continuing to innovate ways for the information ecosystem to serve us all. It feels like the journalism nerds are finally meeting the democracy nerds, and I am here for it.

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