



# How the Center for Cooperative Media Has Supported Momentum in New Jersey's Local News and Information Ecosystem

*Site Summary Report | August 2020*

## Introduction

A foundation to our democracy since its inception, local news outlets around the country are narrators about the fabric of their communities. Perhaps local journalism's most basic function is to provide residents with news that is meaningful to them in a way that helps them live their daily lives and take part in the community. Local news outlets can serve as residents' conduit for critical information that directly impacts their ability to participate fully in their communities as informed citizens. However, local news outlets have cut thousands of reporters and editors in the past decade, greatly diminishing their capacity to consistently and deeply cover residents' lives and their political institutions, from school boards to state legislatures. As a result, even the best local outlets struggle to fully and meaningfully cover their communities on a daily basis— leaving many stories of disaffected citizens and communities untold.

Across the country, journalists, funders, and local leaders are working to transform local news by building and strengthening **local news and information ecosystems**. A local news ecosystem is “the network of institutions, collaborations, and people that local communities rely on for news, information, and engagement”.<sup>1</sup> Healthy ecosystems across sectors have many characteristics, including sufficient backbone infrastructure to support convening, collaboration, mobilizing resources, and building capacity in ecosystem actors, such as local newsrooms. Through collaboration among news providers and communities they serve, local news outlets can increase their reach, become financially sustainable, and provide news that is aligned to residents' interests and priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ecosystems.democracyfund.org/what-is-a-news-ecosystem/#:~:text=Democracy%20Fund%20defines%20a%20news%20ecosystem%20as%20the%20network%20of,deeply%20engaged%20with%20their%20communities.>

This report synthesizes results of a case study examining how a group of philanthropic funders established a backbone organization, the Center for Cooperative Media (CCM), to support diverse news and information providers in the New Jersey news and information ecosystem. In the following sections, this report will surface lessons that can be helpful to ecosystem builders in New Jersey and other communities. Specifically, the report describes CCM as a backbone, summarizes the New Jersey local news ecosystem, and how CCM has approached key backbone roles.

The results depict a “moment in time” for the ecosystem. They are based on interviews, completed between September-December 2019 with CCM staff and other ecosystem leaders and members that are “close in” to the ecosystem work in New Jersey and have been the primary catalysts for developing ecosystem backbone structures. We also relied on review of existing CCM reports and other documentation to deepen our understanding of the context.

## Center for Cooperative Media as a Backbone

Backbones such as CCM provide administrative and infrastructure support for a collective action effort—such as a local news and information ecosystem—and facilitate collaboration and coordination of stakeholders’ activity toward a shared vision<sup>2 3</sup>. In New Jersey, the ecosystem is fairly well established after 8 years of work from CCM and other ecosystem builders. Over time, the roles that CCM plays have shifted. Initially, there was a need to support startups and early stage news businesses, though over time fewer startups have come into the ecosystem and CCM’s role has evolved toward coordination and convening. Recently, CCM has played an active role in mapping ecosystem needs and bringing diverse and non-traditional stakeholders into the conversation. In the following sections, we share what we learned from New Jersey’s ecosystem builders about how CCM was established and the different backbone roles that it plays.

**In 2012 the Center for Cooperative Media was founded as a grant-funded program housed at Montclair State University with the goal of fostering cooperation among media outlets across the state of New Jersey.** Early on, NJ ecosystem funders and other stakeholders with experience in the New Jersey news ecosystem discussed who should fill the backbone role for their ecosystem. Initially, a large regional news outlet was going to step into the role, but “it was intentionally designed that there needs to be an impartial facilitator, and Montclair State University stepped up to house the Center and figure it out.” When thinking about successful backbone models, stakeholders spoke to other enabling conditions they considered when choosing to establish CCM. One stakeholder noted that it’s critical for the backbone to “have a solid home” whether that’s at a university, nonprofit, or any other parent entity to provide credibility and give it “something to tie itself to.” Additionally, a new backbone greatly benefits from external funding which demonstrates that there is buy-in to the backbone from other stakeholders across the ecosystem. When staffing the backbone, stakeholders also mentioned that it is helpful to “hire people who are going to have the entire ecosystem at heart and really look at things with a wide lens.”

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<sup>2</sup> Hanley-Brown, Kania, and Kramer (2012); Kania and Kramer (2011); Surman and Surman (2008)

<sup>3</sup> Hanley-Brown, Kania, and Kramer (2012); Kania and Kramer (2011); Turner, Merchant, Kania, and Martin (2012)

Today, CCM is still grant-funded and housed at Montclair State University and the organizational structure has largely stayed the same. CCM has also been granted a high level of autonomy-- both from funders and from the University, which allows them to innovate and be responsive to the needs of the ecosystem rather than having to wade through red-tape and bureaucracy. There are inherent risks in relying on grant-funding were those funding streams to shift or run dry, though stable funding allows CCM to carry out its mission to serve the public and provide many of their supports and resources at no cost to newsrooms, which greatly facilitates the uptake of those supports by newsrooms.

### *Who Is Part of New Jersey's Local News and Information Ecosystem?*

The New Jersey local news and information ecosystem is statewide, and CCM works to grow and strengthen the work of news and information providers across the state of New Jersey. Although geographically small, New Jersey consists of 565 municipalities ranging from coastal communities to urban centers. In its own mapping, CCM estimates that there are 750+ outlets operating in the state.<sup>4</sup> However, interviewees noted that many news and information providers were concentrated in the “suburban, wealthy, white, affluent communities.” Academic research conducted in New Jersey in 2015 supports this as researchers from Rutgers University found that “the smallest, wealthiest community (Morristown) has, proportionally, substantially more journalism sources than the largest, lowest-income community (Newark).”<sup>5</sup>

**New Jersey benefits from a diverse set of ecosystems actors that bring different networks, expertise, and skills to the table.** New Jersey-specific news organizations, such as NJ Spotlight or NJTV, serve important statewide information needs and smaller, hyperlocal outlets and ethnic media serve specific communities. Various journalism support organizations serve important needs. Free Press, a national media advocacy organization, helps to support news and information providers by facilitating community engagement events and TAPinto, an online franchise network for local news outlets, provides support and a platform for hyperlocal news outlets. Other community organizations like Creative NJ or New Arts Brunswick help bridge the gap between journalism with other sectors like art to advance the goals of the ecosystem.

**Ethnic media have deep and trust-centered ties to their community, and efforts to include them in ecosystem activities are under way.** According to CCM's report, *The State of Ethnic and Community Media Serving New Jersey*, there are 119 ethnic and community media outlet<sup>6</sup> serving the state, many of whom have decades-old relationships with the communities they serve.<sup>7</sup> However, ethnic and community media have not received the same resources provided to more mainstream media outlets and years of harmful

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<sup>4</sup> <https://newsecosystems.org/njmap/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://mpii.rutgers.edu/results/>

<sup>6</sup> In their study, researchers defined an ethnic and community media outlet as “one that serves a specific cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, or language community.”

<sup>7</sup> <https://centerforcooperativemedia.org/research/state-of-nj-ethnic-community-media/>

coverage of ethnic communities by mainstream media outlets have also resulted in a distrust of mainstream media among ethnic and community members. As a result, ethnic and community media participation in broader ecosystem activities has been historically low. In an effort to counter this trend now, CCM and other interviewees noted their intentionality in working to increase the connectedness between these outlets and others in the ecosystem through events like ethnic and community media summits that solicit the editorial priorities and challenges that ethnic press expect in the years to come.

**In New Jersey, CCM is seen as an “anchor” of the New Jersey news and information ecosystem.** An evaluation of the New Jersey news and information ecosystem conducted in 2017 confirmed that both journalists and other media support organizations recognized and appreciated the critical role that CCM plays. As one interviewee noted, “the advantage and the difference we have made is by having [CCM]; having a central hub that everyone can turn to; a hotline, a friend.”<sup>8</sup> Their deep experience and relationships across the ecosystem position them well to push forward in strengthening the ecosystem and CCM’s connections with other stakeholders and media support organizations, facilitates greater impact in the ecosystem.

### *What are the needs, priorities, and gaps in the ecosystem that CCM is addressing?*

**CCM works to support news and information outlets through many different avenues and has managed to be adaptable as the ecosystem has evolved.** Efforts early on focused on strengthening the New Jersey news ecosystem by promoting collaboration. To further expand and fortify the news ecosystem in New Jersey, CCM implemented the Grow and Strengthen program in 2013, which works to identify “a cohort of news entrepreneurs who were interested in starting new sites” and provides microgrants to get operations off the ground as well as providing regular coaching sessions, supporting the growth of those organizations as they began to expand or strengthen their services. As time has gone on, CCM, because of its connections and ability to understand the needs of the state’s local news organizations, has continued to coordinate collaborative reporting projects, host sustainability summits, conduct research on the NJ news ecosystem, and more recently, make intentional efforts to support and strengthen ethnic and community media partners in the state.

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<sup>8</sup> Data comes from ORS Impact evaluation, *New Jersey News Ecosystem: Summary of Evaluation Findings*, 2017.

## ..... What Backbone Roles is CCM Playing in the Ecosystem?

While the roles that backbones play can vary across context, topics, and different approaches to collective action models, several roles have been associated with successful and healthy network functions<sup>9</sup>, including:

- Leading and executing a **shared vision** of what the ecosystem is aiming to accomplish;
- **Convening a wide range of diverse stakeholders** to build trust and relationships;
- **Building capacity** of ecosystem members to engage in the work, and
- **Coordinating resources and collaborative activities** across ecosystem members.<sup>10</sup>

### How is CCM Leading and Executing a Shared Vision in New Jersey?

Backbones can help establish and lead a shared vision for a local news and information ecosystem, and research suggests that a common agenda is more likely to achieve system-level changes.<sup>11</sup>

**CCM has served as an essential partner in executing a larger ecosystem vision.** Early ecosystem efforts in New Jersey coordinated by Democracy Fund, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation strove to strengthen collaboration among newsrooms, promote greater community engagement, and increase experimentation in business models among newsrooms and communities across New Jersey. CCM plays an important role in all these goals. As its name suggests, the Center for Cooperative Media promotes collaboration nationally and coordinates projects statewide. Its Grow and Strengthen program and travel grants support newsroom sustainability. And projects like *Stories of Atlantic City* act as partnerships with community engagement organizations like Free Press better engage the community members that news and information providers serve.

**CCM's ecosystem efforts serve all New Jersey's residents.** Local news and information is an invaluable asset to communities and essential for a functioning democracy. Through all its programming, CCM is working to support the people and organizations that provide that. Collaboration, capacity building, and convening are all ways in which news outlets can pool their resources to get that information to communities. More recently, CCM has worked to understand how communities of color are being served by news and information outlets. Recent research mapped ethnic and community media in the state and

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<sup>9</sup> These roles correspond to our set of principles about healthy ecosystem functioning developed with Democracy Fund and input from the field. The principles can be found in Appendix A of the Full Report.

<sup>10</sup> Backbone entities support all these functions, although priorities may shift over time. Often as backbones are launched, they focus on guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, and establishing infrastructure. As they mature, backbones may expand their focus to include mobilizing resources and advancing policy.

<sup>11</sup> Networks addressing complex challenges like those facing local journalism are most successful when they share a common vision and strategy to achieve that vision and are more likely to achieve system-level changes, such as policy change or program and practice improvements.

CCM conducted interviews with those leaders to better understand the support they need to reach the communities that they serve—communities that have historically been underserved and in some cases harmed by traditional media.

## How Does CCM Convene Ecosystem Stakeholders?

Backbones like CCM are uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders in a neutral and safe setting to address common issues or facilitate discussions across diverse partners and stakeholders<sup>12</sup>.

**Many local news and information providers connect through New Jersey News Commons, CCM's flagship network of news and information providers in the state.** Initially, the main goal of CCM was to foster collaboration between the multitude of news and information providers in the state, who were described as “working in silos” prior to CCM's convening efforts. However, CCM's efforts to promote collaboration, serve as a coordinator for collaborative reporting projects, and convene a network through the New Jersey News Commons has resulted in news and information providers feeling like there is a metaphorical “water cooler” for them to gather around and talk about issues, challenges, and solutions facing local news and information providers. Today, the New Jersey News Commons hosts a formal, robust network of over 250 news and information providers across the state.

**Convening ecosystem stakeholders is a key function of CCM,** particularly through the New Jersey News Commons network. Activities designed to convene stakeholders are diverse and far ranging and include both formal and informal opportunities. CCM runs the local Online News Association (ONA) group, which provides an opportunity to convene ONA members from across the state. CCM also hosts numerous workshops, trainings, and conferences that also serve to bring together journalists and information providers. There are also opportunities to convene specific groups or around certain purposes. Recently, CCM convened a group of college news providers to identify opportunities for collaboration and peer learning. It also convened a group of over 45 stakeholders and media organizations to coordinate coverage around the 2020 census to provide more comprehensive and responsive coverage of census efforts.

### *Who is at the table, in what ways, and who is missing?*

**With more than 250 members across the state representing a broad range of news organization types and sizes, the New Jersey News Commons, CCM's flagship partner network of newsrooms includes a diverse set of news and information providers.** In addition to traditional media organizations, the network includes a variety of new and hyperlocal outlets, public media outlets, and multi-media news organizations. Outside of the NJNC, CCM has also started more engagement with non-traditional

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<sup>12</sup> The convening role intentionally builds connections based on common goals, complementary strengths, and strategic opportunities (often across traditional silos or divides) so newsrooms can equitably access innovation and information. Convening is often an early role that backbones play in connecting newsrooms and other ecosystem partners together so that they build relationships and trust that facilitate sharing of information and collaboration.

information providers including organizations like Free Press, Creative New Jersey, CoLAB Arts, and community organizations like PTA's and church groups. Recent efforts have included more authentically engaging community members, particularly those in more marginalized communities who have historically been responsible for producing and disseminating their own information at the community level.

In terms of who's missing from the table, stakeholders that participated in this case study noted that community and ethnic media outlets exist within the ecosystem, but that systemic barriers and lack of trust have historically inhibited their ability to be represented in the ecosystem. In addition to outlets owned by or produced for communities of color, the NJ ecosystem could also work to better incorporate smaller outlets. One stakeholder noted that inclusion of diverse stakeholders requires intentionality on the part of the convening organization, otherwise "you keep serving the same people and you're not going to grow". In the spirit of expanding their network, CCM recently conducted a landscape analysis<sup>13</sup> of ethnic and community media organizations in the state which identified and catalogued around 120 organizations, the audiences they serve, and the distribution mechanisms they utilize. That analysis and report are helping guide efforts to better include ethnic and community organizations in the ecosystem moving forward.

### How Does CCM Support Capacity Building of Newsroom Partners?

Backbones like CCM provide capacity-building support to ecosystem newsrooms around community engagement, business operations, evidence-based practices, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>14</sup>

**CCM offers a wide variety of free skill-building opportunities to network members.** In addition to trainings on a wide array of topics, from how to track mis- and disinformation to LinkedIn fundamentals to workflow and technology for collaborative reporting projects. Many ideas for trainings are sourced from New Jersey News Commons members and CCM solicits requests for training and seminars to host.

**CCM provides direct capacity to news and information outlets through different grant programs.** Its Peer Learning and Collaboration Fund facilitates capacity building through peer learning and provides travel grants for outlets to go "study" another organization to learn new practices and approaches to strengthen their work and organizational sustainability. Similarly, CCM has supported capacity building through its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion grants, which provide \$500 for people "to attend events and conferences hosted by organizations that work toward improving diversity, equity and inclusion in media."

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<sup>13</sup> <https://centerforcooperativemedia.org/research/state-of-nj-ethnic-community-media/>

<sup>14</sup> Capacity building falls broadly in two categories — human resource development, and operational infrastructure and resources. Most often, human resource capacity-building takes the form of coaching, helping newsrooms adapt ecosystem resources to their own environments, but other mechanisms of capacity building include training, mentorship, fellowships, internships, peer learning communities, and other professional development activities. Operational infrastructure can include equipment, shared space, technology, and shared services.

## How Does CCM Coordinate and Mobilize Resources?

CCM is uniquely positioned because of its neutrality and connections to local news providers to coordinate and mobilize resources<sup>15</sup>, both for individual members, and for the ecosystem as a whole. Some of the main ways that CCM coordinates and mobilizes resources are by supporting collaboration among ecosystem members and finding/leveraging resources to support local news across the ecosystem.

### *How is CCM Supporting Collaboration Across Ecosystem Members?*

**Coordinating collaborations is a foundational part of the NJ News Commons.** Several stakeholders noted that CCM's role as a neutral 3<sup>rd</sup> party in those collaborations greatly facilitated the success of those collaborations. Because it isn't a news producer itself, CCM is trusted to run the collaborations in a way that benefits all partners; as one stakeholder said, "a neutral third party makes a huge difference in the success of collaborative projects."

In addition to coordinating the work of collaborative efforts, CCM is committed to doing so in an inclusive and equitable way. Regarding inclusivity, CCM has made an effort to include ethnic media and organizations from historically under-represented communities. It has also made a push to include communities in the creation and telling of their own stories, partnering with organizations with expertise in community engagement including Free Press. CCM also manages their collaborative projects with an eye to equity, taking into account the capacity of each partner to contribute to the work and recognizing that the amount of hours an organization can dedicate to the work is not directly linked to the value they bring to the collaboration. CCM strives to consider all the different aspects of partner contribution and capacity to ensure that small partners are not alienated, and big partners don't feel that they're taking on an undue burden.

Examples of successful collaborative efforts include:

- ***Stories of Atlantic City:*** a partnership between media organizations and under-represented communities in Atlantic City. Journalists and community members worked together to "put community in the driver's seat" and help them tell their own stories that are typically left untold.
- ***Voting Block:*** a partnership with community organizations in different cities across the state to bring together voters across the political spectrum for a "dinner party" where they try to bridge partisan divides within a community and create content that represents a diverse set of views and opinions.

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<sup>15</sup> Coordination activities can range from hosting or facilitating events and conferences, facilitating collaborative activities, and creating shared resources. Mobilization of resources includes finding and leveraging funding and ecosystem assets to strengthen the ecosystem and its members and advocating for and potentially creating system changes to transform the journalism field.



- **Toxic NJ- Dirty Little Secrets:** A project stemming from a partnership between the Center for Investigative Reporting, CCM, and 10 of the more prominent news outlets across NJ. The project was one of the first statewide collaborative reporting efforts and served to help news outlets report on lesser known sources of environmental contamination in the state.

### *How is CCM mobilizing resources to strengthen the ecosystem?*

Since its inception, CCM has been committed to supporting sustainability in the local news and information ecosystem. One of the first efforts undertaken by CCM was its “Grow and Strengthen” program in which it gave microgrants to support new journalism ventures and help them establish a foothold in the ecosystem. Additionally, many of the trainings and resources it hosts and disseminates to members focus on ways to boost newsroom sustainability. In its early years, CCM focused a significant portion of their efforts on supporting new digital startups that were coming on the scene to fill information gaps in their communities. Today, there are fewer new organizations starting so CCM has shifted to provide more support for existing and established organizations, helping them to adapt their business and revenue models to match more closely with community preferences and behaviors.

## Implications for Other Backbones

**Independence is seen as a key facilitator to CCM's success.** It was intentional that CCM was not a news creator when deciding where the backbone could be placed. Having a coordinator that has the capacity and no editorial stake can help dull the competitive edge between outlets.

**Research that better defines what the New Jersey ecosystem looks like has helped in its mission to support residents of New Jersey.** Research reports conducted by CCM have helped it better understand who the news and information providers are in the state and illuminated areas where its support could go further. Its 2019 report, *The State of Ethnic and Community Media* was one of the first efforts to understand the state of ethnic and community media, and synthesizes themes and recommendations for how to better support what it found was a “robust and optimistic, yet under-resourced and under-appreciated sector” in the state.

**The New Jersey News Commons helped establish a peer learning and knowledge sharing mechanism in the state.** Members of the News Commons appreciate the camaraderie that has been established and view it as a place where they can solicit advice, ask questions, and connect with other news and information providers in the state. Early champions of CCM, also viewed it as an important step toward greater collaboration as it helped to build relationships between journalists that had been in competition in the past. Moving forward, CCM is thinking through ways to better reach out to and support ethnic and community media members, a sector that has historically been left out of ecosystem activities.

## ..... Closing Statements

This report is a point-in-time depiction of the Center for Cooperative Media and how it has evolved into a backbone organization supporting collaborative journalism, the development of the New Jersey news ecosystem, and capacity building of news and information providers in the state. It offers examples of how CCM has worked to better define the news ecosystem in New Jersey through its research and how it has supported network development through its New Jersey News Commons, as a coordinator of collaborations, and as a capacity builder for news and information outlets. These examples and lessons offer insights and considerations others working on local news and information ecosystems. This data was collected in late 2019 and early 2020 and may not reflect CCM's most recent efforts and responsive adaptations to changing community information priorities. For additional information on CCM's current and emerging efforts and impacts of those efforts, please visit their [website](#).