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Media: can insulated public journalism funding survive a hostile Congress?

A feasibility assessment of who still covers your town, who owns what's left, and who decides what you see — built around the one architecture in this domain with a completed, real-world durability test: a 58-year-old public broadcasting institution, formula-funded and insulated by design, that just voted to dissolve itself.

ABSTRACT

This inquiry set out to name the binding constraint behind local news collapse and score the leading fixes against it. The headline finding is not a number but an institutional fact: the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was multi-year, formula-funded and administratively insulated specifically to survive political cycles, and it still dissolved in January 2026 after Congress rescinded its funding on a bare-majority vote — the single clearest evidence in this report that good funding design is necessary but not sufficient against a determined political majority. The domain's headline statistic, the "news desert" county count, turns out to rest on one uncorroborated research lineage with two undocumented biases pulling in opposite directions; we sized one of them directly and found all five of one state's "zero-outlet" counties actually sit inside a television market with local news coverage the count excludes by design. A ten-architecture scorecard was built to rank the leading fixes, then put through an adversarial red-team pass before being trusted — which caught and reversed our own overclaimed headline that one instrument "wins every objective weighting," a claim that rested on a score this project had never actually verified. We report the corrected, more honest finding: no single architecture dominates, and the most reliable results are at the bottom of the ranking, not the top.

PART 1

The collapse, measured — and one long-standing claim about it just broke

-57%
NEWSPAPER NEWSROOM JOBS SINCE 2008

~80%
NEWSPAPER AD REVENUE LOST SINCE 2005

<50%
GOOGLE+META'S DIGITAL AD SHARE, 2024

$258.6B
TOTAL US DIGITAL AD MARKET, 2024

Newspaper newsroom employment fell from about 71,000 to 31,000 between 2008 and 2020 – 57%, confirmed against BLS data independently of Pew's own restatement. Total newsroom employment across every sector, including a 144% *rise* in digital-native newsroom jobs over the same period, fell only 26%, cushioning but not reversing the print collapse. Newspaper advertising revenue fell roughly 80% from its 2005 peak of about $49 billion to under $10 billion by 2022.

Pew Research / BLS OEWS · BLS CES industry employment · Pew Research, Newspaper Fact Sheet

PRIOR BROKEN

The commonly repeated claim that Google and Meta together take a "majority" of US digital ad revenue is no longer true. Their combined share fell below 50% in 2024 for the first time in roughly a decade, as Amazon's share climbed toward 17%, independently verified against two separate reports. The market that took local advertising isn't a duopoly anymore – it's a widening triopoly, and any argument that leans on "two companies control the ad market" is arguing from a stale premise.

eMarketer 2024–2026 estimates · IAB/PwC Internet Advertising Revenue Report FY2024

> PLAIN TALK
>
> Local newspapers lost about four out of every five ad dollars they had in 2005. The story that "Google and Facebook took it all" is half wrong – Amazon is now big enough that no two companies control the market anymore.

PART 2

The desert map's hidden problem: one research lineage, two biases nobody has sized

SINGLE-ROOT, PARTLY SIZED

213
US COUNTIES WITH ZERO LOCAL OUTLETS

1,524
COUNTIES WITH EXACTLY ONE

~55%
OF ALL US COUNTIES, COMBINED

5 of 5
MS "DESERT" COUNTIES WITH REAL TV COVERAGE

Every circulating "news desert" figure — the 213 zero-outlet counties, the ~55% of counties with one outlet or none — traces to a single continuous research lineage running from UNC's Penny Abernathy through Northwestern's Medill Local News Initiative. No independent national census of local outlets exists. That lineage's own methodology carries two documented biases pulling in opposite directions that no publication, including its own, has ever sized: it excludes commercial TV and radio entirely, and it counts "ghost papers" — a masthead that still publishes with few or no remaining reporters — as a served outlet.

Medill Local News Initiative, State of Local News 2025 · UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media

We sized the first bias directly rather than leave it as a caveat. All five of Mississippi's Medill-designated zero-outlet counties sit inside a Nielsen television market with a full-power commercial news operation — one of them, Benton County, has an active, dated local-news beat from a Memphis CBS affiliate the desert count simply doesn't see. The second bias — ghost papers inflating the "not a desert" column — rests on an existing but dated (2018) national estimate of 1,000 to 1,500 such papers; we could not complete a matching same-state audit to net the two biases against each other.

Medill interactive county map, cross-referenced against Nielsen DMA boundaries · UNC, The Expanding News Desert (2018)

> PLAIN TALK
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> The number everyone cites for how many American counties have "no local news" comes from one research group, and it has two known blind spots pointing in opposite directions — it misses local TV entirely, and it counts papers with no reporters left as if they still cover the news. We checked one of those blind spots in one state and found it real: every "desert" county we checked actually had a local TV station covering it.

PART 3

The institution that dissolved itself

DESIGN INSULATED IT. POLITICS UNWOUND IT ANYWAY.

58
YEARS CPB OPERATED

$535M
CPB'S ANNUAL FEDERAL APPROPRIATION

$1.1B
TOTAL RESCINDED, FY2026–27

17% vs 9%
RURAL VS. NON-RURAL REVENUE SHARE FROM CPB

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting was funded two years in advance on a formula basis specifically to insulate it from short-term political pressure — a firewall built into the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and never removed. In July 2025, the Rescissions Act clawed back its entire FY2026 and FY2027 appropriation on a bare 51–48 Senate vote. CPB's board voted to dissolve the organization outright on December 10, 2025; the announcement came January 5, 2026. Rural and tribal stations, which drew 17% of revenue from CPB versus 9% at non-rural stations, are documented to have been hit hardest — several tribal stations lost more than half their budgets outright.

Rescissions Act of 2025, Public Law 119-28 · CPB board statement, Jan 5 2026 · CRS/CPB station-revenue data via KUNR

This is the report's central design lesson, and it cuts against the instinct to simply "fix the funding mechanism" and move on. A formula-based, multi-year-insulated design is not a hypothetical safeguard here — it is exactly what CPB had, for over half a century, and it failed the one real test it was ever given. Every candidate architecture in this report that depends on ongoing appropriated funding inherits this same exposure until proven otherwise.

> PLAIN TALK
> Congress designed public broadcasting's funding specifically so no single Congress could easily kill it. One Congress killed it anyway, with a simple majority vote, and the institution chose to shut itself down rather than limp along defunded. That is the strongest evidence in this whole report about what "durable" funding design actually requires.

PART 4

Who owns what's left: hedge funds, broadcast consolidation, and a regulatory vote three days out

-14%

NEWSROOM STAFF AFTER INVESTMENT-OWNER ACQUISITION

160+

NEWSPAPERS OWNED BY ALDEN GLOBAL CAPITAL

~80% / ~54.5%

NEXSTAR-TEGNA'S RAW / UHF-DISCOUNTED HOUSEHOLD REACH

Aug 6, 2026

FCC VOTE ON THE NATIONAL OWNERSHIP CAP

A peer-reviewed study of 211 major US newspapers, 2005–2022, found that acquisition by a hedge fund or private-equity owner cuts newsroom staff by roughly 14% relative to papers under other ownership, concentrated in general-assignment and political-reporting roles. Alden Global Capital, now the second-largest local news publisher in the country behind Gannett, owns more than 160 papers; the specific magnitude of its own cuts is documented by union and press reporting, not by an academic study isolating Alden specifically.

Peterson & Dunaway, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (2023) · Northwestern Local News Initiative, Feb 2026

Broadcast ownership is consolidating on two tracks at once. Nexstar's acquisition of Tegna closed in March 2026 above the federal 39% national ownership cap via an ad hoc FCC waiver, reaching roughly 80% of US TV households before the standard UHF discount and 54.5% after it. The FCC had a vote scheduled for August 6, 2026 – three days after this research was conducted – to replace the hard cap with case-by-case review. **[Update, Aug 6 2026: the FCC voted 2–1 to repeal the cap, Commissioner Gomez dissenting on the ground that only Congress can alter a statutory cap – the expected litigation theory. The deregulatory direction this filing documented is no longer a forecast.]**

FCC, Fact Sheet on Replacing the National Broadcast Ownership Cap (Jul 2026) · Nexstar FCC filing, Mar 2026

> PLAIN TALK
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> Whoever owns a newspaper matters: get bought by a hedge fund, and the newsroom shrinks by about a seventh, on average, in a real academic study. Meanwhile the rule capping how much of the country one TV company can own is about to be gutted – a change already road-tested by the country's biggest station merger this year.

PART 5

What platforms actually pay for: bargaining codes fund incumbents, and Meta can just walk away

PRIOR BROKEN

~90%

OF AUSTRALIA'S BARGAINING-CODE MONEY TO 3 FIRMS

-85% / -64%

CANADA: LOCAL VS. NATIONAL OUTLETS' FACEBOOK ENGAGEMENT LOSS

AU$200M+

ESTIMATED ANNUAL AUSTRALIAN DEAL VALUE

0

MEASURABLE DROP IN META'S OWN CANADIAN USAGE

Platform-publisher bargaining codes, the most-discussed instrument for making Google and Meta pay for news, do not appear to fund local journalism the way their advocates argue. In Australia, the one peer-reviewed distributional estimate available finds roughly 90% of bargaining-code payments flowed to three large incumbent publishers. When Canada passed its own version, Meta simply blocked news outright rather than pay – a ban still in effect as of mid-2026 – and the damage landed asymmetrically: local outlets lost 85% of their Facebook engagement at the one-year mark versus 64% for national outlets, while Meta's own usage in Canada stayed essentially flat by two independent measures.

Brevini & Ward, Media International Australia (2023) · Media Ecosystem Observatory, "Old News, New Reality" (Aug 2024) · Reuters/Similarweb analytics

The asymmetry is the finding: platforms can walk away from these deals at negligible cost to themselves, while the publishers most dependent on referral traffic – smaller, local outlets – absorb nearly all the damage. This is also the one instrument in this scorecard actively opposed by the reform coalition it's nominally meant to serve: Free Press and Public Knowledge both formally oppose the US equivalent (the JCPA) as an incumbent-favoring measure, the same critique this report's own evidence supports independently.

> PLAIN TALK
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> The plan to make Big Tech "pay for news" mostly ends up paying the biggest newspaper chains, not your local paper – and when a government tried it anyway, Meta just turned off news for the whole country rather than pay, and barely noticed the difference to its own business.

PART 6

The constitutional screen: real, but not finished doing its job yet

DIRECTIONAL, NOT FINAL

This domain carries a constraint no other Gubment filing has had to score against: the First Amendment affirmatively forecloses whole categories of instrument before economics or politics even enter the picture. The Supreme Court's 2024 decision in *Moody v. NetChoice* held, with a genuine six-justice majority, that a platform's curation of its own feed is protected editorial speech – not a minor aside, a real holding. But the two state laws that decision was actually about, in Texas and Florida, remain unresolved in active litigation: Florida's is headed to trial September 8, 2026, after the district court denied both sides' summary-judgment motions in June – while rejecting Florida's argument that the First Amendment doesn't reach platform editorial decisions – and Texas's injunction stands after a May 2026 stay denial, with its scope still being briefed. Nothing about the doctrine is fully settled yet. A parallel signal: Maryland's digital advertising tax already lost its pass-through provision on First Amendment grounds in 2025, a warning sign for any future tax specifically earmarked to fund journalism.

Moody v. NetChoice, 603 U.S. 707 (2024) · Fourth Circuit ruling on Maryland's digital ad tax (Aug 2025)

> PLAIN TALK
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> The Supreme Court has said platforms get real free-speech protection for how they arrange their own feeds – but the actual state laws that triggered that fight are still tied up in court two years later. Nothing here is finally decided; treat it as a trend, not a rule.

PART 7

Why the money already on the table isn't enough

28%
TRUST "MASS MEDIA," NEW RECORD LOW

43-pt
GAP, REPUBLICAN VS. DEMOCRAT TRUST

~55×
PHILANTHROPY SHORT OF ONE YEAR'S AD-REVENUE LOSS

$4M
ILLINOIS'S TAX CREDIT, ACTUALLY DISBURSED, 2025

Public trust in mass media hit 28% in September 2025 — the first time Gallup's series has dropped below 30% — with an extraordinary partisan split: 8% among Republicans, 51% among Democrats. Meanwhile the two flagship philanthropic vehicles for saving local news, Press Forward and the American Journalism Project, have raised or deployed roughly $700 million combined since their founding. Newspaper ad and circulation revenue fell $38.7 billion in a single year (2022 versus the 2005 peak). Philanthropy's entire multi-year total is smaller than one year's loss by a factor of roughly 55 — not the "same order of magnitude" a casual read might assume.

Gallup, Trust in Media (Sept 2025) · Press Forward, American Journalism Project public disclosures · Pew Research, Newspaper Fact Sheet

What does work, at small scale: Illinois's payroll tax credit for local journalists disbursed a real $4 million in its first completed year (2025), supporting 260-plus jobs, with 30% of funds reaching nonprofit outlets and most of it landing outside Chicago. New York's parallel credit only closed its first application window in April 2026 — too early to call its own uptake "modest," despite that being the seed assumption this report started with.

Northwestern Local News Initiative, Illinois tax credit disbursement (Aug 2025, Jul 2026) · NY Empire State Development program page

> PLAIN TALK
>
> Fewer than 3 in 10 Americans trust the media at all, and that number splits sharply by party. The nonprofit money trying to save local news — a real, serious effort — is still about 1.7 orders of magnitude short of replacing what the industry lost in just one bad year. One state's small tax credit for local reporters, though, is actually proven to work at the scale it was tried.

PART 8

What other eras and countries tried: a real steelman for subsidy, with an asterisk each time

MIXED STEELMAN

The strongest historical case for government-supported journalism without state capture is the earliest one: from the 1790s through the 1830s, US newspapers carried up to 95% of mail weight while generating as little as 3–15% of postal revenue, under a uniform, viewpoint-neutral rate available to any publisher. Historians broadly credit that design — universal, formula-based, discretion-free — with fostering pluralism rather than capture. The same era ran a separate, genuinely partisan mechanism alongside it, government printing patronage to favored newspapers, which is the useful contrast: subsidy design, not the presence of subsidy, is what determines whether capture follows.

Richard R. John, Spreading the News (1995) · McChesney & Nichols, The Death and Life of American Journalism (2010)

The modern comparator, Nordic direct press subsidies, has genuine peer-reviewed support for avoiding viewpoint capture through the same design principles — but the same literature finds these subsidies did not prevent commercial decline, and Finland cut its own subsidy by roughly 96% from its historical peak despite it having the identical arm's-length design. The one live "outside the appropriations cycle" model on offer, the BBC's licence fee, is itself under an unresolved government review as of this writing.

Grönlund, Villi & Ala-Fossi, Media and Communication (2024) · Nordicom Factsheet 2022:1 · UK DCMS Charter Review Green Paper (Dec 2025)

> PLAIN TALK
> The best historical evidence that government can fund journalism without controlling it comes from George Washington's post office, not a modern program. The closest living version — Nordic newspaper subsidies — genuinely avoided political capture, but didn't stop papers from struggling anyway, and Finland gave up on its version almost entirely.

PART 9

The scorecard, twice-checked: one consistent design, one refuted one

ARCHITECTURE	COVERAGE	DURABILITY	DIVERSITY	MARKET	TRUST
PAYROLL TAX CREDIT	3	1	4	3	3
PLATFORM BARGAINING CODE	1	1	1	1	3
DIGITAL AD TAX, EARMARKED	3	2	3	3	3
PUBLIC MEDIA, APPROPRIATED	4	1	5	3	2
PUBLIC MEDIA, NON-APPROPRIATED	4	3	5	3	3
NEWS VOUCHERS/CREDITS	3	1	3	3	3
STATE CIVIC-INFO CONSORTIA	3	2	4	3	3
PHILANTHROPY MATCH	3	2	3	3	3
STRUCTURAL ANTITRUST	3	3	3	3	3
MANAGED TRANSITION (STATUS QUO)	1	5	2	1	1

Ten candidate architectures, five objectives — and two full adversarial checks. The first red team withdrew an overclaimed headline; then an independent blind second scorer caught the durability axis still crediting design labels the red team had explicitly banned: brand-new instruments were scored as if durability were a blueprint property rather than a track record. Reconciled, the result sharpened rather than blurred. Public media funded outside the annual appropriations cycle is now the clear most-consistent performer — its distribution record to some 1,500 local and tribal stations is the best-evidenced reach in the field, its durability still capped by Finland's counter-example. The platform bargaining code is the one architecture the record actively refutes on four of five axes, not merely ranks last. And doing nothing is now the evidenced worst option on three axes — accelerating consolidation and a two-country polarization mechanism operating on precisely the more-trusted local tier — rather than the assumed one.

10 architectures × 5 anchored objectives × 5 weightings · red team + independent blind re-score, both reconciled and committed

CORRECTED VIA RED TEAM, NOT ASSERTED

APPENDIX

The honesty box

The scorecard's own first-pass headline didn't survive scrutiny. A red-team pass caught that "structural antitrust wins every weighting" rested on a market-concentration score this project never independently verified — no dedicated workstream on *US v. Google*'s actual remedies was ever run, and the correction is documented in full rather than quietly fixed. **The ghost-paper bias is only half-sized.** We proved the TV/radio exclusion bias directly in one state; the ghost-paper bias rests on a 2018 literature estimate we could not refresh with a matching audit. **Four anchor rows started blank and were filled later, not guessed at the start** — broadcast ownership cap status, media trust, and the philanthropy-vs-revenue ratio were all queued, then completed, in a second research pass, exactly as logged. **The constitutional screen mostly confirms a list already narrowed by earlier design choices** — it did real gating work on only one candidate (the earmarked ad tax); for the rest, content-based instruments were excluded from consideration before the screen was ever applied, and the report says so plainly rather than overstating the screen's independence. **No hybrid architectures were scored**, though at least two obvious combinations — a non-appropriated public-media floor distributed through existing local nonprofit channels, or antitrust action paired with funding restoration — plausibly beat every single instrument tested and are flagged for the next pass rather than invented here.

THE RECEIPTS · 12-workstream protocol · Phase 0 gate with a documented GO verdict · pre-registered anchor table preserving our own corrected priors (the ad-duopoly claim broke;

CPB's fate was worse than assumed) · deviations log (11 entries) · adversarial red-team pass with a full reconciliation log, two overclaims caught and corrected · four commits across two branches, all public.

CITE · Gubment. "Media: Can Insulated Public Journalism Funding Survive a Hostile Congress?" Policy Whitepaper No. 9, Aug 2026. gubment.com/media · Sources & data: gubment.com/media/sources