

Short Takes with Phil Napoli Transcript

Deondra:

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways and Means Short Takes, brief conversations to explore the podcast topics a bit more. We're creating this bonus content for each episode in season five. I'm Deondra Rose, director of research for POLIS, the Center for Politics at Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy. Today I'm talking with my colleague Phil Napoli about news deserts, places where there is little or no local news coverage. Phil is the James R. Shepley distinguished professor of public policy and an affiliate of the Dewitt Wallace Center for media and democracy here at Sanford. He directs the News Measures Research Project.

Deondra:

Phil, thank you so much for joining us today.

Phil:

Oh, pleasure to be here.

Deondra:

I have to start off. It was really striking to hear in the episode about how government support for local news in the US pales in comparison to support in other countries. Can you talk a little bit more about what other countries are doing in this area?

Phil:

Sure. If you go back to how sort of media developed in different countries, there was, especially when broadcasting came along, that was really where we saw countries going different directions in terms of the degree of government involvement, government support. Obviously, we have a primarily commercial broadcast system, but when you look at other countries, even in the realm of print media, we'll see subsidy models in some cases that are designed to sort of maintain diversity of viewpoints. In some Scandinavian countries, there's been a tradition of subsidies directed at the second most widely read newspaper in a city so that that paper is able to survive and provide competition to the leading paper. We've just never had things like that really here.

Deondra:

In the US, we have noticed that the private sector has stepped up to support local journalism in a way that the public sector has not. Can you talk a little bit about why that might be the case?

Phil:

Sure, yeah. The foundation community that has started to recognize the importance of local journalism as a funding priority has definitely expanded over the past decade. One of the reasons is because a lot of times we actually have foundations that might think of their mission as supporting a particular community and the health of that community and have come to recognize that to really sort of pursue that mission properly, they need to think about journalism within that context. Foundations are starting to recognize that their goals of healthy communities really do intersect with there being a viable and robust local news ecosystem in these communities.

Phil:

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It's also the case that in this space, and it's probably a great thing, that many of the foundations really do a lot of advocacy work on their own that is trying to get other foundations on board and create partnerships and things like that. A lot of credit goes to some of the pioneers working in this space. The Knight Foundations, The Democracy Funds, they really do a lot to try to make other types of foundations see this as something that should be a priority when perhaps they didn't realize that before.

Deondra:

Federal funding for public TV and radio is pretty small, and yet it's still a perennial political football. How can we change that? Do states and cities need to step up, for example?

Phil:

It's such a political culture issue really. There is, even within journalism, even journalism professionals, editors, publishers still have a real hard time getting comfortable with any kind of public funding model, and again, if you think about our political culture, the strong first amendment tradition we have in this country that really assumes an antagonistic relationship between government and the press, that that I think goes a long way still towards explaining why we have the model that we have here and why it has persisted in the face of the decimation of the traditional economic model for journalism.

Deondra:

Phil, are there ways that we can have public support for local journalism while still making sure that there's no government meddling?

Phil:

That's certainly the major concern and I think a lot of people would disagree on the answer, but that being said, we have examples of this in place to some extent. We have the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which sort of acts as a buffer between the federal government and the public broadcasting system. We could imagine other proposals that might be viable. There was a proposal a few years back. Could you imagine a scenario where say when you complete your taxes and you know that there's some amount of your tax dollars that are going to support journalism, that you had the option of identifying which local news outlets or national news outlets or regional news outlets that you wanted your money to go to so individuals could support the outlet that best reflects their priorities? There's a whole gamut of ideas. It's not an unsolvable problem by any stretch of the imagination.

Deondra:

Public distrust in news media has grown over time. What can or should news organizations do to improve this situation?

Phil:

That's a great question. I'd love to say I know the answer to that and I don't. I can tell you a bit about what news organizations are experimenting with to try to address this. Some are, for example, experimenting with new levels of transparency. It might sound odd, but say, hey, here's a story that we're publishing and if you click this link, you could see the reporter's notes or here's links to the original interview files, things of that sort to try to get the public the ability to sort of look behind the curtain a little bit more and to see the work that goes into the reporting.

Deondra:

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Phil, you made a fascinating point about the democratization of journalism in the podcast and I think you mentioned it's not your favorite thing. This idea that anyone can be a journalist and I'm really curious if we all feel like we can be empowered as journalists, what do we miss out when it comes to the things that we lack? We're not professional journalists. What are things that professionally trained journalists can offer society that we as individual journalists can not?

Phil:

I mean, one of the things we traditionally assumed we could associate with professional journalists was a commitment to objectivity, for example, that in today's discussion about how journalism operates, that really has started to fall by the wayside, but that used to be part and parcel how we defined a professional journalists, but there is an ethical component, there's procedural components about how many sources do you consult in order to consider a piece of information verified. There's the legal dimension, which is when we think about the institutional context in which journalism works, where does the legal support come, for example, if a story generates a lawsuit? A citizen journalist is in no position to defend him or herself more than likely in that type of situation. There's that infrastructure around reporting that we shouldn't lose sight of.

Deondra:

New digital news sources are popping up all the time. How can citizens evaluate which ones to pay attention to?

Phil:

That's getting increasingly challenging because as our research is revealing, many of these new digital news sources oftentimes are doing something to misrepresent their true origins, their true funding sources, their true intentions. I think that's probably one of the biggest challenges to being a media consumer today is being able to accurately gauge the nature of the news source that you're consuming.

Deondra:

When you think about the future of local news and democracy, what gives you hope?

Phil:

I think I see hope in some small incremental measures that we've started to see in some places. For example, in New Jersey they passed the Community Information Bill where revenues from a spectrum auction were being directed to supporting nonprofit journalism outlets in that state. It'd be neat to see that kind of public support model for local journalism expand at the state level, at the county level. Who knows? The possibilities are wide open there, so that gives me some hope. I see hope in the way in which more and more foundations seem to be recognizing this subject as something that really is central to their mission, so that's a positive occurrence.

Deondra:

Phil, my final question for you is, I'm very curious, are there any surprising or juicy stories from doing your research that you can share with us?

Phil:

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Well, I think the most interesting, the juiciest aspect of this work is that you really don't use that term too often in relation to academic research, but is how it originated, which was, and people, this is long enough ago now that people don't remember this, but if you would go back to 2013, 2014, the Federal Communications Commission was planning on doing some really robust research in this area around how well community information needs were being met. That research plan generated so much political hostility that ultimately the entire research project was canceled. The consulting firm that was going to conduct the research dropped out because they were getting death threats. Those of us who had worked on the project found ourselves getting harassing emails and the presidents of our universities getting harassing emails about our involvement in this project. All my political donations ended up reported on Foxnews.com, as were the political donations of anybody who worked on this research in any capacity, so that got kind of crazy.

Phil:

In fact, what happened was the foundation community stepped up and said, well, this was important work that needs to get done, and that's how I ended up in this space.

Deondra:

Wow, that's fascinating. Thank you so much Phil for that.

Deondra:

Thank you for joining us today for Ways and Means Short Takes. Phil Napoli is the James R. Shepley distinguished professor of public policy and an affiliate of the Dewitt Wallace Center for media and democracy here at the Sanford School. He also directs the News Measures Research Project.

Deondra:

This season of Ways and Means is sponsored by POLIS, the Center for Politics. Next week on Ways and Means, we'll be talking about a surprising finding that instead of turning people off to politics and civic engagement, certain childcare programs can actually motivate them to get involved. I'm Deondra Rose. See you then.