

National Public Radio creates nonprofit, local journalism in underserved regions with new regional journalism hub

National Public Radio is creating a new journalism hub in the Midwest that will emphasize investigative reporting and underserved communities in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa.

The hub, funded through a [\\$4.7 million grant from philanthropists Eric and Wendy Schmidt](#), means that these states will get an infusion of money while two huge news events are playing out in communities across America: the pandemic and civil unrest following George Floyd's killing.

"I think the opportunity for us to reach into those American communities that are news deserts is huge," said Tim Eby, general station manager for St. Louis Public Radio, one of the stations included in the new hub. "For us, it's a matter of finding a unique way to do that."

One example of the new possibilities made available with the creation of the Midwest hub is reporters from the four different states can collectively compare and contrast the differences in the various states' governments, Eby said.

"To have the investigative resources to do that will be really, really interesting, and helpful to our audience," he said.

The Midwest Journalism Hub will be added to the already-existing hubs in California, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, and the hundreds of public radio member stations across the United States.

The grant will fund the hub for three years, said Christopher Turpin, chief of staff for the president and chief executive of NPR.

NPR itself announced it would begin temporary pay cuts and furloughs to avoid layoffs.

Like much of America at the moment – 120,000 and counting dead from Covid-19, Minneapolis torn apart by racism as another black man was killed by a cop and sky-high unemployment from stay-at-home orders – local journalism, when it is needed most, is in shambles.

And leaders in public radio think their non-profit local member station model and collaborations between stations can help with filling in the gap left by the robust local newspapers that no longer exist.

“We see the opportunity to create a really powerful journalism network, and a journalism network that increasingly ensures the need that is being left by the demise of local newspapers,” Turpin said.

NPR member stations across the country have become “journalism engines” which is a change from how they formerly operated, Turpin said.

NPR is an independent nonprofit organization and a membership organization that licenses local stations that pay membership fees. At those local stations, many of which are housed at public universities, listeners in the region annually donate to them. [According to NPR's online overview of funding](#), member stations heavily rely on individual contributions from listeners and local businesses called underwriters.

Turpin said it's not as if member stations did not produce news, but they also were established as community institutions with loyal members.

As local journalism has declined, public radio, which covers 98.5% of the country, has stepped in.

“In the last few years, we’ve seen well over a thousand journalists across the country added to member stations doing really robust beat reporting and covering local issues in a way they weren’t before precisely because the need is there,” he said.

The theory behind journalism hubs is focused on how to use resources the most efficiently relative to the stations included in order to provide journalism in the public’s interest, Turpin said.

Partnerships between NPR, its members stations with other nonprofit news organizations to help assist local and regional news, Turpin said.

“We will work with anyone to do journalism in the public’s interest,” he said. “That’s one of the great strengths and powers of public radio and public broadcasting.”

Journalism: a business or public service?

Before Val Hoepfner was the executive director at WMOT in Nashville, Tennessee, and a media consultant, she spent 20 years in the newspaper business.

“What I saw happen first hand was the whole scenario of dollars to dimes. As the paper product became less impactful and the digital product had lots of interest but not as much financial support, I’ve watched newspapers struggle with how to cope with that,” she said.

Journalism is a community service, but for generations, newspapers were built as for-profit businesses, Hoepfner said.

It was given away for free at the beginning and not fully realized as a public service.

“Now we have to find a way to pay for the journalism,” Hoepner said.

Hoepner thinks the nonprofit model is the way to go and pointed to newspapers like Philadelphia Inquirer, the Texas Tribune, and the Voice of San Diego which have become nonprofits and sustain themselves with members instead of advertisers.

“When someone would subscribe to a newspaper and have it delivered to their house, they weren’t paying for the content. They were paying for the delivery, not the journalism that was making that product. Advertising was paying for that,” she said.



(Photo by Athena Pajer)

Since the pandemic, newspapers that weren’t struggling with advertisement revenue will feel the crunch as businesses that would normally pay for marketing are having to cut spending, she said.

“It will force some of these news organizations to give a hard

look at how they are funding themselves,” Hoepfner said.

In contrast to for-profit news organizations and commercial broadcast stations, public radio has acquired loyal listeners who see meaning in the journalism industry and support it financially, she said.

“Public Broadcasting’s focus has always been, compared to folks on the commercial and for-profit side, is that the audience is who we serve,” Eby said. “We don’t serve the advertiser.”

The trust that listeners have in NPR, at the national and local level, is why Turpin said he sees the organization being a part of the solution of America’s local news crisis.

Moving forward in a pandemic, two of the challenges facing public radio member stations are retaining listeners and underwriters who give annually and sustainably funding reporting in regional hubs after grant funding runs dry.

Due to the pandemic, St. Louis Public Radio canceled its pledge drive in March. That cost the station a quarter of a million dollars, Eby said.

“We’ve taken a big hit here unfortunately but that is true for almost all media that rely on event-driven businesses and other advertisers to sustain their service,” he said.

Historically, after times of a national crisis like the 2008 recession public radio lost some of their members but not enough to seriously damage and prevent the organization’s mission, Hoepfner said. She’s not worried so much about public radio as she is about smaller independent community stations.

Still, the grant funding the regional midwest hub is one piece to building a strong connection between NPR and its member stations that last for three years.

Turpin said the organization is aware that it needs to find

new business models that will work because journalism hubs can't sustainably rely on grants. That could mean reimagining how journalism can be produced, and if there are potential ways of monetizing different forms and packages of journalism.

Eby said the way to retain and expand listenership and potential members is to produce great content.

"If we're producing news that no one else is covering or digging deep in stories that no one else has been able to cover because a lot of those times those resources aren't there, and we're able to do it through these collaborations – that is how we will reach more audiences and listeners, and have a greater impact overall," he said.

As NPR shares stories through collaboration and partnership with member stations and other nonprofit news organizations, the on-the-ground work will be tailored towards the needs of individual regions and communities, Turpin said.

"Collaboration and partnership is the way forward and the way things will get done in the future."

Amelia Blakely reported from Anna, Illinois. She recently graduated from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and is now a 2020-2021 Campus Consortium Fellow with the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting in Washington D.C. You can find her on Twitter [@AmeilaBlakely](https://twitter.com/AmeilaBlakely).