

# Missed opportunities for community engagement: An examination of the government-funded Local Journalism Initiative

*Opportunités manquées pour l'engagement communautaire : revue de l'impact de l'Initiative de journalisme local financée par le gouvernement canadien*

Magda Konieczna and Béatrice Girardin

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the Local Journalism Initiative (LJI), initially a \$70-million, five-year program of the Canadian government to fund new reporting positions in existing newsrooms across Canada, with the goal of increasing the amount of civic journalism. Using a mixed methods approach, we analyzed the language in almost 100 publicly available documents, conducted interviews with 11 participants and did a content analysis of 240 stories to examine how newsrooms defined the news desert they were trying to fill, whether work was civically focused and professionally produced, and what the LJI tells us about what kind of journalism the market can't fund. In comparing the implementation of the program to an emerging set of best practices in journalism, we argue that the LJI represents a missed opportunity to help newsrooms evolve to better focus on the kind of information their communities need. We conclude with the one outlier in our sample, a community-access television station, that does make efforts to engage its community.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'Initiative de Journalisme Local (IJL), initialement un programme du gouvernement canadien. Au coût de 70 millions de dollars sur cinq ans, il a pour objectif de financer l'embauche de journalistes dans les salles de rédaction à travers le Canada, dans le but d'augmenter le volume de journalisme civique. En utilisant des méthodes mixtes, nous avons analysé le langage utilisé pour parler de l'initiative dans près de 100 documents publics, mené des entretiens auprès d'11 participants et procédé à une analyse de contenu de 240 articles, le tout dans l'objectif d'examiner comment les journalistes et rédacteurs définissaient les déserts d'information, si le journalisme produit était professionnel et présentait un an-

## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:** *local news, qualitative methods, case studies, Local Journalism Initiative, political economy of news*

**Mots-clés :** *information locale, méthodes qualitatives, études de cas, Initiative de journalisme local, économie politique de l'information*

**APA citation:** Konieczna, K. & Girardin, B. (2024). Missed opportunities for community engagement: An examination of the government-funded Local Journalism Initiative. *Facts and Frictions: Emerging Debates, Pedagogies and Practices in Contemporary Journalism*, 3(2), 8-21. <http://doi.org/10.22215/ff/v3.i2.04>

Open Access / CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

gle civique, et comprendre ce que l'IJL nous dit sur les types de journalisme que le marché ne peut pas financer. En comparant la mise en oeuvre du programme aux meilleures pratiques émergentes en journalisme, nous concluons que l'IJL représente une occasion manquée de concrètement aider les salles de rédaction à évoluer pour mieux se concentrer sur les types d'informations qui répondent aux besoins de leurs communautés. Nous concluons avec une exception identifiée dans notre échantillon, soit une station de télévision communautaire qui fait des efforts pour impliquer sa communauté dans la production du contenu.

## INTRODUCTION

The financial crisis in journalism has led to a range of responses from policymakers, the civic space, and the business community. In the U.S., much of that response has come in the form of philanthropic support—something we’ve seen little of in Canada (Lindgren, 2022). Here, we instead have a government that has long supported news production, and has significantly increased that support in the last five years. But what are the goals of these government interventions? What should we expect them to achieve? How do they measure up? This article uses a mixed method approach to examine the government’s articulated goals for one particular intervention, the Local Journalism Initiative. We examine how those goals play out, and what we can learn.

Ultimately, our findings demonstrate that, while the government sets out to use the LJI to increase journalism that “covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada” (Canadian Heritage, 2020), the program does not offer adequate direction on how to do so. Instead, and in contrast to best practices (Ellis et al., 2022; Wenzel, 2020), it assumes that newsrooms already know how, and that if they haven’t been “cover(ing) the diverse needs of underserved communities,” it’s something that can be remedied with more funding. In this way, the program takes a traditional approach, funding the hiring of newswriters into existing newsrooms. As such, our data suggests that the LJI represents a missed opportunity to help newsrooms evolve to better focus on the kind of information their communities need—approaches that might also help make these newsrooms more sustainable in the long term. Still, we recognize one outlier in our sample—a community access television station that does work to engage its community, in ways that are perhaps traditional to that medium, and that could offer lessons to the other sites in our sample.

## WHAT CAN AND SHOULD GOVERNMENTS DO?

Throughout the 20th century, many states delegated private companies to ensure access to quality information. Still, while we tend to think

of American journalism as fiercely independent, Kreiss and Ananny (2013) argue that even there, the government played an essential role in news production, through postal subsidies in the 18th century that enabled widespread distribution, and later through tax exemptions, by permitting joint operating agreements that otherwise contravened antitrust laws, and by creating the infrastructure for broadcast and internet communications (McChesney & Nichols, 2010).

Today there is growing consensus among scholars and critics that the market simply cannot provide the kind of journalism democracy demands. Journalism is a public good, meaning that it benefits everyone, even those who don’t consume or pay for it (Hamilton, 2004). That, coupled with high fixed costs, means that true public service journalism cannot be adequately supported by the marketplace. Like with schools, roads, and libraries, it makes sense for the government to step in (see, e.g., Murschetz, 2019; Konieczna, 2018).

Still, while the rationale for government support for journalism is well-established (if not without its critics), figuring out how to provide it has proven tricky. In Europe, governments have tended toward direct subsidies to news organizations, despite the challenges they pose to journalistic independence (Murschetz, 2019). These subsidies have “an in-built bias toward failure,” Murschetz argues, because they don’t help to overcome the economic crisis at the heart of journalism; can be seen to waste taxpayers’ money; do little to support innovation in media; and don’t incentivize news consumption or satisfaction with journalism (Murschetz, 2019).

The core question, Murschetz argues, is how to create these structures in a way that supports accountability. He offers some best practices:

- Providing state support within existing institutional structures independent from the government;
- Ensuring support is based not just on economic principles but on political, social, cultural and democratic ones; and
- Offering transparent rules (Murschetz, 2019).

Pickard (2011) levels a similar argument, noting that we need to build “an alternative media infrastructure insulated from those commercial pres-

sures that, if not caused, at least exacerbated today’s journalism crisis” (Pickard, 2011, p. 90).

At the same time, the idea of what journalistic interventions can achieve has been evolving. When the field of nonprofit news started to grow in the early 2000s, it was seen as a way of continuing to do the good work journalists had long been doing (Konieczna, 2018). Today, those expectations have changed. We see growing support for a more community-centered journalism (Wenzel, 2020), which recognizes that long-standing journalistic norms emerged as a response to market pressures and thus aren’t always focused on the needs of community members. Given the tools to build a more intentional journalistic environment, such as philanthropy and government funds, these scholars argue, we should work with the community to provide the information they need (see, e.g., Wenzel, 2020; Ellis et al., 2021). Below we introduce the LJI and argue, as scholars of community-centered journalism have, that its goal of producing journalism that is “relevant to the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada” (Canadian Heritage, 2020) firstly requires community engagement to determine those needs.

### Canada and the Local Journalism Initiative

The Canadian government has a long history of funding media and journalism, in particular through the CBC and, more recently, the Canada Periodical Fund (which itself replaced older programs). These interventions come out of investigations of the state of journalism, including the 1970 Davey report, an outcome of Senate hear-

ings on media ownership. The most recent federal committee report examines the erosion of local journalism (Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 2017) and led to the government announcement in 2018 of \$595 million over five years to support media. This included the Canadian journalism labour tax credit (Canada Revenue Agency, n.d.), which refunds 25% of the costs of hiring journalists at eligible news organizations. Also in 2018, the government announced \$50 million (later topped up to \$70 million) for the Local Journalism Initiative, or LJI, (Canadian Government News, 2019), which funds new positions in existing newsrooms. (The government has since renewed the LJI, with \$58.8 million for 2024-2027. ) This study focuses on the LJI specifically because, as direct cash to news organizations, it is the most obvious and transparent measure of government support for news.

The Canadian government describes the LJI thus: “The Local Journalism Initiative supports the creation of original civic journalism that is relevant to the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada, broadening availability and consumption of local and regional news on matters of civic governance” (Canadian Heritage, 2020). The government defines underserved communities as news deserts—“where citizens do not have access to journalistic information about community issues and institutions because there are no daily or community newspapers and other media”—or areas of news poverty—“communities where there is limited access to journalistic content about community issues and institutions through existing news media” (News Media Can-

**Table 1:** List of Administrator Organizations (News Media Canada, n.d.-a)

Administrator Organization	Area covered
News Media Canada	English, French and Indigenous print and online news media across Canada
Reseau Presse	Official language minority written press: French newspapers outside Quebec
Quebec Community Newspapers Association	Official language minority written press: English newspapers in Quebec
National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada	Ethnic newspapers and media
Community Radio Fund of Canada	Community radio
Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS) -and- Fédération des télévisions communautaires autonomes du Québec	Community television

ada, n.d.-c). But, it fails to define what it means to cover the “diverse needs of underserved communities”—a failure that we will argue leads to limitations in the program.

To implement the LJI, the government designated seven associations, operating across medium and language, to administer the initiative, to avoid the perception of government interference. Each of these Administrator Organizations (AOs) set up its own application and assessment process for news organizations. Journalists can be paid up to \$60,000 per year and freelancers and project-based work can also be funded. Each news organization is responsible for hiring its own reporters, though one AO helps its members with that process.

Despite the arms-length relationship there are some government-mandated requirements for recipients:

- The program funds the hiring specifically of professional journalists;
- These journalists need to produce additional content above what was already being produced; and
- The stories need to be made available to any news organization to republish, including those not involved in the LJI.

The initiative ran as a pilot program from Oct. 2019 to March 2021, and was renewed for the period of April 2021 to March 2024, and was renewed again from 2024-2027. In its inaugural year, the initiative funded 342 journalists in 251 newsrooms across Canada for 18-month terms (Greenspon & Davey, 2021).

## METHODS

This article uses a mixed methods approach to enable examining the LJI from a range of perspectives. We started by collecting publicly available documents about the Local Journalism Initiative to investigate how stakeholders express their goals for the program. Putting together the corpus of documents was challenging because each stakeholder communicates through a different set of channels, not all of which are easily searchable. As such, the list below represents all the documents we were able to find, starting with directly visiting the websites of stakeholders, followed by web searches using the terms “Local Journalism Initiative,” “Initiative de journalisme local,” and finally, snowball sampling. Overall, almost 100 documents were examined.

The materials were collected over the winter of 2022. Subsequently, a discourse analysis was conducted using the grounded theory approach described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The documents were examined for recurring themes related to the goals and aspirations for the program. A set of codes was developed and defined through an iterative process, from the documents to the codes and back again, until expressions of goals for the LJI were adequately coded and a level of saturation was reached. We then returned to the list of codes, analyzing them in turn to see how they related to one another and which were nested under the others.

This method offered insights into how the LJI is conveyed and promoted to participants and the public by the stakeholders who participate in it

**Table 2:** *Breakdown of the corpus of documents examined*

Stakeholder	Number of documents	Information source
Government	5	Government LJI website Government press releases Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage
Administrator Organizations (AOs)	67	Organizations' websites Blank application forms to apply for positions to each AO
News organizations, media critics	20	Articles about their participation in the LJI (found through the AO portals that publish all LJI content) Job ads Op eds, columns or Tweets about the LJI (found through searching news databases, partially through snowball sampling)

(with the exception of community members, since no documents were located that reflected their perspectives). Still, this approach left many questions about how the LJI is actually understood and implemented across newsrooms. To begin to address these shortcomings, we followed up with case studies of six news organizations that received LJI funding (the case selection process is described in detail below). For five of the six case studies, we interviewed the LJI-funded reporter and their editor or publisher (a loose interview guide is in Appendix A). At the sixth site, there were no staff reporters—instead, the LJI funds were used for freelancers. In that case, we only interviewed the editor/publisher.

We also did a basic content analysis at each case study site, randomly selecting 20 stories produced by the LJI-funded reporter, and 20 produced in the year prior to the period of funding to give us a basis of comparison for the LJI-funded content. We examined only stories produced by newsroom staff, excluding editorials, letters to the editor, syndicated content, newswire stories, etc.—which in some newsrooms meant we were excluding the vast majority of content published, both before and during the LJI window. The content analysis allows us to examine the degree to which the LJI funding achieved its goal of producing local content by coding the place in which each story was set, and whether it reflected the government’s goal of creating “original civic journalism,” and “news on matters of civic governance.” The government’s LJI documents define civic journalism as reporting that focuses on “the activities of the country’s civic institutions (for example, courthouses, city halls, band councils, school boards, federal Parliament or provincial legislatures) or subjects of public importance to society” (Canadian Heritage, 2019). As a result, we coded for the number and type of governmental institutions mentioned in each story. Our codebook is in Appendix B.

## Case selection

We aimed to choose sites that were very different from one another, to capture the scope of the LJI nationally, across geography, language, Administrator Organization, and medium, and across the urban-rural divide. The LJI requires organizations to put their stories in a repository,

so these were easily accessible—but because we wanted to examine pre-LJI content, we were also limited to those publications with easily usable online repositories of their work. We also needed to confirm that staff at the organizations were willing to be interviewed. Satisfying all these criteria proved difficult. Ultimately, we found six appropriate sites:

- **Alberta Jewish News**, an independent newspaper that has covered news and events from a Jewish perspective, including Holocaust education, racism, human rights, health, and incarceration, since 1990. *AJN* publishes a newspaper and a website. Their LJI funding was administered by the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada;
- **The Eastern Graphic**, owned by Island Press, Limited, a family-owned media company that has four newspapers on Prince Edward Island. It was founded in 1963 and has 15 full-time employees. It received LJI funding through News Media Canada;
- **Focus Media Arts Centre**, located in Regent Park, a historic public housing project near downtown Toronto. The non-profit centre was founded 30 years ago to counter mainstream media narratives of the community. The centre operates in multiple mediums, including internet radio and TV. It got its first LJI position, for a part-time employee, in 2020, and last year received a second position to work in two nearby communities. Focus’s LJI funding came through Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS);
- **The Hamilton Spectator**, a daily newspaper owned by Torstar, a large publisher of daily and community newspapers in Ontario. The newspaper first hired a reporter to fill its LJI role in early 2020, and that same reporter’s contract has been renewed ever since then. It was funded through News Media Canada;
- **qathet Living**, a 60-page, free community magazine covering Powell River, British Columbia, since 2006. The team consists of three full-time staff members, and a number of contributors each month, and was also funded through News Media Canada; and

- **Le Quotidien**, an online, daily, French-language newspaper in the relatively remote region of Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean in Quebec. As of 2020, it is published by the Coopérative nationale de l’information indépendante press group, a press cooperative. The publication has had three cycles of LJI funding through News Media Canada, focused on reporting on the region and on youth.

Examining these cases, and the broader collec-

tion of publicly available documents about the LJI, this study asks the following:

**RQ1.** How do the LJI-funded newsrooms define the news desert they are working to fill? And, what kind of work are they producing to fill those news deserts?

**RQ2.** Is the work professionally produced and civically focused?

**RQ3.** What does the LJI tell us about what kind of journalism the market can’t fund?

**Table 3:** *Diversity of cases across a range of factors*

	<b>Administrator Organization</b>	<b>Geographic diversity</b>	<b>Linguistic diversity</b>	<b>Rural/Urban*</b>
Alberta Jewish News	National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada	West	English	Large urban population centre
Eastern Graphic	News Media Canada	East	English	Small population centre
Focus Media Arts Centre	Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS)	Central	English	Large urban population centre
Hamilton Spectator	News Media Canada	Central	English	Large urban population centre
qathet Living	News Media Canada	West	English	Small population centre
Le Quotidien	News Media Canada	Central	French	Large urban population centre

\*We used the Statistics Canada classification: large urban population centres (>100,000 residents); medium population centres (30,000 to 99,999 residents); small population centres (1,000-29,999 residents) (Statistics Canada, 2017).

## FINDINGS

### Conceptualizing and filling news deserts

RQ1 asked how the funded organizations were defining news deserts, and what kind of work they were doing to fill them. In documents about the LJI, the government defines news deserts as “communities where citizens do not have access to journalistic information about community issues and institutions because there are no daily or community newspapers and other media (for example, community radio or television). Also, if they (sic) are other public or private broadcasters, they do not produce local news.” It defines areas of ‘news poverty’ as “communities where there is limited access to journalistic content about community

issues and institutions through a daily newspaper or public or private broadcaster. Available sources of local news—whether a newspaper, a community radio station or other media—demonstrate significant gaps in coverage due to a lack of capacity” (Canadian Heritage, 2019). We see here a suggestion that a lack of resources (“capacity”) at existing news organizations limits how much reporting they produce, and that the government can solve these gaps with funds that increase the *amount* of journalism. In line with this perspective, one of the AOs, the Community Radio Fund of Canada, describes the initiative as one “which aims to increase the production capacity of local news in markets with little or no service” (Community Radio Fund of Canada, 2020).

To that end, the LJI requires recipients to commit to producing a certain amount of civic journalism above what they were already doing. Each administrator organization has its own requirements: News Media Canada's guidelines specify an average of five to seven stories a week, for instance (News Media Canada, n.d.-b). CACTUS and the Fédération des télévisions communautaires autonomes du Québec note that funded organizations need to "work with citizens and local organizations" to produce three "civic-function news stories (i.e. different topics)" per week and at least one, and on average two, hours of "civic-function journalism" per week, above what was already being produced prior to the LJI funds (The Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations, n.d.). The organizations are also required to make their stories available to be republished, which can increase the amount of civic journalism outside of funded organizations.

This focus on the amount of journalism is evident in essays CACTUS published from funded newsrooms:

- Télé-Soleil noted that it was hard for its director, working on her own, to produce informative content for her community. With the LJI money, the station was able to hire a journalist who relaunched an existing news program and set up a new one, adding that, "Without the Local Journalism Initiative, the very survival of Télé-Soleil would have been compromised, and with it, the very existence of news in the eastern region of Haute-Gaspésie" (CACTUS, 2021)—a remote county in Quebec.<sup>1</sup>
- Regent Park TV similarly noted, "With the increased capacity as a result of the Local Journalism Initiative funding to report about what is happening from within our local community, Regent Park TV has gained new importance to the community and has become instrumental in covering stories and issues that connect our local neighbourhood with events beyond" (CACTUS, n.d.-b).

To deepen this analysis, we interviewed editors and reporters, as well as examining the findings

from our content analysis.

#### *Alberta Jewish News*

*AJN* used the money as a pool from which to pay freelancers for the first time. "Before LJI it would either be (the editor or the publisher) doing matter-of-fact event coverage or we would ask a group that's having an event, 'could you provide an article for us about why it's important,'" the publisher said (personal communication, Oct. 24, 2022). In this way, the funding dramatically impacted the newsroom and the content it produces. About 90% of the stories on *AJN*'s website came from newswires focused on Israel or Jewish life. As noted in our methods section, these stories were not part of our analysis; still, they represent most of what readers see when they look at the site. In contrast, all but one of the LJI stories focused on the Jewish communities in Edmonton and Calgary. In other words, *AJN* was able to mobilize the LJI funds to significantly increase the amount of local news produced.

#### *Eastern Graphic*

The *Eastern Graphic*'s application for LJI funding identifies rural communities in Prince Edward Island as areas of news poverty. All but one of the stories in our analysis of content produced by the LJI-funded reporter was local. From September 2021 to March 2022, the LJI reporter didn't publish anything, working instead on a 32-part special series about mental health and addiction after the government closed a space frequently used by homeless people. PEI's premier committed more funding for methadone treatment and mental health after being questioned about the newspaper's reporting (Lewis 2022).

Despite this impact, the series violated the terms of the LJI set out by the AO working with the *Eastern Graphic*, which requires newsrooms to publish five to seven stories a week. The editor said the AO contacted him to ask why he wasn't publishing—but he wasn't warned that his funding was in danger. When it wasn't renewed, he got no explanation but suspects it was a result of his publishing schedule. He points out that during the time of the reporter's contract, he found an important story and decided to use LJI funds to cover it be-

<sup>1</sup>These comments are translated from French by Google Translate and the authors.

cause he had no other resources. “That right there is small publications. In big corporations you can just switch around journalists,” he said (personal communication, July 29, 2022).

### Focus Media Arts Centre

In their application for LJI funding, Focus staff argued that their community is underserved by media, despite being adjacent to downtown Toronto. The Centre notes that the funding allowed it to present “stories that might not receive the same coverage from mainstream media sources” (CACTUS, n.d.-c).

Most AOs use their LJI efforts to increase the amount of news produced; CACTUS, the one working with Focus, does, too, but also looks for reporters to “convene public events and programming that engage the community in dialog” (CACTUS, n.d.-c). In interviews we learned that Focus worked to engage the community by spending LJI funds on a trainer who taught teenagers to produce a newscast, and to stream community events or public meetings. “The LJI journalists are not just there to be journalists but—at least for CACTUS—the journalists are there to provide support for the communities to help with the production,” said Focus’s artistic director. “So the LJI journalist serves as a resource for community members to produce their own content” (personal communication, Aug. 9, 2022).

In contrast to the news content produced with the LJI funding, our analysis found that pre-LJI, Focus produced little news. We found two fictional films; a conceptual film about what it’s like to have dyslexia; and an African folk tale. There were also a few local pieces: two reports on community groups; coverage of community events; a conversation with neighbourhood police officers; and footage of a town hall meeting.

### Hamilton Spectator

The *Spectator*’s LJI funding was for coverage of the electoral district of Haldimand-Norfolk, adjacent to the paper’s existing coverage area. Their LJI reporter had been the editor and reporter at a weekly newspaper covering the area until it shut down. As a result, “there were so many stories that come out of there that weren’t being told and we didn’t have the resources to dedicate to that, because there’s so much going on in our market,

and having somebody duck in and duck out wasn’t doing it justice,” the *Spectator* editor noted (personal communication, Oct. 4, 2022). While the funding is literally for covering the electoral district, his coverage has tended to include two adjacent Indigenous reserves. “It’s a lot of territory but I go where the news is, and it could be argued the reserves are even more of a news desert than Haldimand-Norfolk in terms of attention paid by non-Indigenous media,” the reporter said (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022).

When we examined the *Spectator*’s coverage, the results were very clear: of the 20 randomly selected pre-LJI stories, none were set in Haldimand-Norfolk. Of the 20 LJI stories in our sample, all but two were set there. “On other beats, people might get pulled off,” the editor said. In contrast, the LJI reporter remained in place: “We knew that the money was given to us so he could report in this area and we were very cognizant of the fact that we (can’t) lie and say it’s about this and use him as a (general assignment) reporter.” Many of his stories get picked up by community newspapers in the area, which no longer have the resources to adequately cover it themselves. One paper in particular publishes “almost all” of his stories, he said. “Their only reporter in Norfolk is me and I don’t work for them” (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022).

### *qathet Living*

*qathet Living* found someone they wanted to hire—an 18-year-old member of the Tla’amin Nation, a nearby Indigenous community, who had been an occasional contributor to the magazine—and applied for LJI funds to bring her on. Before this, the magazine hadn’t had a full time contributor from the Tla’amin Nation and the editor noted that, without the funds, they would not have been able to hire someone to cover some of the major issues of 2021, including the discovery of graves at the residential school where many of the Indigenous children in the area had been sent (personal communication, Aug. 10, 2022). Given the reporter’s background as a member of the local Indigenous community, they were lucky, the editor noted, to have her reporting on this and other Indigenous issues that year. The LJI-funded stories we examined focused heavily on government institutions and local issues, with almost all pieces touching



those areas. Among the most mentioned institutions were the fishing ministry, the local town council and elected officials, and the Tla'amin Nation.

### *Le Quotidien*

*Le Quotidien* had two LJI reporters in the time period we examined. One covered the north of Lac St-Jean, an area that is a news desert by virtue of its geography, being a two-hour drive from the City of Saguenay. The reporter noted that as one person, he's never able to fully cover the area. The second was reporting on youth issues in the area, focusing on work by young people and issues of interest to them. She noted that there are few other voices writing for this demographic.

### **Was the work professionally produced and civic-focused?**

RQ2 asks whether the LJI succeeds at the government goal of increasing the professional production of civic journalism. The government's LJI website notes, "The Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) supports the creation of original civic journalism that covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada" (Canadian Heritage, 2020) and that, "Civic journalism covers the activities of the country's civic institutions (for example, courthouses, city halls, band councils, school boards, federal Parliament or provincial legislatures) or subjects of public importance to society" (Canadian Heritage, 2019).<sup>2</sup> A news release adds that the funding is specifically for professional journalists: "In Budget 2018, the Government announced a new investment of \$50 million over five years to support professional local journalism" (Canadian Heritage, 2019b).

Requirements for applicants illustrate that "professional" might refer to education or work experience. For instance, Metroland Media, a large news publisher in Ontario, required applicants to have a degree or diploma in journalism or a related field, and experience writing, taking photos, and shooting video (Torstar, n.d.). Further, in a press release, an executive from the large chain Postmedia noted that, "We're looking for strong journalists

who have great narrative skills on multiple platforms and a proven ability to initiate coverage and create contextual features" (Business Wire, 2020).

In contrast, while CACTUS notes that applicants should have a journalism degree or experience (The Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations, n.d.), it also seeks skills including "self motivation and proven ability to generate story ideas" and "ability to identify, research and produce engaging video stories, and to convene public events and programming that engage the community in dialog," adding that preference will be given to applicants with experience in community media, production skills, and data journalism skills (CACTUS, n.d.-a). The organization also offers training on community engagement.

### *Alberta Jewish News*

For the publisher of *Alberta Jewish News*, a Jewish perspective was more important than the civic focus. Our content analysis found that columns about Jewish tradition or writings, both LJI-funded and not, tended not to focus on government institutions. Some articles about the local Jewish community focused on public institutions such as hospitals or universities; others focused on private institutions such as Jewish schools or nursing homes, and some mentioned no institutions at all. The stories published with the LJI funding did not demonstrate a significantly greater civic focus than those published before the LJI period. However, in interviews we learned that before the LJI, all stories (except those written by the editor or publisher) were submitted by volunteers, usually event organizers, and thus did not represent professionally produced journalism. This difference is significant but not captured by our content analysis, which is a limitation of our study.

### *Eastern Graphic*

About half the stories produced by the *Eastern Graphic's* LJI-funded reporter mentioned government institutions. In interviews, we learned that one of the editor's goals was to use the LJI money to hold government accountable for a lack of services in rural areas of PEI. The articles mention a

---

<sup>2</sup>This definition, presumably originating on the government site, is republished across the websites of the AOs.

variety of government institutions: the provincial Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, and the police.

### Focus Media Arts Centre

As noted above, before the LJI, most of the content produced by Focus Media Arts Centre was fictional or experimental. The LJI-funded content mentioned almost four times more government institutions than did the pre-LJI pieces. Still, it seems almost unfair to compare the pre-LJI pieces with the stories produced using the LJI funding, since the pre-LJI content was not news. Interviews offer important insights here.

The LJI-funded staffer was a long-time volunteer before being hired—suggesting perhaps a different definition of professional. He noted that the centre always had a civic focus, using a social justice framework to improve civic engagement, even when producing dramas. In other words, the civic focus was always there; what the LJI brought was the focus on *journalism*. The artistic director noted that an idea or story is civic if it is “an event that engages the community and (is) related to issues or social inclusion, if it’s related to community matters that are relevant to the community” (personal communication, Aug. 9, 2022). If the centre covered a cultural bazaar, for instance, “it’s about the context of empowering the members of the low-income community to have employment opportunity, income generation opportunity, and recognition that they’re there and that organizations and institutions in the area should use them,” he said (personal communication, Aug. 9, 2022).

### Hamilton Spectator

The editor at the *Hamilton Spectator* told us that she did not work with a clear definition of civic journalism: “I feel like it’s baked in. It’s just a lot of the time what we do,” she said, referencing ingrained journalistic norms. She noted that when they cover stories of civic importance, it’s not because they identify them as civic and thus as their responsibility; instead, “we just think they’re important stories to tell,” (personal communication, Oct. 4, 2022). Almost all the *Spectator* stories we examined—both by the LJI reporter and by the newsroom in the year before LJI funding—were civic focused, with the vast majority mentioning multiple government institutions.

The reporter noted that when he had previously worked at the Norfolk County newspaper—now a portion of his LJI-funded coverage area—he was able to focus more directly on things like city council. “When you say civic journalism, the first thing that comes to mind is covering council and I wish that I could do more of the holding politicians to account,” he said (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022). Instead, because the position covers such a large area, “the role is less about being in the weeds of any particular council but more farming, economic, COVID that would apply in a bigger area.” He sees the civic focus of the position as advocating for people who lack agency. For instance, when a detox centre at Norfolk General Hospital closed:

perhaps some other outlets would just quote the press release, but in my role I can go to people who use the service, and ask what it means for them. I can take an extra day and bring questions to the hospital and keep the topic in the public eye and it can be picked up by another outlet, so to me, in as unbiased a way as I can, that’s advocating for as many people as possible. (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022)

### qathet Living

At *qathet Living*, the topics examined by the LJI reporter and before the period of LJI funding are similar in terms of their local focus and the topics they cover—fishing, hunting and, more broadly, the community’s relationship with nature. However, the stories written before the LJI less frequently mention government or civic institutions. These content observations were validated by the editor, who noted in particular that without the LJI reporter the publication would have been less able to cover issues such as discoveries of graves of children at a government-funded, church-run residential school where many of the Indigenous children in the publication’s coverage area had been sent (personal communication, Aug. 10, 2022).

### Le Quotidien

At *Le Quotidien*, our content analysis revealed minor upticks in focus on civic institutions by the LJI-funded reporters compared to the newsroom before the funding came through. The regional reporter was most focused on ministries dealing with

agriculture, parks, wildlife, and climate change; the youth reporter was more heavily focused on high schools and regional colleges.

### **What does this tell us about the market for news?**

Finally, RQ3 asked what the LJI tells us about the kind of journalism the market cannot fund. This is, of course, a complex question that is hard to examine empirically, because it is unclear what data sheds light on it. Still, the LJI offers some insight: by definition, the LJI-funded positions are ones the news organizations perceive that market *isn't* supporting—and, the newsrooms have made an argument for why this is a gap that should be funded by a government grant, an argument that was accepted by their Administrator Organization. As such, the answers to RQ1 and RQ2 can guide our inferences.

Seen this way, the answer to RQ3 was relatively clear at the *Hamilton Spectator*—reporting on Haldimand-Norfolk had shrunk in recent years, and so the *Spectator* applied for government funds to beef it up. “I have a large geographic area with different communities. There are former municipalities, and any one of them has had its own full paper (at some point) with multiple reporters each,” the LJI reporter said. “I have to let go of the pressure to cover every single story everywhere, but I do as much as I can. It’s trying to fill the news desert but I can’t fill the desert myself” (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022).

The evidence here goes even deeper though. As noted above, one requirement of the LJI is that all stories be publicly available for other news organizations to republish. “The LJI funds are supporting local news in Haldimand literally by my news being in the (local newspaper there),” the reporter noted, because it’s able to republish his work, per the requirements of the LJI. One paper in particular publishes “almost all of my stuff,” he said. “Their only reporter in Norfolk is me and I don’t work for them. ... They would never have deigned to run a competitor’s article in the past but it’s a sign of how everyone’s hobbled” (personal communication, Oct. 17, 2022). This makes very clear that the market has not been funding the amount of reporting on the area that editors think it should. (Note that one shortcoming of this research is that

we are not examining whether audiences feel there should be more reporting.)

In Regent Park, the situation is less clear than at the *Spectator*, since there are plenty of other news organizations covering Toronto, and examining their content is not within our scope. Here we note the Centre uses LJI funds to train teenagers to produce a newscast, and to stream community meetings. This is in line with CACTUS’s description of the LJI: “The journalists will co-ordinate teams of citizens and local organizations to produce news and local information, building news production capacity in these underserved communities for the long haul” (CACTUS, n.d.-a). Thus, even if some of the content is covered by other media, Focus contributes by training and offering voice to a group that is likely underrepresented in other media.

At the *Eastern Graphic*, the editor called their series on mental health and addiction the most impactful work he’s ever done, and noted that the newsroom wouldn’t have been able to do it without the LJI funds. The LJI enabled *Alberta Jewish News* to pay writers for the first time, instead of being limited to publishing press releases by event organizers. *qathet Living* was able to use the money to hire and train a young reporter who was a member of the local Indigenous community to report from an Indigenous perspective. Through this examination we see at least hints of the kind of reporting these publications feel is not supported by the market.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings we present above highlight the ways in which LJI-funded newsrooms define and aim to fill news deserts by producing professional and civically-focused news, ultimately focusing on the journalism that the market cannot produce. Still, despite the fact that the LJI led to the hiring of hundreds of journalists and the production of thousands of stories, when compared to emerging best-practices around community-centered journalism, it is evident that the program is ultimately limited in its aims. Advocates of community-centered journalism (Ellis et al., 2022; Wenzel, 2020) note that journalism that truly fills the needs of communities cannot adequately be funded by the marketplace. The LJI acknowledges this, too. But, the community-centered jour-

nalism movement argues that mission-focused funding sources, e.g. philanthropy and government, should support a community-centered approach that works with citizens to figure out what kind of information they want and need to make their community a better place (Ellis et al., 2022). Freed from market constraints, the Canadian government, too, could develop a mission-focused approach to support the production of the kind of news community members truly need. Indeed, the government rationale for the program suggests as much by noting that the goal is to support “the creation of original civic journalism that covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada” (Canadian Heritage, 2020). While this wasn’t one of the questions we initially asked, throughout our research we did not observe any evidence that newsrooms or program administrators were working to determine the “diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada” (Canadian Heritage, 2020). This leads to an LJI that remains limited in its aims for two reasons.

First of all, the language around the LJI focuses on the needs of news organizations themselves, rather than on serving the needs of communities. In a press release, the Department of Canadian Heritage noted that recipient organizations will be able to hire journalists or do projects “to give their news greater visibility in underserved communities” (Canadian Heritage, 2019). The difference here is perhaps subtle, but if we look closely we see that the goal is giving “their” news greater visibility. What we see here is an industry focus, with an emphasis on serving the needs of the news organization by making its content more visible, as opposed to explicitly serving these already underserved communities. Other statements are more ambiguous, noting for instance that, “The objective must be to increase local civic journalism *in* underserved communities (emphasis added)” (Canadian Heritage, 2020). It isn’t entirely clear whether this statement refers to producing more news *about* underserved communities, *for* them, or merely *in* them.

The other shortcoming of the LJI is the government’s focus on the *amount* of journalism available. This is perhaps because this kind of metric is easier to quantify—government funding for journalism is already controversial, even without the government judging the content of local news (see,

e.g., Scire, 2020; Ho & Ingram, 2018; Dzsurdzsa, 2021). This means that news organizations that attain the quota of stories (five to seven per week for those funded by News Media Canada, for instance) are fulfilling the criteria of the program; when the *Eastern Graphic’s* LJI funding wasn’t renewed after the editor decided to respond to what he perceived as community needs in a way that led to a more sporadic production of content, its editor believed it was judged as not being successful in the program. (Note that we don’t know why the *Graphic* didn’t receive LJI funding in the subsequent year; we do know, however, that News Media Canada was concerned about the regularity of the paper’s coverage. The lack of transparency around the program is a secondary problem not fully examined here.) Indeed, among the editors we interviewed, this quota was identified as the largest challenge to fulfilling the requirements of the program.

The exception to these shortcomings is the CACTUS approach to the LJI, which asks newsrooms to “convene public events and programming that engage the community in dialog” (CACTUS, n.d.-a). In response, Focus, the CACTUS-funded newsroom examined here, used the LJI funds to train teenagers to produce a newscast. Helping community members develop skills to collect and produce news has long been a goal of community television, but incorporating it into the LJI makes this a novel approach, and worthy of further examination to determine whether it could be implemented more broadly. Perhaps within the CACTUS approach lies the solution to creating a stronger, more impactful LJI. While plenty of other more engaged approaches may exist, any revision to the LJI would do well to start by examining the work of the CACTUS-funded organizations to assess what they teach us about how to be more community-oriented.

Ultimately, though, we don’t know the impact of the LJI on communities. Are they better served than they were before the funding? What concerns do community members have that could be addressed through a more community-centered journalism—and how do communities that host LJI reporters wish that would play out? Future research should investigate this element of the program.

---

**Magda Konieczna** is associate professor in the journalism department at Concordia University. She is the author of *Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails* (Oxford University Press, 2018).  
[magda.konieczna@concordia.ca](mailto:magda.konieczna@concordia.ca)

**Béatrice Girardin** serves as a technology consultant and advisor, leading digital transitions across diverse organizations. She holds bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering from Polytechnique Montréal and a graduate diploma in Visual Journalism from Concordia University.  
[bg@volume10.com](mailto:bg@volume10.com)

---

## REFERENCES

- Business Wire. (2020, January 30). Now hiring – community journalists. *Financial Post*. <https://financialpost.com/pmn/press-releases-pmn/business-wire-news-releases-pmn/now-hiring-community-journalists>
- CACTUS. (n.d.-a). *Apply for TV journalist positions under Local Journalism Initiative | CACT(us)*. <https://cactusmedia.ca/http%3A/%252Fwww.cactusmedia.ca/sites/default/files/cactus/LJI+journalist+application+form+Oct+24.doc> Retrieved October 10, 2021.
- CACTUS. (n.d.-b). *Like a cat with three legs, we go on*.
- CACTUS. (n.d.-c). *LJI journalists serve Regent Park Community*. <https://www.commediaportal.ca/web/en/blog/lji-journalists-serve-regent-park-community>. Retrieved October 12, 2021.
- CACTUS. (2021, March 9). Le projet d'initiative de journalisme local (IJL), une nécessité pour assurer l'information télévisuelle en Haute-Gaspésie. *Community Media Portal*. <https://commediaportal.ca/fr/blog/le-projet-dinitiative-de-journalisme-local-ijl-une-necessite-pour-assurer-linformation>
- Canada Revenue Agency (n.d.) Guidance on the income tax measures to support journalism. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/businesses/topics/corporations/business-tax-credits/qualified-canadian-journalism-organization/guidance.html>
- Canadian Government News. (2019, May 29). *The Government of Canada supports Canadian journalism to ensure the vitality of democracy*. <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/the-government-of-canada-supports-canadian-journalism-to-ensure-the-vitality-of-democracy-822434599.html>
- Canadian Heritage. (2019, May 22). *Glossary of terms—Local Journalism Initiative*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/local-journalism-initiative/glossary.html>
- Canadian Heritage. (2020, June 19). *Local Journalism Initiative*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/local-journalism-initiative.html>
- Community Radio Fund of Canada. (2020, 21 janvier). *Les récipiendaires de fonds dans le cadre de l'Initiative de journalisme local en radio sont connus*. <https://crtc-fcr.ca/recipiendaires-de-fonds-cadre-de-linitiative-de-journalisme-local-radio-connus/>
- Dzsurdzsa, C. (2021, August 18). Overseers of \$50 million local journalism subsidy won't say how money was distributed. *True North*. <https://tnc.news/2021/08/18/overseers-of-50-million-local-journalism-subsidy-wont-say-how-money-was-distributed/>
- Ellis, P. L., Voakes, P. S., & Bergen, L. (2022). *News for US: Citizen-centered journalism*. Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Greenspon, E., & Davey, K. (2021, August 3). As revenue declines and big tech steps in, there are three options to help journalism in Canada. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/as-news-organizations-revenue-declines-theres-three-options-to-help-journalism-in-canada>
- Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press.
- Ho, K. K., & Ingram, M. (2018, February 28). Canada pledges \$50 million to local journalism. Will it help? *Columbia Journalism Review*. [https://www.cjr.org/business\\_of\\_news/canada-journalism-fund-torstar-postmedia.php](https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/canada-journalism-fund-torstar-postmedia.php)
- Konieczna, M. (2018). *Journalism without profit: Making news when the market fails*. Oxford University Press.
- Kreiss, D., & Ananny, M. (2013). Responsibilities of the state: Rethinking the case and possibilities for public support of journalism. *First Monday*, 18(4). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i4.4323>
- Lindgren, A. (2022, fall). Talk now, avoid conflict later: Openness and transparency are essential as philanthropic support for journalism becomes more widespread. *PhiLab*, 4. [https://philab.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Annee\\_PhiLanthropique\\_case\\_studies\\_2.pdf](https://philab.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Annee_PhiLanthropique_case_studies_2.pdf)
- McChesney, R. W., & Nichols, J. (2010). *The death and life of American journalism: The media revolution that will begin the world again*. Nation Books.
- Murschetz, P. C. (2019). State-supported journalism. In T.P. Voss & F. Hanusch (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of journalism studies*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- News Media Canada. (n.d.-a). *Administrator Organizations*. Retrieved October 29, 2021, from <https://nmc-mic.ca/lji/about-lji/administrator-organizations/>
- News Media Canada. (n.d.-b). *Application guidelines for call for applications 2021-2022*. <https://nmc-mic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LJI-IJL-Guidelines-2021-NMC-03-01-eng-FINAL.pdf>
- News Media Canada. (n.d.-c). *How It Works*. Retrieved October 10, 2021, from <https://nmc-mic.ca/lji/about-lji/how-it-works/>
- Pickard, V. (2011). Can government support the press? Historicizing and internationalizing a policy approach to the journalism crisis. *The Communication Review*, 14(2), 73–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2011.573430>
- Scire, S. (2020, May 8). In Canada, a government program to support local news tries to determine who's most deserving. *Nieman Lab*. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/05/in-canada-a-government-program-to-support-local-news-tries-to-determine-whos-most-deserving/>
- Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. (2017). *Disruption: Change and churning in Canada's media landscape*. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/CHPC/Reports/RP9045583/chp-crpo6/chpcrpo6-e.pdf>
- Statistics Canada. (2017, January 16). *Population centre and rural area classification 2016*. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects/standard/perac/2016/introduction>

Strauss, A. C., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

The Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations. (n.d.). *Application form for a journalist under Heritage Canada's Local Journalism Initiative*. <https://www.cactusmedia.ca/sites/default/files/cactus/LJI%20Application%20form%20for%20>

[Community%20Television2.pdf](#)

Torstar. (n.d.). Retrieved October 15, 2021, from <https://jobs.smartrecruiters.com/Torstar/743999712279858-reporter?trid=162ef3c2-cdcc-47a9-8327-c69d95269302>

Wenzel, A. (2020). *Community-centered journalism: Engaging people, exploring solutions, and building trust*. University of Illinois Press.

## APPENDIX A

### *Loose Interview Script*

#### Reporter

- How did having LJI funding affect your job on a day-to-day basis?
- Each LJI position was earmarked to cover a particular topic. Do you feel you did a good job of your beat – why or why not?

#### Editor/Publisher

##### *The position*

- How was the LJI position defined?
- Can we see your funding application for the position, and any reports you sent back to your Administrator Organization?
- Why did you specify that you wanted LJI funding for this particular role? Why can't the market support the particular journalism you're trying to fund here?

##### *How it was implemented*

- How did you track the work that was being done?
- Was there a single editor assigning stories?
- What kind of stories fit into the position and what kind didn't? How did you make that decision?
- The LJI requires the reporters to produce civic journalism – how do you define civic for the purposes of the position?
- What are the characteristics of a successful story for your LJI reporter?
- In general, how did you measure whether your newsroom was successful in the program?

##### *Impact*

- Are you happy with how it turned out? Why or why not?
- What worked well about the LJI?
- What challenges did you face?
- What is your sense of the impact in your community? What evidence do you have of that?
- What recommendations do you have for future iterations of the program?

## APPENDIX B

### *Codebook*

Headline or equivalent for broadcast	Date	Reporter	Where the story is set	Government institutions named	Non-government institutions named