

Howard Center for Community Journalism Overview

Background

While many of the efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation are national or international in scope, local communities are ground zero for misinformation. The scope of these issues may be smaller, but the ripple effect can be widespread. Consider, for example, misinformation about critical race theory in schools and the impact that controversy has had in communities across our nation. “To inoculate audiences against malicious content, we need to build their trust in factual and high-quality journalism. We believe local news outlets are the best place to roll out and implement our findings since they are the most trusted news sources in their communities,” according to ICFJ’s Dismantling Disinformation proposal.

But one of the challenges facing many communities across the country is the lack of reliable local news sources. [“News deserts”](#) – places with little to no journalistic news coverage -- have developed in both rural and urban areas. In other areas, the news outlets covering a community have been decimated by staff cuts, leaving fewer reporters to cover a community. This void leads to a proliferation of bad information being shared on social media in these communities with no counterbalance or challenge to its accuracy.

Meanwhile, in some communities those voids have been filled with so-called [“pink slime” websites](#). These are [partisan sites](#), in many cases paid for by political action committees, disguised as news websites. One researcher told us when she spoke to a woman who regularly visited a pink slime site, the woman said it was the only news source she had to get information about her community. This misinformation/disinformation cuts across all topics and news beats. As one reporter who has covered misinformation on a national scale put it: “Every reporter is now a misinformation reporter.”

This challenge exists in both rural and urban communities, and both in predominantly white communities and in minority communities. In many cases, the information voids are similar but the lack of trust in the news stems from different causes and the tactics of misinformation/disinformation are often different, depending on the population targeted. To fully address the issue, demographics should be considered.

Without key community-level reporting, local communities cannot thrive and are more susceptible to misinformation/disinformation. This can undermine our democracy from the ground up. “Results demonstrate a negative impact on community members’ sense of community, with participants missing celebrated gatherings and noting increased isolation and diminished pride in their community. Findings also show the impact on residents’ daily lives, with one participant declaring ‘life is harder’ ...” according to a 2022 study by researchers at the University of Minnesota.

But young journalists are not being properly prepared to build relationships and trust in skeptical communities or confront misinformation in a way that builds credibility. Journalism schools and student media typically do not prioritize sustained relationship-building efforts that lead to increased trust in news. University communities also tend to be more educated and more liberal – two characteristics of people that trust the news media to a greater degree. This can create a dynamic where students are

learning how to practice journalism in a community that is predisposed to trust their work. Secondly, typical journalism classes have students parachuting in for one or two stories and then on to another class or another topic. We believe there needs to be a better model that prepares students for a career of trust-building work along with proficiency in methods that debunk misinformation.

Our solution

The Roy Howard Community Journalism Center would be designed to experiment with trust-building journalism by students in a community lacking reliable and robust news coverage. The students will provide coverage of a community, building relationships and trust. The students also will debunk false information in that community and seek to expose the sources of misinformation. In their proposals, schools will outline whether their program would create a new news organization or partner with an existing news organization(s) to develop a new hub of coverage.

The goal is for the students to:

- Actively experiment with trust-building, establishing best practices that can be shared across educational institutions and media organizations.
- In a hands-on way, acquire local/community reporting skills.
- Learn fact-checking/debunking journalism skills.

At a programmatic level, the goals are to:

- Establish and share best practices for teaching trust-building skills and community journalism.
- Establish and share best practices for teaching fact-checking/debunking in a local community.
- Provide valuable journalism for an underserved community.

The winning proposal will be funded at \$1 million per year for three years.

Selection process

The winning partner will be selected through a competitive process, with a limited number of universities invited to participate in the application process. We started by identifying four regions that are news deserts in states with a high percentage of “pink slime” websites. They are:

- West Texas
- Northern Southwest (southern Colorado/Utah, northern Arizona/New Mexico)
- Appalachia
- Deep South

We invited 19 journalism programs in those four regions to participate.

We included Hispanic Serving Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

A total of 12 of the 19 invited schools submitted initial Letters of Intent. Review committees including journalism professionals and educators evaluated the proposals and selected six schools to receive design grant of \$15,000 each.

The six schools are:

- North Carolina A&T University
- University of Southern Mississippi
- Louisiana State University
- Texas Tech University
- New Mexico University
- West Virginia University

The schools are expected to submit detailed, in-depth proposals by July 31, including:

- A detailed outline of the experiential learning the students will participate in and what students will gain from their work in the center.
- How the program will be staffed, including how the program will recruit staff members.
- How the program will recruit students, particularly students from under-served populations.
- Partnerships and how they would work, including letters of commitment from partners.
- How the program will share learnings and best practices with other universities.
- How the program will train practicing journalists in the trust-building and misinformation/disinformation skills learned at the center.
- Proposed outcomes and measures.
- A detailed three-year budget for the program.

Once we receive the full proposals, up to three will be selected for site visits. We were impressed with the innovative ideas and efforts to address news deserts and educate students contained in the initial LOIs.