

News Cooperatives Planting the Seeds of a More Democratic Journalism

By Kate B. Maxwell

Bright spots, including hundreds of new digital outlets and a growing number of cooperatives providing an alternative media model, are popping up across the evolving media landscape. They promise a sustainable media future that prioritizes workers and their communities — one that better embodies democratic values. These outlets may differ in legal structure, audience and revenue, but all are focused on ensuring that the future of journalism is in the hands of those creating it — and those relying on it.

With decisions driven by those producing journalism, and those who need it, the profit motive and metrics of success look very different, and so does the incentive to invest in local jobs and communities. Local news cooperatives spend their budgets on reporting that will serve their community, developing sustainable growth by prioritizing steady employment and providing coverage that will center the audience — such as in-depth election guides, public library events, information about food bank access, a database of worker wage violations, a text messaging news service for tenants, or useful information on public health and housing. Moreover, these outlets are more likely to offer diverse perspectives and coverage that serves a broader public interest and the needs of marginalized communities. Co-ops cut out the middleman while prioritizing community needs.

Many cooperative outlets across the country were established [in response](#) to the shuttering of popular media or the extractive practices of owners. These include local publications such as the *Colorado Sun* and *The Racket*, and [national outlets](#) like *Defector*, *The Appeal*, *404 Media*, *Aftermath*, and *Sequencer*. Some were founded by groups of

former coworkers. But there have also been successful startups without a previously established audience, such as [Hellgate](#), [Block by Block](#), [Range Media](#), [Unicorn Riot](#), [Brickhouse](#), [Flaming Hydra](#), Canopy Atlanta and the movement journalism outlet *Press On*. The model is also growing internationally.

The [legal structures](#) and funding for these



graphic: CPA Journal

cooperatives vary. Their funding sources include: relying on revenue from readers; grants from foundations; tax deductible donations; advertising; paywalls; subscribers, or other ways for members to participate. Some are determined to keep coverage free. Some have explored participation and ownership options for their audiences, while others are establishing [shared](#) services amongst outlets, like the *Granite State Collaborative* and *New Jersey News Commons*. Democratic ownership allows journalists the ability to approach both editorial and economic strategies in new and creative ways. They are more likely to [gauge success](#) through impact, trust or sustainability, and more likely to meet audience members where they are — finding ways to remain flexible as funding and technology shifts. They are also more likely to be transparent about their budgets, donors, and editorial approach. Since profits can be dedicated towards a more sustainable model of growth, this structure returns the primary power of the press to journalists working for and with their communities.

A growing number of journalist-run and [civic media](#) organizations, though not formally structured as cooperatives, have turned to increasingly participatory ways of engaging their audiences, like *City Bureau*, *Documented*, *Outlier*, or my own outlet [The Mendocino Voice](#).

Co-op and community-based media outlets are moving journalism in the opposite direction of legacy media by applying the same principles of [democracy](#) and equity to our news outlets that we want to see in our communities. By treating local news as a commons, guided by a belief that essential information our communities need should belong to everyone, these cooperatives are demonstrating that journalism can be transparent, accessible, and accountable to the people it serves.

Hyperlinks for this article at <https://bit.ly/47cSMA0>

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