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What do New Jersey news consumers want?

Assessing satisfaction with local news

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Introduction

Local news outlets are competing for the attention of their audiences like never before. In the current high-choice environment, what can local news providers do to make sure their news is valuable to their audiences? Likewise, what kinds of data do organizations whose missions are to support and strengthen local news need to do their work?

This report lays some groundwork for answering these questions. Drawing on a survey of New Jersey local news consumers (N=305) conducted by the national media and technology advocacy organization Free Press, and the transcripts from a number of focus groups Free Press designed to assess local information needs, we present a snapshot of how New Jersey residents feel about their local news, how they are accessing it, and which topics they want to see more of. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the widespread cuts to local newsrooms over the last decade (Center for Cooperative Media, 2017), compounded by the revision of the business model in the digital environment, audiences are expressing frustration. However, there are also bright spots and avenues for improvement.

The Center for Cooperative Media undertook the analysis of the survey results as part of a larger effort to map the local news ecosystems of New Jersey, and to provide insight to the more than 250 local news outlets that make up the *New Jersey News Commons*. In the report that follows, we first outline the demographics of the respondents, showing that they tend to be middle-class to affluent and from urban or suburban areas. We then look at satisfaction with local news, finding that people from rural areas and with the lowest household incomes are the least satisfied with their local news, while people from urban and suburban areas with higher household incomes are more satisfied. We also show that satisfaction with local news varies according to the medium by which people consume news, with the daily newspaper and social media rating worst among legacy and digital media, respectively; while radio and, paradoxically, social media, rate highest in these two categories.

Who were the survey respondents and focus group participants?

In 2015, Free Press conducted a survey of its membership, to gauge access to and opinions about local news. More than three hundred people completed the survey, providing opinions about their local news and some demographic information, allowing for an analysis of how opinions about local news vary across New Jersey.¹ The survey was part of the *News Voices* project, which aims to help foster better relationships between newsrooms and communities, and promote deeper listening by journalists to community concerns. In addition, since late 2015 Free Press has held 16 public events around the state, gathering more than 700 residents and journalists to discuss local information needs and brainstorm ideas for improving local news ecosystems.

¹ The survey was administered online in 2015 to Free Press members. The heading was “Tell us what you think of your local media.” The survey was completed by 317 people; after manually editing for user-errors (e.g. not properly answering key questions) and duplicates, the final N was 305. The Center for Cooperative Media used the respondent-provided data about where the respondents lived to map further demographic data onto the responses.

The respondents to Free Press’s membership survey live predominantly in urban and suburban communities in New Jersey (44%; N=135 and 42%; N=128, respectively; see Figure 1). A smaller portion, 14% (N=42) live in rural communities. In addition, the bulk of survey respondents (31%; N=93) have household incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000, with nearly the same number (28%; N=85) in the \$75,000-\$100,000 bracket (see Figure 2). It is important to note that the survey drew from Free Press membership, was voluntary, and was administered online, which means that there were several layers of self-selection at work. Importantly for our purposes, these residents are highly engaged with issues around local media, and are therefore likely to be more thoughtful than the average person about the issues confronting the sector.

Likewise, the focus groups from which the qualitative data were drawn were part of Free Press’s *News Voices* project, which is an ongoing effort in New Jersey and elsewhere to bring together community stakeholders and journalists to assess information needs and rethink what local news can be. The transcripts from 16 *News Voices* events held around the state in 2016 and 2017 provide insight into the survey data below.

Figure 1: Character of respondents’ communities

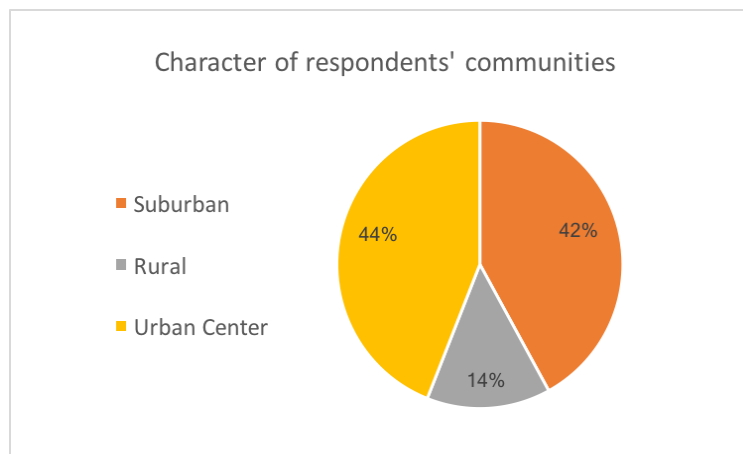
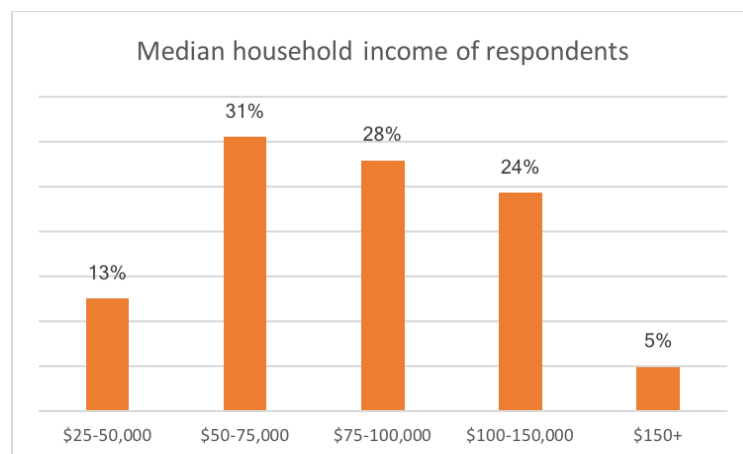


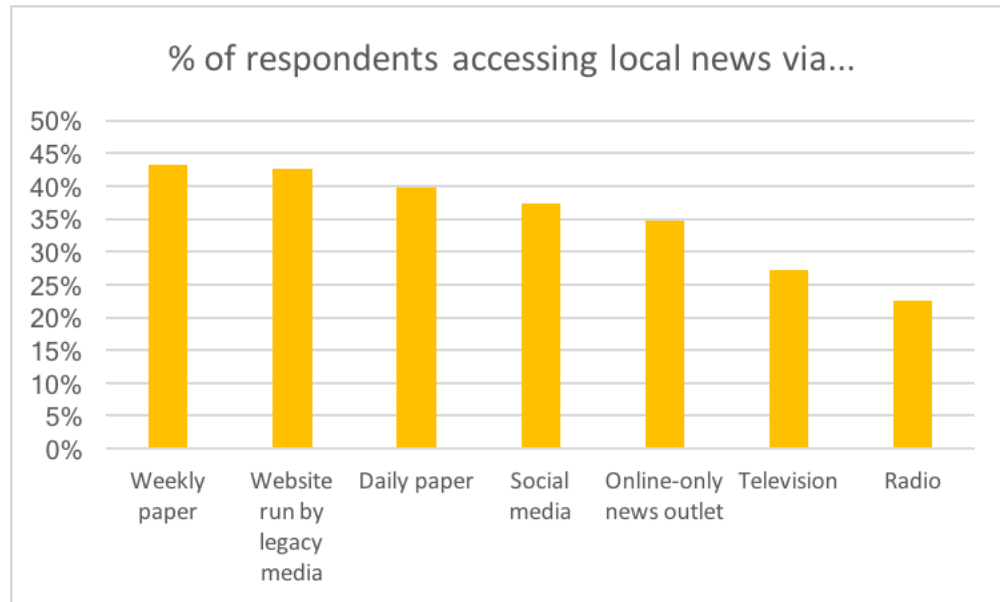
Figure 2: Median household income of respondents



Modes of consumption of local news

While news is increasingly consumed in digital form, local news (especially when compared to national) still has one foot firmly planted in analog. In general, local news is still most likely to be consumed on television (Pew Research Center, 2015), and legacy media such as radio and print are among the top sources for local news among blacks and Hispanics in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2017; 2016). The consumption patterns observed in Figure 3 reflect this reality.²

Figure 3: People are still accessing local news in traditional formats, but digital is also prominent



The weekly newspaper is the most popular source for local news among these New Jersey residents, reflecting the strong – though diminished – role the community weekly has historically had in New Jersey (McCullough & Anderson, 2013). The daily newspaper ranks third, with the other top-five spots are filled by digital media, run either by legacy news organizations or digital-native news sites.

Interestingly, respondents said that television and radio are their least-turned-to sources for local news, contradicting local news consumption patterns observed for other areas (e.g. Pew, 2015). This is almost certainly due to the fact that the two major media markets serving New Jersey are based out-of-state, in Philadelphia and New York City, resulting in an anemic local television news market (Hale, 2013), as well as the fact that the survey respondents were not representative of the diversity of the many ethnic communities in New Jersey, whose local news is more likely to be provided via traditional media (Lin & Song, 2006).

Satisfaction with local news

Satisfaction with local news was assessed using a Likert Scale that asked respondents to rate their local news on a scale from one to five, with 1 representing “awful,” and 5 representing “excellent.” We

² For raw numbers and exact percentages for all figures, see Appendix A.

compared the responses to this question with the demographic and local news consumption data presented above. We found that satisfaction with local news does indeed vary for respondents from communities with differing levels of household income, from different types of towns, and by mode of consumption.³

Table 1: Household income by local news satisfaction

Household income	Local News Rating			Total
	Awful	Mediocre	Good to Excellent	
\$25-50,000	21	13	4	38
	55%	34%	11%	100.0%
\$50-75,000	45	26	22	93
	48%	28%	24%	100.0%
\$75-100,000	42	26	17	85
	49%	31%	20%	100.0%
\$100-150,000	31	25	18	74
	42%	34%	24%	100.0%
\$150+	5	6	4	15
	33%	40%	27%	100.0%
Total	144	96	65	305
	47%	32%	21%	100.0%

Table 4 shows that satisfaction with local news varies depending on the median household income of one’s community.⁴ The biggest disparity is between respondents from communities in the lowest income bracket, from which more than half (55%; N=21) rate their local news as “awful,” and residents of very high-income communities (ave. median income of more than \$150,000), who are 20 percentage points less likely to do so (33%; N=5).

³ Note that the relatively low total N (305) means that when responses are divided between multiple categories, the findings become less generalizable; in other words, we present these findings as suggestive of general sentiment rather than definitive statements.

⁴ Census data on median household income was mapped onto survey respondents’ answers to a question asking where they lived.

Similarly, respondents from communities with household incomes in the middle brackets uniformly rate their local news as awful more than twice as often as excellent. Clearly the quality of local news, at least in the views of these respondents, leaves much to be desired.

The *News Voices* events held by Free Press around the state provided greater insight into what residents are thinking about when they express this displeasure. With a median household income of \$26,214, Camden is the poorest city in New Jersey.⁵ Focus group participants there showed great frustration with local news:

“I’d like to see a local media that is as aggressive about reporting the good things that happen as the robberies and murders,” said one participant.

Another participant was nostalgic for the *Camden Courier-Post* of previous years. “They used to have an all-star team there,” she said, rattling off the names of journalists now at other outlets. “Now, it’s so corporate and puny it’s depressing. It’s disheartening.”

The Camden participants listed resources for local news that, notably, included many sources that fall outside the traditional newsroom: an email blast called “Camden Stories” from two local civic organizations; the website for Camden City Hall; a particular journalist’s stories for the *Courier-Post*; and Channel 19, the cable channel for a local school district, among others.

Montclair, by contrast, falls into the \$150,000-plus household income bracket. At the event in Montclair, the frustration was of a different variety. A young man gave an example of the kind of basic local news he’d like to have and doesn’t get:

“When they are doing water main work and closing streets, so that it affects my commute, why can’t I get a reliable text alert on that?,” he asked.

These comments show that information needs can and do differ by community, something that local news providers are well-positioned to capitalize on.

We also measured differences in satisfaction local news according to the “character” of respondents’ communities.⁶ While respondents from urban and suburban communities expressed strong displeasure with their local news (44% and 45% rated it as awful, respectively), we found that residents of rural communities reported the lowest levels of satisfaction: 64% rate it as awful, while just 14% rated their local news as good or excellent.

⁵ See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/camdencitynewjersey/PST045216>.

⁶ We use the State of New Jersey’s “character” categories for municipalities: rural, suburban, and urban center, from the annual Uniform Crime Report; accessible at: <http://www.njsp.org/ucr/uniform-crime-reports.shtml>.

Table 2: Character of community by local news satisfaction

	Local News Rating			
Character of Community	Awful	Mediocre	Good to Excellent	Total
Suburban	58	36	34	128
	45%	28%	27%	100.0%
Rural	27	9	6	42
	64%	21%	14%	100.0%
Urban Center	59	51	25	135
	44%	38%	19%	100.0%
Total	144	96	65	305
	47%	32%	21%	100.0%

While there is not an overwhelming amount of research on levels of satisfaction with local news (there exists much more polling on satisfaction with national news, and on trust of local news, for example), a relationship between satisfaction with local news and the character of one’s community has been found in other studies as well (e.g. Pew, 2015). The major distinction between rural, suburban and urban communities in research on local news thus far has been around the concept of “news deserts,” with studies finding that both urban (e.g. Napoli et al., 2015) and rural (e.g. Abernathy, 2017) communities can be devoid of the local news that residents desire (see also McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2015).

Another factor related to local news satisfaction is the medium by which people access it. Table 6 shows a few things; first, that although radio comes last in terms of consumption (as shown in Table 3), those who do rely on radio for local news rate it highly. Second, respondents have a love-hate relationship with social media, which is both the most detested for local news and the third-most highly rated.

Table 3: Mode of consumption compared with local news satisfaction

Mode of local news consumption	Local News Rating			Total
	Awful	Mediocre	Good to Excellent	
Daily newspaper	51	37	33	121
	42%	31%	27%	100.0%
Weekly newspaper	50	49	33	132
	38%	37%	25%	100.0%
Radio	20	26	23	69
	29%	38%	33%	100.0%
Television	20	36	27	83
	24%	43%	33%	100.0%
Website run by legacy media	46	48	36	130
	35%	37%	28%	100.0%
Online-only local news outlet	38	45	23	106
	36%	43%	22%	100.0%
Social media	49	33	32	114
	43%	29%	28%	100.0%

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one category, so the total is greater than 305.

In addition, though the daily newspaper remains among the most-relied-upon sources for local news (Table 3), it is also highly disliked (42% rate it “awful”), suggesting both that respondents have noticed the major cuts to local legacy newsrooms (e.g. CCM, 2017), and perhaps have a lack of knowledge about alternatives such as digital-native hyperlocals.

For those who do rely on the online-only outlets, 43% rate them as mediocre, a tie with the other medium that received the highest “mediocre” rating, television. One point worth re-stating when discussing satisfaction in this context is that the respondents to this survey self-selected (i.e. chose to voluntarily fill out a survey on local media), and are therefore more civically engaged (and likely more critical) than average.

The Free Press *Voices* gatherings again surfaced some of the reasons behind these ratings. In Hackensack, participants who said they were active in their local communities and value community journalism praised the local news delivered in traditional formats: the daily paper and the weekly community paper. The dislike for social media as a source for local news was explained by another participant, who stated:

“It seems like, with Facebook, I honestly don’t know what’s going on. You’ve got people who seem to be journalists posting stuff, but it seems biased. They just seem to go after people they don’t like, in that way people get criticized on social media.”

In Camden, speaking mostly of TV news, several agreed that the investigative function has almost totally disappeared, and has been replaced by filler, mostly sports and weather:

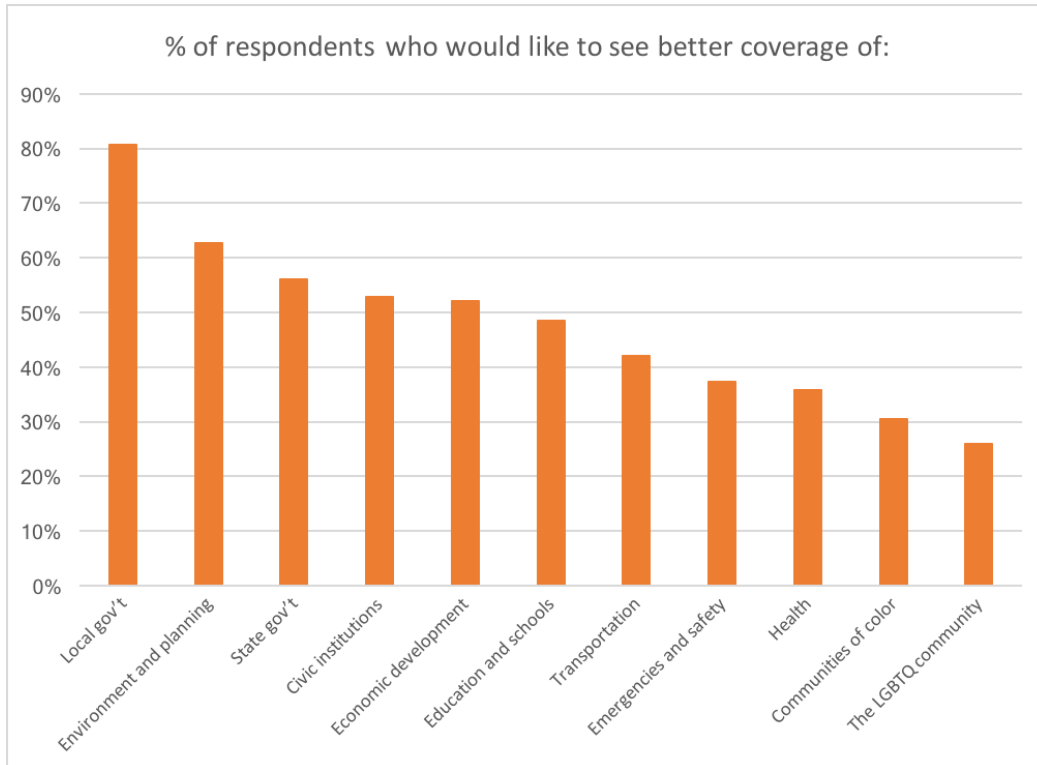
“We need a broadcast outlet that is not robotic and predictable,” one participant said.

If these comments seem in some senses contradictory, it reflects the great diversity of information now available to the average news consumer, even at the local level. As recent national political events and the presidential election of 2016 showed, we live in a climate of deep uncertainty about the truth and veracity of what we see in our daily media.

Respondents want better coverage of local government, among other things

Finally, the survey asked respondents which topics they’d like to see their local news outlets do a better job of covering. The topics that respondents could choose from track closely with those that have been identified elsewhere as “critical information needs,” such as information about the education system, transportation and economic development (Friedland et al., 2012).

Figure 4: Topics respondents would like their local media to do a better job of covering



An overwhelming 81% want to see their local news outlets do a better job of reporting on local government. Four of the six other “hard news” categories – environment and planning, state government, economic development, and civic institutions – were all noted by more than half of respondents. It is interesting that fewer than half of respondents noted emergencies & safety (including crime) or health; in particular, crime and health news have been strongly criticized for their increased presence on local television news and as being more in the interest of local news providers (in that they are inexpensive and easily accessible topics) than in the interest of the public (e.g. McManus, 1994; Wenzel, Gerson, & Moreno, 2016).

Participants in the focus group discussion held in New Brunswick highlighted the many topics that residents feel are being ignored by their local media. Among the specific issues raised were the activities of municipal boards and commissions, information on local construction projects, the local impact of national policies, and basic information on local legislation. At the Montclair event, a participant said he can’t find information on proposals or decisions connected to community events and economic development. The group agreed that better coverage of school policy, events, and taxes was needed.

A participant at a *News Voices* event at Rowan University gave the point of view from the government side:

“I’m a council person in Winona, and there aren’t any reporters at any of our meetings anymore. In the past, the Gloucester County Times used to be there, more often than not. Now all I see is a lot of rumors posted on Facebook, and a lot of them have nothing to do with reality.”

Another participant stated, *“I’m in Atlantic County. I don’t know where the tax money goes and neither does anyone else, from what I can tell.”*

These findings indicate that residents are paying attention, and that they are not receiving the information that they need to participate in their democracies in a meaningful way.

Toward more robust local news ecosystems

It is clear that communities in New Jersey are hungry for more and better local news. To be sure, there are many great journalists and publishers who still provide hard-hitting reporting and analysis about local topics and issues. But the years of cuts and downsizing in local journalism have been noticed, and are being lamented. The good news is that this same desire for more local news is an opening for would-be journalism entrepreneurs, and in recent years we have begun to see signs of new growth in the sector (Amditis, 2017).

For journalism outlets both old and new, it is more important than ever to provide accurate, meaningful information that responds to community information needs. The recent efforts around engagement and the more general turn toward the audience are encouraging steps in this direction, but local news providers need to build this orientation into their everyday practices. As recent studies show, putting the audience at the center will be economically beneficial in the long run (e.g. American Press Institute, 2018), and the tools for doing so are increasingly sophisticated (Hanson & Goligoski, 2018).

As part of the Center for Cooperative Media’s research project to map the local news ecosystems of New Jersey, we will identify the news deserts in the state – those places where there is an insufficient amount of local news coverage. We will focus especially on coverage of local government. Part of the reason for concern, as reflected in the data presented above, is the decline in local legacy media in recent decades. For example, the Center for Cooperative Media (2017) found that several New Jersey community newspapers that were taken over by Gannett in 2016 saw a decline in quality, including fewer bylined stories about the community, fewer “community information” stories (such as announcements about local events or openings), and fewer advertisements.

At the Montclair *News Voices* event, a participant had clearly noticed these effects: “We used to have a weekly that used to do a pretty good job on town news,” she said, “but then Gannett purchased it and now there’s nothing there.” Another participant at the Montclair event stated, “I’m here because I live in a news desert [Warren County] that just became a news desert because of layoffs and cutbacks in coverage by mainstream media that used to cover us pretty well. We actually have a contested local election in my township, first time in a while, but the only place I can get any information is on Facebook, and what I read there I don’t trust.”

Building back a strong and vibrant local journalism infrastructure is a daunting challenge, but a necessary one. It is also complex; to serve their communities for the long term, news organizations need to find a funding model that is sustainable. This will depend on several things: re-educating the general public about the importance of local news; creative solutions to funding (e.g. Schmidt, 2018); and even strengthening local economies. For example, Pew Research Center (2015) compared the local news ecosystems of Denver, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; and Sioux City, Iowa. As the more densely populated, more highly educated, and more affluent of the three, Denver’s local news ecosystem was more robust on several measures: “Denver’s 140+ identified news providers – including 25 digital-only outlets – [was] about 2.5 times that of Macon (24) and Sioux City (31) combined,” the report found (p. 5). The high-choice environment of Denver also meant that residents could look to outlets for topics that those outlets did best, such as the local daily newspaper to which residents turned first for economic development news (p. 5).

Reviving local journalism may also mean supporting organizations that fall outside of the category of the traditional newsroom, as the Camden residents showed when they identified non-journalism news providers in their community. The very concept of the “local news ecosystem” implies a more inclusive view of what constitutes a news provider, as it can increasingly be anyone from a librarian to a chamber of commerce to a civic group on social media. In this vein, Ali (2017) argues for a shift in the collective mindset, from thinking about local journalism as a consumer good to thinking about it as a “merit good,” which moves the onus for sustaining local journalism from advertisers to public policy and government.

As policymakers, funders, journalists, and the public push for more and better local journalism, we hope that the findings presented here, in addition to the mapping of local news ecosystems, will provide fertile ground for the growing and strengthening of local news and information producers.

Appendix A: Supplemental data

Data for Figure 1: “Character” of survey respondents’ communities

	Frequency	Percent
Suburban	128	42.0
Rural	42	13.8
Urban Center	135	44.3
Total	305	100.0

Note: Character of NJ municipalities sourced from NJ State Police 2015 Uniform Crime Report, Section VII; accessible at: <http://www.njsp.org/ucr/2015/index.shtml>.

Data for Figure 2: Median household income of survey respondents

	Frequency	Percent
\$25-50,000	38	12.5
\$50-75,000	93	30.5
\$75-100,000	85	27.9
\$100-150,000	74	24.3
\$150+	15	4.9
Total	305	100.0

Data for Figure 3: People are still accessing local news in both traditional and digital formats

	Frequency	Percentage
Weekly paper	132	43.3
Website run by legacy media	130	42.6
Daily paper	121	39.7
Social media	114	37.4
Online-only news outlet	106	34.8
Television	83	27.2
Radio	69	22.6

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one category, so the total is greater than 305.

Data for Figure 4: Topics survey respondents want their local news to do a better job of covering

I wish my local news did a better job of covering...	Topics survey respondents want more of (N=305)	
	Frequency	Percentage
Local gov't	246	80.7
Environment and planning	191	62.6
State gov't	171	56.1
Economic development	159	52.1
Civic institutions	161	52.8
Education and schools	148	48.5
Transportation	128	42.0
Emergencies and safety	114	37.4
Health	109	35.7
Communities of color	93	30.5
The LGBTQ community	79	25.9

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one category.

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