Media Seeds Developmental Evaluation Report
Stage 2 - Implementation and experiment process in a rural Appalachian media desert.

by Laura W. Black and Michelle Ferrier, based on collaboration with Peggy Holman, and members of the Southeast Ohio Media Seeds planning team.

Project Summary

The Southeast Ohio Media Seeds Project has completed its final phase, where the Journalism That Matters team along with the local project team are working with three communities to build capacity for news and information. This report discusses our learning from the second evaluation stage by focusing on the design and implementation of media experiments in rural, Appalachian media deserts. Media deserts are defined as communities that lack access to fresh, daily local news and information.

From our first phase of work, we identified three communities for interventions: McConnelsville and Chesterhill in Morgan County, Ohio and Pomeroy, located in Meigs County in Ohio. The second stage involved three experiments: (1) an embedded, local journalist, (2) postcards with local news sent directly to residents, and (3) an online local news platform. In this evaluation, we asked:

1. How did we create and provide local news in a rural Appalachian media desert?
2. How did we cultivate and support participation from potential partners?
3. How did these activities dovetail with JTM principles and our insights from stage one?
4. What else has emerged? How can these learnings inform the national conversation?

The Journalism That Matters team is using a process called Developmental Evaluation, which involves active, ongoing collaboration between project leaders, community members, project advisors, community innovators and evaluators. Journalism That Matters has used the developmental evaluation process, as designed by Michael Quinn Patton, on prior work on engagement, journalism and communities. Our overarching goal, through the developmental evaluation lens, is to help develop a programmatic model of community-based media innovation that could be shared with journalists and local leaders in similar communities.

As a whole, the Media Seeds Project operates with principles drawn from Journalism That Matters' engagement work in building community: *Nothing About Us Without Us, Speak Truth to Empower,* and *Listening is Our Superpower.* These principles guide our project activity and are central to the evaluation of our success. We divided this evaluation into two stages, based on the design of the Media Seeds project. The first stage involved doing a deep ethnographic dive into the region and connecting with locals to better understand the communities (Media Seeds Developmental Evaluation Report (Stage 1)). In the first stage, we developed the insights: *Consider Your Identity, Listen Deeply, Make the Invisible Visible, Embrace Serendipity,* and *Treat Every Community as Unique*.

During the second stage of the evaluation, we developed five insights that may be applicable to other projects engaging local communities.

#1 Design for the Realities of the Region: Assess the constraints and assets of local infrastructure, geography, and culture. Innovations should be designed to fit these realities.
#2 Attend to Journalists' Emotions and Inner Life: Working alone in a media desert can be isolating and emotionally difficult. Journalists need preparation and tools to manage emotional dynamics.
#3 Recognize Limits and Public Perceptions of Existing Local Media: Local media are embedded in cultural and political institutions. Just because some local media exist, does not mean they necessarily serve the public.
#4 Anticipate that Innovations May Disrupt Existing Power Structures: Change is difficult and can be threatening to local leaders, who may resist or challenge your work.
#5 Enlist a Local Champion, Even if the Journalist is From the Community: Supportive local partners play an important role that is different from what journalists can do alone.

Some of the key lessons we draw from this work are that doing this work in rural media deserts means confronting some substantial challenges related to infrastructure, politics, and local cultures. The lack of regular internet and cell service are significant barriers to the distribution of local news, and this was evident during our project. Additionally, although we did not begin this project with the goal of disrupting local power systems, it became clear that media innovations were seen as disruptive. This led to some notable pushback against our project from local political leaders. Some keys to success in this kind of work are developing strong networks of collaborative relationships and creating a clear vision for the project that is mutually agreed upon. All three of our experiments had some successes, but the region faces substantial challenges and there is still a lot of work to be done. As one of the next steps, the Southeast Ohio Media Seeds Project team is involved in conversations with local health departments and other community partners about the continuation of ZipIt News. Our hope is that the project lives on beyond our implementation stage and can become an important part of the community fabric.

Introduction

The Southeast Ohio Media Seeds Project is using a process called Developmental Evaluation as an assessment tool. This approach uses active collaboration between project leaders, community stakeholders, and the project evaluator throughout the entire process. Based on the work of Michael Quinn Patton, developmental evaluation aims to capture learnings in real time rather than waiting until the project is completed. This approach does more than just capture lessons learned for future projects, it also allows project teams to make adjustments along the way based on what is learned.

The overarching goal of the evaluation process is to capture our learning from the Southeast Ohio Media Seeds Project and to develop a programmatic model of community-based media innovation that could be shared with journalists and local leaders in similar communities. As a whole, the Media Seeds Project operates with engagement principles drawn from the work of Journalism That Matters work in building community infrastructure as described in the report *Journalism for Democracy and Communities: A New Framework.* Out of work with journalists and community engagement practitioners emerged the three principles: *Nothing About Us Without Us, Speak Truth to Empower,* and *Listening is Our Superpower.* These principles guide our project activity and are central to the evaluation of our success: Helping communities to thrive with the design of new communication tools with and by communities.

We divided this evaluation into two stages, which are based on the design of the Media Seeds project. Through the first phase, we developed the following insights: *Consider Your Identity, Listen Deeply, Make the Invisible Visible, Embrace Serendipity,* and *Treat Every Community as Unique*.The results of our first phase can be found in the Media Seeds Developmental Evaluation Report (Stage 1). This report describes our learning from the second evaluation stage by focusing on the implementation of media experiments in rural, Appalachian media deserts, including what we did to create and provide local news and information, and how we cultivated and supported participation from local partners. A *media desert* is a community that is lacking fresh, daily, local news and information. The media deserts model, developed by Dr. Michelle Ferrier, assesses the code, content and conduit levels of communication in geography:

- **Content:** Is there news and information being gathered and disseminated within the community?
- **Conduit:** How does the communication infrastructure support community access through cellular and broadband channels, print and online-only news platforms?
- **Code:** Is the content created in such a way that it is accessible to local residents? Is it written in a language that is accessible to residents? Do algorithms and other online access points limit or constrain the accessibility and circulation of news?

Southeast Ohio represents various types of media deserts: those that lack a daily newspaper, those that have broadband access issues, communities with a newspaper and those with paywalls that limit access to news and information or those communities where local other

factors such as family name and politics play a role. Our work in stage one sought to make visible these complex webs of relations and how they influence the communication flows within the geographies we studied.

During this evaluation stage, we focused on the questions:

1. How did we create and provide local news in a rural Appalachian media desert?
2. How did we cultivate and support participation from potential partners?
3. How did these activities dovetail with JTM principles and our insights from stage one?
4. What else has emerged? How can these learnings inform the national conversation?

This evaluation report captures our learning from these questions and is a result of our process of ongoing reflection. Developmental evaluation for this project involved both actively participating in the project work and also engaging in continual reflection about what we are learning along the way. In addition, ethnographic notes by the project team and meeting notes of local conversations contributed to the evaluation process. Acting as the evaluation lead for this project, Laura Black consulted with Michael Quinn Patton to deepen her understanding of the developmental evaluation process. Michelle Ferrier and Peggy Holman had worked with developmental evaluation in prior JTM work. As an evaluation team, Laura Black, Peggy Holman, and Michelle Ferrier engaged in conversation to develop evaluation questions and processes and reflect on what we were learning throughout the process. Laura also participated in project activities such as meetings with community partners. As both digital and physical ethnographers in the region, Michelle Ferrier and Matt Morris (our embedded journalist), kept online notes of their experiences and activity in the region. The evaluation drew from these experiences as well as materials created for the Media Seeds project such as stories shared on the ZipIt.News platform and the postcards mailed to households in the target geographies.

We also engaged the planning team in ongoing reflection as part of the work process. The planning team engaged in regular meetings, and we built in time for reflection in each meeting. Laura led reflections by posing questions about what we were learning about ourselves and the communities, what has shifted during the project and why, what surprises or challenges we had faced on the project so far, and how project activities related to JTM principles and our learning from the first phase of the project. During all of these activities we kept detailed notes of the conversations, and audio or video recorded the meetings for future reference. This balance of participating in project work and leading the team in ongoing reflections is essential in developmental evaluation work because it both informs the project work in real time and also helps capture learnings for future. We also held a Zoom conference call reflection session with the project team, JTM board members, and representatives from our partners: the Jefferson Center and Democracy Fund. Our hope is that these learnings can help others wishing to spark communication innovation in rural communities.

This report briefly summarizes what we did to accomplish two goals:

1. Co-create local news/ information and communication strategies,

2. Cultivate/support local participation and connection,
3. Learn how to assess the assets of a region, and
4. Learn how to enter and bring value to community communication projects.

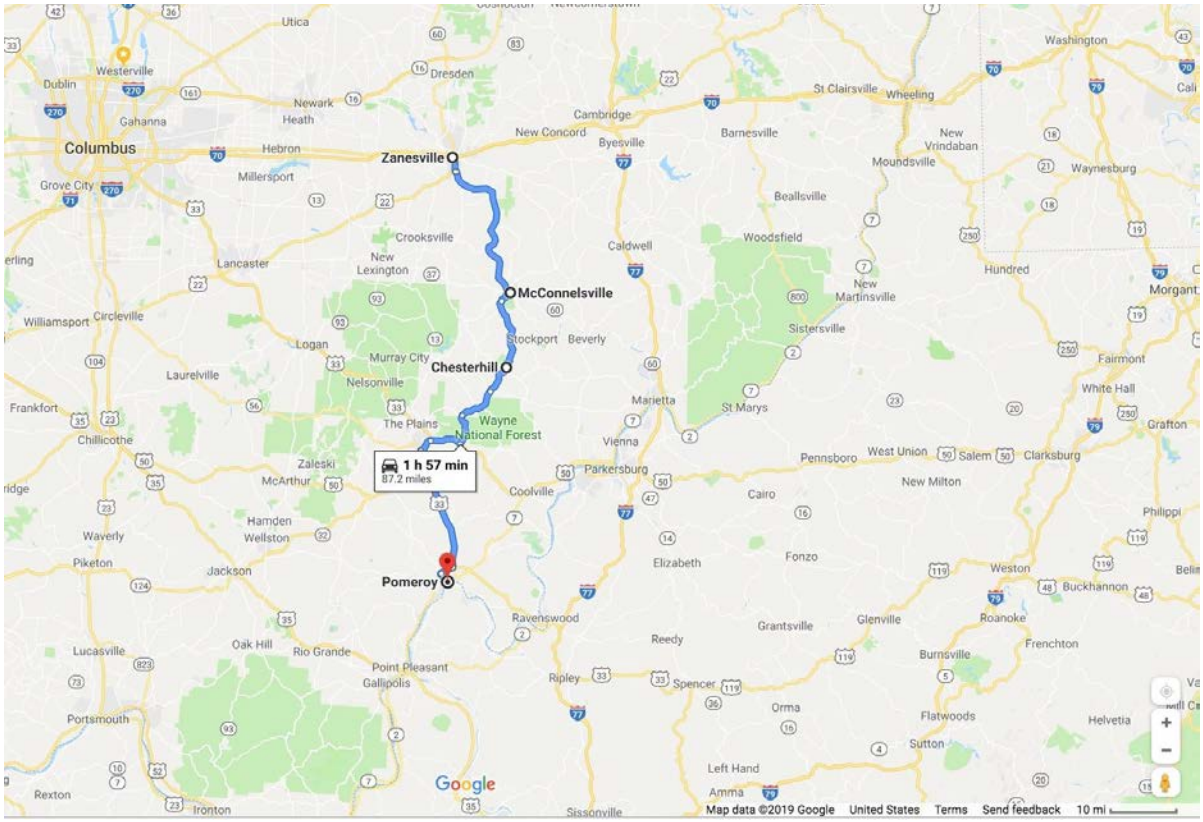
Within this summary, we indicate points where our work shifted because the shifts are important in helping us tease out what we learned. Then we reflect on what we've learned by noting the connection to JTM principles and insights from our previous work. We offer our reflections on how the work can inform the national conversation about how local news and information can be developed and sustained in media deserts.

How We Created and Provided Local News and Information

The Media Seeds Project began implementing local news and information innovations in the summer 2018. After completing the earlier work in asset mapping and digital ethnography to better understand the news and information needs of 20 different counties in southeast Ohio[1], our team selected three geographies for more targeted interventions. These areas are McConnelsville, Ohio (population 1,776), Chesterhill, Ohio (population 279), and Pomeroy, Ohio (population 1,790). McConnelsville and Chesterhill are both in Morgan County, Pomeroy is in Meigs County. The three towns are linked via a blue line on the map below. McConnelsville was the location of our embedded journalist, who engaged in activity in Chesterhill, Pomeroy and also in Zanesville, the site of the local radio station WHIZ-FM, with a broadcast reach extending outside of Muskingum County into Morgan County, Ohio. The map provided in Figure One gives a visual representation of these geographies.

Figure 1. The Southeast Ohio communities of McConnelsville, Chesterhill, and Pomeroy were the sites of our activity for this work.

[1] This earlier work is detailed in the Media Seeds Developmental Evaluation Report (Stage 1).



Once the geographies were selected, we conducted a media survey of all households in our target communities. We used a direct mail postcard with a reply card delivered to each household in our region of study. We asked questions about the media diet of residents and their sentiments about their community and their personal engagement in civic activities. The results of the post-survey are included as part of this developmental evaluation.

Residents who completed the pre- and post-surveys voiced similar concerns. Several complained about the lack of access to fresh, local news and information. Several respondents indicated that they are often left unaware of local events until AFTER they've happened. In the comments box on the reply card, residents voiced their frustrations:

- We need more attention on community events...before they happen :)
- Would like information on public meetings, events, etc. a lot earlier than a day or two
- The newspaper (Daily Sentinel) gives information days after the event. It's usually about 2 to 3 pages. That's it!!!!!
- Daily newspaper comes delivered- sometimes late, sometimes not at all

Our experiments were designed with community residents, stakeholders and needs in mind. The experiments varied as we were testing different kinds of relationships with local community members, as described in the next section (Chart 1). However, in all three geographies we followed a similar process for creating and providing local news and information by using a combination of three experiments, which occurred simultaneously.

Chart 1: Geographies Selected for Media Seeds Project

	McConnelsville	**Chesterhill**	**Pomeroy**
Distances between communities	14 miles to Chesterhill	45.7 miles to Pomeroy	65.6 miles to McConnelsville
Population	1,776 (2017)	279	1,790
Experiment	Local resident trained as journalist to build capacity for local government reporting. Pre-survey responses indicated a distrust of local government and a lack of government transparency in the region. Existing weekly newspaper, the Morgan County Herald, has been operating in the town since 1844. Our journalist lived in McConnelsville, and had delivered the newspaper as a child. His mother worked at the newspaper.	Small community, worked with community "champion" and civic leaders to provide ideas on communication for the village. Village is a mix of cultures, from the Amish that supply the local agricultural marketplace, to the African-American and White communities that come together in Chesterhill. Activity centers around the Chesterhill Produce Auction, an economic driver for the agricultural community. The village council has been working with surrounding small towns to discuss the water needs of the community.	Worked with existing Entrepreneurial economic development initiative (BBEST), run by a local nonprofit called Rural Action. Brought together local, small business owners to examine how best to communicate on regional basis. Town draws residents from across the river in West Virginia with music and new lifestyle shops such as a tea and coffee shop. The town is trying to revitalize the downtown area and develop new businesses.
News Postcards/ Zip-It.News	Distributed two content cards to residents in the region. Online website held	Distributed two content cards to residents in the region. Online website held	Distributed two content cards to residents in the region.

	news stories and allowed users to create and post news and information.	news stories and allowed users to create and post news and information.	Online website held news stories and allowed users to create and post news and information.

Experiment #1: Locally Embedded Journalist

Our first experiment directly explored one of the key principles of engagement from the JTM community work: Nothing About Us Without Us. This experiment tested a "grow your own" approach to building news and information capacity in the region, a concern voiced by residents in the pre-survey distributed in Spring 2018 to households in the region.

This approach followed the "media corps" model, developed by Dr. Michelle Ferrier, who was the project lead and an educator at Ohio University in Athens County, Ohio. The approach seeks to develop the skills and knowledge of a local resident to build the news capacity in the region. Similar efforts by Report for America to develop local newsroom capacity had raised concerns about how local is local -- were embedded journalists "a local boy"? Research on the project had highlighted the difficulty of establishing trust and developing networks in a region that many embedded journalists didn't call home ("Is he a local boy? Is Report for America building trust within the communities it serves?" Nieman Lab, May 6, 2019).

Matt Morris, a resident of McConnelsville, was trained as a journalist to build capacity for local government reporting. Matt was an undergraduate student at Ohio University during the early work of the Media Seeds project and worked closely with Michelle Ferrier in learning journalism and media innovation and community engagement skills. In his classwork with Ferrier, Matt designed what he called a "civic communication channel" to develop and deliver more local government news and information. After graduating with his journalism degree in Spring 2018, Matt was hired as the local journalist and editor for the Media Seeds project to bring more local government coverage to the region. Matt became a writer and editor for ZipIt.News, the online news portal developed for the region built on Matt's civic communication strategy combined with an inclusive news model, where user-generated content is encouraged and distributed. He also was hired as a reporter for the longstanding weekly paper the *Morgan County Herald*. Matt covered local city and village council meetings in McConnelsville, Pomeroy and Chesterhill and wrote enterprise stories on issues affecting the two counties. Matt's stories were posted to the regional online platform, ZipIt.News and to the weekly newspaper, the *Morgan County Herald*. Matt also worked for WHIZ radio station, another regional news outlet in Zanesville, Ohio in Muskingum County, but was not directly involved in creating or distributing news and information on the channel.

In his role for the Media Seeds Project, Matt worked closely with Michelle Ferrier to develop stories and relationships in the region. He lived and worked predominantly in McConnelsville,

but he reported on activities in all three geographies. He reported on village council meetings and investigated and reported on specific local issues. Michelle coached Matt on story selection, sourcing, use of technologies and developing trust within the community.

Experiment #2: Postcards Mailed Directly to Residents

Our second experiment tested two principles in the JTM engagement model: Nothing About Us Without Us and Listening is Our Superpower. From our asset mapping and digital ethnography work, we learned of the challenges residents experienced getting access to fresh news and information. From broadband access and cellular coverage, as well as news paywalls blocking local content, we found that the infrastructure was sorely lacking in providing access to the news and information that did exist in the region.

Our second experiment involved sending postcards with local news and information directly to residents in the target geographies by using the U.S. Postal Service's Every Door Direct Mailing (EDDM) service. Through this service, we could select specific postal routes within ZIP codes to receive our mailing. A full description of this process can be found in Michelle Ferrier's story, When Junk Mail is Used for Good. The first postcard, our pre-survey delivery method, invited residents to complete a survey of their "media diet" as well as to describe the kinds of news and information they needed. These postcards were visually appealing and had content that was specifically designed for the particular geography. Postcards contained teasers of local news stories and QR Codes and website links to the full stories, posted on the ZipIt.News platform.

Figure 2: Example of Postcard

Experiment #3: Online Platform Featuring Local News

Our goal was to build an inclusive communication tool to address the JTM principle: Speak Truth to Empower. From our asset mapping and digital ethnography work, we learned that residents were not getting information in a timely fashion. They did not get notifications of local event or government meetings where they could get involved. We also discovered that local governments lacked transparency about when and how local residents could be involved in decision making, effectively disenfranchising residents from participating in local democratic processes. Local communities lacked websites or communication tools to keep residents informed and engaged. No tools existed to discuss or educate the public about local or regional issues.

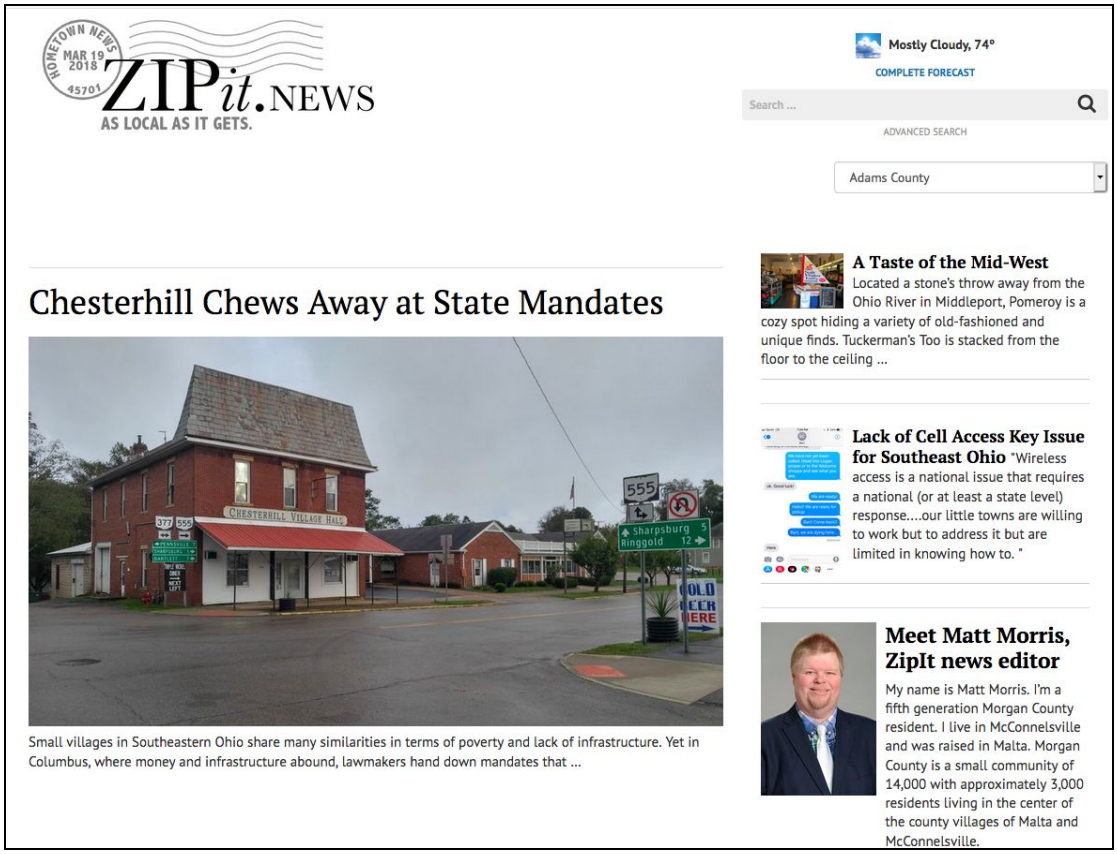
Our third experiment focused on engaging community residents in building an online news resource to the region, that was accessible, free and allowed for residents to contribute by posting stories, events and other information for the region. The ZipIt.News platform is powered

by CommunityQ, a content management system that allows users to create a personal profile from which they can create and share content on the platform.

The ZipIt.News website contained the full news stories that had teasers on the postcards. Initially, the website was populated with the county reports and local stories created by Michelle Ferrier's students during the 2017-18 academic year. Media Seeds team members wrote news stories related to Pomeroy, Chesterhill, and McConnelsville and published them to ZipIt.News in Sept 2018. Oct 2018, Jan 2019, April 2019, and June 2019. These stories corresponded to the content shared on the postcards.

As editor of ZipIt.News, Matt Morris created most of the "reporting" content, posting stories from the region's monthly council meetings. However, readers can comment on the stories and anyone could register for the online platform and add content to share news and information about their town. The most recent ZipIt.News features stories written by local community partners such as those at the County Health Departments. Figure three provides an example of the content from the ZipIt.News website.

Figure 3: ZipIt.News Online



What Shifted as We Did this Work? What Did We Learn?

In the process of creating local news and information, we faced some significant hurdles related to infrastructure, geography, and culture. Although we knew ahead of time that lack of broadband access is a major issue in the region, we were surprised by the extent to which this creates hurdles for local community members. Without consistent internet access, people are not able to get online news, including the online version of ZipIt news. There are some places that offer wifi, such as public libraries, but cell service is inconsistent and often unavailable. In one community we studied, the local library leaves the wifi on after hours, so that residents can access the Internet. In another, when our local team split up while traveling, we could not connect again via our mobile phones. In our solution, we tried to address this gap in coverage by making sure the content from ZipIt.News was downloadable, so residents could save stories to their devices to access later.

The connection issues created a circular conundrum. The issue required a regional response, but the regional residents lacked a communication tool for regional dialogue, conversation, and action around the issue. Nor was archival data of past projects accessible or connection to the influencers who had championed the issue in the past. While the flaws in regional communication and information are noted in the Buckeye Hills Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, the region has yet to address the issue.

> *"We've had conversations around broadband. How do we support telehealth, remote work scenarios...daily business activities? It never entered my mind about how residents get news. Never thought about that."*
> *--Buckeye Hills Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy regional administrator*

Other local leaders were frustrated by past efforts to bring broadband to their rural communities. One community resident pointed toward some towers that had been installed in town years ago, that never got the "last mile" connectivity worked out. The plan has been dormant without local residents knowledgeable of how to get the connectivity they need, both broadband and cellular.

In addition, civic leaders had mixed responses to the use of the Internet and social media to reach people in the region. One local leader remarked that social media was no good. "All the Internet is used for is gaming and social media." Another local leader used social media to further his nighttime standup comedy career. But much of what community residents lacked were news and information about upcoming meetings and events.

> *"Connect local folks and arts, culture, outdoor rec, environmental education, to more people. Broadband would be helpful. Trying to connect the dots of many people trying to do this. Small community, tends to be the same people working at it a while."*

Many of the municipalities did not have local town websites with up-to-date civic information. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, were not used by local leaders to share information or engage local residents.

We learned that the direct mail postcards are especially useful, and EDDM worked very well to get local news into the hands of rural residents. Based on our experience, we believe that EDDM has potential to be successful in other rural environments. However, our survey of residents showed that most respondents had not accessed the online version of ZipIt News, even if they received the postcards. Of those who had accessed the website, most only did so once. So, although EDDM worked well to reach rural residents, there was not as much connection between the postcards and the online platform as we would have hoped.

Another challenge we faced was that these three geographies were physically distant, which required Matt to do a lot of traveling. The trip between McConnelsville and Pomeroy was 66 miles, which takes nearly 90 minutes on rural roads. Because internet access is inconsistent throughout the region, people often preferred to meet face-to-face. So, Matt spent a lot of time traveling, which meant he had less time for reporting and producing news stories. Traveling across such long distances also made it more difficult for Matt to be focused on and available in one specific place. And, of course, such extended travel is physically taxing. A lesson we learned from this is that experiments should be more geographically bound. We suspect that 45 minutes is a good guideline for maximum driving distance in rural media innovation projects.

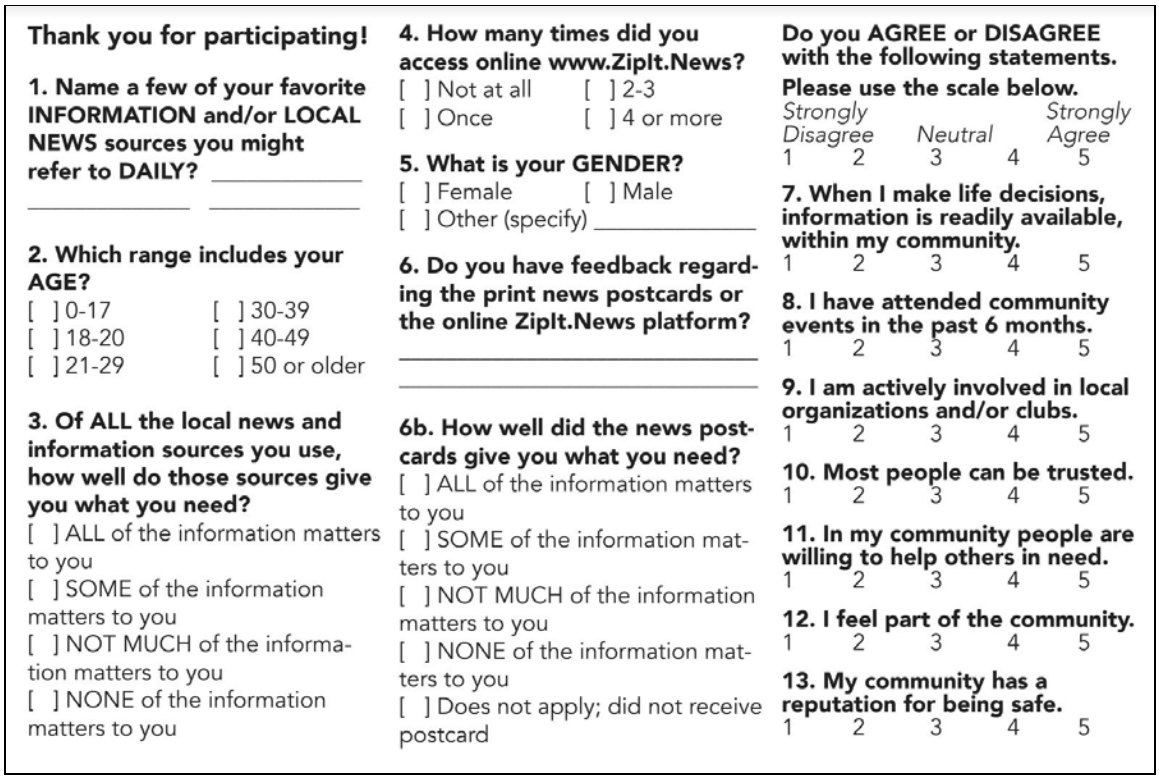
The other major challenge we experienced in this aspect of the project was that Zipit News was a disruption to local news systems. The existing weekly paper in McConnelsville had longstanding relationships to the local political system and leaders from the paper and the city were suspicious of ZipIt.News. Matt faced significant difficulties as a reporter for the *Morgan County Herald*. Despite a long family history with the newspaper -- Matt had delivered the paper at one point, while his mother worked in the news office -- when Matt became a “journalist”, he raised suspicions at the local newspaper. His relationship also changed with local leaders he had known nearly his whole life. As Matt’s identity changed from being a resident to being a journalist in his small town, Matt found his prior relationships strained and antagonistic. Matt had his news stories used for political purposes and was challenged by the regional news commission.

A full accounting of those challenges goes beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, his experiences indicate that even with careful pre-work and an embedded local reporter, there are significant political and cultural challenges to creating news and information innovation in rural Appalachian media deserts. Even as a “local boy,” Matt became marginalized in his own town and frustrated at his perceived inability to make a difference. However, Matt’s inside role as a reporter for the local newspaper and an engineer for the local radio station, made him key to the operations of both as they all clung to survival.

How we Cultivated and Supported Local Participation

In this implementation and evaluation stage, we cultivated and supported participation from local community members. One way we did this was by using EDDM not only to deliver content, but also to *survey residents*. The Media Seeds project sent both pre- and post-survey via postcards to assess residents' perceptions of their local news and information sources, residents' feelings about their local communities, and their involvement in local community activities. In our post survey we also assessed how well ZipIt.News provided residents with useful information and solicited feedback on the ZipIt.News online platform and the postcards. Data from the pre- and post-survey were shared with community stakeholders and the project team during community conversations about the project.

Figure 4: Post-survey Postcard Sent to Local Residents



Thank you for participating!

1. Name a few of your favorite INFORMATION and/or LOCAL NEWS sources you might refer to DAILY? _____ _____ _____

2. Which range includes your AGE?
[ ] 0-17 [ ] 30-39
[ ] 18-20 [ ] 40-49
[ ] 21-29 [ ] 50 or older

3. Of ALL the local news and information sources you use, how well do those sources give you what you need?
[ ] ALL of the information matters to you
[ ] SOME of the information matters to you
[ ] NOT MUCH of the information matters to you
[ ] NONE of the information matters to you

4. How many times did you access online www.ZipIt.News?
[ ] Not at all [ ] 2-3
[ ] Once [ ] 4 or more

5. What is your GENDER?
[ ] Female [ ] Male
[ ] Other (specify) _____

6. Do you have feedback regarding the print news postcards or the online ZipIt.News platform?
_____
_____

6b. How well did the news postcards give you what you need?
[ ] ALL of the information matters to you
[ ] SOME of the information matters to you
[ ] NOT MUCH of the information matters to you
[ ] NONE of the information matters to you
[ ] Does not apply; did not receive postcard

Do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements. Please use the scale below.

Strongly Disagree				*Strongly Agree*
1	2	3 (*Neutral*)	4	5

7. When I make life decisions, information is readily available, within my community. 1 2 3 4 5

8. I have attended community events in the past 6 months. 1 2 3 4 5

9. I am actively involved in local organizations and/or clubs. 1 2 3 4 5

10. Most people can be trusted. 1 2 3 4 5

11. In my community people are willing to help others in need. 1 2 3 4 5

12. I feel part of the community. 1 2 3 4 5

13. My community has a reputation for being safe. 1 2 3 4 5

Post-Survey of Residents

From the pre-survey to the post-survey results, residents rated information availability lowest of all of the community well-being indicators. Just 8.8 percent of residents on the pre-survey rated a (5) on the question, "When I make life decisions, information is readily available within my community." For the post-survey, the percent of respondents who indicated a 5 was 11.7 percent. Residents ranked trust the next lowest on the community wellbeing indicator. On the community trust question, "Most people can be trusted," pre-survey respondents indicated an

8.9 percent agreement with a 5 ranking. Post-survey respondents edged higher with 19.8 percent indicating a 5 ranking.

And while many respondents indicated they feel their community is safe, that they feel a part of the community and that people are willing to help others in need, respondents themselves indicate they are not very engaged in their communities. Less than one quarter of respondents (21%) indicate they are active in local organizations. Twenty-five percent (25%) indicate they have attended a local event in the past six months.

Respondents, when given space to voice their concerns in a comments section, pointed to the lack of broadband and cellular coverage, no access to computers and other infrastructure issues that prevent them from accessing the news. Residents who are able to get broadcast news, receive “local news” from West Virginia, across the Ohio River.

> *“Get internet available to everyone/everywhere. My phone is like my master key…”*
>
> *--Resident in Southeast Ohio*

- Get very little OH news. Dish only comes WV stations, NBC, ABC, and CBS
- HELP GET INTERNET NOT AVAILABLE IN MY ARRIBLE ("area"?)
- Received this card April 30. I have no computer
- Did not see, very little computer use
- I don't have a computer. I have not seen or heard of the postcards before.
- No internet, no postcards received.
- To be able to get Channel 10 News for Meigs County.

Others complained about the quality or quantity of news, whether it was critiquing the reporting of the local reporters, bias in the news or complaining for more (or less) good news.

- Positive News items are too often neglected
- Lack of information before program. Little community information.
- Important news and/or help NON EXISTANT Morgan County
- Poor paper, poor TV, mean facebook, intrusive robo-calls
- A good news reporter for local news.
- Local print journalists are very poor writers, reporters and editors. They need educating.
- Need more local news
- One sided but Meigs CC is known for that.

Other respondents who had received the postcards gave some positive feedback about the postcards and the ZipIt.News platform:

- Postcards grate don't have time for online
- Sorry, I never heard of it. This is the 1st card I have ever got! Um... I couldn't find a page of "discussion" anywhere on your site?! :(
- Yea! Love the cards.

- Online is interesting to read.
- Liked the pictures
- This is the first I heard about ZipIt.News
- For visibility you might start a social media page w/ link.
- I like it

And given the opportunity that SOMEONE might be listening, respondents used the postcard space to vent about other community needs and issues:

- Public waste pick up for recycling, township meeting dates. Neelysville Rd is in BAD SHAPE!!
- Need more church services such as songfest tent meetings.
- Bank, Grocery Store
- "To many drugs and crime"
- Love our produce at Chesterhill. Oh! #43728, I keep up!!!
- Those embezzlers,how do they keep their name out of newspapers and news TV? One for instance- from Pt Pleasant embezzling from PT Valley Hosp.WVa K.D.62?

In addition to the general survey of residents, we cultivated *close working relationships with community partners* in all three geographies. The specific types of relationships varied in each geography, based on specific aspects of those local communities. In McConnelsville, Matt was deeply embedded in the community. He grew up in and currently lives in McConnelsville. He has relationships with many people in the community, and knows the community history well. As an embedded, local journalist Matt was the centerpiece of the Media Seeds work.

In Pomeroy, we partnered with the existing entrepreneurial economic development initiative (B-BEST), run by a local nonprofit organization, Rural Action. In our project's early work, we brought together local, small business owners to examine how best to communicate on a regional basis. Media Seeds team members wrote profiles of some local businesses for ZipIt.News and continued to work with some local business leaders throughout the project. Pomeroy is located on the Ohio River and the town draws residents from across the river in West Virginia with music venues and new lifestyle shops and restaurants. Pomeroy is trying to revitalize the downtown area and develop new businesses, so partnering with the B-BEST team made sense for us in this community.

In Chesterhill, we partnered with both the mayor and the local Village Council Leader, Ken Peters, who acted as a champion for our project. Chesterhill is very small and is a culturally mixed location with an active Amish community plus both White and African-American residents. Local community development includes the Chesterhill Produce Auction (supported by Rural Action and other local nonprofit organizations), where farmers and other local vendors sell their products to restaurateurs and other buyers from around the region. Chesterhill is also home to a new diner featuring local food.

Matt worked with these local community partners, and others, by meeting with them regularly to discuss local news stories. Some of these partners also participated in the larger Media Seeds team planning calls throughout the project. Matt and other project members created stories of local champions, local issues and regional cooperation in ZipIt.News.

Operating with the three JTM principles in mind, our project also brought gifts to the community, sharing the digital ethnography work and social directory and regional gazette on the ZipIt.News platform for each of the 20 counties. We shared online the asset mapping work we had done of the region and community-based solutions to news and information.

In addition, our work in examined the opioid epidemic in Southeast Ohio and throughout the region. We reported on these key issues in ZipIt.News. We engaged our local county health departments in thinking about direct mail to reach residents with health-related information. The students and community members developed digital media strategies for health communication in these rural areas.

Moreover, The ZipIt.News platform was funded by the Media Seeds Project for two years, providing some continuity beyond the immediate project and creating a platform for user-generated content. Our listening work --through our visits, our surveys, our stories and our conversations-- amplified and made visible the rich, complex, frustrating and fractured communication environment in the region.

What Shifted as We Did this Work? What Did We Learn?

One shift that occurred in this stage was that the Media Seeds project lead, Michelle Ferrier, moved to Florida in the fall of 2019, which meant that Matt was the primary local contact for the project. During the Accelerate phase of the project, Michelle Ferrier coached Matt in developing and deepening the project in SE Ohio. On weekly calls, Matt and Michelle discussed story ideas, local politics, new personalities and next steps. They also discussed ideas for developing revenue to support the site.

Matt had a lot of success networking and collaborating with partners in Pomeroy, where ZipIt.News was seen as helpful for local business owners, and in Chesterhill, which had a clear local champion. Matt also developed good relationships with people from Meigs and Morgan County Health Departments and with organizers of independent news outlets such as the *Meigs Independent Press*. But Matt experienced a great deal of push back in his local community, McConnelsville, where residents have a high level of public distrust of local media. Local politicians and leaders of the existing weekly paper were suspicious of ZipIt.News and of Matt, despite the fact that he was in and from the community. This was emotionally difficult for Matt and required the team to provide coaching and support from a distance.

Matt also recognized that he was lacking knowledge of media sales and that his education and experiences had prepared him to produce content as a journalist. He also learned the routines of the community journalist and learned to balance his personal and professional lives. But Matt was frustrated. This was his hometown and he was angry over inaction and dangers he felt town leaders were ignoring. He wondered if his reporting was making a difference.

Michelle identified the Media Sales Institute as training that would provide Matt with additional skills in media sales. Matt submitted his application and was accepted into the Summer 2019 program on DATES. Matt traveled to Atlanta for two weeks to learn media sales techniques he might apply to the Southeast Ohio project. Matt is also fielding job offers from media companies in Georgia, South Carolina and other places not anywhere near McConnelsville. Matt will need to decide if he will stay in Ohio, or take his skills on the road.

The project is at a shifting point now, as we are completing our implementation, acceleration and evaluation phases. At this point, there is some uncertainty about the future of ZipIt.News because the project does not have permanent funding. The county health departments and local business leaders have shown interest in ZipIt.News as a way to share relevant local information, and it is possible that collaboration could continue with these groups.

How the Work Dovetails with JTM Principles and Our Insights from Stage 1

As a whole, the Media Seeds Project operates with engagement principles drawn from the work of Journalism That Matters' work in building community infrastructure. As noted above, the three principles are: *Nothing About Us Without Us, Speak Truth to Empower,* and *Listening is Our Superpower.* These principles guide our project activity and are central to the evaluation of our success. Additionally, we used a mix of experiments to explore an emerging "third way", that we discussed in Journalism That Matters's prior developmental evaluation work:

> *To be a thriving, resilient ecosystem, communication needs to go beyond "reporting" what is happening in the ecosystem to providing robust information and inclusive dialogue, fostering collaborative action that achieves community goals.*
> --*Journalism For Democracy and Communities: A New Framework*

Throughout the project, the Media Seeds team has worked hard to do a lot of deep listening. Matt, as the locally embedded journalist, describes his key role as observing and listening to people in the community. He has also emphasized the principle of *Speak Truth to Empower* through learning to navigate the local power structures and write timely, fair, clear news stories that shed light on local corruption. The combination of his high quality reporting and the relationships he developed with community members helped him provide good information in ZipIt News that could help empower members of the local communities. The ZipIt News platform also provided local community partners with the ability to post news and information, which

helps empower them to communicate their messages with others in the region. In these ways, we believe the SE Ohio Media Seeds project embodied these principles.

Working with the principle of *Nothing about us without us* has been more difficult. Even though we developed productive relationships with key local stakeholders, the logistics of maintaining close collaborations with local stakeholders at three different locations was very challenging. Additionally, involving those stakeholders with the regular Media Seeds team meetings, which were held via Zoom, was very difficult. The lack of cell service and internet access create obstacles for participation, but even if our local partners were able to access the technology they often were not able to find time to meet. We tried holding meetings at various times of the day, so ensure broad participation by residents and business owners. In these rural environments, many of the key community partners are people who are busily involved in many local activities, so they are stretched thin in terms of time and resources. These challenges were evident somewhat in the first stage of our work, but became clearer during this second stage.

Additionally, the developmental evaluation process from the first stage of our work provided us with key insights about entering media deserts, which are:

> **Consider your identity**: Reflect on who you are and what that means for your relationship to the community. What can you offer? What are your limits?
> **Listen deeply**: Use a variety of methods to learn about community assets and needs.
> **Make the invisible visible**: Discover the factors that affect the capacity for community members to connect to themselves and others.
> **Embrace serendipity**: Be willing to let go of plans to work with the unexpected.
> **Treat every community as unique**: Design specifically from what you learn about each community.

These insights, along with the JTM principles, informed our ongoing evaluation of the project and helped us to develop the insights we offer below.

What Else Has Emerged: Key Insights from this Project

Throughout the second stage of this work, we implemented and assessed localized media tools for different rural communities in Southeast Ohio. In this work we began to develop our understanding of key insights that we believe may travel well into other projects. We tacitly drew on these insights while doing this work and we are coming to see them as essential, especially in a rural Appalachian context.

The following insights emerged from a reflection among the Media Seeds team and were further developed during our learning conversation with project stakeholders.

#1 Design for the Realities of the Region
Rural communities have local assets but also face constraints related to infrastructure, geography, and culture. Innovations should be designed to fit these realities.

Many rural communities have **insufficient communication infrastructure**, which can have a significant impact on a project's success. As noted previously, cell service and internet access are not consistently available in many areas throughout Southeast Ohio. This means that many people get their news and information from print, radio, and television sources. If weekly newspapers exist, they are likely to be struggling and staffed mostly by stringers who have low or no pay. Existing local radio culls news from around the region and has limited or no local reporting. Projects that involve a combination of print and online media can be useful to reach a broad range of community members. However, given the lack of widespread internet access in the region it is likely that the older population will only see the print versions.

It is also important to design for **rural geography**. Distances between rural communities can be sizable, and any project that involves multiple communities will require a substantial amount of driving. Road quality can vary, with many major thoroughfares being two-lane roads, and weather can create challenges for travel. Successfully designing for rural media deserts means be mindful of the time and physical demands of travel.

Finally, it is essential to develop a **deep understanding of local culture** and learn to work within that culture. The rural region of Southeast Ohio has predominantly conservative political leanings and an aging population that is not as computer literate and media savvy as people living in more urban environments. Communities have their own calendars, such as in Chesterhill, where town activity circulates around the Chesterhill Produce Auction.
Although there are some local activists working for social justice and progressive community members working for economic development, many of the communities can be insular, homogeneous, and suspicious of outsiders.

#2 Attend to Journalists' Emotions and Inner Life
How do you hold both intimacy and objectivity at the same time? We learned that to build rapport and engagement you must be present. As a local resident in a small town, Matt struggled to make an impact with his reporting work and move his community to action. Even with tenuous and real social connections, Matt was still an outsider.

This work can be isolating and emotionally difficult. Journalists need preparation and tools to manage emotional dynamics. For example embedded journalists can feel overwhelmed and isolated because they occupy a unique role in the community and can face significant hurdles to doing the work. Emotional labor is alienating, and our experience points to a need for trauma training or something that can be refashioned for those who are constantly pummeled by advancing the cause. Providing a support network with others working in similar settings might mitigate some of the feelings of isolation. Additionally, local journalists also need training on

sales and management, skills that go beyond typical reporting and journalistic training, to be successful in promoting innovation. Projects should be designed to provide both emotional support and professional development for those journalists with their boots on the ground.

#3 Recognize Limits and Public Perceptions of Existing Local Media

Local media are embedded in cultural and political institutions. Any new innovation will enter into that cultural and political context. Small town politics have deep roots, with a small number of people holding a concentration of local power. This has clear potential for corruption of the media. In our project we found that many community members distrusted local media, which they criticized for a lack of transparency. Local media also have some structural issues that can be problematic. Paywalls, which are common, prevent the circulation of information to larger audiences. Local papers that only present after-the-fact reports of events do not fully serve the public. In our project we saw some local media sources that underpaid, or simply did not pay, the workers. All of these exacerbate the public distrust of the media. It became clear to us that just because some local media exists, doesn't mean they serve the public.

#4 Anticipate that Innovations May Disrupt Existing Power Structures

Change is difficult and can be threatening to local leaders, who may resist or challenge your work. It became apparent to us that our project was disruptive. The communication innovation we promoted in this rural media dessert challenged the status quo and was seen as threatening to people in power. Although this might not always be the case in other geographies, project leaders should anticipate that innovations could be met with resistance. An isolated, embedded journalist does not have the social capital to effectively manage this disruption, especially if that journalist lacks support from existing local media. It would be useful to find ways to navigate the power system and proactively address the potential for resistance.

#5 Enlist a Local Champion, Even if the Journalist is From the Community

Supportive local partners play an important role in the project's success. This role is different from what journalists can do alone. Ideally the project will involve collaboration between journalists and local community members at all stages of the work, from inception through implementation. In Chesterhill and in Pomeroy, we were piggybacking on the social capital of trusted people and business leaders. Our project faced some challenges that are related to the fact that only one of the primary team members was local to the community and he was in the role of the embedded journalist. Even though Matt grew up in McConnelsville, had family roots in the community, and lived there while doing this reporting, he was still eyed suspiciously. His college education and work as an independent journalist set him apart and marked him as "different." In a way he was liminal--between the local community and the larger world of professional journalism. For example, Matt was challenged by leaders of the local paper, who were suspicious that ZipIt News postcards was postmarked from outside of the local ZIP code (especially since the slogan was "as local as it gets"). Even though the news was investigated

and reported locally, the zipcode marked it as coming from outsiders. In McConnelsville, then, Matt had to act both as the embedded journalist and as his own local advocate. In contrast, the project had more success in the communities of Chesterhill and Pomeroy, where Media Seeds had local champions that could communicate with and support Matt.

Conclusions and Next Steps

In June 2019, we convened a group of project stakeholders to discuss this project, sharpen these insights and develop next steps. The learning conversation consisted of representatives from Journalism that Matters, the Democracy Fund, and the Jefferson Center as well as members of the Media Seeds team. We discussed the report and ended with a reflection on next steps.

One of the conclusions that arose from this conversation was that **infrastructure remains a significant challenge** in rural environments. Although we knew this going into the project, it remained a substantial issue throughout the work. It is important to understand the specific infrastructure situations in local communities so that news and information projects can be designed and deployed appropriately. Based on our experience, we believe that postcard experiment using Every Door Direct Mail targeting has potential to be successful in other rural environments because it can reach every household in the designated area. However, the lack of broadband internet access limits the success of multi-platform news coordination. Our survey of residents showed that most respondents had not accessed the online version of ZipIt News, even if they received the postcards. Of those who had accessed the website, most only did so once. So, although EDDM worked well to reach rural residents, a lack of broadband internet prevented community members from making much connection between the postcards and the online platform.

Relatedly, the team found ourselves wondering what role journalists should have in local efforts to improve infrastructure, such as bringing broadband internet to Southeast Ohio. Throughout the local region, many groups are working on similar issues, but residents of the different communities may not be aware of efforts happening in other towns. As we noted earlier, some of our villages and towns operate with local champions. However, there is oftentimes no local government online and with poor communication regarding civic actions. Archival notes of community and civic actions are lacking. The continuity on large and small initiatives relies on these local champions, who change based on the issue. Local journalists could have a role to play in helping connect the efforts, but this requires journalists to **develop strong networks of collaborative relationships**. During the learning conversation we discussed the importance of learning the local networks of people involved in many sectors of the community, as demonstrated in the digital ethnography work that preceded our selection of the three communities. Making visible the network of relations helps a new or familiar journalist or an intrepid local champion work within existing networks. This ethnography work also helps journalists understand how local projects get done, and it also can help journalists develop a

sense for how their work dovetails with, or can shift, local projects. And from our survey work, residents said they wanted to know their neighbors, through stories of people and places in the region.

Third, the conversation reflected a great deal on the **significant political and cultural challenges** to creating news and information innovation in rural Appalachian media deserts. Although we did not begin this project with the goal of disrupting local power systems, it became clear that media innovations were disruptive and seen as threats by both local politicians and owners of local media. For example, even as a "local boy," Matt became marginalized in his own town as he raised challenging questions about taken-for-granted assumptions about community politics. Some ways the group discussed addressing this concern in future projects include having multiple embedded journalists, either two in the same community or several working together in a region, who can collaborate with and support each other. Local champions can also help in this regard as they can advocate for and support the journalist's work.

We would be remiss to not mention the political climate of the past two years here in the United States, and that our work is situated in deep red political territories of Trump for President signs. Tweets and charges of "fake news" have reached to the local level, and suspicions of the media taint the work of every journalist, even a homegrown one.

Finally, it is helpful if the project can have a **clear vision that is mutually agreed upon** and valued by the community. Developing a shared vision for the work can be challenging in the rural environment, especially if working across different towns. But the processes of listening deeply, collaborating with stakeholders, and talking through what that vision could be is important. Through this kind of deep engagement, journalists can create projects that enable community members to share their own narratives.

Next Steps

One step we will take as an evaluation team is to share the results of the developmental evaluation with others who could find value in it. This includes sharing with journalists, community leaders, and practitioners who are involved in seeding localized democratic innovations. To that end we will summarize the learnings captured in this report to create blog posts or shorter stories that can be easily shared in the appropriate networks.

Locally, the Southeast Ohio Media Seeds Project team is involved in conversations with local health departments and other community partners about the continuation of ZipIt News. Our hope is that the project lives on beyond our implementation stage and can become an important part of the community fabric.