The Virtual SciCon 2.0 Conference Series | Transcript

Sarah Stonbely, Steve Waldman and Jason Gibbins: Reviving News Deserts. Three examples of how to use public money to promote structural change in local/regional journalism

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Mod.: Christina Sartori

Christina Sartori: I start with a welcome, welcome to everybody who joined us today. Welcome especially to our speakers Sarah Stonbely, Jason Gibbons and Steve Waldman. It's great to have you. Welcome SciCon2.0, Science Journalism in the Digital Age. It's a virtual lecture series organised by the German Science Journalists' Association. (It's easier in German: Wissenschaftspressekonferenu) and the Science Media Center Germany, SMC. My name is Christina Sartori. I'm a science journalist and I will be your host today. The focus of SciCon 2.0 is on topics that are relevant for the digital transformation of journalism. So, it's about practical ideas that can be developed and implemented in Germany. SciCon is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Thank you. SciCon started in already in 2020 with a series of lectures. There we looked internationally for concepts and ideas to develop and yeah, well, save the future of science journalism, no less. The lecture series in this year, now 2023, will run until September, and it will conclude in an international conference in Berlin in November. And there we'll try or we will formulate recommendations as a result of all the input we got from the different lectures. That is the main idea. Today's lecture concentrates on local journalism. Its title is Reviving News Deserts, and it describes the situation in some communities in the US where independent local journalism doesn't exist anymore or nearly anymore. They are deserts of news. In the UK and Germany, it is a similar picture. Times are hard for journalism, but they are especially hard for local journalism. And this endangers democracy, as our speakers will argue in just a few minutes. Sarah Stonbely, Steve Waldman and Jason Gibbons will present three different ideas: concepts on how to save local journalism in the US and in UK. Before we start, let's just check a few technical things. That's my job. The session is planned for 45 minutes, but we definitely have to stop after one hour at 5:00 in the afternoon. CET.

After each speech, there will be room for questions of understanding if you directly have a question because you didn't understand something. The actual discussion I propose will take place after all three talks have been presented. You can raise your virtual hand or write in the chat and I will present your question or you just ask

directly. The session will be recorded and transcribed. So, you will be recorded too, because we will add it to the SciCon knowledge reservoir. This is where we store all the lectures and the discussions and the panels we had where you can watch them or read them again if you missed one of the sessions, for example. Um, yeah, I think that's all about the technology. So, let's start with Steve Waldman. Steve Waldman will present the Rebuild Local News Coalition. Steve Waldman founded Rebuild Local News and he is the president of this coalition. He's also co-founder and president of Report for America and Report for America is a national service programme that places journalists in newsrooms across America. Before becoming an advocate of local journalism, Steve Waldman covered national politics as a journalist for Newsweek, US News and World Reports and Washington Monthly. He's also the author of a report for the Federal Communications Commission outlining the information needs of communities. So, Steve, if you are ready, you may start with your talk now and introduce Rebuild Local News.

Steve Waldman: Hi. Very nice to meet you all. I'm going to try to get my presentation set up here. Here we go. Um, so just a caveat first at the beginning, which is to say that I don't actually believe that government policy is the main or only solution to the local news crisis. But in the US anyway, it is the one that has been most neglected and underdiscussed. So, I'm going to focus on that as opposed to some other things. But I wanted to say that at the outset because like the group that I started, Report for America is a nonprofit that places journalists into local newsrooms and has placed more than 550 reporters into 300 newsrooms around the country. And there's hundreds of new news organisations that have popped up in recent years to try to deal with this crisis. But I'm going to focus a little bit on the public policy part of that today. So first, just talking about the crisis, I think you mostly know this and these stats are are, you know, based on the US for the most part. Is this visible properly to everyone?

Steve Waldman: Okay. Um. So, you know, it's there we go. So, on average, two newspapers are shutting each week in the United States, and there's 1,800 communities that have no news source. And the ghost newspapers are a little hard to quantify, but they're just as important. These are papers that are still publishing but have so little news in them about local matters, that get filled with wire service copy and things like that. Here's a very vivid illustration of this. This is the Denver Post, which had been one of the strongest regional papers in the US. They won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013. And this is a picture of them that was a picture they took the day they won the Pulitzer. And this is who's left. So, in general, depending on how you count it, the number of reporters has dropped in the US by about 30,000, somewhere in the 60 percent range. And this really goes, of course, well beyond, you know, the impact of the jobs for these journalists. It just has a massive impact on the health of communities. Uh, you see it? You know, the loss of local reporters leads to local loss of local coverage. This is from a book called *News Hole* that has the number of news stories in 121 papers that they tracked. And what this leads to, there's all sorts of academic research at this point that shows that the collapse of local news causes all sorts of harms to communities.

Steve Waldman: Um, and this is kind of intuitive, but at this point it's interesting to see that it's been really solidly proven through social science research that it leads to more government waste and corruption, more polarisation, which is interesting. And that seems to be because when there's a local news collapse, the vacuum gets filled by other information and the other information in the US anyway is national news or cable news, which tends to be more partisan, and conspiracy theories and social media. There was another study that showed that the collapse of local news actually led to higher taxes because financing costs, borrowing costs for municipal governments went up because no one was watching the store and all sorts of examples of it leading to lower voter turnout, less participation and in civic meetings and things like that. So, it's really important to view this not so much as a problem of journalism, but as a problem for democracy. And on a more fundamental level, just the ability of communities to address their own problems and for residents to make the choices that they want. Um, as I mentioned, you know, this notion that the vacuums get filled is becoming a more and more important part of the discussion. Um, Timothy Snyder, who some of you may know, is a scholar who writes about authoritarianism, especially in Europe and Eastern Europe, although he's a professor at Yale.

Steve Waldman: And it was striking to me, given what he has seen about authoritarianism around the world, that he identified a local news crisis as one of the most fundamental that is facing the US and probably other countries as well. So, you know, as I said at the outset, it's not that I necessarily think public policy is the only solution here. In fact, I think growing philanthropy and the nonprofit sector is probably the most important. And strengthening the business models is essential as well. But in the US anyway, public policy around this area has been pretty neglected. I think it's different from other countries in this regard where it's actually been a topic for longer and more explicitly. There's been a strong ethos here and especially in the journalist community against government involvement. Um, but our argument in creating this very big coalition is that we can't take that view anymore, that the scale of the collapse is so big that it is just not likely that the philanthropic support is going to do the trick. So, we need to look at public policy. And also, you know, just in general, the concept is that certain types of local news are a public good.

Steve Waldman: And so, it's appropriate for taxpayers to be helping to support that. We've seen this in the US in the past. There have been various examples in fact, although people don't really realise this and often will think that, you know, there's no government involvement in the news. In fact, there have been important and key interventions by the government in news throughout American history going all the way back to the founding fathers. Um. It had a postal subsidy that made it extremely cheap to mail newspapers around the country, that was actually a massive subsidy. This probably will be familiar to you. You can see that the US compared to other countries, provides quite little in the way of taxpayer support for journalism in any regard. So, in making the argument for public policy, we're kind of, you know, going up against a tide of resistance to the idea that government should be involved and, you know, should pause to say the concerns are legitimate, like it's easy to see. And we've certainly seen this in other countries around the world, that certain types of government involvement in supporting local news can be really problematic and give governments the ability to

manipulate or reward or punish news outlets. So, we take the concern very seriously. We just think we shouldn't be paralysed by it and that there are models out there, both existing and new ones, that can support local news and in the right way.

Steve Waldman: So, this coalition formed in 2020 of about, it's now up to about 30 different groups, mostly national and state groups that represent news organisations and journalists and philanthropy foundations to try to come up with policies that will advance the ball. So, these may not mean anything to you, but these are just some of the names of the groups that are in this coalition. It's a very broad, broad range. So, our first effort was focused on an idea that is interesting. It was a payroll tax credit for the hiring and/or retaining of local reporter jobs. So, and it would have been a very substantial support, $1.7 billion over five years, and it came quite close to passing, but it fell a couple votes short in the US Congress. But then what happened is it started to spawn local versions of it and there throughout in other states efforts to do similar things. So, I'm going to actually kind of unpack some of these different ideas. Um, this is kind of almost a policy menu right now that we're seeing in the US and because now the attention is focused more on the 50 states, it will end up being a broad mix, but that's fine.

Steve Waldman: It'll be kind of a time of experimentation, I think. So, one approach involves giving tax credits to different participants in the sector. Um, so I mentioned the incentives to hire and retain reporters. There's another idea that is a credit for consumers to subscribe or donate to local news. There is a tax credit for small businesses that advertise in local news. Um, the fourth one is interesting. It basically says, you know, the government itself is an advertiser. It advertises in the US for all sorts of things on the national level. It's, you know, military recruitment and sign up for the census and things like that and local government, it's often, you know, public health advertising, things like that. But if you look at how they spend it for reasons of inertia and technology and other things, it tends to go to either the biggest national publications or cable TV or billboards. And so, we're making the argument that, you know, some of that should go to local news and there should be some conscious effort to target it toward that. New York City has actually had an effective pilot of this, where they put 50 percent of the city's ad spending toward community newspapers. Uh, there's like 250 community newspapers in New York City. Um, and it was really very, very effective and helped keep some of them alive.

Steve Waldman: Um, replanting incentives with that refers to is the idea that in addition to thinking about subsidies, there's other policies that affect, um, how this all plays out. For instance, in the US, I don't know if this is as true in Europe, but one of the problems, in addition to the Internet undercutting the basic business models by drawing advertisers away, you also have had massive consolidation and mergers among newspaper chains and including by financial firms. Private equity and hedge funds now own half the daily newspaper circulation in the United States. And they have tended to have a terrible track record in terms of cutting back on staff and investment in journalism and the community. And so, the notion of replanting is the idea of combining the kind of, you know, the stick of antitrust enforcement with incentives to help community organisations acquire newspapers from chains, sort of deconsolidate.

Other states are looking at fellowship programmes to directly place reporters into newsrooms, a lot like the Report for America programme. And then there are some instances of grant programmes that are funded by the government but run by nonprofit groups. And I think Sarah going to talk about an example of that in New Jersey. Then there's national policy that doesn't necessarily relate to subsidies, but, you know, can involve banking regulation and antitrust. As I said, that can help with local news.

Steve Waldman: Um, and then I mentioned the notion of government advertising. Part of why this is sort of a popular idea right now is it doesn't involve new spending. So, at a moment where people and state governments are kind of cutting back here, you can say this doesn't involve any new spending, just take some of the money that you're already spending and direct it more to have this double benefit of reaching people in their community and helping to underwrite local journalism. And the goal is to try to get enough government support to support 10,000 local reporters over ten years. Uh, this is just, you know what I said before, we just want to acknowledge the real risks involved in government involvement. Um, and to say that there are ways of guarding against this. You know, we think policies that don't involve government officials sitting around and deciding, making grants to news organizations, we don't like that approach. We like things that are based on a more universal set of standards that are more objective and quantifiable. Um, and it's important that this legislation all be supported by both political parties and really thinking through the risks of that. So, the principles of, of how to do public policy that we support are that they be content neutral, non-partisan and ensure editorial independence. Also that they be future friendly, like one of the risks of public policy in general is always that it tends to get made by the existing players, the people who are sitting around the table, and sometimes that distorts the landscape and actually makes innovation harder by blocking out access to new players or folks that aren't there and therefore aren't at the table.

Steve Waldman: So, you want to do public policy in a way that's very future friendly and innovation friendly. So that is my presentation. And I just, you know, as I said, um, I think these public policy ideas need to interact with dramatic changes in the nonprofit and commercial sectors as well. But if you construct them in a thoughtful way, they can and that we can really take advantage of a lot of the innovation that's happened and help fuel that, because that is the good news right now, even though with all the bleak statistics that it gave about the local news collapse, there is a counter. It's small but a counter trend, which is there's been 300 new nonprofit news, local news organizations created in the US just in about the last five years. And it's actually quite a vibrant little sector and it just needs help. And so, you know, the positive part of this is that if you combine thoughtful, philanthropic support with thoughtful public policy, you can actually create a better local news system than you've had in the past.

Christina Sartori: Steve, thank you very much and thanks for ending on this positive note after starting with this. Well, description of news deserts in the UK and all those consequences. Are there any questions directly related? Yeah, I do see hands here. Oh, no. Okay. That's applause. Right. Um, any direct questions of understanding? As I said,

we will discuss after all the three speeches. Speeches? I'm sorry. Okay, well, then let's go to our next speaker. Sarah Stonbely will present the Civic Information Consortium in New Jersey, USA. Steve just mentioned it. Sarah is research director at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University in the USA. She holds a PhD in political communication, media, sociology and journalism from New York University, and she was a postdoctoral fellow at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. Sarah's expertise lies in media, sociology, local news ecosystems and research method methodology. Sarah is a member of the Civic Information Consortium and the consortium is housed within Montclair State University, where she works. Please, Sarah, if you would start now and present to us the Civic Information Consortium.

Sarah Stonbely: Thank you so much, Christina, and thanks. Thanks for having me on this panel. I feel very strongly that's a really important topic and I'm thrilled to be here. So, thanks for having me. Um, I'm going to go ahead and share my slides.

Sarah Stonbely: Sorry, let me just back up and say very briefly. Right. So, I'm at the Center for Cooperative Media in New Jersey. This effort, this public policy effort that's taking place with the Civic Information Consortium is based in New Jersey. And so, the Center for Cooperative Media, which I'm again, the research director of, has been very closely involved with the consortium from the beginning. And it's really exciting to see it happening. And I'll talk, obviously, a lot more about it in just a moment. But what I'd like to start with is sort of some context. And Steve did a little bit of this as well, information about the amount of public funding per capita that the US puts toward public media. So it's just over $3 per person, as you can see here, per capita, and that is more than Tunisia, India and Colombia, but dramatically less than our friends in Germany and the UK, as we can see here and elsewhere, which make a substantially higher investment in public media than does the US. So, we're starting from a very low bar. However, there is definitely room for optimism because the tide does seem to be turning in our favour. You know, Steve, I think laid out very well, you know, the forces, the inertia and the sort of concerns against, you know, very direct public funding, you know, run by politicians, etcetera.

Sarah Stonbely: But there has been this real effort to be creative. Steve has been a huge player in this, the consortium, others to really like really rethink what public funding can look like. And so, it has stopped being an article of faith that the government has to be completely walled off in terms of funding. Um, so the consortium is a first in the nation state level funding mechanism to support local news and information in the state of New Jersey. It was formed in 2018 and has given out nearly $2.5 million so far. And due to an exponential increase in the amount of funding it received in the most recent New Jersey state budget, which was last June, it will give we'll give out $4 Million in 2023. Um, now, I don't want to insult anyone's intelligence with this. I hope I'm not. But I just wanted to show very briefly sort of where New Jersey is because everyone might not know sort of the geography of the US as closely. We're, you know, a very small state, relatively geographically. It's on the East Coast. It's just between New York, Philadelphia and DC, sort of on the East Coast most of the

states are smaller, but New Jersey is the fourth most populous, fourth largest in terms of population density and one of the most diverse states as well.

Sarah Stonbely: So just for a little geographic context there, um, so the Civic Information Consortium and this is the home page of the website and the URL is in the upper left corner if you care to look at it more closely. It's a nonprofit, that includes six public universities and mandates that all grantees partner with one of the universities, both for guidance and so that the universities can be more connected to their communities. There is a board, the Civic Information Consortium has a board. It's made up of 16 people. They are a combination of experts in the relevant fields. So like communication policy, that sort of thing. And then a number of appointees by the governor, the state Senate and universities, and that was all sort of wrangled over and worked out in the course of writing the legislation. But the point of including the universities and sort of a board that is elected from all sorts of parts of the state was to insulate it from exactly this type of concern around political intervention that Steve mentioned.

Sarah Stonbely: There are three statutory public hearings that are required a year where it's open to the public, anyone. They've been webinars, they've been online thus far. I think some of them will be in person going forward where people can come forward and ask any sort of question that they might have. And there are again safeguards built into the legislation which mandate that no one involved in the consortium from on the board or anywhere else can have any ownership stake in any of the grant or any of the projects that are given, grant money or exercise any editorial control that is stated explicitly in the legislation itself. So we're just getting into our third call for proposals, it went out on February 1st. As you can see here. It closes on March 31st. And we're actually giving out $4 million total, 1 million of which will be in new grants. So new projects that are coming to the consortium through an open call and they submit their proposal online and they detail what they'd like to do. And these projects are they run, they run. It's a wide spectrum of news and information initiatives. So, you know, they're coming from arts organizations or universities or civic tech organizations or sometimes also more traditional sort of what you would think of as like a more traditional online newspaper or something like that. There are collaborations, so there's really like a broad array of projects that are proposed and that are granted.

Sarah Stonbely: So, it's really exciting, you know, trying to seed all sorts of different things to see what works. And then the rest of the 1 million, as I'll get into more in a second, goes toward toward different projects that support sort of the infrastructure of the state's local news and information media scape. Um, so the current call focuses, so the 1 million on projects that are specifically going to grow the journalism pipeline, which has become sort of an acute problem. You know, a lot of times when high schools or universities lose money in their budget, the journalism programmes are the first, not the journalism programmes, but like the school newspaper is like the first thing to be cut. So, the number of students who are coming out of the school system in the US broadly, but in New Jersey specifically, which is something we've studied directly, you know, has decreased. So, we really want to encourage, you know, any

project that's going to grow that journalism pipeline, projects that are going to grow and strengthen civic engagement. So this is a very broad term, but something that, you know, sort of Steve mentioned as well, which is the idea that people in communities can feel, again, to have some agency and some investment in their own sort of news and infrastructure, local news and local communication infrastructure, and then nonpartisan civic voter information, which is just become sort of endangered at many levels in the US.

Sarah Stonbely: And, you know, we really want to make sure that ahead of especially the 2024 presidential election, that we can do everything we can to support local news and information projects that can bring, you know, nonpartisan civic voter information, that can help people feel better about that, feel better about going into that election as sort of informed, civically active voters. And then the other 3 million of the four is going to re-up some current grantees. So, another thing that has been maybe a little bit of an issue with philanthropic funding of local news initiatives is that a lot of the funding is project based and not sort of given for operational purposes, right? So, like one project finishes and then the outlet is left scrambling like, what are we going to do for our next project? We have to get more funding because the funding was just given for one specific project. So, this is kind of nice because it acts as operational funding over year over year, um, to the grantees who are, you know, thriving, doing what they said they would do in their, in their prior proposal, investing in the information ecosystem infrastructure. So, this is helping very small hyperlocal news outlets upgrade their tech right, upgrade their websites, upgrade their social presence, whatever, and then their revenue streams. So, we're going to be, you know, hopefully working with organisations that can really sit down and help them think through, you know, diversifying their revenue stream, making, you know, optimising it for whatever their project is.

Sarah Stonbely: We're going to pilot community led grantmaking. So, we feel really strongly about making sure that community members themselves are involved in grant making, too, not just the board and the consortium at the state level. So, we're going to pilot a project like that to see if we can make that work more in the future. And then we're going to evaluate the impact of grantees which is a project that I'm going to be running, and I'll talk a little bit more about that in a moment. So, all of the current grantees, I think there are currently 37 or 36, 37 I'm sorry, the number changes, but we have dozens of grantees currently. They're all listed on this Civic Information Consortium's website. And this is you know, this is for a couple of reasons, right? Number one is transparency. You know, it's public funding. So, it's really important that people can, you know, go on to the website, see who's being funded, go to their websites, you know, see what's happening. Um, and then secondly, just to sort of, you know, create a, you know, documentation because the hope is, of course, that the consortium can be a model, you know, one among many in other states as well.

Sarah Stonbely: So, I just want to give a few examples of current grantees. I've sort of hinted at what type of organisations they are, but just these are just three examples that I chose somewhat arbitrarily. As I said, there are dozens more that you can look at on the website. One is The Trenton Journal. Trenton is the state capital of New Jersey. It's an urban community. And Kenneth Miles started this outlet. It's a digital native

online newspaper. And it's really directed toward the black and brown communities in Trenton to try to give positive news about those communities. That's his part of his mission. And then he feels very strongly about giving like civic voter information as well. So, this is one of the grantees he's been, he's received, he's been re-upped once, I believe, so far. Another is an interesting project. It is a collaboration between a local public library and an organisation called Paterson Alliance. Paterson is another city in New Jersey. It's one of the largest, very diverse. I think it's 40 percent Hispanic and Latinx, and it is one with a large Arab population there as well. So, there are multiple languages spoken. And Paterson Alliance is an umbrella organisation of more than 80 nonprofit groups who serve those communities specifically, but all of Paterson in general, and they partnered with the local library to create an events calendar where they could put online various events that, you know, anyone in the community might be interested in and, you know, just sort of bring people together, just another way to provide the service to the community.

Sarah Stonbely: So, they were another grantee of the consortium. And then finally, what we might recognise is sort of a very traditional online newspaper called Ridge View Echo. They serve four adjacent towns, as you might be able to read in their little subhead there, but are based sort of in Blairstown, which is kind of like the hub of those four. And Blairstown has been a local news desert for more than 20 years when their last truly local newspaper folded. And what's cool about this project is that the last editor-in-chief of that newspaper now runs Ridge View Echo. So, it's really been, you know, sort of truly putting, you know, real money into these communities that formerly didn't have, you know, had lost their newspaper or whatever. And they're back. And this screenshot, which I just grabbed yesterday, shows that they are just reaching their one-year milestone. So that's really cool and exciting. And I think they're also one of the organisations that got re-upped in the last round of grantmaking as well. So, I mentioned that the CIC is undertaking an effort to evaluate the impact of its grantees.

Sarah Stonbely: So you know, it was formed in 2018. We've gone through now two and a half rounds of grant making, and we're going to be doing a third round of grant making. And it's time to, you know, we have now like enough work behind us that we can start showing the impact from some of the grantees that have been CIC grantees. So, I'm leading this effort and I'm sort of thinking about it on three levels. And I'll just go through these briefly, but it's important to show the impact for two reasons. Number one, so that the grantees themselves can tell the stories of the good work they're doing. Right. A lot of them either haven't thought about impact ever, you know, or tracking it. They don't track it themselves. They're very small you know, they're under-resourced. They're not a huge organisation. And that requires time and energy. So, I'm helping them do that. And they can tell those stories then to potentially other funders, you know, to diversify their revenue streams or advertisers or whomever. But then secondly, so that the CIC itself can tell the stories of the good work that it is fostering. And obviously, we want to continue to receive money from the state legislature, which is renewed every year and then, you know, potentially eventually to get some private investment in the consortium as well.

Sarah Stonbely: So, I'm thinking about it in three different ways. I wanted to make it as I said, a lot of these organisations are thinking about impact maybe for the first time or they don't have really the bandwidth to think about it. So, I wanted to just make it super straightforward for them. So, I'm asking them, you know, what is the impact of your work on your community? So, this is like everything from online metrics, like your reach and your social media presence to, you know, qualitative data that really they have to gather because it's the kind of thing that would be impossible for anyone outside of the community to really be able to know. Right. But like, are they sparking, you know, discussions in public discourse? Right. Are they, you know, creating local policy change? Amazing. So, impact of their work on the communities, the impact of the programme on the grantees themselves. So, you know, have they acquired new skills? You know, have they, I was speaking to a grantee earlier this week who was saying that they all just learn WordPress with the help of a consortium grant so that any one of them can go in and update a story or, you know, post a story or change a picture or something like that.

Sarah Stonbely: So, that's awesome. And then, you know, or have they had a new hire? You know, they've hired a freelancer to write stories in Spanish or they've done some other sort of organisational improvement as a result of the consortium grant. And then finally, and this is one that I'll be sort of doing from a more macro level, more sort of bird's eye level. But what is the impact of the consortium on the various local news and information ecosystems in New Jersey and on the New Jersey state level media ecosystem as well? And you know, this is maybe the most difficult to track. It's the most diffuse, but you know, also kind of the most in one way, you know, one of the more important impacts because showing, you know, increased voter participation or, you know, sort of the opposite of all of those bad things that Steve mentioned that are well documented by academic research. You know, can we reverse any of those through our grant making? And then finally, Steve did it just as well. But, you know, there are other efforts ongoing. Could you, are we at the time?

Christina Sartori: Yes, Thanks.

Sarah Stonbely: That's perfect, because that's my last slide and I'm happy to take any questions and any concerns that people might have. And let me just stop my share here. Great. Thanks.

Christina Sartori: So, I didn't want to be rude. Not at all. Not at all. To ask.

Christina Sartori: Questions. Thank you very much. That was very impressive. Very well. Vivid. All those brands and those different things they did. Are there any directly related questions? If not, let's jump from America to the UK. Let's jump to Jason Gibbons. He will talk about the BBC programme called Local News Partnerships, in short. And Jason Gibbins is deputy editor for this programme. He's a multimedia editor and journalist. And prior to joining BBC News Online, he was editor of all print, online and social media titles for a number of local newspapers and websites. Jason has also worked for newspapers such as Northampton Chronicle and Echo, Coventry Telegraph

and as a freelance journalist for the Mail on Sunday and San Diego Express. Jason, if you are ready, you could start now and explain to us the principle of LNP.

Jason Gibbins: Thank you. Good. Good afternoon. I just temporarily lost connection there with the worst timing ever, so I'll just try and share my screen again. Let's, let's just try that one more time. Good afternoon everyone. Hopefully you can now see my screen. Okay, let me do that. Right. Okay. Uh, good afternoon. Thank you again. And as we mentioned, thank you very much for inviting and offering the opportunity to speak this afternoon. So, yes, my name is Jason Gibbons. I'm actually currently acting head of Local News Partnerships, filling in for a colleague. Um, so I have the honour of speaking this afternoon. Um, very briefly as an overview, the Local News Partnerships is a partnership between the BBC and the UK regional news industry that was set up to support public service reporting, sustain local democracy and improve skills in journalism. That's reading that from the background. The partnership is now five years old. Um, so it's now well settled and well established and we can talk about that in a little bit more detail shortly. But the story actually began long before it had been conceived, as the roots of the scheme came from the topics we've been discussing today. Those were the monumental changes that the regional news industry faced by the first financial crisis of the late 2000s. And then more importantly, obviously, the huge loss of advertising revenues that were traditionally monopolised by regional press. Those advertising revenues, obviously, as we all know, sort of going into the hands of the tech giants in that period.

Jason Gibbins: I was editor myself of a regional newspaper. And I saw that journey. I went from working on a small market town newspaper that had a monopoly on all advertising revenue to seeing the loss in resource and revenues that put the industry in a very different place. And so, and this briefly sort of covers that period that I was an editor. I started as an editor in 2007 and by 2017 was the point where I just left the industry and joined the BBC. So, these figures are now quite old, but they're very stark and they briefly show the scale of the losses that the industry faced in the UK. It faced a 69 percent fall drop in advertising revenue over a ten-year period. It faced a 25 percent decline in the number of regional newspapers in the UK, and it faced a similar decline to 26 percent in the number of frontline journalists. So big figures that changed the focus and position of the industry very, very rapidly. So, yeah, as I say, so big figures and that fall in revenues and number of frontline journalists meant it became increasingly difficult for the industry to find the resource to provide coverage of many areas, but in particular local democratic institutions and processes. And so that was a problem in the UK that everybody knew existed, but no one was really sure how, at least partially, to resolve.

Jason Gibbins: So, the first step for our project was as an industry starting to talk. And this slide shows a brief timeline of where we went. First step came in June 2014 when there was a revival of local journalism conference, which was organised by the BBC. And that was the first time, the first point where everybody interested in local news gathered in one room and that was regardless of platform or competition. And they had a good conversation, a good talk about the challenges facing the UK regional news industry and what possible solutions are out there. And it was a real groundbreaking

moment because from that came the A speech in 2015 which started to outline three initial ideas that perhaps the BBC could do to support. And those three initial ideas were to syndicate video, build data journalism skills and employ some local government reporters to fill what was very clearly becoming a local democracy deficit, a democratic deficit as it's known in the UK. So, then we continued to move, and the conversations continued. And so, in 2016, finally there was a key moment when a letter of agreement was signed between the BBC and the News Media Association. The News Media Association, just for information, is the representative body of the UK's national, regional and local news. So, the BBC and the NMA signed a letter of agreement.

Jason Gibbins: That agreement was written into a government white paper, which was published in December 2016. And then we were away. A process that's now five years old started to be launched, and we, the BBC, as part of that arrangement, took responsibility for launching and developing the three core services, the local democracy reporting service, the Shared Data Unit and News Hub. Just on the screen, you can see a very brief outline of what those three services are. News Hub is a bank of BBC News video material for use by online regional news partners. So, BBC Regional News Programmes Share. Share. Share. Share. Local broadcast bulletins, Clips from news bulletins which our news partners can use. The Data Journal. The Shared Data Unit is a data journalism centre of excellence that uses publicly funded data, sets publicly available datasets to tell stories in the public interest, unlike the assets funded by BBC staff. And then they've got the LDRS. So but it's the LDRS that I'm actually going to focus on today, but I'm happy to answer more questions at the end on the Shared Data Unit and News Hub. Just as an overview of the whole process, the whole local news partnerships, the umbrella scheme, cost of the BBC £8 million a year, that's what we participate to it. And the local democracy reporting service specifically costs around £5 million a year. So, €6 million effectively on today's exchange rates. Um, and from this initial launch, um, we now, and from a relatively small base of founder partners, we now work with almost 200 media organisations across the UK.

Jason Gibbins: So that's 200 individual media organisations who jointly are responsible for in excess of 1,000 individual print, online radio, TV news brands. Um, and as its approved partners, there's 1,000 news brands get free access to all content that is created by the three separate elements of our scheme, the SDU and NEWSHUB. So, as I say, the first part of the scheme to actually launch was in September 2017, and that was a shared data unit which uses those publicly available data sets to tell stories in the public interest. But as mentioned, for the benefit of this, I'm going to focus primarily on the development and growth of the LDRS. So, the LDRS was launched in 2018, January 2018, and in its simplest form, the Local Democracy Reporting Service is a local government newswire. Its coverage of local government in all four corners of the UK and all four nations of the UK. And we focused on local government because that's specifically been a sector which is becoming increasingly difficult to resource by newsrooms who were stretched by falling staff numbers and falling budgets. But obviously a key area to ensure that democracy and local government officials are being held to account. And so, in January 2018, our first local democracy reporter in the south east of England, a county called Kent, filed the very first story.

Jason Gibbins: The very first story. Just over five years later, we've now delivered a total of 320,000 new stories for use by those 1,000 plus commercial newsrooms across the UK. So, from small acorns grow. Et cetera. So, five years in, we've published 320,000 stories. This is how the scheme is operated at strategic level. So, as I say, accounting for 5 million of the 8 million overall budget of the Local News Partnerships, the BBC funds the Local Democracy Reporting Service in its entirety. And so, what we do, we provide the funding to two partner newsrooms to cover all employment and salary costs of 165 local democracy reporters that are based across the UK. We also oversee the service. We have a top-level responsibility management of the service, and we provide the tech platforms so that all the stories can be shared to the newswire. But crucially and really importantly, we don't employ the reporters. That responsibility falls to a smaller selection of our partners known as suppliers. So those 200 media organisations that are approved partners of the scheme that have those 1,000 plus brands that I was talking about, a small selection of those are known as suppliers. And we contract embed reporters into their newsrooms. So, they manage the scheme on a day-to-day basis. They are responsible for ensuring that all stories meet required editorial standards. And they are responsible for publishing the stories to the newswire.

Jason Gibbins: Once published, the BBC and all of those other partners that have access to the scheme can then use this journalism entirely free of charge. So let me just show you a little bit about how stories are delivered. All 165 local democracy reporters write their stories in the same shared authoring tool, a simple WordPress portal accessed via a username and password. It's reviewed by a senior colleague in their own newsroom. It's not reviewed by any BBC staff, and then it's published to partner organisations via two channels. So, they write the story in here. Once they hit publish, it appears in the newswires. So larger partners receive the wires. So, we receive the stories direct to their own newswire. The example you can see on screen is the BBC newswire, and copy is delivered alongside content from agencies such as the Press Association, Reuters and others. And you can see there, just from earlier this week or the end of last week, I've just highlighted a couple of stories that fed into the newswire. If you remember just the name of at least one of those stories. So, if I just go back, you see that the Devon Plymouth Council budget story that landed in the BBC Newswire, it also landed in an online newswire which smaller partners have access to those who don't have the ability to host an ingested newswire. So smaller partners are given access to this password protected online portal.

Jason Gibbins: But the same stories are delivered at the same time as they are to those partner organisations with the larger wire systems. So just following the journey of that council budget story. If this is of interest. Partners who receive that story can preview it within the online portal or within their wires. And they can download the text along with any associated audio or video or images for publication or broadcast to their own audiences. So, in this case, local democracy reporter Philip Churm has reported on the approval of the annual budget for Plymouth City Council. Plymouth being a city, a major port city in the south west of England. So, he's gone to the meeting. He's written the story. He still has been reviewed by his newsroom. He's

published the story to the wire partners can then see, can read the story and decide if they want to download it. And download it they did. Philip is employed by a company called Radio Exe radio broadcaster. So. So that organisation used it. The company that employs him, the BBC, used the story. It landed in their newswires. It was of interest to our BBC teams and they used the story. And Plymouth Live, which is a print and online news outlet owned by REACH PLC, Reach being one of the largest media groups in the UK, they also use the story. Reach PLC in Plymouth are a direct rival to Radio Exe, but they still have access to the story.

Jason Gibbins: They still use the same wire copy for the benefit of their own audiences. So that's one story used by at least three separate rival news organisations. And for the story of this importance, my assumption would be that it's probably used by at least 2 or 3 other additional news groups that are registered to receive stories in the southwest of England. So that's how the scheme works. As I say, we were a world first. We had a blank sheet of paper, no template when we set out on this scheme and it's evolved a little bit and you know, some things have worked, some things haven't and we've continued to evolve. But overall, where are we now? The scheme as of today produces 1,300 trusted stories per week for use by partners. It protects public interest news and it employs 165 journalists. Ninety-nine percent of all stories in our last survey were used at least once. But on average, every story is used at least up to three times. Primarily, two thirds of the stories are used as leads or major items, and the service is possible to replicate. We already have similar models launched in New Zealand and Canada. This week alone, I've had similar conversations about the service with SVT in Sweden and YLE in Finland. There are downsides. Vacancies can be hard to fill.

Jason Gibbins: Not all partners get equal benefit because it is text based and it tends to favour text-based suppliers. Although we do try and offer some video and audio, and small organisations can traditionally struggle to compete to employ local democracy reporters in their newsroom. But that's something we've worked very hard to overcome and we've got some smaller players that now do employ. And diversity is a problem which is very representative of the UK media market. We'd like a more diverse reporter pool as well. Just finally, two minutes on what comes next. So, what comes next? Time will tell. My funding for the LNP is guaranteed until at least the end of 2027, but we're now turning thoughts beyond that. And in January of this year, a sustainability of local journalism report, which was published by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport from the UK government, recommended that the LDA should be protected moving forward, and we should explore ways to widen the service. So, thank you. Um, just very finally, there's my screen as my contact details. Uh, just worth reiterating that one final point. The, um, is not about replacing existing service. It's about supporting existing service. It's not about rescuing industry. We could never do that. We can't do that. We're just ensuring that we provide some support to ensure that all the democratic decisions in the UK got a proper platform to report from. So, thank you.

Christina Sartori: Thank you, Jason. Thank you very much.

Christina Sartori: So, we do have already a few questions in the chat. I will start with the last one directly to Jason. Were there any voices against that the BBC would take this money out from its budget because I mean you spoke about several million pounds. Yes, they do have to come from somewhere.

Jason Gibbins: It does and a really good question and bizarrely I've never been asked that question before. But I said I was speaking with some colleagues from Finnish broadcaster this morning and that very same question was asked. So, I've never been asked it before and asked it twice in the same day. Um, so I mean my answer then was, was no, not that I'm aware of. The BBC budget is obviously very large. You know, BBC has a big budget. We're fortunate with licence fee funded. We have a big budget, um, and brains much larger than mine produce for BBC budget every year and decides what can be spent where. But this money was found within BBC operations. No, I mean clearly it came at the expense of something, but it's never been specified specifically what it wasn't at the expense of BBC journalism, for example, or BBC journalist numbers. So, we didn't get any criticism for the BBC spending funds from the BBC budget.

Christina Sartori: Since we are running late, I'll have to ask Jason, Steve and Sarah, do you have five more minutes? Absolutely. We haven't had. Is that okay for you? Thank you. Okay. One general question for all three of us was if you get money from well, you get it from the BBC. But to Sarah and Steve from the state, from the government. Um, you mentioned it already. Sometimes journalists do have a problem with that. Or even the community might say, well this, this, um, they can be bought those journalists. How do you counter this?

Sarah Stonbely: But I can go really briefly because I feel like. Go ahead. A little bit more to say. But it's funny, I also was just asked this recently for the kind of the first time and there has not been to our knowledge, any resistance, you know, any significant pushback. And it's been a really very sort of small amount that's in the budget for the state. You know, the entire state of New Jersey has a massive budget. And, you know, this has been in the most recent budgeting, it was $5 million or four. $5 million. So that's really kind of a drop in the bucket. Thus far, there has not been any significant pushback, but I don't know if that's just because the programme is so new that people don't know about it. If it hasn't hit the radar of any of these, you know, type of organisations, that would push back. But so far, thankfully, in New Jersey, no.

Christina Sartori: Steve, you showed in your talk already that it's not the first time that the government does help.

Steve Waldman: Well, yeah. And I think the risk, just two examples of the risk. One in Canada when they did something like this. Um, one of the conservative parties labelled all the support as basically being Justin Trudeau's minions. Like basically that it was, you know, all the reporters in Canada were working for Trudeau essentially was the, was the messaging because the government was funding it. And in the US, when we were pushing the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, it mostly was flying below the radar screen, but at one point, uh, Donald Trump gave a speech, said that it was all a

plan to have the, you know, Biden support the, uh, liberal media. Um, so it will be attacked on those grounds. And we have to be careful in structuring it. Part of how you do that is hopefully on the creation side. You had made it be nonpartisan, bipartisan legislation. But structurally, I think the key is to be content neutral. So, you have to have kind of basic standards of who is eligible for it. And that is going to include conservative outlets and liberal outlets and outlets that aren't really identifiable as either. And if you do that, it will become a little more like, you know, we have something here called the charitable deduction. I don't know if you have that in Germany, but you basically can if you give money to charity, you can take a deduction off your taxes. Yes. And you don't you know, it's widely popular, even though it is kind of a subsidy for, you know, Sarah's subsidising all my crazy charitable choices. Um, but everyone kind of is happy to tolerate that diversity because it lifts up the whole field. And that was, I think, the premise by a lot of the previous efforts, like the postal subsidy is very diverse in who the recipients are and yeah don't like some of who gets it but you know people like get it and you know it is a kind of open question whether in this new more polarised, you know, setting, whether people will tolerate that kind of diversity.

Steve Waldman: But in other contexts, it does work. So, I think programme structure matters a lot. You know, I think one thing that they did and, you know, to me, grant programmes are the toughest ones to pull off. Um, and they have advantages because they can be way more precise and targeted toward need. But they also have probably the most, most prospect for manipulation if you do grant programmes in the wrong way. So, it's significant that the way New Jersey set it up was not, as a government agency giving out the grants, the government funds it, but it is funded through an independent, nonprofit organisation, which itself has various governance rules and rules about who is on the board and transparency and things like that. So they were, I think, very conscious of how to set up the firewalls, um, you know, to, to do it. So, I do think it's kind of the combination of the politics of it, of you really want to, uh, you know, I'm working with all these states and then there's these democratic states that have bills are moving forward. And I keep saying, could you please get Republican co-sponsors for this? And they say, we don't really need that here because it's a Democratic state and I said we do need that even whether you need to pass it or not. This has to be a bipartisan thing or else it's just going to become a thing where, you know, it's going to become another culture war thing where Democrats support local media and Republicans oppose it. And that'll make matters worse.

Christina Sartori: So, since we are looking for ideas to implement in Germany, do you have any recommendations like this was really tough, avoid to do this or this? Really this thing or this idea or this way really helped us. Um. Steve. Sarah. Jason.

Jason Gibbins: I mean, I would just briefly say I think the challenge is clear. You know, clear. Sarah and Stephen have you know, where we are is a very similar story. It's not because of what the regional press might say. You know, the BBC is not responsible for the challenges faced by the regional press in the UK. It's a global issue and funding for journalism is a challenge in at least all of Western Europe or the Western world. So I think, you know, my advice is, is talk partnership, is partnership. The most important

word in our scheme is partnership. You know, we, the BBC, have spoken and worked with the commercial news sector. We've created a partnership. We've created a scheme that is in the benefit and the interest of all. And it's a case of putting aside in some way traditional media rivalries. You know, there's a phrase about UK media, dog eat dog, where, you know, you would always fight. It was competition, it was about sales, it was about revenues. You know, and you do that. But I think you have to put aside those traditional rivalries and work for the greater benefit. And you can still compete against each other. You can still disagree on other areas. You can still you know, the BBC is still in constant communication with the commercial sector about things that we're doing that they don't agree with, the commercial sector doesn't agree with, and that will be challenged. But we have this partnership that is for the benefit of all media platforms in the UK or as many platforms as want to be a part of it. And b) most importantly, the UK public who now have an insight into decisions being made in their name in local government chambers.

Christina Sartori: Sarah, I saw you nodding.

Sarah Stonbely: Well, in New Jersey I think there were two things, two really important ingredients that led to the passage of the Civic Info bill and then the creation of the consortium. Number one, there was this policy window that was created by the spectrum, the sale of spectrum auction in the US, which was sort of an anomalous kind of one-off type of event, but it created this opportunity. It became a financial windfall for the states who had valuable spectrum that were sold to private companies. So, they had this windfall of money that was like sort of the impetus for the whole thing. So that's a little bit hard to replicate. But then secondly, and as importantly, there was this immense, immense, massive grassroots effort on the part of Free Press and the center and all these other players who really saw that this opportunity was coming and went around the state for months and months and talked to people. Local people recorded their answers through surveys and focus groups and meetings about their local news and information and how they noticed that it had become so anemic and they were missing local news and really created this groundswell that became in the end, I think, very difficult to ignore for politicians, for the politicians who then ultimately enacted the civic info bill, which became the consortium. So, I think if you're trying to replicate it, those are kind of two ingredients that, you know, to varying degrees, might need to be there.

Steve Waldman: Uh, you know, a lot of these ideas, the other ideas that I talked about are very new and haven't actually been implemented anywhere yet. So, I can't in good conscience, you know, say any one of them has proved themselves. I think conceptually what I like about them is that they are entitlements. You don't have to go back to them every year for a new appropriation. They have sort of universal standards. You don't have to, as a small entity, have to know how to apply for grants. You meet simple standards. And if you meet them, then you get it. It's more of a blunt instrument. Most of these in that way it's less fine targeted. But I think in the long run they'll be more durable using that approach. But that's speculation at this point.

Christina Sartori: Let's hope it works.

Christina Sartori: We are at the end of the SciCon2.0 session called Reviving News Deserts, How to Support Local Journalism. I want to thank you all, everybody, for listening, asking and writing questions and especially our speakers, Stephen Waldman, Sarah Stonbely and Jason Gibbons, thank you very much for those three really interesting talks with a lot of ideas. I hope we can use this in Germany. And thank you also to everybody organising and planning this session and for the technical support by congressa. And one more thing to note for you. The next SciCon2.0 session will take place on the 15th March at 3:00 pm CET. The topic will be monetisation options for journalism in the digital age. And Rasmus Nielsen will talk about this. You're all cordially invited and I think if anyone has a special question to Steve, Sarah or Jason, he might try to just email them

Christina Sartori: Okay. Thank you very much, everybody, and have a good day.