



Case Study

View from Detroit

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ON APRIL 23, 2019, the HBO program *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* aired an exposé on Detroit's Little Caesars Arena.³²⁶ The segment brought renewed attention to the arena's owners, the billionaire Ilitch family, who also own the Little Caesars pizza chain, the Detroit Tigers, the Detroit Red Wings, and Olympia Entertainment. Five years earlier, the family had brokered a deal with the city that redirected \$324 million in state tax funds, meant in part for Detroit Public Schools, to build a sports stadium in downtown Detroit.³²⁷ In addition to the state subsidies, the city had transferred land assessed at approximately \$2.9 million to the Downtown Development Authority, a partner in the arena deal, at a cost of \$1.³²⁸

Olympia Entertainment promised Detroiters that, in exchange for the money earmarked for the city's schoolchildren, a majority of whom are black and live below the poverty line,³²⁹ it would build a development called the District Detroit, creating five new neighborhoods with a footprint of fifty city blocks of land in downtown Detroit, replete with residences, retail, and entertainment.³³⁰

Five years after the initial announcement, the District Detroit has yet to be built. The downtown area that was supposed to sprout housing and upscale neighborhoods now hosts 27 surface parking lots.³³¹

While local news covered the deal extensively at the time it was struck, that coverage, especially by legacy outlets, was largely uncritical. An independent data analysis conducted for the Detroit Equity Action Lab at Wayne State University, which examined more than 200 articles about the new arena published from 2013 to 2015, revealed that 80 percent of the stories by the city's major papers and TV stations—the *Detroit Free Press*, *The Detroit News*, Click on Detroit, *Crain's Detroit Business*, Michigan Radio,

WDET, WXYZ, and Fox 2 News—had a pro-development slant, framing the deal as positive and offering little or no critical analysis. By contrast, articles from newer or alternative outlets with less reach—*Bridge Magazine*, *Detroit Metro Times*, and *Motor City Muckraker*—were more numerous, and only 3.6 percent were pro-development.³³²

Kirk Pinho, a reporter for *Crain's Detroit Business* who had been writing about the arena deal from the beginning, admits that if he could do it all over again, he would do it differently. "I probably could have been more critical, that's for sure," Pinho says. "It could have been covered more comprehensively early on."³³³

After *Real Sports* aired its damning piece on the arena, every major Detroit newspaper and local television station followed up and started raising questions. Just a few miles from the arena, in the rapidly gentrifying North End neighborhood, William Copeland, the justice director at the East Michigan Environmental Action Council, read one of those follow-ups and shook his head in disbelief. "The justice community had been raising the alarm on Little Caesars Arena as soon as the plans were made public," he says. "There are Detroiters who predicted this. We saw it coming. We raised opposition."³³⁴

Copeland adds that journalists covering public meetings at the time seemed uninterested in activists' concerns and did not pursue those leads. "Grassroots initiatives are underreported, not reported, or misrepresented," he says. "More people want to combat the injustices they see, but the lens of the grassroots activity going on is so often missing."³³⁵

Copeland's observations are echoed in a 2010 study from the University of North Carolina (UNC) that examined 11 major daily newspapers in North Carolina and found that "local media favor professional and formalized groups that employ routine advocacy tactics" and that they



Construction of Detroit's Little Caesar's Arena.

“work on issues that overlap with newspapers’ focus on local economic growth and well-being.” By contrast, the study found, “groups that are confrontational, volunteer-led, or advocate on behalf of novel issues do not garner as much attention in local media outlets.”³³⁶

When established local media outlets overlook volunteer and community-led efforts, they miss out on important stories. “I don’t think the Detroit media did its job vetting the details of the deal,” says Aaron Mondry, the editor of Curbed Detroit, a digital outlet focused on Detroit street life, housing, and development. “It’s a generally known fact that sports stadiums are not good investments.” Mondry points out that the inadequate coverage has repercussions far beyond this one project. “If the media isn’t doing its due diligence on some of the biggest development projects in the city,” he says, “then residents should be skeptical of everything journalists produce. If we missed that, then what else are we missing, what else are we not looking into?”³³⁷

THE FAILURE OF DETROIT’S legacy media outlets to investigate the arena deal more critically when it was first brokered exposes an uncomfortable truth: there are communities across the country whose critical information needs have gone unmet for much longer and in

subtler ways than the recent local news crisis would suggest.

Unlike many U.S. cities today, Detroit still has multiple media outlets: two major daily newspapers (the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News*), local and regional public radio stations (WDET and Michigan Radio), a prominent Black newspaper (*The Michigan Chronicle*), several ethnic media outlets (*Latino Detroit*, *Detroit Jewish News*, etc.), an alternative weekly (*Detroit Metro Times*), and a monthly glossy magazine (*Hour Detroit*). Its commercial TV news operations include affiliates of Fox, NBC, ABC, and CBS. Numerous digital publications have also emerged in the past five years, among them Outlier Media, Tostada Magazine, Riverwise, Planet Detroit Newsletter, and Motor City Muckraker—each with a staff of just four or fewer people.³³⁸

And yet Detroit newsrooms are facing many of the same challenges as the rest of the journalism industry, with shrinking staff, faithless corporate ownership, and tumbling ad revenue stemming from both sharp declines in local retail and the siphoning of ads and eyeballs by tech companies such as Craigslist, Facebook, and Google.³³⁹ Legacy newspapers, in particular, have shrunk considerably. The *Detroit Free Press* had 350 journalists on staff in 1995 and has just 120 today.³⁴⁰ The *Free Press* and *The Detroit News* now deliver just three print editions a week (including



a Sunday edition published jointly to cut costs).³⁴¹ In August, Gatehouse Media, a mega-newspaper chain not known for prizing serious watchdog journalism, announced that it would acquire Gannett, the mega-chain that owns the *Free Press*, setting the stage for further staff cuts.³⁴² These economic pressures add to the challenge of providing deep, comprehensive local news—especially needed in a city that in 2013 filed for the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history.³⁴³

Kimberly Hayes Taylor, a features reporter at *The Detroit News* from 2002 to 2009, witnessed multiple rounds of buyouts and layoffs. “By the time I left, I would say at least two or three dozen people, newsroom-wide, had already left,” she says. “We’re talking about in business, in sports, and on the city desk and features. There are not as many photographers left.” What remains, she says, is “a shoestring, compared to what used to be a whole boot.”³⁴⁴

Community papers are proving to be even more vulnerable. After nearly 30 years, the *Michigan Citizen*, a weekly that reported on civil rights, police brutality, and questionable development deals from the perspective of the state’s black community, closed in 2014.³⁴⁵ At its height, the paper had a dedicated following and a circulation of 56,000.³⁴⁶ But once ad revenue began to drop, says Teresa Kelly, its co-founder and former publisher, “business just wasn’t the same,” and “we were always on the edge.” For Kelly, who started the paper with her husband and later passed the reins to her daughter, the paper’s closing was a loss to more than just her family. “To have a healthy community, you have to have an informed community,” she says. “People have to know what’s going on, and what’s going to affect them.”³⁴⁷

The growing local news crisis is exacerbating inequalities that have historically plagued the wider news industry—many of which are playing out in Detroit. While the city’s population is more than 80 percent black, the *Detroit Free Press* is only 16 percent minority-staffed and the *Detroit News* is only 17 percent minority-staffed.³⁴⁸ And research suggests that there are multiple communities in Detroit that feel their

stories are being overlooked and their concerns neglected.

When the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan launched the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund, it conducted a study that concluded that “across platforms—whether print, digital, television, or radio—there was reported a sense that Detroit’s most critical news stories are under-covered. There was concern that most Detroit narratives are not being told—that coverage disproportionately skews toward the revitalization of midtown and downtown Detroit at the expense of the rest of the city and of the full diversity of its population, especially the African-American community.”³⁴⁹

That neglect, the study found, feeds “a lack of trust between many Detroit citizens and the media institutions that cover, or fail to cover them. Indeed, this lack of trust was described across racial and ethnic lines as an even greater barrier than the need for enhanced resources.”³⁵⁰

In her decades at *The Michigan Citizen*, Teresa Kelly found that the distrust was mutual—the media didn’t trust Detroiters, either. “The assumption is that media people know what’s good and that community folks are ‘obstructionists,’ she says. “It’s racism. Pure, simple, unadulterated, un-discussed, un-dealt-with racism.”³⁵¹

Investigative journalist Steve Neavling of *Detroit Metro Times* believes that much of journalists’ inattention stems from fear. “Reporters have a real anxiety of going into neighborhoods,” he says. “They are afraid of Detroiters.”

Neavling says that after five years of covering the city hall beat for the *Detroit Free Press*, he grew disillusioned. The paper “wanted quick-hit stories,” he says, and was reluctant to let reporters “dive into real issues that affect Detroiters.” He recalls efforts by editors to include “diverse” voices that he viewed as disingenuous, after the fact, and lacking in nuance. They “would have reporters go to places like barbershops, as though Detroiters only hang out in barbershops and churches,” Neavling says. “Reporters would go to barbershops and get a quote and sprinkle it in the story as an afterthought, but not use the perspective of Detroiters to frame and shape the story.”³⁵²

“By the time I left, I would say at least two or three dozen people, newsroom-wide, had already left,” says Kimberly Hayes Taylor, a features reporter at The Detroit News. “We’re talking about in business, in sports, and on the city desk and features.” What remains, she says, is “a shoestring, compared to what used to be a whole boot.”

Candice Fortman, a lifelong Detroit resident and chief of operations at Outlier Media, says that reporters ignore certain neighborhoods “because they don’t live in those communities, they don’t worship in those communities, and they don’t shop in those communities.” Not reporting in communities fuels distrust and “makes their news seem alternative, as though it is some other place.”³⁵³

Fortman has worked in media for 10 years and spends her days thinking up ways to reach residents who have turned away from traditional news outlets. While she says she’s protective of the way people talk about the news industry, she also admits that journalists and editors are quick to dismiss legitimate criticism: “We decide the people who are criticizing us aren’t important enough to be critical,” she says. “They’re not smart enough. They’re not degreed enough. They’re not all these things that we place false value on, so we don’t listen to them. But those are our consumers. Those are the people who are not subscribing to us, who are not becoming members, who aren’t listening to our podcasts, who aren’t getting our newsletters. You can’t treat them like others and then ask them to be supporters.”³⁵⁴

As Detroit has shifted from bankruptcy to partial recovery, many residents lament that establishment news media has often failed to report critically on the facts and perspectives of the city’s poor and its African-American communities, on issues ranging from water shutoffs, to redevelopment, to the bankruptcy itself. There is a sense that legacy media has consistently missed opportunities to expose corruption, greed, and unfairness in favor of narratives that reflect the concerns of the city’s government, real estate developers, foundations, and other established institutions.

ONE OF THE MOST CONTENTIOUS issues in recent years has been the city’s water shutoffs. In 2013, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) began pursuing a strategy of cutting off service to collect on overdue payments and, in the spring of 2014, ramped up a campaign of mass shutoffs that reportedly affected 112,000 Detroit homes between 2014 and 2018.³⁵⁵

Given the potentially severe consequences—especially to the health of young children and pregnant women³⁵⁶—the sparse and largely uncritical coverage was particularly egregious. There was little, if any, coverage in all of 2013.³⁵⁷ An article published in *The Detroit News* in March 2014 seems to be one of the earliest, offering an uncritical report of DWSD’s announcement of the shutoffs and quoting government officials, without offering community perspectives.³⁵⁸ Local TV news gave the issue some coverage in April 2014.³⁵⁹

At first, says Monica Lewis-Patrick, president of We the People of Detroit, those protesting the shutoff policy “got pushback from the media that we were just a few wayward activists who didn’t understand what was happening.”³⁶⁰ It was not until Lewis-Patrick and other Detroit activists turned to the United Nations in an effort to bring attention to the shutoffs,³⁶¹ when the issue started receiving international attention, that coverage from established local outlets in Detroit picked up.³⁶² The UN issued a statement saying, “Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights.”³⁶³ Lewis-Patrick recalls: “After the UN rapporteurs came, we got a national boost for a couple of weeks.”³⁶⁴

Even then, water activist Sylvia Orduño felt that some local media outlets showed more interest in the UN rapporteurs’ visit than the policy’s impact. “We wanted media to cover the scale and scope of the shutoffs,” she says, “the disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, on people of color.”³⁶⁵

In a city where nearly 38 percent of residents live below the poverty line,³⁶⁶ where water bills reportedly run almost twice the national average, and where a bill could eat up more than 10 percent of a household’s income,³⁶⁷ few established media outlets considered the issue of water affordability. Every single time that we wanted to get the media to cover an issue,” Orduño says, “they would only do it if we would give them the contact of a person whose water was shut off so that they could go and talk to that family. But



Detroit residents protest water shutoffs.

the thing is it never gets at the root of the problem. And so we got tired of participating in this exposure of families.”³⁶⁸

Some reporters seemed to adopt the DWSD’s narrative that the water crisis was the fault of irresponsible residents. On a live MSNBC show in July 2014, Detroit reporter Hank Winchester of Local 4 WDIV stated, “People simply don’t want to pay the water bill and would rather spend money on cable.”³⁶⁹

Such claims provoked widespread outrage. “The water struggle in Detroit wasn’t really perceived as a water struggle,” says Tawana Petty, director of data justice programming for the Detroit Community Technology Project. “It was being perceived as a bunch of Detroiters who just didn’t want to pay their bills. If a root cause analysis was done, then we would understand that folks were paying high percentages in water and sewage rates that were not affordable relative to their take-home income.”³⁷⁰

Distrust in local established media among communities of color had been years in the making, but the lack of critical coverage of the water shutoffs caused trust to deteriorate further. In its wake, Orduño says, “we decided we weren’t going to bother so much with the local media anymore.”³⁷¹

REBUILDING TRUST WILL TAKE substantial effort. In early 2019, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy released a report, *Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America*, that prioritizes diversity and equitable representation as one of its key recommendations: “News organizations should adopt recruitment, hiring and retention practices that increase diversity of staff, and even of owners,” the report advises. “Newsrooms should develop mentoring and training programs that can help enlist, retain and promote more women and journalists of color at all levels. And they need to include other underrepresented groups, such as underrepresented geographical and political groups, so that the reporting they produce reflects the entire community.”³⁷²

Vincent McCraw, a former breaking-news digital editor and producer at *The Detroit News* and current president of the Detroit Chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists, spent years pleading with editors to hire more journalists of color. “You have to make the effort,” he says. “I get that because of the buyouts and the layoffs that resources are stretched, but you have to make more of a commitment even in these challenging times.”³⁷³

The current editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, Peter Bhatia, who took over in 2017 and back in 2009 became the first journalist of South Asian descent to lead a major daily,³⁷⁴ says that he is taking concrete measures to address diversity and inclusion. “We have a new initiative we’ll be launching later this year,” he says, “sort of a listening tour to try to connect better with communities that perhaps has slipped some in recent years.”³⁷⁵

“Do we satisfy every community?” Bhatia continues. “I don’t think that we probably do. But we’re out there doing everything that we can all the time with the resources that we have to bring home the story of Detroit for the people who live here and for the people who care about Detroit.”³⁷⁶

IN THE MEANTIME, smaller outlets are stepping into the breach.

Launched in 2016, Outlier Media

"I wanted to provide information not about low-income families but for low-income families," says Outlier founder Sarah Alvarez. "Most of the news that's produced in Detroit is actually produced for residents who live outside of Detroit, suburban news consumers—people with more money to spend."



Residents in downtown Detroit protest pervasive water shutoffs, which began in 2013 and continue today.

focuses on issues important to low-income families. "I wanted to provide information not *about* low-income families but *for* low-income families," says founder Sarah Alvarez, a former civil rights attorney turned public radio journalist. "Most of the news that's produced in Detroit is actually produced for residents who live outside of Detroit, suburban news consumers—people with more money to spend."³⁷⁷

Outlier used data collected from United Way's 211 helpline to pinpoint the information that Detroiters needed most. It identified housing and utilities as top priorities, then built a database, accessible from mobile phones, to provide critical information at the hyperlocal level.³⁷⁸ "There are information gaps, and there are also accountability gaps," Alvarez says. "Without good information on what should be happening and who is supposed to do it, residents don't have the ability to hold their public officials accountable."³⁷⁹

One way that Alvarez tries to bridge the information and accountability gaps is through hiring. At Outlier, the entire staff is composed of women of color who live in Detroit. "You just need to be incredibly intentional about who you hire," Alvarez says, "and you also have to understand the

value of living where you work. I think that I am much better able to serve my community as a journalist by being part of it."³⁸⁰

In 2017 Serena Maria Daniels, recently laid off as a breaking news reporter at *The Detroit News*, started *Tostada Magazine*, an independent digital publication founded on the premise that food journalism has the power to unify communities and preserve culture. She quickly saw that she was filling a niche. "When I founded *Tostada Magazine* and started writing about Southwest Detroit and about Latino communities," she says, "the response was immediate. People were starved for content that accurately reflected the community that wasn't a story about victimization or criminalization."³⁸¹

Daniels says that Southwest Detroit's sizable Mexican community is largely invisible to established media outlets. "The only instances that I ever heard about the Latino community was with regard to immigration stories," she says. "Maybe the occasional Cinco de Mayo story. But by and large, I don't see the Latino community really being represented in legacy media."³⁸² Now in its third year, *Tostada* has grown enough to allow Daniels to continuously hire freelance journalists of color to write stories about food in their communities.

But niche digital-native startups like *Tostada* and *Outlier*, both of which operate on micro-budgets, can't come close to solving the systemic, intractable, nationwide challenges of local news, as Alvarez well knows. "We don't have the answer to the news business' sustainability problem," she says. "Instead we're honest about what we're hoping to build, and we don't try to raise more money than we know we can use. That means we spend a lot of time very close to being broke, as an organization."³⁸³ Nor does she see *Outlier* "as a replacement to legacy media, but more as an intervention. We don't have a ton of resources, this is a very difficult industry, so we do the most with our limited resources."³⁸⁴ But until the powers that be can figure out a new business model that doesn't depend on vanished advertisers and feckless owners, these innovative outlets are working hard to improve the lives of Detroiters.