Trust Was an Infrastructure

What must survive when a newspaper disappears? Paid scrutiny, editorial independence, fair challenges and visible repair.

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News can remain plentiful when local reporting disappears. What disappears with it may be the machinery that lets a claim be investigated, challenged and repaired.

The Feed Was Still Full

A county can lose its local newspaper without running out of things to read.

The feed does not go blank. National stories arrive, followed by political arguments, video clips, local rumours, and commentary about people who have never visited the place. Information remains abundant. What may disappear is somebody paid to check what happens down the road.

A reporter attends an ordinary meeting. She asks why the figure in a budget changed. The promising allegation falls apart after three calls, so no article appears. An editor refuses another story because the evidence is not ready. Most of this work leaves no shareable headline.

Northwestern University's Medill Local News Initiative reported in October 2026 that **238 US counties had no locally based professional news outlet**. More than 1,400 other counties had only one. Over the preceding year, **170 newspapers closed or merged**, while 75 new local outlets had begun operating since the start of 2025, most of them digital. These counts concern the supply of local professional reporting. They do not mean that people in those counties are cut off from all information, nor that every surviving outlet performs good journalism. Medill also cautions that its 2026 inventory reflects changes to how some outlets are classified. [M01]

The picture is neither a golden age ending nor an inevitable replacement arriving. Some capacity is vanishing. Some is being rebuilt. They are not always in the same places or doing the same work.

We often describe that change as a crisis of *trust*. But trust is a person's judgement, and the thing they judge is a complicated operation. A publisher's reputation, a reporter's accuracy, and a subject's ability to contest a damaging assertion are not interchangeable.

The old newspaper did not deserve trust just because it had ink and an address. Where it worked, it had something more practical: paid reporting time, an editor empowered to stop publication, someone responsible for the result, and a process by which outsiders could challenge an error. Where it failed, those functions were captured, ignored, or unavailable to parts of the community.

The newspaper was a business. The useful parts were infrastructure.

An inspectable claim is only a starting point. Someone must still be paid and able to investigate it, assess a challenge and correct an error when one is established.

The Bill Arrived Elsewhere

Reporting is labour before it becomes content. Records have to be found; witnesses contacted; claims checked against documents; and sometimes weeks of work end with the discovery that there is no story. A subscription can pay for a finished article. It is harder to charge an advertiser for the false story a conscientious reporter never published.

Traditionally, revenue from readers and advertising supported newsrooms that could do some of that work. The subsidy was uneven. Owners could interfere, advertisers could apply pressure, and underserved communities had every reason to question whom the arrangement existed for. But removing a flawed financing model does not remove the public value of scrutiny—or pay the person who must now supply it.

There is an instructive attempt to measure that value outside the newsroom. Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee and Dermot Murphy examined local newspaper closures and municipal borrowing in the United States. In their detailed 2018 working paper, the authors reported estimated increases of **5.5 basis points in bond offering yields** and **6.4 basis points in secondary-market yields** after newspaper closures; some estimates were larger for project-linked revenue bonds. The study was subsequently published in the *Journal of Financial Economics* in 2020, whose abstract summarises borrowing-cost increases of **5–11 basis points**. [F01, F02]

The researchers did not simply compare one city before and after its newspaper disappeared. Their empirical work included within-state comparisons, population-matched neighbouring counties, and a strategy using the spread of Craigslist to test whether the closure effect could be separated from deteriorating local economic conditions. The published paper describes its conclusions in causal terms. Still, it is a quasi-experimental, observational study: its identification assumptions matter, and the estimates should not be read as a guaranteed cost for every town or every closure. The specific 5.5- and 6.4-point figures here come from the earlier full working paper, not from an independent page-by-page audit of the 2020 typeset article. [F01, F02, F03]

Nor is a bond yield a measure of whether readers believe the news. The proposed channels include weaker government monitoring and poorer information available to investors. The study supplies evidence that losing a local information intermediary may affect a market far beyond subscriptions.

A newsroom may close because the money coming in no longer supports the work. Some of the cost associated with losing that work may then turn up on another balance sheet.

This is why rebuilding journalism cannot mean merely rebuilding its interface. Somebody still has to finance the investigation.

Two Complaints Against the Same Broadcaster

An even clearer part of journalism’s infrastructure comes into view when somebody challenges a story.

In October 2024, Danish regional broadcaster **TV MIDTVEST** reported on a family seeking permission to train their child, who has cerebral palsy, at home, alongside a claim for compensation for lost earnings. The account criticised a municipality's handling of the matter. It described the family's 2023 contact with the municipality as an *application*, resulting in an apparent wait of 15 months set against a stated six-month maximum processing period. [D01, D02]

But the meaning of *application* was the dispute. The family understood its 2023 approach to be an application. The municipality counted the case from a formal application. Denmark's Press Council, *Pressenævnet*, found that the broadcaster had not made those competing positions sufficiently clear. The report had also described the municipality's child and family manager as unwilling to comment, although confidentiality obligations prevented him from discussing the details of an identifiable citizen case. The council treated that formulation as imprecise and examined the adequacy of the resulting correction. [D01]

After the manager complained to the broadcaster, the website's body text was changed: the family had *contacted* the municipality, and the manager *could not discuss a specific case*. But the internal heading still described the family as submitting an application. The television segment, the council found, had not been corrected. A reader returning to the article would see some different words. Someone who read the original version might never learn why they changed. [D02]

In a decision dated 19 May and published on 9 June 2026, the council criticised TV MIDTVEST for the misleading coverage and inadequate correction. It ordered the broadcaster to publish a separate, prominent notice of the criticism online and to announce it in a comparable television news slot. Its decision also specified a link from the original article **if that article remained available and unchanged on the criticised points**. The council did **not** order the story erased; it rejected the complainant's deletion demand. [D02]

We can verify the ruling and those instructions. We have **not** independently verified every act of the broadcaster's subsequent compliance. That distinction matters. An order to publish criticism is not evidence that its intended audience received it.

Nor did the council decide whether the family's entire account of its treatment by the municipality was true or false. A process designed to examine reporting cannot be used as a shortcut for resolving the original administrative dispute.

Now consider a **different** TV MIDTVEST report, from November 2025, about a municipal decision returned for reconsideration by Denmark's Social Appeals Board, *Ankestyrelsen*. The serious defect identified in that decision concerned failure to involve the child adequately. A municipal child and family manager complained about the reporting, its verification, and the way his willingness to comment was described. [D03]

This time, the council **did not criticise the broadcaster**. It found that the defect was sufficiently explained and that the broadcaster had taken adequate steps to put the substance of the story to the municipality. A written response from the municipality had appeared in the article. The ruling acknowledged that a different description of the manager's response might have been more precise but did not find grounds for criticism on that point. [D03, D04]

These are separate articles and decisions. The public summaries do not establish that they concerned the same child or family, and we need not pretend they do.

The pairing matters for another reason. The objector was part of the public authority being investigated. If a powerful institution could silence an accurate story simply by making a complaint, accountability would become a means of intimidation. If a newsroom could dismiss every objection on the grounds that its subject was powerful, inaccurate reporting would gain immunity.

An accountability process worth defending must be able to explain both a finding of fault and a finding of *no fault*.

The Notice and the Sentence

Greenland offers a more unsettling illustration, under **its own** media-responsibility law and Press Council, separate from Denmark's.

On 20 April 2026, Greenlandic broadcaster **KNR** published a report drawing on Reuters about politician Pele Broberg and an American businessman, Drew Horn. KNR's paraphrase changed the sense of one claim: it represented Broberg as denying that Horn was seeking influence in Greenland. The Greenlandic Press Council found that Broberg had said something narrower—that Horn's wish to gain influence did not give him cause for concern. Denying a motive and denying concern about a motive are not the same assertion. [G01, G02]

The council also criticised KNR for repeating other disputed and potentially damaging assertions without first giving Broberg sufficient opportunity to respond. It did **not** resolve the truth of every disputed assertion about the relationship. Part of its task was to determine what the broadcaster had an obligation to check before publishing. [G01]

The council reached its decision on **30 June 2026**. KNR published a dedicated account of the criticism on **3 September 2026**, explaining the disputed paraphrase and the failure to seek comment. That publication is directly verifiable. A separate radio announcement was ordered; its actual broadcast and the number of people who heard it have not been independently established here. [G01, G02]

A closer examination of **KNR's original 20 April article**, as it appeared during our review on **15 October 2026**, reveals something even more useful than a tidy success story. Near the top, KNR had added a note linking to the council's criticism. Lower on the same page, the sentence the council had criticised—the assertion that Broberg denied Horn was seeking influence—was still present. The page also carried an earlier clarification on a different point, concerning whether Broberg had been portrayed as an informant to the White House. This was not an untouched original article, but the criticised sentence remained. [G01, G03]

That does **not**, on its own, establish that KNR disobeyed the council. The council's decision distinguished publication of its criticism from an order to rewrite the report; it said it lacked legal authority to require a direct correction or retraction in the article, though it could require publication of its criticism. It specified a link on the original page under stated conditions. The original page does indeed carry such a link. [G01, G03]

But it creates a revealing editorial tension: the notice can be present while the challenged sentence remains quotable without it. A system can satisfy a visible procedural requirement and still leave the repair vulnerable to separation from the original claim. A screenshot, quotation, excerpt or automated summary could retain the sentence while omitting the note. That is a **risk**, not a measured finding about how readers actually behaved.

This case separates three things that are often treated as one: **a notice of criticism was published; the original item linked to it; the people exposed to the first claim encountered that notice.** The first two are observable in KNR's web record. The third is not. A press-council notice must not be confused with a demonstrated correction of the underlying sentence.

Neither a press-council notice nor a source link can guarantee that the notice follows a story across radio, reposts, search results or AI-generated answers. But their existence allows us to ask where the chain broke. That is more useful than simply declaring the broadcaster trustworthy or untrustworthy.

The Right to Be Answered Is Not a Right to Win

The case for an answerable institution is not a demand that every complaint succeed. An unfounded complaint may itself be costly, especially when it comes from an administration, a wealthy subject or an organised campaign. Reporting about people with influence must remain possible even when they refuse to cooperate.

Nor is every newsroom with a complaints procedure doing good journalism. An institution can publish carefully formatted decisions and still fail to fund investigation, suppress inconvenient inquiries, or favour its owner. The existence of an ethics committee is evidence of a committee. It is not, by itself, evidence of independence.

The reverse is also true. A freelancer or small local newsroom without a formal press council can do outstanding work: preserve interviews, show documents, disclose a conflict, explain a refusal, and issue a visible correction. A badge and a corporate legal department are not prerequisites for accuracy.

Independent scrutiny remains valuable because the publisher should not always be the final judge of its own conduct. But the mechanism has to have limits. Different jurisdictions have different eligibility rules, deadlines, media coverage and remedies; not everyone with a general objection has standing to compel an adjudication. A public complaint record can also expose private people or sources if handled carelessly. [G04, D05]

The goal is **answerability**, not an automatic right to retract, erase, expose sources, or veto a story.

What We Could Test Instead of Asking for Trust

The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2026* found that, across 48 surveyed markets, an average of **37%** said they trusted most news most of the time. The figure was **55% in Denmark** and **25% in the United States**. These are survey responses about perceived trust, not audits of newsroom accuracy or tests of press-council effectiveness. [T01, T02, T03]

Trust can fall even as a reporter produces a sound investigation. Trust can rise around a flattering falsehood. A newsroom's most important correction may anger its most loyal audience. A high trust score cannot decide any of those cases.

Instead of using trust as the sole test, try examining what the publisher can demonstrate when someone challenges a consequential claim.

Capacity: Was somebody able to obtain the records, make calls and investigate the answer that did not produce a publishable story? Who funded that time?

Editorial independence: Could the person responsible for the reporting reject a weak claim even when the owner, sponsor or most valuable customer wanted it published? Are conflicts disclosed without exposing confidential sources?

Responsibility: Can an affected person identify who published the material and who is answerable for the headline, translation or summary—even when the underlying reporting came from somebody else?

Fair contestation: Is there a reachable channel for substantive complaints, a recorded decision and a way to explain why a complaint was upheld or rejected? Is there independent escalation where appropriate? Can the process resist strategic filings intended to exhaust the reporter?

Repair: Does a consequential correction have an accessible date and reason? Is it visibly connected to the original item? If republishers are notified, can the publisher distinguish a notice *sent*, receipt *acknowledged* by a specified recipient, a verified change in the affected output, and evidence that somebody actually *encountered* the corrective information?

None of these tests establishes that a story was true. They are operational criteria for making a publication inspectable and answerable, and they can be measured without making public every private document behind a story. They are **proposals**, not features currently claimed to be running in Hedegreen Research V3.

There is a cost to building and maintaining such systems. A small newsroom may need shared services or proportionate procedures, rather than a bureaucracy as large as its reporting staff. A safeguard designed to protect journalism must not make it impossible for a new journalist to practise it.

The Work Behind the Address

The old press should not be sentimentalised. It could ignore a community, get a fact wrong, bury a correction or protect the powerful. Some of its institutions deserved to disappear. None of that makes a popular feed an automatic replacement for investigation and public responsibility.

A newspaper was only one way of organising the work. The printing press, the office, the distribution network and the commercial model can change. The obligation remains to check a claim before making it, defend a sound story when challenged, and make an important error difficult to miss when discovered.

We should judge a successor not by whether it resembles the old institution, but by whether anyone can inspect the work it claims to perform.

A claim needs an address. So does a complaint.

The harder question is whether anybody is still paid—and required—to answer either one.

— Dennis Hedegreen, trying to see the structure

Sources and method

This is an evidence-backed editorial argument, not an empirical test of a new journalistic infrastructure. Bracketed references refer to the source bibliography in the publication package. The Medill figures are the 13 October 2026 release; the bond-study point estimates shown come from a 2018 working version and the 2020 peer-reviewed article summarises a wider range. The Danish and Greenlandic press councils are separate jurisdictions. An ordered or published notice does not by itself establish subsequent compliance on all channels or reach to the original audience. Proposed Hedegreen Research V3 workflows are not presented as deployed.

- **[M01]** Northwestern University Medill Local News Initiative, The State of Local News: 2026 Report (13 October 2026) (https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2026/report/).
- **[F01]** Gao, Pengjie; Lee, Chang; Murphy, Dermot, Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance, Journal of Financial Economics 135(2) (2020), 445–467, DOI 10.1016/j.jfineco.2019.06.003 (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304405X19301606).
- **[F02]** Gao, Lee and Murphy, Financing Dies in Darkness? Brookings Hutchins Center Working Paper No. 44 (2018) (https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP44.pdf).
- **[F03]** Brookings Institution, Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance (24 September 2018) (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/financing-dies-in-darkness-the-impact-of-newspaper-closures-on-public-finance/).
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- **[D02]** Danish Press Council (Pressenævnet), Full decision, case 2025-08870 (19 May 2026) (https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Anonym-kendelse-08870.pdf).
- **[D03]** Danish Press Council (Pressenævnet), No criticism of reporting on an Ankestyrelsen decision; case 2025-13374, summary (9 June 2026) (https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/2026/ikke-kritik-for-omtale-af-afgoerelse-fra-ankestyrelsen/).
- **[D04]** Danish Press Council (Pressenævnet), Full decision, case 2025-13374 (https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Anonym-kendelse-13374.pdf).
- **[D05]** Danish Press Council (Pressenævnet), How to complain (official guidance) (https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/hvordan-klager-man/).
- **[G01]** Greenlandic Press Council (Det Grønlandske Pressenævn), Decision 26/00270, decided 30 June 2026; document dated 3 September 2026 (https://aua.gl/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/DK-Anonymiseret-kendelse-i-Sag-nr.-26-00270.pdf).

- **[G02]** KNR, Pressenævnet kritiserer KNR (3 September 2026) (https://www.knr.gl/da/nyheder/pressenaevnet-kritiserer-knr).
- **[G03]** KNR, Original 20 April 2026 report about Drew Horn and Pele Broberg (https://knr.gl/da/nyheder/amerikaner-har-delt-oplysninger-til-det-hvide-hus-baseret-paa-samtaler-med-politiker-og).
- **[G04]** AUA / Greenlandic Consumer and Competition Authority, Det Grønlandske Pressenævn: remit, procedure and eligibility (https://aua.gl/pressenaevnet/).
- **[T01]** Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2026: overview and key findings (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/dnr-executive-summary).
- **[T02]** Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2026: Denmark (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/denmark).
- **[T03]** Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2026: United States (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/united-states).

RELATION MEMORY

CONTINUES Fake News Hates Structure · Adds the paid capacity and institutional answerability required to act on an inspectable claim.

SOURCE LAYER Corrections Need Memory · Distinguishes a dated notice, a changed output and audience encounter.

SOURCE LAYER Claims Need States · Keeps attributed assertions, adjudicated findings and unresolved outcomes distinct.

SOURCE LAYER Sources Should Travel With Claims · Connects each consequential claim to the scope and version of its evidence.

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