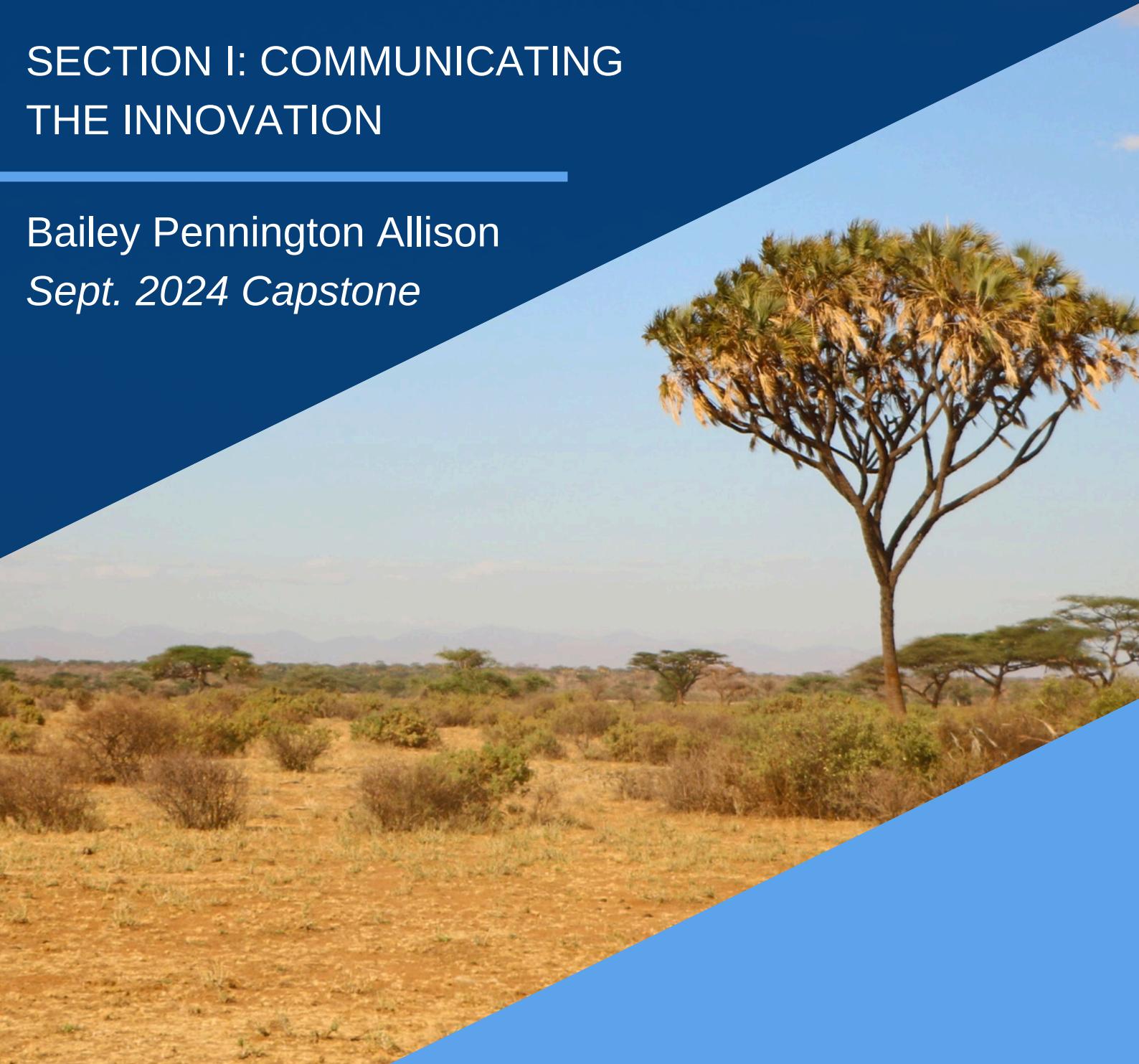# Combatting News Savannas Through Convergence

SECTION I: COMMUNICATING THE INNOVATION

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Sept. 2024 Capstone

Combatting News Savannas Through Convergence

Bailey Pennington Allison — MMI 622, Sept. 2024

Introducing: News Savannas

The term **news desert** is commonly used to describe areas with no remaining local news source, primarily newspapers. However, this term doesn't fully describe the edge condition taking place in many U.S. communities. Unlike its news desert counterpart, a **news savanna** is a community that is transitioning toward desertification, but retains enough of a local news presence to provide some routine coverage. News savannas serve as the precursor to news deserts and serve as both an indicator of what's to come and an opportunity to prevent that outcome.

The Vision

To combat the growth of news savannas and rebuild community trust, local governments should partner with community members to form advisory boards focused on creating and disseminating factual, relevant local news information.

Key Concepts & Stakeholders

- **NEWS:** factual information/reports of recent events (i.e. traditional journalism)
- **NEWS MEDIA:** focus on "traditional" broadcast TV news and print newspapers
  - **STATE/REGIONAL:** larger TV news stations, print and digital newspapers focused on a statewide or regionally applicable view of news
  - **LOCAL:** typically city or county based print newspapers and nearby TV stations focused on hyper-local news content
- **COMMUNITY MEMBERS:** focus on "average" residents of a community who are not actively involved in nor employed by government or news
- **LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:** focus on local government entities such as municipalities and county governments

The Context

Numerous factors are impacting the creation, dissemination and consumption of accurate local news content, with political attitudes, poor business models and the rise of social media being chief among them. News savannas are an increasing problem just as news consumption and trust in traditional news sources are declining, leading to mis- and dis-information as well as lack of information in general.

The Details

- "In 2016, 51% of U.S. adults said they followed the news all or most of the time, but that share fell to 38% in 2022" (Forman-Katz, 2023)
- "Daily newspaper circulation nationwide – counting digital subscriptions and print circulation – continues to decline" and "there has been a drop in audiences" (Lipka & Shearer, 2023)
- According to Pew Research, nearly one-fifth of "U.S. adults say they turn most to social media" for news consumption (Mitchell et al., 2020)
- "News media must win back the trust of the consumer if they want to stay relevant... Trust was not lost overnight, nor due to a single issue or event. Likewise, regaining credibility will also take time and will require changing the operational status quo" (Nelson, 2023)
- "A robust local media benefits local government, and it's in the best interest of local officials to support their news organizations" (Funkhouser, 2024)

"News media is an integral component of everyday life for most consumers... A lack of trust and a plethora of options have made it difficult for the average news consumer to figure out what is real and whom to trust in a continuously fragmenting market"
(Poelking, 2019)

The Challenge

The challenge is to improve the exchange of hyper-local information between communities, news media and local governments in a viable and dependable manner. The goal is to create an innovation that addresses the growth of news savannas at the local level, with the opportunity to recreate the concept in other communities.
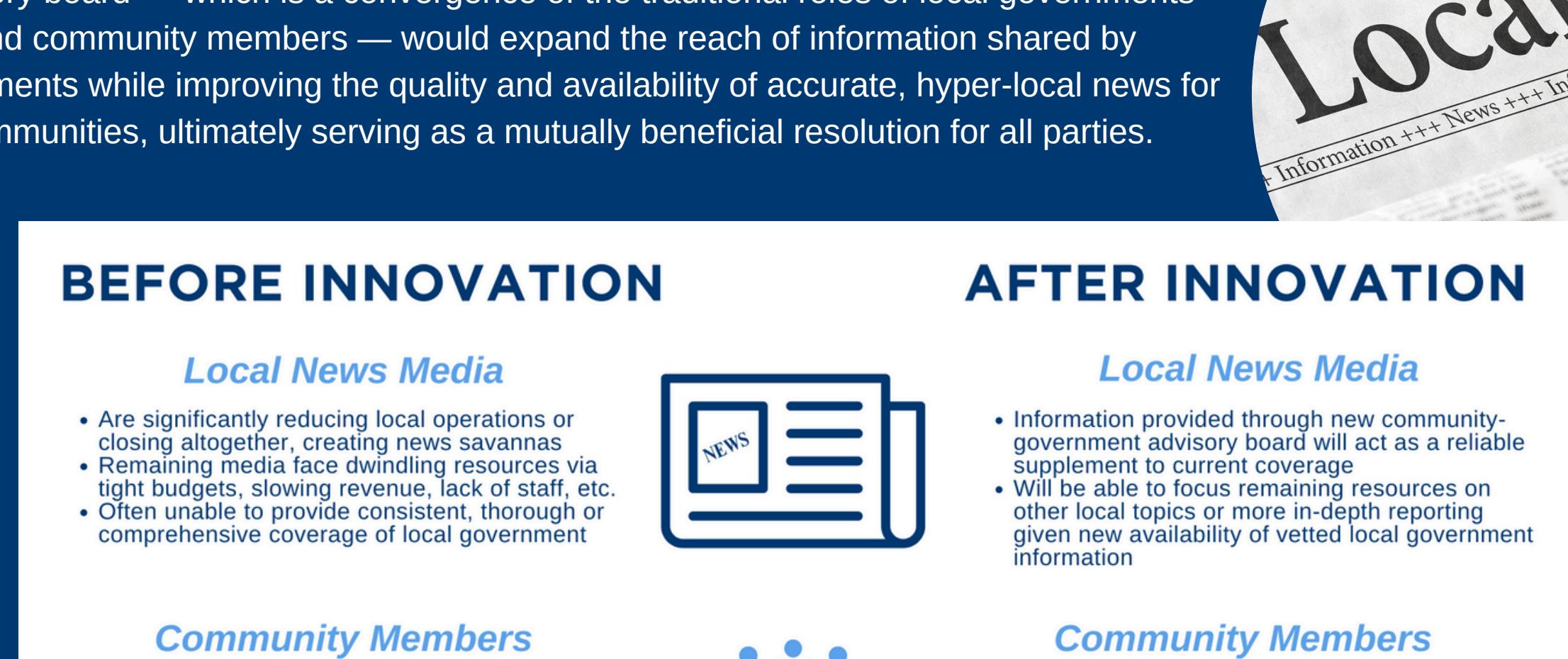
Design Principles

"People seldom get their news from print media any more. They get their news from online and there are so many sites online that are not factual... It doesn't bode well for our future."
Stuart Smith, concerned community member

1. To collaborate across stakeholder silos to exchange information
2. To rebuild trust through partnerships and attention to accuracy
3. To understand the importance news serves in communities as a whole
4. To embrace digital convergence as a tool, not a replacement
5. To discover financially feasible and sustainable options for news dissemination
6. To focus on local first and consider replicating success on a larger scale
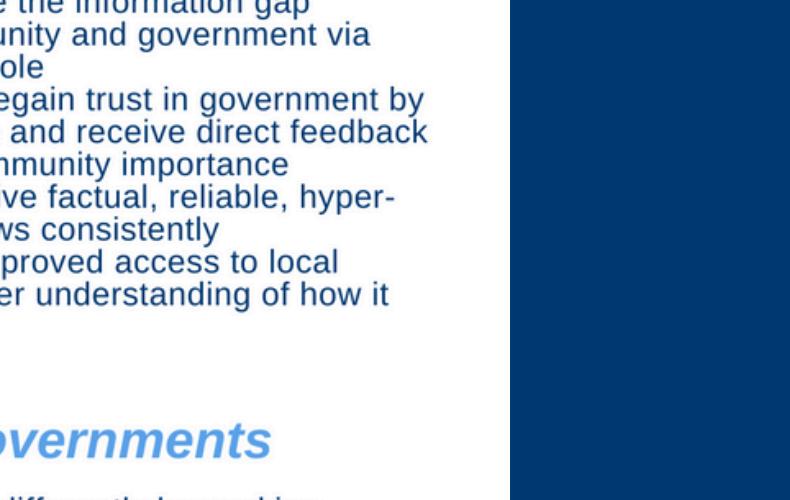
The Innovation

The innovation is to create a volunteer advisory board situated within local governments which would help fill the information gap for community members and serve as a supplement to remaining media outlets.

This board would include the public information officer (or similar role) as a representative from the government perspective who works in concert with community volunteers to cover government meetings and events of community interest in a manner that is both factual and meets the needs of both parties. This board would be government subsidized, but the information it disseminates would be free to consume. The goal would be to issue locally-focused information on at least a twice per week cadence across a broad spectrum of platforms (social, digital, print, etc.).

BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS

KEY PARTNERS	KEY ACTIVITIES	VALUE PROPOSITIONS	CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS	CUSTOMER SEGMENTS
• Primary stakeholders: local governments (i.e. municipal and/or county governments) and local community members serve as key partners • Key suppliers: all parties can supply and exchange news information • Key partners should work together in collaboration to achieve the business model value proposition Secondary stakeholders: remaining local news media (can benefit from innovation)	• In addition to news gathering, information exchange and related activities, this model requires government meeting attendance, collaboration between all stakeholder segments, writing, editing, research and fact-checking as well as intimate knowledge of the local community **KEY RESOURCES** • Key resources include time, willing participants (both local governments and community volunteers), receptive consumers, news-worthy information, distribution channels and mutual collaboration between parties	• The goal of this business model is to help fill the information gap left by growing news savannas (pre-news deserts) • This model aims to exchange factual and trustworthy, community-focused information between governments and residents — it will solve the needs of both primary stakeholder groups to disseminate and receive relevant, local information	• Historically, community members and local governments have a distrusting relationship, but both groups have a complicated relationship with traditional news • This business model aims to bridge these gaps while serving as a supplement to existing news coverage **CHANNELS** • News should be shared through a variety of channels in order to reach the broadest audience • Social media, websites, e-newsletters, radio segments and print in-mail options • Focus on accessible, convenient and digestible information	• Non-government community members ("average" residents of a local area) • Board volunteers (community members willing/able to volunteer their time and talents to serve on the board/commission) • Local government PIOs (public information officers who will assist and advise volunteer board) • Local government leadership (city councils, county commissioners, etc.) • Community historians, activists, nonprofits, etc. (provide additional context and insight) • Remaining local news media

COST STRUCTURE	REVENUE STREAMS
• The biggest overall cost for both stakeholder groups is time — time to share, gather, vet, create, distribute and consume news content • Additional costs also include: resources (i.e. access to supplemental information, background context, records, etc.), distribution (i.e. web software, print services, etc.) and government staff hours (i.e. billable time spent assisting advisory board/commission volunteers)	• Most community members pay little to no cost for their news information (few subscribe to existing print publications and rely on social media and/or broadcast news segments) • Local governments incur a slightly higher cost, using tax dollars to employ PIOs and pay for web and/or mail services • This business model would operate as a not-for-profit entity, serving the public good, but would likely need to be government subsidized for news dissemination methods (i.e. software for e-newsletters) — there would be no monetary revenue

While this innovation would not replace the role of traditional news media as the fourth estate, it would serve as a companion to the coverage provided by local news media. The advisory board — which is a convergence of the traditional roles of local governments and community members — would expand the reach of information shared by governments while improving the quality and availability of accurate, hyper-local news for communities, ultimately serving as a mutually beneficial resolution for all parties.

BEFORE INNOVATION

Local News Media
- Are significantly reducing local operations or closing altogether, creating news savanna
- Remaining media face dwindling resources via tight budgets, slowing revenue, lack of staff, etc.
- Often unable to provide consistent, thorough or comprehensive coverage of local government

Community Members
- Face dwindling credible sources to receive local news information due to living in a news savanna
- Often turn to social media for current, hyper-local information in the absence of relevant and consistent news media coverage
- May consume mis-/disinformation without traditional fact-checking offered by news media or other reliable sources
- Struggle to trust both local government and local news media due current one-way communication methods

Local Governments
- Unable to share information through traditional means (i.e. press releases, interviews) due to the lack of local news media
- Currently disseminate information via owned accounts (i.e. web, social)
- Rely on community attendance of meetings or events as well as news media coverage
- Often viewed as not transparent or unreachable given lack of information shared direct to communities

AFTER INNOVATION

Local News Media
- Information provided through new community-government advisory board will act as a reliable supplement to current coverage
- Will be able to focus remaining resources on other local topics or more in-depth reporting given new availability of vetted local government information

Community Members
- Volunteers will bridge the information gap between their community and government via new advisory board role
- Non-volunteers will regain trust in government by being able to provide and receive direct feedback on information of community importance
- Community can receive factual, reliable, hyper-local government news consistently
- All will experience improved access to local government and better understanding of how it functions

Local Governments
- Will share information differently by working directly with community volunteers via new advisory board
- Will disseminate information via new means (i.e. meeting recaps, dedicated blog, etc.)
- Will be more transparent by providing and receiving direct feedback from the communities they serve
- Build relationships with community members and groups not otherwise typically reached by former dissemination methods

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