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How Loud Does the Watchdog Bark? A Reconsideration of Losing Local Journalism, News Nonprofits, and Political Corruption

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Abstract

Journalism has long been presumed to serve as a check on the powerful, shedding light on wrongdoing; however, as local newspapers reach market failure, extant theory predicts corruption will go unchecked. We operationalize corruption as federal prosecutions for public corruption (PPCs), defined by the US Department of Justice as crimes involving the abuse of public trust by federal, state, and local public officials. We examine changes in the local news media ecosystems: first, whether declines in local newspaper employment and circulation are associated with changes in PPCs; and second, whether efforts to supplement watchdog journalism with nonprofit journalism might mitigate associated declines in federal PPC. Our findings suggest nonprofit interventions in failing local commercial news markets may be an important safeguard for keeping public officials accountable.

Keywords

corruption, local journalism, news nonprofits, watchdog journalism, news philanthropy, public service journalism, public accountability

The connection between a free press and the ability to hold public officials to account is one of the benchmarks of liberal democracy. Globally, research supports the link

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between journalists' ability to reveal corruption and effective democratic governance (see Mellado 2015). However, the economic instability of the news industry is a global problem (Newman et al. 2021), and in the United States, it manifests as the market failure of local newspapers. When news organizations face financial pressures, commercial logics may lead newsrooms to underinvest in the types of journalism that require more labor, such as boots-on-the ground reporting, while audience logics may prompt a focus on content that facilitates reader interest and engagement, especially for digital news (Blassnig and Esser 2022). Long-standing research supports a mismatch between the news journalists think is important for the public to know—information about public affairs, politics, and socially significant institutions, versus the news that audiences tend to actually consume—content about entertainment, sports, lifestyles, and obituaries (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Napoli et al. 2018).

US newspaper newsroom employees dropped by 57 percent between 2008 and 2020—from about 71,000 to 31,000 (Walker 2021). These job cuts have undermined both routine beat coverage of civic institutions and specialized investigative journalism at the regional, state, and local levels (Hayes and Lawless 2021). Local news, especially the local newspapers that have long served as "keystone media" (Nielsen 2015), producing the largest quantity of original content about any one place, face significant challenges, due in part to their smaller, geographically defined audiences (Hindman 2018; Usher 2021). Since 2004, more than 2,100 newspapers have closed in the United States (about 20% of all metro and community newspapers), leaving an estimated 1,800 communities without regular access to local news and information: what some call "news deserts" (Abernathy 2020).

However, a flourishing of new, often digital-first nonprofit news media, backed by philanthropic foundations, individual donors, and even tech companies (Konieczna 2018; Usher 2021) has emerged as one effort to supplement decaying commercial news media. The number of local news nonprofits more than doubled between 2017 and 2021 (Institute for Nonprofit News 2022) and foundation funding for nonprofit news in the United States grown significantly: from $84 million in 2009 to $533.5 million in 2020 (Media Impact Funders 2022); in 2020, the Knight Foundation, Google, and Meta (Facebook) each pledged $300 million over 3 years to support local journalism (Usher 2020). Thus far, there has yet to be a systematic assessment to determine whether news nonprofits are associated with ameliorating the negative externalities of declines in local journalism.

We consider how these challenges to the news and information environment across the United States might impact journalists' monitorial role—particularly at the local level. More specifically, we examine (1) the relationship between declines in local newspaper journalism and changes in federal prosecutions for public corruption (PPCs) across all 94 US district court jurisdictions and 3,143 counties and (2) whether efforts to supplement decaying local news infrastructure through nonprofit journalism might be associated with mitigating or even strengthening PPCs. Our findings suggest that declines in journalism employment have mixed results for its association with PPCs. However, our other findings provide strong statistically significant results: circulation is positively associated with PPCs, and both the presence and funding of nonprofit watchdog journalism are positively correlated with PPCs. This article provides some of the first empirical evidence at scale that nonprofit news interventions may help facilitate democratically beneficial outcomes.

Losing Monitorial Journalism: Defining the Watchdog Role of Journalism

Newspaper Employment and Corruption

The current social and political context in the United States and the extreme economic crisis facing its local journalism prompts a reexamination of just how US federal, state, and local officials can be held accountable when there is limited journalism dedicated to exposing their wrongdoings. This connection between journalism as a defense against corruption and as a check against power has become part of the central normative claims about why journalism matters for producing social knowledge and facilitating democratic participation (Schudson 2018). While journalism serves many functions from community cohesion to shaping cultural memory to entertainment (Zelizer et al. 2021), declines in journalism often prompt concerns about the fate of public interest journalism, or journalism that serves a significant social and political role in maintaining civic life by providing news about public affairs, and powerful people (Konieczna 2018). In this article, we focus on journalism's monitorial or watchdog role and use the phrase "watchdog journalism" as an umbrella term to encompass how newsroom cuts to both routine beat coverage of civic institutions and to investigative journalism, the "franchise of the industry" (Houston 2010: 46), might impact journalism's ability to hold the powerful accountable.

Watchdog journalism has a variety of "folk" meanings (Palmer et al. 2020) and is sometimes used interchangeably with the terms "investigative journalism," "public affairs journalism," and "accountability journalism." Journalism's watchdog role encompasses monitoring those in power, representing the public's voice to the political establishment, and mediating for political actors (Norris 2014). Even as the institutional news media experiences record levels of mistrust in the United States and globally (Newman et al. 2021), the connection between a free press and the ability to hold public officials to account may still be the "most hallowed" function of the press in a liberal democracy (Bennett and Serrin 2005: 109). And in the United States, despite deep asymmetric polarization on the right about trust in media, there is broad acceptance of the watchdog role of journalists. As of 2020, 73 percent of Americans agreed that in general, "it's important for journalists to function as watchdogs over elected officials," although only 30 percent believe journalists are "getting it about right" (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020).

Watchdog journalism is not necessarily adversarial; rather, it can focus on showing the public how government agencies and public services are doing their jobs (Breiner 2016). Small-market newspapers often duck adversarial coverage and worry about negative journalism undermining community cohesion, as Carey (2017) found in research on Appalachia. However, local news that serves the "good neighbor" role rather than an adversarial one can still diagnose problems and, in some cases, offer solutions (Ali et al. 2020) and may be the only source of original news coverage for a particular community (Abernathy 2020). In fact, as Ekström et al. (2006) argue, while investigative journalism that discloses political wrongdoing is rare in local news, local news provides a form of "scrutiny" that is related to ordinary news reporting, whereby the press helps inform and critique the performance of public institutions and performance of public officials. However, these news routines have been significantly disrupted both by digitalization and by the interrelated collapse of the advertising model of commercial news media (Ryfe 2009).

Corruption and the Market Failure of (Local) Journalism

The watchdog function of journalism requires significant financial and personnel resources: enough journalists who are able to provide regular coverage of these public institutions, monitoring public officials for wrongdoing while providing citizens with civic information and developing the kind of source relationships that might help them discover abuses of public trust (Hamilton 2004, 2017). In the pre-digital era, this journalism was subsidized by the rest of the newspaper: sports, lifestyle, obituaries, crosswords, and so forth. News came as a bundle, so to read the sports section, a news consumer had to buy the whole newspaper. Digital distribution atomized the news article (Coddington 2019), unbundling watchdog journalism from the journalism that was better supported by audience demand and the commercial marketplace. Historically, newspapers derived revenue from advertising and subscriptions. However, the advertising revenue model has imploded, particularly for midsize to large daily metropolitan and regional newspapers. Newspapers have been undercut by Google, Facebook, and Amazon, which now dominate 70 percent of digital ad spending in the United States; newspaper advertising has declined from roughly \$ 63.5 billion in 2000 to \$ 14.3 billion in 2018 (Pew Research Center 2019). Audience attention has also shifted, with audiences preferring national news coverage to local news (Hopkins 2018) and average users visiting local news sites no more than three times a month, usually for less than a minute (Zheng et al. 2021).

Consolidation in the newspaper industry along with the rise of hedge fund investments in newspapers as distressed assets has resulted in further cuts in watchdog journalism, including the routine beat coverage that provides regular scrutiny of public officials and public institutions. Peterson and Dunaway (forthcoming) estimate that hedge-fund-owned companies have cut an average of more than nine reporters/editors per newspaper (14% fewer staff) compared to newspapers without this ownership structure. The Gannett newspaper chain, which owns an estimated 1/6 of all newspapers in the United States (494 papers in 42 states), has closed or consolidated 130 newspapers across the country between 2020 and 2022; in Southeastern Michigan, five journalists now cover a geographic swath of population of 1 million (Gustafson 2022). In 2018, a former chain of 16 California news dailies went from 1,000 journalists to 150 under the ownership of hedge fund Alden Global Capital. Peterson (2021) estimates that job cuts at major newspapers result in a loss of 300–500 fewer political news stories annually, per outlet. As Hayes and Lawless (2021) note, ". . .with fewer reporting resources and a shrinking news hole. . . newspapers have reduced coverage of local elected officials, city halls, school boards, county commissions and virtually every aspect of local government" (p. 3).

Of course, there is no "one" global journalism (Hanitzsch 2007) and the centrality of watchdog journalism varies across the globe (Waisbord 2000). Still, cross-national scholarship suggests a robust press can contribute to a culture of civic life and public governance that is more effective, incentivizing politicians implicitly or explicitly through threat of sanction to minimize corruption (Bruns and Himmler 2011). Using a global dataset from 1980 to 1995, Boix et al. (2003) find that even controlling for all sorts of indicators of democratic well-being, newspaper circulation was the single biggest predictor for creating well-informed citizens and improving government accountability.

Although it is a foundational premise of framing and indexing theory, the connection between journalism and political corruption in the United States alone, rather than as part of a cross-national sample, has received surprisingly little empirical scrutiny (Bennett 1990; Usher 2023). Rubado and Jennings (2020) specifically looked at cuts to newsrooms in California from 1994 to 2016 at 11 California newspapers; results from 246 elections in 46 cities showed that lower staffing resulted in lower voter turnout and less competitive elections; they suggest—but cannot fully support—that this decreased coverage might lead to increased municipal corruption. Economists have consistently demonstrated the strongest link between local news coverage and corruption in the hybrid media environment in the United States. Gao et al. (2020) find that when newspapers close, the municipal borrowing rate for cities increases—for example, that it is riskier to offer easily accessible debt when a city lacks a newspaper to keep watch over political officials. This association is compelling, but is not evidence that corruption then occurs. Other economists linked the growth of corporate misconduct to the closures of local newspapers; however, this conduct was *reported*, not hidden (Heese et al. 2022). An analysis of 69 of the largest newspaper closures between 2004 and 2020 shows a positive association between newspaper closures and PPCs; however, closures do not tell us much about news provision or news supply, just that an outlet closed or merged (Matherly and Greenwood 2021). Extant theory suggests that in a healthy democratic and civic culture, "bad apples" will be held legally accountable (e.g., PPCs will go *down* rather than *up* if the press is weakened); or, as *The Washington Post*'s slogan puts it, "democracy dies in darkness." We operationalize this concept in this article as federal PPCs and hypothesize:

> H1a: When local newspaper resources for news gathering decline (as measured by newspaper employment), we will also see an associated decrease in PPCs.

Newspaper employment gives a "supply" measure: an indication of the resources available to gather and to produce news. However, even if there is news available, it does not mean that people are consuming the content. Studies with natural and field experiments have found that respondents with a higher exposure to corruption information are more likely to hold corrupt politicians accountable (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013). Thus, we look at newspaper circulation as an indicator of the take-up of local news and information in a community (a "demand" measure):

H1b: When local newspaper availability declines (as measured by newspaper circulation), we will also see an associated decrease in PPCs.

Nonprofit Newspaper Interventions

Nonprofit journalism has become an important strategy for supporting journalism that keeps powerful government and business interests accountable (Konieczna 2018). News nonprofits are designated as tax-exempt organizations by the Internal Revenue Service and must be "organized exclusively and operated primarily" for a 501(c)(3) purpose, which must be educational, charitable, or for the promotion of social welfare, or a combination of these functions (Schmalbeck 2010). By statute, nonprofit news outlets must serve the public interest. Investigative journalism, which goes above and beyond a monitorial role to engage in sustained inquiry into possible wrongdoing (Houston 2010), is both costly to produce and poorly supported by the market (Hamilton 2017). Investigative journalism suffered some of the earliest job cuts (Pérez-Peña 2008), and as such, investigative journalists were also some of the first to look to a nonprofit model to support their work; in 2009, journalists from 27 nonprofit news outlets created what was originally called the Investigative News Network (INN), a nonprofit collective to facilitate collaboration.

In addition, as other prestige watchdog beats have been cut to curb costs, there has been a wave of new, primarily digital-first nonprofit news outlets that aim to supplement journalism that can hold the powerful accountable but that the commercial newspaper model can no longer support. In 2016, 21 states lacked a dedicated newspaper journalist based in Washington, DC (Pew Research Center 2019). Between 2014 and 2022, newspaper reporters covering state houses declined by 23 percent, but according to Pew findings, "of the 1,761 journalists who report from state capitols, 20% work for nonprofit news organizations, up from just 6% in 2014" (Scire 2022). In 2015, INN was renamed the Institute for Nonprofit News and now includes over 300 members, with a mission that has expanded beyond investigative journalism to include more general watchdog journalism, news organizations it describes as "holding the powerful accountable and strengthening democracy" (Institute for Nonprofit News 2022).

For now, the audiences for nonprofit news are often far smaller and more elite than commercial news media (Benson 2018), raising questions about whether these outlets improve public knowledge about politics and governance writ large. Still, their work has significant influence due to their elite funders, elite audiences, and their status within the field of journalism (Benson 2018), including Pulitzer wins and collaborations with larger, established commercial news outlets. As the global momentum for nonprofit news and cross-national collaborative investigative journalism grows (Carlson 2016; Usher and Layser 2010), it is important to assess the efficacy of these news nonprofit interventions. Thus, we pose our second set of hypotheses:

H2a. The presence of an INN member in a US judicial district will be positively associated with PPCs.
H2b. Growth in financial support of INN members will be positively associated with prosecutions for PPCs.

Data and Measurement

We conduct secondary data analysis to test the suggested hypotheses on the relationship between local journalism and political accountability. The main outcome variable, *Corruption*, is the number of PPCs across the 94 US federal district courts, which are reported annually to Congress by the Department of Justice's Public Integrity Section (2003–2019). We use several indicators for measuring local journalism change: (1) newspaper employment per county from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2003–2019); (2) newspaper circulation by county from the University of North Carolina's (UNC) US News Desert dataset (2004, 2014, 2016, and 2019); (3) the number and years of operation of digital-first nonprofits who are members of the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) (2009–2019); (4) the funding flowing to INN members, drawing from the Media Impact Funders database of philanthropic contributions (2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019). County-level variables were aggregated to the district level by summing the values for all counties within each judicial district. We include a table summarizing descriptive statistics of key variables included in the main regression analysis in Supplemental Appendix Table A1.

Corruption: Public corruption is the "misuse of one's public office and/or authority for personal gain," and can include either elected officials or appointees (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016). In the United States, cases are brought by federal government attorneys against federal, state, and local officials, law enforcement, and other government employees; these official corruption prosecutions include bribery, graft, conflicts of interest, and other misconduct (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse [TRAC] 2021). Despite concerns about the politicization of US attorneys, scholars have been unable to show clear links between partisanship and prosecutorial activity (Pavlik 2017).

Newspaper employment, drawn from BLS data, assesses the newspaper employment in each county. This gives an understanding of the supply of news in any one county, and therefore, in any one US judicial district. Newspaper employment is a fairly coherent category of labor employment captured by the US government that reflects newsgathering capacities (as opposed to television broadcasting or internet publishing). While this category does not break out reporters or editors from news assistants or printers, the count can be taken as a proxy measure of journalism resources, with different categories of news employment representing at least some presence of a newspaper in a county (Napoli et al. 2017, 2018).

Newspaper circulation is one measure of audience demand for local news, thus providing an alternate but complimentary understanding of the availability of local news and information. The US News Desert dataset from UNC includes county-level newspaper circulation counts, which include print and online subscriptions, and provides an alternative indicator for measuring the local journalism environment for limited data points. In addition, circulation data at the county level help mitigate situations where journalists might cover one county while employed in a proximate region. We measure changes in newspaper circulation per capita to account for different populations in each county. The UNC data are only available for 2004, 2014, 2016, and 2019; however, in previous analyses (Usher 2021), we have found that the UNC data are highly correlated with the BLS data, giving an additional support for our measure.

Nonprofit News: We use the membership data from the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) (2022) as our measure of nonprofit news organizations. INN is the broad umbrella group for nonprofit journalism in the United States, and while not all of it is locally focused, the existence of an INN member is a broader proxy for the commitment to alternative, philanthropic funding for journalism in an area. This membership list includes each member's geographic location and year of joining the Institute, which offer us a comprehensive list of the 300 or so news nonprofits that have the networks and intra-industry prestige, recognition, and expectations for professionalism to provide high-quality public interest journalism (Ferrucci and Alaimo 2020).

Nonprofit Funding: Media Impact Funders is a member-supported philanthropic organization that connects data on media funding and is affiliated with Candid, which helps set standards for categorizing, tracking, and analyzing philanthropic contributions across the globe. The grants are categorized by self-report and/or review by the Candid staff; the data are only as good as the data the nonprofits have reported. We manually scraped the total funding data annually for each of the INN members in our data set from 2009 to 2022, with the first funding year recorded for each outlet matching the year the organization became an INN member, as well as the funding for each outlet for 5 years between 2010 and 2019 (2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019), allowing convergence with other temporal data points.

Method

We employ several empirical strategies to test our main hypotheses. For the newspaper employment variable (H1a), we conduct a time-series-cross-section analysis with data ranging from 2003 to 2019. With our numerical outcome and explanatory variables, we conduct ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis with fixed effects to account for unobservable cross-sectional and time-specific variables. The analysis of employment change and PPCs estimates the following regression model:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Corruption}_{it} &= \alpha + \beta_1 \log \text{Employment}_{i,t} + \beta_2 \log \text{Employment}_{i,t-1} \\ &\quad + X'_{it}\gamma + u_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it}\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where Corruption_{it} denotes the counts of public corruption prosecutions per each US judicial district i, in year t between 2003 and 2019. Employment_{it} indicates the newspaper employment in each judicial district, and we include lagged newspaper employment variables because a decline in newspaper employment may require a longer time frame to have effects on the journalism's role as a watchdog against public corruption. In the main analysis, we construct regression models with different time lags of two consecutive years (t=0, −1; t=−1, −2; and t=−2, −3) and test delayed effects of the employment shifts on PPCs across varied time frames. In addition, we conduct robustness checks with longer time frames (t=−1, −2, −3; t=0, −1, −2, −3) to validate our findings from the main analysis. All of the newspaper employment variables are log-transformed across all model specifications.

We account for several district level covariates in the model (X): we include *Population* to account for more (less) densely populated areas reporting a higher (lower) number of PPCs and a larger number of employment. Districts with more economic resources may accompany higher opportunities for involvement in public corruption, and we include *GDP per capita* to control for such positive effects of income on the two key variables. Both population and income data are from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)[1] and we employ log transformed variables. We include *Court Efficiency* to account for general efficiency and capacity of each judicial district. We use the median time from filing to disposition as a measure of court efficiency and retrieve annual data from the US Federal Courts.[2] We further include two-way fixed effects across judicial districts (u_i) and years (v_t) to control for unobservable district- and time-specific variables.

For the circulation analyses (H1b), we construct a pooled dataset from 4 years included in the UNC dataset: 2004, 2014, 2016, and 2019. Due to limited data points, this analysis compares observations from the same data points and does not include lagged variables. We construct a regression model of corruption on circulation (log transformed) with the same set of district-level control variables (*Population, GDP per capita*, and *Court Efficiency*) from the previous model:

$$\text{Corruption}_{it} = \alpha + \beta \log \text{Circulation}_{i,t} + X'_{it}\gamma + u_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

We analyze the association between nonprofit accountability journalism and PPCs with INN membership and media funding datasets (H2a and H2b) across US judicial districts. Our empirical analysis draws inference from observational data on PPCs and journalism, but since the central arguments of this paper probe the association between the two variables, we employ various empirical strategies to disentangle the main relationship between accountability journalism and public corruption.

First, we conduct regression analysis with a lagged explanatory variables of the cumulative number of INN members in our analysis to examine how the endowment of accountability journalism in the previous term is associated with PPCs in the current term. The regression analysis employs the following form:

$$\text{Corruption}_{it} = \alpha + \beta\, \text{INN members}_{i,t-1} + X'_{dt}\gamma + u_i + v_t + \varepsilon_{dt} \tag{3}$$

where variables are measured at each district i in year t. $\text{INN members}_{it-1}$ includes the cumulative number of INN members in a judicial district measured in the previous year ($t-1$). Greater newspaper *Employment* can facilitate greater watchdog capacities

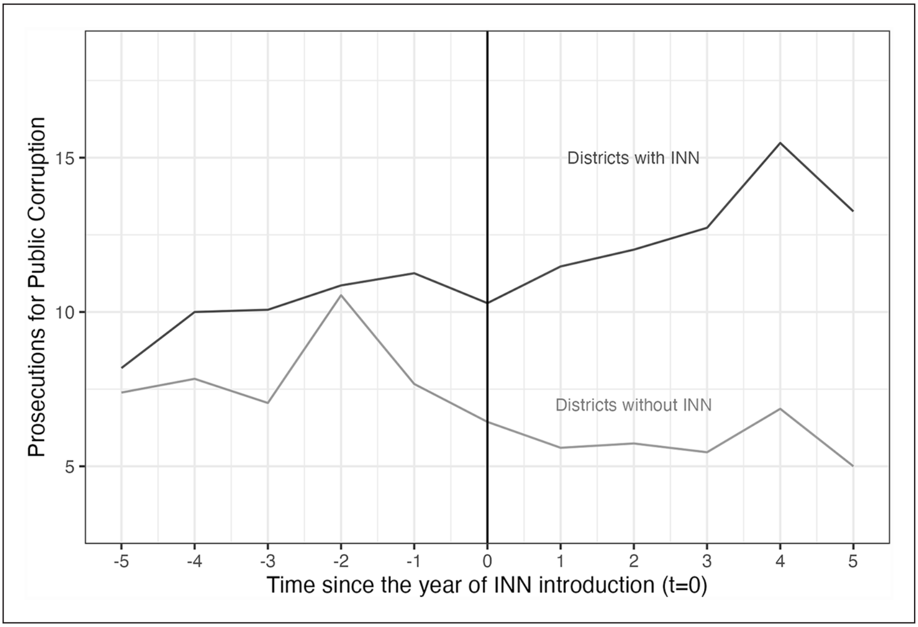

Figure 1. Trend in PPCs across judicial districts: The plot depicts temporal changes in the average number of PPCs before and after a new INN membership ($t=0$, vertical solid line). The plot further compares the trend with that from districts without any INN members.

and more PPCs, and we account for the potential confounding effect by including a lagged *Employment* variable in our model. The model further include district-level control variables (*Population, GDP per capita*, and *Court Efficiency*) and two-way fixed effects across judicial districts and years following the previous model specifications above.

We employ a second empirical strategy, a difference-in-differences analysis (Angrist and Pischke 2014), to better investigate the divergent effects of nonprofit watchdog journalism across districts with and without INN member outlets. This method is effective in examining treatment effects with observational data, especially when we observe divergent paths across treatment and control groups after intervention. Such a divergence between treatment and control groups may signal a treatment effect. Figure 1 describes the divergence in average PPCs between districts with and without INN member outlets before and after an introduction of new INN membership ($t=0$). The trend lines first show parallel trends before the intervention of new INN membership. They are relatively stable but increasing in the number of PPCs across the two types of districts, except for a sudden bump in ($t-2$) within districts without INN members, followed by a decrease in PPCs right before the intervention. Such trends begin to diverge in $t=1$, where PPCs increase in INN districts and decrease in districts without INN members. This divergence continues in the following years, widening the gap between the two district types.

We conduct a difference-in-difference analysis to statistically estimate this divergence. We first assign judicial districts that have ever had an INN member within the 11-year period under study into a treatment group and those without any members into a control group. Within the treatment group, we treat the year in which an INN member is introduced in a district as the intervention and code the *Time* variable as 1 on and after the membership year ($t=0, 1, 2, \ldots$), and 0 for pre-membership years ($t=-1, -2, -3, \ldots$). The introduction of nonprofit journalism may have a delayed impact on PPCs; to account for this, we estimate an additional model with a modified *Time* variable, where 1 year after new INN membership is coded as 1 ($t=1, 2, 3, \ldots$) and years prior to this are coded as 0 ($t=0, -1, -2, \ldots$).

To better investigate the proximate effects of nonprofit journalism, we isolate the dataset within 5 years of the membership year ($-5 \le t \le 5$). The difference-in-differences analysis estimates the following form:

$$\text{Corruption}_{it} = \alpha + \beta\,\text{INN}_i + \gamma\,\text{Time}_t + \delta(\text{INN}_i \times \text{Time}_t) + X'_{it}\sigma + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{4}$$

where the difference-in-differences coefficient σ refers to the difference in pre- and post-intervention levels of PPCs across districts with and without INN outlets:

$$\begin{aligned}\delta = &\left\{E[\text{Corruption}_{it} \mid \text{INN}=1, \text{Time}=1] - E[\text{Corruption}_{it} \mid \text{INN}=1, \text{Time}=0]\right\} - \\ &\left\{E[\text{Corruption}_{it} \mid \text{INN}=0, \text{Time}=1] - E[\text{Corruption}_{it} \mid \text{INN}=0, \text{Time}=0]\right\}.\end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

The key outcome of interest is σ, and we expect a positive coefficient, which indicates a higher number of PPCs in judicial districts with nonprofit accountability journalism after their membership year. We include the identical control variables (*Population, GDP per capita, Court Efficiency*, and *Employment*) to the regression analysis and report robust standard errors clustered at each judicial district to account for potential serial correlation at the district level.

As a second instrument for measuring the impact of resources for watchdog journalism, we probe the relationship between *Nonprofit Funding* for INN journalism and PPCs. The media funding data provide data entries for 5 years between 2010 and 2019 (2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019), and we conduct regression analysis with a pooled dataset from these 5 years and include year fixed-effects to account for time-variant covariates. We take a log of the funding variable to account for its skewness and include population, GDP per capita, and court efficiency as control variables.

Results

Newspaper Employment and Corruption

Is there any relationship between newspaper employment and PPCs across judicial districts? We examine the relationship between the two variables with a regression analysis. Results in Models 1–3 of Table 1 show a mixed relationship between newspaper employment and PPCs across US judicial districts (H1a). We find positive

Table 1. Newspaper Employment, Circulation, and Prosecutions for Public Corruption.

	Dependent variable				
	Prosecutions for Public Corruption				
Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Newspaper employment ($t=0$, log)	0.351 (0.253)				
Newspaper employment ($t-1$, log)	0.072 (0.239)	–0.035 (0.252)			
Newspaper employment ($t-2$, log)		0.420* (0.241)	0.292 (0.262)		
Newspaper employment ($t-3$, log)			0.037 (0.246)		
Circulation ($t=0$, log)				2.714** (1.074)	10.808*** (3.247)
Population (log)	–0.466 (1.353)	–0.604 (1.404)	–1.045 (1.513)	4.604*** (1.155)	17.367 (11.116)
INN members ($t-1$)	–0.046 (0.206)	0.012 (0.207)	0.029 (0.214)	0.479* (0.244)	0.385 (0.359)
GDP per capita (log)	12.611** (6.304)	14.033** (6.680)	17.927** (7.233)	–0.136 (2.255)	–0.124 (11.457)
Court efficiency	–0.043 (0.082)	–0.033 (0.081)	–0.025 (0.082)	–0.248 (0.158)	–0.202 (0.286)
Fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Observations	1,440	1,350	1,260	359	359

Note. *$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

coefficients for the newspaper employment variables across model specifications with different time lags, which may indicate that judicial districts with a larger newspaper employment tend to have a higher number of PPCs, but the results are not statistically significant at the conventional confidence levels except for the 2-year lag variable in Model 2. The coefficient has statistical significance at the 0.1 level, and we conducted additional tests to check the robustness of this finding.

We first run an additional model with a different time frame in Model 3 by including the 2-year lag variable and a 3-year lag variable ($t=-2, -3$). Coefficients for the two variables are positive but not statistically significant. We further conduct additional analysis with different time frames ($t=-1, -2, -3$ and $t=0, -1, -2, -3$) and find that none of the lagged variables, including the 2-year lag variable, were statistically significant (see Supplemental Appendix Table A2). If there is a delayed effect of decline in newspaper workers on public corruption, we should observe a statistically significant coefficient with the 2-year lag variable in Model 3 and other model specifications, but the coefficient is not distinguishable from zero across different models. As such, we do not find a robust correlation across different modeling strategies.

We further use newspaper circulation change as another measure of local journalism change in addition to the employment analysis above (H1b). Models 4 and 5 in Table 1 show a statistically significant association with newspaper circulation (Model 4; $b=2.7$, $SE=1.1$, $p<.01$): US judicial districts with higher newspaper circulation are likely to show a higher number of PPCs. The results are robust after controlling for the population variable and two-way fixed effect models to control for unobservable variables across districts and time (Model 5; $b=10.8$, $SE=3.2$, $p<.01$).

Nonprofit News Outlets, Watchdog Journalism, and PPCs

While circulation and employment trends in newspapers have been declining, the number of nonprofit news outlets has grown, at least as indicated by the growth and scope of the INN. As such, we probe whether nonprofit watchdog journalism is positively associated with PPCs: in other words, if there is strong nonprofit accountability journalism, will we see more PPCs (H2a and H2b). We present results from three empirical analyses: (1) regression analyses with the cumulative number of INN members in a judicial district; (2) difference-in-difference estimation with the INN membership as an intervention; and (3) analysis with funding data.

Table 2 reports empirical results from OLS regression models in which the cumulative number of INN members is the explanatory variable and the count of PPCs is the main outcome variable. Results from a pooled dataset from 2009 to 2019 in Models 1 and 2 show positive associations between the number of INN members and PPCs. Districts with more INN members are likely to have a greater number of PPCs, but the coefficients for INN membership are not significant at the conventional confidence levels once control variables are added. Model 3 includes regression results with cross-sectional data with the main variables aggregated at the district level. We conduct this additional analysis to examine the general associations between the total number of INN members and PPCs across districts and to account for the zero (0)

Table 2. INN Membership and Prosecutions for Public Corruption.

	Dependent variable		
	Prosecutions for Public Corruption		
Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
INN members ($t-1$)	1.379*** (0.367)	0.323 (0.306)	
INN members (cross-section)			3.926** (1.541)
Population (log)		−1.490 (2.571)	5.775*** (1.580)
GDP pc (log)		22.183** (9.066)	2.527 (6.404)
Newspaper employment (log, $t-1$)		0.002*** (0.001)	
Newspaper employment (log, cross-section)			–0.054 (0.776)
Court efficiency		0.017 (0.085)	–0.364 (0.276)
Observations	990	990	90
Fixed effects	N	Y	N
F Statistic	42.893***	70.970***	10.613***

Note. *$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

observations in the INN membership variable. We use the total number of INN members as the main explanatory variables and the averages for the rest of the variables in the analysis. The coefficient for INN membership is positive and statistically significant, further suggesting a positive relationship between INN membership and PPCs.

Difference-in-Differences Analysis

We further analyze the effects of INN membership on PPCs with a difference-in-differences approach. Table 3 summarizes results from the difference in difference models. The coefficients of our interest are those from the interaction term (Time * INN), showing the difference between districts with and without INN members before and after their introduction. Models 1 and 2 report results with binary explanatory variables (Time = {0, 1}) and the difference-in-differences coefficients are positive and retain statistical significance. Districts with INN members tend to have a greater number of PPCs after a new INN member is introduced, compared to those districts without INN members. Results in Model 2 further show that the results remain constant even after accounting for the lagged effects of INN membership.

Model 3 further examines the effects of INN membership on PPCs with a continuous explanatory variable recording 5 years before and after the new membership (Time_trend = $\{-5 \leq t \leq 5\}$). The coefficient from this model confirms findings from the other models, reporting a higher number of PPCs within INN districts after a new INN member is introduced. Judicial districts are likely to have a larger number of PPCs after an introduction of a nonprofit accountability journalism outlet, corroborating the temporal trend found in Figure 1.

Nonprofit News Funding and PPCs

We also examine the correlation between funding for nonprofit watchdog journalism and PPCs (H2b). Table 4 presents regression results with the Media Impact Funders philanthropic data from 5 years (2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019) as the main explanatory variable. Coefficients show a positive correlation between funding for INN members and PPCs. Federal judicial districts with greater philanthropic support for nonprofit news outlets are more likely to report a higher number of PPCs. The results are robust after including district-level covariates in the regression model. Combined results indicate the presence of watchdog journalism can facilitate a greater check on political corruption.

Discussion

In this article, we considered the importance of journalism's watchdog role: journalism that provides public accountability for both routine and problematic actions of powerful actors and institutions (Breiner 2016; Ekström et al. 2006). This includes beat journalism focused on civic institutions, businesses, and powerful people; prestige journalism coverage like State House and Washington reporting; and investigative

Table 3. Results from Difference-in-Differences Analysis of INN Membership on Prosecutions for Public Corruption.

	Dependent variable		
	Prosecutions for Public Corruption		
Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
Time ($t=0$)	–2.810** (1.161)		
Time ($t=1$)		–2.322** (1.091)	
Time trend			–0.373** (0.161)
INN	–1.409 (1.182)	–1.149 (1.086)	0.196 (0.823)
Population (log)	7.229*** (0.967)	7.175*** (0.963)	7.164*** (0.965)
GDP pc (log)	7.488*** (2.328)	6.808*** (2.296)	6.751*** (2.322)
Court efficiency	–0.263** (0.125)	–0.251** (0.125)	–0.249** (0.126)
Newspaper employment (log)	0.008 (0.244)	0.022 (0.243)	0.024 (0.243)
Time ($t=0$)*INN	2.744* (1.431)		
Time ($t=1$)*INN		2.954** (1.421)	
Time trend*INN			0.489** (0.236)
Constant	–172.852*** (26.993)	–165.542*** (26.723)	–165.865*** (27.059)
Observations	749	749	749
F statistic	37.234***	37.071***	37.003***

Note. *$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Table 4. Funding for Nonprofit Journalism and Prosecutions for Public Corruption.

	Dependent variable	
	Prosecutions for Public Corruption	
Variables	(1)	(2)
Nonprofit funding (log)	1.644*** (0.353)	0.878** (0.347)
Population (log)		5.973*** (1.646)
GDP pc (log)		2.704 (4.390)
Court efficiency		–0.150 (0.187)
Employment (log, $t-1$)		0.427 (0.681)
Constant	–6.962* (4.008)	–112.671** (48.475)
Fixed effects	Y	Y
Observations	192	192

Note. *$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

journalism. We had two key aims: to see how declines in local newspapers might be associated with PPCs and to assess whether efforts to intervene in the market failure of newspaper journalism through nonprofit news might improve or halt the effect of a diminished legacy local news landscape. Watchdog journalism is a source of journalistic authority, and distinguishes what professional journalists *do* that sets them apart from citizen journalists: most people do not have time for systematic, routine coverage and analysis of public meetings; the press pass system of credentialing limits who has access to people in power; and journalists have distinct first amendment protections, including those that shield them from revealing confidential information and sources in court (Carlson 2017).

Our first set of hypotheses considered whether declines in the supply (as measured by news employment) and the demand (as measured by news circulation) would leave negative impacts on corruption of public officials (as measured by PPCs). The rationale for the *negative* impacts on PPCs is that when journalism does not serve a monitorial role, shining light on wrong doing, the wrongdoing goes undiscovered, and thus, unprosecuted. So when newspaper employment declines overall, we would expect to see an associated drop in PPCs, which we test in H1a. However, the association is not as clear as extant theory predicts: we find a weak but statistically significant drop in PPCs with an employment decline from 2 years prior, but this result is inconclusive in other model specifications. As such, we are wary of overstating this association between newsroom employment and PPCs.

One explanation for the inconclusive results in H1a may be that our measure of journalism employment includes *all* types of journalism, from feature writers to sports journalists to photojournalists. In some years, more watchdog journalists might be cut than in others, with an effect that takes more than a year or two to emerge in the PPC data. Thus, the scale of employment cuts may not matter as much as which types of journalism get cut. This also is consistent with theory: journalism as a whole may be less important to government accountability, in part because journalism serves a myriad of *other* important social roles, such as facilitating community conversation and shaping collective memory, which our outcome variable of interest, PPCs, is not best suited to measure. Our dataset does not break down these cuts by beat; however, the results of our other hypotheses provide strong support that watchdog journalism may be the most important form of journalism when it comes to government accountability.

However, our finding that higher circulation is positively correlated with PPCs (H1b) gives us confidence that our models and theoretical approach is sound; this relationship between circulation and government accountability is well-documented cross-nationally (Bruns and Himmler 2011). Circulation can be seen as a proxy for demand, an indicator of the take-up of local news and information. If news about a corrupt public official is circulating widely throughout a community, then it is likely that sanction is not only warranted also but expected.

Our second set of hypotheses considered the efficacy of nonprofit news outlets as a supplement for declining journalism in a geographic area: whether the addition of nonprofit news (measured by the lagged number of INN member organizations) and nonprofit funding (measured by funds per year per outlet) have *positive* impacts on political accountability. We find statistically significant results for both hypotheses. As such, there is strong support that nonprofit watchdog journalism can serve an important, supplemental role in shoring up government accountability that can help mitigate the impact of the declines of local newspapers. Furthermore, we also find that philanthropic funding for journalism matters: a well-funded nonprofit watchdog outlet is associated with greater PPCs. Commercial logics undermine the incentive for for-profit news media to continue to invest in watchdog journalism; the support for both H2a and H2b points to both the efficacy and the importance of finding revenue streams to support journalism that is poorly supported by the market outside of commercial logics.

However, there are several issues that complicate empirical support for journalism's efficacy as a watchdog, and our findings provide a partial but incomplete understanding of the complicated institutional interplay between the press and public officials/institutions. First, the connection between journalism's role in making corruption visible and actual sanction by law enforcement is murky. Journalism cannot act on behalf of the public to sanction bad actors; journalists can only expose wrongdoing and hope that the public, in turn, acts accordingly—either voting someone out of office or hoping that other public stakeholders exact criminal or civil sanctions. Similarly, it is impossible to measure corruption that did not occur because public actors were kept in line by the threat of exposure (Schudson 2008); for example, the cumulative effect of an education beat reporter's presence at every school board meeting. Furthermore, PPCs are just one measure of government accountability—and while PPCs encompass wrongdoing at the federal, state, and local levels for that jurisdiction, there are many other indicators that might help form a more complete picture of how changes in our news and information ecology might impact the functioning of both public and private sector employees and businesses.

That said, PPCs provide an important and widely used snapshot of the robustness of public accountability, as the measure covers local, state, and federal actors with annualized corruption numbers at the judicial district level (Artello and Albanese 2020). Future research should look at more complicated interplays between journalism and other civil society institutions that help sustain democracy. More broadly, researchers should consider how right-wing radicalization and declines in media trust might undermine journalism's capacity to publicize wrongdoing of powerful people and institutions. By considering the changes in journalism and associated shifts in government accountability, our scholarship provides some of the first empirical evidence that both the existence of nonprofit news outlets in a geographic location and the level of the funding for these outlets can facilitate democratically beneficial outcomes. The watchdog function of journalism is increasingly challenged by commercial logics; however, our findings suggest that nonprofit interventions in failing local commercial news markets may be an important safeguard for keeping public officials accountable.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

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