



# Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

## ***Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy***

By Margaret Sullivan

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on June 5, 2024 to discuss *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*. The author, Margaret Sullivan, is the media columnist for the Washington Post. This is a book about the precipitous decline of local newspapers and why the loss of their coverage endangers democracy and good government.

In the book, Sullivan explains why the decline occurred a few years into the 21st century—basically, the internet and social media destroyed newspapers’ business models—and what were the results (between 2008 and 2017, newspapers eliminated 45 percent of newsroom jobs).

And the consequences? Some small towns and even mid-size cities no longer have daily newspapers, in print or digital forms, and in these places no one reports on local government, politics or culture. In big cities, newsroom cutbacks have meant less coverage.

Sullivan offers a few ideas for what might replace the lost coverage. We focused our discussion on these ideas and on what citizens and institutions in Urban Atlanta could do to support nonpartisan, professional local journalism.

### Three Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are three “big ideas” drawn from *Ghosting the News* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. The loss of professional journalists covering local government in Urban Atlanta is a danger because scrutiny by reporters creates accountability and better performance by governments. Along with high quality services, accountability and performance build trust in government.



2. We need for-profit news organizations to find sustainable business models and demonstrate their value to subscribers and advertisers.
3. But we cannot depend on for-profit news organizations alone for journalism. We need others to step up, including citizen advocates, who can explain why citizens should subscribe to newspapers and donate to news nonprofits. We need foundations to help nonprofit news organizations provide basic information about government and public issues. Universities and high schools could also help by training students in journalism and creating reporting partnerships with news organizations. This could result in valuable work experience for students as they expand coverage of local government and politics.

## Why Do These Things?

Sullivan's book paints a dire picture of local politics and government without nonpartisan, professional journalism. She offers no easy answers for changing this decline. Given the difficulties, should we make an effort to bolster local journalism? We think so. Here's why:

- We cannot have positive civic engagement without a common understanding of community issues and government actions. Only journalism can give citizens and leaders this common understanding.
- We need scrutiny of government by trained and fair-minded outside observers.
- There is a relationship between healthy community involvement and journalism. The more people know about their communities, the more they want to be involved.
- Good journalism can change government for the better by pointing out needs that leaders had not recognized.
- Thoughtful, fair journalism creates informed voters.

## What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. That's true even for something as necessary for healthy communities as professional journalism. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- There is a lack of trust in the news media.
- It will be difficult to convince people who have come in the past 25 years to expect news for free to pay for it through newspaper subscriptions or donations to nonprofit news organizations.
- We still do not have successful business models for privately owned newspapers or nonprofit news organizations to follow.
- There are no advocacy groups that speak up for local journalism. As a result, many citizens don't know what good journalism is or how to value it.
- Artificial intelligence will have an impact on journalism. Problem is, we don't know if the impact will be mostly good or mostly bad.
  - If AI allows us to see what happens in government agencies that aren't covered today, that could be a good thing.
  - If AI results in wildly inaccurate reporting—or generates propaganda—these would clearly be bad things.

## Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- While there are no citizen-led advocacy groups that speak up for local journalism, they could be created. And having citizens explaining to other citizens why nonpartisan, professional reporting is critical to good government—and why citizens ought to support it through subscriptions and donations—could make a major difference.

- We need current and former public officials to add their support for local journalism by explaining to citizens how professional reporting keeps state and local government honest and makes it more effective.
- It's true that we do not have successful business models for local journalism, but many are working on this. There's every reason to believe sustainable business models will be found.
- A hopeful sign is a growing collaboration among the news media. One example is the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's partnership with WABE, the public radio station, on an hour-long daily public affairs program called "Politically Georgia." This is the kind of partnership that could build support for both organizations.
- Let's make sure that artificial intelligence benefits local journalism. Here's a good test: Could AI take transcriptions of school board meetings and accurately summarize their decisions and discussions? If so, AI could deepen coverage and understanding of public agencies, augmenting human reporting.

## A Synopsis of *Ghosting the News*

*Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* is 95 pages, not including acknowledgements, a reading list and notes. There are five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion.

Sullivan is the media columnist for the Washington Post. She is a former public editor of the New York Times and former editor of the Buffalo News.

This is a book about the decline of local newspapers—and outright collapse of some—and why the loss of their coverage of local politics and government is endangering democracy. This brief book sets out to explain what caused the withering of newspapers, why it happened so quickly, and what the consequences are. Along the way, it offers some potential solutions.

The tone is grim. Here are a few facts from the book:

- American newspapers eliminated 45 percent of their newsroom employees between 2008 and 2017. There were even deeper cuts after that.
- Some of these layoffs were at small newspapers, but large and storied ones suffered as well. The Denver Post once had a newsroom with 300 reporters and editors who did a good job of covering a large metropolitan area. By 2020 the editorial staff had shrunk to 70.
- More than 2,000 American newspapers have closed since 2004.
- Hundreds of counties in American have no newspapers or meaningful news outlets at all.
- Fewer than one in six Americans pays for local news in any form today. They depend on TV news or what they read on the internet.

What does all this mean? "Democracy suffers when local journalism fades," Sullivan writes.

How? In two ways, she says. First, the lack of coverage opens the door for corruption in government. Without reporters attending meetings and informing citizens of what city and county officials are doing, citizens don't know enough to question decisions, complain to council members and commissioners, and hold local officials responsible at election time.

Second, it forces people to use other ways of judging elected officials, besides reading about their actions. Increasingly, they use partisanship. If you don't know that your county commissioner has made questionable decisions, how do you decide whether to vote for her in the next election? You look at her party affiliation. The fading of local news coverage, then, is pushing people, as Sullivan puts it, "into tribal corners, voting along strictly party lines."

One consequence can be found in municipal borrowing costs. A 2018 study of bond issuances found that where there's no journalistic scrutiny—either because there's no local newspaper or it doesn't cover local government—rating agencies consider it a risk and include it in their ratings. The result is that cities that rarely or never see a reporter pay an average of 5 to 11 basis points more than cities with coverage. Bottom line: The absence of scrutiny can cost cities hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But the losses are greater than financial, Sullivan says. When newspapers are not around to tell readers about local theater, museum exhibitions and dance performances, local culture suffers as well. “After all,” she writes, “a newspaper’s purpose isn’t only to keep public officials accountable; it is also to be the village square for an entire metropolitan area, to help provide a common reality and touchstone, a sense of community and of place.”

So what happened to newspapers in the 21st century that caused them to wither and, in some cases, die? A series of hammer blows. The most important one was that the internet laid siege to newspapers’ business models, which were based on advertising sales. First, classified ads went to Craigslist and other sites. Then Facebook and Google created digital advertising markets that were better and cheaper than the print ones offered by newspapers. Finally, Amazon drove some local stores (and faithful newspaper advertisers) out of business.

Subscribers deserted newspapers, and Wall Street hedge funds swooped in to buy up century-old newspaper chains and dismantle whatever remained. All this happened in a breathtakingly short period of time.

It would appear to be a hopeless situation except for a few things. First, a few prominent newspapers have made a transition to new, digital business models. One is the New York Times. At its peak in the mid-1990s, the Times had a weekday circulation of about 1.2 million printed papers, including a slimmed-down national edition. Today, the Times prints fewer than 300,000 newspapers but its digital subscriptions are over 10 million—and still rising.

With such numbers, the Times can attract digital advertising but it can also make subscriptions a major source of revenue. After all, digital news (unlike print editions) can be delivered, essentially, at no cost. So the more you sell, the greater the profits.

A second source of hope is the arrival of digital news sites, many of them owned by nonprofits. Some, like the Voice of San Diego or Minnpost in the Twin Cities, assign professional reporters to cover local governments. Others, like East Lansing Info in Michigan, use “citizen journalists” to contribute stories.

A big question: Are these sites sustainable? It’s not yet clear. Philanthropy has been one source of funding for the nonprofit news organizations. The Texas Tribune, for instance, was launched with a \$1 million grant from a wealthy investor. It continues to get foundation support, which it has augmented with memberships and events like the Texas Tribune Festival each fall in Austin, which nets about \$1 million a year for the news organization.

But is this mix of foundation support, memberships and events enough to keep these news organizations afloat and covering local government? Again, it’s not yet clear.

A third source of hope is how public broadcasting has stepped up in some cities to fill some of the gap left by newspapers. Where these stations have done so, they’ve hired additional reporters, taken on public policy reporting and designed better websites to keep citizens informed.

Unfortunately none of this makes up for the loss of newspaper reporters at city halls and county courthouses—and the cultural coverage the newspapers once supplied. And, except for the New York Times and a few others, no newspapers have come up with business models that could support the reporting staffs they had 20 years ago.

In other words, the prospects for local journalism remain grim, and there are no clear solutions on the horizon.

## About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at [atlantaurbanist.com](http://atlantaurbanist.com).