

Community Signals

A Meta-analysis of Recent National Research for Public Media

Executive Summary

August 16, 2026

Preface

Public media is at a turning point. Federal funding has been withdrawn, and a coalition of groups and thought leaders is actively debating what “the future of public media” should look like. Locally, public media practitioners are setting near-term priorities and figuring out how to allocate limited resources to meet the moment. And the leaders of the large national public media organizations are discerning how best to serve their members.

The “Community Signals” project enters the conversation from an unusual starting place: not the balance sheet or the board room, but the community. Its findings emerge from a meta-analysis of three major national studies City Square Associates conducted between 2024 and 2026. Together, these studies measure the needs, sentiments, and opinions of over 100,000 US adults—a unique source of insight into what communities actually want and need from public media. American Public Media Group and the Station Resource Group—as a service to both their own constituencies and the public media community at large—engaged City Square Associates to bring the three studies into conversation with one another and to translate what they say into an answer to this one question:

**What are the Signals coming from the community
that public media should attend to as it contemplates its future?**

What follows is an overview of the results of the meta-analysis. The detailed findings, including citations from the original research studies and more detailed discussion are in a white paper that is available at <http://citysquareassociates.com/signals>.

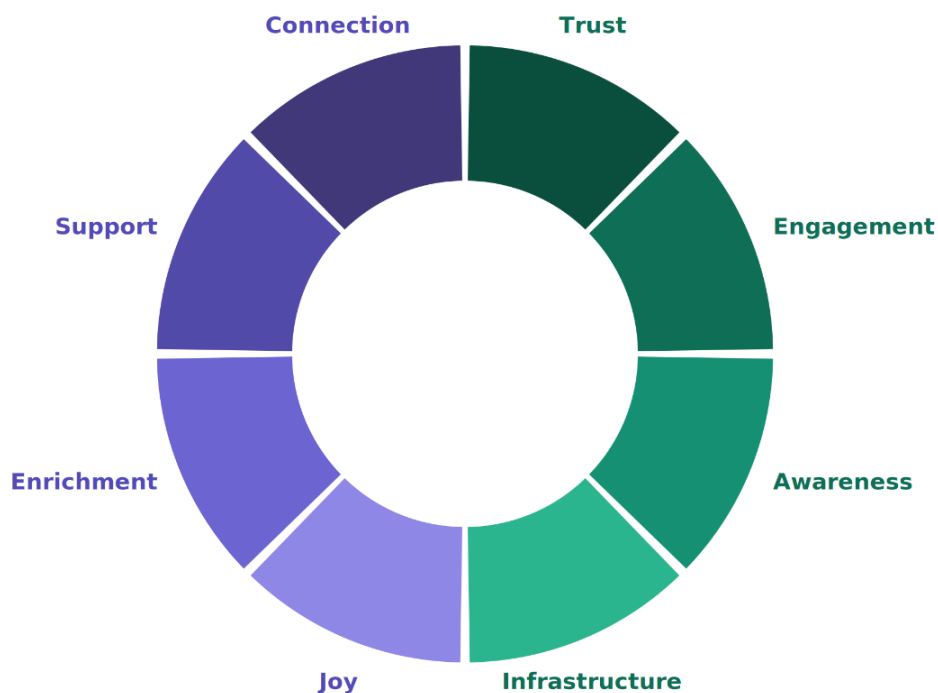
1. The Overall Framework

Our meta-analysis revealed eight Signals: overarching themes that emerged across the three studies, representing the needs, values, and aspirations of people across the country. As a conceptual device for thinking about what they represent and how they interact, we have grouped them into two constituent models: Signals relevant to public media’s **Service Model** (what it can and should provide), and those relevant to public media’s **Operational Model** (what it takes to deliver on this sustainably).



SERVICE MODEL
What public media can provide

OPERATIONAL MODEL
What it takes to provide it



2. Signals Related to the Service Model of Public Media

- **Connection.** Americans feel disconnected and are actively searching for a remedy—through local information and storytelling, through in-person gatherings, and through the quiet companionship media can provide. This demand also aligns with some of public media’s existing strengths: local journalism, live events, and radio that eases isolation. What communities are asking for is not simply content pushed through a transmitter, but an institution that brings them together. Connection is both a service in its own right and the form the other services are increasingly asked to take.
- **Support.** People need practical, functional help in their daily lives, and those needs are layered. Some are nearly universal, like emergency and weather alerts. Others are persistent but narrower, mattering intensely to particular communities. Local stations have long provided some forms of this assistance, leveraging their institutional capabilities and local presence—but there is opportunity to expand what support looks like. And because interest in these services doesn’t depend on already knowing public media, Support also offers a rare path to reach beyond the existing audience.



- **Enrichment.** A large share of the public is hungry to grow: to feed their curiosity, challenge their thinking, and encounter perspectives they wouldn't otherwise meet. They want news that makes them more empathetic, music that connects them to other cultures and carries real context, and educational content that gives their children a strong start. These are the curatorial, depth-over-breadth services the market has little incentive to build. Communities—and especially the donors who know public media best—already recognize this enrichment role as central to its identity and one of the core reasons they invest in it.
- **Joy.** In a society that feels increasingly polarized and isolating, Americans are actively looking for joy and uplift. They want news that makes them hopeful and sheds light on the good in the world, comedy and lightness to relieve the tension, and music that uplifts, soothes, and brings back good memories. Those closest to public media see the fit clearly. This Signal invites public media to embrace the lighter and more restorative side of what it offers—music, drama, lifestyle, cultural programming—as legitimate public value in their own right.

3. Signals Related to the Operational Model of Public Media

- **Trust.** There is a deep, largely unmet appetite for information people can rely on, and public media holds an advantage in being able to meet it. But that advantage is contingent: trust is earned locally and through a visible presence in a place. Being counted among the nation's most trusted brands is not, by itself, a trust strategy. Public media earns durable trust by showing up as an accountable community nonprofit, woven into local life.
- **Engagement.** Engagement with public media runs well ahead of awareness of it: many US adults report engaging in some way with it over the past year, often without knowing that's what they're doing. That engagement is more often relational and values-based than transactional; donors see themselves as "supporters," and many give in support of the mission even while consuming little content. It spans many platforms and reaches well beyond programming into community service, and engenders civic and cultural vitality.
- **Awareness.** Public media remains largely unknown at the local level: few can name their station and fewer still can say what it offers or represents. This is an operational constraint, because people cannot trust, support, or build a relationship with what they don't know is there. Awareness tracks closely with goodwill—those who understand public media speak well of it—so every unreached person is a positive relationship



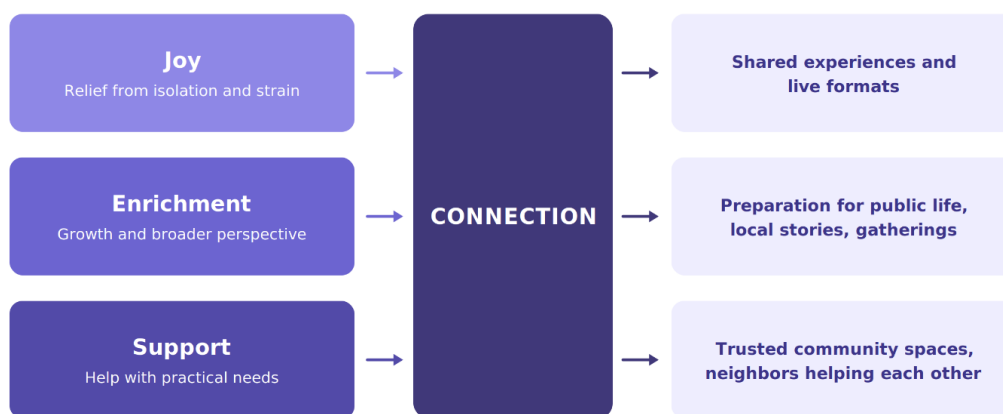
that never had the chance to form. The unaware are more diverse and more service-oriented, and are reached through usefulness rather than institutional mission.

- **Infrastructure.** The concept of infrastructure for public media needs to be expanded and tiered going forward. Digital is where audiences already are—consuming, listening, and giving—which makes it the primary delivery investment. Broadcast should remain a public-service ideal focused on equity rather than audience development. And beyond technology infrastructure is the need for civic infrastructure—building out, literally and figuratively, the physical and social infrastructure grounded in convening, support, and community immersion. Here, universal access takes on new meaning and new modes of delivery.

4. An Integrated Framework

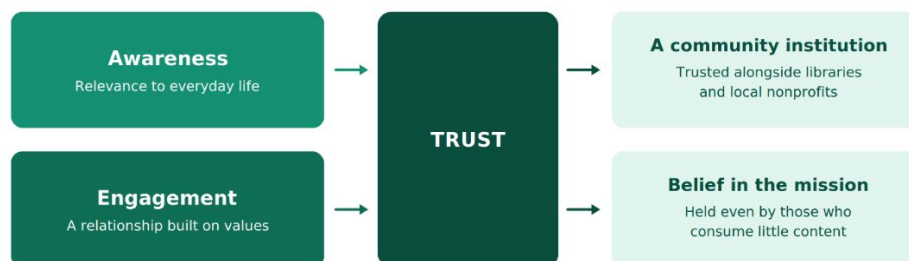
It is tempting to treat the eight Signals as distinct product lines, each available to invest in on its own. The data suggest otherwise. What a Signal means, and what it asks a public media organization to do, can shift depending on which other Signal it is read alongside—and the Signals amplify one another, so that action taken on one directly affects the next, which affects the next in turn. They are fundamentally integrated, an organized whole whose properties cannot be predicted by looking at the parts in isolation.

This holds within each model. Among the Service Signals, Connection turns out to be less a standalone priority than the form the others increasingly take: relief (Joy), growth (Enrichment), and practical help (Support) are all sought in communal, in-person, connective forms rather than as content pushed through a transmitter. A single well-chosen investment can answer several of these needs at once.





Among the Operational Signals, the same logic applies: Awareness is not simply an information gap but a question of being identifiable and credible; Trust is earned as much by what kind of institution a station is taken to be as by its editorial performance; and both resolve into the same underlying asset, a sustainable and valued kind of presence in the community.



And it holds across the two models. The Operational Signals are the conditions that make service delivery possible, while the Service Signals orient how those conditions get built—so much so that nearly every Service Signal shares evidence with nearly every Operational one. Read as a menu, the framework invites a station to pick one item and fund it. Read as a model, it shows that the same work must satisfy several needs at once. That is the central claim of this meta-analysis: together, the eight Signals describe what communities need and what public media exists to provide.

5. Using the Signals

Research can inform executive decisions and strategy, but it can never replace them. The work of Community Signals does not end with the meta-analysis. We have tuned our metaphorical rabbit ears to the signals coming from the community; now public media practitioners have the opportunity to take action.

Some of that action is immediate. Executive leaders and boards of local public media organizations can assess the service they provide right now, and the way they provide it, against these Signals—and against the ones coming from their own communities—to decide what might need to change in the near term to fulfill their mission sustainably. That is a question they can begin to answer today, on their own and with peers across the system.

But the withdrawal of federal funding was a major disruption that invites all with an interest in the common good to reconsider how public media should be structured—not just for the next three to five years (the horizon of a typical strategic plan) but for the next sixty-five. Our hope is that these Community Signals can help anchor that larger conversation as well. The three studies behind them do not exhaust everything US communities are saying, but the needs, sentiments, and opinions of the 100,000-plus adults who spoke to us are, for the moment, the best means we have of bringing the community into a discussion about its own future.



Methodology

Three studies form the backbone of the analysis. RUN (Researching Unmet Needs), commissioned by SRG, Greater Public, and PMCC, explored what Americans want and are not getting that public media is suited by mission and capabilities to provide. The Rural Study, commissioned by the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, examined the real needs of rural communities. And FUND (Finding and Understanding New Donors), crowdfunded by 58 local public media organizations and supported by Greater Public and CDP, profiled the donors behind the surge in giving that followed the 2025 funding cuts.

Each was built for its own purpose; the meta-analysis is what happens when all three are read together. The work moved in three steps: (1) We analyzed the questionnaires and datasets from all three studies to see where they overlap and what broad themes emerge when they are brought into conversation. (2) We treated each emerging theme as a prototypical “Signal,” then returned to the data to interpret it, curating observations grounded in specific datapoints. Refining these collections gave us eight Signals, organized under two interrelated models: the Service Model and the Operational Model. (3) Because the same datapoints often built more than one Signal, we then quantified and mapped the associations between them, thus reading the Signals as a connected system rather than eight things in isolation.

City Square Associates led the analysis, informed throughout by our partners at APMG and SRG, whose standing as leaders in public media helped us turn Signals drawn from community data into language that speaks to the people who run public media.



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