

Community Signals

A meta-analysis of recent national research for public media

Prepared by **City Square Associates**
in collaboration with
Station Resource Group &
American Public Media Group

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Introduction

Prologue

The meaning of the word “media.” Media professionals and people in general are accustomed to thinking of “media” in terms of electronic media: radio and TV to begin with and, since the 1990s, the internet. Thinking more broadly, however, philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously taught in the 1960s that media are “any technology or artifact that acts as an extension of the human body, senses, or mind.”¹ What distinguishes electronic media specifically is its ability to enable this extension instantly and broadly. What a person posts to social media, for example, is in principle accessible to anyone with a broadband connection almost as soon as they hit “post.” And that has made a world of difference. Literally.

McLuhan believed that electronic media would bring people closer together and form what he referred to as a “global village.” But he also predicted that the proliferation of electronic media might also increase tribalism, as people seek to escape information overload or flee ideas different from their own.²

The rise and disruption of public media. In a sense, public media was born as a safeguard against this eventuality. Determined “to educate, inform, and inspire,” the architects of public radio and television believed in the promise of a global village where people are inspired by their curiosity to learn new things and explore new territories. Public media emerged to help the public navigate a limitless universe of knowledge through thoughtful investigation, curation and dialogue. Although commercial media entities were and are capable of doing these things, there are few reliable market incentives to actually do so. Hence the “vast wasteland” that FCC Commissioner Newton Minow described in 1961³ and the idea of preserving some portion of the broadcast spectrum specifically to remedy the situation.

Fast-forward to today—65 years later, and one year since the defunding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (the entity that represents the most visible expression of the federal government’s interest in promoting media that serves the common good). There has been lively discussion about whether and in what ways public media continues to be relevant. After all, much has changed since the days of Newton Minow and Marshall McLuhan. So much has been said and written about “digital transformation,” that it is easy to forget how profoundly different the world of content creation and distribution today

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¹ *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

² From a 1969 interview with *Playboy*. https://www.understandingnewmedia.com/mm1/class_materials/mcluhan-playboy.pdf.

³ From a speech delivered on May 9, 1961 to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, DC. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.html>.

is from the world these thinkers were looking at in the 1960s. For example, in the sixties, preserving broadcast spectrum for a civic purpose was the very definition of “universal access.” But can the same be said now, when use of linear broadcast media continues to decline and smartphones are ubiquitous? This is one example of just how much has changed, and doesn’t address the profound political and social changes that have accompanied the technological ones.

The meaning of the word “public.” We know generally what needs existed in the 1960s that gave rise to public media, but do those same needs exist today? And what other needs, if any, are there that public media by virtue of its mission and capabilities is well-suited to address? If our inquiry into public media has been inspired in part by a meditation on the meaning of the word “media,” it requires a complementary meditation on the meaning of the word “public.”

Almost from the start, commercial corporate media has viewed the “public” first and foremost as an aggregate of people to be monetized. Whether through the advertising and sponsorship model of traditional radio and television, or the subscription model of digital distribution services, the objective has been to defray the cost of and generate profit from the content by extracting revenue from the users, either indirectly (advertising) or directly (subscription fees). In this way of thinking about “the public,” the primary objective is to reach and build audiences. Audiences have been defined in commercial media by their behavior of consumption (they are “viewers,” “readers,” “listeners”), so in consequence, they are valuable not in themselves, but only insofar as they are a source of revenue to the corporate entity and profit to the investor.

The financial outcomes of public media are not ends in themselves, but means of ensuring that public media will be resourced to serve the public good—not just the preferences of their most loyal viewers, listeners, and readers.

But if public media exists for the public good—not for the monetary benefit of owners and investors—then its understanding of the word “public” is functionally different. It sees “the public” not just as a potential “audience” to be monetized but as a “community to be served.” This is why, for example, public radio music stations might represent genres and artists who may not be broadly popular but are culturally valuable and underrepresented elsewhere; or

why public television documentaries might exhibit an uncommon level of depth or rigor even though not every viewer has the desire or bandwidth to absorb it. Understandably, in an effort to remain relevant and stand out in a media landscape where public media and commercial media mix and mingle in people’s daily experience, many public media practitioners have fully adopted the competitive and market-based framework of their commercial counterparts. But to engage in “audience building” without an eye ultimately for “community building” is to miss the whole point of public media’s existence.

A community-based approach. Taking the above into account, this white paper proceeds not from an audience-centric viewpoint, but from a community-based one. Any effort to envision the future of public media must begin with the experience of the public. Like the rabbit ears on a vintage RCA TV set, **our metaphorical rabbit ears are tuned to the Signals coming from the community:** What needs and aspirations are they striving to meet? What values, beliefs, and opinions drive them? Where do they see media in general—and public media specifically—fitting into their lives and into the culture at large? Proceeding from a community-based foundation does not mean that audiences are unimportant. Actually reaching people with public media content and services matters, and creating the opportunities for people to financially support and invest in the organizations established to do the work is fundamental. And it certainly doesn't mean that deep policy and business analyses are unimportant.

But the financial outcomes of public media are not ends in themselves, but means of ensuring that public media will be sufficiently resourced to serve the public good—not just the preferences of their most loyal viewers, listeners, and readers but the civic health of local communities and of the nation as a whole. That is the unique contribution of this white paper to a discussion of what public media leaders should be doing right now, *and* to the larger conversation about what public media should look like in the future. We leave it to others, drawing on their particular expertise and relevant research to complement this work with their advice on how best to structure and fund it.

About the "Community Signals" project. This paper summarizes a set of findings we have come to frame as "Community Signals," which emerged from a meta-analysis of three major national research studies City Square Associates conducted between 2024 and 2026 on behalf of public media stations and organizations. Together, these studies measure the needs, sentiments, and opinions of over 100,000 US adults, making them an unusual source of insight.

The meta-analysis was born from a desire to use these studies to redefine what public media is and can be at a critical turning-point in its history: Federal funding had recently been withdrawn, and a coalition of groups and thought leaders had begun actively pursuing parallel discussions about what "the future of public media" looks like. It also reflects an interest in extending the value of the three studies. Each had already generated a deep body of reports, dashboards, executive summaries, webinars, and presentations; the open question was whether putting them into conversation with one another would yield something new, more comprehensive in scope and more urgent in implication.

To that end, Station Resource Group (SRG) and American Public Media Group (APMG) enlisted City Square Associates to triangulate the findings and identify definitional themes that could put into plain language the needs local communities are expressing. Those themes are discussed here as the eight Community Signals, which we see as foundational to articulating the vision and refining the mission of public media in all the ways it exists to serve the public.

What follows below is an overview of the methodology and process behind the meta-analysis, along with an overview of the three underlying studies (RUN, Rural, and FUND). We then provide an

orientation to the Community Signals framework before a summary review of each of the eight Signals: what they mean, how the data support their meaning, how they should be understood. Finally, having articulated the eight Signals, we explore the nuanced and crucial ways in which they intersect and affect each other—underscoring a main observation that this model of community service and public good is an integrated whole, not a checklist of optional strategic priorities.

Background and method

The underlying research studies

Starting in March 2024 and continuing through 2026, City Square Associates worked in partnership with several organizations within the public media ecosystem to better understand the communities and constituents that local organizations endeavor to serve. These partnerships resulted in three studies that operate as the backbone for the meta-analysis we conducted as part of the Community Signals project.

	RUN <i>Researching Unmet Needs</i>	Rural <i>Rural Community Research</i>	FUND <i>Finding and Understanding New Donors</i>
Funders	Greater Public, Station Resource Group (SRG), Public Media Content Collective (PMCC)	National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB)	58 local public media organizations; Greater Public; CDP
Fieldwork	July – Nov. 2024	March – April 2026	March 2026
Total sample	n = 31,103	n = 5,810	n = 65,412

RUN was a national study that explored the unmet needs of Americans—particularly in the media space of news and music—that local public radio organizations well-positioned to address. The core of this study was a national survey completed by 10,002 US adults age 18 and older. Twenty-two public radio organizations also chose to field the survey to their members and/or a drilldown of residents in their own markets; these local oversamples brought in another 21,101 responses. The analyses in this paper focus on the 10,002 responses from the core national sample.

Rural was another national study conducted in partnership with NFCB in 2026. The goal was to help ensure that the support and advocacy NFCB provides to its stations—many of whom serve primarily rural communities—reflects the real needs of those communities and is grounded in an understanding of that population (demographically, emotionally, technologically). The Rural study consisted of a survey fielded to both rural and non-rural communities across the US (the latter included as a control sample to understand the extent to which the profile and experiences of rural

Americans are truly distinct). The survey was completed by a total of 5,810 adults age 18 and older (representing n=4,375 in rural communities, and n=1,435 respondents in non-rural communities).

FUND was also conducted in 2026 in partnership with Greater Public, CDP, and 58 local public media organizations representing radio, TV, and joint licensees. The objective was to develop a detailed demographic, psychographic, and behavioral profile of donors who were part of the observed surge in giving from 2025. The FUND survey was distributed to individuals who donated to any one of the 58 participating stations last year, yielding a total sample of 65,412 responses across the country.

Process for the meta-analysis

The process in carrying out the meta-analysis consisted of several iterative steps.

1. We closely analyzed the questionnaires and datasets from all three studies in order to identify the places where they overlap and which broad thematic areas might emerge when all three of them are brought into conversation with the others. There was an active and intentional effort to ensure the themes emerged broadly from all three studies, and were not a unilateral output from any single study.
2. Once these themes were identified as prototypical “Signals,” we reviewed the data to understand what they meant. This involved a curation of observations under each Signal, grounded by specific points of evidence (i.e., datapoints) from the survey samples. In reviewing and refining these collections of observations and evidence for each Signal, we ultimately arrived at the framework detailed in this report: eight Signals organized evenly under two interrelated models (the Service Model and the Operational Model; see below, “The Signals Framework”).
3. After establishing the framework, we explored how different Signals interacted with one another. Because the data points used to build one Signal were often also used to build other Signals, it was possible to quantify and map the associations and connections that exist *between* Signals rather than treating each in isolation. These associations are explored in greater depth towards the end of this white paper (see “Discussion and Concluding Remarks”), and they serve as a useful guide for those seeking practical applications of the findings from this meta-analysis.

While City Square Associates led and conducted the analysis, the work was informed by a collaboration with our partners at APMG (led by Jean Taylor and Jeff Freeland Nelson) and SRG (led by Bill Davis). Their input was invaluable as leaders in the public media space, who helped us translate the Signals emerging from community data into clear messaging for an audience of public media professionals.

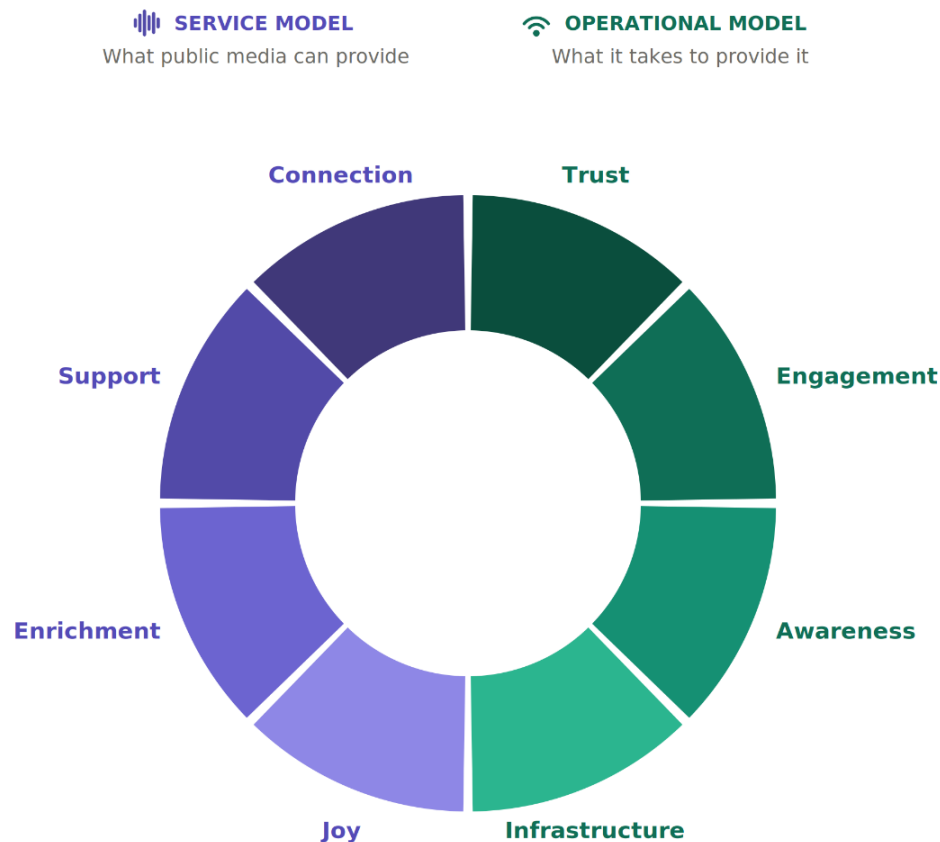
We used an LLM (Claude, Opus 4.8) for analytic assistance in limited and specific ways. It was used to help identify and map specific questions to specific Signals; to quantify the degree of overlap between Signals in terms of the datapoints used as evidence; and to generate the images for the

Signals Framework and inter-Signal associations (see “Discussion”). Claude was not used for interpretation or copy drafting as a part of this study.

Each of the three studies previously described (RUN, Rural, FUND) are referenced throughout this white paper in defining each individual Signal. These references appear in-text parenthetically as notations, to identify which study and survey question was analyzed to support the associated observation (e.g., “Rural Q30”). The questionnaires may be viewed and downloaded at citysquareassociates.com/signals.

The Signals Framework

Our meta-analysis revealed eight Signals, as 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 with each other, we have grouped them into a framework that includes 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).



The following sections of this white paper will explore each Signal in-depth—first independently, and then in conversation with each other. Below we offer a brief introduction into each Signal, and what they each signify.

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, as they matter intensely to particular communities. Local stations have long provided some forms of this assistance, leveraging its 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.

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 this. 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) physical and social infrastructure grounded in convening, support, and community immersion. Here, universal access takes on new meaning and new modes of delivery.

Note about Cross-Signal References

In summarizing and exploring each Signal, we occasionally make reference to the ways in which they inevitably overlap with or impact other Signals. We allude to these associations briefly and parenthetically in each Signal's summary. But these references also highlight the extent to which all eight Signals are inherently and fundamentally integrated with each other; actions taken to address one will have an effect on another. We explore these associations and inter-relations in more depth in the section "Discussion: An Integrated Framework."

The Signals

Connection

Americans want more connection to one another and to their communities—through local information and storytelling, in-person experiences, and even media-enabled parasocial relationships. Public media emerges as a natural catalyst for these kinds of connection.

Americans are telling us in large numbers that they feel disconnected, and that they are actively looking for a remedy. A meaningful proportion of the general public reports having felt lonely or isolated over the past year (Rural Q9), and relatively few describe the places they live as “tight-knit” (Rural Q5). Taken together, these are subtle but persistent Signals that the sense of belonging people expect from their own communities has grown thinner than it once was. This is not a passive condition; a substantial portion say they’ve recently gone searching—for a trusted community space, for ways neighbors might help one another through hard times, for live events where they can simply be among others (Rural Q11). **The need for connection is felt, named, and acted upon.**

Much of this need lands on ground familiar to public media. When asked what they wish they had more of, people put local information first: what’s happening in their own city, town, or neighborhood tops the list of unmet needs across a wide field of news and information topics (RUN Q9,10). And they don’t want that information merely to be informed; they prize content that leaves them better prepared to participate in public life (RUN Q11,12). This is the connective tissue that many in public media already believe that it provides; journalism as a thread that ties people to the place they live and to one another as neighbors and citizens. For a field that has long defined itself around news and civic information, this is affirming and challenging. It says the core mission still answers a real and current hunger. It also says that the hunger is distinctly local.

But there’s more to this that requires more from public media. The very same appetite for connection expresses itself as a desire to be out in public and in person. Across all three studies, most Americans already make the effort to show up: at farmers markets, at libraries, at concerts, at sporting events. The pattern points unmistakably to a population looking for reasons to step away from their screens, leave their homes,

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and be with other people beyond their immediate families or social circles (FUND Q31; RUN Q43; Rural Q38). There is a reminder here that, while media may connect people virtually, the desire for tangible, physical connection is ignored at public media’s own peril. One relevant area in which that demand seems to outstrip supply is live music. The unmet needs people name most are not requests for more to listen to, but for more to attend—live concerts, music festivals, and reliable calendars for discovering local shows (RUN Q23,24). And music itself is understood as a means of connection: to

other cultures, to a community of fellow fans around a shared genre, or as a way to bring people together in one's own home (RUN Q21). The throughline is people wanting to come together, and music is a powerful motivation for doing so.

Public media is well positioned to address this Signal. Public radio in particular already serves as genuine company for a great many people, easing the very isolation they describe (Rural Q30). This helps to explain why so many say it matters that community radio focus specifically on connecting people within a community (Rural Q34), and why so many see real value in community radio that hosts local stories, showcases local musicians, and convenes live gatherings around local issues (Rural Q36). Those who know public radio best already see its potential for delivering on these needs—local happenings, preparation for public life, and calendars of area concerts and performances (RUN Q32,33,40).

Furthermore, the people closest to stations—donors—underscore this sense of fit and priority. When asked what they'd like their stations to prioritize, they answer plainly: more locally focused content alongside national programming, more coverage of what's happening in their community, more organized opportunities to volunteer, and more of the kinds of events they already seek out on their own (FUND Q27). This is a call to action from the most committed.

The audience has, in effect, already assigned public media the role; the question then is execution. Is a public media organization that exists solely to push nationally produced content through to a local community via transmitter or broadband really meeting the need for connection that communities express today? The demand for connection is real, the fit with public media's identity is strong, and the invitation from the community could hardly be more explicit: **bring us together**.

Support

Americans need practical, functional assistance in their daily lives. These needs are layered: some are close to universal, some are modest but persistent, and some are important to particular communities. Public media has historically offered support services across that range, and can build outward from the information & entertainment role it already holds.

The need for practical assistance from public institutions is very clear. Many communities, especially those in rural areas, report gaps in access to essential services like healthcare, childcare, eldercare, mental health, local news, and even public libraries (Rural Q7). They also absorb major life disruptions, with many experiencing major weather events or unreliable cell and internet service in the last year (Rural Q9). Despite a strong reported sense of community self-reliance in addressing local issues, many still look to institutions for help, with a majority of rural and non-rural Americans alike agreeing that the government needs to do more to support basic services where they live (Rural Q8) (see “Trust”). These gaps point to areas where public media can help address market and government failures, making the case for its value as an essential civic institution.

Historically, public media has already provided relevant support services like emergency warnings, early childhood and educational resources, and workforce development. These services go well beyond "media content," and are not always lucrative or relevant to most of the general public. But they leverage public media organization's place in the community and technology infrastructure in order to provide service. And the data show that the needs those services were built for have not subsided. To help alleviate some or many of these gaps, public media can marshal its existing media infrastructure while expanding local presence (see "*Infrastructure*").

The entry-point for support service can be something people already value from public media: useful information. The strongest reported content gaps reflect needs for *practical* local information. There is a widespread need for information about things happening in people's city, town, or neighborhood (RUN Q9), and the local information people seek out relates to weather and severe weather alerts, crime and public safety, traffic and road conditions, and community events (Rural Q23). Of these, emergency and weather alerts stand apart as the leading information interest and need across samples (RUN Q9; Rural Q23), one that the public already sees public and community radio as fit to provide (RUN Q41; Rural Q34; Rural Q36).

Below that demand are needs that are important to particular communities. Interest in language and cultural programming is limited overall, yet rises substantially among Spanish speakers and BIPOC communities. Children's programming follows the same shape, drawing modest general interest but far more among parents, and a meaningful share of adults with a child say "free educational resources for young children" would be personally valuable (Rural Q23; RUN Q41). The same pattern holds for the services that reach furthest past media content. Digital skills, affordable housing, and translation services are generally less sought after, yet non-rural respondents seek more support for each than rural ones (Rural Q11). Each kind of support may not be broadly needed, but is crucial for certain segments of the public.

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Other needs emerged as narrower but persistent. There is a demand for economic empowerment information: help with jobs, training, and educational opportunities, financial planning, and support for small businesses and self-employment (Rural Q11). "Jobs training" ranks second to emergency information among the kinds of help people report actually seeking out in the past year, and many report that job information would be valuable coming from a community radio station

(Rural Q36). This demand for information that could materially improve the economic circumstances of a person and their community is the kind of service that showcases public media's purpose, and one that commercial outlets have less incentive to fill.

Support services also represent an opportunity to increase public media's reach and awareness, since interest in these offerings does not depend on already knowing public media (see "*Awareness*").

People with little knowledge of public radio are at least as likely as the most knowledgeable, and in some cases more likely, to say they would personally value emergency alerts, community events calendars, and public service announcements about health and safety. On content about local culture, history, artists, and musicians, interest among the least familiar falls well below interest among those who know public radio best (RUN Q41). The offerings that reflect public media's institutional identity often require familiarity to land. The offerings that solve a practical problem do not. For a field working to reach beyond its existing audience, "support" can be an asset.

Enrichment

Communities are seeking more information and entertainment that helps them grow, content that broadens their thinking, music that connects them to a culture, and services that give their kids a strong start. These communities, and the donors who know public media the best, already see public media as equipped to meet that need, and eager for it to do more.

There is a measurably large portion of the general public that is hungry to grow, feed their curiosity, and challenge their understanding of the world. These individuals have a widespread interest in and appetite for news that does more than inform; they want journalism that helps them become better people, that builds their capacity to empathize with others, and that exposes them to perspectives they wouldn't otherwise encounter (RUN Q12). A clear majority believe that broadening people's outlook on the world is simply what the job of news should be (RUN Q25). That hunger for enrichment extends past the newsroom into culture and leisure, where the need is often driven by limited access. Many people describe entertainment and recreational opportunities as difficult to reach, especially in rural communities (Rural Q7). People are looking for information and entertainment that leaves them feeling more well-rounded, more open to the world, or more culturally fulfilled than before.

The appetite to grow through learning extends into a longing for cultural experiences that encourage growth—experiences that market-based or for-profit services are not readily able or motivated to fill. Musically, people are interested in sounds and artists that can connect them to other cultures and that comes with commentary on the artist and the story behind the songs (RUN Q21). A meaningful proportion of people express an interest in getting even more out of their entertainment content, seeking music-focused podcasts centered on the artists in their favorite genres, interviews with their favorite musicians, or live radio shows hosted by people who can offer history, commentary, or context rather than just play the next track (RUN Q23). These kinds of needs are precisely the niche, curatorial services that commercial platforms, chasing scale, have little reason to build. Public media has a structural advantage in this arena: it can serve *depth* where the market serves breadth, and it can do so in genres and communities with dedicated, engaged followings eager for something more than just the next song.

Enrichment also encompasses the growth of children. Parents describe an interest in local public media being a partner in their kids' early education, as they'd value free educational resources for

their kids especially if it came from public media (RUN Q41) (see “Support”). Similarly, a significant portion of millennial parents who were identified as new donors for local stations said they see the quality of children’s programming as among the most valuable things their station offers (FUND Q26).

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Public media already occupies a meaningful place in the minds of people with a hunger for enrichment. Many Americans believe public media would be good at providing enriching content—for example, news and information that makes people more empathetic or exposes them to new points of view (RUN Q33). That association with content that promotes enrichment is even stronger among those who know public media best, confirming the general public’s intuition that this sort of

content is the kind of thing public media is equipped to deliver (RUN Q33). And that association is not confined just to news; a sizable portion of Americans say they would find it personally valuable if a public media organization in their area made content that highlights local culture, history, artists, or musicians (RUN Q41). Communities have, in effect, already pointed to public media as the right place to go for content that nourishes their minds through intellectual and cultural enrichment—not surprising, given public media’s legacy identity as a go-to for this.

Donors offer some of the clearest evidence that this identity persists. Asked what they value most about their local station, people frequently point to something as simple and enduring as their favorite PBS or NPR programs (FUND Q26). These specific shows are the vehicle through which the enrichment need has traditionally been met, and the door through which many first enter public media. An overwhelming majority of donors further agree that public media plays an important role in supporting local arts, culture, and music (FUND Q28). For a mission sometimes treated as secondary to news and information, this level of agreement is striking, and it suggests that enrichment is not a peripheral service public media happens to offer, but one of the central reasons people feel invested in it at all.

Joy

In a moment that many experience as heavy—polarized, isolating, stretched thin—Americans are actively reaching for joy: content that inspires, music that uplifts, news that sheds light on the good in the world. Public media is well-suited to provide it, and the audiences closest to it already recognize this as core to its value.

Americans are reaching for joy, and the reach has an urgency to it. Many describe feeling stretched thin trying to balance everything in their lives, and say they have felt isolated or lonely over the past year (Rural Q9). Mental health sits at the very top of the causes people say they are passionate about (RUN Q45). And nearly half of Americans say that the world has become so polarized that they have

pulled back from the news altogether (RUN Q25) (see *“Trust”*). Taken together, these describe a population under real strain, and in response, actively seeking out media that lifts them rather than depletes them. The appetite for joy is a profoundly human response to a heavy moment, and it deserves to be taken as seriously as any other need the community is naming.

That appetite shows up first in what people ask of news and information. Among the many jobs they want journalism to do, being made to feel hopeful ranks near the top of what they seek out *and* what they feel is in short supply (RUN Q11,12). In the same vein, news that sheds light on the good things happening in the world sits just behind trustworthiness and careful research among the qualities people most want and feel is also in short supply (RUN Q13,14). This is not foreign to public media, and those who know it already see the natural fit for this. Those who name hopefulness as an unmet need overwhelmingly see public radio as well-suited to deliver it, and a solid majority say the same about shedding light on the good in the world (RUN Q33, 34) (see *“Awareness”*).

This Signal extends well beyond journalism, into content and services that exist specifically for the purpose of uplifting. Comedy is among the most frequently sought kinds of content across twenty-five subject areas, and a top unmet need in the sense that people are looking for more—testimony to just how tense people are feeling during this time of polarization and isolation (RUN Q6,7). Music also functions as essential emotional infrastructure. People most often look for music that is uplifting, helps tune out the rest of the world, and gets them “pumped up” (RUN Q21). Among rural listeners, the same impulse takes a slightly different shape: music “brings back memories of important times,” “creates a soothing atmosphere,” and “helps them cope with life’s challenge’s (Rural Q26). Here too, public media’s current users see the fit, with a strong majority calling uplifting music experiences exactly the kind of thing public radio would be good at (RUN Q38). This is the part of the Signal that invites public media to embrace, without apology, the lighter and more restorative side of what it offers: music radio, period drama, lifestyle, travel, cooking—all providing legitimate public value in their own right, rather than a garnish on what is thought to be more “serious” work.

The appetite for joy is a profoundly human response to a heavy moment, and it deserves to be taken as seriously as any other need the community is naming.

Building on the view from the general public, an overwhelming share of donors agree that public media plays an important role in local arts, culture, and music (FUND Q28)—a striking level of consensus for a part of the service sometimes treated as secondary. The endorsement is not just nominal, as donors are considerably more likely than non-donors to seek out live music in their own communities (Rural Q27), and to value public radio’s role in

highlighting local culture, history, artists, and musicians (RUNQ 41). The people who sustain public media are saying plainly that the joyful and cultural side of its work (see *“Enrichment”*) is not a bonus but core part of what they are paying to protect: the uplift, comfort, and delight that so much of public media’s service was always built to provide.

Trust

There is a deep unmet appetite for trustworthy information, and public media enjoys a real advantage in meeting it. That advantage, however, is earned by showing up in people's lives as much as in the quality of content. Notwithstanding public media's widely-promoted brand positioning, trustworthiness is not an attribute public media can take for granted.

The appetite for trustworthy information is widespread, strong, and as yet largely unmet. Asked what they look for in the news stories and sources, Americans rank “something I can trust” at the very top of seventeen attributes in terms of what they seek *and* what they wish they had more of (RUN Q13,14). And the hunger is for genuine trustworthiness, not comfortable agreement. The characteristics that would merely reinforce an echo chamber (e.g., news that flatters one's existing opinions or comes from a like-minded host) sit near the bottom of what people want (RUN Q13, 14). And it's clearly valued in the public media space. Americans most often cite trustworthy news coverage among the most valuable things a local station can offer, after only weather and emergency alerts (Rural Q36).

That unmet need sits atop a wider erosion of trust, driven by forces public media did not create but must now navigate. Polarization is pushing people out of the information ecosystem altogether (see “Joy”). Nearly half say the world has become so divided that they follow the news less than they once did, and a large majority report active concern about the accuracy and reliability of what they encounter (RUN Q25). In rural America, the estrangement runs deeper still: A majority feel that those in charge routinely overlook places like theirs (Rural Q8). Public media is not seen as a cause of this crisis, but neither is it exempt from suspicion. Among donors (the people who know and value public media most), nearly a quarter sense a liberal slant, far outnumbering those who see a conservative one—and this within a donor base that itself leans liberal (FUND Q28). In other words, trust cannot be assumed even among the faithful.

Public media will more durably earn trust by leaning into its identity as a community nonprofit—present, accountable, woven into local life—than by resting on its laurels as a “trusted news brand.”

Public media is nonetheless widely recognized as part of the solution. Those same donors referenced above also regard public media as an essential part of a free and independent press, and it is the outlet people most often expect to present multiple points of view fairly (RUN Q34; FUND Q28). Since a majority of Americans link the health of democracy to the health of journalism, and believe that supporting local reporting is an important way to preserve it, public media's role as vital civic infrastructure is consequential (RUN Q25) (see “Infrastructure”).

But the evidence is also clear that trust is not a brand attribute to be inherited and banked; it is built locally and continually earned. When rural Americans are asked whom they actually trust, local nonprofits and community organizations rank near the very top—second only to local libraries, well ahead of local news outlets, and dramatically ahead of national news organizations, which carry a

net-negative trust score (Rural Q10). And people trust the neighbors they know over the media they consume. A majority say they place more faith in information from people where they live than in what they see in the news or online (Rural Q8). National recognition and reputation, however strong, does not travel intact into a given community. Trust is granted close to home.

Trust is earned locally as well as nationally, and relevant beyond news and journalism, including a broad array of content and services that communities need to thrive

And it is earned by showing up physically and substantively in people's communities, just as much as through producing and distributing content. The data suggest trust rises and falls with presence: rural Americans who struggle to access basic services, and those who describe their communities as lonely, declining, or stressful, register lower trust across every institution—local and national news most of all (Rural Q7,10). Where institutions are absent from the material

and social life of a place, trust withers; where they are present and useful, it has room to grow. This points to an operational truth that runs against the grain of brand-based confidence: public media will more durably earn trust by leaning into its identity *as a community nonprofit*—present, accountable, woven into local life—than by resting on its laurels as a "trusted news brand." What builds trust is coverage people can rely on, of course, but also the visible commitment to a place beyond what airs, which includes things like critical information during times of emergency, access to high quality early childhood learning resources, and community convenings (*see "Support"*).

This Signal does not point to a public media that lacks a trust advantage; it offers nuance on how the advantage is contingent, earned locally as well as nationally, and relevant beyond news and journalism including a broad array of content and services that communities need to thrive. Being counted among the nation's most trusted brands is not a trust strategy. Looking into the present and future, institutional trust will require meeting people where they are and with what they need.

Engagement

Engagement with public media is more than getting people to watch or listen: it is a values-based relationship expressed across many platforms and community services, one that is related to civic and cultural vitality and, for many, to financial support. Public media deepens that relationship by showing up as connective tissue in the communities it serves.

Engagement with public media runs well ahead of awareness of it, which poses a significant operational challenge. Even after public media is plainly defined for people, unaided awareness of specific local public media brands and an understanding of what public media is remains low (*see "Awareness"*). Yet paradoxically, a slight majority of US adults report at least some engagement with public media in some way over the past year, most seeking out public media content monthly or more (RUN Q29, 30). In other words, people are already engaging with public media without

necessarily knowing explicitly that is what they are doing. The task, then, is less about building recognition out of nothing than it is about being present and intelligible in the places people already are.

And those places have become increasingly varied. Traditional broadcast—television for many, radio for others—remains a primary point of contact, but a meaningful proportion of the population primarily engages public media through YouTube, social media, and livestreams (RUN Q29). Affirming what most public media professionals presume to be the case, engagement has evolved beyond a single distribution channel, and it is now a matter of showing up wherever attention lives across platforms. Just as important is that the touchpoints people value reaches well beyond content into service. They prize the emergency information and public-service announcements their stations provide, and they welcome stations acting as community infrastructure—offering calendars of local events, highlighting local culture and musicians, convening discussion of local issues, and hosting festivals and gatherings (RUN Q41; Rural Q36). Millennial parents of young children uniquely value early learning content, so much that they support it financially (FUND Q26). Operationally, engagement means being available as a presence in community life, on whatever platform or in whatever space a person may need or prefer, as a source of social and educational support that should be defined more broadly than just “programming” (see *“Engagement” and “Support”*).

This points to the deeper character of engagement: it is relational and values-based, not merely transactional. The people who support public media financially tend to describe themselves as “supporters” rather than “members,” a telling preference since it frames the relationship around shared values rather than dues paid for benefits or fees paid for services (FUND Q18). That values orientation runs deep enough that many donors say they give in support of the mission even though they do not consume much of the content, a sentiment especially pronounced among newer donors from the past year. It is also associated with civic and cultural vitality (FUND Q28). Regular users of public media are markedly more likely to be highly civically and culturally engaged, and interest in community-rooted media concentrates among the civically engaged (RUN Q42,43; Rural Q37,38).

The task is less about building recognition out of nothing than it is about being present and intelligible in the places people already are.

Engagement is strongly correlated with financial support, though this connection is not as linear as often assumed using a traditional marketing funnel model where the unaware become aware, the aware start using, and users start paying. Donors do tend to be among the more engaged: across both radio and television licensees, the highest levels and frequency of engagement show up among major and active multi-year donors—whether measured through radio listening, television viewing, or the wider set of touchpoints (FUND Q19,20). However, engagement and giving are better understood as traveling together and reinforcing one another than as one producing the other. Broad public engagement plainly outstrips the donor base—far more people engage than give—and, on the other side, a substantial share of donors give out of conviction while remaining light consumers of

content (FUND Q28). The relationship even runs in the less-expected direction: sizable portions of new and lapsed donors, and a meaningful number of major and multi-year donors, report engaging more frequently after making a gift, suggesting that the act of support can itself deepen engagement rather than simply follow from it (FUND Q21). Engagement and financial support are mutual; neither reduces to the other.

Awareness

For all the esteem public media holds for itself, it remains largely unknown at the local level, where few can name a station and fewer still understand what it offers. That obscurity is not just a marketing challenge but an operational constraint, because people cannot access, trust, or build a relationship with what they do not know is there.

Public media's obscurity is most acute at the community level, where a station may broadcast for years without ever becoming a name its listeners can bring to mind unaided. When asked to describe public radio in their own words, only about a quarter of Americans offer anything resembling an informed account (RUN Q26). Naming is the largest gap, as seven out of ten Americans cannot recall a single public radio station when asked, and fewer than one in ten correctly name a local one (RUN Q28). The pattern repeats with community radio: Nearly half of rural Americans are unfamiliar with the concept, and among those who claim familiarity, a sizable share cannot actually identify what it is (Rural Q32,33). This is deeper than a branding problem. The identities of local public media organizations have only thinly penetrated the public consciousness, and recognition is shallow where it exists at all.

This matters because awareness is directly related to sentiment. Those who know public media best are consistently the most likely to speak well of it and the least likely to speak ill, and the relationship holds for community radio just as clearly (RUN Q26,28; Rural Q33). The pattern is a reassuring one, since it confirms that the public media mission tends to earn goodwill once it is understood. But it also reveals the opportunity being left on the table. If sentiment rises reliably with understanding, then everyone not yet reached represents a positive relationship that has simply never had the chance to form.

As noted earlier (see *"Engagement"*), the relationship between engagement and awareness is especially telling: People do not need to understand what public media is in order to use it. Nearly four in ten Americans report engaging with a public radio station, yet only a small fraction of that can demonstrate a credible understanding of what public radio is (RUN Q29,30). The same disconnect appears in rural markets, where far more people turn to public or community radio for music and local news than can accurately describe it (Rural Q22,27,32,33). Public media's reach, in other words, is already broader than its recognition. Engagement comes first; people are absorbing content and services without necessarily crediting the institution behind them. Awareness is what would convert that unrecognized use into a relationship people can name and return to deliberately. The bridge to trust runs along similar lines (see *"Trust"*), since those least aware of community radio are also the

least likely to regard any institution as trustworthy (Rural Q10). People will not trust, or support, an institution they cannot identify as the source of what they already value.

Who the unaware are matters for how public media might reach them, because they are not a random cross-section of the public. Compared with the well-acquainted, the least aware skew somewhat more conservative and are notably more racially and ethnically diverse (RUN Q44,51). They are also less civically engaged, less culturally active, and less driven by a wide roster of causes (RUN Q42,43,45; Rural Q37,38). This is not an audience that will be won by appeals to public media's self-understanding as a mission-driven cultural institution, because that framing presumes a familiarity they do not have.

Awareness is what would convert that unrecognized use into a relationship people can name and return to deliberately.

What they do value points the way forward. The least aware are more likely than the current base to find real personal value in public media as a provider of the practical services like emergency alerts, event calendars, and health and safety announcements (*see "Support"*), and considerably less likely to prize content centered on local culture, history, artists, or musicians (RUN Q41) (*see "Enrichment"*). The door into awareness for these audiences is usefulness and personal relevance. Public media becomes known by being present and practical in daily life, and only later, perhaps, appreciated for the cultural work it prizes in itself.

The Signal is therefore an operational one. Awareness in the general public is low and concentrated among those already inclined toward public media, while the unaware are more numerous, more diverse, and reachable mainly through service rather than content. Raising awareness is what turns the engagement people already have into recognized, trusting, and durable relationship, and it will be built, like both of those, close to the ground.

Infrastructure

In every generation, public media has had to decide what infrastructure to build in service of one obligation: reaching the people others would not. Today that mission points less toward towers and bandwidth than toward civic and emotional infrastructure, the connective tissue that convenes communities and binds people to the places they live.

Public media has always been, at least in part, an infrastructure project. And in every generation it has had to decide what infrastructure to build in service of the obligation to reach people the market would not reach on its own. The mission was not defined by a delivery technology, but by who had to be reached and what they needed once reached. When the Public Broadcasting Act established that charge in 1967, it named local community service, outreach, and the interests of particular localities

alongside broadcast itself. Universal access was the mission, and broadcast infrastructure—through towers and transmitters—was the truest expression of this public service.

This mission of universal access has remained relevant today, although the reality behind that logic has shifted. The specific problem broadcast was built to solve (getting a signal within reach of every home) has largely been addressed by other means. Most rural Americans are now connected, with broadband at home and smartphones, smart televisions, and laptops in hand (Rural Q15,16,19). The genuinely unconnected represents a small population, and most of them still find ways to get online (through work, school, libraries, or public wifi) (Rural Q15,17). Behavior has followed the connectivity, as Americans get their news and music across a spread of formats—television and YouTube and streaming alongside radio—and even in rural markets, a third of listeners reach radio through a smartphone app rather than a home or car set (RUN Q17,22; Rural Q29). Tellingly, the people most invested in public media are not asking for more towers; when donors name what stations should prioritize, improving local signal ranks near the bottom (FUND Q27). None of this diminishes the towers or the legacy that built them. It means the universal-access rationale, once the whole of the case, now carries only part of it.

If the broadcast signal and the digital connection are already there, what is missing is a reason to be encountered. This points to a different kind of infrastructure, one that is *civic* rather than *technological*.

The public continues to value public media's role as a guarantor of access. Rural and non-rural Americans alike rate it important that community radio serve people without reliable internet or mobile service, and reach those who may not use other media (Rural Q34). Radio's near-universal reach across ages and incomes is widely recognized, and a majority still regard it as a fallback when other connections falter (Rural Q30). This is a genuine public good, endorsed even by the many who do not personally depend on it, and broadening public media's sense of its own infrastructure does not mean abandoning the minority for whom the signal remains a lifeline. It means recognizing access as one civic function among several rather than the single organizing purpose.

But the Signals coming from the community around Infrastructure present public media with something of a puzzle. Public media is already present across both broadcast and broadband, and still many people never find it (RUN Q26,28; Rural Q32). If the broadcast signal and the digital connection are already there, what is missing is a reason to be encountered. This points to a different kind of infrastructure, one that is *civic* rather than *technological*. If the scarce and valuable thing in 1967 was bandwidth, the scarce and valuable thing now is the connective tissue that binds people to one another and to the places they live. The Signals we have already traced lead here: a deep hunger for connection and community, and a search for joy and shared experience in a moment many find heavy and isolating. These are needs for infrastructure too—the civic, social, and emotional kind—

and they name work public media is unusually equipped to do: being the tissue that binds a community; providing emotional sustenance through enriching, uplifting content; and convening the conversations a community must have about its own future. This creates a new localized relevance for public media, and offers a new kind of universal access.

The Signal, then, is not to trade towers for town squares but to see them as complementary. This is consistent with the notion of “media” as “any technology or artifact that acts as an extension of the human body, senses, or mind (*see Prologue.*) Public media’s legacy is the stewarding of infrastructure in the public interest, and the infrastructure that interest most requires is now civic. Answering that call is not a departure from the mission but its truest continuation.

Discussion

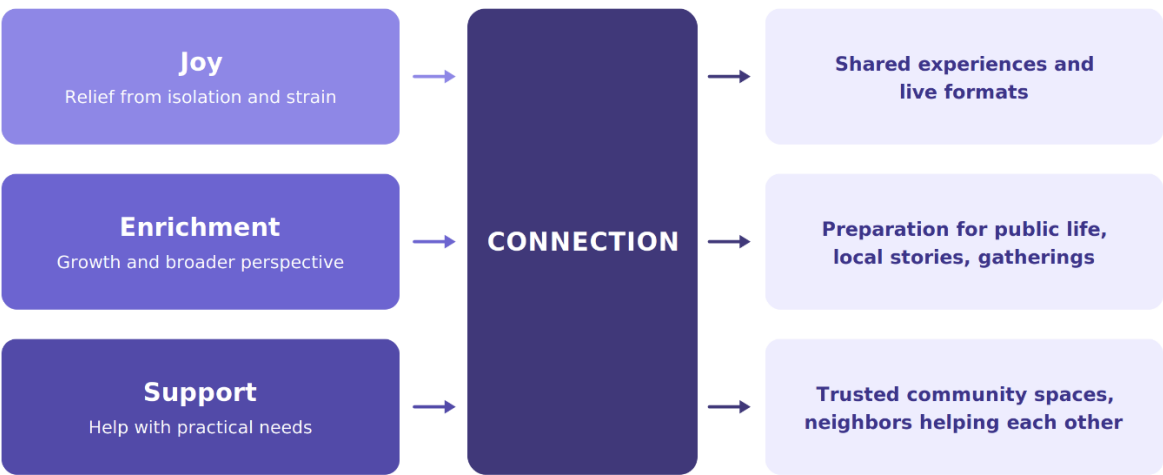
An Integrated Framework

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 considered alongside. There are also ways in which the Signals “amplify” each other: Actions taken to address and adapt to one Signal will directly affect another, which will itself affect another. They are inherently and fundamentally integrated, and should be seen as a kind of *gestalt* (German for “configuration”, referring to an organized whole whose properties cannot be predicted from just looking at its separate parts).

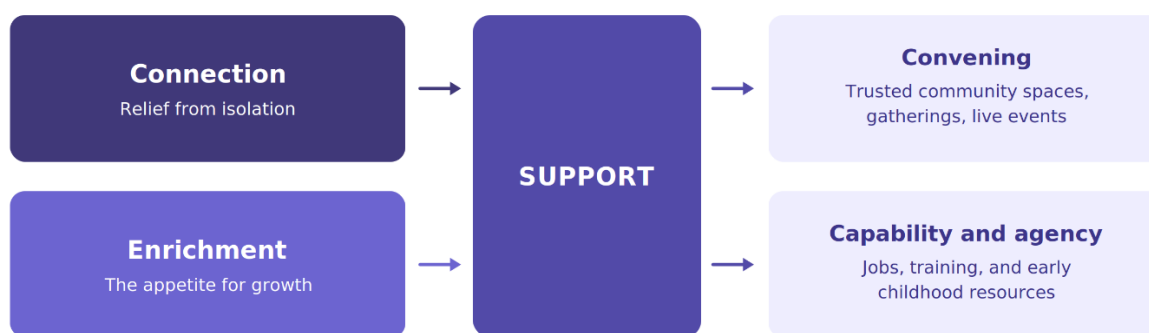
The examples below showcase this for specific pairings within—and across—the two models of the framework (Service model and Operational model).

How the Service Model Signals Work Together

Considered in isolation, **Connection** seems like it can describe its own distinct strategic priority. Americans report wanting more local information and storytelling, more in-person experiences, and more of the companionship media can provide, and public media is well positioned to offer all three. That understanding frames Connection as one more service to deliver. The understanding that emerges when considered alongside other Signals is that Connection is the lens through which to deliver the rest of public media’s services. Paired with **Joy**, the relief people are seeking is social in nature, sought through shared experiences and live formats as much as through uplifting content itself (RUN Q12,21). Paired with **Enrichment**, growth is wanted in communal forms—in being better prepared to participate in public life, in local stories, in gatherings around local issues (RUNQ12,23). Paired with **Support**, practical needs are also addressed communally, with people reporting they have gone looking for trusted community spaces and for ways neighbors might help each other through hard times (RuralQ11,36). In each case, the Signal is not competing with Connection for investment but rather delivered through it.



What **Support** asks a station to provide changes depending on which Signal it is read with. Alongside **Connection**, it asks for convening; Support delivered as convening answers the isolation people report. The assistance people seek includes a trusted community space to share or get local information, ways neighbors can help each other through tough times, and live events where they can be among others (Rural Q11). Community radio is valued in turn for hosting local stories, convening gatherings, and programming that brings people together around local issues (Rural Q36). Alongside **Enrichment**, it asks for capability and agency; Support delivered as capability answers the appetite for growth. Much of the assistance people seek is shaped like learning, including information about jobs, training, and educational opportunities (Rural Q11), and free educational resources for young children are among the services parents most want from public radio (RUN Q41).



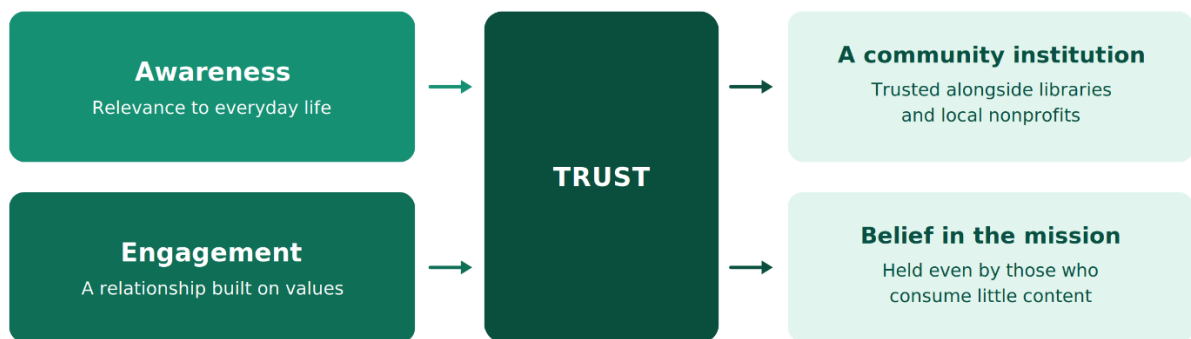
A support service is rarely doing one job. Understood as a menu, the Service Signals invite a station to pick one and fund it. Understood as a model, they instead show that a single investment can answer several needs at once. And it should, because together the Signals describe what communities need and what public media exists to provide.

How the Operational Model Signals Work Together

The operational Signals describe what has to be in place for public media to meet community needs. Awareness, Trust, Engagement, and Infrastructure are enabling conditions, and how they relate to one another shapes what it takes to satisfy any of them.

In isolation, **Awareness** may seem like a simple information gap. Few Americans can both describe local public radio accurately and name a station in their area, which suggests the work is telling more people what public media is so they start using it. The pairings indicate otherwise. Paired with **Engagement**, awareness turns out *not* to be a precondition for use: once public radio is described for them, most US adults actually report engaging with it in the past year and a majority seek it out monthly or more (RUN Q29,30). People are already using something they cannot name. Paired with **Trust**, the unfamiliar turn out to be less likely to consider any organization trustworthy, not only media organizations (Rural Q10), which makes their distrust a posture toward institutions rather than a gap in information. Awareness is therefore less about merely supplying information than about being identifiable and credible. Some people need to be able to name what they are already using, and others need a reason to regard this institution differently than they regard institutions generally.

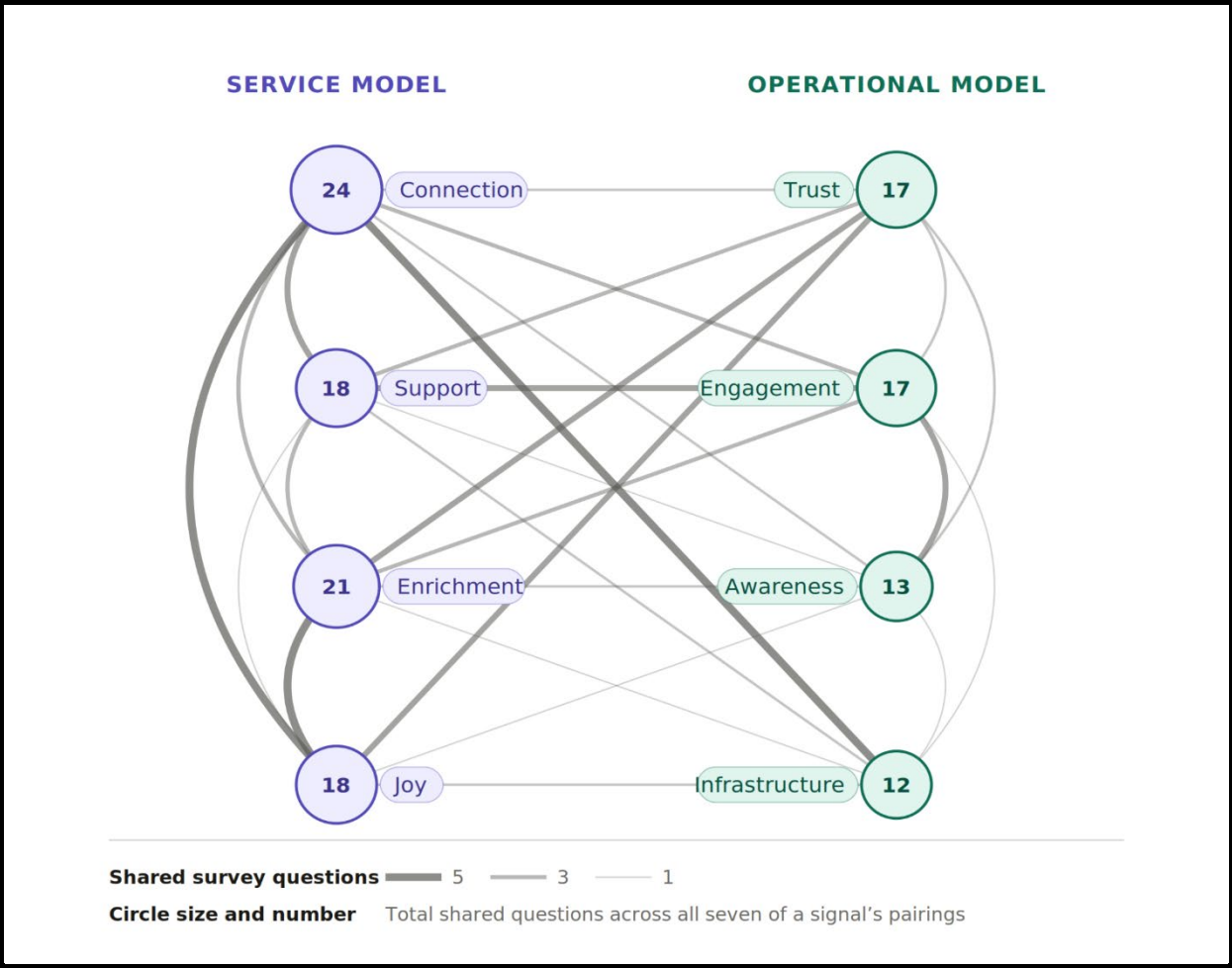
In isolation, **Trust** may seem like a matter of editorial performance, but the pairings show it is also earned outside the station. Alongside **Awareness**, trust depends on what kind of organization a station is taken to be. The same question that shows the unfamiliar distrusting institutions broadly also shows which institutions they do trust, and the ranking favors libraries, local nonprofits, and community organizations over local news outlets, with national news organizations trailing well behind (Rural Q10). A station perceived *as a community organization* starts from a different place than one seen as a newsroom. And alongside **Engagement**, trust exists independent of personal use. Trustworthy news coverage is among the most valued services people want and see public media as fit to provide (RUN Q14,34; Rural Q36). Among donors, that belief persists even when their consumption does not. Nearly all agree public media is an essential part of a free and independent press, and a majority of new donors say they support the mission despite not consuming much of the content (FUND Q28). People sustain a relationship with public media on the strength of what they believe it does, whether or not they use it much.



Taken separately, these Signals point simply toward better messaging and better programming. Taken together, they point towards a more sustainable and valuable kind of *presence*. Both depend on a station being recognized as a particular kind of institution in the community it serves. This is the value of reading the operational Signals as a model rather than a menu. Understood as a system, they show that the same work must satisfy several necessary functions at once.

Service and Operational Models Rely on Each Other

Just as the Signals *within* each of the models (Service and Operational) are mutually dependent, the same is true *across* the models. The Operational Signals are conditions that make service delivery possible; what the Service Signals ask for orients how those conditions get built. The visualization below represents the strength of connection between individual Signals, on the basis of how many questions or datapoints are shared between them as points of evidence to illustrate the Signal. Nearly every Service Signal shares evidence with every Operational one.



Community Signals Network. Each Signal is represented by a node. The number in each node is the sum of its shared questions across all of its pairings, counted once for each Signal it shares them with. Higher numbers indicate Signals whose evidence is more entangled with the rest of the framework (i.e., their evidence comes from questions that are broad and measure multiple Signals at once), meaning they are difficult to address in isolation. Lower numbers indicate Signals measured more uniquely by questions specific to that Signal, not Signals of lesser importance. The width of each line reflects the number of questions shared by that specific pairing. Pairings with less overlap are not necessarily weaker or unrelated. Given the structure of the surveys, they may simply require more indirect inference to see.

Strengths and Caveats

We are confident in the findings from the meta-analysis, and the salience of the resulting Signals Framework, largely because of the depth and richness of the source material. This work is grounded in the datasets of three large-scale quantitative research studies that each sampled tens of thousands of Americans; in aggregate and taken together, this lends statistical confidence that the observed trends are measurable and real. These underlying samples were not only large, but inclusive and representative. Despite the fact that these projects were funded and supported by public media organizations, the focus was very intentionally not on public media audiences (viewers, listeners, donors, subscribers). RUN and Rural in particular had an intentional focus on surveying the general public in communities across the US, to understand the lives and needs of those with varying degrees of connection to public media. Those general public samples involved minimal screening (only omitting minors under age 18) and were actively managed to reflect the demographic and geographic profile of the American public.

In addition to confidence in projecting these findings to the real world, this analysis has the benefit of representing a bottom-up (public-to-institution) narrative of needs, as opposed to a top-down (institution-to-public) approach. We feel that this is more aligned with public media's service mission; any conversation or discourse around the future of the sector should stem first from the public.

At the same time, though, we also see a certain degree of face-validity in the findings based on the extent to which they have been more or less independently "verified" by the perspectives of public media professionals. In an earlier phase of the Community Signals initiative, City Square Associates partnered with APMG to conduct over 40 in-depth interviews with a broad cross-section of thought leaders in the system: local station executives, national institutional leaders, advocates, funders, researchers, and public media adjacent professionals (e.g., leaders from independent non-profit newsrooms). Without any view into the meta-analysis findings, those conversations surfaced or hinted towards many of the Signals (e.g., trust as a finite and irreducible asset, the need for civic infrastructure, the ability and imperative to deliver on support services and community connection). While there was not a complete alignment in the Community Signals and the discussed priorities and anxieties of system leaders, this gives us a sense of optimism that the conditions are ripe for seizing the moment to build relevance and sustainability based on the current needs of the American public.

We do, however, note some caveats and constraints of the analysis. The biggest limitation is that the three original studies were not designed to be combined and analyzed together. They were each born out of very specific objectives and needs, and the corresponding survey questionnaires and samples were designed to meet those objectives. As a consequence, questions that are somewhat related or similar were not necessarily asked in similar ways, reducing the ability to directly compare and synthesize results across studies. This also means there are gaps in learning: for example, many of the unmet needs questions from RUN and Rural were not asked with the donor sample of the FUND study, and many of the public-media specific questions from FUND were not positioned for a general public

audience. And across all studies, there are questions that were simply not asked, but would have contributed greatly to fleshing out the Signals with more depth. For example, we did not include brand-specific Net Trust questions that would cover the national public media brands or compare local and national public media brands with other entities. And importantly, FUND did not—by design—address the needs and behaviors of non-donors in regards to what they want and value from their local stations. Still, the practice of a meta-analysis is intended to look for common ground and trends wherever they may exist, and the shared general focus of these studies on community needs—and how public media may be positioned to deliver on them—offers enough topical depth to be able to say something meaningful.

It is also worth noting that we analyzed and extracted these Signals using data from each study's total sample as evidence. The analytic process did involve some degree of exploration into segments of each sample (e.g., demographic groups from RUN, donor segments from FUND, rural and non-rural respondents), but any observations that emerged from this exercise served to fortify the general themes already developed from the topline samples. For RUN in particular, we also did not include for consideration the large control sample of local station members and constituents (n = 8,517); while these were valuable for local-level analyses in that study, we found value here in leveraging the view into unmet needs from the national general public sample.

Using the Signals

It is important to acknowledge that research can only inform executive decisions and strategy; it can never replace it. Hence, the actual work of Community Signals doesn't end with the completion of the meta-analysis. Returning to the original metaphor, we have tuned our metaphorical rabbit ears to the signals coming from the community. Now we must act.

There are actions to be taken in the present moment—choices to be made, and priorities to be set for the immediate future. Executive leaders and boards of local public media organizations should be assessing the service they provide to their communities right now, and the way in which they provide it, to determine whether and to what extent they align with these Signals (and the ones coming from *their own* communities). What might need to change in the near term if public media in those places is to fulfill its mission sustainably? Independently, and in collaborations with peers in SRG, MMG, and other associations, executive leaders have the ability to ask and answer that question today.

But, as noted in the Introduction, the elimination of federal funding created a major disruption, and that disruption is an invitation to think about how public media writ large should be structured in the future—not just for 5 years, but for the next 65 years. These Community Signals can provide a valuable anchor for this larger discussion about the future. Although the three studies that are the source here don't exhaust the sum total of what US communities are saying, the needs, sentiments, and opinions of the 100,000+ U.S. adults who spoke to us through the research are, for the moment, the best means we have of including the community in this critical discussion.