



STATION RESOURCE GROUP

The American Journalism Project and Local Public Media Organizations

The American Journalism Project is a venture philanthropy dedicated to local news. “By providing course-altering investments and venture support to civic news organizations, AJP aims to build a new public service media that is governed by, sustained by and looks like the public it serves.”

AJP is looking for entrepreneurial nonprofits and promising leaders. “Like other venture investors, we are looking for a return,” AJP CEO Sarabeth Berman told SRG. “Not a financial return to us, but a return in public service impact, in sustainable, mission-focused success.”

The AJP investment model centers on expanding capacity and sustainability at news organizations, not paying journalists, editors, or supporting reporting projects. AJP grants are designed to slingshot organizations forward in generating new revenue, including salaries, technology, and overhead costs.

The direct funding is complemented by what AJP refers to as venture support – ongoing coaching, operational support and strategic guidance focused on sustainability. AJP staff provide much of this support, but also rely on networking among grantees.

More than many funders, AJP outlines a [clear, high-level framework](#) of the organizations they are looking to fund – the vocabulary will be familiar to every SRG member. AJP also has a [detailed rubric](#), drawn from this framework, for assessing the organizations it considered for support.

Inclusion of public media

AJP initially declined to support public media organizations. This spring’s selection of two public media organizations for a “pilot” round thus has some significance. It is clear from multiple conversations that the shift was not without some controversy and, once made, some very deliberate exploration of the field and vetting of station prospects.

SRG was part of the exploration and vetting, along with others in the field. Consultant Mark Fuerst called it “a multi-individual, multi-organizational effort to just shed some light on the strength of the leading stations, their reach and financial strengths, and the trajectory of local news within so many public media organizations.” He and others called out the important role

of Michelle Sribnovich, former General Manager at Detroit's WDET and now a VP at AJP, as an important ambassador and translator in the process.

A key driver moving the public radio investments forward was a grant to AJP from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. "We are very pleased to partner with the American Journalism Project in supporting the growth of local news through public media. We believe public radio stations are well positioned to play a key role in this space," said Michael Murray, president of Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. "With additional funding and strategic guidance from AJP advisers, entrepreneurial stations can become leading sources of local reporting for cities and regions across the country."

The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations listing of the grant highlights the narrative that AJP put forward and that the Foundations found compelling. Almost certainly taken from the AJP proposal to the Foundation, the language is worth a careful read by public media leaders:

"This is an existential moment for the local news industry, as the pandemic and the ensuing economic downturn have led to untold layoffs and accelerated already-steep revenue losses for the local news industry.

"The American Journalism Project envisions a public service media that is governed by, sustained by, and looks like the public it serves. We are reigniting the spark behind local news – a public good and fundamental democratic institution. We are committed to building and growing a dynamic local civic news ecosystem, focused on meeting the information needs of communities across the country.

"Public radio is a well-established pillar of the local news ecosystem, but faces challenges across digital competencies as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in its staffing and audience demographics. With commuter drive times down during COVID-19, public radio faces another challenge in its reliance on broadcast audience-based revenue streams. There is even greater concern about the economic crisis ahead for public radio. This is a critical time to find new innovations in public radio.

"We seek to pilot a program to explore bringing our course-altering grants, sustained operating support, and strategic guidance to innovative local public radio stations."

At Louisville Public Media, AJP saw an opportunity to add to LPM's marketing efforts to promote expanded beats, as well as a campaign to increase major gifts and audience revenue. At WFAE, the focus is on restructuring the revenue team and developing emerging news products and community engagement while continuing to build audiences.

Looking forward

There are many points of alignment between AJP's efforts and what public media leaders believe are the next key steps for their organizations.

Perhaps most important, public media leaders and the AJP team understand that most funds that sustain and grow local journalism will come from the communities that local journalism serves. The funds will arrive as small one-time gifts, sustaining memberships, significant gifts from individuals of substantial means, place-based philanthropies, an array of business sponsors, and creative arrangements with community partners.

The sensibility that SRG and its members share with AJP is to accelerate innovation and effectiveness in generating this revenue, much as public media has done in the broadcast space for decades – with an eye to a larger and more diverse mission-driven journalism eco-system, and to tools and techniques that best fit a wider array of channels and platforms.

When AJP President Sarabeth Berman spoke of the importance of networking among grantees, there is much that public media can bring to the table in proven principles, practices, and business models. There are also opportunities for public media organizations to learn from organizations that are in different places in their own development and that have front-line experience in revenue and service approaches that public media organizations have barely scratched.