The Research-Practice Gap in Journalism:
Why It Exists and How We Can Address It

By the

Journalism Bridging Project

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Table of contents

Executive Summary

Academic researchers can help journalists, publishers and content producers through the massive shifts in their industry. There is, however, palpable disconnect between the academy and those within the field. We call this disconnect the research-practice gap in journalism — and it's a gap that we argue must be bridged.

Written by a passionate group of journalists and academics, this report examines the gap as it exists in the U.S., and proposes ways to bridge it. We imagine a future where evidence, data and peer assessment support decision-making in journalism — whether by reporters, editors or news executives — and where journalism better informs the questions researchers ask.

While academic studies have their place as the *focus* of journalists' reporting, we're concerned with what research can tell us about how journalism should be *practiced and produced.*

Some key takeaways

Why the gap exists

Newsrooms need practical solutions now, while most academics need to publish and get tenure. Most journalism organizations don't have the time or resources to grapple with densely worded academic papers that often fail to highlight the practical implications of their results. These research projects can also have limited accessibility, as the studies are usually published in subscription-based journals that charge up to $1,000 or more for annual subscriptions. Academics can take critical stances in their research, pointing out flaws and blind spots in current practices, instead of providing practical solutions. Such work can be useful but can make journalists feel that researchers are armchair critics rather than partners invested in solving problems. Newsrooms perceive academic researchers as extractive instead of collaborative, sometimes considering their presence more of a hindrance than a help. Plus, academic researchers often lack recent industry experience, which makes them less able to understand and react to current newsroom pressures.

Why it matters

News organizations today face existential challenges including declining revenue, shrinking staffs, public hostility toward journalists and a lack of time for professional development. The crises now facing news organizations are felt at every level, from the beat reporter to the CEO, and at every type and size of newsroom — although the way these challenges are expressed can vary considerably, in terms of the resources organizations have available and the leeway individual employees have to enact change. Because of these roadblocks, media organizations and academics should work together consistently to learn from each other. One example of fruitful collaboration is a University of Wisconsin-led [training program](#), which saw UW-Madison journalism professor Sue Robinson train 22 newsrooms to help them leverage academic insights on engagement, transparency and solutions-oriented journalism. Another effort is the [LIFT Project](#), which

Michigan State professor Danielle Brown created to identify how the media can better address the information needs of Black Americans in the Midwest.

For many newsrooms, "audience research" tends to mean "metrics" — things like page views, time on page, how readers found the website and so on. But academic research on audiences goes a layer further and uses various quantitative and qualitative methods — from surveys and content analysis to focus groups and experiments — that can reveal additional evidence-based insights. Academics also add investigative capacity that is often missing from newsrooms seeking to know more about optimizing workflows and audience reception. But, as alluded to above, academics and newsrooms alike find it difficult to form such partnerships.

Efforts to bridge the gap

The landscape surrounding the gap is complex. It includes news organizations, academic researchers, nonprofit and for-profit research outfits, journalism support organizations and trade publications. Academic centers are bridging the gap in several ways. Examples include Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, which runs fellowship programs inviting academics, journalists and policymakers to develop and publish research impacting the industry, and the Center for Media Engagement (CME) at the University of Texas, which regularly partners with news organizations to conduct field research.

Not all efforts to bridge the gap have worked, but we can also learn from past missteps. For example, CME and API tried creating quarterly research summaries for journalists, but they struggled to find enough papers featuring clear, practical implications.

Lessons from other fields

Journalism is far from the only field that deals with a research/practice divide. We can learn from other fields, including medicine and education. For example, the National Cancer Institute developed the Translational Research Program, which funds and shares results of early clinical trials with practitioners. UpToDate is a database that compiles the latest medical research and provides practical recommendations. In the field of education, The American Institutes for Research connects directly with institutions to train teachers while also working to find relevant innovations to help in the classroom. Meanwhile, Regional Educational Laboratories (REL) train educators on how to read and understand the research in the REL clearinghouse

Ways forward

Bridging the journalism/research gap is possible, but stakeholders must recognize that many of these issues are structural and will require massive systemic shifts. We suggest the following, ranging from "small potatoes" initiatives to "big fish to fry" systemic changes.

The simplest way to bridge the gap is by making sure journalists and academics spend time in the same rooms. Conferences can bring professionals from both worlds together to exchange ideas. Programming could include panels that mix scholars and journalists, summaries of research

insights and ask-me-anythings between journalists and researchers on key topics. Universities can leverage relationships with alumni and neighboring newsrooms to bring research and practice together more.

Research accessibility — in terms of both obtaining and understanding the work — can also help bridge the gap. Researchers should create non-scholarly outputs based on their academic papers, such as "how-tos" or abstracts that summarize the practical ramifications of the research. Publishing the non-peer reviewed piece earlier can help the researcher to make a practical impact before their work is yesterday's news. Academics could write more case studies analyzing how news organizations have solved problems, in a move one might call "solutions research."

The field also needs more knowledge brokers who can understand, synthesize and translate the research to help newsrooms answer particular questions. They could act as matchmakers, connecting a newsroom with a scholar who knows how to research the topic at hand. In addition, journalism could benefit from a research dissemination platform with practical guides, case studies and tools for integrating research into daily journalistic practices. Pairing a custom AI interface with human curation might help make the platform more useful and efficient.

On the more systemic side, tenure reform could incentivize researchers to draw out real-world relevance and help newsrooms with application, rather than always seeking to expand their number of peer-reviewed articles. Both academics and practitioners would benefit from sabbaticals where they can spend significant time in each other's environments. Journals could institute open-access "recommendations" sections on their articles, or carve out a special type of article that prioritizes solutions.

Research-focused professors and profession-based instructors should work together more, and research should inform skills classes, beginning with introductory reporting for undergraduates. Educational organizations such as the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication could revise their competencies to include research comprehension, evaluation and application, helping to inform the curricula of accredited schools.

Finally, funders need to invest in the kinds of projects we have discussed above, and more. Particular funding opportunities that stand out include supporting academic-practitioner partnerships (with payments for newsrooms), paying personnel tasked with implementing research findings in the newsroom, opening up journal access and creating new pathways to connect researchers and newsrooms — especially trying to bring in players beyond the "usual suspects."

The report is organized as follows:
- We break down the reasons why the gap exists.
- Next, we highlight several areas of research that offer practical insights for journalism, pointing to why bridging the gap is so important.

- We then map out the major players in this space to help readers understand the breadth of organizations that either are, or could be, involved in bridging the gap.
- We take a deeper dive into some select efforts to cross the divide, in the field of journalism and in other fields, namely medicine and education.
- Finally, we offer a menu of "ways forward": ways to collaborate in closing the gap. These include everything from small, discrete efforts to big structural changes.

Our hope is that each reader will see at least one suggested solution that sparks something in them: a desire to work collaboratively, to chip in a small bit of time, or even an entirely new, innovative idea for bridging the gap.

In this way, we hope that professionals from all sectors of this community — reporters, editors, news executives, professors, university and departmental leadership, associations, funders and more — **will be able to see the ways we can mend this divide, together.**

The ultimate aim is to improve the news: the information people need to make decisions about their lives. We are hard pressed to think of a higher cause, or a more opportune time than now.

1. Introduction: The research-practice gap in journalism

When Sue Robinson worked as a newspaper reporter, she would sometimes get phone calls from academics whose lines of inquiry were far afield from the reality of the profession.

As one example, one researcher wanted to know how much influence advertisers had over her copy. The answer was none: She abided by the strict separation between editorial content and the business side, known then as The Wall.

So, she said, they were "very disdainful" in the newsroom. "[We] were like, 'You have no idea what you're talking about. You're in an Ivory Tower, and I'm like, here on the ground, trying to get this news out,'" Robinson said.

Now, as a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Robinson is the researcher calling newsrooms. **This time around, she is working to bridge the gap between scholars and journalists.**

What Robinson has realized, in making the big leap, is that the divide between academia and newsrooms is worth bridging. After all, most journalists and journalism researchers are intensely invested in making journalism better.

In fact, over nearly a century, researchers have worked to better understand journalism and its challenges. **Scholars have shed light on how the news frequently perpetuates [racial stereotypes](),**[1] **how "balanced" reporting furthers false claims [about climate change](),**[2] **how [transparency can engender trust](),**[3] **and much more.**

At the same time, the news industry's challenges have deepened into crises, including revenue loss, layoffs, deepening distrust from members of the public, dangers to reporters' safety and governmental incursions on freedom of the press.

Journalism research is no silver bullet. But it does offer crucial insights based on evidence and rigorous peer review, which may support news organizations more effectively than their long-standing practice of following tradition or informed hunches.

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[1] Dixon, T. L., & Linz, D. (2000). Race and the misrepresentation of victimization on local television news. *Communication Research, 27*(5), 547-573.
[2] Boykoff, M. T. (2001). Who speaks for the climate?: Making sense of media reporting on climate change. Cambridge University Press.
[3] Curry, A. L., & Stroud, N. J. (2021). The effects of journalistic transparency on credibility assessments and engagement intentions. *Journalism, 22*(4), 901-918.

What is the gap?

Unfortunately, there is a deep divide between journalism research and journalism practice. **In many ways, this is ironically about poor communication.** That is, scholars' knowledge gains often don't make it into the hands of journalists, or are not expressed in a way that can have an impact. Competing priorities in academia and industry can widen the divide, but at its base the gap consists of a tradition of the two parties failing to communicate. The two sides also tend to highlight differences instead of finding common ground.

The gap is nothing new. As long as there has been research into journalism, there has been a divide between the theoretical and practical. But for much of the 20th century, the gap between researchers and journalists seemed less wide than it is now. For example, after its founding in 1908, the University of Missouri's journalism school encouraged professors performing research to also work in newsrooms. After World War II, many of the applied communication scholars who had worked in the U.S. Office of War Information went on to found university journalism programs that blended theory and practice.

However, changes in academic attitudes and incentive systems began to widen the gap in the decades that followed. In a 2022 Nieman Lab survey, journalists indicated that research does help make journalism better for audiences and society. **But they said researchers often ask the wrong questions, and saw academics as "outsiders" who don't understand how journalism works.**[4]

At its core, the mismatch exists because each field has different priorities. Journalists seek applicable information that will help them figure out how to do their reporting now, as the media environment's sands shift beneath their feet. Academia prioritizes the development of theory and the accumulation of empirical evidence, without a strong emphasis on immediate applicability. The different priorities lead to clashing practices: For example, journal articles usually fail to highlight practical implications, and are often locked behind paywalls.

Yet there is a growing corps of journalism researchers who are working to answer the questions that matter for journalism today, and to do so in a way that can make a difference. In short, they are starting to bridge the gap. These include researchers like Sue Robinson, who gets on the ground with newsrooms, engaging with journalists to train them in engagement methods. Other university-based efforts include initiatives and centers that have found creative ways to publicize research findings and connect with the intended audience — news organizations. For example, the Center for Media Engagement publishes its research as publicly available white papers and reaches out to trade outlets for coverage before its researchers then write up studies for journals. Mark Coddington and Seth Lewis, the professors behind the RQ1 email newsletter, regularly

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[4] https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/07/out-of-touch-but-inspiring-journalists-share-their-thoughts-about-academic-research/

summarize some of the most interesting and useful journalism research for an audience of both academics and non-academics.

How can we strengthen the support for current and emerging researchers like this, and increase the impact of their work? To accomplish this, what are the roles of universities, news organizations and funding bodies?

Why this report

This report seeks to answer these questions and more. We wrote this report with the aim of imagining a better future for journalism: sustainable, robust, serving the needs of all sectors of society. **We imagine a future where evidence, data and peer review support decision-making in journalism, improving the industry and our democracy.**

To take on such an expansive vision, we've necessarily had to limit the report in some ways: To start with, we focus on the problem as it exists in the United States. **In addition, while academic studies also have their place as the *topic* of journalists' reporting, here we're concerned with what research can tell us about how journalism should be *practiced and produced.*** Given that focus, our conversations with academics mostly centered on those who research in the disciplines of journalism and mass communications — though we acknowledge the relevant research that goes on in other fields, from sociology to management. Finally, we focus here on what we see as a key divide: between those who practice or produce journalism, and those who carry out research in academic settings. Occasionally we'll consider the contributions of people in adjacent roles, such as academics who focus on teaching, or researchers outside of academia, but they are not the focus of this report.

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- We then map out the major players in this space to help readers understand the breadth of organizations that either are, or could be, involved in bridging the gap.
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2. Why does the gap exist?

There are many benefits to bridging the gap between academic research and journalism. At the same time, the size of that gap should not be understated. **And even more crucially, to bridge the gap, we must understand how it came to be.**

Differences in expectations

Journalists and researchers often agree on a similar vision: the survival of democracy requires strong, independent journalism. **Yet the incentive structures for journalists and academics set up different expectations for each.**

Newsrooms want research to focus on **timely, practical issues,** and are interested in solutions that can improve a news organization's sustainability and resilience. **And they want those solutions now**, before conditions on the ground change yet again.

As Erica Beshears Perel, director of the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina, says, "It is an emergent situation in terms of the business models, in terms of trust, in terms of just what's happening in newsrooms on the ground. **It is changing really quickly.** That makes research a lot harder to do."

Benjamin Toff, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota, concurs. "There's a sort of pace and urgency… people in the industry want very clear roadmaps." A VP at a multimedia news organization described the problem this way, in a forthcoming scholarly paper for the journal *Journalism*: "You're so busy putting out the news of the day. **It's like, when do you have the time to focus on how you actually do your job?"[5]**

On the flip side, academic journals frequently emphasize theoretical questions and building a body of empirical knowledge, regardless of news organizations' immediate needs. They also **stress methodological rigor, and the benefits of peer review** — the process whereby scholars critique and vet each others' work before publication in journals. As a result, study development from inception to publication often **takes several years.**

Talia Stroud, who leads the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas, explains that there can be immense value in the academic approach, even when its findings appear abstract or incremental: **"Even in the basic sciences, there's research that has no practical purpose at the time you're doing it,** and then you discover later that it really does."

But journalists, understandably, often **find the theoretical focus of much academic research immaterial** when issues plaguing newsrooms need practical solutions. "Journalists… just want to

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[5] Article will be available soon at the [Journalism Bridging Project website](#)

know the bottom line," Stroud says. "And that's not the incentive structure [in academia]. And frankly, that's not the way that journalism faculty are trained."

In addition, the slow production time of academic research can make it less suitable to addressing emerging issues in journalism. By the time an academic idea has time to take root in a newsroom, the moment may have passed for it to be of use. **"[Academics] certainly can't move fast enough for the newsroom,"** says Joy Mayer, director of Trusting News, a support organization that helps newsrooms build reader trust. "Research doesn't move at the speed of news."

On top of this, **research is often so specific that it has limited applicability to other geographies or sectors**, according to participants in the *Journalism* study.[6] For example, when a study outlines techniques for building trust in Finland, can that help a newsroom in the United States? Academics may argue, "sometimes, yes," but often such studies appear to journalists to be irrelevant.

What's more, journalists can be put off by what seems like academics' constant criticism of their profession. There's a reason for this: **Many academics view their role as critical, functioning as a watchdog that focuses on uncovering flaws in journalistic practice.** Academics argue that such work is valuable, because often a problem must be diagnosed before solutions can be sought. However, this critical stance can lead to frustration among journalists who feel that academic research is rarely invested in finding real solutions — or that it fails to highlight the industry's real successes and best practices.

Barriers to accessing research: Paywalls and time

Although academic research is plentiful, **studies tend to be published in subscription-based journals, which place articles behind paywalls.** Journalists don't usually have institutional access, and therefore face difficulty in accessing research findings. Subscriptions to these journals are expensive. Subscriptions to some top periodicals cost more than $1,000 annually. Organizations such as Nieman Lab, Poynter and Journalists' Resource help bridge the gap by summarizing studies and interviewing authors, but they can only cover a small portion of the studies out there.

The volume of research can itself be problematic, presenting another serious barrier for practitioners, according to journalists interviewed for the *Journalism* paper. Newsrooms work at a breakneck pace, especially as belts tighten. Most journalism organizations don't have time to think about big picture ideas or strategic improvements when they are trying to get the paper out that day or get a liveshot ready for the nightly news. This lack of time affects outlets' ability to keep up with what's being published, to read the articles and to figure out how to apply findings to their own practices.

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[6] Article will be available soon at the Journalism Bridging Project website

As one journalist told the *Journalism* researchers, **"When you're in the middle of the weeds, it's extremely hard to get up on the balcony...** We're supposed to be the leaders of this newsroom, figuring out the path forward... [but] we can't even identify the path."

Participants in the *Journalism* study said this problem is compounded because researchers and journals often don't make it clear who their target audience is. **Several said studies may try to appeal to reporters, when only editors or executives have the power to make the recommended changes.** A reporter said, "If no one can show my bosses... if there was evidence that coverage of women's sports was beneficial for XYZ reasons, then we probably would cover more of it. In the absence of that, we're just going to keep doing what we've been doing."[7]

But other participants noted that **managers don't have the time to read or implement research, either.** An editor at a digital news outlet said, "It is harder to fit things like this into my day, now that I have like 18 competing demands."

Mayer points out that coming from a journalism support organization, her whole approach is to present newsrooms with actionable advice. **"And still it's feeling harder and harder to get newsrooms' attention for the 15 minutes** it would take to read a post about [for example] five things you need to do differently with your election coverage this season."

The time spent on this kind of strategic work takes money away from newsroom salaries, Toff points out. "And I think researchers themselves are so inundated with, there's just too much to read." Mayer mentions that the information onslaught affects her, too. **"I'm like, dude, *I* don't always read the research."**

TL;DR: Academic research formats

That lack of time clashes directly with the way journalism research is written. As with much social science research, journalism papers can be long, often around 8,000 or 9,000 words. The typical format of a research article doesn't help non-academics to easily identify the most important takeaways. **By journalists' standards, these articles "bury the lede."** While journal articles typically feature abstracts, even these don't often focus on practical implications. What's more, academic jargon and theoretical terms in these publications can hinder a journalist's understanding of research.

Perel says that parallel to this, there is a "discoverability" issue. "There are so many resources that have been published over the last, who knows how long, about how to grow your audience, how to best practices for starting a newsletter, all of this type of thing. **And they get published and then they just sit on a website somewhere and no one ever goes back to them."**

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[7] Article will be available soon at the [Journalism Bridging Project website](#)

Envisioning a way forward, she says, will require the academic world to re-think its publishing approach, much like many newsrooms are doing today. "(Some) journalists are (still) producing news according to formats and ideas of journalism that existed 20, 25 years ago, and may or may not be super matched up to what people want to read. **Similarly, researchers may be producing research in forms and in ways that are not super interesting or relevant to the practitioners.**

"If you want a specific audience to find it useful, you need to build it with that in mind," Perel says.

Challenges in collaboration

Many in this arena say researchers can best support journalists when the two sectors act collaboratively — for example, when academics turn to newsrooms to see what questions they need answered. **At the same time, the busy nature of newsrooms and journalists further hinders collaboration with academics.** Newsrooms can sometimes perceive academics as extractive rather than collaborative, and as disconnected from the practical realities of the industry.

This perception is exacerbated by some academics' lack of recent newsroom experience, which leads to a disconnect in understanding the practical barriers journalists face. "Researchers do not seem to know much about journalism," one journalist told scholars conducting a survey for [Nieman Lab](https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/07/out-of-touch-but-inspiring-journalists-share-their-thoughts-about-academic-research/).[8]

Mayer concurs: **"[The partnership] tanks pretty quickly if they ask for things that aren't practical... o**r this might apply to other kinds of newsrooms, it would never apply to my kind of newsroom.

"Journalists just don't have any tolerance for that at all."

Cultural differences

Finally, some of journalists' skepticism about academia might be ascribed to newsroom culture. **There's a long history of journalists doing things a certain way because "this is how it's always been done."** Mayer says, "I feel like journalists really struggle to make time for emerging best practices or evolution on things that feel softer or things that compromise their autonomy. They think they've got it covered, their coverage is fine." An editor in the *Journalism* study explained that many newsrooms are "automatically dismissive" of academics, due to journalists feeling that they "know everything they need to know."

David Bornstein, co-founder and CEO of the Solutions Journalism Network, describes how he's seen this resistance in action. Based on a robust body of research, he argues that engagement around an issue doesn't get bolstered by simply beating the drum about the issue's importance.

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[8]https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/07/out-of-touch-but-inspiring-journalists-share-their-thoughts-about-academic-research/

"The climate crisis, people are paralyzed, people don't know what to do about it," Bornstein says, by way of example. **Yet, he recalls that challenged by this research, many journalists stiffen their resistance and cling to the old ways of doing things**. "Journalists will say, 'We have to keep telling them how serious it is, otherwise they'll get complacent...' Disengagement is something that journalists will say, well, they should just toughen up and pay attention."

Changes afoot?

At the same time, our interviewees noted that journalism culture seems to be changing. With the status quo no longer working, journalists are becoming more open to new approaches. And academic research — done right — offers an evidence-based way to think differently. **"I just got off a call with a Zoom room full of journalists and they said, what impact do newsrooms see when they do these things? They're hungry,"** Mayer shared. "They need to be able to take back to their boss what exactly, what precise benefit will we see if we take time to engage with the strategies you're telling us to use?"

Overall, the reasons for the research-practice gap in journalism can be summarized as:

1. **Restricted access**: Paywalled research is out of reach.
2. **Busy newsrooms**: Not enough time to read or collaborate with researchers.
3. **Format and relevance**: Research is too dense and lacks practical implications.
4. **Perception of academics**: Academics seen as extractive, out of touch.
5. **Training needs**: Newsrooms don't consider academic training as practical.
6. **Different deliverables**: Journals focus on theory. Practitioners need immediate takeaways.
7. **Incompatible timelines**: Academic research takes years.
8. **Coverage gaps**: Research may not cover relevant sectors or geographies.
9. **Different interests**: Academics and journalists prioritize different topics.
10. **Role of criticism**: Academics as critics can conflict with practical problem solving.

3. Why it matters

Newsrooms today face existential challenges: Falling revenues. Harassment and intimidation. The rise of anti-media sentiment. To many journalists, journalism research seems to be removed from their day-to-day realities. While that is often true, our interviewees argue there is plenty of grounded research that fruitfully informs, or could inform, how journalists operate. **And, they say, the time for drawing researchers and journalists together into more collaborative work is now.**

How research can help

One area where researchers have had an impact is engaged journalism.

Engaged journalism can be understood as journalism that makes a concerted effort to connect meaningfully with communities through practices that include listening to community feedback, collaborations with audiences, and providing the opportunity for them to interact with content.[9]

University of Wisconsin's Sue Robinson, a former journalist, **recently found that such work has real impacts.** She engaged 22 newsrooms in a nine-month training to transform political coverage, called Advancing Democracy. The course is a collaboration between Trusting News, Hearken, the Solutions Journalism Network and a mediation training organization called Good Conflict.

Participating newsrooms that were trained in numerous engagement methods, along with related practices such as increased transparency with audiences and solutions-oriented journalism, ultimately changed their approach to coverage by applying what they've learned. After the training, the news outlets published less "horse-race coverage" based on polls and pundits discussing which candidate was likely to win. **The newsrooms instead produced more stories based on what readers considered the most important issues, a practice NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen refers to as "not the odds, but the stakes."[10][11]**

In another example, Michigan State professor Danielle Brown is using research on Black Americans' relationships with the news to rethink information provision in several Midwest states. She says, **"The LIFT Project... really centered the question, what solution could we create that would actually be meaningful for Black communities?"** To that end Brown has been surveying community members to learn their information gathering habits. Now she is working to develop a network of "trusted messengers" in those communities, including not just journalists but religious leaders, coaches, activists, youth program leaders and more.

Building community trust

Andrea Wenzel, an associate professor at Temple University and another former journalist, also **sees this area of research as one where she can work with newsrooms in a meaningful way.** "I feel like I've found at least small ways to be in conversation with journalists who are doing that kind of work," she says.

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[9]https://medium.com/the-impact-architects/towards-a-useful-typology-of-engaged-journalism-790c96c4577e

[10]https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/what-are-the-impacts-of-newsroom-training-on-reimagining-political-coverage-2fe1e125432d

[11] https://x.com/jayrosen_nyu/status/1632441109661077504?lang=en

Wenzel cites community journalism outlet [Germantown Info Hub](#) as an example of that meaningful work.[12] The project grew from her research into institutional mistrust[13] of news outlets — mistrust that can stem from practices like "parachute journalism," where reporters from outside an area swoop in to cover a story without proper context, making members of that community feel misrepresented and unheard. Wenzel found that residents of Germantown, a neighborhood in Philadelphia, wanted a central space to better connect the work of community groups in the area. **In response, researchers and community members launched the Info Hub, whose website circulates stories from the local communication network, and which collaborates with local media partners to share ideas.**

Wenzel argues that research is a crucial bedrock to support well-informed societies and communities. **"I think it's critical to bridge the gap," she says.**

Joy Mayer, a former journalist who leads the journalism support organization Trusting News, says **knowledge of how people interact with the news and what news they consume is substantially greater than it used to be.**

Journalism organizations, news outlets and academic researchers all have interest in audience research. Benjamin Toff, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, studies audience issues including news trust and news avoidance. **Toff says he finds journalism organizations are quite interested in this kind of research, because they need to understand audiences beyond metrics data and reader surveys.** "It's an area where as researchers, you can fill a gap."

Getting newsroom buy-in

While journalism researchers explore a number of topics that might benefit practitioners, not all newsrooms are welcoming of this research. **Journalists, editors and news executives can be resistant to accepting findings that imply a criticism of existing practices, or that seem challenging to implement.**

Brown has personally experienced this tension while researching the protest paradigm: the tendency of news outlets to focus on the more sensationalistic aspects of public protests — like occasional violence — instead of covering the underlying and enduring grievances that prompted the action.

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[12] https://germantowninfohub.org/
[13]https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/mistrust-and-local-news-urban-and-suburban-philly.php

Protest paradigm research was not well received by newsrooms until recently, Brown says**. For example, she recalls how in 2017, a newsroom resistant to her recommendations insisted her data must be incorrect.** George Floyd's murder in 2020 and the protests that followed made some newsrooms reconsider how they reported, but change wasn't immediate. Local coverage following the killing kept to the traditional blueprint of highlighting violence, Brown says. **"It was really devastating to me because I want to talk about this thing over and over again like I want a hole in my face."**

Since 2020, Brown says, "while it's not a revolutionized paradigm, we have seen newsrooms be able to make significant shifts very quickly in their coverage and in their language."

Brown says academic research brings a number of benefits to newsrooms, including resurrecting a near-extinct newsroom practice: writing post-mortems. **"We're not on deadlines like [journalists] are on deadlines,"** she says. **"We can do the work that they did in the days of the past, when they had more time."**

Renewed interest in collaboration — despite the challenges

The researchers we interviewed noted that bridging the gap is a challenge. The economic realities of the news industry can have repercussions for research. **"The news organizations that I've collaborated with on research, if they have a change of staff, then that relationship might become more fraught,"** says Wenzel. Without an infrastructure to support collaborative projects that change culture or practices, "it's not always sustainable."

David Bornstein, CEO of the journalism support organization Solutions Journalism Network, says that in some ways, it's become more difficult for newsrooms to integrate research. **"It's very hard to get to create change when news organizations are very much on the defensive,"** he says. Shrinking staff, low revenues and unfavorable public opinion of the scholarly profession make some practitioners hesitant to participate in research initiatives.

At the same time, researchers argue that current conditions for newsrooms create more impetus to draw in and apply research.

Toff points to local news funding initiative Press Forward, philanthropic support and nonprofit models as positive signs for those interested in bridging the divide. He says, **"I think there's a lot more interest in collaboration and bringing in researchers.** Some of it is coming from funders who want to make sure that the resources they're putting towards supporting journalism aren't just going to be wasted. And so they want to be able to be sure that there's some effort to measure impact."

Robinson says collaboration is crucial in this historical moment, a "critical juncture" for journalism and democracy itself, as concern over journalism's potential demise grows. "When

you do not have a shared set of facts, you have a split public sphere," she says. When one half of the country believes one fundamental idea and the other half believes a completely different fundamental idea, she says, "Nobody can talk to each other."

Addressing such existential issues, according to Robinson and others, requires that journalists and researchers talk to each other.

11 ways it matters

Academic researchers cover journalism from a multitude of angles, and their work can benefit newsrooms in a number of ways. To sample the different flavors of practically oriented journalism research, we pored over the last few issues of RQ1, a newsletter produced by professors Mark Coddington and Seth Lewis. These reveal a huge variety of research topics, including:

Topic	Example
Audience habits and preferences	"Next Gen News: Understanding the audiences of 2030," by FT Strategies and the Knight Lab, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University
Business models, revenue, strategy	"The burden of subscribing: How young people experience digital news subscriptions," by Marianne Borchgrevink-Brækhus and Hallvard Moe
Dynamics and norms of new platforms and technologies	"What news is shared where and how: A multi-platform analysis of news shared during the 2022 U.S. Midterm elections," by Christine Sowa Lepird, Lynnette Hui Xian Ng, Anna Wu and Kathleen M. Carley
Equity, justice, and underserved populations	"What makes for robust local news provision? Structural correlates of local news coverage for an entire U.S. state, and mapping local news using a new method," by Sarah Stonbely
Ethics, law, and the role of the press	"Tale of two requesters: How public records law experiences differ by requester types," By A. Jay Wagner & David Cuillier

Influences on news content	["The new news barons: Investment ownership reduces newspaper reporting capacity,"](#) by Erik Peterson and Johanna Dunaway
Media management and training	["'Worse than the harassment itself.' Journalists' Reactions to Newsroom Social Media Policies,"](#) by Jacob L. Nelson
Mis/disinformation, bias, and news literacy	["'Fair and balanced;: What news audiences in four countries mean when they say they prefer impartial news,"](#) by Camila Mont'Alverne, Sumitra Badrinathan, Amy Ross Arguedas, Benjamin Toff, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Nielsen
Newsroom cultures, values, and journalists' roles	["The epistemic injustice in conflict reporting: Reporters and 'fixers' covering Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine,"](#) by Johana Kotišová
Partisanship and polarization	["Politicizing the pandemic? Partisan framing of the early COVID-19 pandemic was infrequent, particularly in local newspapers,"](#) by C. Daniel Myers
Reporter safety and working conditions	["Acutely precarious? Detecting objective precarity in journalism,"](#) by Jana Rick

4. The landscape: Who does the gap affect? Who might help bridge it?

To move towards solutions for bridging the gap, we need to consider the players in this space. That starts with understanding the news industry and academia — **but there isn't simply a black-and-white divide with research on one side and news organizations on the other.** There are players who sit in a gray area, or who do adjacent types of work that could be turned creatively towards gap-bridging — or who are working to bridge the gap already.

The Journalism-Research Landscape

1 News Industry

Newspapers 6000 in U.S. 1200 daily
550 local digital news outlets
800 local TV stations
225 local public broadcast stations

The industry is shrinking, leaving many news organizations without the necessary resources to produce substantial research and development.

35.7% decline in full-time journalists from 2003 to 2023

26.6% the proportion of journalists working in digital media fields

2500 journalists working in public media

Research
Internal market research on audiences has been the **most commonly practiced form of research** by news organizations, though much of that work has shifted toward **understanding of digital analytics.**
Use of research ranges from deep and detailed **knowledge of audience behavior** at major news organizations to **basic understanding of digital analytics or subscriber demographics** at many smaller ones.

Boat = weaker connections (more individual, more ad-hoc)

Bridge / road = stronger connections (more systemic, more frequent)

Academia 2

1000 Peer-reviewed academic journal articles about news published each year in **journalism and communication-related journals.**
Other relevant disciplines: sociology, psychology, human-computer interaction, management, political science

The cost of many journal subscriptions - which puts articles out of reach for most newsrooms. **$1000** or more

Examples of publicly-oriented research centers
Center for Media Engagement, University of Texas at Austin
Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University
Agora Journalism Center, University of Oregon
Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina
Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University
Minnesota Journalism Center, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Examples of research translations and collations
RQ1 – A newsletter about recent journalism research written by Mark Coddington of Washington and Lee University and Seth Lewis of the University of Oregon
Research List: Solutions Journalism and Constructive Journalism a database maintained by Kyser Lough, University of Georgia

5 Trade Publications

These are publications written for those working in the news industry. There is crossover with support organizations, with Poynter also offering a robust media news site, and API a newsletter.

Some trade publications (like *Columbia Journalism Review, Nieman Lab* and *Journalists' Resource*) frequently publish summaries of research or articles by researchers, who adapt from their work. Some (like *Editor & Publisher, Digiday* and *Mediaite*) cover research more rarely, **focusing more closely on news and insights from within the news and publishing industries** themselves.

3 For- and Non-Profit Researchers
These organizations typically make research publicly available, aiming to reach the public as well as decision-makers in various fields. These organizations are influential, but there are few of them. **Examples include the Pew Research Center and Gallup.**

4 Journalism Support Organizations
These organizations (including both nonprofits and for-profit consultants) work directly with news organizations **to provide training, coaching, consulting and support.** Some (like Trusting News and the Solutions Journalism Network) focus on particular issues news organizations face. Some of these organizations conduct or commission research about the news; some draw substantially on others' research, and others draw only lightly on research.
Examples:
American Press Institute | Institute for Nonprofit News | Impact Architects | Maynard Institute for Journalism Education | OpenNews | Poynter Institute | Solutions Journalism Network | Trusting News

The news industry

When we talk about the American news industry, we are discussing an entity that encompasses a variety of organizations. **In planning and writing up their work, researchers must take stock of the diversity of the sector,** in terms of for- and non-profit structures, ownership and medium (print/online vs. broadcast vs. digital native). The challenges faced by, for example, a legacy newspaper owned by an investment firm, differ greatly from those of a public radio station or a

small nonprofit news site. And the questions on the minds of reporters are not the same as those considered by editors or executives.

Snapshot:
- 6,000 newspapers in US[14]
- 1,200 daily (20%)[15]
- 800 local TV stations[16]
- 550 local digital news outlets[17]
- 225 local public broadcast stations (mostly radio)[18]

The industry is shrinking, leaving many news organizations without the necessary resources to produce substantial research and development.

35.7%: decline in full-time journalists,
- 70,000 in 2003
- 45,000 in 2023[19]

26.6%: the proportion of journalists today working in digital

2,500: journalists working today in public media[20]

Internal market research on audiences has been the most commonly practiced form of research by news organizations,[21] though much of that work has shifted toward understanding of digital analytics.[22]

Use of research ranges from deep and detailed knowledge of audience behavior at major news organizations[23] to basic understanding of digital analytics or subscriber demographics at many smaller ones.

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[14] The State of Local News Project, 2023.
https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2023/report/#executive-summary
[15] The State of Local News Project.
[16] Pew Research Center Local TV News Fact Sheet, 2023.
https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/local-tv-news/
[17] The State of Local News Project.
[18] The State of Local News Project.
[19] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes273023.htm
[20] The State of Local News Project.
[21] For a history of news organizations' use of market research, see Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom*, 1993. https://cup.columbia.edu/book/when-mbas-rule-the-newsroom/9780231080484
[22] See, for example, a 2016 Reuters Institute report on newsroom analytics research:
https://www.niemanlab.org/2016/02/the-next-step-moving-from-generic-analytics-to-editorial-analytics/
[23] See, for example, The New York Times' Data and Insights Group:
https://www.nytco.com/careers/data-and-insights-group/

Academia

About 1,000 peer-reviewed academic journal articles about news are published each year in journalism and communication-related publications. Much of this research is behind expensive paywalls. Research with implications for the newsroom can be found in the fields of journalism and mass communications, but also in sociology, psychology, political science, human-computer interaction, management and more.

Some academic research is intended to be directly applied by news organizations, but other research is primarily intended to develop theory in academic disciplines.

Many academics studying journalism are tenured or tenure-track professors. They are usually paid in part to do research, but also to teach and do administrative work, constraining their time and resources for research.

The tenure system rarely rewards professors for public outreach or translating their work for journalists, and tenured professors often maintain a focus on reaching academic audiences (see Why the Gap Exists section).

Other journalism faculty are instructors or professors of the practice, whose jobs are usually more teaching-focused, but these individuals can do research too. Too often, tenure-track professors and professors of the practice are siloed from one another. Journalism faculty frequently regard teaching and research as separate spheres rather than key endeavors that strengthen each other.[24]

Similarly, journalism students are often overlooked as part of this landscape. But they can be well-placed to learn about journalism research and apply it as they begin careers. Fewer students may be entering the news industry, however, because of the shrinking field.

Researchers and centers in academia increasingly fall under a model we call "publicly oriented research." Like the non-academic researchers we list, these researchers make many of their findings public. They also often work with news organizations to determine research topics. Examples include:
- [Center for Media Engagement](), University of Texas at Austin
- [Center for Cooperative Media](), Montclair State University
- [Agora Journalism Center](), University of Oregon
- [Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media](), University of North Carolina
- [Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy](), Harvard University
- [Minnesota Journalism Center,]() University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

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[24] McDevitt, M. (2000). Teaching civic journalism: Integrating theory and practice. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 55(2), 40-49.

A few researchers are taking on the work of translating and collating. Examples:
- RQ1 – a newsletter about recent journalism research, written by Mark Coddington of Washington and Lee University and Seth Lewis of the University of Oregon
- Research List: Solutions Journalism and Constructive Journalism – a database maintained by Kyser Lough, University of Georgia

Non- and for-profit research organizations

These organizations typically make research publicly available, aiming to reach the public as well as decision-makers in various fields. **These organizations are influential, but there are few of them.** Examples include the Pew Research Center and Gallup.

Journalism support organizations

These organizations (including both nonprofits and for-profit consultants) work directly with news organizations to provide training, coaching, consulting and support. Some (like Trusting News and the Solutions Journalism Network) focus on particular issues news organizations face. Some of these organizations conduct or commission research about the news; some draw substantially on others' research, and others draw only lightly on research.

Examples:
- American Press Institute
- Institute for Nonprofit News
- Impact Architects
- Maynard Institute for Journalism Education
- OpenNews
- Poynter Institute
- Solutions Journalism Network
- Trusting News

Trade publications

These are publications written for those working in the news industry. There is crossover with support organizations, with Poynter also offering a robust media news site, and API a newsletter.
- Some trade publications (like Columbia Journalism Review, Nieman Lab and Journalists' Resource) frequently publish summaries of research or articles by researchers, who adapt from their work
- Some (like Editor & Publisher, Digiday and Mediaite) cover research more rarely, focusing more closely on news and insights from within the news and publishing industries themselves

Examples:

- Columbia Journalism Review
- Nieman Lab
- Journalists' Resource
- Editor & Publisher
- Digiday
- Mediaite

5. Past and present efforts

The research-practice gap in journalism is arguably as old as the journalism academy itself. **But early academic journalism institutions demonstrated a surprising amount of cohesion between research and practice.** In the first 20 years after its 1908 founding, the University of Missouri journalism school hired industry professionals and encouraged them to do research. Professors created classroom materials based on industry observations instead of relying on textbooks, and they were encouraged to work in newsrooms during their free periods to improve their journalism skills.[25] In addition to such practicality, the school encouraged the production of original knowledge.

During World War II, seminal communication scholarship often took an applied approach. Legends of the field such as Paul Lazarsfeld, Kurt Lewin, Howard Laswell, Theodore Adorno and Wilbur Schramm carried out research for the Office of War Information, drawn by the leadership of CBS News Radio commentator and Rhodes Scholar Elmer Davis.[26] And after the war, many scholars from the office moved to the Midwest, where they **created journalism programs that blended theory and practice,** in keeping with the ethos of land-grant universities.[27]

However, in the intervening decades, the **gap between journalism research and practice grew,** due in large part to the misaligned incentives between the two professions (see Why does the gap exist? for more).

Now, we seem to have entered a third era: one in which stakeholders in this landscape explicitly recognize the problem of a research-practice gap, and work to address it.

"There are a lot of efforts going on," says Andrea Wenzel.

In this section, we provide a few in-depth examples of current institutions that aim to bridge the journalism/research gap.

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Housed within the Harvard Kennedy School, the center aims to create a space where academic work has an impact beyond the university sphere. **At the center, journalists and academics share space, teach classes and participate in public events equally.** The center runs several research

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[25] Williams, S. L. L. (1929). *Twenty years of education for journalism: A history of the School of Journalism of the University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA.* EW Stephens Publishing Company.
[26] Pyo, J.Y. & Usher, N. Recovering the Midwestern ethos of journalism research. In Bélair-Gagnon, V., & Usher, N. (Eds.). *Journalism Research That Matters.* Oxford University Press.
[27] Pyo, J.Y. & Usher, N. Recovering the Midwestern ethos of journalism research. In Bélair-Gagnon, V., & Usher, N. (Eds.). *Journalism Research That Matters.* Oxford University Press.

programs with a permanent academic staff, investigating topics like documentary film development and the future of news. Scholars can publish their research as articles in the center's online publications or create products like podcasts or videos.

Example gap-bridging initiatives include:

- **[Journalist's Resource](#), a trade publication that helps journalists use and report academic information**. It includes a section on media with a critical analysis of journalistic work. Journalist's Resource was one of the 12 selected projects for the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education.
- In a similar vein, the center created the [Misinformation Review](#), which director Nancy Gibbs describes as a "first of its kind" peer-reviewed journal. **This journal stands out for its fast pace, addressing urgent matters in an accessible way for researchers and journalists.**
- **The center is also known for its fellowship programs, inviting academics, policymakers and journalists to develop research, which is later published openly to impact the industry.** For example, one past fellow from 2021 is the journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa. The center is currently working on the "Leaders in Practice" program, which offers shorter residencies for industry professionals and researchers to address pressing topics in journalism.

Center for Media Engagement

Mission: The [Center for Media Engagement](#), housed at the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas, is dedicated to developing a media system that encourages members of the public to "understand, appreciate, and participate in the democratic exchange of ideas," often by working closely with journalists and other public and private entities.[28] **CME regularly partners with news institutions in its research, publishes its research as publicly available reports, reaches out to trade and popular press outlets for coverage of the work and periodically conducts workshops with journalists.**

Example gap-bridging initiatives include:

- Regularly partnering with news organizations to conduct field research. For instance, researchers partnered with City Bureau to study the Chicago media landscape and with 24 Gannett-owned newsrooms and Coral by Vox Media to **test what happens when newsrooms turn off their digital comment sections.**
- CME received funding from the Knight Foundation for the Connective Democracy Initiative, **designed to bridge the deep divides facing U.S. communities.** This funding has produced research collaborations with journalism organizations, such as Resolve Philly.
- **CME director Talia Stroud also gave us a great example of a gap-bridging initiative that *didn't* work so well.** When CME and API tried to create quarterly research summaries for

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journalists, they struggled to find enough papers with clear, practical implications — raising an important point to address in future initiatives.

Pew Research Center

Our final case study isn't an academic center — but, tellingly, its lifecycle included an academic phase. The [Pew Research Center](#) is a nonprofit self-defined as a "fact tank" dedicated to "[informing] the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world." Pew's research on journalism falls under the News Habits and Media section, with projects studying how audiences and journalists see news and the media industry. The center was founded in 1990 by the Times Mirror Company, and from 1997 to 2006, the project's journalism work was affiliated with the Columbia School of Journalism. In 2011, the Pew Charitable Trusts consolidated research work on various topics, including The Project for Excellence in Journalism, under the independent nonprofit Pew Research Center.

Although no longer with a foot in academia, Pew's efforts give us examples that we can look towards as we seek to bridge the academia-newsroom divide. Pew's gap-bridging initiatives include:

- The Committee of Concerned Journalists (1997-2011), which invited journalists and academics to discuss the profession's future. **The Committee offered training workshops to over 7,000 journalists across the country.**
- The [Elements of Journalism,](#) **one of the most cited books on journalistic principles and taught worldwide**, by Tom Rosentiel and Bill Kovach.
- A book for journalists—[We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too (2007)](#)—was published based on a **five-year study on television news with analysis of content from 150 TV stations and interviews with nearly 2,000 journalists.** The News Coverage Index and The News Interest Index, which monitored media coverage and interest in news weekly, came out of the same study.
- **The annual [State of the News Media Report](#)** examines news funding and consumption, providing resources to journalists based on their challenges, and is widely anticipated by the industry.

6. Lessons from other fields

Here we detail what journalism can learn from other fields where professionals have endeavored to bridge research and practice — namely, medicine and education. While the incentive structures in these fields are very different, they share with journalism a grounding in truth, accountability and public service. In this section we explore the robust systems medicine and education have created for continuous learning, application of research and professional development.

From translational research and tailored support to practical application

In medicine, translational research seeks to bridge the gap between laboratory findings and clinical applications in an attempt to improve patient care. For instance, the National Cancer Institute's [Translational Research Program](#) funds and shares the results of early clinical trials.

Educational researchers contextualize their findings to address local needs. Organizations like the [American Institutes for Research](#) (AIR) tailor their support to fit different educational environments, ensuring that interventions are relevant and effective by linking their work to classroom practices, policy making and structural change. One example is its work on "[Teacher Preparation and Performance](#)," in which AIR connects directly with institutions training teachers to understand their scope and function. Then, the organization provides assistance — such as by creating more pathways to teacher education or finding opportunities to make professional development more affordable. Journalism researchers can follow this model to similarly provide recommendations and a range of effective practices tailored to diverse newsroom contexts.

Knowledge infrastructures and accessibility

Both medicine and education have established knowledge infrastructures that facilitate the dissemination and practical use of research. **Medical professionals use databases like [UpToDate](#), which compiles and organizes the latest scholarly research, providing practical treatment paradigms and recommendations**. Similar online resources exist for a number of subspecialties, which means practitioners can easily find relevant developments in their practice areas.

Educational institutions have also developed platforms like the [Regional Educational Laboratories](#) (RELs) to translate research into practice by partnering policymakers with practitioners. Working with key education stakeholders is essential to the REL program's success, as it involves local, regional and state education leaders to design, execute and evaluate activities meant to improve long-term student outcomes. This focus on applied research, training, coaching, technical support and dissemination to address high-priority needs ensures effective

communication and supports applying evidence-based practices. RELs even train educators on how to read and understand the research they include in their clearinghouse.

In both fields, knowledge brokers support this infrastructure. **Knowledge brokers facilitate the transfer of research findings to practice by translating complex research into user-friendly formats and helping practitioners implement new strategies.** For instance, in medicine, knowledge brokers help to ensure that the latest research findings are integrated into clinical practice. This is done through in-house professional development sessions and large educational organizations bringing scholars and practitioners together through conferences, workshops and materials. In education, the National Council of Teachers of English has a research series geared toward practitioners. In an example closer to home, the Journalism Education Association solicits peer-reviewed research for their teacher-centered quarterly magazine.

Professional development and pre-service learning experiences

Medical and educational professionals work in a culture of continuous learning, one where they regularly attend training sessions, professional learning communities and conferences. It is a culture that ensures practitioners are up to date on knowledge and best practices. **Both fields link professional development to credentialing and understanding changing and evolving industry practices.** Organizations such as the American Medical Association and the National Education Association provide publications, host conferences, build certificate opportunities and serve as places where medical professionals and educators can earn the required professional development hours to maintain a license to practice. These organizations also work with state boards of medicine and education to maintain standards of practice linked to the state credentialing exams.

Most professional schools (i.e., law, medicine, business, education, engineering and nursing) require credentialing through internships, field experience, and licensing exams. **Notably, journalism in the U.S. is a field without formal certification.** Professional journalists have pushed back at certification-focused learning or full licensure as a journalist (beyond the press pass). Required credentialing could be perceived as a direct attack on the foundational freedom of the press and the rights of the Fourth Estate, which means it would take a systemic change to explore that possibility.

Medicine and education are both fields that ostensibly could possess wide knowledge gaps between researchers and practitioners, but as the examples above show, they have found ways to begin bridging their gaps through translational research, knowledge brokers and professional development — **all ideas for closing the gap that we will consider in our final section.**

7. Ways forward

Ways Forward To Bridge the Research-Practice Gap
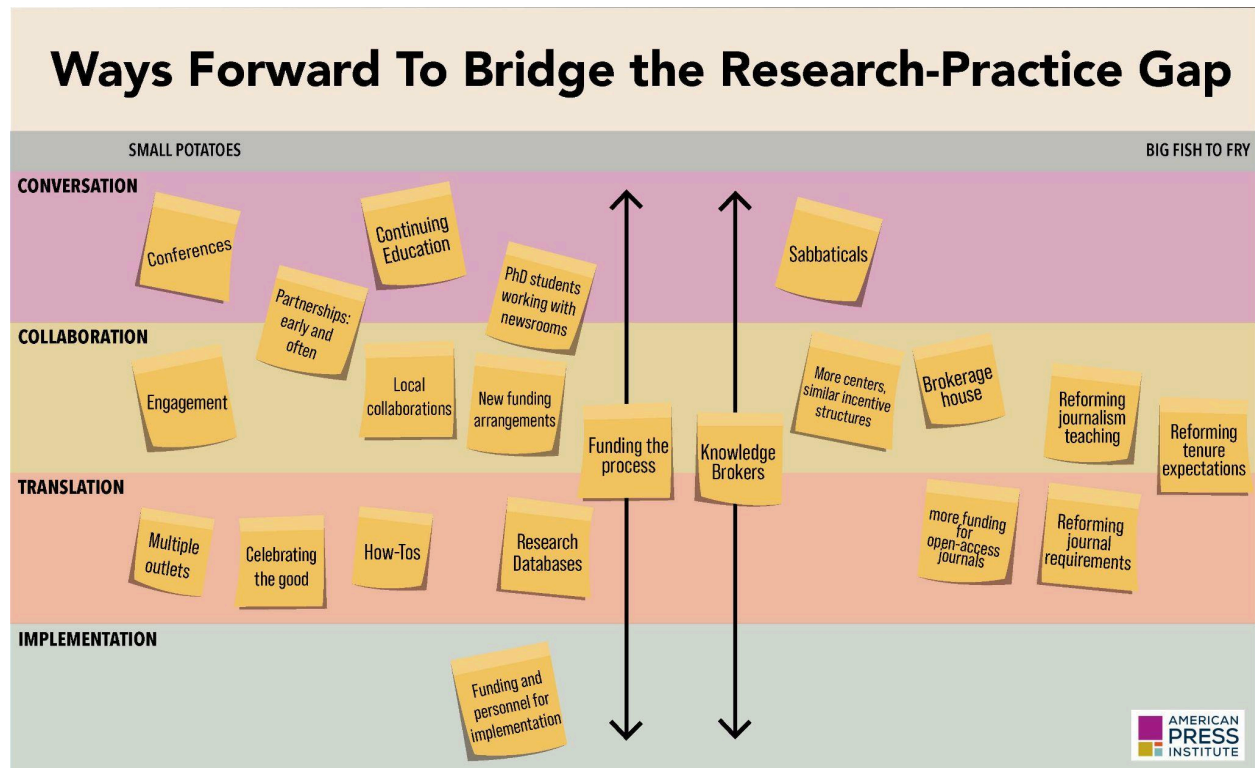
Our conversations with journalists and academics have yielded a wide variety of proposals for how we can begin to bridge the research-practice gap. **Some of these are more "small potatoes" or tactical fixes — not overnight successes, but projects that should be doable if the relevant stakeholders find the time, money and willpower to plan and implement change.** For such changes, it might be possible to effect change by working with reporters, engagement editors and membership managers on the journalism side, or professors on the academic side.

On the other end we have the "big fish to fry" — more systemic reforms and sweeping changes to incentives. To accomplish these changes will require years of concerted collaboration as well as sustainable funding streams. In a way, what these changes require is a movement: people who are passionate about making evidence-based improvements to journalism, and able to regularly put aside even a small amount of time to collaborate, ideate and push forward such changes. People higher up the chain of command, such as higher-level editors, publishers, CEOs and journalism school deans, may need to be involved to make changes happen.

As we can see from the illustration above, the "small potatoes — big fish" delineation involves a rough spectrum. **At the same time, we can understand most initiatives as addressing a particular part of the research-to-practice pipeline — whether enhancing cross-border conversations,**

easing collaboration, facilitating translation or laying the groundwork for implementation. Again, some initiatives will cross boundaries.

In rough order from "small potatoes" to "big fish to fry," our suggested fixes are:

Engagement: Sometimes an impactful collaboration starts with a small gesture of outreach. News organizations should consider when they might fruitfully inform researchers of their initiatives — and if they already do so, look beyond the "usual suspect" researchers they always contact. Scholars are also usually happy to share copies of their papers or to translate them into plain-speak. Arguably, they can do more to show they're available to do this work, and they should reach out more to reality-check their research questions. "Ask the journalists what would be useful to them," an editor in the *Journalism* study said.[29]

Conferences: Academics and practitioners both attend journalism conferences. They rarely attend the same ones. Conferences are, however, one promising avenue for in-person connection, through both informal networking and deliberate programming aimed at encouraging the exchange of ideas. Academic researchers seeking practical impact should target practitioner-oriented conferences like those of the Online News Association or Radio Television Digital News Association, or popular interdisciplinary media events like South by Southwest. Other conferences to consider include those of professional journalism associations such as the National Association of Black Journalists, and regional events, such as those run by state newspaper associations. Programming at conferences could include panels that mix scholars and journalists, summaries of research insights, and Reddit-style ask-me-anythings between journalists and researchers on key topics. In short, conferences work because there, journalists are "in a continuing education mode," eager to consider new information, according to a reporter/producer in the *Journalism* study.[30]

Different outputs for different audiences: Erica Perel describes how the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media has worked to make its research accessible. On their website, the center documented trends on newsroom unionization via traditional research and analysis. But it also did an "editorial deep dive," a more journalism-like piece that involved interviews with unionizing newsroom staff. Thinking about these kinds of multiple outputs can help researchers to inform journalists as well as their fellow academics. And publishing the non-peer reviewed piece earlier can help the researcher to make a practical impact — before their work is yesterday's news.

Celebrating the good: Danielle Brown points out that when academics always act as critics, it can leave journalists frustrated. Sometimes, she says, researchers need to celebrate what's been done right: "To me, that helps journalists understand that we aren't here to simply critique you. We're here to help you and your colleagues become better, because we have the time and obsession to do it." Think of it as "solutions research": Academics could write more case studies analyzing how news organizations have solved problems, to model what might be copied as well as to inspire hope.

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[29] Article will be available soon at the [Journalism Bridging Project website](#)
[30] Article will be available soon at the [Journalism Bridging Project website](#)

Partnerships, early and often: Collaborations between researchers and newsrooms are crucial to producing practical research and encouraging its application. What's clear is that journalism researchers should not approach these as "interventions," as other fields refer to them. Instead, they should seek partnerships that are, as Andrea Wenzel says, "collaborative from the ground up." Joy Mayer says partnerships need to start early in the research process, with researchers asking newsrooms "are these actually useful questions?"

How-tos: Mayer recalls how Trusting News worked with an academic to put together 125 slides of research on trust. While that offered a comprehensive look at the research at the time, for many busy newsroom staff, "it was just too much to keep up." Instead, she urges that resources for journalists be written in a "how-to" style, to better align with the pressing problems newsrooms are trying to address in the moment.

Continuing education: Professional development workshops and seminars are natural connection points for scholars and practitioners, as seen in fields like medicine and education. While journalists do not have credentialing that requires continuing education, these opportunities can still be encouraged and incentivized by universities and news organizations. This can happen through workshops and learning communities.

Local collaborations: Universities can work with nearby newsrooms to address their issues through research. When researchers show up in person and observe, their understanding of newsroom pressures can arguably be deepened versus what's capable in a few online meetings.

Ph.D. students working with newsrooms: As a researcher, working with newsrooms is a skill, Talia Stroud says. It's not one commonly taught in journalism schools, either. Offering Ph.D. students a hands-on way to learn this skill "is a starting point," she says.

User-friendly research databases: Medicine has UpToDate; education has RELs (see the Lessons from other fields section for more). Why not journalism? Perhaps we need a platform with practical guides, case studies and tools for integrating research into daily journalistic practices. In a similar vein, Erica Perel describes a meeting with colleagues where she imagined "Google for journalism resources." [Then ChatGPT hit the scene](#) — so they built a custom AI interface that helps visitors search for tips on building an audience.[31] A variety of stakeholders in this landscape could be in a position to build tools with a similar purpose: surfing the vast array of journalism papers out there, and surfacing easy-to-understand, actionable insights.

Sabbaticals: Stroud suggests that journalists could spend time on secondment in academia, while academics could work in newsrooms. "It would raise all boats... Anytime that you experience some other organizations which you're not a part of, you learn so much. And there are things that can't be communicated in any other way... the constraints, the opportunities, the reward structure, all of those things."

More centers, similar incentive structures: Stroud says research that benefits newsrooms tends to happen when faculty and institutional interests are aligned. There are different ways of doing

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[31] https://chatgpt.com/g/g-elLiKRSA6-local-news-audience-assistant?ref=img.pt.

this, she suggests. "Whether that's a center, whether that's a really entrepreneurial dean or provost or president, that's going to place a greater emphasis on practical work that transcends traditional theory/practice divides."

Knowledge brokers: This term can encompass a variety of activities, but the key concept is that we may need a new class of professionals, one whose job is to link academia and newsrooms. [As Matt Weber suggests](), a key part of acting as a knowledge broker is simply ensuring that journalists and news organizations are aware of relevant, up-to-date knowledge.[32] For example, in medicine, knowledge brokers organize conferences and workshops. Brokers might also translate collate research and translate it into practical recommendations. Or they could act as matchmakers, connecting a newsroom with a researcher who knows how to research the topic at hand. This role could be institutionalized within journalism schools or professional associations.

Reforming tenure expectations: Most universities place a higher premium on the number of peer-reviewed articles, and the prestige of the journal, than on the scholar's engagement with newsrooms. While some journalism programs have begun to reimagine the place of public scholarship, professional work and community connection in their tenure and promotion guidelines, more must do so. Academics who wish to specialize in practical impact need a pathway to advancement. Associations in the field should consider providing journalism schools with guidelines to revise their tenure and promotion policies.

Reforming journal requirements: Journals in the field could place a higher value on practical implications and easily understood prose. Perhaps a "recommendations" section could be made open access, as abstracts are currently. Or journals could carve out a special type of open-access article that prioritizes solutions. Such a category might also be paired with faster peer review turnaround times, although journals may need to offer better incentives to make that happen.

Reforming journalism teaching: Professors can help bridge the gap by training the next generation of journalists to use research — and impressing upon them the importance of doing so. Journalism schools do teach about theories, methods, and how to understand research findings, but these skills are often treated separately from practical journalism skills such as writing, editing and photography. For example, many j-schools operate "theory" master's programs that are siloed from "practice" master's programs. Tenure-track professors and professors of the practice often have limited opportunities to collaborate on curricula or pedagogy. In contrast, we'd argue that research can and should inform skills classes, beginning with introductory reporting for undergraduates. Educational organizations such as the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication could revise their competencies to include research comprehension, evaluation and application, helping to inform the curricula of accredited schools.

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[32] Weber, M. Advocating for journalism studies' impact on policymaking. In Bélair-Gagnon, V., & Usher, N. (Eds.). *Journalism Research That Matters.* Oxford University Press. Weber suggests that academic researchers can fulfill the knowledge broker role, and while that may be true to a certain extent, we suggest thinking creatively about how we could fund and organize this role as its own specialization - as has been accomplished in medicine.

The role of funding

We note funding as an important consideration that touches upon nearly every other suggestion in this report. As we've documented, much of the gap exists because of misaligned incentives. Creating new incentives may mean a financial outlay, at least initially; and instituting new systems and practices will similarly take financial resources. Some of the particular roles for funding that our interviewees highlighted:

- **Supporting academic-industry partnerships.** Andrea Wenzel explains, "As a researcher, you have more leeway to negotiate what makes sense for the research and for the mutual goals when it's funded independently as opposed to funded by the newsroom directly." Joy Mayer, meanwhile, emphasizes that newsrooms often don't know if they'll benefit from research. Therefore, she urges that research partnerships include payment to newsrooms for their time.
- **Funding and personnel for implementation.** Journalists interviewed in the *Journalism* study described how even after an informative collaboration, newsroom personnel lack the time to implement research findings. They suggested that funders prioritize support for newsroom staff to figure out how to institute changes. "Not just, 'Here's our playbook, good luck to you. Because then it won't happen," an executive director of a nonprofit news organization said.[33]
- **Money to open up journal access.** Most journals lock articles behind paywalls that are cost prohibitive for everyone not associated with an academic institution. New funding streams or arrangements could see newsrooms granted more access to read research papers.
- **Funding the process.** Andrea Wenzel points out that philanthropic foundations sometimes fund research, but they rarely fund the process that connects researchers to efforts to innovate in newsrooms. She's working to start a center at Temple to direct funding to such efforts. "We're going to be doing it on a very small scale, but it would be great if there was a more systematic approach of doing that in other places and more broadly. And also in connecting folks." She points out that there is a real danger of inequity and of leaving out those who might help push the state of journalism forward. "There's still a risk of excluding people who are doing valuable work because they're not part of the cool kids' funder club."

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[33] Article will be available soon at the [Journalism Bridging Project website](#)

8. Conclusion

We hope you're as excited by this buffet of ideas as we are. **Because, while there is no doubt that the research-practice gap in journalism is a difficult problem, it's also a space full of opportunity.**

We embarked on this report because we saw serious divides between these two professions. We saw academics pursuing questions that, despite their best intentions, are unlikely to be illuminating for newsrooms. We saw newsrooms stumbling through decision-making on their own when there are copious resources out here to help them — not just written studies, but living, breathing people who they can align with to meet both research and business goals. We saw the left hand just not knowing what the right hand was doing. **And we found there were a lot of people — smart, dedicated people, including the interviewees, authors, editors and reviewers who contributed to this report, but also including *you*, the reader — who want to make things different.**

What comes next? Coming together. **We hope this report will be the spark for stakeholders from all over the academia-journalism landscape to join forces**. Perhaps we'll try out some of the approaches in the Ways Forward section. Undoubtedly, you and others like you will come up with some exciting new ideas. We can't help but think that by bringing together these thinkers and doers — and by starting to align our incentives — we'll make progress and shed light on the big questions facing journalism today.

As Sue Robinson suggests, **"Why not join our powers? Just try out a bunch of things, because clearly, the status quo is not working anymore."**

We couldn't agree more. Let's start trying. **We've got only the status quo to lose.**

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Onwards, as we begin to bridge the gap!