

## STUDY ON MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

### Background

The authors of the US Constitution considered a free press to be so critical to democracy that they enshrined it in the First Amendment. They recognized that the exercise of democracy requires citizens to be knowledgeable—having reliable, accurate and thorough information. The League of Women Voters demonstrates this same recognition in its mission to empower voters and defend democracy. This mission provides the foundation for the proposed Pierce County study on Media and Democracy.

Pierce County is large geographically and complex in governance. With 21 cities and a large unincorporated area, understanding the bases of local governance decisions and how to successfully engage in local democratic processes is a challenge for many residents. Traditionally, local news sources, especially newspapers, have provided regular and essential reporting with varying depth and breadth of coverage. In 2021, two trends dominate the news media landscape, impacting the ability of Pierce County residents to be well-informed and to participate effectively in democracy:

1. Decades-long corporate consolidation of traditional news media outlets has resulted in fewer and smaller local information sources and less investigative journalism. The decline or outright disappearance of robust local news sources limits the ability of citizens to know about and respond to issues that affect them, or to hold public officials and institutions to account for their stewardship of public funds and the enforcement of fair policies and standards. In addition, public trust in news sources that *are* available has decreased, with readers perceiving increased levels of bias in even generally trusted media outlets. Democracy cannot be successfully practiced in the absence of reliable and accurate information.
2. Increasing dependence on Internet-based sources, especially social media, raises additional and related concerns. As our polarized national discourse demonstrates, easily shared and often non-curated electronic sources offer alternate universes that share few facts in common. Subject to minimal government regulation, privately-owned electronic platforms (such as Google and Facebook) have a reach that is both global and intimate, enacting a new form of surveillance capitalism that “monetizes the user experience” (and influences behavior) through vast residual data generally collected without the users’ knowledge. This commercialization of massive user data through targeting human anxiety, fear, and desire has also enabled its politicization, with targeted voters being inundated by messages exploiting these same human vulnerabilities. The increasing risk of misinformation and disinformation poses a clear threat to democracy and personal autonomy, whether at the local, state, or national level.

### Elements of Proposed Study

Media and Democracy is an expanded study with new scope and outlook for work. We appreciate the initial planning and beginning work for the previously approved study on Local Journalism, and explicitly reflect some of that group’s words in the background for this Media and Democracy study. We recognize the continuing relevance of changes in the local news media landscape for citizen engagement. Given the pervasive presence and influence of Internet and social media-based sources, we will center our investigation on the effects of access to regular media outlets and Internet-based sources on informed participation in democratic action.

Attention to DEI questions will be incorporated at every stage of planning and research:

- Who should participate in this?
- Who would benefit?
- What are the barriers to participation?
- How does this address underserved voters?
- How does this address equity?

### **Study Scope of Work:**

We propose a two-year study to investigate the effects of contemporary media trends on Pierce County, to identify regular news outlets available in the county (including ownership, publication, curation, reach); and to collect data from residents regarding their access to the reliable, regular, and accurate information needed to exercise their rights as citizens. We will develop appropriate data collection instruments, gather basic information about currently available media outlets, conduct surveys and/or qualitative interviews with residents, and situate Pierce County within the context of current scholarship about US news media outlets and Internet/social media information sources. Explicit study questions include:

1. How do Pierce County residents learn about the daily workings of their local government and actions of elected officials, about candidates seeking election, about how to ensure that their voice is represented in decisions that affect their lives?
2. What are the barriers to accessible, accurate and regular information (including economic, geographic, linguistic, race/ethnicity, disability, other identity)?
3. What are the threats and potentials of Internet-based/social media sources and how are these made manifest in Pierce County?
4. What relationships exist between news media and other institutions in providing access to reliable information that encourages civic participation and represents the experiences and concerns of diverse and under-represented voters (e.g. libraries, schools, faith-based communities, other non-profit and public interest groups)?
5. What promising practices and news media funding models could provide sustainable, accurate and fairly-curated information sources?

### **Outlook for Work:**

#### June – September 2021

- Constitute study work group and recruit consultants/interns:
- Invite LWV members to join study group and participate in data collection process and other research (Propose Fall unit meeting on topic to encourage participation);
- Identify LWV members and others willing to be consulted on the project;
- Identify and invite other community members who may be willing to participate/consult (journalists, community organizers, etc. with specific outreach to members of BIPOC communities and other marginalized groups);

- Consider engaging intern(s) from local colleges/universities to participate in research (inventories, interviews, possibly content analysis);
- Set regular meeting time for committee to plan full study program.

2. Develop approach to data collection about Pierce County media outlets to include:

- Define “regular media outlet” to distinguish from private blogs, government communications, or informal publications;
- Create template of questions to inventory/survey the availability and accessibility of news outlets in Pierce county (e.g. location/reach, local contacts, ownership, funding model, curation, challenges and plans for future);
- Plan qualitative interview study and develop initial questions for use with county residents regarding what information is available, barriers to access, other challenges and needs;
- Explore potential value/capacity for sampling local news media coverage with a content-analysis project.

October 2021 – October 2022

- Inventory/survey Pierce County news media outlets (and conduct content analysis if able);
- Conduct qualitative interviews with diverse sample of Pierce County residents;
- Situate Pierce County within a review of current scholarship about US news media (ownership consolidation, local effects), and the threat and potentials of Internet-based/social media sources;
- Identify alternate funding models and organizational forms that may promote access to reliable information (to include the role of institutions such as libraries, schools, and other nonprofits).

November 2022 - February 2023

- Prepare summary report of survey/interview findings and complete full written draft of study
- Secure reading committee (League members and possibly others) to review draft and suggest changes based on criteria set by President/Board.

March 2023- June 2023

Follow process for further review and membership approval:

- Respond to review, resolve any issues, and prepare final draft with recommended consensus discussion questions (March)
- Present draft and recommended consensus questions to LWV board for recommendation to members (March)
- Incorporate any minor changes needed (or if major, request new timeline for Board review)
- Upon positive Board action, post draft of study on members-only webpage for review (March)
- Present study at scheduled unit meetings (or general meeting) using consensus questions (April)

- Present unit meeting reports to Board for action and development of consensus position (May)
- Post new position on web site (May)
- Consensus position presented for membership ratification (Annual Meeting —2024)