

THE NATIONAL **AI** LABORATORY FOR CIVIC JOURNALISM

STRENGTHENING LOCAL JOURNALISM THROUGH ETHICAL AI

— CAMBRIDGE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCER —

INTRODUCTION

Across cities and towns in the United States, democracy is quietly unraveling. The threat is slow and insidious: a steady erosion of civic engagement at the local level. At the center of this decline is the disappearance of local news organizations, which have long served as an essential pillar of grassroots democracy.

For generations, local news organizations functioned as trusted watchdogs, covering town hall meetings, tracking municipal budgets, and holding local officials accountable. They connected neighbors with shared information, elevated overlooked voices, and ensured that residents could engage meaningfully with decisions that shaped their daily lives.

However, the shuttering or gutting of thousands of these newsrooms due to consolidation and cost-cutting has resulted in communities losing more than just headlines. They've lost civic awareness, political engagement, and electoral participation.

A growing body of research shows that the loss of local news leads to measurable democratic backsliding:



Voter turnout declines, especially in local elections.



Fewer candidates run for office, and incumbents increasingly win unopposed.



Public accountability weakens, with government spending less scrutinized and borrowing costs rising.



Polarization deepens as national partisan narratives replace local context.



Civic knowledge and community cohesion decline, leaving residents isolated and uninformed.



Misinformation spreads more easily in the absence of trusted local news sources.

EMPOWERING LOCAL JOURNALISTS WITH
ETHICAL AI TO RESTORE CIVIC COVERAGE
AND STRENGTHEN GRASSROOTS
DEMOCRACY NATIONWIDE.



Cambridge
Artificial
Intelligencer



CAMBRIDGE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCER (CAI) is a direct response to this crisis. We believe that the intentional and ethical use of AI can restore the watchdog role of local journalism and strengthen democracy from the grassroots level.

Even in cases where local newsrooms manage to survive, their resources are severely limited. Civic accountability reporting, a time-intensive form of journalism that holds power accountable, typically suffers the most. In most cities and towns, dozens of public meetings occur every month with little or no press coverage. And true civic coverage goes far beyond attending meetings. It involves decoding dense, often impenetrable public records, including budgets, audits, procurement documents, zoning rulings, crime statistics, school assessments, and environmental reports, the raw materials of local government. These records may be public, but they are rarely accessed by the people they affect. Without journalists to report, interpret, and contextualize the workings of governments, the public remains in the dark.

This is where AI offers transformative power. Local newsrooms of all sizes, equipped with the appropriate AI tools, systems, and applications, can analyze extensive datasets, identify patterns, and communicate findings of public interest. When used intentionally and ethically, AI will assist local journalism in fulfilling its democratic mandate: making power visible and accountable to the communities it serves.

Artificial Intelligence now stands at a crossroads. Misused, it could hasten the collapse of local journalism. But used wisely, it can help local newsrooms rebuild capacity, scale civic coverage, reengage communities, and reinvigorate democracy itself.

OUR MISSION

Cambridge Artificial Intelligencer (CAI) is a nonprofit AI lab dedicated to strengthening democracy through local civic journalism. We design, build, and deploy modular AI systems that help local newsrooms decode government complexity, monitor public meetings, and produce high-quality accountability reporting at scale. We do not replace journalists; we equip them to do more, faster, and with greater civic impact.





The Civic Reporting Engine:

A High-Performance AI Stack for Local Accountability Journalism

At the core of CAI's innovation agenda is the Civic Reporting Engine, a modular, AI-powered architecture designed to help newsrooms decode civic complexity, generate public-interest reporting at scale, and make local government institutions and elected officials accountable to the communities they serve.

Unlike generic AI tools, the Civic Reporting Engine is purpose-built for the demands of civic journalism. It enables journalists to query across transcripts, budgets, meeting records, and regulatory filings using natural language, then returns context-rich answers, insights, or even news reports. Each component is optimized for local reporting tasks but is designed to work in concert as part of a comprehensive civic intelligence system.

Civic Meeting Reporting Module (CMRM):

The Civic Meeting Reporting Module is CAI's agentic system for converting public meetings into high-quality journalism at speed and scale. It automates the most time-consuming aspects of coverage while maintaining full editorial control for journalists.

Journalists guide the process, ensuring that the final output is a high-quality, publishable news report. By reducing the manual workload, the module frees reporters to focus on in-depth analysis and storytelling.

With this system, local newsrooms can now cover every meeting, motion, and decision that matters, restoring the oversight local democracy requires.





Civic Knowledge Base (CKB)

The Civic Knowledge Base is CAI's structured civic memory: a dynamic, queryable graph of people, policies, departments, budgets, and timelines. It encodes how local government works and what decisions were made, by whom, and under which authority. It integrates CAI's ethical framework to ensure all outputs are grounded in transparency, accountability, and credible sourcing. Developed in partnership with The Poynter Institute,

CAI dramatically expands civic reporting capacity, empowering a single reporter to monitor, analyze, and explain the full machinery of local governance. This is how we make trusted local journalism viable again, not by scaling staff, but by scaling capability.



Data Visualization Module (DVM)

CAI's Data Visualization Module converts complex civic data, such as budgets, votes, zoning maps, and regulatory timelines, into interactive, story-ready visualizations. These visuals can be auto-generated or guided by journalist queries and tied directly to reporting narratives.





Fine-Tuned Local News Model

CAI is developing a bespoke large language model fine-tuned on thousands of civic meeting transcripts, public records, and local news stories. This model is trained to reason through complex institutional data while maintaining journalistic standards and an editorial tone.

Why It Matters:

Civic accountability journalism has long been constrained by capacity. Covering dozens of public meetings, decoding government budgets, and tracking decisions across departments requires time that most local newsrooms no longer have. The Civic Reporting Engine removes that constraint. Automating the most labor-intensive aspects of civic reporting enables local newsrooms to produce civic coverage on a previously impossible scale.

Every dollar invested in CAI generates exponential reporting capacity, empowering a single reporter to monitor, analyze, and explain the full machinery of local governance. This is how we make trusted local journalism viable again. Not by scaling staff, but by scaling capability.

IMPACT AND MEASUREMENT

CAI will track success across four dimensions:



Adoption of AI tools by local newsrooms



Volume and quality of civic and enterprise reporting



Ethical standards embraced across the field



Community engagement with AI-generated civic journalism

ADVISORY COUNCIL AND STRATEGIC COLLABORATORS

CAI is supported by an advisory council of respected leaders across journalism, technology, public policy, and AI ethics. This group helps shape our strategic direction, ensure technical and editorial rigor, and connect our work to the broader ecosystem of democratic innovation.



Robert Caulk: CEO/Founder of Emergent Methods and creator of AskNews; leads CAI development, agentic system architecture, and AI-powered reporting workflows



David Karger: Computer scientist at MIT CSAIL; renowned for pioneering work in organizing complex civic data and making information systems more accessible



Arvind Satyanarayan: Associate Professor at MIT CSAIL; leading expert in interactive data visualization and the usability of complex public datasets



Max Metral: MIT Media Lab graduate; co-founder of Firefly and CTO at Sesame Care, with deep expertise in applied AI and personalization



Kinsey Wilson: Former EVP of Innovation/Strategy at The New York Times and Chief Content Officer at NPR; currently leads Newspack at Automattic



Anne Galloway:
Founder of VTDigger; Advocate for nonprofit accountability journalism



JJ Yore: Co-founder of NPR's Marketplace; CAI board member with extensive leadership experience in public radio and civic media



Carey Goldberg: Journalist and co-author of The AI Revolution in Medicine; CAI board member focused on responsible AI communication



Jennifer Preston: Former VP of Journalism at the Knight Foundation; senior advisor to CAI on journalism innovation and field leadership



Kelly McBride: SVP at the Poynter Institute, leading the development of CAI's Ethical AI Governance Framework

FUNDING AND SUPPORT



CAI has completed its foundational R&D and is actively building the Civic Reporting Engine and core modules in partnership with leading advisors and prototype collaborators. With an initial grant from the Navigation Fund, development is well underway.

We are now seeking \$1.5 million in unified support to accelerate national rollout and hands-on adoption in local newsrooms.

This funding will power:

- ✓ Deployment of Civic Reporting Engine tools in newsroom pilots
- ✓ Expansion of our core team of AI technologists, development journalists, & civic engineers
- ✓ Open-source platform and onboarding portal development
- ✓ Partner newsroom coordination and support services
- ✓ Ongoing ethical governance, transparency, and public documentation
- ✓ Development of additional AI-powered tools and platform features that accelerate the revitalization of local journalism, starting with civic reporting and expanding over time to meet evolving newsroom needs.

JOIN US

We invite foundations and civic-minded supporters to help transform local journalism. By supporting CAI, you invest in practical, scalable AI solutions that serve communities, build trust, and help ensure democracy thrives in every corner of the country.

CONTACT



Charles Kravetz
Founder & Chairman
Email: ckravetz@cai.news



Mark Coffey
CEO
Email: mcoffey@cai.news



Cambridge
Artificial
Intelligencer