

CAMBRIDGE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCER

THE NATIONAL AI LABORATORY FOR CIVIC JOURNALISM

Rebuilding local journalism. Restoring
civic engagement.

Live in nine newsrooms across seven states. Building for every
newsroom in America.

SUPPORTED BY



CAI.NEWS

The seats where reporters used to sit are empty

Local journalism was the civic nervous system of American democracy. Nearly every city and town had a newspaper, and that newspaper had someone in the room when decisions were made.

We know what happened. Google, Facebook and other social media gobbled up what once was newspaper advertising, papers closed or were hollowed out, and newsroom employment collapsed. Newspaper newsrooms employed about 71,000 journalists in 2008. By 2020, about 31,000. Since 2005, 3,500 papers have vanished.

What went with them was more than headlines. When a community loses its reporters, voter turnout falls, fewer candidates run, incumbents win unopposed, public spending goes unexamined, and residents lose the shared facts that make local self-government possible. The rooms where decisions get made are still full. The seats where reporters used to sit are empty.

71k → 31k

NEWSPAPER JOURNALISTS,
2008 TO 2020, A 57% DROP

3,500

PAPERS GONE SINCE 2005, ALMOST
40% OF ALL LOCAL PAPERS

91,438

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
TO COVER



Dozens of civic meetings like this are held every month in every town in the country.

The United States has more than 91,000 local governments: cities, towns, counties, school boards, and about 40,000 special districts governing water, fire, parks, and transit. That number has climbed steadily since 1972 and is still rising. Since 2008, the reporter count has gone the other way. No philanthropic budget on earth can put a reporter in 91,000 town halls. The answer had to be leverage, and that means AI.

02

What empty seats cost a town

America has roughly 19,500 incorporated municipalities, counties, townships, school districts and special-purpose districts spending in aggregate \$2.5 trillion a year. Nearly all of them run on the same machinery: a select board, city council, planning board, zoning board, or school committee that meets in public, dozens of times a year. Add it up nationally and these bodies are in session by the thousands every single week, deciding school budgets, housing density, infrastructure spending, multi-year procurement contracts, and permits for everything from a warehouse to a data center. This is not a footnote to how the country is governed. It is a huge share of how the country is actually governed, and almost none of it gets watched.

That is the chokepoint. Not the newsroom. The meeting.

Here is what happens when nobody is watching. A newspaper closing raises its town's borrowing costs by 5 to 11 basis points for years afterward, because nobody is left to see how the money gets spent. Mayoral races get less competitive too: in California, as local newsroom staffing shrank, average victory margins climbed toward 50 percent and fewer people bothered to run at all.

None of this means the information disappeared. It means nobody is left to make it usable. When Dunn County, North Dakota lost its local paper, the county government ended up building its own Facebook following just to keep residents informed, because there was no newsroom left to do it. Nationally, residents in news deserts turn to Facebook groups and Nextdoor before any official source, filling the gap with what one researcher called unvetted, unfact-checked information bouncing around an echo chamber. The public record is still public. What disappeared is anyone whose job is to read it, verify it, and hand it back in a form people can actually use.

None of this is hypothetical, and none of it is old news. Right now, in exactly these rooms, three fights are playing out nationally. More than 300 towns and counties, Fort Worth among them, one of our own pilot markets, have moved to block or restrict data centers. Dozens of city councils have voted this year to limit local cooperation with ICE. And Massachusetts's state-mandated zoning law has gone all the way to the state supreme court, in a fight that runs straight through Brookline and Berkshire County, two more of our pilot markets. These are the contested issues people search the news for. Almost none of the meetings where they get decided are covered the way a debate in Washington would.

We believe artificial intelligence could just as easily undermine local journalism as it could be the thing that saves it. Which one happens depends entirely on intent, and on who builds it.

03

What we built

Cambridge Artificial Intelligencer was founded to address the crisis in local civic journalism. We built the Civic Intelligence Platform: it watches every public meeting in a community, builds a living model of how that community actually governs itself, and lets a reporter ask plain English questions across the full arc of an issue, not just one meeting, and get a sourced answer back in seconds.

That is the AI answer to the leverage problem. Getting there took longer than we expected, because the technology almost worked against us.

04

What we learned the hard way

When ChatGPT first launched, we were as excited as everyone else. It felt like an extraordinary leap. That excitement did not survive real testing. What looked like a breakthrough turned out to be something more troubling: a system that was not just occasionally wrong, but unpredictably so. Run the same query twice and you could get two different answers, with no way to know in advance which one to trust.

Journalism runs on determinism. A quote is exact or it is not a quote. A vote count is right or the story is wrong. Large language models are the opposite: fluent, probabilistic, worded differently every time, and most dangerous when they are confidently wrong. That mismatch is a wall every AI project eventually hits, not just in journalism. Journalism just has zero tolerance for it: a system that gets things wrong sometimes is not one any newsroom can trust. That is why most AI journalism projects stall at the demo.

We hit that wall hard, three years ago. The Navigation Fund funded the work required to get through it, which led us to Dr. Robert Caulk and Emergent Methods, the team behind AskNews, one of the most advanced agentic news systems in production and operator of the world's largest news knowledge graph.

You cannot make a language model deterministic. You can make what it sees deterministic. So that is what we built: a structured, continuously updated model of how a town actually governs itself, its people, departments, boards, budgets, and votes. Every question the platform answers is grounded in that model, and every claim it returns carries its source, down to the timestamp in the meeting video where it was said.

The reliability lives in the architecture, not in the model. That is the difference between a simple transcription agent and a system a newsroom can rely on.

How it works

With support from the Navigation Fund, the Knight Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Inasmuch Foundation, our work became The Civic Intelligence Platform.

The **Civic Intelligence Platform** watches every public meeting in a community, maintains a living model of how that community governs itself, and lets a reporter question the full arc of an issue in plain English. Not one meeting. The whole arc, across months or years. Ask how a budget line moved over three years, who changed a vote and when, which vendor keeps recurring across contracts, or simply *how did we get here*, and get a sourced answer in seconds that can be checked in one click and published by deadline.

IT LISTENS

Every public meeting

Select boards, councils, school committees, and special districts, watched continuously and transcribed with timestamps. →

IT REMEMBERS

Civic knowledge graph

Who voted with whom, which budget lines connect to which departments, which vendors recur across contracts, how a position shifted over time. →

IT EXPLAINS

Sourced answer

Plain English questions across months or years, answered in seconds, with every claim traceable to the timestamp in the video where it was said.

Reporters decide what is a story and what runs. The platform does the watching, the remembering, and the connecting. And the platform compounds. Every meeting it reads makes the next answer sharper. It is worth more in year three than in year one, and the longer it runs, the harder it is to replace.

Because it was built as infrastructure rather than as an app, the same foundation can carry more than reporting: community newsletters, public dashboards, civic education, and longitudinal research all sit on the civic record it already maintains.

WHY THIS IS NOT A MEETING SUMMARIZER

A transcription tool

Runs one operation against one document and returns a text file at the end of a meeting. A meeting summarizer costs fifty dollars a month and does that job.

The Civic Intelligence Platform

A research analyst that remembers every meeting, vote, speaker, and policy across an entire beat, queryable in plain English with sourced answers in seconds.

The difference is not incremental. It is the difference between a calculator and an analyst, and it is why the right comparison for CAI is not AI that helps a reporter do journalism, but AI that makes civic coverage possible where it currently is not.

Built with the newsrooms that use it

A dozen newsrooms across seven states are running the platform in live production, and the range is deliberate: The Berkshire Eagle, a long established regional daily in Massachusetts. Brookline.News, a hyperlocal startup covering a single town, also in Massachusetts. Harpswell Anchor, a weekly on the Maine coast. Adirondack Explorer, covering the Adirondack Park region of New York. Cookson Hills Publishers, small market papers in Oklahoma. El Paso Matters and Fort Worth Report, nonprofit newsrooms in Texas. LINKnky, covering Northern Kentucky. Simsbury Town News, covering Simsbury, Connecticut. A system that holds across that range holds for the country.

Working journalists shaped this platform at every step. They tested it against live deadlines and told us what to build next.

His team can no longer imagine covering local government without it.

EDITOR, BROOKLINE.NEWS

That is the kind of feedback you only get from people who depend on a system for real work. This platform was built in partnership with the newsrooms that use it.

Local accountability is not expensive. It has simply never been built as infrastructure.

The ask

\$5M

OVER THREE YEARS

500

NEWSROOMS REACHED

\$3,600

PER NEWSROOM, PER YEAR

Four foundations brought us here. The Navigation Fund funded the breakthrough. Knight is underwriting the reasoning layer and the first cohort. Luce and Inasmuch broadened the base. We are raising \$5 million over three years to take the platform from its test cohort into five hundred newsrooms.

That is roughly \$3,600 per newsroom per year, about five percent of the loaded cost of one entry level civic reporter. And because the system was built to scale, almost every dollar of it is fixed. The five hundredth newsroom costs little more than the fiftieth, because the meeting was already read and the query costs cents. We are not funding newsrooms one at a time. We are funding the last mile between a proven system and a country that has civic accountability again.

The question facing local journalism was never whether AI would enter the newsroom. It was who would build it, and on whose terms. We built CAI as a nonprofit, with journalists in the room, ethics in the architecture, and no owner but the public interest. It works. It is running. The newsrooms using it prove it.

Now we put it everywhere.

Advisory Council and Strategic Collaborators

CAI is guided by leaders from journalism, technology, public policy, and AI ethics.



Robert Caulk

CEO and Founder of Emergent Methods, creator of AskNews; leads CAI's technical development and agentic system architecture.



Kinsey Wilson

Former EVP of Innovation and Strategy at The New York Times and Chief Content Officer at NPR; leads Newspark at Automattic.



Kelly McBride

SVP at the Poynter Institute; leads development of CAI's Ethical AI Governance Framework.



Jennifer Preston

Former VP of Journalism at the Knight Foundation; senior advisor to CAI.



Anne Galloway

Founder of VTDigger; advocate for nonprofit accountability journalism.



JJ Yore

Co-founder of NPR's Marketplace; CAI board member.



Carey Goldberg

Journalist and co-author of *The AI Revolution in Medicine*; CAI board member.



Chris White

General Manager at Microsoft Research; former DARPA program manager.



Max Metral

MIT Media Lab; co-founder of Firefly and CTO at Sesame Care.

Join us

Local journalism is being rebuilt right now. We invite foundations and civic-minded supporters to help put the Civic Intelligence Platform in the hands of every newsroom in the country.



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Sources

JOURNALIST EMPLOYMENT	Pew Research Center
PAPERS CLOSED SINCE 2005	Medill School of Journalism, <i>State of Local News 2025</i>
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND INCORPORATED PLACES	U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Governments
MUNICIPAL BORROWING COSTS	Gao, Lee and Murphy, <i>Journal of Financial Economics</i> , via Brookings
MAYORAL RACE COMPETITIVENESS (CALIFORNIA)	Rubado and Jennings, <i>Urban Affairs Review</i> , via Nieman Lab
DATA CENTER MORATORIUMS	SemiAnalysis; Moratorium Nation
LOCAL ICE COOPERATION RESOLUTIONS	CBS Philadelphia; WVXU; <i>The Press Democrat</i>
MASSACHUSETTS MBTA COMMUNITIES ACT	<i>The Boston Globe</i> ; Ballotpedia