

## The Development of Local News Collaboration: A Population Ecology Perspective

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The increasingly popular local news collaboration (LNC), a form of local news production, was analyzed as a budding *population* or collection of entities with increasingly similar forms and practices. Growth of the population over time is examined by both tracking the number of foundings and “mortalities” of collaborations and by measuring changes in the population density. The relative isomorphism (homogeneity) of collaboration practices, the relative success of local news collaborations, and the relative formality of practices were assessed. Changing levels of legitimacy of local news collaborations were also assessed, and three types of legitimacy were correlated with density levels, level of collaboration success, and adoption of formal agreements. As anticipated, the results indicate that LNCs are forming a population, but that it is a young, budding population. LNCs are still seeking niches within the journalism space and have not yet attained a shared understanding of best practices. Results also point to the importance of the journalism field’s institutional actors in the emergence of this population.

*Keywords: local news, collaborations, population ecology, legitimacy, isomorphism*

As the financial state and reporting capacity of local news organizations decline around the world (Galletero-Campos, 2019; Hess & Waller, 2017; Nielsen, 2015)—conditions worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hare, 2021)—organizations are pooling resources and participating in collaborative news projects. Industry optimism about local news collaborations is high. Collaborations have been viewed as a cure for an ailing local news industry, bringing cooperation rather than competition and providing resources for sustainability and meaningful journalism in a hostile environment (Burkins, 2020). While collaborating in news reporting is not new (Schwarzlose, 1998; Stonbely, 2017), emerging collaborations have a particularly heightened

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awareness of shared identity (Stonbely, 2017), and a notably purposeful embrace of professional, public-service goals, often pursued through ambitious investigations (Amditis, 2019; Jenkins & Graves, 2019).

Yet, collaborations can be temporary; their efforts can be hindered by limited resources (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Jenkins & Graves, 2019) and by the difficulties in coordinating dissimilar partners<sup>1</sup> (Jenkins & Graves, 2019; Stonbely, 2017). News-producing organizations are the most common partners, but the types of partnering news producers vary from legacy news organizations to niche outlets. Collaborations may also involve organizations that do not produce news (Stonbely, 2017), including journalism professional associations; journalism training, research, and advocacy organizations; and community organizations. Amid the variation in collaborations, there are signs of emerging best practices for work routines, story types and forms, governance structures, and funding mechanisms (Bryant, 2020). Similarity in practices and structures may reduce uncertainty and transaction costs for organizations, growing trust among them and easing the way for new collaborations (Aldrich, Ruef, & Lippmann, 2020).

We analyze local news collaboration (LNC) as a particular organizational form and set of practices that is reproducible at the collective or *population* level. A *population* is a group of entities that have similar forms and practices and develop in comparable ways (Aldrich et al., 2020; Lowrey, 2012). Analyzing characteristics that emerge and spread at the population level is one way to map and understand the development of these forms and practices over time. Characteristics examined in this study include the changing *density* of the population (number of collaborations in the population), and the relative legitimacy, stability, journalistic success, and *isomorphism* (sameness) of the population.

The growing popularity of news collaborations across the United States and around the world (Jenkins & Graves, 2019; Konow-Lund, 2020) begs questions about the nature of this popularity and reasons for it. Some research and trade literature (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Graves & Konieczka, 2015) points to financial and professional benefits; however, there are doubts about the sustainability of news collaborations (Jenkins & Graves, 2019) and about their cultural fit with a traditionally competitive journalism profession (Stonbely, 2017). According to literature on population ecology and institutional theory (e.g., Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Lowrey, 2012), the reproduction of any new organization and growth of its population may be due to the organization's rising legitimacy and standardization and not because of its measurable efficacy—that is, not because “the ideas work” (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002, p. 75). Therefore, we ask how and why news collaborations may develop as a population. Are we seeing steady population growth? If so, is growth correlating with successful journalism, or is it correlating with mimicry and “taken-for-granted” legitimacy? Is their spread due more to demonstrable success or to industry buzz?

First, we discuss the local news collaboration phenomenon and the literature on collaborations. We then explain the population ecology approach, its place in journalism studies, and its applicability to our research questions. This is followed by a study of local news collaborations through an analysis of a data set of collaborations and a study of their changing legitimacy through an analysis of trade industry literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, “partners” refers to organizations within collaborations.

### ***Local News Collaborations***

Financial and quality problems in local news have received strong attention in the United States (Abernathy, 2019; Grieco, 2019; Napoli, Weber, McCollouth, & Wang, 2018), and similar problems have been found in other media systems (Hess & Waller, 2017; Nielsen, 2015): in the United Kingdom (Cawley, 2017); in Spain, Finland, and Sweden (Galletero-Campos, 2019); and in Russia (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2020), to name a few. News companies—journalism’s core production organizations and primary social actors—have weakened (Nielsen, 2015), becoming less central in supporting and shaping the boundaries of the journalism space.

Organization studies scholars have observed that collaborating is common “when the main social actors are weak and there is a need for resources for conceptualizing, justifying and mobilizing change” (Smith-Doerr & Powell, 1994, p. 251), and that no single organization in any field “contains the requisite know-how and skills to determine the development of organizational fields” (p. 251). Similar claims have been made in the journalism field: As Burkins (2020) said at a recent Collaborative Journalism Summit conference session, “no one news organization has all the audiences or all the resources.”

The Center for Cooperative Media, a grant-funded program in the United States that tracks and supports news collaborations, describes collaborative journalism as “executing journalistic endeavors using a cross-entity approach” (Center for Cooperative Media, n.d., para. 1). Collaboration among rival news outlets is a growing practice and form. It is a logical next phase for local journalism, some scholars say (de Aguiar & Stearns, 2015; Heyward, 2019), especially for local outlets seeking sustainability and relevance amid shrinking resources (e.g., Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Jenkins & Graves, 2019; Paulussen, Geens, & Vandenbrande, 2011).

News collaborations have a history (Stonbely, 2017). The 1800s saw the emergence in the United States of ephemeral associations among city newspapers and telegraph services seeking cost sharing, which eventually led to a more stable Associated Press (Schwarzlose, 1998). The 1970 Newspaper Preservation Act in the United States allowed some city newspaper competitors to merge noneditorial functions to help stave off financial failure (Niebauer, 1987). More recently, news company chains have shared editorial labor and content across local publication properties, aided by online technology. While informal sharing of reporting across journalists in rival publications has always been quite common in the United States (Stonbely, 2017) and Europe (Slauter, 2012), competition in news reporting has been the more manifest expectation for news outlets covering the same local area. The current local news collaboration form, with its emphasis on resource-and-information-sharing across rival news outlets in the same locale, represents a change in this expectation in the United States (Stonbely, 2017), Europe (Jenkins & Graves, 2019), the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere (Kaplan, 2013).

Despite optimism, few view collaboration as a panacea for the problems of local news. The sustainability of collaborative projects is still uneven (Jenkins & Graves, 2019; Stonbely, 2017), and some journalists have resisted collaborating with rivals, viewing it as inappropriate in a competitive profession (Berglez & Gearing, 2018; Heyward, 2019; Paulussen et al., 2011) or as a management ploy to fill news holes cheaply (Stonbely, 2017). Despite these concerns, local news collaborations over the last decade have

multiplied. There is evidence that they are helping a depleted field financially and professionally (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Graves & Konieczna, 2015).

### ***Populations of Collaborations***

The concept of the *population* helps explain the collective growth and persistence of organizational forms and practices, such as those of local news collaborations. The population ecology approach was used to study the emergence and development of various types of media, including newspapers, which were examined in early seminal studies of populations (e.g., Carroll, 1987). More recent population research on media includes studies of social networking sites (Weber, Fulk, & Monge, 2016), blogs and fact-checking sites (Lowrey, 2012, 2017), microradio stations (Greve, Pozner, & Rao, 2006), and podcasts (Sherrill, 2020).

We define a *population* as a group of entities with similar forms and practices that develop in comparable ways (Aldrich et al., 2020; Lowrey, 2012). A population is also an instantiation of a particular *organizational form*, defined as an “abstract specification of a type of organization” (Carroll & Hannan, 2000, p. 59), and it is expected that population members will have an organizational form,<sup>2</sup> which is a key concept in population studies. We cannot study a group of entities with similar forms if the core form is unknown: How do we decide which kinds of entities should and should not be considered “local news collaborations”?

Early on, Hannan and Freeman (1989) proposed that socially agreed-upon boundaries around an organizational form are a good starting place for identifying the defining features of organizational forms in populations. From this perspective, organizational forms are cultural objects. Those features of cultural objects that are widely agreed-upon “determine form membership,” and changing these features “blurs the organization’s identity and lessens the [organization’s] legitimation that flows from membership in a form” (Carroll & Hannan, 2000, p. 62). Accordingly, we define local news collaborations in terms of the widely agreed-upon problems of local news that collaborations were created to address—problems such as diminishing resources and relevance and the limited capacity of single news operations to inform diverse local publics about important, complex issues (e.g., Nielsen, 2015). Consistent with Stonbely’s (2017) definition, we define local news collaboration as an arrangement between *multiple local news and information organizations* that aim to *supplement each organization’s resources and maximize the local impact of the content produced*. To function alone without partners, to keep resources to yourself, or to

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<sup>2</sup> News collaborations are an emerging organizational form, and many are still seeking stability and independent identity; however, organizational ecology research has focused on a range of loosely structured and nascent organizations (e.g., Baum & Shipilov, 2013). Furthermore, collaborations meet most common definitional criteria of organizations (Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Tolbert & Hall, 2009): Collaborations have two or more partners, they mobilize resources to achieve specific goals, they act collectively, they have differentiated tasks, and they have governing mechanisms (coordinators, rules). As emerging organizations, they meet two other criteria less consistently: intent to persist beyond single projects (Carroll & Hannan, 2000) and independent definitional identity or “boundedness” (Clegg & Hardy, 2001, p. 3). However, many intend to persist: Of the 179 collaborations in the Center for Cooperative Media’s Collaborative Journalism Database that identified as either “ongoing” or “temporary,” 105 identified as “ongoing” or had continued at least three years.

focus on nonlocal/national problems would violate the identity boundaries of the local news collaborative form. We also note that the idea of the news collaboration as its own organizational form is strengthened through valuations from powerful actors in the field: foundations, nonprofits, research centers, and professional associations.<sup>3</sup>

Decisions by news producers in collaboration are shaped by endogenous “speciation” processes by which media entities (like news collaborations) develop into legitimated, widely understood, and meaningful forms (Weber, 2017). Decision makers’ thinking is more than just rational cost/benefit analysis of the external context. The spread of new ideas, practices, and forms may initially be prompted by business pressures, but they also require “emphasis upon the continuity and alignment of change with prevailing values and practices” (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 75). Therefore, the need to “be in accord” with institutional and professional journalism values and practices also drives decisions about change, at least as much as strategic calculations of market conditions (Lowrey, 2012).

Population boundaries are more likely to be challenged during times of vulnerability, such as when the population emerges or experiences disruption (Aldrich et al., 2020; Baum, 2001; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). During these times, social actors, such as collaborations and the partners that make up collaborations, are more likely to adapt to their environment strategically, scrambling for a foothold and seeking niches that promise survival. Over time, social actors stabilize and behave more institutionally (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Lowrey, 2012; Nelson, 2008), reacting less to external change and conforming more to the other similar actors within their population (Lowrey, 2012). Consequently, social actors become increasingly *isomorphic*, converging “on a dominant design” (Aldrich et al., 2020, p. 199) and looking more like one another due to mimicry, coercion, or common response to a common environment (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Social actors within populations also gain legitimacy as they become more isomorphic and grow in number—in other words, as *foundings* and *density* increase (Baum & Shipilov, 2013; Dimmick, 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

These dynamics suggest two research questions related to the growth dynamics of an emerging population—in our case, the emerging population of news collaborations.

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<sup>3</sup> A Knight Foundation-funded guide on news collaborations focuses on building “scaffolding” that allows partners to “rise above their specific newsroom identities and sustain working together” (Porter & Shapiro, 2022, p. 5). Liza Gross of Solutions Journalism, speaking of her partnership with the Local Media Association, said the two organizations are “committed to strengthening the local media ecosystem by building sustainable, long-term collaboratives” (Cholke, 2020, para. 2). Guidebooks supported by Knight, Local Media Foundation, Center for Cooperative Media, and Solutions Journalism Network include sample ads for collaboration manager positions, urge that managers be “independent” from news organizations (Gross, 2018; Porter, 2021), and urge pursuit of external funding and creation of other revenue streams for sustainability (e.g., Oliver, 2020). Separate awards for collaborations (ONA’s Online Journalism Awards’ category for collaborations; INN’s Journalism Collaboration of the Year award) indicate recognition and distinct identity. Guidebooks urge collaboration branding for unique identity (Porter, 2021; Porter & Shapiro, 2022).

*RQ1: Will emerging populations, over time, become more endogenously isomorphic in their practices and forms?*

*RQ2: Does changing population density correlate more strongly with isomorphism or with evidence of success?*

### ***Legitimacy and Density***

The relationship between legitimacy and population density is central to population analysis. As a population grows and increases in *density*—i.e., as the number of population members during a certain time period increases—it signals that its organizational members are socially appropriate and have a future because they are stable and relatively replicable. These signals attract would-be entrants to the population. Growth leads to stronger legitimacy, and stronger legitimacy encourages growth (Aldrich et al., 2020; Carroll & Hannan, 2000). Entrants to a new population seek to reduce uncertainty about their decisions—important in the case of local news collaborations, given the distrust among competing local news outlets and the lack of resources understaffed news outlets have for experimentation. Isomorphism of a population’s forms and practices helps reduce this uncertainty because it signals to newcomers (e.g., emerging collaborations) that the population’s forms and practices are legitimate. This leads to decisions that are driven more by mimicry than by analysis of the market or community (Aldrich et al., 2020; Carroll & Hannan, 2000). As a population ages, change slows: “[Entrenched interdependencies with external institutions, organizational age, routines, path dependence, isomorphism, and the value of public legitimacy all encourage ‘structural inertia’” (Lowrey & Kim, 2016, p. 698).

Prior research on new, emerging media populations has found that legitimacy and isomorphism increase over time, but that population density begins to level off early: Growth slows as legitimacy wanes and as the carrying capacity, or resource level, of the population’s environment decreases (Lowrey, 2012, 2017; Sherrill, 2020). The result is a population with the beginnings of an S-curve shape: The curve levels as young populations approach “middle age.” These dynamics suggest outcomes for the LNC population in terms of changing density, legitimacy, formality, stability, and endogenous vs. exogenous focus:

*RQ3: Does growing legitimacy lead to a higher density of emerging populations?*

*RQ4: As legitimacy grows, are emerging populations more likely to be governed by formal agreements?*

*RQ5: Does the growing density of emerging populations correlate more strongly with rising legitimacy than with populations’ professional success?*

Ecological and institutional studies have examined several types of legitimacy. According to Carroll and Hannan (2000), an organizational form is legitimated “to the extent that its structure and routines follow the prevailing institutional rules” or “when it attains a socially taken-for-granted character” (p. 7). Their first criterion—following institutional rules—suggests two commonly studied types of legitimacy: sociopolitical and normative.

- *Sociopolitical legitimacy* derives from accord with powerful institutions in society and is evident from recognition or endorsement by powerful people and organizations in and beyond the field (Baum & Shipilov, 2013; Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Rutherford, Mazzei, Oswald, & Jones-Farmer, 2018), such as “key stakeholders,...key opinion leaders, or government officials” (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648).

- *Normative legitimacy* refers to “congruen[ce] with social values”; we note that the term is often used more narrowly to refer to the professional field so that legitimacy means being in accord with “that which is to be desired” within the profession (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, p. 53).

Carroll and Hannan’s (2000) second criterion suggests legitimacy is based on common, assumed social knowledge.

- *Cognitive legitimacy* (or “constitutive legitimacy”; Carroll & Hannan, 2000, p. 223) is acquired when knowledge of a phenomenon is “widely spread” (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648) and when “relevant actors see it...as taken for granted,” or as “the natural way to effect some kind of collective action” (Carroll & Hannan, 2000, p. 223). Cognitive legitimacy is strongly identified with population ecology (Baum & Shipilov, 2013), and it is viewed as a precursor to growing population density—though in chicken-egg fashion, growing density can also increase cognitive legitimacy.

These different dimensions of legitimacy suggest different possible outcomes for population development over time:

*RQ6: Do emerging populations show more sociopolitical legitimacy, normative legitimacy, or cognitive legitimacy, and what are their patterns across time?*

### **Methodology**

Two methods were used to address the research questions: a population ecology analysis that tracks the emergence and development of local news collaborations (LNCs) across 20 years and a content analysis of news articles on LNCs to measure changing levels of legitimacy.

### **Population Ecology**

An analysis of the population ecology of U.S.-based LNCs was conducted using a secondary analysis of aggregated data. The data included the demographics of the population’s members, specifically when members emerged and when they disbanded (mortalities). Our population included only U.S.-based local news collaborations, so the study’s claims are limited to the U.S. local media system. This was partly a practical decision, as the database was mostly U.S.-focused, but we also excluded non-U.S. collaborations because boundaries for professional appropriateness differ across media systems.

Data on collaborations derive from the publicly available Collaborative Journalism Database (2020) curated by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University in New Jersey, U.S. The data are self-reported via an online survey form, which the Center promotes. The Center collects and cleans data on

journalism-oriented collaborations, which may be local, national, or international in scope. The Center is an academic and professional hub that has tracked and supported LNCs for over 10 years, and across the journalism field, the Center is identified with the news collaboration movement. Our analysis included collaborations from the database that fit the definition of LNCs stated earlier and for which information on types of organizations and founding and ending dates was available at the time of study—248 collaborations in total. It is unknown how comprehensive the database is, but it is the most comprehensive available.

Of the 248 collaborations, 124 included local legacy news organization partners (i.e., financially stable news-producing operations originating on nondigital print or broadcast platforms; Arrese & Kaufmann, 2016). 102 included local public TV/radio stations, 88 included local nonlegacy outlets, 78 included local nonprofit media, 55 included professional associations/networks, 31 included university partners, and 6 included non-news community organizations. The mean number of collaboration partners in the database was 8.1 ( $SD = 10.98$ ). Politics was the most commonly reported project topic ( $n = 45$ ), followed by environment (36) and economy (26). Eighty collaborations reported foundation funding. Of the collaborations reporting their status, 68 reported a temporary status, and 75 reported a more stable “ongoing” status.

### ***Population Measures***

#### *Demographics of the Population: Density, Foundings, and Mortalities*

The number of *foundings* is the number of LNCs that started in a given year. The number of *mortalities* is the number of LNCs disbanded or brought to completion in a given year. The population’s *density* is the total number of LNCs “existing any time during the year” (Carroll & Hannan, 1989, p. 530). Density was calculated by subtracting mortalities per year from the cumulative number of foundings (Carroll & Hannan, 1989; Lowrey, 2012). Foundings, mortalities, and density were tracked from 2000, but measures of isomorphism, LNC success, and formal agreements were limited to years with at least five foundings, i.e., 2009 and later.

#### *Level of Isomorphism (Homogeneity or Sameness)*

Measures of isomorphism are consistent with DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) original suggestion: “decrease in variation and diversity” in “key indicators” (p. 155). An increasingly common way of operationalizing isomorphism is as the deviation of an organizational characteristic(s) from some standard—for example, deviation from a fieldwide mean of characteristic(s) (e.g., Deephouse, 1996; Glynn & Abzug, 2002). Accordingly, we measured isomorphism in two ways: (1) as the per-year standard deviation of collaboration size (number of organizational partners) from the mean of collaboration size, such that lower deviation = greater isomorphism in size; and (2) by per-year deviation of types of collaboration partners (e.g., legacy news outlets, nonprofits, etc.) from the standard of perfect isomorphism of partner types.

The measure of isomorphism of collaboration partner types is explained here in more detail: (1) For each type of organizational partner per year, the percentage of collaborations that included this type was calculated, and the percentage without this type was calculated. (2) The greater the difference between



these two percentages, the more homogeneous the collaborations for that year. To illustrate, if there were 10 collaborations in a particular year, and all 10 included at least one legacy media partner, then collaborations in that year would be 100% isomorphic on that characteristic (100% with legacy media minus 0% without). Conversely, if there were five collaborations (50%) with legacy media and five (50%) without, this would constitute maximum diversity, or 0% isomorphism on that characteristic ( $50 - 50 = 0$ ). Therefore, the standard against which collaborations deviate is the expectation of uniformity or perfect isomorphism, and a 50/50 ratio is the greatest deviation from this standard, or most heterogeneous. (3) Finally, the mean of these percentage differences for each organizational type was calculated for each year to provide an isomorphism score for the collaborations per year. Ultimately, the higher the mean, the more isomorphic or similar the collaborations are across the population for that year.

#### *Evidence of LNC Success*

Population success per year was measured in two ways: One measure was the percentage of LNCs per year that won at least one professional award/prize. The database's self-reported data on awards were supplemented by data from an online search using the following terms: the collaboration's name, the name of the community or region, and the words "award" and "prize." Thirty awards were national (most from professional associations), and 18 were local: 4 regional, 7 state, and 7 city/community. The second measure was the mean number of organizational partners in a collaboration: The more partners, the broader the reach and the stronger the presence of a collaboration in its local area.

#### *Formal Agreements of LNCs*

These were measured as the percentage of LNCs per year that reported that the collaboration was governed by a formal (written) agreement.

### **Content Analysis of LNC Legitimacy**

A content analysis of 141 stories about LNCs from journalism trade/professional publications was conducted to measure the three types of legitimacy. Common publications in the sample included the *Nieman Journalism Lab*, *Poynter, Editor & Publisher*, and *Columbia Journalism Review*. Blogs and social media posts were not included. To find stories, a Google search was conducted using the terms *collaborat\**, *cooperative*, and *partnership* with the terms *local news* and *local journalism*. These terms were also searched in the Communication Source database. Stories determined to be unrelated to LNCs, as defined above, were omitted from the sample. These data were largely unavailable before 2011, the first year that at least five relevant stories appeared.

Following several rounds of informal pilot coding, a formal reliability test was conducted on 14 randomly selected stories (10% of the sample). Reliability scores for all but two variables were below .70. The protocol was revised, coders were retrained, and a second intercoder test led to Kappa coefficients of .80 or higher on all but one variable (.69 for the normative legitimacy variable; caution is warranted in interpreting normative legitimacy).

### **Legitimacy Measures**

One measure of legitimacy was the number of stories per year that focused on LNCs. Previous research on legitimacy has used amount of media attention as a measure of public legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). However, as discussed, research indicates legitimacy has different dimensions, so we also adopted measures of three commonly analyzed dimensions: cognitive, sociopolitical, and normative.

*Cognitive legitimacy* refers to taken-for-grantedness or widely shared knowledge of a phenomenon. Each story was coded for evidence of a definition or description of a news collaboration. The absence of a stated definition or description within the story indicates cognitive legitimacy (*1=No definition*) because it suggests wide knowledge about news collaborations, given that the writer/editor thought it unnecessary to define or describe it (see similar methods in Lowrey, 2012, Sherrill, 2020). The level of the population's cognitive legitimacy per year is the percentage of stories each year that are coded *1=No definition*.

*Sociopolitical legitimacy* refers to sanctioning by "established organizations" in the field (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 658) and an "interconnectedness between a population and its institutional environment" (Baum & Shipilov, 2013, p. 89) This "organizational linkage" outwardly "signals integrity and accountability" to the field (Rutherford et al., 2018, p. 913). We follow Baum and Shipilov (2013) in measuring sociopolitical legitimacy as the "number of formal relations between the members of a population and key institutions in a population's environment" (p. 89). Specifically, we counted trade-publication stories about collaborations that had at least one reported source (quote or paraphrase) that was a national-level or international-level authority in the journalism space. Authorities include national news outlets, national field-level journalism organizations (journalism foundations, nonprofits, professional associations, training centers), national news corporations, or national political authorities: *1 = Yes, at least one authority is sourced in the story and 0 = None sourced*. The level of sociopolitical legitimacy per year is the percentage of stories each year with at least one authority sourced.

*Normative legitimacy* refers to desirability or approval within the professional field. The tone of each story was coded as positive, neutral, or negative toward news collaborations. Measures were collapsed into either *positive = 1* and *neutral or negative = 0*, and level of normative legitimacy per year was measured as the percentage of stories each year coded as positive. The number of stories per year was also recorded for all legitimacy types in addition to percentages.

### **Findings**

RQ1 asked whether LNCs would become more isomorphic (similar) across the years. Results are mixed: Collaborations have become more similar to one another in size, but with more varied types of organizational partners. From 2016 to 2020 (a range with more collaboration cases and therefore more reliable data), the standard deviations of the number of organization partners in collaborations decreased, indicating growing isomorphism. However, the means for isomorphism of organizational types across the years showed a slight downward trend, with collaborations showing greater variety and less isomorphism in organizational partner types over time, counter to expectations (Table 1).

**Table 1. Population Growth of Local News Collaborations: Density, Foundings, Isomorphism, Collaboration Success, and Formal Agreements, 2000–2020.**

Years	Population Growth		Isomorphism		Collaboration Success		
	Foundings <sup>1</sup>	Density <sup>2</sup>	Isom. type of org <sup>3</sup>	Isom. number of orgs <sup>4</sup>	Formal agreements %	Awards won %	Number of partners <i>M (SD)</i>
2020	40	135	70.59	8.85	60.00	---	7.39 (9.51)
2019	38	107	73.38	9.64	65.00	16.00	7.63 (9.57)
2018	26	87	75.13	9.89	76.20	14.70	8.92 (9.90)
2017	36	79	77.18	23.08	50.00	14.70	6.46 (9.89)
2016	29	71	77.71	47.08	65.00	13.30	9.36 (15.09)
2015	19	54	78.32	26.86	57.10	10.70	7.44 (7.59)
2014	13	42	76.45	2.35	62.50	8.00	4.77 (2.35)
2013	9	32	82.11	12.01	40.00	2.70	9.56 (17.50)
2012	1	29	---	---	---	---	---
2011	5	28	82.11	12.01	75.00	0	11.60 (9.71)
2010	8	25	82.11	12.01	50.00	12.50	7.00 (5.61)
2009	13	22	78.44	15.80	42.90	15.40	9.85 (15.75)
2008	1	11	---	---	---	---	---
2007	0	10	---	---	---	---	---
2006	3	10	---	---	---	---	---
2005	1	7	---	---	---	---	---
2004	1	6	---	---	---	---	---
2003	3	5	---	---	---	---	---
2002	0	2	---	---	---	---	---
2001	0	2	---	---	---	---	---
2000	2	2	---	---	---	---	---

<sup>1</sup>Foundings: Count of collaborations started in each year

<sup>2</sup>Density: Cumulative count of collaboration foundings minus collaboration mortalities

<sup>3</sup>Higher mean = greater isomorphism. These are the means of the differences per year between the percentage of collaborations with and without different partnering organizations. Figures from 2010 to 2013 are means of percentages for this range of years; the means of combined years in these ranges were used because of the low number of collaborations for individual years.

<sup>4</sup>Lower standard deviation = greater isomorphism. These are standard deviations of the number of organizations within collaboratives for each year.

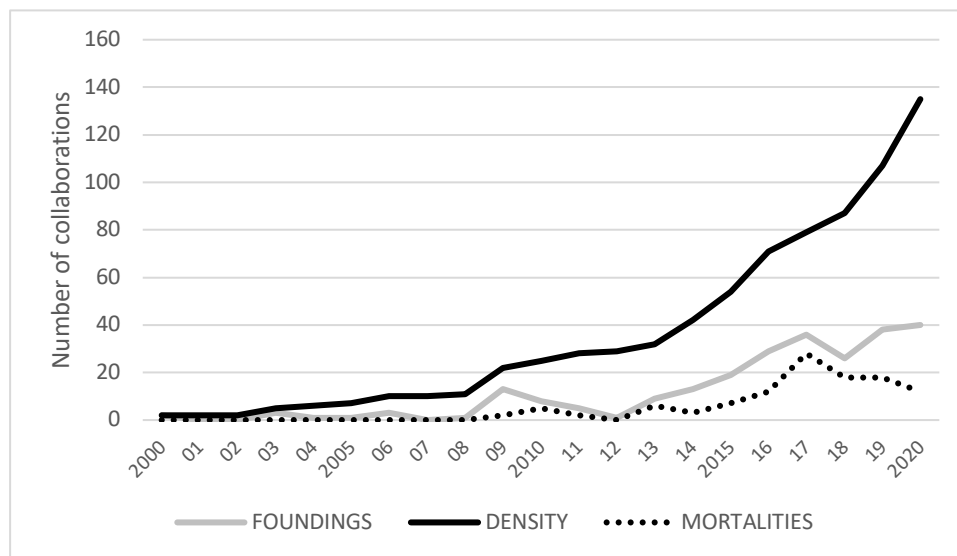
<sup>5</sup>Data were not calculated for fewer than 5 cases (collaborations).

<sup>6</sup>Data on 2020 awards were not used because many awards were still being judged.

RQ2 asked if density growth would correlate more strongly (and positively) with a change in the level of isomorphism than with evidence of success. Again, the results were mixed. Contrary to expectations, isomorphism by type of organizational partner declined as density increased. However, isomorphism by collaboration size correlated with density more strongly than did awards won, a measure of collaboration success. As the population took on more collaborations, collaborations became more similar in size; the

correlation was weak ( $r = .12$ ), but it was stronger than between density and awards won. Awards won showed some increase but with an uneven pattern and with a recent rise following an earlier decline. Mean number of partners, the other success measure, showed no clear pattern over time.

These first two research questions are grounded in the assumptions of a population at midlife, which may help explain the weak and mixed results. The isomorphism of the LNC population is not fully evident and increases only inconsistently as the population density grows across the years. These findings seem a better fit for a population that is young and budding, as density is still rising at an accelerated rate in 2020 (see Figure 1) rather than tapering off in the expected S-curve shape, which begins to flatten at the top. In young populations, population members are still seeking resources and niches and are responding “instrumentally” to their environments; they engage in relatively less mimicry than other population members (Lowrey, 2012, p. 228). Adapting to particular conditions and surviving may be more important than appearing appropriate to others.

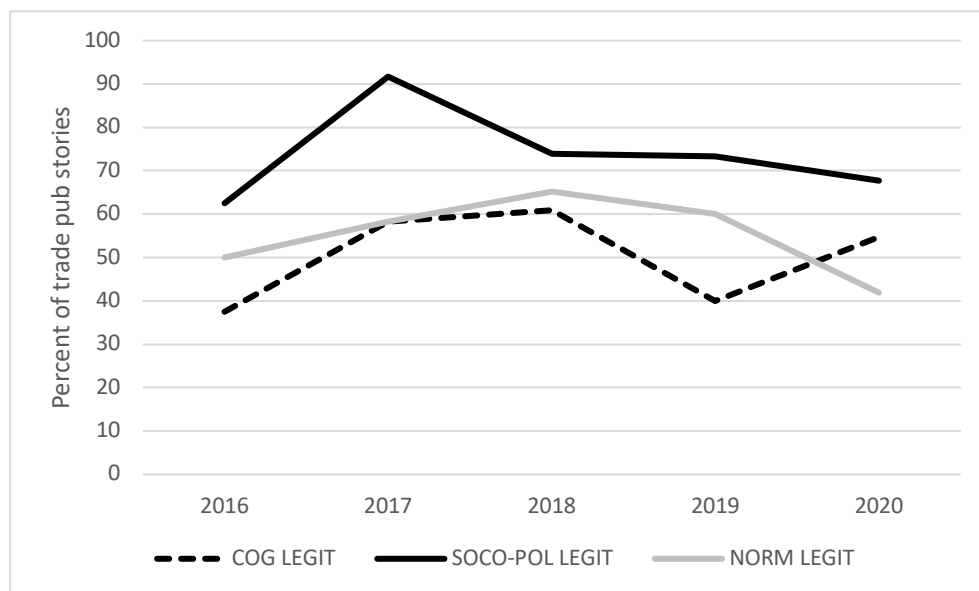


**Figure 1. Population growth of local news collaborations, 2000–2020: Density and number of foundings and mortalities.**

RQ3 questions whether legitimacy levels will rise at the same rate as density, suggesting a causal relationship. Evidence across the different dimensions of legitimacy indicates that it does. The rise in the number of trade stories that focus on news collaborations is similar to the rise in population density from 2011 forward (2011 is the earliest year that at least five stories were found; Tables 1 and 2). Bivariate correlations show a very strong correlation ( $r = .87$ ). Additionally, a sizable 275% increase in the number of trade-publication stories from 2015 to 2018 precedes a sizable 70.8% increase in density from 2017 to 2020. Growth in stories also occurs at the same time as sizable growth in foundings. These results are consistent with the assumption from population ecology that “legitimation of a form increases the founding rate of populations using that form” (Hannan & Freeman, 1989, p. 132). According to this perspective,

legitimacy reduces uncertainty about would-be entrants to the population, making it more likely that they will join the population.

Both Table 2 and the line graph in Figure 2 show an increase in cognitive and normative legitimacy from 2016 to 2018 and an increase in sociopolitical legitimacy from 2016 to 2017. These increases correlate with a moderate rise in population density, and they precede a steeper rise in density between 2018 and 2020. Though based on visual observation rather than statistical comparison, these apparent patterns are consistent with the assumption that a rise in a population’s legitimacy encourages new entrants to a population. In the final year of the analysis (2020), normative legitimacy—the positive “buzz” about collaborations in the field—declined substantially, while cognitive legitimacy ticked back up.



**Figure 2. Changes in cognitive, sociopolitical, and normative legitimacy of local news collaborations, 2010–2020.**

RQ4 questions whether stronger legitimacy corresponds to a greater likelihood that collaborations will be governed by formal agreements. According to the results, these do not correspond. There is no meaningful correlation between any of the legitimacy measures and the percentage of collaborations with formal agreements. These percentages fluctuate unpredictably across these years (Tables 1 and 2).

RQ5 questions whether rising density would correlate more strongly (and positively) with the rate of legitimacy than with evidence of success (percentage per year that won awards and the mean number of collaboration partners). The findings indicate a stronger correlation between density and legitimacy. The number of stories mentioning LNCs (a measure of legitimacy) correlates more strongly with rising density ( $r = .87$ ) than do either success measure—the rate of awards won or number of partners. In addition, the rise in the three dimensions of legitimacy that precedes steep growth in population density indicates that density is more strongly related to legitimacy than to evidence of collaboration success.

**Table 2. Changes in Legitimacy, 2010–2020.**

Years	Legitimacy (Trade-Publication Stories)				
	Cognitive <sup>1</sup> % ( <i>n</i> )	Sociopolit % ( <i>n</i> )	Normative % ( <i>n</i> )	Number stories on collabs <sup>2</sup> ( <i>n</i> )	Number stories on local news ( <i>n</i> )
2020	54.80 (17)	67.70 (21)	41.90 (13)	31	158
2019	40.00 (12)	73.30 (22)	60.00 (18)	30	144
2018	60.90 (14)	73.90 (17)	65.20 (15)	23	101
2017	58.30 (14)	91.70 (22)	58.30 (14)	24	77
2016	37.50 (3)	62.50 (5)	50.00 (4)	8	35
2015	--- <sup>3</sup>	---	---	4	56
2014	---	---	---	3	30
2013	100.00 (5)	100.00 (5)	100.00 (5)	5	19
2012	60.00 (3)	100.00 (5)	80.00 (4)	5	24
2011	40.00 (2)	20.00 (1)	20.00 (1)	5	31
2010	---	---	---	3	40

<sup>1</sup>Percentage of stories coded as legitimate.

<sup>2</sup>Number of stories focused on collaborations: This is also a measure of legitimacy.

<sup>3</sup>Data in 2014 and 2015 were not calculated, as there were fewer than 5 stories.

Finally, RQ6 asks about comparisons in degree of legitimacy across the three types of legitimacy and about patterns in these types over time. From 2016 to 2020 ( $n = 116$  stories), sociopolitical legitimacy was the most prevalent ( $M = 67.07$ ,  $SD = 19.26$ ) (see numbers of stories per year in Table 2.) Approximately two-thirds of the stories about collaborations across these years cite national-level leaders and experts in the field. This suggests that during the population's early years, LNCs draw more legitimacy from the field's authority figures—company executives, directors of foundations and professional organizations, and prominent experts. Sociopolitical legitimacy is followed by normative legitimacy ( $M = 52.57$ ,  $SD = 10.26$ ) and cognitive legitimacy ( $M = 48.58$ ,  $SD = 10.53$ ). Cognitive legitimacy's relatively smaller mean in this young population is consistent with population ecology theory: Rising taken-for-grantedness is generally viewed as correlating with rising density, and so, theoretically, cognitive legitimacy should be more evident later when the population has more members.

Generally, across all three legitimacy types, we see a rise until roughly 2018, followed by a small drop-off. An exception is cognitive legitimacy, which increases from 2019 to 2020 (Figure 2). This rise in 2020 could mark the beginning of a rise in widely understood taken-for-grantedness. This is speculative, but the drops in normative legitimacy and sociopolitical legitimacy in 2019 and 2020 could also be a consequence of rising taken-for-grantedness. More recent stories about collaborations are more likely to simply introduce and define this new phenomenon in the field and less likely to emphasize promotional descriptions and affirming quotes from industry leaders.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the LNC population is part of a wider ecosystem or "community" of multiple populations of local news media (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2020; Bryant & Monge, 2008). As such, it would help to know more about the broader community of local news media—particularly how

the legitimacy of local media is changing, as this comparison can provide a meaningful context for changes in LNC legitimacy. In Table 2, we provide the number of trade publications per year that focus broadly on local journalism.<sup>4</sup> The number of stories about local journalism is roughly 4–6 times the number of stories about LNCs. Furthermore, both collaboration and local journalism story counts climb precipitously over time. This comparison indicates that the LNC’s climb in professional prominence may be partly a consequence of the rising attention that the field’s professional institutions and trade media have given to local journalism in general.

### Discussion

Predictions for the growth and development of the population of local news collaborations are grounded in assumptions about midlife populations. These assumptions come from prior studies of new media forms (Lowrey, 2012; Sherrill, 2020; Weber et al., 2016)—that is, populations that have developed and have begun to level off in terms of the number of members (density), showing the start of an S curve. The continuing upward rise of the LNC population’s density suggests that collective thinking about LNCs and convergence in a dominant, legitimated form and set of practices are still in the early stages, and collaborations are still experimenting and adapting to their particular conditions.

Neither measure of isomorphism showed a strong positive correlation with density. These findings are also consistent with the dynamics of a young population: Density is still accelerating, which suggests legitimacy is growing and that no “ceiling” on growth is yet in sight. This encourages variation, as collaborations keep experimenting in search of success, certainty, and stability. The study also found an uneven pattern of collaboration success over time, as measured by awards won and the number of collaboration partners, and the use of formal agreements was not clearly rising. It appears that agreement about best practices is still budding. Agreed-upon practices are important, as prior literature on collaborations suggests that trust and reduced uncertainty among collaboration partners is vital to the success of news collaborations (Bryant, 2020; Jenkins & Graves, 2019), a finding that is consistent with population ecology studies (Aldrich et al., 2020; Lowrey, 2012) and with literature on interorganizational relationships (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Williamson, 1981).

However, there are some signs of the emergence of an LNC population as an increasingly coherent “species” in terms of appearance and behavior. Legitimacy, as measured by the number of trade-publication stories about collaborations, correlated strongly with the growth of the LNC population, and substantial growth in trade-publication stories preceded the biggest increases in population density. Furthermore, cognitive legitimacy levels rose in the final year, a rise that corresponded to rising density. Rising cognitive legitimacy, or taken-for-grantedness, reduces uncertainty and attracts new entrants to the population (Aldrich et al., 2020). However, we note that the number of stories on collaborations was relatively low compared with the number of stories on local news in general, and this proportion held relatively steady across the years. This finding is inconsistent with a picture of growing legitimacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Stories about local news were collected by searching “local news” and “local journalism” in titles of articles published in trade publications used in the measure of LNC legitimacy. These were searched on publication websites and in EBSCO Host.

We also found high sociopolitical legitimacy. Journalism's institutional leaders spoke most favorably about LNCs during the emergence of the collaboration form, indicating the important roles they play in shaping and promoting new ideas. The diminishing number of supportive quotes in recent stories may also hint at population development. This is because growing awareness of LNCs would make the mere promotion of the phenomenon less necessary while making applied how-to information more necessary, as local actors try to put this field-level innovation into practice at various local sites.

These mixed findings reveal an ongoing need for collaborations to experiment but also a need for a clear road map for this growing form. Variation of LNCs is high, and variation seems likely to continue, given that these are *local*-level collaborations. While much of the "theorization" (Greenwood et al., 2002) about local news collaboration is being generated by national-level institutional actors (research and training centers, media labs, nonprofit centers, etc.), collaborations are *local* in their instantiation, and this means that the collaboration form must be adapted to a great diversity of local-level needs. There are implications for this both at the level of the individual collaboration partner (e.g., news organizations) and the journalism field level. Because of the unsettled nature of the form of collaboration, news managers should keep experimenting with different practices to see what works best. At the level of the journalism field, the variation of the many local instantiations of LNCs can offer the field's institutional "theorizers" valuable lessons, and these can be shared across professional venues, encouraging modeling, synthesis, and isomorphism, and generating best practices.

#### ***Study Limitations***

Much of the data on the collaborations themselves is derived from voluntarily offered self-reports. It is unlikely that the data set is comprehensive; however, the high standing of the Center for Cooperative Media in the field means that this collection is well known and widely publicized. Future analysis would benefit from a more systematically constructed list that is less reliant on self-reporting; furthermore, this is a young population, so we have data only on the earliest years. We also note that measures of legitimacy are limited by content analysis limitations, particularly the inability to understand the context that produced the text. In this case, we cannot know the attitudes of the relevant professional actors in the field who produce the trade articles or are cited in them.

#### ***Future Research***

A follow-up analysis of this population's growth after more "maturing" would shed further light on the institutionalizing tendencies for this developing form. Would we then see isomorphic tendencies, where population members mimic one another's practices/forms more than they respond to changing, disruptive local news environments? Or are external conditions so difficult and unpredictable that local news producers will continue to behave "instrumentally," primarily seeking whatever efficiencies, audiences, revenue, and survival that niches offer? Population ecology predicts that institutional behavior will set in at some point, but this point may be shifted later because of unusually challenging, uncertain times in local journalism. Further research on the broader context of the "community" of local news, with its multiple and interacting populations, would be helpful beyond this study's limited comparison of LNC and local news legitimacy. An international comparison of these communities would also be a logical next step.



In some ways, greater isomorphism would ease the start-up and maintenance of local news collaborations. Collaborations promise benefits in “producing better local accountability journalism” and “addressing topics that might otherwise go uncovered” while also enhancing journalists’ community engagement and doing so with cost savings (Jenkins & Graves, 2019, p. 41). The sooner that best practices are widely agreed upon, the easier it will be for beleaguered local news producers to develop and maintain news collaborations. While not an immediate problem, the potential dysfunction from institutionalizing is also worth noting. It is true that shared agreement can grow trust, routines can make operations more manageable, and both can encourage replicability of collaborations and population growth. However, as with any growing population, it is important to counter the tendency to rely on settled, familiar routines, and managers should continue to monitor the changing external environment. After all, there is little evidence that the local news environment is becoming less disruptive or more predictable.

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