

BLUEPRINT FOR LEVERAGE:

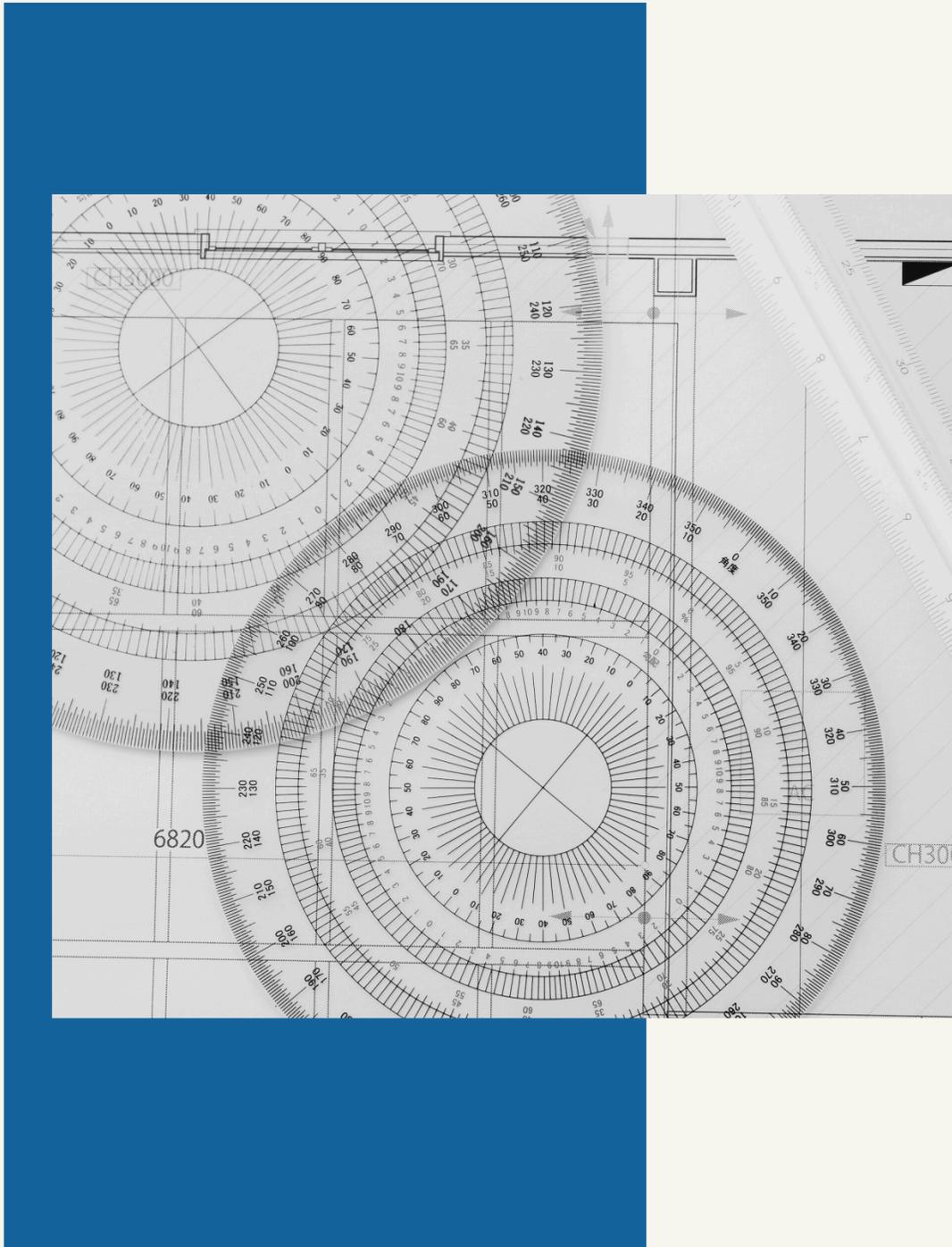
Turning Ecosystem Research into
Power, Strategy, and Community Trust

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November 17, 2025





What do we mean by “Ecosystem Research”?

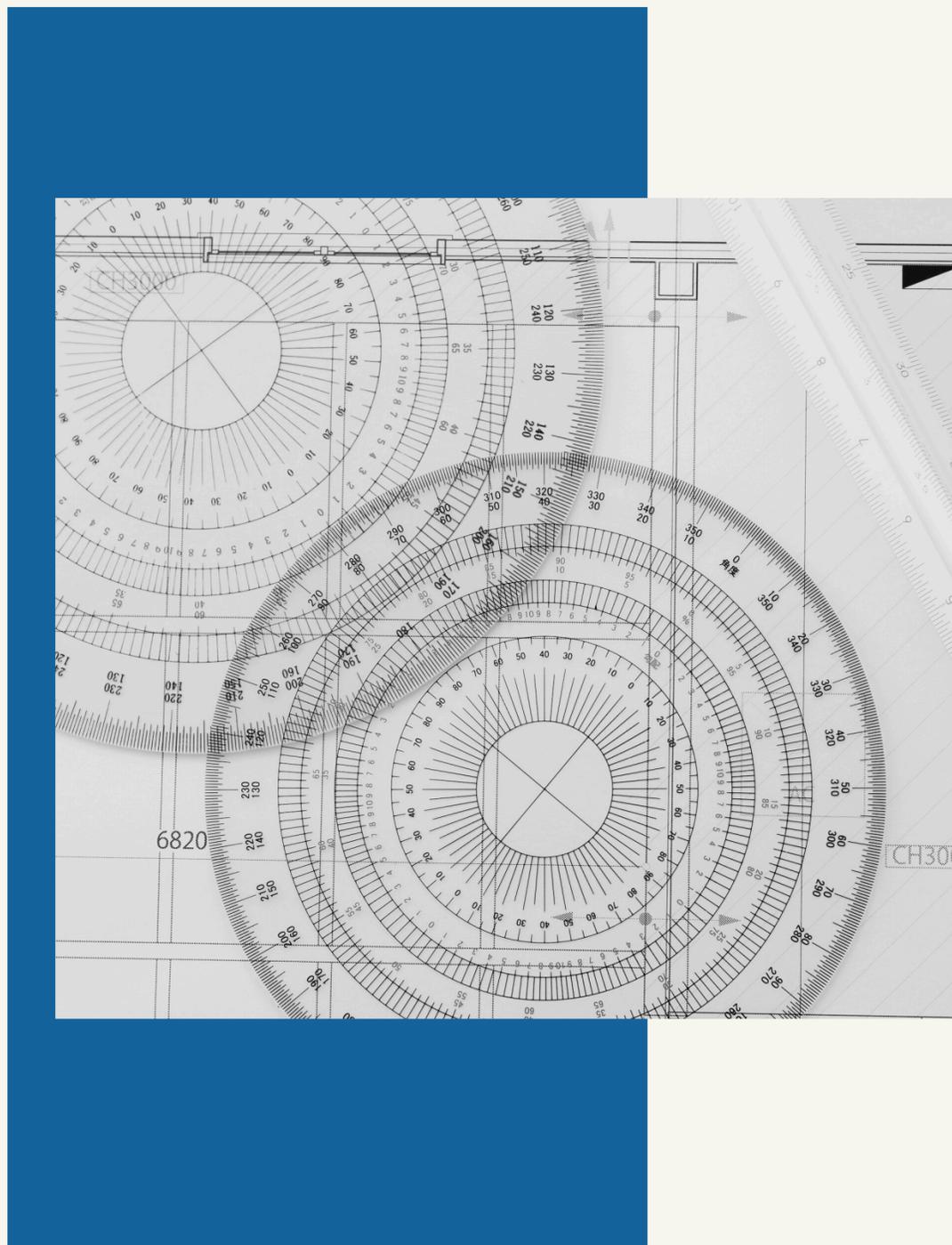
Data and qualitative insights that show how news and information circulates, benefits, falls short, or harms

Understanding the flow of trust and attention

Capacity and collaboration mapping

Surfacing assets and leaders

Centering the community rather than the media industry



What does “Ecosystem Research” consist of?

— Landscape scan of local news and info providers

— Audience research

— Community listening (needs, habits, gaps)

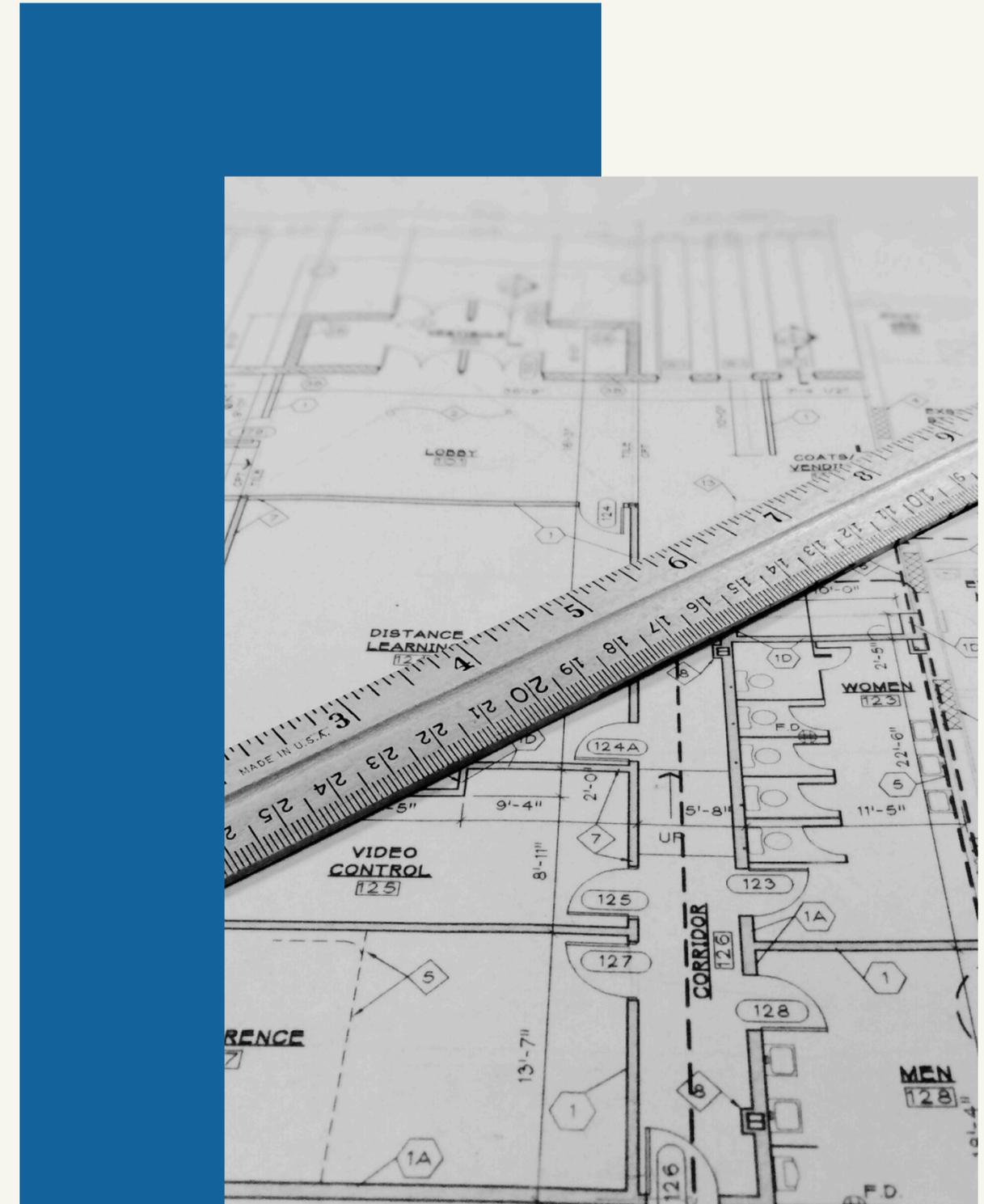
— Content analysis

— Foundational research (what needs to be covered)

Why do the Research?

Because your information ecosystem is your civic immune system. If it's not actively maintained, the pathogens win.

- Healthy info ecosystems = creative and collective solutions, accountability, community safety
- Poor ecosystems = policy failures, misinformation, and social fragmentation
- Community foundations already hold relationships, capital and convening power, and are mandated to serve the public good (news/info = public good)
- Research prevents guessing and making assumptions



There is so much good!

Ecosystem research can be a map of what's possible; It doesn't have to be a diagnostic of scarcity!



Solutions Circles at the Mississippi Free Press



Rocky Mountain Community Radio



Wichita Info Challenge Winners



Cicero Independiente

Missed Opportunities Happen When...

Research is treated as a one off report

Learnings aren't integrated across departments

The loop isn't closed with communities who participated

It's used to justify a short grant cycle without a long-arc strategy

There isn't appropriate staff time allocated to implementation



The Leverage Points



1. Strategic Communications

Using the research to inform local narrative and shore up the foundation's position as a civic actor

Talking points grounded in data

Press releases, speeches, op-eds rooted in community needs and successes

Annual report content

Messaging that helps residents know **why** the foundation is investing in local news/information

Data-informed communication strategy in key civic moments (e.g. elections, community crisis)

2. Fundraising (Institutional + Individual)

Research becomes a donor activation tool

“Here’s what’s broken/where the opportunity is here’s where your dollars help.”

Briefings for donor-advised fund (DAF) holders

Segmented donor strategies based on research findings

Multi-year pitches tied to real gaps and opportunities

Show the ROI of funding journalism (accountability outcomes, audience reach, civic participation)

3.

Community Engagement & Trust Building

Using research to deepen relationship capital.

Community listening events informed by findings

Sharing back what you learned (closing the loop = trust)

Co-designing solutions with neighborhoods most impacted

Creating a community advisory groups around information equity

Using research to build / repair damaged trust with excluded groups

4. Ongoing Data Infrastructure

Treating the work as longitudinal, not episodic.

Set a plan for 2-3 year updates (or a mid-point update, if a time-bound strategy)

Consider what a “pulse check” looks like at regular intervals

Ongoing internal engagement with learnings (a dashboard is nice, but not necessary)

Sharing data infrastructure with local universities, community colleges, or civic orgs

Tracking community shifts over time

5.

Cross-Sector Convening Power

Organizing the ecosystem rather than passively funding it.

Newsrooms

Libraries

Civic Tech Orgs

Local Government

Funders

Business stakeholders

Faith Communities

Community Orgs

6. Policy Influence

Using research to shift systems, in addition to supporting outlets

Use findings to brief city council, state legislators, school boards

Inform public funding models for local news

Push digital equity and public communications policies

Advocate for local public media investment

Position the foundation as a data-informed civic interlocutor



Best Practices for Successful Implementation

1.

Build Internal Champions Early

Cross-functional team, anchored with a lead champion

Create shared language around your strategy

Clear benchmarks and regular progress check-ins

2.

Co-Design With Community

Community drives the agenda

Community helps sense-make of the findings

Community is part of the response, not an afterthought

3.

Budget for Implementation AND Research

Communications

Follow-up listening

Convenings

Staff time

4.

Create a 2-3 Year Strategy Arc

Who do you want to influence?

Which Donor Segments need education?

What community tables need strengthening?

What data do you want to pay attention to, and what do you want to measure, year over year?

5. Bring in Practitioners

Journalism

Philanthropy

Strategic Planning

Community Engagement

In Practice

- **Grow your coalition:** Invite funders and champions to the table to learn with you and collectively set priorities. This promotes a shared understanding and will help unlock relationships and resources.
 - **Engage information providers:** Share the research with the community of local media, civic organizations, nonprofits, and other trusted messengers. Facilitate conversations about how they will use it. Encourage collaboration.
 - **Engage your community:** Share the research publicly and offer the community opportunities to learn what you learned. Build community understanding and trust. Co-design your solutions.
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**Let your
research
be your
compass!**

