

Exposing Local Sources: The (Non)Use of Secure Tip Communication Methods by Local US News Organizations

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Introduction Individuals who provide information to news organizations face substantial security risks. Although relatively usable and secure tools for soliciting news information from the public exist, little is known about how frequently they are deployed by hundreds of local and community-focused news organizations throughout the United States. Yet the robustness of local news organizations is crucial to the health of a democratic society: a strong local news ecosystem correlates with greater civic engagement¹, reduced polarization² and reduced government spending and corruption³. Our work reveals that while webforms are prevalent, virtually no local news organizations clearly support secure (e.g., encrypted and/or anonymous) methods of exchanging information with the public, revealing an important gap in the usable security infrastructure.

Methodology Using samples from prior work⁴, the authors systematically reviewed the websites of large (N=50), online (N=38) and local (N=303) US news organizations, recording the existence of any page with language that encouraged visitors to submit news-related information; we call this a *tip page*. If this existed, we then recorded the presence or absence of each of the communication channels indicated in Figure 1.

Results

- **Large/online news organizations offer multiple forms of encrypted communication channels**, such as Signal, GPG, SecureDrop and WhatsApp, these channels were almost nonexistent at the local level.
- **More than half (59%) of local news outlets offered an embedded web form** as a means of contact. This appears to correlate to the use of particular the content management systems (CMS).
- **Many news organizations do not explicitly indicate how the public can reach them with news information.** Of the nearly 400 news organization websites reviewed, only 86% of large (N=43), 59% of online (N=23), and 41% of local (N=125) news organizations clearly indicate how they can be reached with news "tips," even as these become more important for accountability journalism.

Future Work While web forms offer robust security properties in a "first contact" scenario,⁴ they do not provide a secure channel for verifying audience-submitted information. Future work will include interviews with staff at these organizations to understand what drives their decisions to offer certain contact methods over others.

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News Organizations That Offer Each Communication Method on their "Tip Page"











		Large	Online	Local
	Email	72%	87%	43%
	Phone	63%	22%	35%
	Postal Mail	49%	48%	13%
	Web Form	42%	48%	59%
	Signal	26%	22%	0%
	GPG	16%	4%	0%
	Secure Drop	12%	39%	0%
	Proton Mail	9%	0%	0%
	SMS	7%	0%	0%
	Whats App	7%	9%	0%

Figure 1: Percent of type of news organization whose tip page mentions each communication method

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