

ON THE PULSE OF LOCAL NEWS

A Quantitative Look at Attitudes Toward Virginia's Newspapers

Research Commissioned by
the Virginia Press Association



VPA

BACKGROUND

There's no denying it: for more than a generation, newspapers have been hit hard. Faced with a variety of obstacles – declines in ad revenue, the widespread availability of free content on digital platforms, the pressure to enhance profitability by owner-investors, even attacks on their credibility from no less than the nation's highest office – newspapers have worked hard to find a new normal.

While headlines have tilted toward stories that bemoan these challenges, newspapers, including and especially local newspapers throughout Virginia, have quietly pivoted to new revenue models, harnessed digital resources, and developed increased efficiencies – all while maintaining an abiding commitment to objectively serving local communities with facts, information and insights. That resilience among newspapers may be the headline that is too often not written.

This period of disruption will no doubt continue, leaving us a vital question: where do we go from here? As we assess both the challenges and opportunities for newspapers in the years ahead, a critical factor will be the public's perception as to the value of local newspapers – as a source of reliable news, as a means of holding governments to account, as a trusted community pillar and as an integral component of a democratic system.

OVERVIEW

To gauge public attitudes toward newspapers – their popularity, value, effectiveness and trustworthiness – the Virginia Press Association retained Richmond-based SIR to undertake a comprehensive research study. One of Virginia's oldest and most reputable research firms, SIR was able to engage more than 6,000 readers of Virginia-based newspapers. To our knowledge, "A Quantitative Look at Attitudes Toward Virginia's Newspapers" is the single largest research study of its kind, and the results – some predictable, some surprising – provide important insights

into what newspapers are doing well and where opportunities for improvement exist. Employing these findings in strategic ways could well lay an important foundation for positioning Virginia's newspapers as a model for their peers across the country.

METHODOLOGY

An online survey was developed for two comparative groups: (1) the General Public, a group of 1,444 Virginia adults who read the news at least weekly as identified and recruited by online survey panel providers; and (2) 5,014 readers of Virginia newspapers (referred to throughout this report as Virginia Readers) whose email addresses were provided by 108 VPA member publications. The surveys were conducted in Summer 2021.

"[The] resilience among [Virginia] newspapers may be the headline that is too often not written."

KEY FINDINGS

In analyzing the results of the survey, four predominant themes emerged:

- 1. LOCAL NEWS.** *For nearly all local topics, readers overwhelmingly turn to local newspapers as their primary source.* The fact that readers rely on local newspapers as their go-to source for what is happening in their communities is not surprising. What is eyebrow-raising is the domination of local newspapers in this category, especially when you consider the myriad online and electronic sources that are available elsewhere. And yet, four in five Virginia Readers say that they prefer local newspapers for coverage of local news, politics, business and entertainment. And readership is steady and reliable: more than 70% of Virginia Readers read their local paper daily, and 75% say it's a useful news source, outpacing other news sources.
- 2. TRUST.** *Readers trust local newspapers.* Both the General Public and Virginia Readers consume news from a variety of sources, but both groups see local newspapers as the most trusted, outperforming national newspapers and TV/radio news sites in trustworthiness. Readers find local newspapers to be reliable, familiar, accurate and objective in their reporting.
- 3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.** *Readers see local newspapers as engaged in their community, playing an important role in maintaining accountability, transparency and keeping the public informed.* Readers feel a sense of connection to their local newspapers. They see them not only as a vital source of keeping people informed but also as understanding the community, including its history. More than nine in 10 readers, for example, recognize the importance of local newspapers in keeping government and elected officials accountable.
- 4. NOT TELLING YOUR STORY.** *Readers feel good about newspapers but do not believe they are executing their roles effectively.* The survey data pointed to “performance gaps” that highlight the difference between what readers feel is most important for local newspapers to provide and how well their local newspapers perform at meeting those expectations. When it comes to attributes such as keeping citizens informed, keeping government officials accountable and serving as a necessary part of the fabric of the community, readers rated local newspapers as performing “below expectations.”



WHAT THIS MEANS: AN OPPORTUNITY

Those of us who care about the health and integrity of the newspaper business can take considerable comfort in much of what newspaper readers told us by way of this survey. Both the General Public and Virginia Readers spoke unambiguously about the value they find in newspapers, especially local ones. Their views also reflected a strong understanding of the critical role that newspapers play in keeping the citizenry of our democracy informed. All of that is encouraging news.

However, we must keep in mind an important context: these results were culled from those who regularly read newspapers. While it's an important starting point, we must not assume that these attitudes are shared by those who never pick up a paper. Those who get their news elsewhere are likely to have opinions that are less positive than those held by those in the survey sample.

Still, measured against the competition – TV/radio outlets, national newspapers, digital outlets – local newspapers are in a strong position. They are trusted, valued, and esteemed as an essential part of local communities, even as readers tell us there is room for improvement. Positioning local papers

as “anchor community institutions” – an authentic position if there ever was one – will help undergird their integrity in reporting the news, engendering trust, keeping governments accountable and reflecting the community's values.

And so, in this context, the results of this survey are a starting point, a statistical benchmark of current attitudes and a de facto gauntlet thrown down as a challenge to do better. While there is so much to feel good about, we cannot feel so good as to be lulled into inaction. The abiding implication is it's time to get to work in helping instill a palpable attitude that Virginia's newspapers are meeting the public's expectations in serving a vital role in their communities.

CONCLUSION

Newspapers are in the business of reporting news, and most do it well. But is that enough? While you can make the case that it should be, the fact is that newspapers cannot take for granted that the public – or even newspaper readers themselves – have an appreciable understanding of the values that undergird news gathering, the process by which reporting takes place and the decision-making that goes into producing the next edition. Toward that end, it's time for newspapers to be more proactive about promoting themselves and engaging the public with greater transparency. With this level of intentional engagement, local newspapers can forge stronger connections that can place local papers firmly at the center of their communities and showcase how these papers merit continued public support and trust.

ADDENDUM

Results of Key Findings

The following graphs support the four key findings of the research and present other notable survey results.



KEY FINDING #1:

For nearly all local topics, readers overwhelmingly turn to local newspapers as their primary source.

Both the General Public and Virginia Readers prefer their local papers for all local topics except for weather, which they receive from TV and radio sites.

News Source Preferences – General Public

PREFERRED SOURCE FOR NEWS TOPIC	National newspapers	Local newspapers	Magazines	TV/radio news sites	Social media sites	Podcasts
National news	28%	7%	2%	51%	11%	3%
Local news	4%	48%	2%	36%	10%	1%
National politics	27%	7%	2%	50%	11%	4%
Local politics	6%	53%	2%	27%	8%	2%
National sports	17%	8%	5%	50%	18%	2%
Local sports	4%	47%	3%	32%	14%	1%
National business	35%	6%	6%	44%	7%	2%
Local business	5%	58%	2%	21%	12%	1%
National weather	19%	12%	1%	56%	11%	1%
Local weather	4%	34%	1%	48%	12%	1%
National entertainment	16%	5%	13%	31%	33%	2%
Local entertainment	4%	40%	4%	22%	28%	1%

TOP SOURCE

News Source Preferences – Virginia Readers

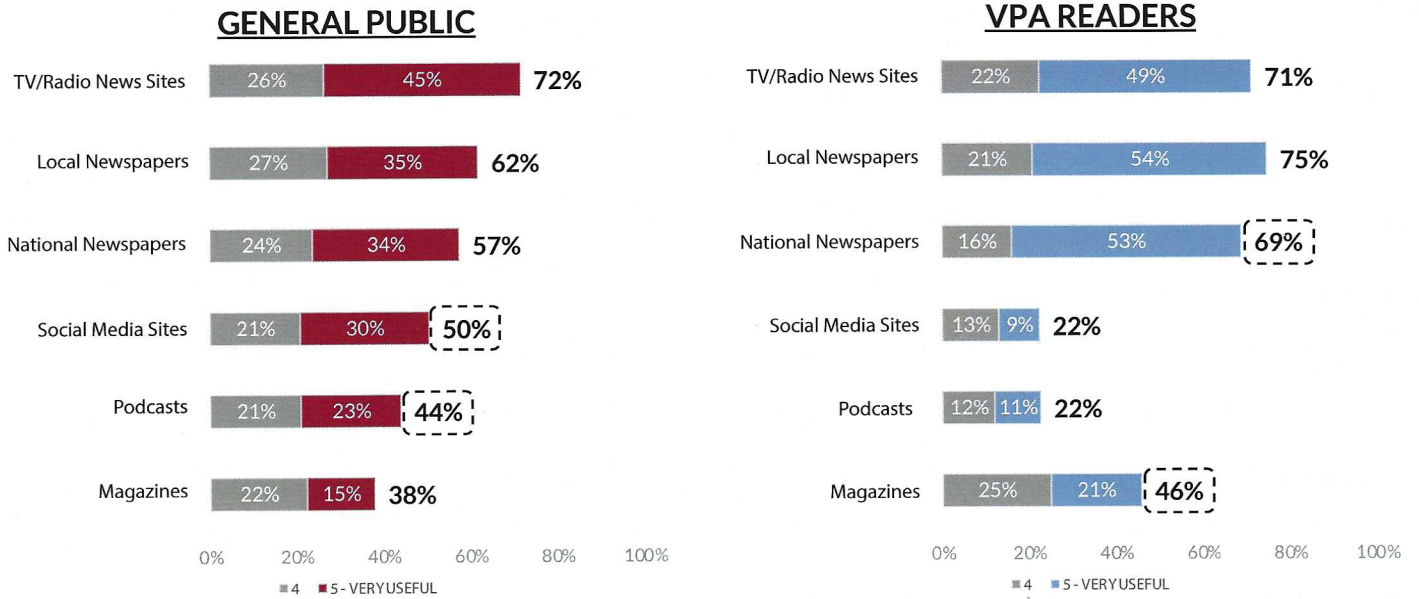
PREFERRED SOURCE FOR NEWS TOPIC	National newspapers	Local newspapers	Magazines	TV/radio news sites	Social media sites	Podcasts
National news	44%	13%	1%	39%	2%	1%
Local news	5%	78%	0%	15%	2%	0%
National politics	46%	12%	2%	37%	2%	1%
Local politics	7%	83%	0%	8%	2%	0%
National sports	33%	27%	2%	35%	3%	0%
Local sports	7%	80%	0%	11%	2%	0%
National business	52%	15%	4%	27%	1%	1%
Local business	4%	88%	0%	5%	2%	0%
National weather	23%	17%	0%	57%	3%	0%
Local weather	7%	43%	0%	45%	5%	1%
National entertainment	35%	16%	11%	30%	7%	1%
Local entertainment	5%	83%	1%	5%	7%	0%

TOP SOURCE

KEY FINDING #1 (con't):

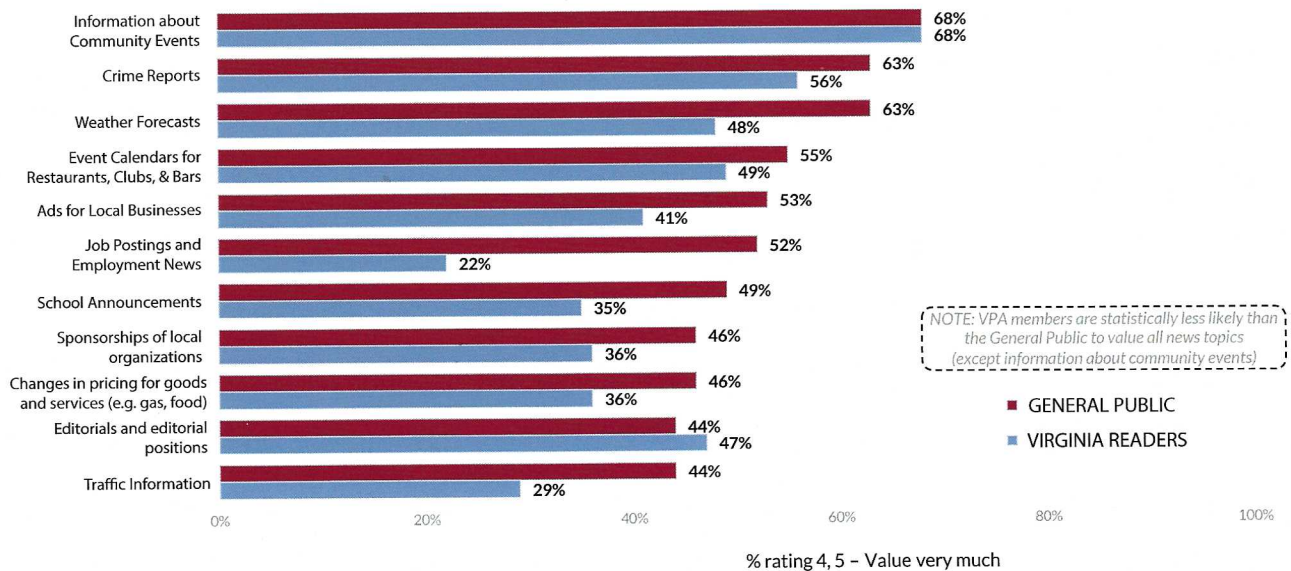
For nearly all local topics, readers overwhelmingly turn to local newspapers as their primary source.

The General Public turns to local papers because they find it more useful than any other medium besides TV and radio, and Virginia Readers find their local papers the most useful of all sources.



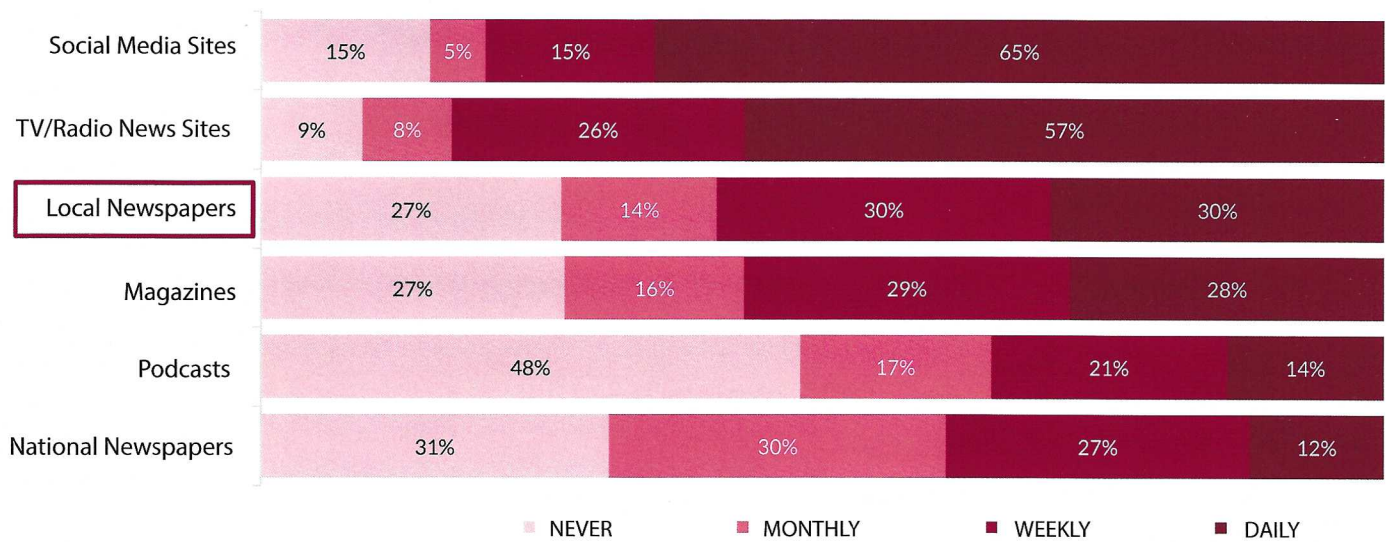
When they open their local papers, readers search for a variety of topics, and the General Public and Virginia Readers are aligned in finding the most value in learning about community events.

Local News Impressions – Topics Valued

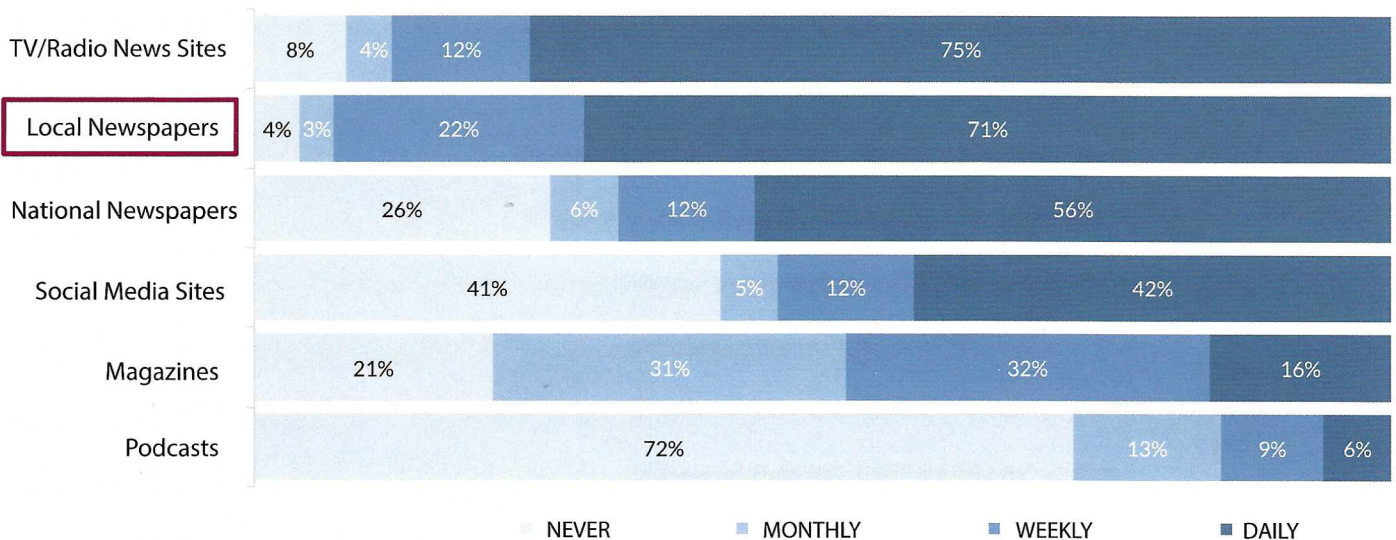


Because of the usefulness and value of the information readers find on the topics they're looking for, nearly three-fourths of General Public readers and the vast majority of Virginia Readers say they turn to their local newspaper sources daily or weekly.

News Source Reading Frequency – General Public



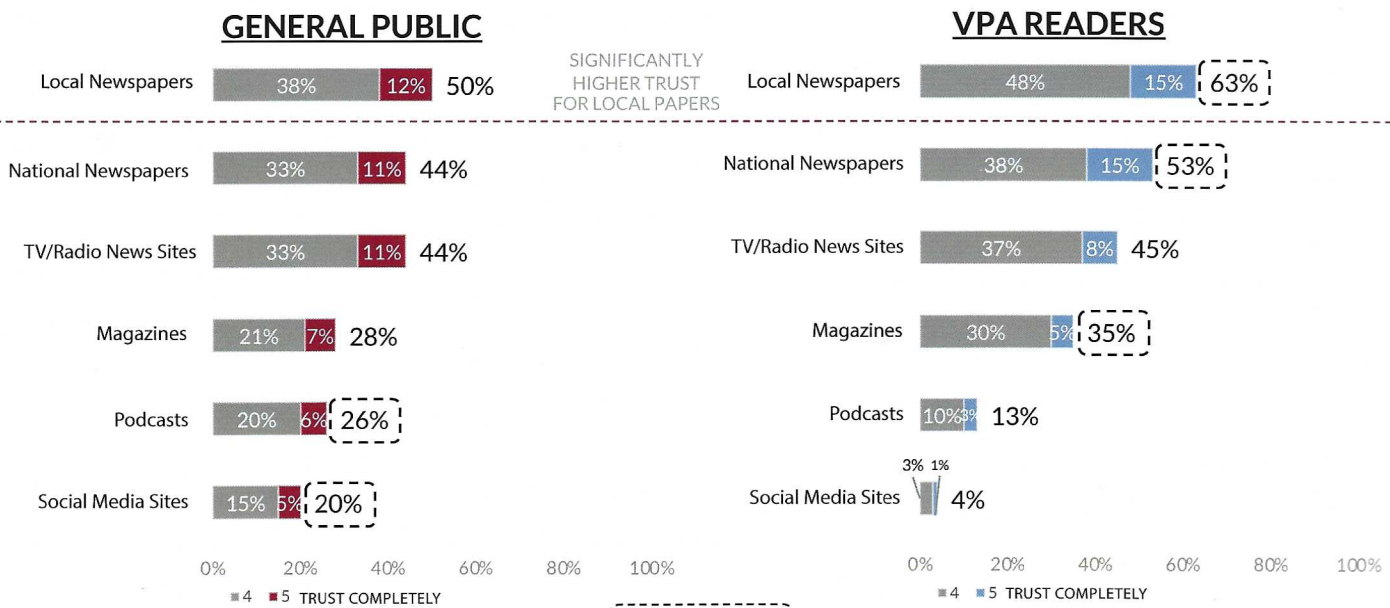
News Source Reading Frequency – Virginia Readers



KEY FINDING #2: Readers trust local newspapers.

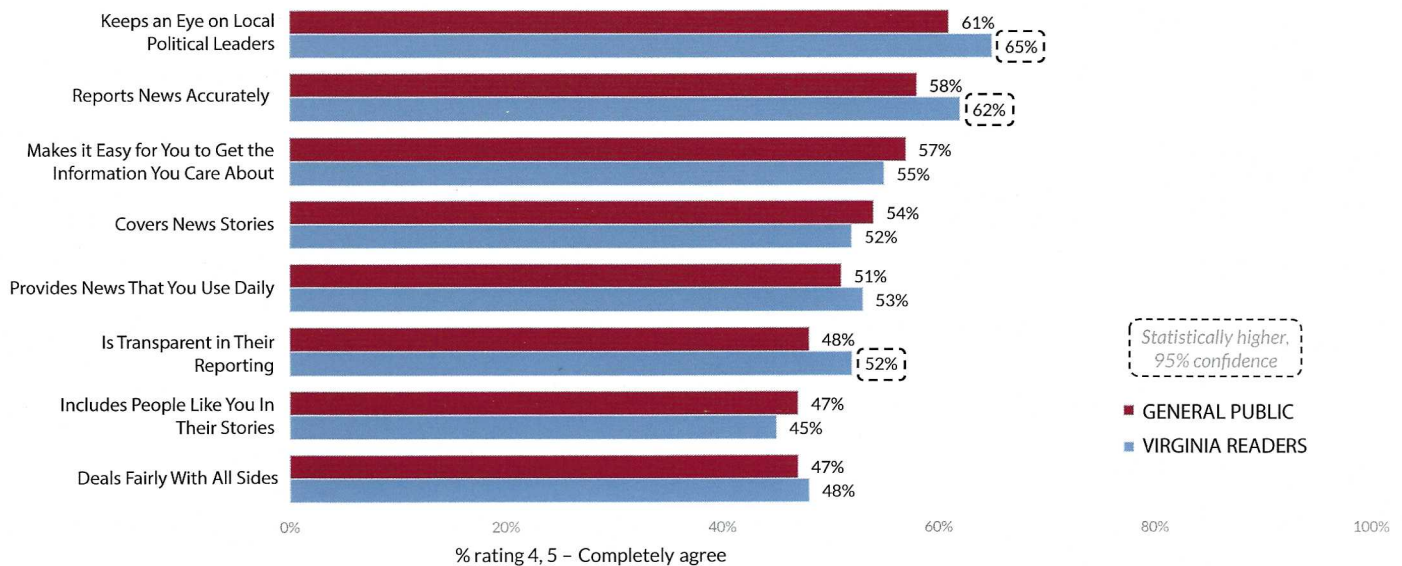
Both the General Public and Virginia Readers trust their local papers above all other sources.

News Source Trustworthiness



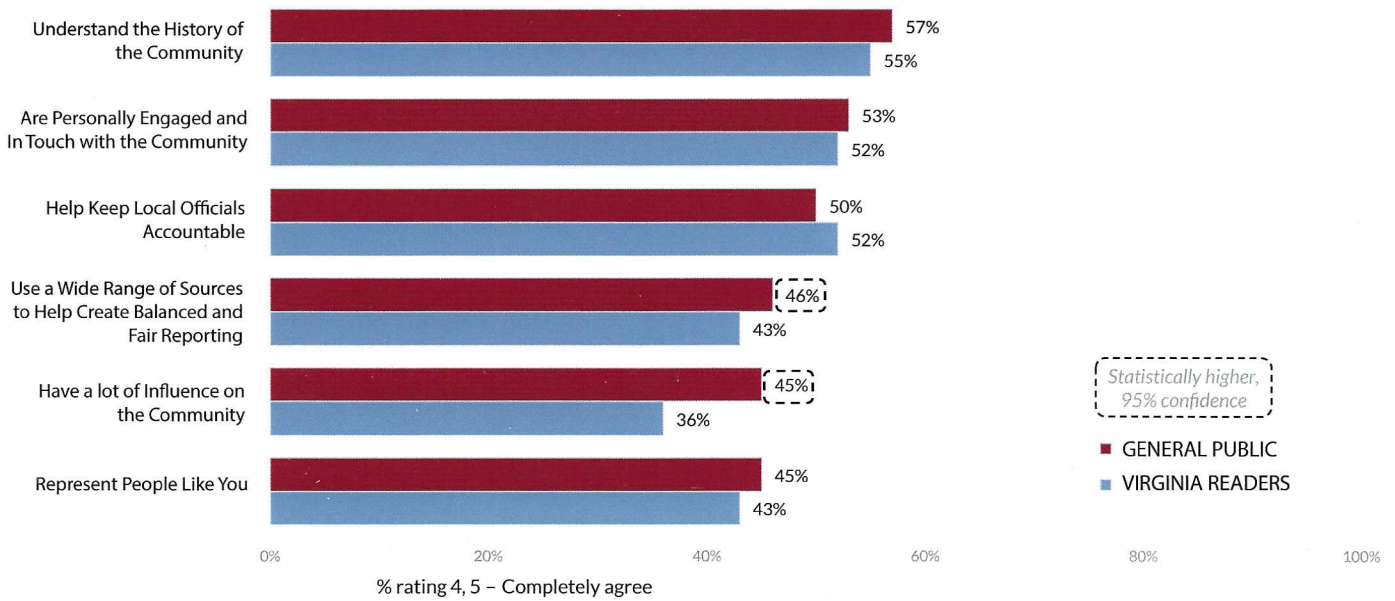
Local papers earn readers' trust by maintaining accountability for local political leaders, reporting news accurately and thoroughly, and making it easy for readers to find the information they care about.

Local News Impressions



Trust is also established and reinforced through local journalists' ability to engage their communities and understand the history of the places and people they cover, while using their place of influence to maintain accountability and ensure fair and balanced reporting.

Local News Impressions - Journalists

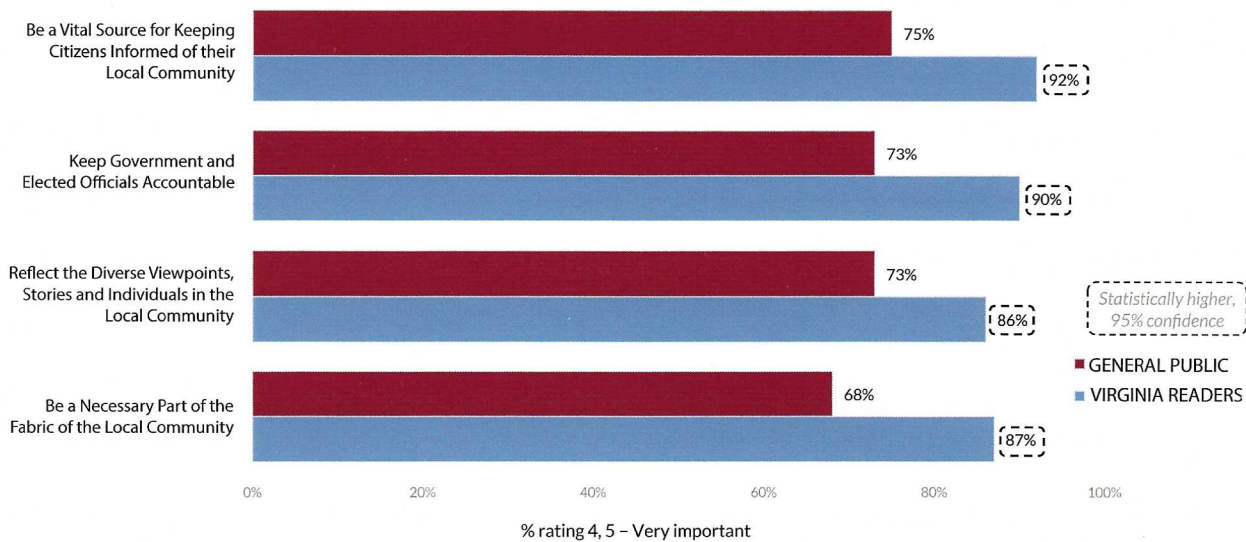


KEY FINDING #3:

Readers see local newspapers as engaged in their community, playing an important role in accountability, transparency and keeping the public informed.

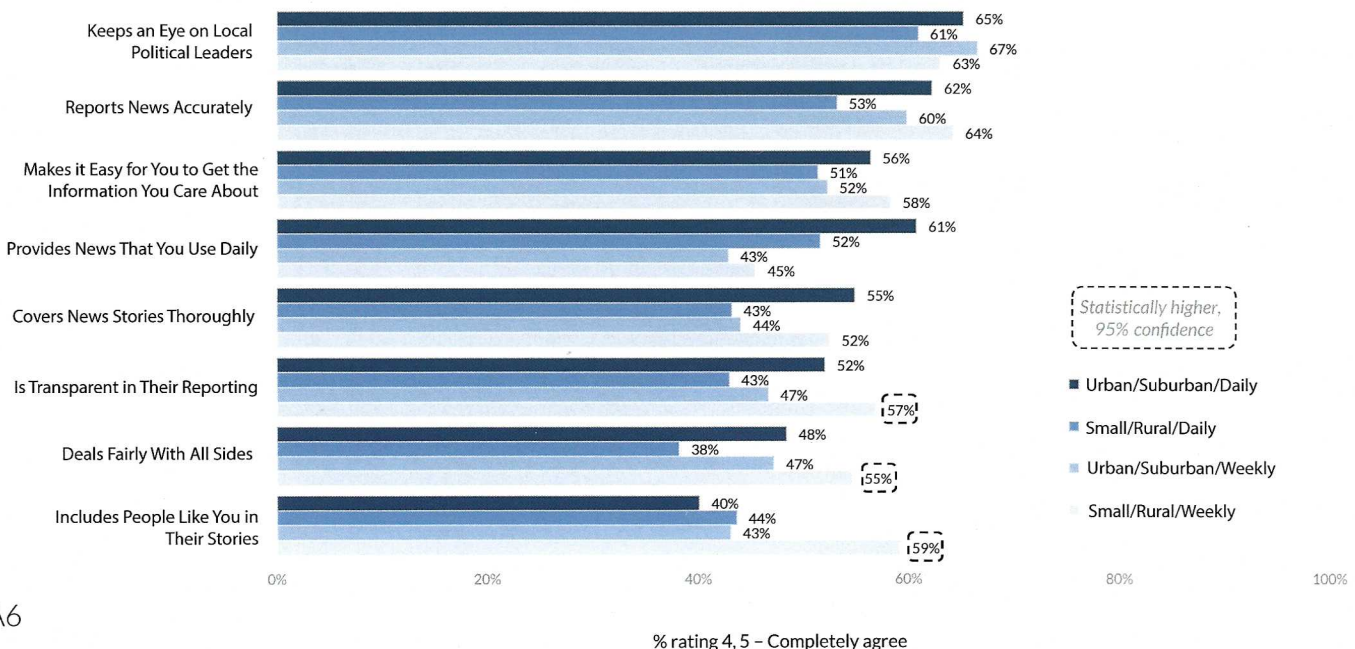
The General Public, and Virginia Readers especially, say it is very important to keep residents informed, hold officials accountable, and be a part of the fabric of the community.

Local News Impressions - Importance



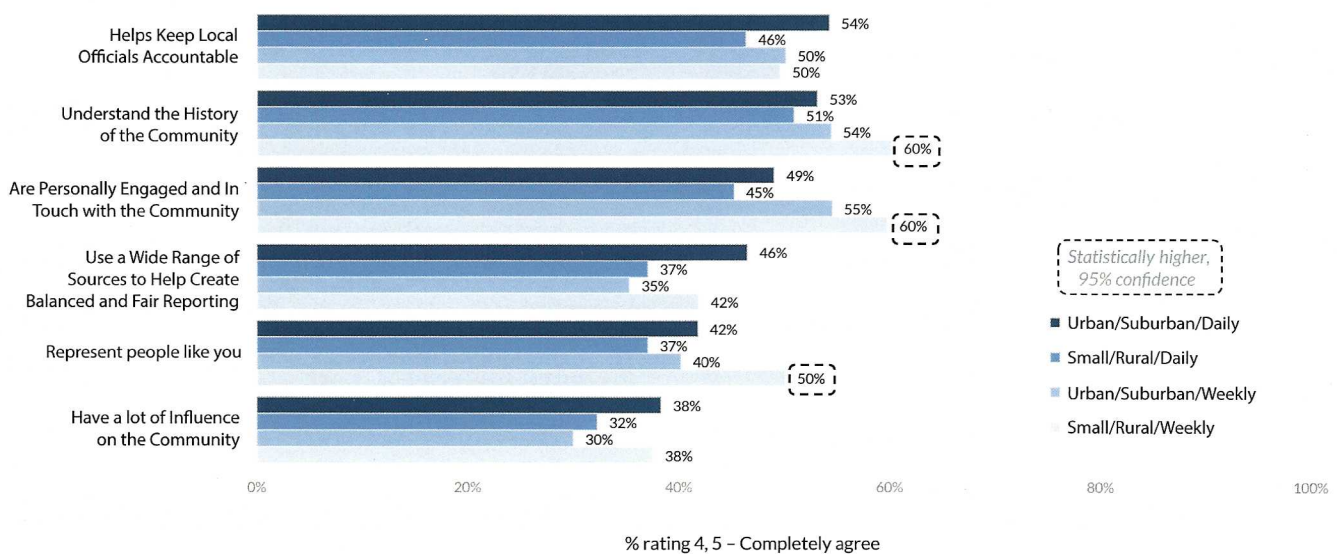
Overall, Virginia Readers tend to agree that their local papers keep an eye on community leaders, report news accurately, and make it easy to find the information they care about. Ratings around the daily usefulness of news, as well as the transparency, thoroughness, and fairness of reporting, tend to be more variable depending on the type of publication and the community served.

Local News Impressions, Virginia Readers By Region/Daily/Weekly



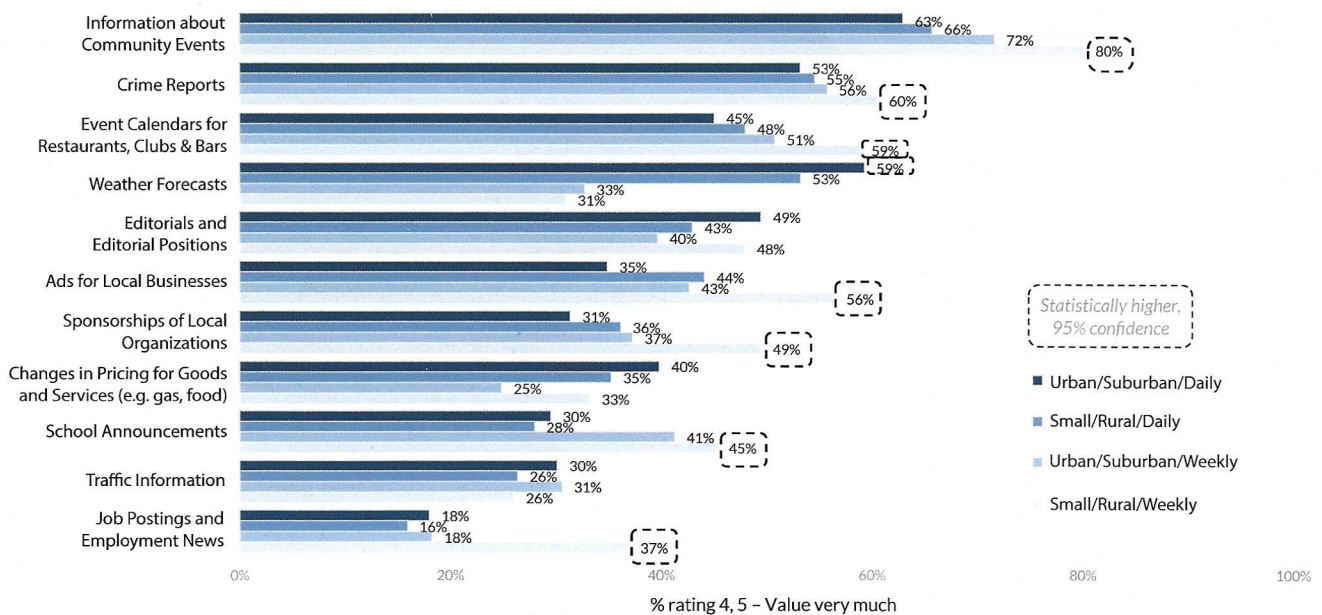
Similarly, Virginia Readers tend to agree on the performance of their local journalists, with small, rural weekly readers feeling their journalists to a better job of understanding the history, as well as personally engaging and representing their communities.

Local News Impressions – Journalists, Virginia Readers By Region/Daily/Weekly



Though topics of interest vary by type of paper and community served, information about community events is the most sought after on the part of Virginia Readers.

Local News Impressions – Topics Valued, Virginia Readers By Region/Daily/Weekly

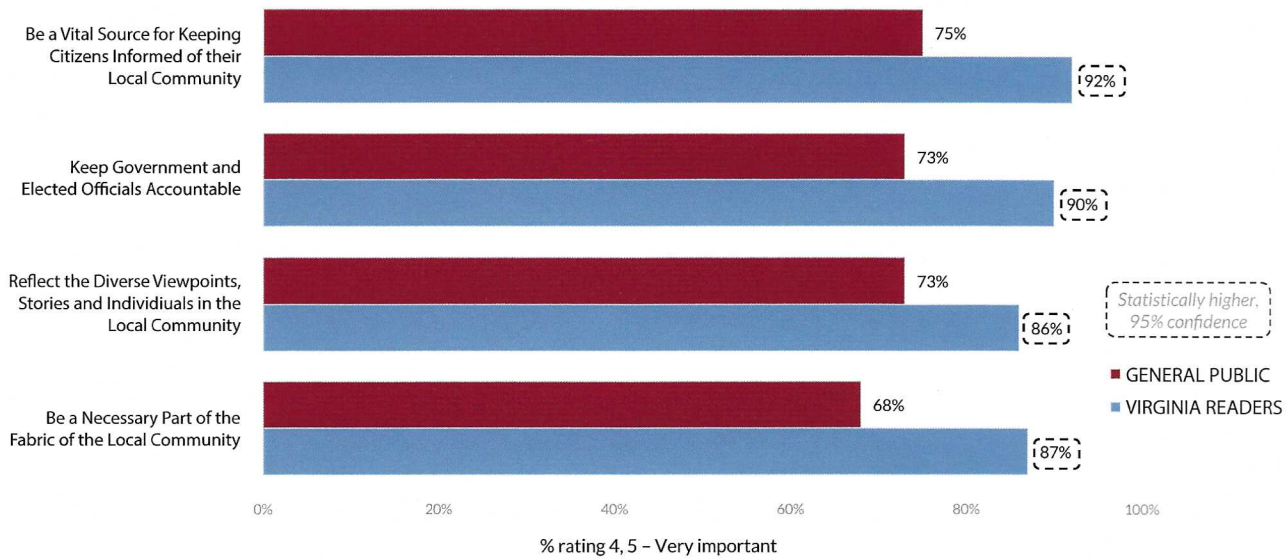


KEY FINDING #4:

Despite the high regard readers have for the place of Virginia's newspapers, readers are less convinced that the papers are executing their role effectively.

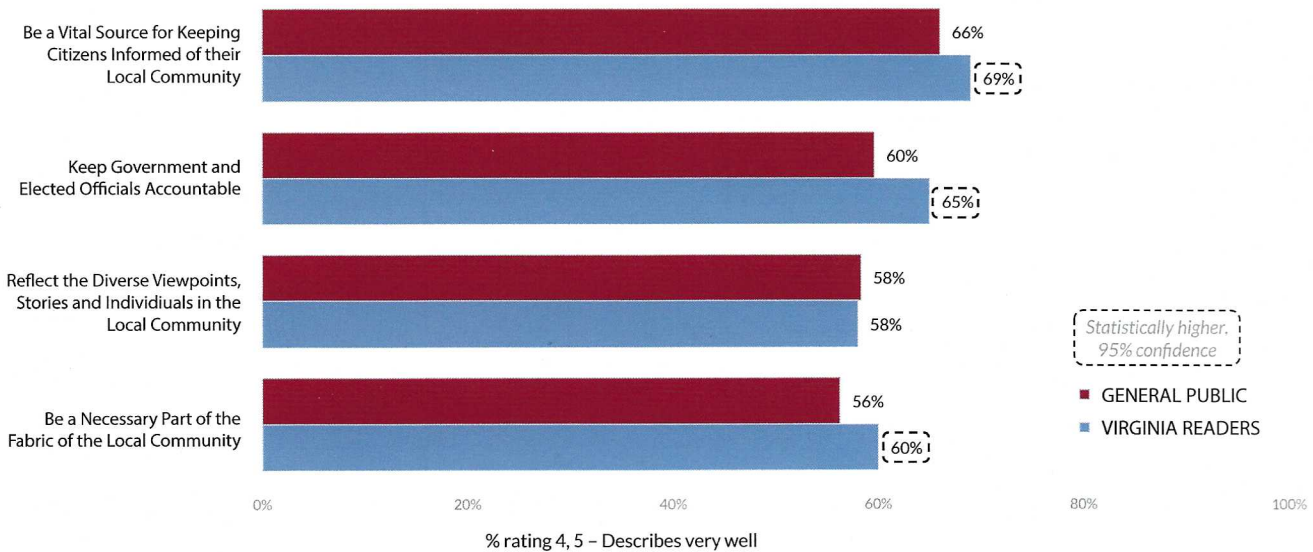
Recall that all readers, and especially Virginia Readers, feel it is somewhat or very important for their local papers to keep residents informed, hold officials accountable and be a part of the fabric of the community.

Local News Impressions – Journalists



However, a significantly fewer portion of readers across the board feel that their local papers are succeeding at meeting their expectations when it comes to keeping residents informed, holding officials accountable, and being a part of the fabric of the community.

Local News Impressions – Performance



In looking at the discrepancy between how papers perform in the eyes of readers versus the importance readers attach to certain attributes, local papers underperform most at being a necessary part of the fabric of communities, reflecting the diversity of local communities, and keeping officials accountable.

Local News Impressions – Gap Analysis

ATTRIBUTE	GENERAL PUBLIC			VIRGINIA READERS			
	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	
Be a vital source for keeping citizens informed of their local community	75%	66%	88%	92%	69%	75%	100% Perfect alignment
Be a necessary part of the fabric of the local community	73%	60%	82%	90%	65%	72%	< 90% Below expectations
Reflect the diverse viewpoints, stories and individuals in the local community	73%	58%	80%	86%	58%	67%	> 110% Above expectations
Keep government and elected officials accountable	68%	56%	83%	87%	60%	69%	

Local News Impressions – Gap Analysis, Virginia Readers By Region/Daily/Weekly

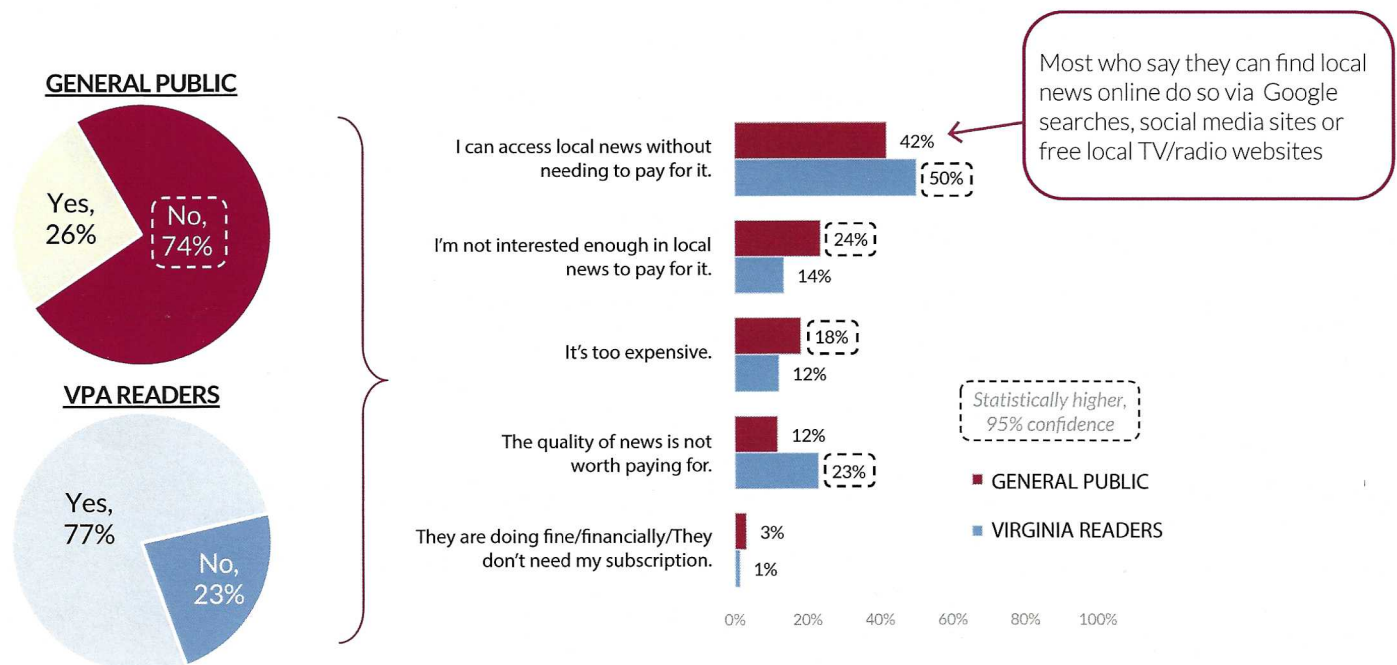
ATTRIBUTE	URBAN/SUBURBAN DAILY LOCAL PAPER			SMALL/RURAL DAILY LOCAL PAPER			URBAN/SUBURBAN WEEKLY LOCAL PAPER			SMALL/RURAL WEEKLY LOCAL PAPER			
	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	IMPORTANCE	PERFORMANCE	GAP SCORE	
Be a vital source for keeping citizens informed of their local community	92%	67%	73%	92%	69%	75%	92%	69%	75%	92%	74%	81%	100% Perfect alignment
Be a necessary part of the fabric of the local community	91%	64%	71%	89%	64%	72%	91%	61%	68%	88%	71%	81%	< 90% Below expectations
Reflect the diverse viewpoints, stories and individuals in the local community	87%	62%	72%	89%	58%	66%	84%	57%	68%	88%	58%	66%	> 110% Above expectations
Keep government and elected officials accountable	86%	59%	68%	82%	52%	63%	85%	54%	63%	86%	61%	72%	

OTHER NOTEABLE FINDINGS:

Subscription Rates

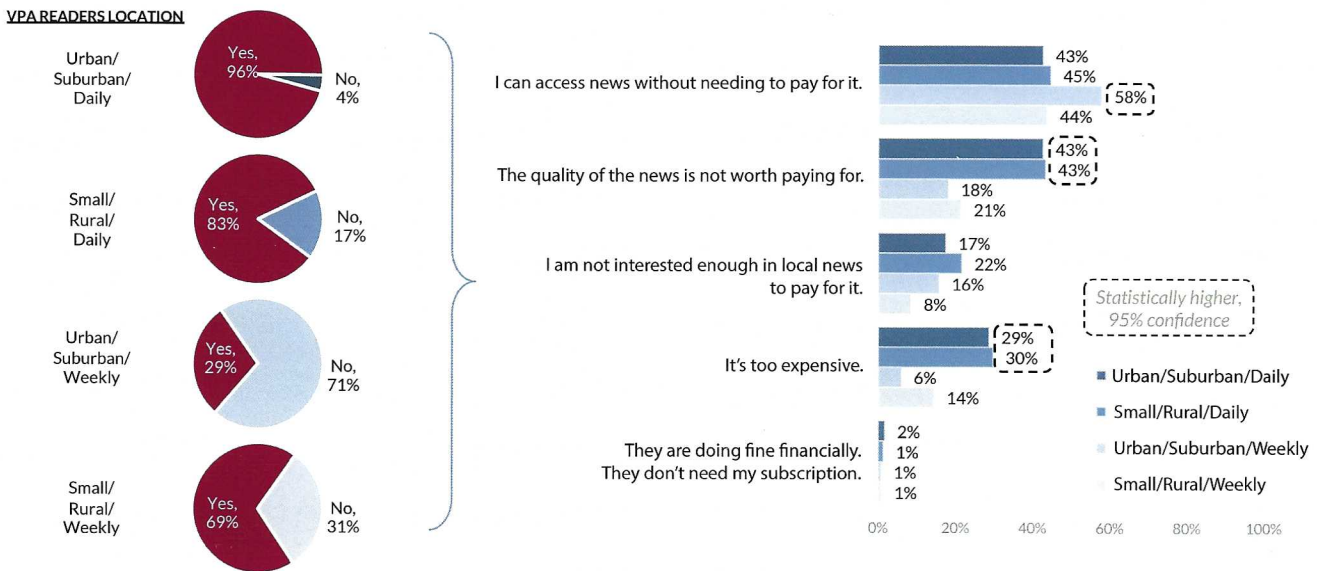
Over one-fourth of General Public respondents and over three-fourths of Virginia Readers subscribe to their local paper. While reasons for not subscribing vary, the majority overall feel they get enough local news without having to pay, and nearly a quarter of Virginia Readers feel the quality of the journalism doesn't warrant the expense.

Local News Subscriptions



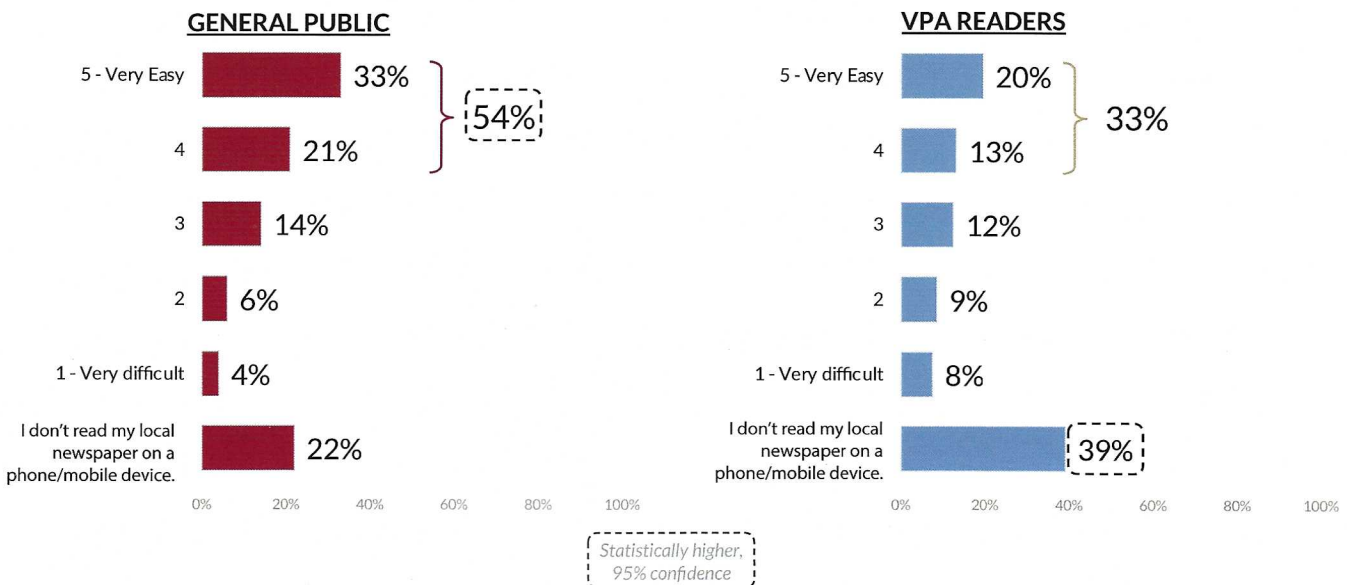
Most Virginia Readers subscribe to their local paper except those in urban/suburban areas with weekly local papers. Meanwhile, many who don't subscribe feel they can access local news without paying, and those with daily local papers mention the quality and cost as barriers to subscribing.

Local News Subscriptions, Virginia Readers By Region/Daily/Weekly



While over half of General Public respondents find reading their local paper on a mobile device to be easy, nearly four in 10 Virginia Readers don't access their local papers on their mobile devices.

Ease Of Reading News On Moble Devices



On the Pulse of Local News: A Quantitative Look at Attitudes Toward Virginia's Newspapers is a compendium of findings from a survey of around 6,000 Virginians that was commissioned by the Virginia Press Association and conducted by the research firm, SIR.

For a copy of the complete study or for more details about the research, contact the VPA at (804) 521-7570 or deanam@vpa.net.

For more information about the Virginia Press Association, visit www.VPA.net.