

FOCUS GROUP BACKGROUND BRIEF



RESEARCH PROJECT

Advancing Sustainable, Reliable Journalism in New Mexico

CONVENER

Society of Professional Journalists, Rio Grande Chapter

RESEARCHER

New Mexico First

FUNDERS

Thornburg Foundation and Democracy Fund

- Focus group participants are urged to review this report before their discussion.
- Join us at one of these locations:
 - **Portales:** March 19, KENW-TV 52 Broadcast Center, Eastern New Mexico University, 1500 S. Avenue K
 - **Las Cruces:** March 20, NM Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum-Oregon View Room, 4100 Dripping Springs Road
 - **Santa Fe:** March 22, KSFR 101.1 FM, Santa Fe Community College-Room 570, 6401 South Richards Avenue
 - **Albuquerque:** March 23, KNME-TV, 1130 University Blvd NE



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Executive Summary

New Mexicans rely on accurate, reliable news coverage to inform their personal, economic and voting decisions. However, there are fewer journalists producing high-quality work, particularly in rural areas. This document provides background information on the condition of journalism in New Mexico and creates a foundation for focus group discussions across the state.

Across the country, most Americans worry about news bias or media inaccuracies. They lack faith in the press and are concerned about sensational coverage, an expansion of news sources promoting certain ideologies, a lack of investigative journalism, and inaccurate reporting. New Mexico residents share those concerns. Mainstream journalism here and nationwide is defined by newsrooms increasingly tasked to do more with less. This includes smaller staffs, less time and fewer resources.

In New Mexico, nearly every established media company is entering a second decade of shrinking staff sizes and diminished coverage. The state is home to 359 media outlets, the majority being radio and newspapers. Public and private television, online publications and a handful of magazines comprise the rest. Together, these media sources provide critical services, including investigative journalism. In the last decade, New Mexicans have witnessed unethical, or in some cases, criminal behavior in multiple levels of New Mexico government that investigative journalism helped to uncover. The need to support journalism's capacity to hold government and elected officials accountable as the "Fourth Estate" cannot be overstated.

This report provides a closer look at New Mexico's local news media platforms: print newspapers, online news outlets, radio, television, public journalism, and alternative or advocacy journalism. Regardless of the news medium, some challenges cut across all types of outlets, such as a shortage of qualified media professionals to do the work. In addition, some sources indicate that New Mexico has a shortage of Spanish-speaking or Native American media considering the diversity of our population. Addressing these and other challenges will include supporting the next generation of reporters as well as professional development for current journalists.

These current and future reporters will face a world that demands "fast news." This pressure on mainstream media to report information immediately often comes from news breaking on the Internet and on social channels like Facebook and Twitter, whether or not the source is valid. As a result, public trust can erode.

Rural communities have unique media access challenges. Research shows that people in rural areas tend to turn to newspapers over other traditional media. While this local trust is heartening, it may complicate the problem of getting reliable news to rural communities since their shrinking staffing levels make in-depth coverage on important topics highly difficult.

The issue of "orphan counties" affects some rural New Mexicans' ability to receive in-state programming. Instead, they receive programming from neighboring Texas communities. For example, Las Cruces residents receive El Paso television news and Clovis receives much of its programming from Amarillo rather than Albuquerque or Santa Fe. The programming communities receive is largely determined by Nielsen, which focuses on people's consumer markets rather than their news needs. Nielsen has concluded that eastern New Mexico and southern New Mexico are more closely allied with the Amarillo and El Paso media markets. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), as well as the cable and satellite television industries for the most part, honor Nielsen's market definitions.

In an effort to meet demand for fast-paced, accurate news and to do so amid the new realities facing media professionals, three progressive models may provide some answers: collaborative journalism, bringing together multiple reporters and editors to cover an issue; aggregate journalism, which curates existing news stories from multiple sources; and public-private partnerships, through which media outlets can partner with state universities, think tanks or nonprofits focused on policy to improve coverage or citizen engagement.

All these issues warrant further attention and potential local or statewide efforts. The following report offers details to inform such considerations.

Foreword

Purpose of this Report

New Mexicans need accurate sources of information they can rely on to make decisions for their families and businesses, engage in work to improve their communities, and take part in the democratic process. Although the need for accurate, trustworthy news is greater than ever, there are now fewer journalists producing high-quality work, particularly in rural areas outside of Albuquerque and Santa Fe. This document is intended to get people thinking and talking about fundable projects that could strengthen journalism throughout the state, as well as concrete ways to advance journalism locally. Specifically, it is designed to support a series of focus groups to explore ways to ensure that all New Mexicans have access to a variety of media sources offering varied perspectives, and that those sources are deemed trustworthy and relevant by residents.

This project is funded by grants from the Thornburg Foundation and the Democracy Fund.

Note: There are few right or wrong answers to any public question, and the problems and opportunities around our state's journalism and media capacity are complex. As a result, no brief explanation of the situation – including this report – can cover all available information and opinions. The working professionals and future journalists of New Mexico will lend their expertise to the question of how to strengthen journalism in New Mexico.

About New Mexico First

A statewide public policy organization, **New Mexico First** engages people in critical issues facing their state and communities. The nonpartisan, nonprofit group produces comprehensive policy reports – primarily on natural resources, education, health, good government and the economy. These analyses inform policy discussions, legislative options and often student learning as well. These documents also provide the foundation for New Mexico First's unique town halls and forums that convene citizens to develop proposals to improve the state. The reports are available at nmfirst.org. Our state's two U.S. Senators – Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich – serve as New Mexico First's honorary co-chairs. The organization was co-founded in 1986 by then U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici.

About Society for Professional Journalists

The nation's most broad-based journalism organization, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, SPJ promotes the flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry. It also works to inspire and educate current and future journalists through professional development, and it protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press through its advocacy efforts. The research project for which this report was commissioned was spearheaded by the Rio Grande Chapter of SPJ, which serves all of New Mexico and El Paso.

Authors and Reviewers

This New Mexico First report was prepared by Heather Balas and former *Albuquerque Journal* reporter and editor Autumn Gray. The section on Federal Communication Commission regulations was prepared by Ernie Sanchez, an attorney with extensive expertise on FCC matters. The writing team was advised by: Sarah Gustavus, New Mexico PBS; Carmen Lopez-Wilson, Thornburg Foundation; and Grant Taylor, New Mexico First.

WHERE DO WE GET OUR INFORMATION?

Throughout this document, we provide as many data sources as possible. We draw from published reports, newspaper and journal articles, first-hand interviews and online resources. All direct quotes are from interviews conducted for this report unless otherwise noted. We know that policymakers, researchers and students use our reports, so we provide the details you need to learn more. Footnotes provide short references to the complete citations in the detailed bibliography.

Section 1

The Condition of Journalism in New Mexico

A Landscape Overview

Across the country, most Americans believe news bias or inaccuracies are major problems today. National survey data reveal that people's top concerns about news media include the spread of inaccurate information on the internet and owners of news outlets attempting to influence the way stories are reported. Americans also worry about sensational coverage, bias in reporting and selection of stories, an expansion of news sources promoting certain ideologies, a lack of investigative journalism, and inaccurate reporting.¹

New Mexico residents share those concerns. Mainstream journalism here and nationwide is defined by newsrooms increasingly tasked to do more, with less:

- Reporters wrestle with writing more stories per day because fewer bodies exist to handle the news load and because social media and the internet drive instant demand for the latest information.
- There are fewer reporters, photographers and videographers, in part because pay is low, hours are long and odd, and the increasing workload leads to burnout.
- Reporters' attention is fractured among multiple jobs within the newsroom due to staff cuts.

Whereas at one time a reporter's job involved gathering information from multiple sources, double- and triple-checking facts, and producing a fair and accurate story on a deadline, that same reporter today handles myriad simultaneous responsibilities. He or she may need to be a photographer or videographer while conducting an interview, be responsible for crafting a daily blog, and maintain regular social media and website postings that align with the day's stories.

The results of that work environment are almost inevitable: an increase in shallow reporting, unverified information, undertrained and overworked staff, turnover, staff shrinkage, and loss of institutional knowledge.

In fact, most of New Mexico's established media companies are entering a second decade of shrinking staff sizes and diminished coverage. An evaluation of New Mexico's news industry counted the recent loss of some 30 news services due to closures, consolidations and start-up failures, the most impactful being the shuttering of the Scripps-owned Albuquerque Tribune in 2009.² The problems are worse in the state's rural areas, where community news is dominated by the Albuquerque and Santa Fe metropolitan. Residents from Farmington to Hobbs are left wondering why they should spend time on stories on urban crime or other reports irrelevant to their local lives.

The *Albuquerque Journal*, which has sustained a few rounds of layoffs in the last decade, continues to be the state's "paper of record," with a Sunday circulation of about 98,000 statewide. It also has a northern New Mexico edition that competes with the capital city's paper, the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. Both are local-family-owned, a rarity amid the country's media conglomerates, and both show commitment to local enterprise coverage and complex, investigative pieces.

The *Journal* and *New Mexican* stand in contrast to the state's biggest newspaper chain, Gannett, with seven properties, including the *Las Cruces Sun-News* and the *Farmington Daily Times*. As with any concentration of ownership or power, such publications are at increased risk for less diverse coverage, fewer representations of differing viewpoints, and increased influence from politicians and advertisers. At the same time, concentration of ownership can also reduce costs and increase production efficiencies.

Despite significant media outlet losses, readership/viewership remains fairly healthy among those that remain. New Mexico is home to 359 media outlets, the majority of which are radio and newspapers (202 and 74 respectively). Public

¹ (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2018)

² (Marcotte, 2017)

and private television, online publications and a handful of magazines comprise the rest. It is estimated that more than 700,000 of the state's two million people read a newspaper.³

Types of News Media

Depending upon whom you ask, this mix of media outlets represents either unlimited opportunity or precipitous decline. The following is a closer look at our local news media platforms.

PRINT NEWSPAPERS

New Mexico is home to 69 print newspapers (40 daily and 29 non-daily), including three major urban papers as well as multiple weekly or semi-weekly rural publications. Most publish both print and online editions. Though they have a digital presence, it is not strong in many communities. Most charge a subscription fee. Some are locally owned; others are part of large chains. For example, where there were once three competing newspapers in Quay, Curry and Roosevelt counties, there is now one company – Clovis Media Inc. – owned by the Stevenson newspaper company in Wyoming. Under one company the paper is published less frequently, possibly making it more difficult to hire staff. In addition, rural residents may be deprived of receiving local information when they most need it.

Across the state, both urban and rural newspapers operate today with far smaller news desks than in years past. This cutback not only diminishes the potential for investigative pieces but also limits growth and innovation in coverage or dissemination. Instead, many papers find themselves just treading water. This challenge is especially true of rural papers, where time and money are scarce, but nevertheless they operate in places with significant political and socio-economic issues that cry out for coverage.

On the flip side, the larger urban dailies are finding some capacity for innovation. The *Santa Fe New Mexican* is developing news partnerships with online news startups. The paper took this approach to achieve broader distribution of stories and to elevate reporting through joint investigation. The *Albuquerque Journal*, meanwhile, has focused on amplifying its digital news platform and fostering more team coverage internally.

ONLINE NEWS OUTLETS

New Mexico's email and web-based media sources reach a growing audience. We are home to at least three exclusively online news outlets - *New Mexico In Depth*, *NMPolitics.net* and *New Mexico Political Report*. They do not charge for a subscription. Their focus is primarily government, policy and politics, publishing a mix of original content, submitted editorials and occasionally republished information from other sources. One is for-profit and two are nonprofit in structure, two receiving foundation funding. These types of outlets usually also receive advertising money. All rely on partnerships and collaboration with established media.

The growing influence of online outlets – as well as the digital versions of traditional print publications – points to the need for reliable high-speed broadband throughout the state. Rural and tribal areas are particularly likely to experience gaps in internet coverage, limits to the amount of streaming media subscribers can download, or higher access costs.

RADIO

Radio comprises more than half of the state's media outlets, which should create a highly favorable environment for quality reporting as well as effective consumer reach by radio broadcasters. Other factors to consider in our state include lack of ability for our residents to access information, for a variety of reasons. In a state that has a high rate of illiteracy and poor broadband access, radio can be a significant provider of news, community connections and economic development engagement.⁴

In reality, only a handful of New Mexico radio stations produce notable, localized product on a regular basis. Like rural newspapers, they do so with staffs typically no more than three or four people deep. Sometimes they make use of volunteers, like Santa Fe's community radio station KSFR. Because of its larger team that includes both paid staff and volunteers, KSFR produces some of radio's stronger daily content. The station is also highly collaborative and played an active role in the Solutions Journalism Network project. (See below.) Some community stations like KSFR tend to have a weak signal but reach a populated area. Others such as KENW-FM cover more miles but in sparsely populated territory. At least three stations – KANW, KENW and KUNM – carry National Public Radio (NPR) programming in addition to local

³ (Marcotte, 2017)

⁴ (Meyers, 2007)

content. Some stations also provide additional content digitally, often distinctly different from what is released on the regular airwaves.

There is little doubt radio remains a relevant source of news, especially in a state like New Mexico. But in an increasingly digital age, does it make sense for radio stations to be so abundant in the number of stations? To what degree might consolidation eliminate duplication of efforts or strengthen news coverage? Or might some existing stations adjust their focus to address unmet needs? Could an increased use of podcasts help local radio extend its reach to digital news consumers? (See “cross-cutting issues” below.)

TELEVISION

Three major commercial Albuquerque-based network television affiliates – KOAT, KOB and KRQE – dominate local TV news throughout New Mexico. Large national companies own each of them. Annual in-state research published by the Garrity Group indicates that most New Mexicans (over 70 percent) say they get at least some of their news from television. However, this behavior does not hold true for younger viewers. Millennials decreased their access of TV as a news source by 21 percent between 2011 to 2017. Age aside, the number of New Mexicans who use television as a source declined eight percentage points since 2011 and, in eastern New Mexico, declined by 27 percent over the same period.⁵

Efforts to elevate coverage exist. For example, KOAT has a limited collaborative relationship with the *Albuquerque Journal*; the two outlets share polling information. KOB partners similarly with the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. KRQE, with no partnership, offers more news hours and perhaps because of that, seems to devote more time to more complex coverage.

PUBLIC JOURNALISM

New Mexico’s three public television stations offer reporting on issues of significant social concern to New Mexicans: health, crime, politics and education. Each station is affiliated with a state university. Public media – both TV and radio – is the longstanding example of nonprofit journalism. It depends on private donations and grants for survival. Though local public television stations often do not have a nightly news, the coverage offered garners some of the most respect among TV news viewers.⁶ For example, New Mexico PBS (i.e., KNME) has engaged in several notable collaborations with organizations like the Solutions Journalism Network’s “Small Towns, Big Change” and “State of Change” reporting projects and with the People, Power and Democracy Project (PPD) with *New Mexico In Depth*, KUNM radio and the *New Mexico News Port*.

ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM

In each of the categories above, some publications approach the news with a style that diverges from traditional media. Examples include the Albuquerque *Weekly Alibi* and the *Santa Fe Reporter*. Publications like these often print in a tabloid format or online on a weekly basis. Rules governing traditional media coverage do not restrict them, so some stories may read as opinionated. They do not feel obliged to report on general news, rather picking themes, trends and topics the community may find interesting. Some, like the *Santa Fe Reporter*, have active digital platforms and leverage analytics to track engagement and social media to connect with the community.⁷ Not surprisingly, local consumers tend to view these as watchdog publications, containing aggressively reported stories of importance to them.

CHALLENGES FOR NATIVE PRINT MEDIA

The biggest challenge for Native American papers in our state is trying to cover - equally and fairly - such a huge geographic area, that holds many unique Native communities, schools, and chapters, with such a small staff.⁸ Travel costs as well as overall costs are increasing including paper costs for newsprint. Like for all papers, decline in readership, leads to a drop in circulation revenue with dwindling advertising revenue following close behind. Interestingly, Native paper readership may be much larger than subscription numbers show. For example, the Navajo

⁵ (Garrity Group, 2017)

⁶ (Marcotte, 2017)

⁷ (Marcotte, 2017)

⁸ (Arviso, 2018)

Times reports it sells 15,000 copies per week, however it estimates that the average number of people in a household that share a print copy of the Navajo Times is 6-7, making overall print readership an estimated 95,000 per week.⁹

CROSSCUTTING CHALLENGES

Regardless of the news medium, some challenges cut across the landscape:

- There appears to be a shortage of **Spanish-speaking and Native American media**, considering the diversity of New Mexico's population. There are opportunities to do more within existing media outlets, as well as by establishing new ones. This is an area where New Mexico could establish itself as a national leader, with Spanish media growing across the country. Spanish-language television networks Univision, Telemundo and Azteca America operate affiliates in New Mexico and thrive in our markets. But they do not provide much local news. Similar can be said of many of New Mexico's Spanish language radio stations. Koahnic Broadcast Corporation produces two national news programs, *Native America Calling* and *National Native News*, from Albuquerque but those programs do not focus exclusively on local news. The Navajo Times and the Jicarilla Chieftain based in Dulce, New Mexico are the only Native papers that circulate in the state.
- New Mexico **lacks enough qualified professionals** to do the work; well-trained journalists can earn more elsewhere, so many of the most capable people leave the state. Alternatively, many who want news jobs cannot get them due to shrinking newsrooms and fewer media outlets. Many would-be journalists are now contributing to the growing public relations/marketing industry instead.
- A troubling trend exists among marketers who create content – especially digital – that **looks like news but is advertising**. This type of information contributes to the public notion that “news” is one-sided and biased, when in reality, consumers are reading well-disguised paid ads.

These types of concerns informed a project that the Solutions Journalism Network and LOR Foundation launched in 2016: a network of newsrooms across New Mexico and Colorado collaborating to produce solutions-oriented reporting on issues facing rural towns in the Intermountain West.¹⁰

Education and Training

Whether educating the next generation of reporters who are currently in college or investing in professional development for working journalists, supporting those who choose news media as a career is a sound investment in a healthy democracy. There is even a role for media literacy among the general public who consume news media.

ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

Three universities dominate the role of preparing the next generation of New Mexico journalists: Eastern New Mexico University, New Mexico State University and the University of New Mexico. Each school offers hands-on training and coursework in print and broadcast media, and the program at UNM is nationally accredited. Opportunities exist to increase internships and formal learning opportunities with media outlets.

Some people believe the schools are doing good work preparing the next generation of working journalists in New Mexico. Others are concerned that there are not enough well-trained students completing these programs. Still others point to a lack of academic preparation in high school, indicating that some students arrive at college unprepared for the rigors of journalism training, including print, online and broadcast news. When looking for ways to strengthen these learning opportunities, one might consider additional industry collaborations and improved coordination between the three universities, area high schools and their public broadcasting stations.

FELLOWSHIPS FOR WORKING JOURNALISTS

In other parts of the country, internships and fellowships exist to help prepare members of the media more effectively cover *policy* rather than just the daily horserace of *politics*. For example, the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation (a health policy organization) runs a nationwide fellowship program to help reporters gain an in-depth grasp of U.S. health issues through site visits, briefings and discussions with policy experts as well as other journalists. The fellowships are paid, and they cover participants' travel. The project aims to encourage and inform coverage of the

⁹ (Arviso, 2018)

¹⁰ (Solutions Journalism, n.d.)

complex economic, political and medical issues for a broad range of audiences.”¹¹ The foundation also offers a series of webinars for journalists on healthcare reform. What might such internships and fellowships look like in New Mexico, perhaps covering our most critical issues such as water, education, economics and public health?

MEDIA LITERACY FOR THE PUBLIC

Beyond improvements to university level education in journalism, it might also be worthwhile to consider teaching media literacy at the middle and high school levels. While it is clear that significant improvement can be made in the way media delivers the news, there also must be some responsibility on the part of the consumer to understand differences among products being delivered. When is an article really an ad versus a true news piece, and how does one know the difference? It is important for people to know what qualifies as opinion, or what is a reputable news source. How can New Mexico do a better job of educating all its residents?

“Orphan” Counties in Rural Areas

Most people would agree that New Mexicans should be able to receive television programming that features local and New Mexico news, politics, sports and emergency information. Surprisingly, residents of five New Mexico counties (Doña Ana, Curry, Roosevelt, Quay and Union) are virtually cut off from such local and state programming. Instead they receive programming from neighboring Texas communities. For example, Las Cruces residents receive El Paso news and Clovis receives programming from Amarillo rather than news from Albuquerque or Santa Fe. The satellite television industry refers to these counties located on edges of a state as “orphan counties.” These New Mexico counties are not alone. There are over 80 orphan counties throughout the country.

The programming communities receive is largely determined by Nielsen, which is a global measurement and data company that provides clients with information about what consumers watch and what they buy. Nielsen uses an algorithm to divide the country into 210 markets. From a marketing standpoint, Nielsen has concluded that eastern and southern New Mexico are, respectively, more closely allied with the Amarillo and El Paso media markets than the Albuquerque-Santa Fe market. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as well as the cable and satellite television industries for the most part, honor Nielsen’s market definitions.

In recent years, Congress asked the FCC to study the issue and develop proactive ways to help orphan counties secure television programming from within their own states. Congress has since authorized individual county governments to petition the FCC to have their county assigned to an in-state media market. This is the primary vehicle which may potentially reunite New Mexico orphan counties with the Albuquerque-Santa Fe media market. Through this process, Durango, Colo., was recently granted permission to be included in the Denver market rather than the Albuquerque-Santa Fe market. So far, an extensive grassroots and legal effort has enabled PBS KENW-TV in Portales to continue to serve New Mexico as it had for decades. Substantial concerns remain, however, that Nielsen, which has broad discretion, could change its market definition, causing New Mexico residents to lose KENW local and state coverage in exchange for Amarillo programming.

Unfortunately, most counties are not familiar with the FCC reassignment option, and virtually none has the knowledge or funds to pursue such a reassignment request. In addition, Texas television stations are likely to fight to keep New Mexico counties in their viewership. One way to assist orphan counties is to establish a “Local Journalism Defense Fund” that would fund and help successfully guide counties through the rigorous, complex and costly regulatory and legal process.

¹¹ (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.)

Section 2

The Changing Way People Receive News

Differences by Ages, Rural or Urban, and Interests

Technological advances have made it easier than ever for people to access information. Despite that, “most Americans believe it is now more difficult to be well-informed and to determine which news is accurate.” They also increasingly perceive the media as biased.¹² With misinformation prevalent, many consumers also have difficulty determining real news from “fake.” Moreover, the definition of fake news depends upon whom you ask. Amid the changing informational landscape, Gallup polling shows that media trust in the U.S. is eroding, making it harder for the news media to fulfill their democratic responsibilities of informing the public and holding government leaders accountable, even though most Americans believe the media play a critical role in our democracy.

According to the Knight/Gallup survey, most Americans fall into one of two categories:

- “Knowledgeable Optimists,” who are informed and believe it is possible to find the truth
- “Inattentive Skeptics,” who are less informed and pessimistic that the truth can be identified

Partisanship and education influence these beliefs. In fact, the differences in how people consume news, where they get it and what they make of it depends largely on demographics – age, political leanings, geographic location, race, gender and education. These distinctions are important when studying media in a state like New Mexico.

We are largely rural and Hispanic. The rural areas tend to run Republican, while urban areas like Santa Fe and Albuquerque skew Democrat. That combination tends to make us a “purple” state. More young people reside in the cities, as do people with college and post-college degrees. The characteristics of media consumers heavily impacts their perception of what they read and view:¹³

- Democrats largely trust the media, and Republicans do not. In a state that runs purple, how can the media increase Republican trust?
- The number of people who believe there are enough news sources for them to sort out the facts is declining.
- Younger adults (aged under 50) are more likely to consume news online, including on social media, while older adults are much more likely to watch or listen to news.
- Most Americans believe the media does not do a good job of separating fact from opinion.
- Most Americans claim to rely on a mix of liberal and conservative news sources, but one in four admit to getting news from only one perspective. What changes can be made to the New Mexico media landscape that would broaden consumers’ interests?

In 1989, 25 percent of U.S. adults said there was a great deal of political bias in news coverage. Today, that number is 45 percent. Yet, regardless of demographic, those polled had far greater faith in the objectivity of cable and national news – FOX, CNN, NPR – than they did in local news. What could local media do to increase the perception of neutrality and, therefore, engender trust?

Across the demographics, those polled replied it was very important for the news media to help them feel connected to their community. Some rural New Mexico newspapers appear to be addressing that concern by concentrating on hyper-local news – weddings, obituaries and children’s activities – that capitalize on the family-oriented nature of their communities.¹⁴

Research also shows that people in rural areas tend to turn to newspapers over other traditional media.¹⁵ While this local trust is heartening, it may complicate the problem of getting reliable news to rural communities since their sparse staffing levels make in-depth and timely coverage on important topics highly difficult. Additionally, as increasing

¹² (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2018)

¹³ (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2018)

¹⁴ (Marcotte, 2017)

¹⁵ (Todd, 2015)

numbers of people get timely news online, small newspapers face increased pressure to keep up with changing technology.

That means that more complex issues requiring more time and manpower often go uncovered in rural areas. In fact, a Solutions Journalism Network study found there to be a significant gap between what readers were interested in and the news that is available to them. Among SJN focus group participants, economic vitality and diversification ranked as the number one issue of concern, followed by health and infrastructure.

The same study, which focused on a handful of small towns including Taos and Española, found relevance to be especially problematic in rural news coverage. Only one in five people surveyed thought their local news to be consistently relevant and valuable. Most complained about negativity in the news and too much attention given to high school sports and petty crime. One Española resident was quoted as saying, “This newspaper just contributes to the ongoing destructiveness of people. It doesn’t represent my family, my culture, my heritage, my children.”¹⁶

FAST NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Across the board, from rural and urban New Mexico and nationwide, there has never been greater demand than now for fast news. Simultaneously, the public expects fair, quality reporting. This pressure on mainstream media to report information immediately often comes from news “breaking” on the internet and on social channels like Facebook and Twitter, whether or not the source is valid. Public expectations and competition often force media to release information without time to verify facts and/or track the most credible sources, much less obtain information reflecting all sides of an issue.¹⁷

As a result, public trust can erode. Interestingly, distrust is not limited to the Fourth Estate; the public is skeptical about virtually everything, according to a recent public media poll. “Trust in the institutions that have been the pillars of U.S. politics and capitalism is crumbling. Americans have limited confidence in its public schools, courts, organized labor and banks — and even less confidence in big business, the presidency, the political parties and the media.”¹⁸

Even though the public expectation for “news, now” is near insatiable and social media influences that craving, the majority of Americans believe social media has had a negative impact on the news.¹⁹ By contrast, they believe the internet, news aggregators, citizen videos and cable news have brought a positive effect on U.S. news in the last decade.

New or Growing Journalism Models

In an effort to meet demand for fast-paced, accurate news and to do so amid the realities facing media, three progressive models may provide some answers: collaborative journalism, aggregate coverage and private-public media partnerships.

Collaborative journalism brings together multiple reporters and editors to cover an issue. They research and write stories collaboratively. The idea is that more people have the capacity to reach out to more sources, therefore crafting a broader, fairer, more accurate story. Collaborative journalism presents its own sets of challenges: If the reporters represent different news organizations, would those traditional news outlets be willing to play in the same sandbox with one another? Does such a model diminish one of the main drivers for media – getting the scoop before the other guy? If the collaborative reporters do not hail from established media, who pays them, and what authority guides coverage or issues professional standards?

Aggregate journalism: Alternatively, aggregate journalism curates existing news stories from multiple sources – such as broadcasts, publications, blogs – and puts them all in one place. The Drudge Report is an example of an aggregated site on national issues. In our state, some media organizations, including *Searchlight New Mexico* and *New Mexico in Depth*, produce content that is intended to be distributed through media partners, like newspapers across the state. These entities are providing a valuable service across the state.

¹⁶ (Todd, 2015)

¹⁷ (Washington Post, 2018)

¹⁸ (NPR, PBS News Hour, Marist Poll, 2017)

¹⁹ (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2018)

Problems can exist with this type of content, however. What or who ensures the news is substantive? Would the public trust the aggregator? What type of oversight might ensure the news aggregated is culled from disparate outlets, offering a variety of perspectives?

Private-Public Partnerships (P3s): We have already noted small trends toward media collaborating with one another. But instances also exist of media partnering with state universities, think tanks or nonprofits focused on policy. An example of this occurred last year when KOB and New Mexico First came together to cover Albuquerque's mayoral debates.²⁰

During the 2017 Albuquerque mayoral debates, candidates answered questions during a live evening broadcast that had been formulated by public consensus earlier in the day at four community centers throughout the city. Participants had been asked to read background information on public safety to help develop thoughtful, issue-based questions as a means for yielding an informative and fair mayoral candidate debate. Together, they agreed on the public safety questions that they wanted the mayoral candidates to address.

Might forums such as this be an alternative way of informing the community about issues people care about on a routine basis? Would it work in a digital age?

Conclusion

Our state and nation rely on a free press, as well as a highly qualified and rigorous press. The increasing marginalization and diminished capacity of local and state journalism – coupled with the growing need to prepare the next generation of ethical, intellectually curious reporters – is critical to a healthy democracy. In New Mexico, it is essential to recognize that good work is underway among many media outlets. It is equally important to acknowledge our shortcomings and seek constructive solutions. This report, and the focus groups to follow, will hopefully move forward constructive discussions about sustainable, reliable journalism in the Land of Enchantment.

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²⁰ (New Mexico First, 2017)

FOCUS GROUP OUTCOME REPORT



RESEARCH PROJECT

Advancing Sustainable, Reliable Journalism in New Mexico

CONVENER

Society of Professional Journalists, Rio Grande Chapter

RESEARCHER

New Mexico First

FUNDERS

Thornburg Foundation and Democracy Fund
April 2018



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Foreword

Purpose of this Report

New Mexicans need accurate sources of information they can rely on to make decisions for their families and businesses, engage in work to improve their communities, and take part in the democratic process. Although the need for accurate, trustworthy news is greater than ever, there are now fewer journalists producing high-quality work, particularly in rural areas outside of Albuquerque and Santa Fe. This document is intended to provide ideas for fundable projects derived directly from New Mexico journalists that could strengthen journalism throughout the state, as well as concrete ways to advance journalism locally. Specifically, these projects if implemented, could help ensure that all New Mexicans have access to a variety of media sources offering varied perspectives, and that those sources are deemed trustworthy and relevant by residents.

This project is funded by grants from the Thornburg Foundation and the Democracy Fund.

About New Mexico First

A statewide public policy organization, **New Mexico First** engages people in critical issues facing their state and communities. The nonpartisan, nonprofit group produces comprehensive policy reports – primarily on natural resources, education, health, good government and the economy. These analyses inform policy discussions, legislative options and often student learning as well. These documents also provide the foundation for New Mexico First’s unique town halls and forums that convene citizens to develop proposals to improve the state. The reports are available at nmfirst.org. Our state’s two U.S. Senators – Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich – serve as New Mexico First’s honorary co-chairs. The organization was co-founded in 1986 by former U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman and the late Senator Pete Domenici.

About Society for Professional Journalists

The nation’s most broad-based journalism organization, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, SPJ promotes the flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry. It also works to inspire and educate current and future journalists through professional development, and it protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press through its advocacy efforts. The research project for which this report was commissioned was spearheaded by the Rio Grande Chapter of SPJ, which serves all of New Mexico and El Paso.

Report Authors

This New Mexico First report was prepared by Pamela K. Blackwell and Heather Balas. A special thanks to those who helped to recruit participants and hosted the focus group meetings.

- Portales: Duane Ryan, KENW-TV 52; Patricia Dobson and Darrell Rowe; Eastern New Mexico University
- Las Cruces: Glen Cerny, KRWG, NM Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum
- Santa Fe: Peter Smith, KSFR 101.1 FM, Santa Fe Community College
- Albuquerque: Kevin McDonald, KNME-TV

Focus Group Overview

Engagement Process

In March 2018, staff from the public policy organization New Mexico First traveled to four New Mexico communities (Portales, Las Cruces, Santa Fe and Albuquerque), to meet with over 85 professional journalists and journalism students to learn about the challenges facing the field. Staff also sought out concrete ideas to strengthen and advance journalism locally and statewide. Specifically, this series of six focus group meetings was designed to explore ways to ensure that all New Mexicans have access to a variety of media sources offering different perspectives, and that those sources are deemed trustworthy and relevant by residents.

Prior to the focus groups, participants were provided with a background report on the status of journalism and related issues for New Mexico. That report can be accessed at nmfirst.org.

Professional journalist focus group participants were asked a mix of the following questions. Emphasis was placed on participants identifying fundable projects that would most impact and strengthen journalism in our state.

- What are the greatest challenges for quality news right now in New Mexico?
- In what ways are the changing faces of journalism (bloggers, independent reporting, social media) affecting news reporting?
- To what degree do you think the media today is equipped to cover complex policy, rather than horserace politics?
- Would journalists like to collaborate – and what might that look like long-term?
- What are your views of the role of journalism in community engagement?
- To what degree do media consumers know the difference between reputable journalism and other sources?
- What has triggered funding declines?
- How would you describe the public's trust in media?
- What is the status of the journalism workforce pipeline?
- How do people get their news?
- How might journalism be funded/financially strengthened by local support, foundation support, sharing back-end business (HR, etc), soliciting support from local residents, or new models like co-ops for news projects?

Journalism and communications students at Eastern New Mexico University, New Mexico State University and the University of New Mexico were asked the following questions.

- How many want to be journalists or have a journalism related career? (Choices: Journalist, PR/Marketing, Other)
- What are the barriers to entering into the journalism profession?
- What are the barriers to completing a degree in journalism/communications?
- What is the role of a journalist in society?
- How many have written/reported for a high school, college or other news source or worked in a newsroom? (print, media, broadcast)
- What do you need to succeed in getting employment in journalism? (e.g. experience, contacts, guidance, writing coach)

Journalism Sector Challenges

Shared Challenges Faced by Journalism Community

Focus group participants identified the following shared challenges.

- **Changing face of media creates opportunities and challenges**
 - Opportunities: More ways to access news (print, online, video, social media). Various mediums have allowed more and diverse voices to join the conversation.
 - Challenges: Determining who is viewed as trustworthy in providing news, public expectation for turn-around time in producing news, reporters attributing motives and bias rather than objectivity in news stories.
- **Rural journalism** – Rural journalism is struggling for money and qualified staff. In rural communities, local news is trusted more than the news they receive from Albuquerque, El Paso or Amarillo/Lubbock. The one exception is weather broadcasts in which these local communities (Portales, Clovis and Las Cruces) find that Texas stations cover their weather better than those in Albuquerque.
- **Shortage of in-state news** – Shortage exists especially in eastern New Mexico where broadcast news comes from Amarillo or Lubbock, and local residents cannot adequately access locally produced public broadcasts. Similar challenges exist in Las Cruces where all television news except the public station come from El Paso.
- **Corporate ownership** and control of local media hinders locally relevant reporting.
- **Need for media literacy by consumers** – Consumers do not know how to sort news from opinion and distinguish credibly sourced material from editorials. Consequently, they do not see the value of investing in local news.
- **Cultivating the next generation** of qualified, intellectually curious journalists – Journalism students and employers report that students do not have the experience to meet employers' needs, nor are they always really interested in local news. They often prefer sports or national news.
- **Professional development**, particularly on policy matters is needed for existing reporters
- **Legal challenges getting public information** from state and local government agencies – There seems to be a culture in Santa Fe, and to a lesser extent from local officials, of “don’t provide reporters anything,” or make it unnecessarily difficult to get information.
- **Need for government literacy** – New reporters and the public lack appreciation for why, for example, city council meetings on seemingly small issues are relevant and important to those in local community.
- **Need for more experiential learning** opportunities, mentorship and career pathway guidance for students
- **Retention and recruitment** – Reporters having to do more with less are drawn away to larger better paying media markets or professions.
- **Funding shortages across the board** – This includes for reporters, editors, staffing, infrastructure, IT, equipment/reporting gear such as cameras.
- **Increasingly multifaceted role of journalism** – Journalists are called upon to fulfill all these roles with community engagement most recently rising to the top of the list.
 - Fourth branch of government, government oversight, inform and protect the public
 - Community engagement
 - Inform generally, content provider
 - Arbiter of reputable and credible news versus that which is not
 - Advertiser
 - Educator, media literacy for the public
 - Educator, translator – explain complex issues in the news to the public and how they impact their lives
 - Employer
 - Mentors to the next generation of journalists

Strengthening the Journalism Sector

Impactful Solutions from Journalists and Students

Participants identified a wide range of potential activities that could strengthen the journalism industry and improve consumers' access to quality news. Those ideas can be grouped into five main categories:

- Cultivating the next generation of journalists
- Professional development for existing reporters
- Improved collaboration on actual reporting
- Legal defense fund for media
- Journalism financing models
- Media literacy for the public

Cultivating the Next Generation of Journalists

Professional journalists and students agree that more needs to be done to support students interested in journalism careers.

CONFERENCE SCHOLARSHIPS – Provide travel and registration scholarships to attend New Mexico Press Association or other statewide conferences for journalism students. These scholarships should cover the duration of the conference so students can make the most of networking and learning opportunities.

MULTI-MEDIA PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – Provide more professional development instruction on how to use and optimally employ all media and reporting styles including print, broadcast and online, at professional journalism conferences. Individual journalists are increasingly required to be not only the writer, but also the blogger, photographer, videographer and social media manager for their own stories. Fewer young people are interested in being “just writers,” and students overall are not receiving the multi-media training they need to meet employer demands.

INTERNSHIPS – Fund paid internships and paid mentorships so students can get the in-the-field experience they need before they graduate. Students and potential employers both report that students are graduating without the experience that they need. Employers would like to mentor students, but lack the staff and funding to provide meaningful mentorship opportunities.

EXPERIENCED JOURNALIST FACULTY – Fund and allow for more in-the-field journalists from various media disciplines to become faculty. This is an additional way for students to better connect with the journalism industry and learn first-hand what is required of them once they graduate.

JOURNALISM COURSEWORK FOR NON-COMMUNICATIONS MAJORS – Offer entry level journalism courses to non-journalism/communications students, introducing them to the profession, the importance of quality research gathering, objective reporting, and media literacy.

K-12 CURRICULUM – Through age appropriate curriculum, introduce students to journalism, journalism professionals, the difference between fact and opinion, quality research and writing methods.

NEW REPORTER RETENTION – Set up programs (i.e., loan repayment, paid fellowships or “new hire” bonuses) that help financially incentivize new journalism graduates, including those of color, to choose to work in New Mexico. Entry-level journalism jobs commonly pay very little and graduates are drawn to leave the state or enter other professions with higher pay.

Professional Development for Existing Reporters

Participants held that one of the best ways to strengthen journalism is to support the reporters themselves, allowing them to learn new ways to report the news and the space to do more of what they do best.

MULTIMEDIA COLLABORATION –

- Fund a joint conference of the New Mexico Broadcasters Association, the New Mexico Press Association and the Society for Professional Journalists Rio Grande Chapter that includes facilitated sessions on the future of journalism and improved in-depth research.
- Design and fund monthly, joint newsroom trainings for new reporters from all disciplines.

IMPROVED POLICY TRAINING FOR ALL REPORTERS – Provide slots for journalists in the existing “Leadership New Mexico” program or – better yet – create a customized project specifically for journalists. One option for customized approach includes a customized, year-long, paid media fellowship for existing journalists that includes quarterly policy workshops. The fellowship meetings could take place throughout the state or to reduce costs, in a central location. Journalists noted it would be helpful to also pay their employers to cover the loss of that journalist for approximately 12 days out of the year.

POLICY BRIEFS – Journalists want to offer more in-depth policy reporting but often lack the time to do deep research. One solution would be to fund development of policy briefs based on New Mexico First background reports, and with a journalist on the editing team to ensure that the content is useful, news worthy and objective.

GOVERNMENT LITERACY AND RELATIONS –

- Fund development of briefs on the branches of government, law and regulatory processes and how to obtain public information from government agencies.
- Offer a free, independent workshop between reporters and the public information officers in the new governor’s administration. Place emphasis on how to improve trust between the entities and develop some basic, voluntary guidelines for working together effectively.

EDITOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – Support professional development programming specifically geared toward recruiting and providing guidance and support for newsroom editors.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – Fund research on best practices for newsrooms and journalists to take a lead in community engagement and addressing “citizen journalism.”

UNDERSERVED COMMUNITY MEDIA – Develop and support news publications customized for underserved and tribal communities including recruitment, training and professional development for reporters of color and those who represent underserved communities.

GEAR FUND – Provide funds that improve aging “newsroom” infrastructure, technology and reporting equipment such as cameras, wi-fi hotspots, reliable tripods, etc.

Improved Collaboration on Actual Reporting

COLLABORATIVE REPORTING TEAMS – With the changing face of journalism, participants generally agreed that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the once strongly held concern over who gets the story first.

- Develop a searchable database on published stories and (voluntarily) what reporters are working on now. The database would help to connect reporters to one another for advice. It would also help identify shared issues among communities. (Example: reporters from Española and Silver City were both working on local crime issues; they agreed that their individual coverage would differ considerably but it would be helpful to share national data sources, solutions research, etc.)
- Support a coalition of reporters across media and communities to work on specific topics or policy areas. By working together, they can better elevate awareness of the shared issues of multiple communities to the broader public and decisionmakers.

- Fund a central, public document collector to garner requested public documents for multiple media outlets. Journalists suggested this function because it can be difficult, time consuming and costly for reporters to travel to the locations where public documents are made available (i.e., Santa Fe), creating a disincentive for reporters to dig further into an issue.
- During the state legislative session, create a voluntary coalition of reporters from different media outlets to cover different topics, sharing the details each day with the reporter team. There are hundreds of topics to cover during a legislative session and small news staffs by themselves do not have the resources and staffing necessary to effectively cover the issues in-depth.

Financing

- Fund a legal defense fund that pays for the legal assistance necessary to submit Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requests to allow local broadcasters to broadcast their signal to their local communities.
- The fund could also support problems reporters encounter related to the state Inspection of Public Records Act (IPRA).
- Support research on best practices for funding news entities and quality, locally relevant news production. Analyze for-profit, public and nonprofit journalism models.

Media Literacy for the Public

Support media literacy programs for the public that demonstrate the difference between fact and opinion and credibly sourced material, shed light on the editorial process, and the optimal way various mediums can be used to produce quality journalism. This could be accomplished through community engagement workshops led by local news outlets culminating in a “citizen journalist” certificate for example, journalism appreciation courses for college students, and age appropriate curriculum for K-12 students. Those who see the value of quality news are more likely to trust and invest in legitimate news outlets. This type of programming could also result in cultivating the next generation of journalists.

Conclusion

New Mexico and the nation rely not only on a “free press,” but also on a highly qualified, fair, smart and rigorous workforce of journalists. The increasing marginalization and diminished capacity of local and state journalism – coupled with the growing need to prepare the next generation of ethical, intellectually curious reporters – is critical to a healthy democracy. In New Mexico, it is essential to recognize that good work is underway among many media outlets. It is equally important to acknowledge our shortcomings and seek constructive solutions. The journalists New Mexico First staff met are passionate about what they do, and they have a wealth of knowledge and expertise to share with their communities, readers and audiences each day. And they want to do more, but need additional support and investment to do so. This report, through the candid and invaluable input of reporters and students, sets out concrete pathways for strengthening journalism in our state.