

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

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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.

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- 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.