Media Landscape Study and Recommended Solutions for Consideration

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Assessing Accountability Journalism in Colorado

The Media Landscape Study was conducted to help The Colorado Trust understand the current reach and scope of local news, the state of accountability journalism, the role of journalism in creating, changing and/or maintaining narratives, and present solutions. For the purpose of this report, accountability journalism is considered a form of journalism that:

- Holds powers accountable and influences public policy.

- Informs the public on critical information needs.

- Serves as a community-based conduit to help understand local communities and their priorities.

- Highlights underlying systemic issues. Identifies the need for solutions at the societal level.

The Media Landscape Study focused deeply on four selected counties in Colorado — Alamosa, La Plata, Montezuma and Weld — and included newspapers, radio, television, online and other, non-traditional sources of local news, information, storytelling and analysis (e.g., college journalism programs, newsletters, email listservs, library information, storytelling initiatives).

Researchers at the University of Denver and Hearken used a mixed-methodological approach for the study, which included a statewide survey of journalists, a content analysis of news stories published within the selected Colorado communities, community listening and a community-led design component.

This study was conducted from March 2020 to September 2020. This time coincided with the start and evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with protests against police brutality and for racial justice in the U.S. and Colorado. These factors should be taken into account for context.

Survey of Colorado Journalists

The purpose of this survey was to examine the perceptions of Colorado journalists of accountability journalism, as well as diversity and inclusion within the local industry. The questionnaire was disseminated to a database of 1,837 journalists across Colorado and 153 responses were collected.

ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM: KEY FINDINGS
- Print outlets are more likely to be identified as holding powers accountable and highlighting inequities, followed by radio outlets. TV outlets are the least likely to be named.

- Organizations with strong statewide recognition, like The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun and Colorado Public Radio, are most frequently identified for holding powers accountable.

- There are gaps in coverage of government policy, racial and economic inequities, and environment. There are gaps in coverage of rural communities (Eastern Plains, Western Slope and southern Colorado).

- There are gaps in coverage of specific racial/ethnic populations — such as African American, Latino/Hispanic, Native Americans and immigrant communities, as well as residents with lower socioeconomic status.

- Journalists who identified as people of color were more likely to say that "diversifying sources" and "building relationships with the community" could strengthen accountability journalism, compared to those who identified as white. Overall, "more funding and more journalists" was the most popular tool to strengthen accountability journalism.

- Over 70% of journalists said their audiences are very trusting of their own outlets, similar to past research that points to a high level of trust in local Colorado media (84%) (CMP, 2019).

- Only 30% of journalists said Colorado residents are very trusting of local media outlets in the state, comparable to the relatively lower U.S. public trust in local news nationwide (45%) (Gallup, 2019).

DIVERSITY IN THE COLORADO MEDIA LANDSCAPE: KEY FINDINGS

- 60% of Colorado journalists said newsrooms address the needs of their own communities, but only half said they address the needs of diverse communities.

- Journalists covering urban and suburban communities were more likely to say newsrooms do not address the needs of diverse communities, compared to rural journalists.

- 75% of Colorado journalists who identify as people of color said newsrooms do not address the needs of diverse communities, compared to 50% of white journalists.

- One-third of journalists said their newsrooms are not racially and ethnically representative of the communities they serve.

- To increase diversity and inclusion, journalists recommend "funding to diversify newsrooms," "diversifying leadership positions," and "enhancing retention of journalists."

Content Analysis

The content analysis detailed the media landscape and examined media content for accountability journalism indicators in four Colorado counties: Alamosa, La Plata, Montezuma, and Weld. A total of 631 news stories from 43 traditional and non-traditional outlets were analyzed.

- More than 38% of the local news output analyzed were original, local, and addressed critical information needs (i.e., healthcare, civic information, emergencies, education, economic development, politics, environment and transportation), compared to barely 12% across the U.S. (Napoli et al., 2018). Weld and La Plata county outlets had the majority.

- Local print outlets across the four counties generated original content offering critical information, from The Durango Herald and the Greeley Tribune to newspapers like Johnstown Breeze in Weld, Southern Ute Drum in La Plata and The Valley Courier in Alamosa.

- Nearly 80% of news items addressed at least one critical information need, a rate much higher than local news nationwide (Napoli et al., 2018).

- Healthcare, civic information, and emergencies were the most commonly featured critical information needs. Transportation, environmental, and political issues were the least.

- About two-thirds of news items featured original content, a rate higher than elsewhere (Becker, 2015; Napoli et al., 2018). Numerous radio stations, particularly in Weld (e.g., KUNC-FM, KTRR-FM, and KKPL-FM), provided their audience with original reporting covering critical information needs.

- One-third of the news items featured unoriginal content, which came from sources at the local (e.g., The Durango Herald and the Greeley Tribune), state (e.g., The Denver Post and KMGH-TV), national (e.g., Fox News), and international (e.g., Associated Press) levels.

- 62% of news outputs focused on events occurring within the geographic scope of the county where the outlet is based, compared to only 17% across 100 U.S. communities (Napoli et al., 2018). The nonlocal stories featured issues and events occurring in other Colorado counties, across the border in New Mexico, in other neighboring states, and nationwide.

- Nontraditional sources of news hold great potential for accountability journalism. NGOs like La Puente and government actors like Greeley-Evans School District 6, City of Durango, and SLV Emergency competed with newspapers and radio stations in meeting three of the four criteria for accountability journalism — critical information needs, originality, and locality.

- There was a lack of thematic reporting that takes into account broader contexts and the underlying systemic issues (only 4% of news outputs).

Community Listening and Design

The purpose of the community listening and design component was to assess how critical information was being accessed, understand the impact of societal narratives, and identify community-led solutions to improve access to critical information and build trust between marginalized communities and institutional information-providers to impact narrative change.

A total of 42 community stakeholders across the four counties participated in the community listening and design process of this study. Of the 26 community stakeholders who were individually interviewed, 62% (16 individuals) self-identified as a member of a marginalized or underrepresented community. Their areas of focus included immigrant rights, youth services, homelessness, aging, LGBTQIA+, government, arts, tribal affairs, agriculture, renewable energy, small-business development, racial justice, women's issues, reentry programs, domestic violence, and civic efforts.

Despite having their own areas of success in serving vulnerable residents and community-specific, nuanced challenges, the general insights collected in each region revolved around common themes.

Shared challenges that often blocked access to critical information included generational poverty and lack of economic opportunity, institutional and systemic racism, lack of a trusted messenger of local news, and lack of continuous philanthropic investment and state and federal funding.

Relational, one-to-one communication with trusted community members or trusted community-serving organizations surfaced as the most effective strategy for marginalized and underrepresented communities in rural areas accessing critical (often, life-saving) information.

People trust people, not institutions. Even when a trusted individual works for a community-serving institution, the individual remains the default reliable source. This model — though unsurprising among immigrant, migrant, Indigenous and refugee communities, especially during the volatility of the Trump administration and a global pandemic disproportionately affecting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) communities — places a heavy burden on trusted individuals.

Relational communication is especially taxing for disparate, rural communities. For example, Alamosa sits in the San Luis Valley (an 8,000-square-foot valley with 23 distinct communities), where — according to community leaders working with immigrant and non-English-speaking populations — many residents are unable to read either English or Spanish and rely heavily on oral and visual communication translated into Spanish or Q'anjob'al, a Mayan language native to Guatemala.

While the collaborative nature of nonprofit service providers in these communities had developed over time based on a need to serve residents with little resources, the strength of their partnerships have been truly put to the test throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Across all communities, there were mentions of rapid, collaborative response during the pandemic and related economic shutdown by nonprofit organizations mobilizing together and distributing existing resources.

Proposed Solutions for Consideration

ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

There is a clear need for increased capacity and collaboration to reinforce accountability journalism and shift narratives around marginalized communities. Core needs include additional support to:

- Address gaps in coverage of rural areas (Eastern Plains, Western Slope and southern Colorado), certain communities (African American, Latino-Hispanic and Native American), and specific issues (social justice, government policy, politics, environmental issues and transportation).

- Generate more local, original content that tackles community issues to provide residents with the critical information they need to evaluate local politicians' performances, better grasp policy issues and operate in a democracy.

- Bolster collaborations between bigger news outlets with more resources and experience in investigative reporting and smaller outlets with stronger community ties to strengthen journalism organizations' focus on issues that matter to local communities.

- Foster collaborations between traditional news organizations and nontraditional sources (e.g., NGOs and government bodies) to catalyze thematic framing to further contextualize issues.

- Increase newsroom diversity (through both hiring and retention) to change the type of stories that are told about marginalized communities to shift societal narratives. Improve access to records and diversification of sources.

- Develop training workshops and fellowships to help journalists, as well as communication specialists in nontraditional news outlets, identify ways to contextualize issues.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS

When focusing on the documented needs of underrepresented community members, there is a clear need for increased trust between institutional information-providers and marginalized residents. Simply, the way traditional information-providers (news organizations, local government, healthcare providers, etc.) disperse critical information isn't working for Colorado's most vulnerable residents.

We can improve access to critical information and resources by "learning from the wisdom of those that we serve," a community leader in Alamosa said.

Rather than maintain the same strategies that have been utilized to serve white, English-speaking, literate, able-bodied residents, information-providers must deploy community-led communications methods through trusted leaders to provide equitable access to critical information, diversify the information being published to reflect the entire community and take into account the perspectives of all impacted communities to shift societal narratives that cause harm. The following core needs are required to use a strength-based model to improve information access:

- Community-activated collaboration with community-driven leadership that is supported with sustained funding to strengthen the work that trusted individuals and organizations are already doing to get critical information to marginalized residents.

- Capacity-building to ensure marginalized residents have access to comprehensible critical information about news and resources through their communication-method of choice.

- Resources to build infrastructure and partnerships coordination around each community's distinct informal communication networks by equitably compensating the trusted community leaders while reducing duplication across services providers.

"Communication goes beyond the words. Communication starts with a trusted member that connects with you that has a compassion, perspective and comes from a position of equality," a community leader in Durango said.