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The evaluation team is grateful to the many individuals who contributed their insights to this report. First and foremost, we thank the staff and leadership at grantee organizations for sharing their wisdom and learning across multiple touch points during the three-year evaluation project. Their thoughtful observations represent a valuable source of learning for The Colorado Trust and the field more broadly. We are also deeply appreciative of the community organizers who participated as interviewees for this final report; their perspectives provided an important complementary lens for understanding the role and impact of journalism grantmaking.

Special thanks to the Colorado Media Project (CMP), which served as The Trust's strategic partner for its journalism grantmaking portfolio. The insights and lessons CMP shared from their work represent a significant contribution to The Trust's learning. Lastly, we want to recognize The Trust for its commitment to supporting a multi-year evaluation process that centered learning with and from grantees and CMP. This learning orientation surfaced lessons that can not only inform The Trust's future grantmaking but also the broader philanthropic field's understanding of how journalism grantmaking contributes to systemic changes that advance the wellbeing of all communities.

This report is based on an internal evaluation report produced for the Colorado Trust. The evaluation team obtained permission from grantees to publish the details of their work described in this report, as well as consent for any attributed quotes.



In 2019, the Colorado Trust launched its five-year Building and Bridging Power strategy, which aimed to build community power and strengthen an organizing infrastructure and advocacy environment so that impacted community members would be able to advance policy solutions addressing their most pressing issues at local, regional, and state levels. This evaluation report addresses the media and narrative component of the strategy, which sought to increase the capacity of the Colorado media ecosystem to draw attention to inequities and amplify the narrative power of impacted communities. This reflects The Trust's intention to develop narrative power and shift popular narratives that can inform policy solutions that advance health equity.

The evaluation examined whether and how The Trust's journalism grantmaking contributed towards these goals, using a mixed-methods approach to assess its investments in accountability reporting and communitycentered journalism, its strategic partnership with the Colorado Media Project, and the role of its journalism grants in advancing narrative power. Key findings and lessons are summarized below.

Accountability Reporting on Inequities

Key Findings:

- Reporting on inequities: The Trust's support enabled state and national media outlets to expand their reporting on inequities in Colorado. Community-based outlets also contributed to local coverage of inequities, supported by flexible grants that strengthened their reporting capacity.
- Contributions to informed action: Grantees' reporting contributed to efforts to hold decision-makers accountable and advance solutions to inequities, including government actions to address inequitable treatment and outcomes among historically excluded or underserved groups.
- Targeted capacity supports: The Trust's support for specific capacity-building opportunities responded to the field's expressed needs. But for journalists to fully leverage these opportunities, other factors that constrain their ability to pursue accountability reporting must be addressed.

Lessons Learned:

- Ensuring local accountability: Resources that bolster newsrooms' organizational capacities to produce in-depth reporting are needed to address gaps in local accountability journalism, particularly outside the Front Range region of Colorado.
- Sustaining impacts: Investments in longer-term newsroom capacity, such as hiring staff and strengthening networks, enable the most enduring impacts on accountability reporting on inequities.

Community-Centered Journalism

Key Findings:

Capacity to produce and expand access to local reporting: The Trust's grants strengthened the capacity of small community-based outlets to produce more local reporting, while also improving access to local reporting that met the information needs of underserved communities through expanded distribution, multilingual content, and service-oriented ("news you can use") stories.

- **Newsroom diversity and inclusive reporting practices**: State and local outlets were able to make meaningful progress towards greater newsroom diversity and inclusion, for example by implementing more inclusive reporting practices and nurturing a more diverse pipeline of young journalists. However, broader shifts in workplace culture and policies, particularly within large organizations, were more difficult to discern, in part because such organizational change involves a long-term, complex, and challenging process extending beyond the scope of The Trust's grants.
- Community relationships and voice: The Trust's support helped outlets strengthen their community relationships, with increased trust and engagement of underrepresented and underserved groups. In addition, grantees' reporting elevated diverse community voices by including a relatively strong emphasis on sources with lived experience. However, gaps in the geographic scope of the portfolio meant that multiple regions of Colorado were not represented in grantee coverage.

Lessons Learned:

- Improving access: Inclusive collaborative models that leverage the existing capacities of small local outlets can significantly expand communities' access to local reporting. However, efforts to increase access by translating English-language stories into other languages must overcome challenges around what to translate, how to do it well, and how to reach non-English speaking audiences.
- Increasing diversity and inclusion: Progress towards more diverse and inclusive newsrooms requires significant organizational investment. For example, paid internship programs for underrepresented groups require substantial staff and organizational capacity. And institutional follow-through is needed to operationalize lessons from trainings, mentorship, and other capacity building.
- Building trust: Developing trusting relationships with communities requires years of intentional effort, hinging on the authenticity and consistency of efforts to understand and reflect the priorities and realities of communities, as well as a commitment to the lengthier process of developing connections with community members who have lived experience with the issues being covered.

Partnership with the Colorado Media Project

Key Findings:

- Complementarity: CMP complemented and amplified The Trust's investments, both by helping media grantees connect, share, and collaborate and by layering on additional capacity supports and funding opportunities that enabled grantees to expand upon work supported by The Trust.
- Funder coordination: CMP helped strengthen philanthropic understanding of and coordination around Colorado's news and information ecosystem by providing funders with ecosystem-level research, technical knowledge, and peer learning opportunities.
- An evolving organization: As a relatively new organization, CMP refined its ecosystem-building roles during its three-year partnership with The Trust. Its responsive approach to supporting Colorado's news ecosystem enabled CMP to identify and address capacity gaps as they emerged, but also posed challenges at times, stretching its staff thin, creating some ambiguity around its strategic priorities, and making it harder for newsrooms to understand CMP's roles vis-à-vis other actors.

Lessons Learned:

Enabling mutual impact: CMP and The Trust were mutually impactful in strengthening local journalism. The Trust's partnership with CMP helped set CMP's trajectory as a grantmaker as it refined its position and value within the ecosystem, while CMP's approach to pooled and aligned funding amplified the impact of The Trust's investments.

Leveraging CMP's strengths: CMP's strong understanding of and relationships with Colorado newsrooms – and most particularly its strengths as a connector – are important ingredients in its effectiveness as a grantmaker and ecosystem builder.

Narrative Power

Key Findings:

Contributions to communities' narrative power: The Trust's journalism grants contributed to the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to exercise control or influence over the stories told about them. This is reflected in: grants to outlets led by and for people of color; support for newsrooms to recruit reporters and contributors from communities impacted by inequities; and investment in coverage that elevates the agency of these communities to advance change.

Lessons Learned:

- Ensuring sustainability: The precarious sustainability of many newsrooms, particularly small local outlets that center and serve underrepresented communities, is a barrier to strengthening the narrative power of these communities.
- Expanding who gets to tell the stories: A pathway for strengthening the narrative power of communities impacted by inequities is to expand the parameters around who can contribute to local coverage, creating entry points for those with lived experience (including those without formal journalism training) to shape and tell the stories of their communities.
- Understanding the narrative ecosystem: Journalism needs to be understood as one piece of the broader narrative ecosystem, intersecting with the communications and storytelling efforts of organizers, advocates, and other influencers seeking to shape public and policy discourse.

Strategic Takeaways

The evaluation findings point to the important roles that journalism grantmaking plays in advancing the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to advance solutions that address their most pressing issues. Three broad implications emerged for funders' strategies to support narrative power.

- 1. The value of an ecosystem approach: An ecosystem lens highlights complementarity among different actors, supporting both individual and organizational capacity as well as the connective infrastructure needed for collaboration and mutual support. It also accounts for power dynamics and historic inequities that influence resource distribution and relationships within the ecosystem.
- 2. Interconnections across grantmaking areas: The contributions of journalism grantmaking to narrative power may be strongest when strategically aligned with related areas of grantmaking, such as organizing and advocacy. While a funder's relationship with journalism grantees may be distinct due to the firewall protecting journalists' editorial independence, at a strategy level there is value in thinking holistically about how different components of the narrative ecosystem fit together, enabling journalism grants to reinforce and be reinforced by other power-building investments.
- 3. The long-term nature of systemic change: Helping communities strengthen their narrative power is a systems-level change that is distinct from communications efforts to achieve specific policy outcomes. It requires a long-term strategy focused on the conditions needed for communities to have power over narrative levers, not short-term wins within a few legislative cycles. Sustained support over decades is needed to realize transformative narrative outcomes.

In 2019, the Colorado Trust (The Trust) launched its five-year <u>Building and Bridging Power (BBP) strategy</u>. The goal of the strategy was to "build community power and strengthen an organizing infrastructure and advocacy environment so that impacted community members are able to advance policy solutions addressing their most pressing issues at the local, regional, and state levels." The strategy encompassed three funding components:

- Organizing people and resources for direct involvement in issues and in decision-making arenas;
- Contributing to a durable, long-term policy infrastructure that centers community voices throughout the policy process;
- Developing narrative power and shifting popular narratives that can inform policy solutions that advance health equity.

This evaluation report addresses the third funding component, which focused on The Trust's investments in journalism. Collectively, these investments aimed to increase the capacity of the Colorado media ecosystem to draw attention to inequities and amplify the narrative power of impacted communities.

The Trust engaged Dilliplane Consulting, in collaboration with Barsoum Policy Consulting, to serve as the learning and evaluation partner for this strategy component from 2021-2024. This report represents the culmination of this partnership, sharing the cumulative insights and learning gathered over the three-year period.

The report is structured as follows:

- Strategy overview: This section provides an overview of The Trust's theory of change for its investments in journalism, along with a summary of the grant portfolio.
- Evaluation approach: This section describes the key learning questions that guided the evaluation, along with the methods and data sources.
- Findings: Across four sections, the report examines whether and how The Trust's journalism grantmaking advanced progress towards its goals, assessing its investments in accountability reporting and community-centered journalism, its strategic partnership with the Colorado Media Project, and the potential contribution of its journalism grants to narrative power. Guided by The Trust's evaluation questions, each section summarizes evidence on whether and how the grants contributed to intended outcomes and distills key lessons learned.
- Strategic implications: This section offers key takeaways and strategic implications of the evaluation findings that can inform philanthropic support for media and narrative efforts.

The Trust defines **narratives** as the societal stories that are rooted in shared values and common themes, influencing how people process information and make decisions. These stories are conveyed through myriad channels, including journalism, film, television programs, music, books, art, and advertising, as well as through the strategic communications of actors across sectors.

Narrative power is defined by Rashad Robinson as "the ability to change the rules and norms our society lives by." Narrative power brings the "ability to shape public discourse, debate and imagery." It is also the "power to define, to make some subjects visible while erasing other histories." In the context of The Trust's strategy, narrative power may be demonstrated when communities impacted by inequities are able to influence the societal stories told about them and amplify those stories within discourse to help drive narrative change and address inequities through policy and systems change.

The Trust's investments focused on journalism as an important storytelling channel through which narratives are disseminated and reinforced. But The Trust also recognized that many other actors and communications channels beyond journalism – including policy advocates and grassroots organizers, which were the focus of the other two components of the BBP strategy – contribute to the broader process for advancing narrative and policy change.

Theory of Change

The theory of change for the media and narrative component of The Trust's BBP strategy was grounded in its overarching vision of building community power to help advance health equity. The goal of the media and narrative component was that communities most impacted by inequities exercise narrative power over the stories told about them, leading over time to narrative changes that center their voices and experiences and inform policy solutions. The Trust posited that this would ultimately contribute to policy and systems changes that advance racial and economic equity.

To advance the overarching goal, The Trust's grantmaking sought to support and strengthen the capacity of the Colorado media ecosystem to draw attention to inequities and amplify the narrative power of communities most impacted by inequities. Its approach was comprised of three strategic pillars:

- Supporting journalism that helps communities hold those in power accountable for policies and practices that contribute to inequities.
- Supporting journalism that centers the perspectives of people most impacted by inequities.
- Partnering with the Colorado Media Project (CMP) as an intermediary that serves regranting, convening, and philanthropic coordination roles.

¹ R. Robinson, "Changing our narrative about narrative: The infrastructure required for building narrative Power" (Color of Change, Apr 2018).

² M. Moore, R. Sen, "Funding Narrative Change: An Assessment and Framework by the Convergence Partnership" (Convergence Partnership, Sep 2022).

³ The Narrative Initiative, "Toward new gravity: Charting a course for the narrative initiative" (Jun 2017).

The graphic below provides a high-level summary of how The Trust's investment in these three strategic pillars was intended to contribute to short-term and long-term outcomes as part of a broader, complex process of advancing narrative power, narrative change, and policy change. Recognizing that narrative and policy change involves a long-term incremental and synergistic process that extends beyond the time horizon of the BBP strategy, The Trust understood the narrative component as a valuable opportunity to generate learning about the pathways through which journalism grantmaking may contribute to the process of narrative power building.

Theory of Change: Building and Bridging Power - Media and Narrative Component

GOAL

Communities most impacted by inequities exercise narrative power over the stories told about them, leading over time to narrative changes that center their voices and experiences and inform policy solutions.



MUTUALLY REINFORCING SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM **OUTCOMES** Local newsrooms strengthen their capacity to center and serve Colorado's diverse communities.

- Improved access to local

- Strengthened skills and networking among journalists

Reporting that centers communities and spotlights accountability for inequities becomes amplified in policy discourse.

- Greater community influence
- Use of grantee stories by
- Diffusion of grantee stories via other media outlets
- of stories in broader policy

Policymakers are held accountable for addressing inequities in Colorado.

- Stronger political pressure
- Greater leverage to advocate for solutions to
- Increased community



THE TRUST'S **GRANTMAKING ACTIVITIES**

THE TRUST'S **APPROACH** accountable for policies and practices

Portfolio Overview

The Trust's investments in journalism encompassed four main categories of grants:

- Multi-year grants to five state and national news organizations to expand accountability reporting on the systems, policies, and conditions that contribute to inequities in Colorado (\$100,000-\$500,000 per grant).
- Three-year grants to six community-based news organizations to meet the critical information needs of diverse communities across the state (\$75,000-\$135,000 per grant).
- Three cycles of one-year grants (\$5,000-\$25,000 per grant) to a total of 20 organizations to help improve diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in Colorado newsrooms.
- Grants to support targeted areas of capacity building.

Implementation of The Trust's approach involved a close partnership with CMP, a nonpartisan philanthropic initiative with deep sector knowledge and connections in the Colorado media ecosystem. CMP served as an intermediary, managing The Trust's multi-year grants to community-based organizations, the annual DEI grants, and some of the targeted capacity-building supports. A summary of The Trust's narrative portfolio is provided in the box below.

The Trust's Narrative Portfolio

Multi-year grants to support local reporting:

Statewide and national news organizations:

- Chalkbeat Colorado
- Colorado Public Radio
- Colorado Sun
- ProPublica
- Radio Bilingue

Community-based news organizations:

- Denver Urban Spectrum*
- El Comercio de Colorado*
- Enterate Latino*
- KSUT and KSJD (co-grantees)*
- Rocky Mountain Community Radio*
- Southeast Express*

One-year grants to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion:

- Aurora Sentinel*
- Bucket List Community Cafe*
- Chalkbeat Colorado*
- Colorado Association of Black
- Colorado News Collaborative *
- Colorado Public Radio*

- Denver VOICE*
- KOTO Community Radio*
- KSJD Radio*
- Mountain West News Bureau*

- Rocky Mountain PBS*

Grants to support targeted areas of capacity building:

- A convening organized by CMP to support reporting on inequities.
- The Watchdog Fund: A shared resource managed by CMP to help journalists cover the costs of public records requests.
- Scholarships for journalists from underrepresented groups in the investigative journalism field to access Investigative Reporters & Editors' (IRE) professional development opportunities.

The Trust's theory of change was ambitious, encompassing diverse hypotheses around how journalism grantmaking can contribute to large-scale goals around narrative power, narrative change, and policy change. Mindful that achieving these goals is a longer-term process extending beyond the three-year scope of the narrative portfolio, the evaluation primarily focused on assessing whether and how the Trust's journalism grantmaking strategy contributed to interim outcomes in the theory of change, while bringing a learning-oriented lens to capture lessons around what it takes to support progress towards longer-term outcomes and goals. The evaluation was guided by five evaluation guestions, developed in consultation with The Trust:

- Q1. Policymaker Accountability. To what extent and how are the Trust's grants helping to advance reporting that contributes to policymaker accountability for addressing inequities and influences the broader policymaking process? What factors facilitate or inhibit the impact of these grants on policymaker accountability and the policymaking process?
- Q2. Community-Centered Journalism. To what extent and how are the Trust's grants helping to advance journalism that centers the perspectives of the people most impacted by inequities? What newsroom capacities are needed to center communities in reporting, and how has the Trust's support helped grantees strengthen these capacities? How does community-centered reporting influence the quality of coverage and the relationships between newsrooms and communities? To what extent and how do the grants strengthen access to local reporting that meets underserved communities' information needs?
- Q3. Partnership with CMP as an Intermediary. What are the contributions and/or challenges of CMP's role as an intermediary in supporting grantees? What are lessons about how to most effectively leverage CMP's role as an intermediary.
- Q4. Contributions to Narrative Power. To what extent and how is the Trust's journalism grantmaking strategy contributing towards a longer-term process of strengthening the narrative power of communities - particularly those most impacted by inequities - within policy discourse? Has the Trust's grantmaking strategy had any unexpected effects that facilitate or hinder the process of building communities' narrative power?
- Q5. Lessons Learned. What lessons can be drawn about the role of journalism grantmaking in strengthening the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to advance solutions that address their most pressing issues?

Methodological Approach

The evaluation design triangulated across multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data. The evaluation team provided a midterm learning update to The Trust in 2023, based on preliminary findings from interim grantee interviews and initial grant reports. This final summative evaluation report is based on insights from those interim interviews plus the following additional data sources: final interviews with grantees, CMP, and other stakeholders; a content analysis of grantee coverage; all grant reports submitted across the three-year period; and additional grant-related documents provided by CMP.

The box below summarizes the methods and data sources. The Annex provides full methodological details.

Summary of Methods and Data Sources

Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following organizations:

- Ten community-based, state, and national outlets that received multi-year grants (interviewed three times across the three-year period).*
- Seven outlets that received one-year DEI grants.
- CMP's director and associate director.
- Four grassroots community organizing organizations in communities served by the media grantees, who provided an external perspective on Colorado media outlets.

Content analysis of grantees' coverage:

- Sample size: The analysis included a total of 472 stories produced by the 10 organizations that received multi-year grants.
- Sampling strategy: Sampling for each grantee was based on what the Trust's grant supported. Seven of the grants funded a specific position or body of coverage; for these grantees, a random sample was drawn from the discrete set of stories produced. The remaining three grants were more broadly directed to supporting the news organization; in these cases, the sampling strategy focused on a random sample of local coverage produced during the grant period.
- Coding and quantitative analysis: A coding framework was developed to quantitatively capture key characteristics of the coverage relevant to The Trust's evaluation questions (e.g., reporting on inequities, accountability journalism, community-centered sourcing, stories focused on historically marginalized groups). All stories were coded manually and then quantitatively analyzed using the statistical software Stata. The Annex provides the full codebook.
- Qualitative analysis: As a complement to the quantitative findings, our analysis incorporated additional qualitative insights into how grantee coverage centers and serves communities; this encompassed coverage beyond the sample of 472 stories.

Grant reports and other grant-related documents:

- Grant reports from all grantees and from CMP.
- Internal documents from CMP, including notes from mid-year check-ins with grantees, post-convening survey data, strategy documents, and information related to how CMP's other grantmaking activities impacted The Trust's grants.



The Trust's Approach

The Trust focused approximately 63% of its journalism funding on multi-year grants to help five state and national news outlets expand their accountability reporting on policies and practices related to racial and economic inequities in Colorado. The grants encompassed multiple models for supporting accountability reporting on inequities, including funding beats focused on equity (at Chalkbeat Colorado, Colorado Public Radio, and the Colorado Sun) and enabling national outlets (ProPublica, Radio Bilingue) to deepen their accountability reporting in Colorado.

As a complement to these grants, The Trust invested in targeted capacity-building supports intended to strengthen journalists' ability to undertake accountability journalism in Colorado.

Our analysis also examined the potential contributions of community-based outlets towards accountability reporting on inequities. Although The Trust's grants to these outlets were not explicitly focused on supporting this type of coverage, The Trust intended to strengthen their overall local reporting capacity, which could include coverage of inequities.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

To what extent and how are the Trust's grants helping to advance reporting that contributes to policymaker accountability for addressing inequities and influences the broader policymaking process?

What factors facilitate or inhibit the impact of these grants on policymaker accountability and the policymaking process?

INTENDED OUTCOMES

The Trust's grants were intended to contribute to multiple outcomes: (1) increase reporting on racial and economic inequities in Colorado, which other stakeholders – including policy advocates, community organizers, policymakers, or others - could then use to (2) hold those in power accountable for addressing inequities and push for solutions that advance equity; and (3) strengthen journalists' capacity to produce accountability journalism.

1. Coverage of Inequities



The multi-year grants to state and national outlets enabled them to increase their reporting on inequities.

The five state and national newsrooms produced a large corpus of reporting on Colorado with support from The Trust's grants. This included 285 stories produced by reporters whose beats focused on equity at Chalkbeat Colorado, Colorado Public Radio, and the Colorado Sun, as well as 6 in-depth investigative

stories produced by ProPublica on issues impacting Colorado. The corpus of reporting also encompassed a considerable amount of Spanish-language coverage focused on Colorado: 152 pieces aired on Radio Bilingue's flagship programs and Spanish translation of 154 of Chalkbeat Colorado's stories.⁴

The Trust's intention for these multi-year grants was specifically oriented towards supporting coverage that helped hold those in power accountable for inequities. The content analysis indicates that nearly half (48%) of the coverage produced with support from The Trust was focused on inequities, defined as stories that substantively described inequities faced by historically excluded, systemically underserved, or underrepresented groups. This coverage typically focused on challenges that these groups face and/or contributing policies and institutional practices. Most of this reporting on inequities included a specific focus on accountability, defined as stories that substantively described what power holders were doing vis-a-vis an issue and/or how they were responsible for causing or addressing that issue. This aligns with The Trust's intention for these grants.

Grantees underscored that The Trust's grants were instrumental in enabling them to expand this type of reporting. For example, Colorado Public Radio described its new race, diversity, and equity reporter, supported by The Trust's grant, as having "a monumental impact on CPR's objective to increase accountability and social justice reporting," enabling the station to "exponentially" increase this coverage. Radio Bilingue, a national outlet, emphasized that the grant had "a profound impact on our team's ability

Accountability reporting on inequities

- **ProPublica's** three-part investigative
- The Colorado Sun's coverage of
- Radio Bilingue's coverage of how

to dedicate themselves to local Colorado issues," resulting in a significantly strengthened network of Colorado-based contacts that enabled the outlet's journalists "to enter conversations about Colorado's history of grassroots power-building and confront systematic barriers facing Colorado Latinos."

Looking at the remainder of the stories that did not specifically focus on inequities, we found that a substantial proportion (29%) focused on accountability and/or policies regarding issues affecting Coloradans more broadly. Although not directly connected to inequities, these stories spoke to the broader goal of holding those in power accountable for policies and practices that impact Colorado communities.

Another of set of stories focused on the contributions of different cultural communities or individual members of those communities, offering a counterbalance to the "negative" lens of stories about inequities. Although The Trust's original intention for its grants to state and national media did not focus on this type of reporting, it resonates with The Trust's parallel support for community-centered journalism, as discussed later in this report.

⁴ Radio Bilingue's coverage included 80 episodes of the hour-long talk show, *Línea Abierta* (21 produced in-kind), and 72 feature reports on the weekly news magazine Edición Semanaria and despachos/news reports (6 produced in-kind).



Community-based outlets made a complementary contribution to reporting on inequities in Colorado.

The content analysis revealed that The Trust's three-year grants to five community-based outlets made a complementary contribution to The Trust's intention to support reporting on inequities. This contribution is unintentional in the sense that these grants were not specifically oriented towards increasing coverage of inequities, but it is not surprising that the community-based outlets produced stories that were important to this outcome. Across the five outlets, approximately 22% of the stories sampled for the content analysis focused on inequities. Two of these grantees stood out as particularly likely to produce this type of reporting, comprising about a third of their sampled stories: community radio stations KSJD and KSUT, who used The Trust's grant to fund a shared reporter focused on underrepresented communities; and the Denver Urban Spectrum, a publication focused on communities of color.

Similar to the state and national outlets, another substantial portion (26%) of community-based outlets' coverage was accountability and/or policy-related reporting that did not specifically focus on inequities. An example of this is reporting by Spanish-language outlets El Comercio de Colorado and Enterate Latino about immigration policies and other government actions that impact immigrant communities. These stories did not necessarily focus on inequities experienced by immigrants, but the coverage spoke to issues that directly impact these communities.

These findings confirm the important role that community-based outlets play in providing local coverage of inequities as well as reporting on policy issues that impact historically excluded, systemically underserved, or underrepresented groups.

2. Contributions to Informed Action



Reporting by grantees contributed to efforts to hold Colorado decision-makers accountable and advance solutions that address inequities.

News stories can potentially influence audience action in a variety of ways - for example, by contributing to decision-maker awareness of an issue or prompting them to take action; by informing the work of advocates, community organizers, or others who serve community needs; or by influencing community members' understanding of and ability to take informed action on an issue. While it is difficult for newsrooms to comprehensively track the impacts of their reporting due to methodological challenges and bandwidth constraints, grantees were able to share various examples of their stories' contributions, as illustrated by the selection below.

Contributing to awareness and actions of decision makers

 Halfway houses: With support from The Trust's grant to ProPublica, freelance reporter Moe Clark produced a three-part in-depth investigation into the failure of Colorado halfway houses to reduce recidivism. Co-published with the Denver Post, the investigation drew on extensive analysis of government and industry records, along with interviews with nearly 50 current and former halfway house residents, staff members, and experts. Following the investigation, a new state law was passed to help address the lack of oversight and transparency of the halfway houses. The bill was sponsored by lawmakers on the Joint Budget Committee, one of whom referenced ProPublica's reporting during a hearing when citing the need for greater transparency and accountability in Colorado's halfway house programs.

- Housing instability of migrant students: Under Chalkbeat's English Language Learners beat, reporter Yesenia Robles produced a story about the precarious housing situation faced by migrant students. In the context of an influx of migrants arriving in Denver, the story described how Denver Public School officials and teachers were struggling to help students and their families when they reached the end of their 30-day limit on temporary shelter provided by the city. Chalkbeat noted that, shortly after this story was published, the city extended shelter for new arriving families by an additional week, and a well-known immigrant entrepreneur reached out to Chalkbeat to learn about ways she could help.
- Fraudulent addiction treatment centers targeting Native Americans: An example from one of The Trust's community-based grantees comes from Rocky Mountain Community Radio (RMCR), a regional network of 20 community radio stations. The network's managing editor provided editorial support to member station KSUT Tribal Radio, helping reporter Crystal Ashike as she began digging into a story on predatory addiction treatment centers in Arizona targeting Four Corners tribal communities. Initial reporting in December 2022 by Ashike, who is a member of the Navajo Nation, was picked up by various outlets via RMCR's network and AP Storyshare, including Aspen Public Radio, Rocky Mountain PBS, and newsrooms serving Indigenous communities such as ICT News and the Navajo-Hopi Observer. By May 2023, the story had attracted additional media attention and escalated with FBI and other law enforcement involvement, prompting Arizona's governor and attorney general to announce the state would take action against the fraudulent treatment centers. The Navajo Nation also launched an initiative to help citizens who were victims of the behavioral health scam.
- Predatory practices of Homeowners Associations (HOAs) in Colorado: Another example from a community-based grantee is El Comercio de Colorado's reporting on problematic practices by HOAs, particularly around inflated fines and interest rates that escalated to foreclosure. El Comercio's investigation into the challenges faced by homeowners, which won a 2023 José Martí Award from the National Association of Hispanic Publications, contributed to the initiative of State Representatives Jennifer Parenti and Brianna Titone to advance a bill establishing protections for homeowners. The bill was subsequently passed and signed into law.

Contributing to the work of advocates, organizers, and others advancing solutions to inequities

- Inequities in housing: The Colorado Sun's equity reporter, Tatiana Flowers, produced a story about a nonprofit fixing up abandoned homes in San Luis Valley to provide good-quality affordable housing. The Sun noted that the story resulted in donations to the nonprofits working on the problem. Notably, The Sun also won unprompted praise from three of the community organizers interviewed for the evaluation. They expressed appreciation of The Sun's neutral approach to reporting as well as its willingness to name power holders who are responsible for problems. The Sun was also praised for providing analysis of the root causes and historical context around an issue while also conveying the human impact through individuals' stories. One interviewee brought up a story on housing written by Flowers as an illustrative example of quality reporting, highlighting how the story was helpful because it described the activism by community members and organizers leading up to a collective action calling out landlords for poor conditions and rising costs.
- Diversity and equity in the truck driving industry: Colorado Public Radio's race, diversity, and equity reporter, Elaine Tassy, reported on a Black-owned truck driving academy focused on increasing the number of truck drivers of color. As Colorado Public Radio noted, the story started as a small feature on a unique company, but it became a deeper piece on inequity as Tassy duq more into the topic and discovered that commercial drivers in Colorado's trucking industry are overwhelmingly white and male. According to Colorado Public Radio, thanks in part to the story, multiple trucking companies are now recruiting truck drivers through the academy, which is also in the process of becoming a staterecognized testing site for truck drivers.

3. Targeted Capacity Supports for Accountability Reporting



Targeted capacity-building supports responded to expressed needs in the field, but for journalists to fully leverage these opportunities, other factors constraining their capacity to pursue accountability reporting must be addressed.

The Trust's funding for targeted supports was intended to help address gaps in journalists' capacity to pursue accountability journalism, specifically responding to needs expressed by the field.

One of these supports was the Watchdog Fund, which sought to help strengthen local accountability reporting through reimbursement for public records requests. Managed by CMP, the fund was intended to help journalists overcome cost barriers to obtaining public records, responding to a need identified in a 2020 survey of journalists commissioned by The Trust.⁵ However, based on lessons learned from two years piloting the initiative, CMP concluded that the Watchdog Fund wasn't the most efficient or effective mechanism for supporting accountability journalism. As CMP observed, support with public records requests focused "too far downstream"; the reimbursement mechanism was not widely used because there weren't enough reporters doing accountability stories in the first place.

CMP proposed to pivot the Watchdog Fund's remaining funds to launch Spotlight: Colorado Fund for Accountability Journalism. This initiative provides more substantial and comprehensive support to newsrooms to carry out investigative or in-depth reporting projects, including: a grant of \$10,000; coaching from Colorado newsrooms that have experienced investigative teams; and freedom of information request and legal support from experts at the Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press' Colorado Local Legal Initiative. Spotlight targets smaller organizations with annual budgets of under \$1 million to help newsrooms that would otherwise lack the internal capacity to set aside time for this kind of reporting.

This pivot aligns with what the evaluation team heard from grantees. As we noted in our 2023 learning update for The Trust, limited use of the Watchdog Fund pointed to more critical capacity challenges that were constraining local accountability reporting: namely, limited staff bandwidth to carry out more in-depth reporting like accountability journalism.

A second targeted capacity support was scholarships for Colorado journalists to attend Investigative Reporters & Editors' (IRE) annual conference and receive a one-year membership. These scholarships for Colorado journalists were part of IRE's broader nationwide program, which selects scholarship recipients from a competitive pool of applicants and provides them with access to investigative journalism resources, tools, and networking opportunities. Across the three years of The Trust's grant, a total of 20 Coloradobased journalists received scholarships. The scholarships focused on groups underrepresented in investigative journalism, such as journalists of color, women, LGBTQ+ journalists, and those from smaller markets and publications, with the goal of strengthening Colorado's ecosystem of investigative journalists.

The data suggest that the Trust's scholarships helped address an expressed industry need for stronger access to professional development opportunities. In its final grant report, IRE noted that it received more than 230 applications nationwide for scholarships/fellowships to participate in the conference in 2024, which speaks to the volume of journalists facing financial barriers to participation. As one recipient told IRE

⁵ D. Coppini, K. El Damanhoury, S. Snyder, "<u>Media Landscape Study and Recommended Solutions for Consideration</u>" (The Colorado Trust, March 2021).

in an interview, they appreciated the Trust's scholarship because they see a serious lack of professional development opportunities. Moreover, as of this report's writing, a majority (65%) of The Trust's scholarship recipients remain active journalists working in Colorado, which IRE observed is a high percentage given extensive layoffs and reduction in resources across the industry. This is relevant to a state-based strategy like The Trust's, where the focus is on strengthening Colorado's ecosystem of investigative journalists in the context of a profession with high turnover and transience.

We have more limited insight into how journalists applied what they learned or gained through the IRE conference and membership. In our interviews with two of the recipients, whose newsrooms also received a multi-year grant from The Trust, we learned that they appreciated the excellent quality of the conference speakers, but had not yet found opportunities to apply what they heard or pursue related story ideas. While we cannot generalize to other recipients, these comments point to other capacity considerations that influence newsrooms' pursuit of investigative reporting, as discussed below.

In sum, the evaluation findings suggest that these targeted capacity supports addressed field needs, but their impact depends in part on there being sufficient resourcing and capacity in place to enable journalists to leverage these supports and consistently pursue accountability reporting.

Lessons Learned: What's Needed to Strengthen and Sustain Accountability Reporting on Inequities in Colorado



Resources that bolster organizational capacity to produce in-depth reporting are needed to help address gaps in accountability journalism.

Research commissioned by CMP shows that Colorado residents view accountability journalism as both a high priority and an area where state and local media could improve. ⁶ The evaluation findings described above suggest that The Trust's funding bolstered the capacity of newsrooms to produce stories focused on inequities and accountability in Colorado. But newsrooms need support to sustain and expand this reporting, particularly when it comes to accountability journalism at the local level.

The content analysis helps illustrate this gap in local accountability reporting. Within the sample of locally focused accountability stories produced by statewide outlets Chalkbeat, Colorado Public Radio, and the Colorado Sun, 89% were focused on communities in the Front Range. This reflects constraints on the capacity of these outlets to report from all counties across the state. As Chalkbeat noted, its statewide reporting mostly involves covering education issues that have statewide impact, including decisions made by the state legislature and state Board of Education. While Chalkbeat does base some of its reporting in communities across the state, it is not staffed to cover school districts, including rural ones, on an ongoing basis. This is an important distinction because it clarifies the importance of journalists who are living in and reporting from communities throughout the state, including in more rural and remote areas.

One solution is to support community-based outlets in deepening their local accountability reporting in communities that statewide media are unable to cover. This, in turn, means ensuring that community-based outlets have the organizational capacity they need to produce accountability reporting. This includes funding to cover the staff time needed to undertake this type of reporting, opportunities for mentorship to strengthen investigating reporting capacities, and support for operational capacities such as liability

⁶ Corona Insights, "Attitudes toward state and local media: Statewide survey 2022" (Colorado Media Project, 2022).

insurance to protect against the threat of legal retaliation for reporting on human rights violations and abuses of power. CMP's newly launched Spotlight Fund is positioned to address such capacity needs. It will be valuable to gather learning about how this initiative may help fill the gap in local accountability journalism.



Investments in newsroom capacity, such as staff and networks, contribute to enduring impacts on accountability reporting on inequities.

The five state and national outlets that received multi-year grants to strengthen their accountability reporting on inequities in Colorado used three distinct models. These models had varying strengths and implications for the longer-term impacts of The Trust's grants.

- Freelancer model: ProPublica was funded to implement a freelancer model, commissioning freelance journalists based in Colorado to conduct three in-depth investigations on issues of concern to Coloradans. This helped fill a gap, yielding a level of deep investigative work that many local outlets lack the resources to do. But the model had limitations in terms of its longer-term contribution to accountability reporting on inequities in Colorado. This is partly due to the relatively narrow scope of the project – limited to six stories – and partly due to the short-term nature of the model. In reflecting on the various models ProPublica has used to produce local investigative journalism, ProPublica's Managing Editor for Local Initiatives observed that the freelancer model does raise a key question: what happens after the engagement ends and the reporter moves on? The editor suggested that the ideal approach would be to fund a staff person based in Colorado, similar to the outlet's regional newsroom staffing model. This would reflect a longer-term outlook than the project-based freelancer model.
- Equity-focused beat model: The Trust's grants to Chalkbeat, Colorado Public Radio, and the Colorado Sun supported a beat model, where funding was used to enable an existing or newly hired reporter to deepen reporting on issues related to equity. Compared to the freelancer model, the beat model offered a clearer pathway to sustained accountability reporting on inequities. The equity-focused reporters were not typically engaged in the level of in-depth investigative reporting that ProPublica undertakes – and therefore are not a direct comparison. But they provided a steadier "drum beat" of in-depth reporting that kept a light shining on inequities, policies, and the actions of those in power over the course of the three-year grants.
- Hub-and-spoke partnership model: As a national organization based in California, Radio Bilingue utilized a hub-and-spoke partnership model to deepen its coverage of Colorado. The outlet's existing distribution model leverages partnerships with 14 Colorado radio stations, along with its two owned stations in Colorado, to broadcast its programming to local audiences. With The Trust's grant, Radio Bilingue built on this model, focusing on expanding its network of Colorado contacts (nonprofits, universities, government) and its connections with Colorado-based bilingual journalists who could contribute reporting and analysis to its flagship news programs. A challenge is that it proved difficult to find bilingual journalists in Colorado and to build local connections to help identify bilingual guests. However, the enduring impact of this model is that the outlet can continue to draw on its strengthened network in Colorado for future coverage of the state.



The Trust's Approach

The Trust's theory of change reflected a multifaceted understanding of what it looks like to center communities in journalism. One facet focused on ensuring that communities - particularly those underserved by other media – have access to reporting that meets their critical information needs, including reporting that is in their native or preferred language. A second facet focused on how news organizations operate. This includes having staff and leadership who reflect the communities that the newsroom intends to serve, as well as implementing newsroom practices that prioritize inclusion of community voices. A closely related third facet involved developing strong, trusting community relationships as a foundation for producing coverage that reflects the full experiences, perspectives, and priorities of community members. The final facet focused on how communities inform the news agenda and exercise agency over the stories told about them. As discussed later in this report, this is closely connected to the concept of narrative power.⁷

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

To what extent and how are The Trust's grants helping to advance journalism that centers the perspectives of the people most impacted by inequities?

What newsroom capacities are needed to center communities in reporting, and how has The Trust's support helped grantees strengthen these capacities?

How does community-centered reporting influence the quality of coverage and the relationships between newsrooms and communities?

To what extent and how do the grants strengthen access to local reporting that meets underserved communities' information needs?

The Trust's intention to support community-centered journalism was reflected across three components of its grantmaking portfolio:

- The first component, comprising about 27% of The Trust's journalism investments, was three-year flexible grants to community-based news organizations to bolster local reporting among Colorado's underserved BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), linguistic, and rural communities.
- A second component was The Trust's grants supporting internal efforts to strengthen DEI in Colorado newsrooms. Comprising a very small proportion of The Trust's journalism investments (5%), these grants were intended to promote more inclusive newsroom practices and culture, and to support a more diverse journalism workforce. With these DEI grants, The Trust sought to strengthen the capacity of Colorado newsrooms to more deeply reflect and connect with the communities they intend to serve, particularly groups that have been historically excluded or underserved. The DEI grants were managed by CMP as part of its broader Advancing Equity in Local News grantmaking program.

⁷ This articulation of what it looks like to center communities is consistent with the conceptualization of community-centered journalism offered by the Agora Journalism Center. See D. Radcliffe, "Redefining News: A Manifesto for Community-Centered Journalism" (Sep. 2023).

The third component brings us back to The Trust's substantial investment in multi-year grants to state and national news outlets. Although these grants were primarily oriented towards supporting accountability reporting on inequities, The Trust's explicit focus on communities most impacted by inequities speaks to its broader intention to support newsrooms that center the voices and experiences of these communities in their reporting. For this reason, we included these grantees in our analysis of The Trust's contribution to community-centered journalism.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

The Trust's grants aimed to contribute to several outcomes related to centering communities in journalism: (1) increased newsroom capacity to produce and expand access to local reporting that meets communities' information needs, particularly communities underserved by other media outlets; (2) improved diversity, equity, and inclusion within Colorado newsrooms; and (3) more trusting relationships between newsrooms and the communities they intend to serve and strengthened voice of these communities in news coverage.

1. Capacity to Produce and Expand Access to Local Reporting



The Trust's grants strongly contributed to community-based outlets' capacity to produce more local reporting.

The Trust's multi-year flexible grants to community-based outlets had substantial impacts on their capacity to expand the amount of local reporting produced for their audiences:

- Rocky Mountain Community Radio (RMCR), a regional network of 20 community radio stations, used The Trust's grant to create its first managing editor position, focused on strengthening members' capacity to collaborate and share content. RMCR emphasized the substantial impacts of this position on the network's capacity to produce local reporting. Maeve Conran, who was hired to fill the new position, provided training and editorial support to reporters, helped onboard new staff, supported stations to participate in collaborative reporting efforts, and enabled greater content sharing across the network. Conran also launched a 30-minute weekly program that repackages local stories produced by member stations, providing ready-made content that several stations regularly broadcast. In interviews, member stations confirmed Conran's significant contribution to their capacity to provide news content to their respective audiences across the state and region.
- Community radio stations KSUT and KSJD partnered to create a fulltime shared reporter position focused on Indigenous communities and other underrepresented communities in Southwest Colorado. The two newsrooms – both of which are small rural outlets – reported that the grant enabled them to triple their story output, expanding the scope of reporting to include issues and underrepresented communities that they otherwise couldn't have covered.

- El Comercio de Colorado, a bi-weekly Spanish-language newspaper serving audiences in the Front Range, used the grant in part to help expand coverage of a newly created congressional district. The publisher also described how the grant enabled the organization to strengthen its use of multimedia content, particularly video, to distribute via the outlet's website and social media. This includes video interviews with various stakeholders – from government officials discussing policies and services to local artists describing their work – which provided rich, substantive content beyond what is included in the newspaper's print edition.
- Enterate Latino, a monthly newspaper serving rural Spanish-speaking audiences in the Western Slope, was able to add an average of four additional pages of local content to each printed edition of the newspaper over the course of the grant. The grant helped cover operational costs associated with expanded content as well as increased printing costs associated with the additional pages of content.
- The Denver Urban Spectrum, a monthly publication serving Black communities since 1987, invested in internal capacity-building around digital infrastructure and content. Historically a printfirst outlet, the Denver Urban Spectrum strengthened and expanded its multimedia content by launching a magazine-style community news radio program in partnership with community radio station KGNU. The program amplifies the voices and stories of communities of color, providing a platform for conversations on social justice, politics, culture, and other issues.

The sixth community-based outlet to receive a three-year grant, the Southeast Express, was a recently established community newspaper producing hyperlocal coverage for a historically underserved community in Southeast Colorado Springs. The outlet unexpectedly closed in 2023, prompting the grant to end early.8



The Trust's grants helped strengthen access to local coverage that meets underserved communities' information needs, including stories in their native or preferred language.

With The Trust's support, grantees were able to deepen access to local reporting in three main ways.

1. More ways to access local reporting

Grantees were able to expand the number of places and platforms through which to access their local reporting. For example, El Comercio de Colorado increased access to its reporting in the new 8th Congressional district by establishing 45 new distribution points in the district and expanding the share of its digital audience located in the district. El Comercio's publisher also expanded upon existing media partnerships to further increase access to its reporting, for example by appearing more frequently as a guest on Radio Bilingue's programs. Enterate Latino increased the number of distribution sites on the Western Slope from 80 to 180, including libraries, businesses, and two bilingual schools that make the paper available to approximately 500 student families.

2. Increased access points for Spanish-speaking audiences to read or listen to reporting originally produced in English

English-language news organizations worked on improving access points through which Spanishspeaking audiences could read or listen to their local reporting. For example, with support from The Trust,

⁸ The evaluation team was unable to secure an interview with the Southeast Express once it closed. Given the limited learning to emerge from this grant, it is not included in the remainder of this report.

Chalkbeat undertook efforts to translate its coverage into Spanish and develop relationships with Spanish-language outlets, several of which picked up some of the translated stories. Community radio outlet **KSJD** used a DEI grant from The Trust to boost access to broadcast news for Spanish-speaking audiences in the Southwest region of Colorado, translating its English-language newscasts into Spanish to be aired during dedicated Spanish-language time slots in its programming.

3. Greater access to reporting that meets practical needs, particularly for underserved communities

Our content analysis of grantee coverage indicates that the Trust's grants helped expand access to "news you can use" and resources designed to address communities' practical questions. The three Spanishlanguage grantees, along with Chalkbeat's Spanish-translated stories, were the most likely to focus on this kind of service-oriented content. This reporting helped strengthen access to critical information related to education, health, employment, voting, immigration, and other key concerns among Spanish-speaking communities that often face barriers to accessing this information.⁹

Service-oriented reporting to meet underserved communities' practical information needs

- El Comercio de Colorado deepened its health coverage, providing accessible information
- Radio Bilingue's hour-long program, Linea Abierta, sought out guests who could speak to
- Enterate Latino created new health and education supplements designed to provide
- Chalkbeat produced several resource guides to help readers navigate topics like bullying

⁹ The content analysis defined service-oriented reporting as stories focused on directly answering people's questions and concerns, such as guidance on where or how to access help with services. Within the sample of stories for the content analysis, Enterate Latino, El Comercio de Colorado, Radio Bilingue, and Chalkbeat's Spanish-translated stories were more likely to include a service-oriented focus (between 15-29% of their stories), compared to the Colorado Sun, Colorado Public Radio, ProPublica, RMCR, and KSUT/KSJD (0-2% of stories). The Denver Urban Spectrum fell in the middle, with about 8% of stories containing a service-oriented focus.

2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Colorado Newsrooms



The Trust's DEI grants made meaningful contributions towards more diverse newsrooms, particularly through its support for paid internship programs.

Several of The Trust's DEI grants aimed to support greater diversity in Colorado newsrooms. This includes paid internship programs for students with backgrounds underrepresented in the journalism as well as ecosystem-level resources to support more diverse hiring practices.

Paid journalism internships for underrepresented groups

The Trust's grants helped four newsrooms host paid internship programs. While the programs varied in size, length, and approach, a throughline was providing practical on-the-job journalism experience for students of color and individuals from other underrepresented backgrounds, including those for whom an unpaid internship isn't feasible. As noted by community radio station KGNU, The Trust's grant provided the funds to formalize what the outlet had long recognized: that there are many diverse young storytellers who want to delve into media but may not be able to do so with an unpaid internship because they need supplemental income.

Grant reports suggest that the internships successfully enabled students to build their journalism skills and portfolios, and in some cases served as a springboard to a next career move in journalism. The internship programs also contributed to the quality of coverage the newsrooms produced. All four grantees provided examples underscoring how the stories produced by interns brought additional cultural representation and perspectives to their reporting and broadened the scope of issues covered, deepening the coverage in ways that resonated with their audiences. For example, Bucket List Community Cafe described how the interns enabled more inclusive storytelling about the Hispanic community in Denver, drawing on Spanish-language interviews and engagement with different people in the community: "Our audience wants to see themselves represented in news, and being able to support these journalists made us able to do that with an inclusive team and storytelling that features all voices."

Paid internship programs

- **Aurora Sentinel:** The Sentinel collaborated
- **Boulder Reporting Lab:** In two consecutive
- **Bucket List Community Cafe:** Bucket List's
- **KGNU:** Over the course of three years, KGNU

Given the relatively small size of these investments (one-year grants of \$5000-\$25,000), the DEI grants made a substantive contribution – both to the pipeline of journalists representing diverse backgrounds and experiences and to the quality of coverage produced by the newsrooms hosting the internship programs.

Ecosystem resources to support diverse hires

The Trust supported Open Media Foundation's (OMF) Career Engine as an ecosystem-level initiative intended to support diverse hiring practices in Colorado newsrooms. The Career Engine aims to help newsrooms fill open positions with candidates that reflect the diversity of Colorado's population. This responds to an expressed need in the field; indeed, multiple newsroom grantees described the challenges they had encountered in finding and successfully recruiting journalists of color. Since 2019, people of color comprised 40% of the positions that the Career Engine helped fill – which OMF noted is higher than the percentage of the news media workforce comprised of people of color. 10 However, OMF also observed significant challenges to its work due to changes in the workforce, including a steep decline in both job opportunities and job seekers. This speaks to the broader contextual factors that impact efforts to support diversity in newsrooms.



Newsrooms were able to deepen their understanding and implementation of more inclusive reporting practices.

A major focus of The Trust's DEI grants was supporting outlets' efforts to better understand and align newsroom practices, policies, and culture with DEI principles.

Grant reports and interviews suggest that the grants contributed towards more inclusive reporting practices by enabling outlets to dedicate resources (including the necessary staff time) towards hands-on training and new ways of working. For example, The Crestone Eagle, a small monthly newspaper serving rural Saguache County, sought out mentorship from the publisher of an all-Indigenous newsroom, IndigiNews. The publisher, Eden Fineday, worked closely with the Eagle's Equity Outreach Regional Editor, providing feedback on unintentional discrimination and stereotyping in stories and consultations on how to build trust, center kindness, and benefit the culture that is being covered. Another example comes from Colorado Public Radio's work institutionalizing source tracking. With support from a DEI grant, the outlet expanded its use of SourceMatters, a tool developed by the American Press Institute to help reporters track the demographics of their sources. Colorado Public Radio emphasized that it took a long time and considerable effort to work out technical challenges and address staff concerns about the additional workload of tracking sources, but they now have 100% participation by their reporters, capturing around 85% of sources. The outlet views these data as "eye-opening" for reporters, helping them understand which voices are missing and enabling them to be more intentional about the diversity of their stories.

The Trust's contribution to broader shifts in workplace culture and policy was more difficult to discern, particularly in larger organizations receiving DEI grants. Internal efforts to establish DEI infrastructure, coordinate internal DEI initiatives, and implement new practices across a large staff speak to a long-term, complex, and often challenging process of organizational change. The trajectory of this kind of process – which in some cases may yield tangible changes in policies, norms, and culture, and in other cases may not - are not well-captured within the course of The Trust's short-term and relatively small DEI grants. 11

¹⁰ Data on the diversity in Colorado newsrooms is limited. A report describing the Colorado News Collaborative's <u>2023 survey</u> of 93 Colorado newsrooms indicated that people of color comprised 33% of non-managerial personnel. Diversity at the management/leadership level was not included in that report. For comparative data at a national level, see Institute for Nonprofit News, "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Index Report 2023" (Oct 2023).

¹¹ Research suggests that organizational transformation towards equitable journalism, even among newsrooms motivated to change, is a difficult, slow, and not always successful process. For example, in Antiracist Journalism: The Challenge of Creating Equitable Local News (Columbia University Press 2023), Andrea Wenzel documents numerous challenges to implementing equitable policies and systems, and notes the limitations of short-term grants for maintaining the organizational infrastructure needed to sustain progress. See also Impact Architects, "Public Square Program Evaluation: 2016-2021. Summary Report" (Democracy Fund, 2021).

3. Community Relationships and Voice in Coverage



Newsrooms significantly strengthened their relationships with underrepresented and underserved communities.

The Trust's portfolio included several examples of how newsrooms were able to strengthen their relationships with the communities they serve, particularly those that have been marginalized, underrepresented, and/or misrepresented in mainstream media coverage. The three examples, described below, offer illustrations of what this work can look like and what it can accomplish.

Strengthened relationships with historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented communities

KSUT and KSJD: Building trusting relationships with underrepresented communities

- What the outlets did: In establishing a shared reporter position focused on Indigenous communities and
- The difference it made: These efforts enabled the reporter to successfully build trust over time:

Chalkbeat: Listening and responding to the needs of Spanish-speaking audiences

- What the outlet did: With support from two consecutive one-year grants (one funded by The Trust, and
- The difference it made: Early signs of trust built include interest from Spanish-language media in

Strengthened relationships with historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented communities

KOTO: Cultivating connections with and service to the Latino community

- What the outlet did: A small radio station serving the Telluride region, KOTO first began offering
- The difference it made: Through the open house, KOTO was able to recruit the station's first Spanish-

While these examples illustrate the process for strengthening relationships with underserved communities, it is important to recognize that The Trust also funded outlets with existing strong relationships with immigrant and Spanish-speaking communities (El Comercio de Colorado, Enterate Latino) and the Black community (Denver Urban Spectrum). These community connections can manifest in collaborations, such as an example we heard from a community organizer who partnered with the Denver Urban Spectrum to help boost vaccination rates in the Black community during the COVID pandemic. Community connections also manifest in the types of organizations who buy advertising space. For example, Enterate Latino celebrates the fact that local organizations from the same Latino community want to place ads in the newspaper.



Although The Trust's portfolio didn't encompass the full geographic scope of Colorado, grantees' sourcing practices elevated the voices of diverse communities.

The Trust's grants aimed to sustain and/or deepen grantees' efforts to reflect the voices of Colorado's diverse communities in reporting, particularly communities most impacted by inequities. To understand how this manifested in grantee coverage, the evaluation's content analysis explored how well the portfolio supported coverage across different regions of the state and the extent to which reporting included community sources, particularly those who had lived experience with the story's topic.

Geographic focus of stories

Most of the stories sampled for the content analysis were focused on the local level (60%) or the state level (29%).¹² Within the sample of local coverage, stories were particularly concentrated in the Front Range

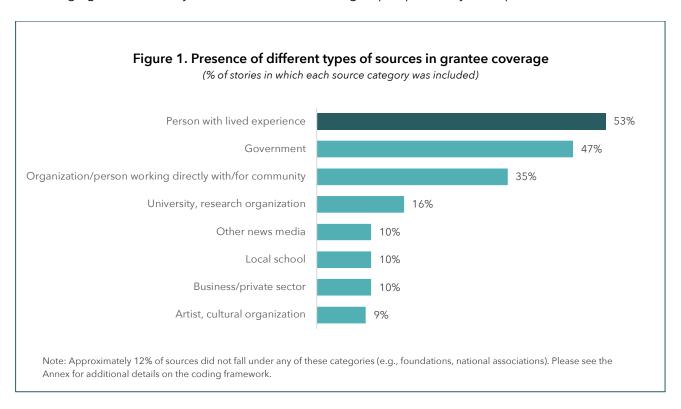
¹² The remaining 11% of stories were regional, national, international, or did not focus on a specific place.

region of the state. This partly reflects the strong focus on the Front Range within the local coverage of the five state and national outlets; 89% of their combined local coverage was focused on this region. It also reflects the fact that two community-based outlets (El Comercio de Colorado and Denver Urban Spectrum) are based in Denver. Local coverage of other regions in the state was primarily provided by the three remaining community-based outlets: Enterate Latino focused on the Western Slope, KSUT and KSJD focused on the Southwest, and RMCR provided local stories from across seven regions, reflecting the respective locations of its member stations in Colorado. 13

Overall, these patterns suggest that The Trust's grants were particularly helpful in bolstering local coverage of communities in the Front Range, the Western Slope, and Southwest. The portfolio was less wellpositioned to address local coverage in other regions of the state, particularly the Southeast, Northeast, and Northwest corners of the state and the Central Mountain region.¹⁴

Inclusion of sources with lived experience

Findings from the evaluation's content analysis suggests that grantee coverage reflected a relatively strong orientation towards sources with lived experience. Over half of the stories (53%) included at least one source that was described as having lived experience with the issue at hand (Figure 1). This includes individuals whom the story described as personally impacted by the story's topic and individuals described as belonging to a historically excluded or underserved group impacted by the topic.



By comparison, a slightly smaller proportion of grantee stories (47%) included at least one government source. This is a notable finding, given the news media's typically strong reliance on government sources

¹³ Within the sample of RMCR's stories, the regional distribution encompassed the Front Range (33%), the Western Slope (25%), San Juan (17%), Southwest (8%), Central Mountain (8%), San Luis Valley (4%), and Northeast (4%).

¹⁴ The regional analysis is based on the Colorado Nonprofit Association's categorization of counties into 9 major regions. This is consistent with the regional definitions used in CMP's 2023 state of the field report.

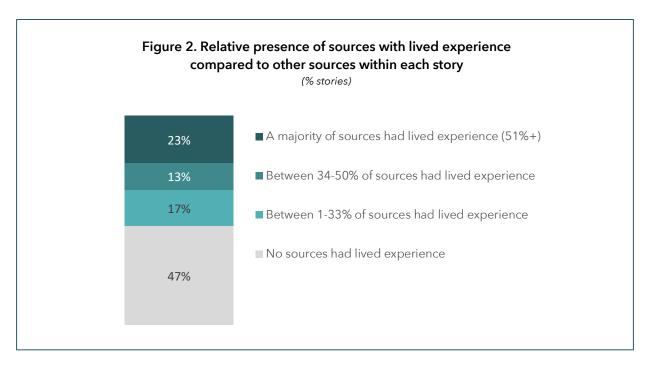
and its tendency to underrepresent voices of community members who have lived experience with the issues, particularly people in historically excluded or underserved groups. In the grantees' coverage, sources with lived experience appeared in more stories than government sources.

In addition, those who advocate for and/or serve the needs of groups impacted by the story's topic appeared as sources in over a third of stories (35%). This included community organizers, advocacy organizations, and nonprofits that promote and serve the needs of communities impacted by inequities, for example by providing housing assistance, youth programs, or support for immigrants. While these sources were not described as having lived experience with the issue, they often communicated the experiences and priorities of those who do.

The relative balance of sources

To explore sourcing practices further, the content analysis assessed the relative balance of different types of sources within each story. By examining the number of sources with lived experience compared to the number of other types of sources within a given story, the analysis sought to offer a more nuanced understanding of how much the coverage "centered" sources with lived experiences.

The findings indicate variation across coverage in the balance of sourcing (Figure 2). In 23% of coverage, individuals with lived experience comprised a majority of the story's sources. At the other end of the spectrum, in about 17% of coverage, individuals with lived experience comprised a third or less of the story's sources.



A limitation of this analysis is that it doesn't capture the amount of space or airtime dedicated to each source and therefore cannot speak to how prominently each voice was featured in a given story. While recognizing this limitation, the findings still offer a useful signal regarding sourcing practices, indicating the extent to which reporters focused on gathering and representing the perspectives of those with lived experience versus other types of sources.

An important nuance to recognize is how sourcing practices are shaped by a news organization's mission and positionality vis-a-vis communities that have lived experience with the issues covered. This has implications for how we define and interpret community-centered sourcing practices. Three comparative examples below illustrate this point.

Sourcing practices as a function of mission and positionality

- Reporting on communities that experience inequities: The reporting by ProPublica and the mission statements speak to their positionality reporting on inequities experienced by communities
- Coverage that is by and for communities that experience inequities: Enterate Latino's mission is paper's local content reflect its orientation towards coverage that is by and for communities
- Reporting on and for communities that experience inequities: KSUT and KSJD reflect a hybrid both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, reflecting the stations' positionality reporting on

Lessons Learned: What's Needed to Support Community-Centered Journalism



Collaborative models can bolster local reporting by community-based outlets when they build on outlets' existing strengths and capacities.

Multiple grantees noted that collaboration can be valuable, but underscored that it is often difficult for newsrooms to participate in collaboratives due to a lack of operational resources. As one grantee observed, funders have been enthusiastic supporters of collaboration, but they need to take this lack of operational capacity into account. Lessons learned, particularly from RMCR and the KSUT/KSJD partnership, offer insights into what's needed to support effective collaboration that boosts local reporting capacity.

One factor that facilitates collaboration is strong relationships and communication structures. As RMCR's managing editor noted, the network already had the bones of a communications structure and existing relationships when she came on board. This sense of community, and an agreed-upon communications structure, can take time to establish and requires resources to manage. KSUT and KSJD's partnership exemplifies a bilateral version of this same strength. They attributed their collaborative success in part to the existing strong relationship and communication between the two outlets and their ability to recognize their respective strengths and weaknesses when working out how to operationalize the partnership. This speaks to a broader lesson that CMP has drawn from its past three years of supporting collaboration: the important role that existing infrastructure plays in facilitating collaborative success.

RMCR's managing editor also emphasized the importance of shifting away from the "one-size-fits-all" model of collaboration where all outlets are equally contributing stories under a related theme. She noted this model shuts out many community-centric newsrooms who don't have the resources or experience to contribute, which means their communities' stories aren't told. With the Regional Roundup, a weekly 30minute program that repackages stories from RMCR's member stations, she has sought to implement a more inclusive collaborative approach by meeting outlets where they are and recognizing that each has something to contribute. For example, she might ask a reporter to hop on Zoom so she can record them talking about what they're seeing in their community around a certain issue, or she might ask a reporter to send her short clips that illustrate how an issue is playing out in their community. She then weaves this content into a regional look at the issue for the Roundup, providing stations with prepackaged material they can easily drop into their line-up.



Multiple challenges complicate efforts to increase access to local reporting by translating English-language stories into other languages.

In The Trust's theory of change, one pathway for increasing access to local reporting involves translating stories produced by English-language outlets and making them available to communities whose native or preferred language is not English. Lessons from the portfolio surfaced several challenges:

What to translate: Outlets that primarily serve English-speaking audiences may wrestle with questions around which of their stories are most important to translate for Spanish-speaking audiences. Grantees emphasized that these decisions need to reflect a strong understanding of what's relevant to different audiences, recognizing, for example, that some stories written to meet the information needs of an audience with certain privileges and access may not always be as relevant to audiences without those same privileges and access.

- **How to translate:** Grantees observed that there are logistical and language justice considerations, such as how long it takes to translate and when the English-language version vs. translated version will be published. There are also challenges with accurate translation; this surfaces with Spanishlanguage translations, but is even more complicated for other languages, as illustrated by KSJD's experience translating its English newscasts into Ute, which has a significantly different language structure than English.
- How to reach intended audiences: Cultivating partnerships with Spanish-language media is a primary approach that English-language outlets use to bring their translated stories to the intended audience. But grantees noted challenges, both in terms of the format and content of stories. For example, English-language outlets that produce very lengthy stories can make it difficult for Spanish-language outlets with shorter story formats to republish their coverage. A story's content must also be understandable across audiences. As Enterate Latino's publisher observed, shared content from English-language outlets can require adjustment to ensure his readers can understand a story that was written for a different audience: "You can have the best written article... but if a reader doesn't understand it, it doesn't mean anything. It's not going to do you any good."



Internship programs to support a more diverse pipeline require significant staff and organizational capacity, including internal DEI capacity.

Grantees noted challenges finding and recruiting journalists of color, multilingual journalists, and journalists from other underrepresented groups. This speaks to an underlying assumption in many efforts to diversify newsrooms: that there is a sufficient supply of journalists from diverse backgrounds. As grantees observed, this assumption is flawed. Both within the pool of existing journalism professionals and within the next generation of reporters enrolled in journalism education programs in Colorado, there were relatively few individuals who come from backgrounds underrepresented in the journalism field.

The Trust's support for paid internship programs offered one potential avenue for addressing this gap. Lessons from the grants indicate that these programs require careful design and significant staff and organizational capacity to support the learning and professional development needs of interns. For example, newsrooms need to provide strong guidance, structure, and mentorship to interns with varying backgrounds and skill levels. This requires significant dedicated staff time, which may strain the internal capacity of the host newsrooms. As KGNU observed based on its experience refining its paid internship program over time, a key lesson is to right-size the program to the organization's internal capacity so that both the interns and the host newsroom are able to reap the full benefits of this type of program.

Effectively supporting interns from underrepresented backgrounds also requires a strong understanding of how to create a diverse and inclusive culture, often within the context of a majority-white outlet. This speaks to a key lesson emerging from CMP's experience supporting a cohort of internship programs, including those funded by The Trust: there needs to be a stronger emphasis on working with the (mostly white) editors who are involved in these internship programs, to deepen their understanding of how to support a diverse newsroom.



Organizational shifts towards greater diversity, equity, and inclusion require institutional follow-through.

The enduring impact of efforts to deepen internal understanding of DEI depends on institutional followthrough, specifically by institutionalizing that understanding into policies, practices, and budgets. As CMP observed, the DEI grants funded by The Trust consistently helped newsrooms identify gaps and spaces

where they were not serving their communities in the ways they sought to. But while some newsroom leaders found helpful or even transformative ways to respond to those gaps, others did not.

KOTO offers one example of institutional follow-through, illustrated by the executive director's mantra: "if you mean it, put it in your budget." In KOTO's case, this meant putting money in the budget to recruit and hire a Spanish-language reporter. It also meant supporting that reporter – not as a "token" hire, but as a partner in building out the station's Spanish-language programming. As KOTO observed, funding from The Trust and CMP empowered KOTO to put the Spanish-language position in the budget for the first time. Three years later, independent of these grants ending, this position will stay in the budget, reflecting the organization's commitment to continuing this work.

The Mountain West News Bureau (MWNB) offers another example of institutional follow-through. Building on insights from community listening sessions in the Four Corners region, the MWNB organized a series of Indigenous-led trainings to help reporters deepen their understanding of how to cover Indigenous communities, including how to build relationships and trust with tribal officials or elders. The MWNB also hired freelance Indigenous editors to work with staff reporters on their stories, which helped ensure that lessons from the trainings took hold. The MWNB observed that it was able to reach a new level of partnership with two Native media organizations, Koahnic Broadcast Corporation and Native Public Media, in part because they could see how the values conveyed in the trainings were then reflected in reporters' work. The three organizations collaborated to launch a new weekly radio segment about the impact of climate change on tribal communities, called "Our Living Lands." In line with the MWNB's efforts to institutionalize what it learned from the trainings and listening sessions, the segment's editorial decisionmaking is in the hands of a three-person Indigenous team.



Building trusting relationships with communities takes time, consistency, and intentionality.

The final lesson is that trust-building is a multi-year process of consistently demonstrating – through action, not just words – principles of respect, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity.

For example, the Crestone Eagle highlighted that it took years to build relationships with Indigenous communities: "It's not an easy door to open." The Eagle's Equity Outreach Regional Editor recalled being turned away more than they had expected when they sought to bring in more diverse voices. They learned that they needed to work through other trusted organizations to build connections: "For example, we got some wonderful contacts not by directly reaching out to someone, but by involving ourselves in other organizations' projects, supporting their mission, and then seeing if they wanted to participate in ours. We also found that trust can be built through resharing content created by another trusted news outlet." Multiple years into this effort, the editor has now built trust to the point where community leaders help connect her to other sources in tribal communities.

KSUT and KSJD emphasized that, even with their existing strong relationships with tribes, it took a significant time commitment for their shared reporter to familiarize himself with the geography and communities in the Four Corners region, and to make interpersonal connections with tribal members and other disenfranchised groups. This is not a "plug-and-play" process, but rather hinges on the authenticity and consistency of the individual reporter's efforts over time. Having a reporter who showed up consistently year after year – and enabling communities to see "the best and brightest parts" of their communities repeatedly lifted up by his reporting – made a big difference for building trust.

As Enterate Latino observed, the process of building and sustaining trust can be particularly challenging in contexts where fear and risk are salient factors for community members. For example, some members of immigrant communities fear repercussions of being quoted or recorded, particularly in English-language media that serve a broader audience. In such contexts, trust can be fragile, requiring outlets to carefully consider how publishing a story could potentially help a community (for example, by bringing attention to a policy's impacts) or harm that community (for example, by triggering hostile reactions or inadvertently negatively impacting an individual source or their families).

Our interviews with community organizers underscore related lessons around what's needed to help build trusting relationships between newsrooms and communities. As noted by one of these interviewees, it can be helpful when a reporter lives in the community they cover because they will be familiar with the local issues and "understand the reality of their community." Another interviewee observed that reporters sometimes don't know the landscape of organizations and people working on social issues: "They'll be like, Oh, my gosh, I didn't even know this organization existed, and I didn't even know this is the work that you all were doing." This interviewee also acknowledged that it is a two-way street, noting that her own organization needs to figure out how to cultivate better relationships with media so they can help their stories get covered.

A further lesson is around whom reporters seek to build trusting relationships with. One community organizer noted that newsrooms often have a quick turnaround time for producing stories. This pushes them to operate in a more "transactional" way vis-à-vis sourcing relationships and to prioritize efficient ways to get a quote, resulting in the same experts being quoted over and over in news coverage. Another community organizer made a similar observation, noting that larger prominent organizations will get more frequent media requests, whereas the smaller organization he works at, focused on undocumented immigrants, does not receive many requests. As these interviewees emphasized, it is important for reporters to include sources beyond elected officials – and even beyond nonprofit staff – by identifying and talking to community members or community leaders who have lived experience with an issue. This is a lengthier process: it involves building the trust of people who may feel they are taking a risk by sharing their story. And it is about building a relationship with a community – not just reaching out when there's a breaking story, but rather proactively asking for input on what the community is talking about and prioritizing.



The Trust's Approach

As The Trust's strategic partner for its journalism grantmaking, CMP played three key roles:

- **Intermediary:** CMP managed The Trust's three-year grants to community-based outlets, the DEI grants, and the Watchdog Fund.
- Convener: CMP served as a convener for The Trust's journalism grantees and other key stakeholders in Colorado's news and information ecosystem.
- Content expert: CMP brought deep knowledge of

and connections with the Colorado media ecosystem and the journalism field more broadly.

Launched in 2018, CMP's mission is to support people, projects, and organizations working to build a healthier, more equitable, solutions-focused local news and information ecosystem for all Coloradans. As a relatively young organization, CMP was still crystallizing its role in the ecosystem when The Trust established this strategic partnership in 2021. Since then, CMP has significantly evolved and expanded, leveraging pooled funds from The Trust and other philanthropic partners to advance key priorities around equity and inclusion, access to trusted local news, and sustainability and efficiency in Colorado's news and information ecosystem.

CMP has a lean staffing model, comprised of Melissa Davis, who served as Director from 2020-2024, and Sam Moody, who served as CMP's Associate Director from 2022-2025. CMP is governed by an Executive Committee comprised of representatives from The Trust and other foundations that have provided significant multi-year financial and/or in-kind support to advance CMP's mission. CMP underwent a leadership transition in late 2024, with Davis transitioning into a new role with Press Forward and Kimberly Spencer joining CMP as its new director.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

The Trust's partnership with CMP was intended to support the value and impact of The Trust's journalism grantmaking. As a collaborative philanthropic initiative with grantmaking, capacity building, and convening roles in the ecosystem, CMP was positioned to both support The Trust's work and amplify it through complementary investments and activities.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

What are the contributions and/or challenges of CMP's role as an intermediary in supporting grantees?

What are lessons about how to most effectively leverage CMP's role as an intermediary?

CMP's Contributions



CMP supported The Trust's grantees by providing opportunities for them to connect, share, learn, and collaborate.

In 2022, CMP organized the Advancing Equity in Local News Convening with support from The Trust, bringing together 120 participants from journalism, philanthropy, academia, and the community. Postconvening survey data suggest that participants came away with new ideas for how to strengthen their reporting about Colorado's diverse communities, as well as useful tools, practices, or action steps for deepening relationships with the communities they serve. In this way, the convening helped advance The Trust's outcomes around community-centered reporting. Survey data and interviews also confirmed the value of the convening for building and strengthening relationships among grantees.

CMP continued to serve this convening role in 2023 and 2024 with two additional annual convenings for journalism grantees. Feedback CMP has gathered indicates that participants particularly value opportunities to sit with peers, exchanging learning about the things they've tried and what they've learned. This aligns with insights that grantees shared in our interviews: opportunities to connect with others who share common interests and challenges is helpful, especially for journalists working in small newsrooms or in remote areas where peer support systems and opportunities to share experiences are less common.

CMP also nurtured the conditions for collaboration, both by connecting grantees and by supporting collaborative efforts through its grantmaking. This is part of CMP's broader effort to expand the leadership in Colorado's ecosystem through its Local News Ecosystem Builders group, which is now comprised of partner organizations like COLab, the Colorado Press Association, and the National Trust for Local News, as well as several newsrooms, including four of The Trust's multi-year grantees - Chalkbeat, Colorado Public Radio, the Colorado Sun, and RMCR.



CMP amplified The Trust's capacity-building investments by layering on additional supports and opportunities.

One of CMP's key contributions stems from its position as an ecosystem-level capacity builder. Drawing on its strengths as a grantmaker and a connector, CMP was able to layer on additional opportunities for The Trust's grantees to strengthen their capacity. For example, CMP organized a DEI training by the Maynard Institute for 20 news organizations, including 10 of the organizations receiving DEI or multi-year support from The Trust. This training complemented the work supported by The Trust's funding. In addition, at least 15 of the organizations supported by The Trust's funding have participated in CMP's #newsCOneeds annual matching challenge. This opportunity to build fundraising capacity and raise money from individual contributors speaks to the longer-term sustainability of The Trust's grantees.

CMP also provided supplemental support for four of The Trust's community-based multi-year grantees:

- El Comercio de Colorado and Enterate Latino: A grant to support collaboration on election coverage in 2022;
- Enterate Latino: A one-year extension grant in 2024 to support coverage of immigration, healthcare, and education issues identified by the community as key priorities;
- RMCR: A grant to hire a digital editor in 2023 and a grant to hire a climate reporter in 2024, supported through CMP's Community News Innovation and Sustainability Fund;

Denver Urban Spectrum: A grant to Local Media Association in 2022 to provide support to the Denver Urban Spectrum with business analysis and strategic planning related to its digital transformation goals.

These grants built on The Trust's multi-year investment in these community-based organizations, enabling the grantees to further deepen their capacity to produce local news.



CMP's Advancing Equity in Local News grantmaking program complemented and extended the work supported by The Trust's DEI grants.

The Trust's support for internal DEI capacity-building provided impetus for CMP's broader Advancing Equity in Local News grantmaking program. Under this program, CMP was able to build on The Trust's investment in internal DEI, leveraging additional pooled funds to focus on two complementary categories of grants (see box). These categories of grants are well-aligned with The Trust's theory of change, speaking to pathways for strengthening the conditions under which communities most impacted by inequities can exercise power over the stories told about them.

Across the three annual cycles of this grantmaking program, a total of 20 organizations received grants under the DEI capacity-building category supported by The Trust's funding. Of those 20 grantees, more than half (12) received funding in another year, under one of the other two categories of grantmaking. In other words, the complementary categories of grants in CMP's Advancing Equity program enabled these grantees to continue and evolve their work over the course of multiple years.

GRANTMAKING

Advancing Equity in Local News **Grantmaking Program Priorities**

In addition, some of these grants deepened the work supported through The Trust's separate multi-year grants. For example, El Comercio de Colorado was also awarded a grant under the category of supporting more diverse and inclusive civic news leadership, entrepreneurship, ownership, and narratives. This grant complemented The Trust's support, providing additional funds to expand the paper's capacity to elevate and engage with Latino perspectives via six community forums. And a grant to Chalkbeat enabled the outlet to continue deepening its work engaging Spanish-speaking audiences, aligned with The Trust's support for the outlet's English Language Learners coverage, translation activities, and community outreach.

CMP also funded grants under this program that sought to **build infrastructure**, particularly for outlets led by and for people of color. This includes grants to Mile High Asian Media to support networking and professional development for Asian journalists and other content creators, and grants to support the Colorado Ethnic Media Exchange, which has evolved into a collaborative effort to strengthen advertising revenue for Spanish-language, Black, Asian, and other minority-focused publications. CMP's investments in these forms of infrastructure complement The Trust's intention to support the capacity of local newsrooms to serve Colorado's diverse communities.



CMP helped strengthen philanthropic understanding of and coordination around Colorado's news and information ecosystem.

As reflected in a 2023 evaluation of CMP, funder interviewees confirmed that CMP's expertise on local news and information ecosystems provided them with **technical knowledge** about the current challenges facing local newsrooms, as well as access to data on Coloradans' news and information needs, particularly in underserved communities. 15 Funders observed that CMP also played an important role facilitating peer learning and knowledge sharing among funders working at the local, state, and national level. As a central table for funders to pool their support for media grantmaking, CMP helped funders support the ecosystem in a way that no single foundation could do on its own – while also helping to facilitate complementarity in the direct grants that these funders made separately from CMP.

Challenges

As a relatively new organization established in 2018, CMP was following a learning curve as it refined its roles as grantmaker, convener, and connector over the past three years. This had implications for The Trust's strategic partnership with CMP, including certain challenges.

One of CMP's strengths is its responsiveness to the needs of individual newsrooms as well as the ecosystem as a whole. With a unique vantage point on the landscape, CMP is able to identify where capacity gaps are and how to potentially address them. However, this responsive approach posed challenges at times. For example, CMP took on an ambitious scope of activities, sometimes making it difficult to discern clear strategic priorities and lines of work. The large quantity of projects spread CMP thin, in terms of both its focus and its staff capacity. As CMP's 2023 evaluation report noted, funders felt the organization's fast pace at times precluded having adequate space to reflect on lessons learned and make adjustments.

CMP's expansive and evolving scope also made it difficult for newsrooms and other ecosystem actors to understand CMP's roles vis-à-vis other actors. Newsrooms expressed particular confusion around which activities and roles were led by CMP and which were led by CMP's main capacity-building grantee, COLab. CMP observed that part of its own learning over the past three years is that it needed to adjust its approach to supporting capacity-building in the ecosystem, drawing on a larger set of capacity support providers to help connect newsrooms with specific expertise, rather than focusing on a single hub to provide this support. As of this report's writing, the respective roles of CMP, COLab, and other capacity builders in Colorado are continuing to evolve, informed in part by the priorities and strategic directions that CMP takes, including in its new role as the home of Press Forward's local chapter.

This brings us to a final forward-looking challenge, emerging from CMP's recent leadership transition. CMP's founding director, Melissa Davis, was the driving force behind the organization's evolution over the past three years of partnership with The Trust. A respected and valued ecosystem leader, Davis was consistently praised by grantees, funders, and other stakeholders for her knowledge of the ecosystem, responsiveness to news organizations' needs, and skills as a connector – contributions that were highlighted as critical to the progress made in the ecosystem since CMP's launch. Davis' decision to step down in late 2024 was a major change for the organization and the ecosystem. This is an exciting

¹⁵ S. Dilliplane, G. Barsoum, "Evaluation of the Colorado Media Project: Summary Report" (Colorado Media Project, April 2023).

opportunity for CMP to chart the next phase of its vision and role in the ecosystem, under new leadership. It is also a time of transition as the organization adjusts to Davis' departure, potentially creating uncertainty around CMP's priorities and relationships with grantees and other ecosystem actors, at least temporarily.

Lessons Learned: What Made CMP a Valuable Strategic Partner



CMP and The Trust were mutually impactful in strengthening local journalism at an important inflection point in Colorado's media landscape.

The Trust's partnership with CMP came at a specific time in the evolution of both CMP, as a relatively young organization, and the local news ecosystem in Colorado, which was eroding as outlets shut down and the journalism workforce shrank. 16 This had implications for the way in which The Trust's funding informed CMP's priorities and the directions it took over the three-year period. The Trust's initial investment came at a time when CMP was considering its strategic plans and evaluating whether or not it should continue beyond its initial scope as a time-limited "project." The Trust's investment put CMP into the role of intermediary, which turned out to be a good fit for the organization and helped set its trajectory as it refined its position and value within the ecosystem.

The parameters of The Trust's funding had an impact as well. CMP observed that the prescriptiveness of The Trust's funding was helpful in that it put a stake in the ground around giving multi-year grants to communitybased outlets and advancing equity in local news. In doing so, The Trust's funding contributed to greater awareness in the ecosystem about how to advance DEI and cover marginalized communities. The Trust's strong involvement in CMP's Executive Committee has also influenced the organization's work.

At the same time, the partnership has enabled The Trust to help lead and shape an effort to bring funders together to collaborate via CMP. This approach to pooled and aligned funding has amplified the impact of The Trust's own investments, offering a host of complementary supports and outcomes that align with The Trust's strategic goals, as described above. The Trust has built on this experience as a leader in Colorado's journalism philanthropy landscape, taking on the role of co-chair of Press Forward Colorado.



CMP's strong understanding of and relationships with newsrooms represent an important ingredient in its effectiveness.

As noted above, CMP's founding director is viewed by ecosystem actors as a responsive leader with strong knowledge of newsroom needs. CMP's decision to create an associate director position reinforced this strength, giving CMP the staff capacity needed to get to know its grantees deeply. This knowledge of grantees has allowed CMP to serve as an effective "matchmaker," connecting grantees with service providers whose expertise meets their needs. CMP further observed that having two staff members created bandwidth to support newsrooms during the proposal development phase as well as during grant implementation. This has helped CMP build trusting relationships that support honest exchanges with grantees. As one grantee noted, it would be valuable for CMP to lean even more into this role, encouraging newsrooms to feel they can email CMP if they need help with something. This would provide a muchneeded resource for small community-based outlets that struggle to figure out what to do when they lack connections and feel they can't show funders they are struggling.

¹⁶ Colorado Media Project, "<u>Local News is a Public Good: Public Pathways for Supporting Coloradans' Civic News and Information</u> Needs in the 21st Century" (2019).



CMP's contributions as a grantmaker are thanks in part to its strength as a connector.

As an intermediary and pooled fund, CMP has leveraged philanthropic support in complementary ways that boost the overall impact of its grantmaking portfolio. Part of what makes its grantmaking successful is its strong focus on connectivity, strengthening the ecosystem as a whole by bolstering connections among different actors.

CMP's emphasis on connectivity is evident in its support for collaborative infrastructure like the Ethnic Media Exchange and COLab, as well as statewide collaborations like RMCR and Rocky Mountain Public Media's Above the Noise initiative. It also manifests in CMP's efforts to connect grantees with providers of capacity-building support, such as the Maynard Institute, Local Media Association, and LION Publishers.

Another example is CMP's efforts to help its grantees meet and learn from one another through convenings and other gatherings. As Mile High Asian Media observed, creating space for people to talk to each other about challenges and what's worked to overcome those challenges not only supports shared learning, but also fosters relationships where people can trust one another and call one another for support. This is a valuable resource, particularly for small community-based outlets, many of which work in isolation and have relatively few peer supports. For example, El Comercio's publisher shared that, thanks to his involvement in CMP's cohort of grantees, he has developed a strong relationship with the Aurora Sentinel, with weekly calls between himself and the Sentinel's editor.

A final example is CMP's efforts to deepen connections between the local news ecosystem and philanthropy. This is part of CMP's theory of change, which includes strengthening funder knowledge and coordination of resources. In addition to its engagement of funders on its Executive Committee, CMP hosts convenings of local, statewide, and national funders to discuss challenges, share opportunities, and jointly strategize. As the new home of Press Forward Colorado, CMP will now also help connect Colorado's journalism ecosystem with a major national philanthropic effort to strengthen local news. From grantees' perspective, it would be helpful for CMP to play an additional "connector" role in this space by helping newsrooms, particularly smaller outlets serving BIPOC and/or rural communities, navigate the evolving philanthropic landscape.

These examples illustrate the powerful ecosystem-strengthening lens that CMP brought to its work – and by extension, to The Trust's journalism investments. By weaving greater connectivity within the ecosystem, CMP supported conditions that helped strengthen and sustain the impacts of The Trust's grants.



The Trust's Approach

Strengthening the narrative power of communities most impacted by inequities is a long-term process, extending beyond the three-year time horizon of The Trust's journalism grants under the Building and Bridging Power strategy. Recognizing this, the evaluation offers preliminary answers to The Trust's evaluation questions about its potential contributions to narrative power. We consider whether and how The Trust's journalism grants contributed to the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to control or influence the stories told about them, exploring their level of influence through three lenses:

- 1. Who controls editorial vision as reflected in newsroom leadership and ownership
- **2.** Who tells the stories as reflected by the roster of reporters and contributors
- 3. Who has agency within stories as reflected in coverage of communities

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

To what extent and how is the Trust's journalism grantmaking strategy contributing towards a longer-term process of strengthening the narrative power of communities - particularly those most impacted by inequities within policy discourse?

Has the Trust's grantmaking strategy had any unexpected effects that facilitate or hinder the process of building communities' narrative power?

INTENDED OUTCOMES

By supporting the news ecosystem's capacity to produce community-centered journalism and amplify coverage that elevates community perspectives and priorities, The Trust aimed to help strengthen the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to exercise narrative power. The underlying measure of narrative power is how much influence or control these communities have over the stories told about them.

1. Who Controls Editorial Vision

The Trust's multi-year support for outlets led by and for people of color – namely, the Denver Urban Spectrum, El Comercio de Colorado, Enterate Latino, and Radio Bilingue – offer the clearest examples of how the grants contributed to the power of communities impacted by inequities to control the editorial vision of newsrooms covering them. By virtue of their decision-making power within these organizations, leaders of color are in a position to determine which issues to prioritize and which stories to tell. This is a form of narrative power that has historically been held by white men in mainstream media.

The implications for shaping the broader news and policy discourse may vary, depending on the focus and audience of each outlet. For example, outlets that produce a greater volume of policy-oriented coverage and reach a larger audience may have the most direct implications for influencing the balance of stories told and heard within policy discourse in Colorado. At the same time, these are not the sole parameters that define how newsrooms influence broader policy discourse. For example, outlets that lift up the expertise and agency of communities impacted by inequities can feed into the broader narratives that these communities internalize and reflect about themselves, helping to inform their positionality with regard to policies and solutions.

2. Who Reports the Stories

An underlying implication of The Trust's support for diverse newsrooms is that it matters who tells the story. Reporters with lived experience or roots in a community may be uniquely attuned to the priorities in that community, the gaps or blind spots in existing coverage, and the nuances in whose story is told and how. This isn't to say that reporters who have lived experience as members of a community impacted by inequities are the only ones who should tell stories about their community; others should also be accountable for covering this community responsibly. But ensuring that those with lived experience are in a position to tell stories about their community may be understood as a way to strengthen the narrative power of this community. The Trust's grantmaking made multiple contributions in this regard.

Staff reporters with lived experience

The Trust's grants supported several newsrooms to hire or deepen the work of staff who have lived experience relevant to the communities and/or issues they were covering. For example, four reporting positions supported with Trust funding were staffed by individuals with lived experience as members of communities that are impacted by inequities. In addition, through its multi-year support to BIPOC-led outlets, The Trust helped sustain reporting by organizations that are largely or entirely staffed by members of the communities they serve.

Community contributors

Some newsrooms brought on additional contributors with lived experience thanks in part to support from The Trust's grants. For example, the Crestone Eagle hired Indigenous and Hispanic writers from the paper's immediate community to author cultural perspectives on topics, while the Denver VOICE increased space in its paper for stories written by its vendors, all of whom have experience with housing instability. Both grantees emphasized the value of going beyond trained journalists to recruit writers who can speak for underrepresented communities. They also highlighted the importance of providing coaching for less experienced writers to support their unique ability to tell their stories. A community organizer interviewee offered a related point, observing that opportunities for community members to submit op-eds is a valuable way for them to give voice to their

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own stories. Creating a process that enables them to do so is a pathway to strengthening their power over the stories told about them.

Paid interns from diverse backgrounds

As noted earlier, paid internship programs can serve as a valuable way to bring individuals with more diverse lived experiences into the newsroom. As one grantee observed, this didn't always mean the intern wanted to concentrate their reporting on the community they identified with, prompting the outlet to adjust its original assumptions about this. But interns' reporting did often translate into more representative storytelling based on the diverse perspectives they brought.

3. Who Has Agency Within Stories

The quality of news coverage - whose stories are told, how stories are told, and the diversity of stories told - offers another lens through which to examine communities' narrative power. This lens reflects the observations of Nigerian activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who explained the danger of a single story: "Power is the ability not just to tell the story about another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person... The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."¹⁷

To apply this lens to the stories told about communities most impacted by inequities, the evaluation examined the breadth of stories told about these communities and the roles that those with lived experience play within these stories.

The breadth of stories told

A frequent and well-documented critique of mainstream news coverage is its focus on problems in communities of color and other historically marginalized communities. 18 Solutions journalism – which focuses on examining solutions that communities are implementing, including evidence of what works or doesn't work – offers one way to counter the negative skew of coverage. Another is to produce stories that elevate a community's culture or achievements. This is a way to reflect the multiple dimensions of a community's experience, not just negative dimensions, thus conveying a more complete portrait of that community.

Two-thirds of grantee coverage included a substantive focus on groups most impacted by inequities, such as people of color, immigrants, individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+, and people experiencing homelessness. About a quarter (26%) of these stories were focused on problems, while 21% focused on solutions.

¹⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "<u>The danger of a single story</u>" (TED, October 2009).

¹⁸ See, for example, "T.L. Dixon, "A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representation of Families, By Race, in News and Opinion Media" (Color of Change, Dec 2017); and F. Subervi, V. Sinta, "Latinos in TV network news: 2008-2014: Still mostly invisible and problematic" (Apr 2015). Criticism of the media's focus on problems in communities of color has also been repeatedly captured in research on community members' views of news media. See, for example, Pew Research Center, "Black Americans' Experiences with News" (Sep 2023); M. Muchna, "What one newsroom learned by asking about the needs of immigrant communities" (Apr 2023); and E. Oost, G. Jones, "The power of listening: How Louisville Public Media shifted from making news about Black people to making it for and with them" (May 2023).

An additional 29% of the stories focused on **elevating the** culture of these groups (e.g., history, traditions) or the contributions of individual group members. The Denver Urban Spectrum, Colorado Public Radio, and KSUT/KSJD were the most likely to produce stories with this focus. This reflects their stated intention to lift up positive stories about diverse cultures. Stories about African Americans stood out as particularly likely to include this focus, due in large part to the Denver Urban Spectrum, which strongly emphasized stories lifting up Black leaders in the community. Colorado Public Radio's race, diversity and equity reporter also made a substantial contribution to this set of stories, for example through stories about culinary traditions, the arts, and history. KSUT and KSJD's shared reporter comprised the largest share of cultural stories about Indigenous communities (representing about a quarter of the reporter's sampled stories), covering examples of how Indigenous cultural knowledge and expression are being preserved, shared, and celebrated.

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Overall, these findings illustrate how grantee coverage offered a healthy mix of different kinds of stories about communities impacted by inequities.

Portrayals of sources with lived experience

News coverage can offer more complete stories about communities by providing more multidimensional and agentic portrayals of sources who have lived experience with the issues covered. As explained by a community organizer interviewee, this requires the journalist to invest in learning about the multiple dimensions of a person's story - for example, not just depicting the person's struggles or the harm they experienced, but rather providing a fuller humanizing picture of their life.

The content analysis explored this is by examining whether grantee coverage included contextual information about sources with lived experience, particularly around their professional or volunteer work. In stories that included at least one source with lived experience, a majority (55%) provided this contextual information. Most frequently, these sources were described in terms of their work with and/or for their community (e.g., an activist pushing for policy change or a nonprofit staff member providing services to community members) or as members of the arts and culture sector (e.g., musicians, artists). Government officials, business owners, teachers, and academics with lived experience were also present in grantee coverage, though not as frequently. This context – only briefly mentioned in some cases, and quite in-depth in other cases – brought greater dimensionality to these individuals as sources in the story by providing information about their work and lives.¹⁹

Casting sources with lived experiences in more agentic roles can also contribute to the multidimensionality of their stories. A criticism of news coverage is that reporters tend to ask those with lived experience to share what they have experienced, narrowly focusing on their experience with a problem (e.g., portraying

¹⁹ In the remaining stories where such information was not provided, sources with lived experience were described only in terms of their relationship to the issue, such as a person experiencing homelessness or a person impacted by immigration policy.

them in terms of their "victimhood"). 20 Portraying sources with lived experience in alternative roles that recognize their expertise and agency aligns with the practice of solidarity reporting, which prompts reporters to ask people affected by an issue what they think about the issue and what they want to see change, as opposed to questions that elicit their emotional pain around an issue. As one community organizer explained, their work seeks to center their members as heroes of their own stories who are taking action to make their lives meaningfully better, whereas reporters tend to focus on the conditions that their members are living in, which centers their victimhood in stories. From this interviewee's perspective, a good

reporter understands how community organizers think about power in the context of telling members' stories: "It's not just about conditions; it really is pairing where people are at right now with the solutions that they want to see in the future and that they're fighting for."

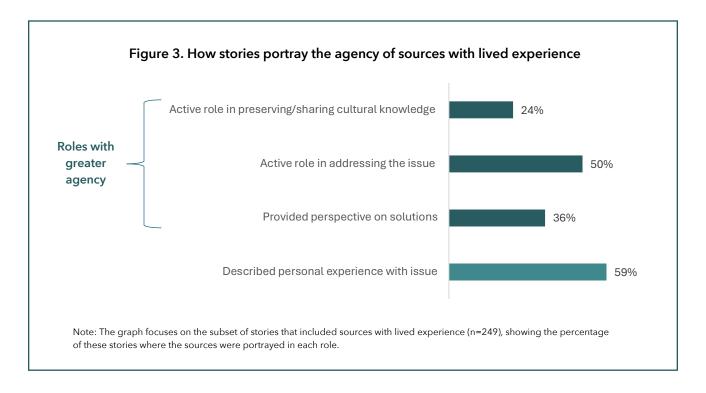
As shown in Figure 3 below, the content analysis found that sources with lived experience were cast in a mix of roles within grantee coverage. Among stories that included one or more sources with lived experience, a majority portrayed the source(s) in terms of their experience with the issue at hand. This is the most common, and perhaps least agentic, role they played within stories. However, there was also a substantial number of stories that more strongly conveyed the agency of sources with lived experience. For example, over a third of these stories included their perspectives on what needs to be done to address the issue, and half included information about a source's own active role in addressing the issue. In addition, nearly a quarter of coverage that included sources with lived experience portrayed them in terms of their role preserving or sharing cultural knowledge. This role centers both their agency and their expertise.

It is important to note that these roles are not mutually exclusive within any given story. For example, in stories where sources with lived experience were asked to describe their experience with an issue, more than half the time the story also included information about the source's active involvement in efforts to address the issue. This suggests that grantee coverage in general tended to cast sources with lived experience in roles that value their expertise and agency.

Stories that convey the agency and expertise of sources with lived experience

- The Colorado Sun <u>covered</u> a demonstration
- The Denver Urban Spectrum published a
- El Comercio de Colorado produced a multimedia piece on a Denver exhibition honoring a Spanish-language <u>video interview</u> with one
- **KSUT/KSJD** aired a <u>story</u> about an addiction

²⁰ This focus on victimhood feeds into broader storylines about communities impacted by inequities, portraying them as helpless and lacking agency over the outcome of their situations. In the context of narratives about immigrants, for example, Define American has highlighted a dominant pattern of immigrant characters being "rescued" by non-immigrants. See Define American, "Telling Authentic Immigrant Stories: A Media Reference Guide" (3rd ed, 2024).



Lessons Learned: What's Needed to Support Narrative Power



Sustainability challenges faced by community-centered outlets represent a barrier to building narrative power.

The evaluation findings suggest that community-centered news outlets are part of the narrative infrastructure that communities impacted by inequities can use to exert influence over the stories told about them. The precarious sustainability of many of these organizations, particularly small local outlets serving underrepresented communities, is a barrier to strengthening the narrative power of these communities.

Part of the challenge is building and sustaining organizational capacity in a field destabilized by high turnover and a disrupted business model. Lessons from The Trust's portfolio suggest that it can be difficult for small community-based outlets to weather the destabilizing impacts of revenue shortages and staff turnover, or to significantly shift operations to adapt to a changing information environment. For example, the Denver Urban Spectrum invested in capacity-building to leverage technology for purposes of new revenue generation. The outlet's publisher observed that the new technologies inadvertently increased demands on staff time for training and implementation, the cost of which is straining the outlet's resources until (or if) the technological investments yield additional revenue.

Another example is KSUT/KSJD's loss of their shared reporter at the end of The Trust's grant. Despite efforts to raise revenue to replace the grant, the stations were unable to maintain the staff position. KSJD now has only a part-time reporter, while KSUT has no reporters on staff. In more extreme cases, community-based outlets were overtaken by resource challenges, resulting in closures. Within The Trust's portfolio, this includes two outlets that had to temporarily suspend operations due to financial insolvency, as well as an outlet that closed permanently.

Another challenge is sustaining the work in the face of burnout. Community-based newsroom leaders, particularly those from BIPOC and other historically marginalized communities, are often working out of a sense of mission and responsibility to their community. The co-founder of Mile High Asian Media observed that part of the challenge is that grants tend to focus on covering the cost of activities, while neglecting the cost associated with staff time required to carry out the activities. Noting the power dynamics with funders, she emphasized the importance of funders proactively encouraging grant applicants to budget for true costs, recognizing the validity of "paying yourself."



Expanding the parameters around who gets to tell stories is a potential pathway for strengthening narrative power.

This lesson speaks to a crosscutting theme across various grants supported by The Trust: the importance of supporting community members – particularly those who represent communities impacted by inequities – to contribute to local coverage.

Grantees observed that expanding the parameters around who can contribute to local coverage helps achieve two interrelated goals. First, it helps address a key pipeline challenge: the shortage of professional journalists and journalism students from communities of color and other underrepresented groups. Second, and equally important, it creates opportunities for those with more diverse lived experiences to tell their own stories and the stories of their respective communities. In the long-term, this opens up a potential pathway for strengthening the narrative power of communities impacted by inequities by influencing who is in a position to tell the stories.

Opening this pathway involves creating entry points for community members to contribute to local coverage – for example, by reserving space within the publication or broadcast, by cultivating community connections to recruit staff or contributors, and by providing fair compensation. This pathway also involves providing mentorship and resources to support staff and contributors' skills in effective storytelling, while also ensuring they are able to bring their own voice and identity to their storytelling.

PERSPECTIVE

PERSPECTIVE

Grantee experiences suggest that this is not just about creating a more inclusive newsroom. It is about recognizing that cultivating the journalism and storytelling skills of those with diverse lived experiences is vital to effective reporting on and for communities.



Journalism is one piece of the narrative power-building equation.

The stories told about communities through journalism do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are part of a much broader narrative ecosystem encompassing entertainment media, the arts, and – most directly relevant to The Trust's BBP strategy and goals – the communications and storytelling efforts of advocates, organizers, government officials, and other influencers seeking to shape public and policy discourse.

These different parts of the narrative ecosystem speak to distinct but intersecting lenses for understanding how to strengthen communities' narrative power. While a journalism lens may focus on the capacity of newsrooms to center communities impacted by inequities, an organizing lens might focus on the capacity of community members to tell their story effectively and the capacity of movement actors to coordinate and coalesce around shared ideas and themes across collections of stories. As one organizer observed, a community member's storytelling is impactful when it both describes the conditions that grab a reporter's attention and also explains how the community member organized with others who have similar experiences to collectively advance change. In this way, the story supports a narrative focused on systemic causes of problems impacting communities and the agency of community members to address them. This illustrates how organizing work may interact with journalism practices in ways that impact the narrative power exercised by communities.

While news outlets do not typically partner and coordinate with organizing or advocacy efforts, it is important to recognize that the ways in which community-centered journalism may help strengthen narrative power (for example, in terms of who control editorial vision, who reports the stories, and how the stories convey the agency of communities) intersect with the ways in which organizers and other movement actors use storytelling to influence narratives and build power.

This final section considers The Trust's broader question about the role of journalism grantmaking in strengthening the ability of communities most impacted by inequities to advance solutions that address their most pressing issues. Based on lessons learned from the totality of The Trust's journalism investments under the Building and Bridging Power strategy, the evaluation findings point to three key roles that journalism grantmaking can play:

Supporting newsroom capacity to produce more coverage of and for communities impacted by inequities:

Here, the role of grantmaking is to help newsrooms increase their reporting capacity vis-à-vis communities impacted by inequities. This can take the form of funding that boosts coverage of and for certain communities, for example by supporting a reporter position focused on equity or underrepresented communities, or by supporting collaborative models that strengthen the reporting capacity of small community-based outlets. It also includes funding to help newsrooms meet the information needs of underserved communities, such as grants that help improve access to local news among rural or non-English speaking communities, including local accountability reporting. In these ways, journalism grants can strengthen the ability of communities to advance solutions, both by elevating their stories and by equipping them with the information they need to take an active role in advancing solutions and holding power-holders accountable for addressing inequities.

Supporting journalism practices that center communities and their agency:

This role of grantmaking focuses on what's needed to center communities in journalism practices. This includes grants to help newsrooms deepen their understanding of and capacity to implement community-centered practices, such as inclusive sourcing, trust-building with communities most impacted by inequities, and culturally sensitive reporting that portrays the agency of impacted communities. This contributes to the ability of communities to advance solutions by ensuring their priorities and voices are centered in coverage and by conveying the agency of community members to address the issues that impact them.

Supporting the ability of those with lived experience to tell the stories about their communities: This role of journalism grantmaking involves supporting those with lived experience, as members of communities impacted by inequities, to take on roles that directly shape coverage. It can take the form of supporting local outlets led by and for communities impacted by inequities, including BIPOC-led media, as well as the infrastructure that strengthens the sustainability of these outlets. It also includes funding to strengthen entry points and mentorship for those with lived experience to produce local coverage, such as paid internship programs and newsroom efforts to recruit and train community members without journalism training to serve as contributors or reporters. These kinds of journalism investments can help strengthen the ability of communities to advance solutions by positioning them in the powerful role of storytellers within the journalism field.

Stepping back to consider the broader implications for funders' grantmaking strategy, the evaluation's findings suggest three takeaways:

1. The value of applying an ecosystem approach

Lessons from The Trust's journalism grantmaking approach, particularly the strategic partnership with CMP, point to the value of using an ecosystem lens. This focuses attention on complementarity in the roles and positionality of different organizations. By asking what's needed to support an effective and sustainable ecosystem, this lens highlights the importance of strengthening individual and organizational capacity, as well as the connective infrastructure that enables individuals and organizations to mutually support and collaborate with one another. It includes an understanding of power dynamics and the ways in which historical patterns of inequity and oppression impact resource distribution and relationships within the ecosystem. An ecosystem lens also recognizes that the ecosystem is not static, but rather evolves in response to contextual factors – as illustrated by the current political landscape and its implications for the role of media in countering (or in some cases perpetuating) narratives that reinforce inequities. From a funding perspective, this lens could be applied to a news and information ecosystem (as CMP does) or to a broader narrative ecosystem that encompasses investments in media outlets as well as other narrative entities (as described below).²¹

2. The interconnections between journalism grantmaking and other areas of grantmaking

The evaluation's findings suggest that journalism grants can help advance progress towards long-term goals like policy change and narrative power building, but the contribution of these grants may be stronger when they are **strategically integrated** with other areas of grantmaking. While The Trust's journalism grants were part of the larger Building and Bridging Power strategy, this narrative portion of the strategy was somewhat siloed, with its own theory of change (and evaluation) separated from the rest of advocacy and organizing portions of the strategy. This made it more challenging to invest – and to gather learning – in ways that took into account how all these pieces are closely interconnected. As one organizer observed: "We can't make policy change without narrative change. And I think earned media is a huge part of narrative change." This comment recognizes that news outlets are part of the same ecosystem as advocates and organizers. The ways in which advocates, organizers, and media work – and their relationships with one another – influence whether and how policy change happens and who has the power to help advance change. A funder's relationship with journalism grantees may be distinct from grants focused on advocacy or organizing work due to the firewall protecting journalists' editorial independence. But at a strategy level, there is value in thinking holistically about how these different components of the narrative ecosystem fit together to advance change.²²

²¹ Narrative power-building frameworks focused on organizers and other narrative practitioners employ similar ecosystem concepts. See, for example, Million Voters Project and Power California, "Narrative Power: Accelerating Narrative Change From the Ground Up" (2023); and Pop Culture Collaborative, "Want Narrative Power? Invest in Narrative Infrastructure" (Nov 2022).

²² It is important to recognize that journalism organizations vary in their relationships with organizers and social justice movements. For example, some explicitly differentiate their practices from more "traditional" notions of journalists as distanced, "objective" observers. Movement journalism, defined by Project South as journalism in service to social, political, and economic transformation, involves collaboration between journalists and movements as well as prioritization of stories that illustrate and amplify community power. Although this falls outside the scope of The Trust's portfolio, it is relevant to broader philanthropic strategies that invest in journalism to advance the narrative power of communities impacted by inequities. See Project South, "Out of Struggle: Strengthening and Expanding Movement Journalism in the U.S. South" (Aug 2017). See also G. Schneider, "What does movement journalism mean for journalism as a whole?" (Reynolds Journalism Institute, Apr 2021).

3. The long-term nature of systemic change

Helping communities strengthen their narrative power represents a systems-level change that is quite distinct from communications efforts to achieve specific policy outcomes. It requires a long-term strategy focused on the conditions needed for communities to have power over narrative levers, not short-term wins within a few legislative cycles. The Convergence Partnership, a funder collaborative focused on health equity, defines a narrative strategy as "a long-term effort to raise certain values and diminish others in ways that engage diverse types of narrators and audiences, and that are not bound by short-term communications needs."²³ This includes a "bottom-up approach" by "strengthening the institutions through which narratives take root, including independent media companies." Such institutional strengthening speaks to the concept of narrative power as it manifests in the ability of communities to exercise power over the channels through which stories about them are disseminated. The long-term investment needed for this type of narrative strategy (measured in decades, not years) runs counter to the shorter-term grantmaking cycles that are common in philanthropy.²⁴ Unless and until funders apply longer time horizons to their narrative investments, progress towards systemic change may be halting.

As the field continues to tackle the challenges to – and the opportunities for – strengthening local journalism, we hope this evaluation's findings help deepen understanding of how journalism grantmaking can advance a long-term vision where diverse communities exercise power over the narratives and the policy solutions that shape their lives and their wellbeing.

²³ M. Moore, R. Sen, "Funding Narrative Change: An Assessment and Framework by the Convergence Partnership" (Convergence Partnership, Sep 2022).

²⁴ The Convergence Partnership estimates narrative strategies require 10-20 year investments. Rinku Sen of the Narrative Initiative has noted it can take 50 years to move narrative change.



Interviews

Grantees

Introductory and interim interviews: In 2022, the evaluation team conducted introductory interviews with the community-based, state, and national outlets that received multi-year grants from the Trust. The purpose was to introduce grantees to the evaluation approach and goals, and to hear about grantees' plans and learning priorities. In 2023, we conducted interim interviews with these same grantees to gather mid-term insights into the work supported by The Trust's grants and hear grantees' reflections on learning thus far. These interviews were incorporated into our 2023 learning update for The Trust.

Final interviews: In September-December 2024, we conducted final interviews with a total of 22 individuals across 15 media outlets that received direct grants from The Trust and/or grants from CMP funded with The Trust's support. This included interviews with one or more individuals from each of the multi-year grantees, as well as outlets that received one-year DEI grants. Because Rocky Mountain Community Radio (RMCR) is a coalition of 20 news outlets, we used a modified approach: we interviewed the managing editor whose position was funded by the Trust's grant, and we interviewed four of the member outlets to hear their perspectives on whether and how this new position contributed towards their capacity to produce and disseminate more local reporting.

Insights from all three sets of interviews informed our final report.

Colorado Media Project

We conducted multiple check-in conversations as well as final interviews with CMP's director and associate director across the course of CMP's three-year partnership with The Trust. Our analysis also incorporated relevant insights (including interviews with CMP's philanthropic partners) gathered from a separate evaluation of CMP our team conducted in 2023.

Community Organizers

As a complement to insights from interviews with grantees and CMP, we conducted a small set of interviews with grassroots community organizers in February-March 2025 (n=4). The purpose was to gather observations about whether and how news coverage contributed to organizing and power-building efforts within communities impacted by inequities, and to explore community relationships with newsrooms. Our original intention was to conduct a larger set of interviews; however, we encountered difficulty securing interviews with advocates and organizers in the context of major policy changes enacted by the current administration, which significantly impacted the work of these organizations and the communities they serve. This represents a limitation of our data collection efforts.

Methodology for Analysis of Grantee Coverage

The content analysis focused on stories produced with support from the Trust's multi-year grants to 10 community-based, state, and national outlets. Based on a random sample of 472 stories published within the duration of the grants, the content analysis explored whether and how stories produced by grantees focused on reporting on inequities and centered communities most impacted by inequities.

In addition to quantitative findings, we conducted qualitative analysis of available information about how different grantees reflected The Trust's intentions to support reporting on inequities and communitycentered journalism. This qualitative analysis encompassed stories that fell outside of the parameters of the content analysis sampling strategy, thereby allowing us to offer a more comprehensive picture of grantee coverage. An overview of our sampling approach and coding framework is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Sampling Approach				
Grantee	# of sampled stories (quantitative analysis)	Scope of sampling frame (determined by the parameters of the Trust's grants)		
State and national outlets				
Chalkbeat Colorado	49	Stories under the English Language Learners beat, plus Spanish-translated stories, supported by The Trust's grant.		
Colorado Public Radio	49	Stories by Elaine Tassy, the Race, Diversity, and Equity reporter supported by The Trust's grant.		
Colorado Sun	50	Stories by Tatiana Flowers, the Equity Reporter supported by The Trust's grant.		
ProPublica	6	A total of 6 in-depth investigative stories produced with support from The Trust's grant.		
Radio Bilingue	33	Feature reports on <i>Edición Semanaria</i> and despachos supported by The Trust's grant. *Note: It was not feasible to transcribe and translate a representative sample of hour-long episodes of <i>Línea Abierta</i> for the quantitative analysis. However, our qualitative analysis included a random sample of 30 <i>Línea Abierta</i> episodes, examining detailed descriptions of the program guests and topics covered, as provided by the grantee.		
Community-based outlets				
Denver Urban Spectrum	48	Local original reporting published on the Denver Urban Spectrum's website (The Trust's grant was for general operating support).		

El Comercio	65	Local original reporting published in El Comercio's print edition and on the website (The Trust's grant was for general operating support).
Enterate Latino	65	Local original reporting published in Enterate Latino's print edition and on the website (The Trust's grant was for general operating support).
KSUT and KSJD	57	Stories by Clark Adomaitis, the shared reporter supported by The Trust's grant.
RMCR	50	Segments from episodes of the Regional Roundup, a weekly program produced by RMCR's managing editor, the position supported by The Trust's grant.

Table 2. Coding Framework				
Code Name	Description			
Key Focal Points of Coverage				
Focus on inequities	A story was coded as focused on inequities if it substantively described inequitable challenges that specific marginalized groups face and the policies and institutional practices that contribute to or reinforce those challenges. "Substantive" means more than a passing reference in the middle of a story; it includes discussion of inequity in the headline, lead, and/or multiple times throughout the story. (This definition of "substantive" applies to all codes.)			
Focus on accountability	A story was coded as focused on accountability if it substantively explained what power holders were doing vis-a-vis a problem/issue and/or how they were responsible for causing and/or addressing a problem.			
Focus on policy/politics	A story was coded as focused on policy/politics if it referenced government/public education policies, regulations, practices, or electoral politics in a substantive way.			
Focus on historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented groups (i.e., communities impacted by inequities)	A story was coded as focusing on one or more of these groups if it referenced the group(s) in a substantive way. Groups included: African American/Black; American Indian/Native America; Asian; Latino/Hispanic; LGBTQIA+ people; people experiencing homelessness; immigrants, refugees, or migrants; rural communities; people experiencing poverty; and people with disabilities.			

Focus on solutions vs. problems	 Problem focus: A story was coded as focused on a problem if it substantively discussed the problem in the headline, lead, and/or multiple times throughout the story, with no mention or only passing mentions of solutions. Solutions focus: Informed by the <u>Solutions Journalism Network's definition</u>, a story was coded as focused on solutions if it substantively described a response to a social problem and why that response has worked or not (including data or comparisons that speak to effectiveness). Neither: The story wasn't substantively focused on a problem or solution.
Focus on celebrating of community culture or community members	This code was applied to stories focused on cultural traditions, events, or profiles of individual community members.
Focus on service journalism	This code was applied to stories focused on directly answering people's questions and concerns ("news you can use"). Examples include voter guides and guidance on where to access help with housing, health, or education services.
Geographic focus	Stories were coded in terms of the geographic category that best reflected the story's focus: local, statewide, regional (adjacent states), national, international, or no specific geographic focus. Stories coded as "local" were also coded in terms of the specific county on which the story focused.
Sources Cited in Cove	rage
Courses Cited III Cove	
Individual with lived experience	This refers to people whom the story identifies as having direct experience with an issue (e.g., a person experiencing housing instability, a person affected by water shortage) and people whom the story identifies as a member of a historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented group (per above definition).
Individual with lived	This refers to people whom the story identifies as having direct experience with an issue (e.g., a person experiencing housing instability, a person affected by water shortage) and people whom the story identifies as a member of a historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented group (per above
Individual with lived experience Individual or organization working with and for	This refers to people whom the story identifies as having direct experience with an issue (e.g., a person experiencing housing instability, a person affected by water shortage) and people whom the story identifies as a member of a historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented group (per above definition). This refers to activists, advocates, community organizers, and organizations
Individual with lived experience Individual or organization working with and for communities	This refers to people whom the story identifies as having direct experience with an issue (e.g., a person experiencing housing instability, a person affected by water shortage) and people whom the story identifies as a member of a historically excluded, underserved, or underrepresented group (per above definition). This refers to activists, advocates, community organizers, and organizations that serve the needs of communities impacted by inequities. This refers to educators and school administrators, from preschool to high

Arts and cultural institutions	This refers to individual artists (e.g., musician, actor, artist), museums and libraries, and culinary experts.	
Business and private sector	This refers to staff or leadership of for-profit companies, as well as data or information from these companies.	
Media	This refers to other media outlets.	
Other	This encompasses all sources that don't fall into the above categories (e.g., foundations, national associations, individuals who were not portrayed in terms of their lived experience with an issue or any of the above sectors).	
Role of sources with lived experience	Stories that included sources with lived experience were coded in terms of the roles that these sources played in the story. These roles were not mutually exclusive in any given story. Experience with issue at hand: A source with lived experience shares their experience with the problem or issue being covered. Views on solution or what needs to change: A source with lived experience shares their perspective on solutions to the problem or what they want to see changed. Active role in addressing the issue: A source with lived experience is described in terms of their active role in efforts to address the problem or issue. Active role in preserving or sharing cultural knowledge: A source with lived experience is described in terms of their active role in preserving or sharing cultural knowledge (e.g., cultural traditions, history, cuisine, art).	

Note: The coding framework distinguished between: (1) sources that were only identified in terms of their lived experience; (2) sources that were identified in terms of their lived experience and their professional sector (i.e., one of the other source categories); and (3) sources that were only identified in terms of their professional sector (i.e., not identified as having lived experience). We combined the first two groups for purposes of reporting the overall number of stories that included sources with lived experience, while also unpacking the difference between these two groups in the context of our discussion of narrative power.