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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 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 The Trust's key learning questions about its contributions to intended outcomes, advanced through its support for accountability reporting on inequities, its investments in community-centered journalism, its strategic partnership with the Colorado Media Project, and its broader intention to strengthen communities' narrative power. Key findings and lessons learned 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 media grantees also contributed to
 this outcome, supported by flexible grants that strengthened their local reporting capacity.
- Contributions to informed action: Grantee stories informed efforts to hold decision-makers
 accountable and advance solutions to inequities, including through government actions to address
 inequitable treatment and outcomes among historically excluded or underserved groups.
- Capacity supports: Support for conference scholarships and records request had modest impacts on
 journalists' capacity to produce accountability reporting, constrained by the narrow scope of these
 investments relative to the broad gaps in newsrooms' investigative reporting capacity.

Lessons Learned:

- Ensuring local accountability: Resources that bolster organizational capacities to produce in-depth
 reporting are needed to address gaps in local accountability journalism, particularly outside the
 Front Range.
- Sustaining impacts: Investments in longer-term newsroom capacity, such as hiring staff and expanding 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 meets the information needs of underserved communities through expanded distribution, multilingual content, and service-oriented stories.

- Newsroom diversity and inclusive reporting practices: State and local outlets were able to strengthen their capacity to reflect and connect with the communities they intend to serve, particularly historically excluded or underserved groups. This is evidenced by progress towards greater understanding and application of more inclusive reporting practices, as well as the contributions of paid internship programs to a more diverse pipeline. Impacts on equity in workplace culture, particularly in large organizations, were more difficult to discern.
- 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, grantee coverage elevated community voices by including a relatively strong emphasis on sources with lived experience. However, constraints in the geographic scope of grantees' coverage meant that communities in multiple regions of Colorado were not represented.

Lessons Learned:

- Improving access: Collaborative models oriented towards the existing strengths and 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 and how to translate, and how to reach non-English speaking audiences.
- Institutionalizing diversity and inclusion: Progress towards more diverse and inclusive newsrooms
 requires significant organizational investment. This includes considerable staff and organizational
 capacity needed to undertake paid internship programs, as well as institutional follow-through to
 operationalize lessons learned 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, and 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 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 it to identify and address capacity gaps as they emerged, but also posed challenges at times, introducing ambiguity in its strategic priorities, stretching its staff thin, 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 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 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: its grants to outlets led by and for people of color; its support for newsrooms to recruit reporters and contributors who are members of communities impacted by inequities; and its 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 serving underrepresented communities, is a barrier to strengthening the narrative power of these communities.
- Expanding who gets to tell stories: Expanding the definition of who can contribute to local
 coverage 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.
- Understanding the narrative ecosystem: Journalism is one piece of a broader narrative ecosystem, intersecting with the communications and storytelling efforts of advocates, organizers, government officials, and other influencers seeking to shape public 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 takes into account power dynamics and historic inequities that influence resources and relationships within the ecosystem.
- 2. Interconnections across grantmaking areas: The contributions of journalism grantmaking to narrative power may be deepened when aligned with related areas of grantmaking, such as organizing and advocacy. A funder's relationship with journalism grantees is distinct due to the firewall protecting the editorial independence of journalists. But at a strategy level, there is value in thinking holistically about how different components of the narrative ecosystem fit together. This enables outcomes from 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 represents a systemic level of change that is quite distinct from efforts to achieve specific policy outcomes. It requires a long-term strategy focused on the conditions needed for communities to have power over the levers of policy change (including narrative levers), not short-term wins within a few legislative cycles. Sustained support over decades not years is needed to realize transformative narrative outcomes.