

Democracy in Local News & Information Ecosystems

October 2024



IMPACT ARCHITECTS

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Arizona

Chicago

Colorado

Georgia

Michigan

New Jersey

New Mexico

North Carolina

Oklahoma

Washington, D.C.

Appendices

Letter from Democracy Fund



At Democracy Fund, we've invested over \$15.75 million in local news ecosystems across the U.S. since 2016. We define a news ecosystem as the network of institutions, collaborations, and people that local communities rely on for news, information, and engagement. This approach puts people and places squarely at the center of our goals and vision. If this work is a success, then communities will have access to news and information that advances justice, confronts racism and inequality, and equips people to make change and thrive, wherever they live.

Over the years, we've seen exciting signs of progress towards reaching that vision. In New Jersey, the state has allocated millions of dollars for local stakeholders to decide how to bolster community media, building on years of community-informed organizing. In North Carolina, media makers from the mountains to the coast are getting recognized and resourced for their work. In New Mexico, more people have more opportunities to get involved in news gathering and reporting, including a fellowship program to help recent grads stay in-state. The model itself is growing as well. Press Forward, a national coalition investing more than \$500 million to strengthen local journalism, launched the Press Forward Local network which quickly grew to 25 chapters of local funder coalitions in its first year.

This is a critical moment in our democracy for this expansion to be a success. Studies [show](#) that strong local journalism can lead to more people voting, counter polarizing narratives, expose corruption, and lead to people feeling a strong sense of community. We've seen much of this show up in these ecosystems in anecdotal ways, but when we launched our new [Equitable Journalism strategy](#) in 2023, we wanted to learn more about local examples of these studies in action. While we know each ecosystem is unique, using some standard data can give us another lens to see trends, similarities and differences, and return to them over time.

With that in mind, we partnered with Impact Architects (IA) to revisit the Healthy Information Ecosystem framework we developed with them in partnership with Knight Foundation and Google News Initiative [in 2020](#). In this version of the framework, we were excited to add another layer of indicators that attempt to measure “pro-democracy” actions, including civic engagement, and connect these indicators to the health of local news. This layer is critically important because it can give us a deeper understanding of if Democracy Fund's [north star goal](#) of an inclusive multiracial democracy is happening, community by community.

The process of adding this layer was an important learning opportunity for us. We learned that standard data measurements for what we might consider pro-democracy actions like volunteering and engaging in community groups were difficult to find across different regions, especially since we don't invest in a standard geography (for example, we have cities and states in this report). Most related data focused on voting and voter turnout, and though we found other options, many were not regularly updated that we could include in future versions of this work. On the other hand, we were inspired by projects that did gather intriguing community data in some of the ecosystems IA studied, such as the [Detroit Metro Area Communities Study](#), a partnership between the University of Michigan and Outlier Media that went deeper into how Detroiters were contributing to their communities via charitable and religious organizations.

Even with these challenges, which IA digs into deeper in their analysis, we believe that this framework helps contribute to an ongoing conversation about how we can learn about communities' news and information ecosystem health with more nuance. The chapters not only give opportunities for actions people and funders can take in the ecosystems studied, but they also have raised many ideas for further research and exploration of how we study and measure the health of news and information ecosystems in a way that puts community needs at the center. There are [many organizations and projects](#) taking on this challenge that we are grateful to continue learning with on this journey. We hope this framework serves as a resource for the field and this cohort of organizations, and welcome further ideas, collaboration, and feedback on the themes and ideas within it.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the IA team and the many folks who contributed time to share thoughts and feedback on their ecosystems. Thank you — this framework wouldn't be possible without your time and all you do in Arizona, Chicago, Colorado, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Washington, D.C.

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Background

In 2020, Impact Architects developed a Healthy News and Information Ecosystem framework, with support from Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, and Google News Initiative. The goal of this framework was to create a standardized way to assess the health of a local news ecosystem, including its strengths and opportunities, in order to compare across ecosystems and assess change over time. We prioritized using freely available, public data sources in order to ensure the framework would be accessible to anyone interested in assessing their local news and information ecosystem. We piloted the original framework in nine ecosystems.

In 2023, we applied the framework to the eight resident Knight communities. Five of these communities were included in the original pilot project, and we were able to document the changes these ecosystems experienced from 2020 through 2022.

In each iteration, we've updated the framework based on the current state of knowledge about the importance of local news and information for communities (as documented [in this literature review](#)).¹ In partnership with Democracy Fund, this latest version of the Local News and Information Ecosystem Framework incorporates indicators to measure civic engagement and democracy.

Overview

Framework

For this project, the Local News and Information Ecosystem Framework includes four categories of indicators: community, information providers, community information needs and trust in media, and civic engagement and democracy. We assess each of the four categories using a combination of indicators and/or research methods.

Community: Population characteristics, including age, race and ethnicity, education, income and poverty levels; household access to broadband and computers; community resources and infrastructure; and community cohesion.

¹ Local News Literature Review. Updated October 2023. <https://airtable.com/appwQS8SaNf7e1QZG/shrTwBbzx70SScpEA>.

Information providers:	The number and type of information providers, including platform, business model, and communities served; and philanthropic funding for journalism.
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Community information needs and trust in media:	Community members' relationships with and trust in media.
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Civic engagement and democracy:	Institutional accountability, individual civic engagement and voting, and press freedom.
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Research has demonstrated that these categories are interrelated.² For example, access to local news that is trusted by community members has been shown to contribute to positive community outcomes. And the lack of local news has been linked to decreased levels of institutional accountability and civic engagement. The aforementioned literature review summarizes research about the connections between community outcomes, information providers, their relationship, and democracy and civic engagement.

We believe this framework is a useful way to get a medium to high level view of the current state of each of these four categories in an ecosystem. However, this approach is complementary to others and has known limitations. Here, we share what rose to the top with respect to the limitations of this approach.

Publicly available data: In an attempt to make a framework that can be applied across diverse ecosystems at relatively low cost, we have opted to use only readily available public data. This means we are limited to including what is already being counted, measured, or documented by others. Additionally, there was some data that was available for one ecosystem but not for others, and data that was available in previous assessments but not in this project, or vice versa.

Imperfect data: While imperfect data are a challenge for any project, given the number of indicators included in this framework, as well as the complexity and dynamic nature of the data (e.g., information providers in an ecosystem), we know that as soon as we document something on paper, it is subject to change.

² Josh Stearns and Christine Schmidt. "How we Know Journalism is Good for Democracy." <https://localnewslab.org/2018/06/20/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy/>.

Limited qualitative data: We conducted a very small number of interviews in each large and complex ecosystem, meaning we were not able to include a representative sample of the diversity of experiences and viewpoints of actors on the ground. This limits both the richness of our information and our ability to analyze the quantitative data. We have attempted to indicate where more on-the-ground learning would be particularly beneficial to understanding an ecosystem and its opportunities.

Dynamic environment: The ecosystems in this report are large and complex, with diverse communities and stakeholders that are constantly changing. The chapters presented here are best understood as snapshots in time.

Lack of up-to-date civic information needs information: There is currently no standard and regularly repeated civic information census to survey residents across the U.S. to understand information needs and the extent to which they are being met. We have relied on various surveys in the past, and on the Knight/Gallup American Views Survey in this report, but the lack of repeatability means it is difficult to demonstrate change over time.

Large, complex ecosystems: Given the size and diversity of the ecosystems included, we knew going in that there would be an uneven distribution of news providers, community health indicators, and civic engagement. In each chapter, we have attempted to identify the main contributors to the unevenness (e.g., rural/urban divide), but the diversity within ecosystems is still flattened in this approach.

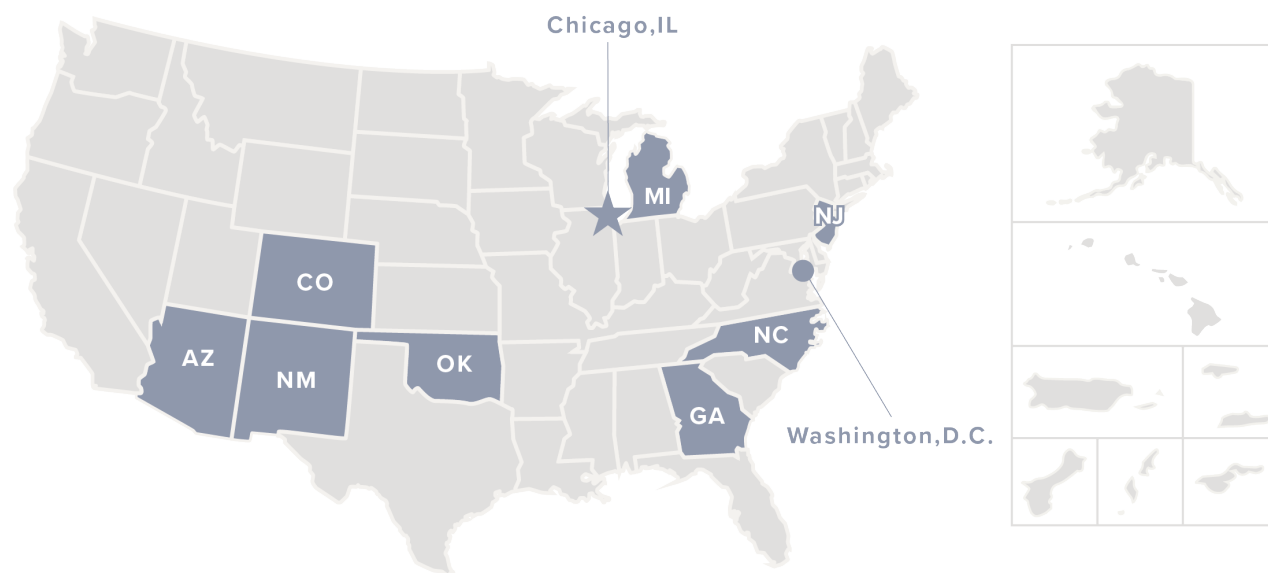
Given the size and complexity of each ecosystem, in conjunction with the other limitations listed above, we opted not to provide rankings for the ecosystems overall, or for each of the categories of indicators, as we have done in past reports. While this makes comparison across ecosystems more difficult, we felt it would have flattened the ecosystems to such an extent as to be not useful.

Local News & Information Ecosystem Assessment Framework



Ecosystems Included

In this project, we have applied the Local News and Information Ecosystem Assessment framework to ten ecosystems: Arizona; Chicago, IL; Colorado; Georgia; Michigan, with a focus on Detroit; New Jersey; New Mexico; North Carolina; Oklahoma; and Washington, D.C.



These ten ecosystems include two cities and eight states, all with diverse populations, information landscapes, and levels of civic engagement. They represent nearly all regions of the U.S. And while Democracy Fund has either made grants or is exploring grantmaking in each of these communities, philanthropic investment in news and information varies greatly across the ecosystems.

Given the size of the states included in this research, there is also significant diversity within the ecosystems. For example, income distribution within states is uneven, both within urban areas and across rural and urban communities. And news and information providers are often concentrated in more urban communities, leaving those who are living in rural areas with less access to relevant, local information. By selecting a diverse array of ecosystems, we are able to test assumptions about the importance of local news and information across different communities and identify themes that emerge both within and across different divides, be it rural and urban, income, linguistic communities, or others. We also hope the diversity of ecosystems can provide relevant examples about different opportunities and points of entry for local funders to support the production of and access to local news and information in support of community health and civic engagement.

Cross-Ecosystem Findings

What is clear from our research is that, rather than healthy vs. unhealthy local news ecosystems, we can think of the strength of local news and information ecosystems on a continuum, with different ecosystems having different constellations of strengths and areas of opportunity within and across a geography. Even with the complexity and diversity among these ecosystems, we have identified the following trends and themes.³

We've grouped ecosystems into four broad categories: strong, emergent, opportunity with bright spots, and under-resourced.

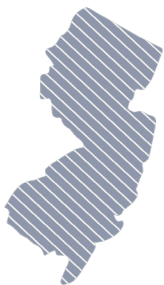


Strong ecosystems

Strong ecosystems generally have higher than average indicators across most if not all of the four categories, and there is evidence of a relationship among information providers, community, and civic engagement and democracy. These ecosystems also demonstrate more consistency across the entire ecosystem, for example, less uneven distribution of information providers across rural and urban areas or more equal access to information across various racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic groups.

³ Because we're working with a small number of cases, we're not able to do meaningful statistical analysis to determine significant data trends.

New Jersey



- Strong collaboration among backbone organization, the Center for Cooperative Media; major funder, the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium; and news providers
- Taxpayer funded grantmaker with a dedicated mission to support civic engagement and local news
- Strong presence of hyperlocal and community media
- Documenters programs placed in multiple counties
- Previously published ecosystem analysis and information needs assessment
- Has average voter turnout and accessible voting, but lack of local coverage of topics such as decision-making at the municipal level limits opportunities for other forms of civic engagement

Chicago, IL



- Multiple organizations that serve “backbone” functions, such as Public Narrative, steward of the Chicago Independent Media Alliance, and City Bureau
- Two daily newspapers, one owned by Chicago Public Media
- Strong public media with significant local philanthropic support
- Vibrant community media
- Collaborative information providers, particularly surrounding accountability journalism
- Home to strong philanthropic support for journalism
- Previously published ecosystem analysis
- Strong civic engagement based on local organizing and mutual support among communities, despite low voter turnout and volunteerism

Michigan

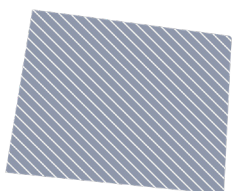


- Strong and diverse statewide media with Bridge Michigan, MLive.com, and Michigan Public
- Documenters programs in Detroit and Grand Rapids
- Two daily newspapers in Detroit, the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News
- Detroit collaboration that includes all forms of media
- Strong culture of service journalism
- Previously published ecosystem analysis and information needs assessment
- Ongoing information needs assessments in Detroit
- Strengths evident in Detroit around identifying resource gaps and information needs could be applied in other areas of Michigan
- Rural parts of Michigan are undercovered
- Low civic engagement metrics statewide, with the exception of voter turnout
- Low voter turnout in Detroit

Emergent

Emergent: Emergent ecosystems generally score higher than average across many of the indicators and/or groups of indicators and show evidence of gathering momentum, but still have gaps in information providers and/or access for significant segments of the population. We also found less evidence of connection among information providers, community, and civic engagement in these ecosystems.

Colorado



- Strong backbone organization, the Colorado Media Project
- Formal collaboration partners connected with nearly all formal news organizations throughout the state, the Colorado News Collaborative and the Colorado Press Association
- Strong presence of public media throughout the state, led by Colorado Public Radio and Rocky Mountain PBS
- Strong presence of community radio in the Rocky Mountain region, with the Rocky Mountain Community Radio Coalition serving as a resource center
- Presence of the National Trust for Local News that supports community-owned newspapers
- Civic engagement is not high despite high voter turnout and engages mostly in state-level politics
- The relationship between local journalism and civic engagement can be stronger throughout the state

New Mexico



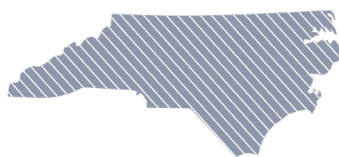
- Strong backbone organization, New Mexico Local News Fund
 - Has past published [research](#)
 - Home to many new startups
 - Home to efforts to address ecosystem challenges, especially related to the pipeline
 - Significant issues around community media as there is very little Spanish-language news and limited media serving Indigenous communities
 - While access to local representatives is often good, civic engagement is spotty, interviewees said
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Georgia



- Many new and growing networks, such as Documenters in Atlanta, National Trust for Local News, and the GA News Collaborative
- Local support from The Pivot Fund
- Previous published [research](#)
- Still challenges like gaps in community news offerings, though startups/newsletters/social media accounts have worked to fill gaps
- Trust in media is a major challenge, particularly when it comes to communities who have become disenfranchised due to harmful coverage in the past
- Past research shows that Georgia falls below the national average for many measures of civic engagement as well as for frequent engagement with civic news

North Carolina



- New networks and collaboration between news organizations and other community stakeholders
- Supported by NC Local News Fund Lab and immense resources from UNC — because of this, there is a wealth of existing research about gaps
- Still have a number of gaps, especially geographic, and civic engagement is fairly low
- Trust is higher than average, however, the state is diverse, and it's hard to characterize the whole population
- Signs of decreased transparency in government, including changes to public records laws

Opportunity with Bright Spots

These ecosystems score lower than average across many indicators and/or categories of indicators and demonstrate significant need and opportunity with respect to information providers, as well as support for community and civic engagement. In each ecosystem, there are examples of bright spots across an uneven landscape, for example strong ecosystems in one geographic area within an ecosystem or the emergence of a strong backbone institution.

Oklahoma



- The relatively new backbone organization, Oklahoma Media Center, is gaining traction and seeing new investment
- Previous published [research](#)
- New collaboration and partnerships, especially with KOSU as an ecosystem builder
- There are some strong Indigenous media outlets, but covering Indigenous affairs remains a challenge among many news outlets
- Very limited resources in rural areas and coverage across the state is spotty, with more outlets and resources in cities, and fewer in rural areas
- Trust in media is a major challenge
- Three of the four Tribal Nations in the U.S. that have constitutionally guaranteed

freedom of the press are in Oklahoma (Muskogee, Osage, and Cherokee),⁴ however their funding is still dependent upon tribal governments

- Interviewees described apathy and information gaps in their communities regarding civic engagement

Arizona



- Does not have a backbone organization, but there is new investment in southern AZ
- There are some new Spanish-language startups filling community information needs, but there is still an opportunity for more Spanish-language and bilingual organizations to fill information gaps, especially those left as other outlets disappear
- While every county in AZ has a news source, counties are large, and the presence of a news source in a county does not necessarily equate to relevant local coverage for all communities in that area
- Recent elections have received national news coverage and attention, but civic engagement is spotty and there's a need for more civic news and information

Washington, D.C.



- Lacks a backbone hub or other major support organization for local news
- Lacks recent, publicly available research about gaps, information needs, newsroom diversity, or the state of the ecosystem
- Has seen the recent impact of financial struggles in newsrooms, such as The Washington Post's buyouts, DCist's closure, Washington City Paper's layoffs and switch to digital, and Street Sense Media's reduction in printing frequency
- Still has geographic and community gaps, particularly in Wards 7 and 8, which remain underserved, and many residents may have been disenfranchised by harmful coverage focused on crime in these communities
- Bright spots include a new community journalism program operated by HumanitiesDC, suggesting opportunities for non-news organizations to fill news and information gaps
- Trust in media is very high relative to the U.S. average, but it's difficult to tell how trust varies across communities — particularly those that are lower income, primarily home to people of color, and/or have historically been underserved by local media
- Engagement with government and politics is unavoidable, but the national often gets more attention than the local, according to stakeholders

Under-Resourced

Under-resourced ecosystems score lower than average across some indicators and/or categories of indicators and demonstrate significant need across information providers. These ecosystems have information gaps in communities and uneven and/or low levels of civic engagement. We did not identify any under-resourced ecosystems in this assessment, although given the unevenness of the large, complex ecosystems, one could identify areas within many, if not all, of the ecosystems that are under-resourced.

⁴ The fourth Tribal Nation that has constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press is the Navajo Nation.

Promising Trends Across Ecosystems

Across the ten ecosystems, we found many promising trends, from increased editorial collaboration and creative community engagement to diverse forms of civic engagement.

Collaboration

Historically, news media have aimed to break news and have exclusive scoops, however, there is a sector-wide trend of increasing editorial collaboration to save costs, pool resources, and serve diverse audiences. This trend was present in nearly all of the ecosystems included in this research. In particular, there were three types of collaboration that present promising models for the field: cross-sector collaboration, sustainability collaboration, and individual newsrooms servicing entire ecosystems.



Cross-sector collaboration

Cross-sector collaboration among advocacy organizations and journalism organizations has become more common in recent years, both in the U.S. and internationally.^{5,6,7} While the specific goals of this type of collaboration vary, they generally include a recognition of different kinds of expertise in different sectors, as well as different audiences or constituencies served by information.

North Carolina is home to a collaboration across local and statewide organizations, newsrooms, and a tech company to address issues of information access among Spanish-speaking farmworkers, especially about extreme weather conditions. After seeing how farmworkers received little to no information ahead of Hurricane Florence in 2018, the group of cross-sector partners helped develop vital communication infrastructure and networks to ensure that farmworkers received timely news and information.

5 Sarah Stobely and Hanna Siemaszko. "Cross-field collaboration: How and why journalists and civil society organizations around the world are working together," Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, March 2022. <https://collaborativejournalism.org/cross-field/>.

6 YI Chen, Gregory Francois, Ritubhan Guatam, Shruti Kedia, Michelle Meza, Mingqi Song, Jack Truitt, and Emily Wymer. "Calling for Coalitions: Building Partnerships between Journalists and Advocates," Spring 2020. Columbia SIPA. https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/migrated/downloads/Final%2520Capstone%2520project%2520Aug%252014_compressed.pdf.

7 Stefanie Murray, AmyJo Brown, Catherine Devine, and Hanna Siemaszko. "Civic Science and Journalism Collaborations," Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, 2023. <https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Rita-Allen-civic-science-report.pdf>.



Sustainability collaboration

While journalism is generally understood to be a competitive environment with respect to revenue, we found multiple examples of sustainability collaborations aimed at generating revenue and/or lowering costs for news organizations.

In Colorado, the Colorado Media Project has worked to reduce costs for newsrooms in the state through various programs, including facilitating the purchase of a printing press in partnership with the National Trust for Local News (NTLN). Ownership of the press will allow NTLN to control the cost of printing, which has been a major concern for publishers throughout the state. And Rocky Mountain Community Radio has developed a program of shared services, including a shared managing editor and a shared digital editor, for its network. The foundations are in place for additional shared services that can save costs for small publishers, such as accounting services, grant writing, and technical support.

New Jersey has seen some of the earliest and strongest examples of journalistic collaboration in the U.S., in large part thanks to the work and infrastructure provided by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University (CCM). CCM has provided editorial support for collaboratives, provides field research and landscape information, and has served as a re-grantor of funds for collaborative work both in New Jersey and across the U.S. CCM was a key player, along with other organizations like Free Press and the Dodge Foundation, that worked to design the NJ Civic Information Consortium, an independent nonprofit that is funded by the state with the mission to “foster increased civic engagement by providing financial resources to organizations building and supporting local news and information in communities across New Jersey.”



Newsrooms servicing an ecosystem

While backbone institutions have tended to be independent organizations associated with universities, community foundations, or other non-news organizations, in some of the ecosystems we looked at, we found individual newsrooms playing the role of backbone institution, providing key infrastructure and resources to other information providers in the ecosystem.

For example, in Oklahoma, KOSU, a public radio station in Oklahoma City, has stepped into a leadership role in the ecosystem, working to identify coverage gaps and find solutions. KOSU has recently been working with Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service to create a community journalism program that would help community members get involved in reporting on their own communities and support local news organizations throughout the state that do not have the resources to cover every public meeting or community event.

In Detroit, Outlier Media has long played the role of ecosystem builder, providing ecosystem-wide information to peer organizations about community information needs and spearheading editorial collaboratives. It also regularly conducts information needs assessments and shares its findings in order to strengthen the ecosystem as a whole. Outlier Media does the same thing with commissioned research that provides information that can benefit the city as a whole. Finally, Detroit’s Documenters program — part of City Bureau’s Documenters Network, which trains and pays community members to attend and summarize public meetings — has been hosted by Outlier Media since its launch in 2019, but the Detroit Documenters contribute to and have a relationship with the eight additional newsrooms that are part of the Collaborative Detroit Newsrooms network.

Innovative Strategies ---

to reach and engage communities that have historically been underrepresented and underserved by much local journalism

Especially in urban ecosystems, like D.C. and Chicago, and in urban areas of larger ecosystems like Denver within Colorado and Atlanta within Georgia, we found hyperlocal and community-led organizations serving specific communities. And while this trend is by itself encouraging, we found some trends in audience engagement strategies across ecosystems.



Direct engagement

While direct delivery of information via text-messaging systems isn’t new, there is an increasing trend of not only delivering information via SMS, text, WhatsApp, WeChat, or other direct-to-consumer messaging channels, but of also soliciting feedback and questions from audience members on these same platforms. This two-way communication, piloted by organizations like Outlier Media and now being implemented by organizations in this research like Conecta Arizona and Enlace Latino, is allowing news organizations to serve actionable information to community members who, for a number of reasons, are not being served by other local news organizations.⁸

⁸ Katie Hawkins-Gaar, “‘It Doesn’t Look Like Conventional Journalism’: Local Newsrooms Using SMS and Messaging to Reach Audiences,” 14 March 2024. <https://www.pressforward.news/it-doesnt-look-like-conventional-journalism-press-forward-funders-support-newsrooms-using-sms-and-messaging-to-reach-audiences/>.



Community information providers

In some communities, we found that journalism or news organizations aren't the only ones that are providing accurate, trusted information. This is likely true for many communities, but there is not a registry of these non-news information providers in each community, and our qualitative research was limited, meaning we could not dive deep into these organizations in every ecosystem.

We found examples of new, participatory, community media to meet information needs and fill gaps, especially by members of the Documenters Network, which trains people to attend and annotate government meetings, “harnessing their collective knowledge, relationships, and capacity to create a powerful new information resource.”⁹ The Documenters Network, founded by news organization City Bureau (highlighted in the Chicago chapter), has many members that are news organizations, but it also has community organizations as partners, such as New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice in Newark and coLAB Arts in New Brunswick, NJ. And even in places where the Documenters Network member is a news organization, it's community members who are non-journalists who are being trained to cover local government.

We also saw how social media is playing a critical role, allowing journalists and other community members to serve as hyperlocal information providers. We saw many examples of this in Georgia, including news organizations like Pasa La Voz Savannah and BeeTV, which both got their start on Facebook, and community Facebook groups like Indians in Cumming Georgia and Indians in Atlanta.



Civic engagement beyond voting

Civic engagement tends to be measured first and foremost around voting and elections: voter registration levels, voter turnout, and index measures like the Cost of Voting Index (COVI), which indicates how difficult or easy it is for people to vote in a state based on state election laws and policies.¹⁰ Other surveys that expand the definition of civic engagement still tend to focus on institutional engagement like donations to political parties or candidates or volunteerism.

However, across the ecosystems in this report, we found that there are diverse forms of civic engagement outside of voting or other institutions that tend not to show up in national data. For example, in Chicago, research by the

⁹ “The Documenters Network,” City Bureau, <https://www.citybureau.org/documenters>.

¹⁰ Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

University of Illinois, Chicago’s Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy found that residents are actively engaged civically, but that it looks like participation in and donations to religious organizations, social mobilization, and other alternative forms of activity.¹¹ Similarly, in a recent survey commissioned by Outlier Media in Detroit they found that residents are actively civically engaged, particularly through attending public meetings and giving monetary donations to charitable organizations.¹²



Backbone institutions

Backbone institutions are organizations that have deep relationships across the ecosystem, provide training, coordinating, and networking support, and can serve as a first point of entry for new journalism funders, often resulting in more equitable distribution of funds across the ecosystem. Some examples in this report include the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund, Colorado Media Project, and the Center for Cooperative Media in New Jersey.

In nearly all research about ecosystems, as well as in our own previous research for Democracy Fund, there is evidence that backbone institutions play a critical role in ecosystems. In a DF Public Square Program Evaluation, we found that backbone institutions tend to achieve: increased funding, increased collaboration, provide an entrypoint for new funders to the ecosystem, create a shared knowledge base, distribute resources more equitably in an ecosystem, and identify and promote shared needs as well as highlighting responses, organizations, and leaders.¹³

Our research here confirms the importance of backbone institutions in ecosystems where they exist. Oklahoma Media Center, for example, has played a critical role in coordinating ecosystem research that has helped local news and information providers better understand gaps, trust, and information needs.

¹¹ Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, “Changing the Frame: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens.”

¹² Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, June 14, 2024. https://outliermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/0617_out_SurveyDMACS_Wave19Toplines.pdf.

¹³ Lindsay Green-Barber and Eric Garcia McKinley. “Public Square Program Evaluation, 2016-2021: Summary Report,” 22 November 2022. <https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Democracy-Fund-Public-Square-Program-Evaluation-2016-2021-Summary-Report.pdf>.

Common Ecosystem Challenges

There are challenging national trends in news and information ecosystems that surfaced in our research, such as the failing business model of commercial media, low levels of trust in media, and polarization among voters. However, within these broad trends, we've identified some specific challenges that were common across at least some ecosystems.

Uneven distribution of resources

Rural areas are most lacking in resources with regard to news and information, but these communities often don't receive the same degree of investment from funders or serve as locations for start-up outlets. Stakeholders often described challenges with attracting and retaining talent in rural areas. Information providers in rural areas also face unique infrastructure challenges for distribution like lack of broadband access, suggesting that alternative methods are necessary to address community needs, like print or SMS.

Sustainable community-serving media

In many ecosystems, there is not adequate news by and for communities of color. The dimensions of this need and opportunities are varied. For example, in D.C., there are community serving outlets led by and aiming to serve Black and African American residents in the District. However, stakeholders said that the reporting does not reflect the lived reality of low-income residents. Another stakeholder in North Carolina said that while there are publications led by and serving specific communities and residents of NC, the language used in reporting is not accessible for a broad audience.

In nearly every ecosystem, we found there to be a lack of Spanish-language news sufficient to meet the needs of large and growing Spanish-speaking communities. And while there were bright spots in nearly every ecosystem of innovative startups serving these communities, such as Enlace Latino in North Carolina, Conecta AZ and Arizona Luminaria in Arizona, and Cicero Independiente in Chicago, given the size of these ecosystems, the diversity within Spanish-speaking communities, and the information needs that exist, there is opportunity for more outlets to directly serve these communities.

Tribal and Indigenous-owned media also faces challenges. Some ecosystems, such as New Mexico, appeared to have few outlets serving Indigenous communities, especially relative to the size of Indigenous populations within the state.

This may be due in part to undercounting of some kinds of information providers — while some communities are served by tribal newsletters or newspapers affiliated with tribal governments, these are often not included in existing lists of news and information providers.¹⁴

Coverage by and for Indigenous communities can also be spotty and complicated due to variations in free press protections among different sovereign nations. In 2018 and 2019, the Indigenous Journalists Association (IJA) surveyed 65 news producers (editors and reporters) and 391 news consumers about press freedom as part of the Indigenous Media Initiative. Asked whether they considered freedom of speech and freedom of the press to be important values at their tribe, 65% of survey respondents said “definitely” about the former, and 57% said the same about the latter.¹⁵ Another 15%, respectively, said these were “probably” important values. 53% said their tribe tries to control tribal media through budgetary restrictions at least “sometimes,” and 51% of producers and 54% of consumers¹⁶ said stories about tribal affairs or officials go unreported due to censorship at least “sometimes.”¹⁷ In interviews, stakeholders in New Mexico and Oklahoma described some of these challenges. Some also noted that legacy media struggles to maintain tribal affairs coverage because they are perceived as outsiders and are sometimes distrusted by communities that have historically faced harmful coverage from such outlets.

Press freedom and information access

We assessed press freedom according to instances of physical intimidation and regulatory incidents, access to legal resources for journalists, and regulatory policy, as well as local institutional accountability. Even with these indicators, we recognize that there are additional factors that impede access to information for the public and journalists that aren’t captured in our work.

We noted a trend in ecosystems in this report of decreasing access to information. For example, the legislature and governor in Michigan are exempt from open records requests, as is the legislature in North Carolina. And in New Jersey, Governor Phil Murphy signed a bill into law in June 2024 that will likely make it more difficult for journalists and the public at large to access government information.¹⁸

14 These findings are in line with a 2018 report by Jodi Rave, published by Democracy Fund, “American Indian Media Today Tribes Maintain Majority Ownership as Independent Journalists Seek Growth.” https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2018_DF_AmericanIndianMediaToday.pdf.

15 “Indigenous Media Initiative,” Indigenous Journalists Association, <https://indigenousjournalists.org/programs/red-press-initiative/>.

16 This question separated responses from news producers and news consumers, while the previous questions combined all survey respondents.

17 Indigenous Journalists Association, “Indigenous Media Initiative.”

18 “New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy signs controversial public records bill into law. Here’s what it means,” CBS News, last modified June 5, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/opra-bill-signed-into-law-new-jersey/>.

Ecosystem Investment Opportunities

A 2023 study conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, in partnership with Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, found an increase in philanthropic support for nonprofit news from 2018 through 2023, as well as an increase in funding for for-profit newsrooms and a growing focus on communities of color.¹⁹ In 2024, a coalition of funders launched Press Forward, an initiative of at least \$500 million over the next five years to support local journalism in order to address “fading civic engagement, eroding social bonds, surging misinformation, and dwindling governmental accountability.”²⁰ Given this increasing interest and growing resources for local news, we have identified the following critical investment opportunities for local news and information ecosystems, based on this research.

Innovative, community-serving news

Communities, including rural communities, benefit from hyperlocal, intersectional, targeted news and information outlets serving them in an appropriate and trusted format. There are many examples in this report of organizations serving hyperlocal, geographically-based communities and intersectional communities (e.g., immigrant agricultural workers living in rural areas or Spanish-speaking youth) through creative methods, like WhatsApp, in-person events, and TikTok shorts.

And while every ecosystem will have unique and specific communities that can be better served by better resourced local news organizations, nearly across the board, all communities would benefit from more and better resourced Spanish-language news organizations rooted in the communities they’re serving.

Community listening, community engagement, and best practices

For many news organizations, there is a desire to do more community listening and community engagement, but there is a lack of resources and staff capacity. In many cases, organizations don’t have the staff to simply report on the communities they aim to cover and serve. Increasing resources for existing community-serving media to do community engagement work is critical to increasing their impact in communities.

In addition to direct support for newsrooms to do audience engagement, there’s opportunity to support organizations that specialize in community listening and information needs assessment, like Listening Post Collective and News

¹⁹ “Philanthropy’s growing role in American journalism: A new study reveals increased funding and ethical considerations,” 23 August 2023. <https://mediainpactfunders.org/philanthropys-growing-role-in-american-journalism-a-new-study-reveals-increased-funding-and-ethical-considerations/>.

²⁰ “Democracy flourishes when people have access to reliable information,” Press Forward. <https://www.pressforward.news/>.

Voices (a project of Free Press), to better understand needs across an ecosystem and to connect these needs to both existing news organizations and new startups aiming to meet those needs.

Backbone institutions

In this and other previous research (both by IA and others), there is clear evidence that backbone organizations that service an entire ecosystem through things like editorial coordination, resource (re)distribution, balancing historic inequities, and more, strengthen the ecosystem and improve resilience. In ecosystems that do not yet have backbone institutions or where they are emergent, there is opportunity to increase investment to strengthen these organizations and thereby the ecosystems overall. In our research presented here, there is a clear opportunity in Arizona, Washington, D.C., and Michigan.

Rural information needs

There is an opportunity to dig into the unique information needs of people living in rural areas, both in terms of coverage and access to information. The challenges posed to information access in rural communities were different in the diverse ecosystems we studied here, such as language barriers for rural North Carolinian immigrant laborers and broadband access issues in rural Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico, suggesting that any ecosystem would benefit from further research to understand unique challenges and gaps present.

In terms of coverage, there is opportunity to support collaborations among existing outlets to help increase coverage areas, such as the work of Rocky Mountain Community Radio, which has a shared managing editor and digital editor that support 20 community radio stations in western Colorado and adjacent regions in Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico.

Consistent measurement about information needs, trust in news, civic participation, and their relationships with each other

While there are a number of surveys that measure trust in news, information needs, and civic participation, they are disparate instruments that do not speak directly to each other, are not repeated at regular intervals (and thus cannot track change over time), and tend to be done at the national level without sufficient responses at the local level to measure specifics within ecosystems.

There is opportunity for collaborative funding for a civic information needs survey that could be repeated regularly (e.g., every two years), include a standard set of questions about information needs and access, trust in news, diverse forms of civic participation, as well as about the relationship among these things, administered nationally but with sufficient local sampling so as to provide meaningful measurement at the level of ecosystems. This would have the benefit of informing future philanthropic investment, journalism, civic organizing and democracy work, and research, as well as creating the possibility of measuring change in ecosystems over time.

Methodology

Applying the Framework

For this project, we applied the updated Local News and Information Ecosystem Framework to ten diverse ecosystems — eight states and two cities — in order to set a baseline for ecosystem health, strengths, and opportunities, and to provide a way to identify trends and areas of divergence across the ecosystems. In total, we documented 86 indicators for each ecosystem.

Community indicators



In order to document the characteristics of an ecosystem's population, we rely on [U.S. Census Bureau data](#).^{21,22} We also use the [National Institute for Education Statistics](#)²³ for both cities and states, as well the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#).²⁴

Information providers



In order to create an accurate accounting of journalism organizations in an ecosystem, we developed a multistep process to access different databases of local news organizations. Even with this five-part search for local media, there are surely outlets that we did not encounter in our search. Specifically, we could not systematically identify local podcasts, community newsletters, or community oriented social media, such as Facebook groups. And given the dynamic nature of local news, the lists will likely have changed from the time of compilation to the time of publication. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

For each ecosystem, our search included:

1. [State of Local News Project](#): The State of Local News Project generously shared their lists of information providers for the ten ecosystems included in this research.²⁵
2. Broadcast TV: We did a manual search for all statewide [ABC](#), [CBS](#), [NBC](#), [PBS](#), and [Fox](#) affiliate stations,

21 "QuickFacts United States," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045222>.

22 We include indicators such as population size, age, race and ethnicity, households with a computer, broadband access, formal education levels, median household income, per capita income, and poverty rate.

23 "Search for Schools and Colleges," National Institute for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/globallocator/>.

24 "Library Search & Compare," Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, <https://www.imls.gov/search-compare>.

25 We went through the lists of news organizations for each state, checking that listed newsrooms were still operating and removing entries for newsrooms that appeared to have closed permanently since the data was originally collected by the State of Local News Project Team.

but not their local satellite stations (can also be found using FCC search for cities). We also included local Univision and Telemundo stations when available.

3. Broadcast radio: We manually searched [CPB](#) and [NFCB](#)'s maps and included local broadcast stations.
4. [Center for Community Media](#): We searched CCM's [Asian](#), [Black](#), and [Latino](#) Media Maps and Directories and included outlets in those databases.
5. Stakeholder contributions: We added any outlets mentioned in stakeholder interviews that had not already surfaced through one of the above lists/databases.

We categorized every publication based on three dimensions. First, we noted the primary distribution medium (print only, digital only, print and digital, broadcast television, or radio). Next, we classified outlets by business model (nonprofit, public media, national broadcast chain, newspaper with corporate ownership, or independent for-profit). While we know there are differences between newspaper holding companies — which can include hedge funds, large media companies like Gannett, and smaller regional companies — we considered a paper to be a “newspaper with corporate ownership” if the company that owned it had media holdings in multiple states. Finally, we determined if the outlet was community-serving, and if so, which community (African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Asian American, Native American, Hyperlocal, or other specific to the ecosystem).

In order to determine the amount of philanthropic investment in an ecosystem, we relied on the Media Impact Funders and Candid database. This database pulls from foundations' 990's, and as such tends to lag at least one year behind. Given the challenges with this dataset, we looked at philanthropic dollars invested over the previous three years (2020, 2021, and 2022), as well as the total number of funders and recipients of grants. Finally, we calculated the investment per capita based on the number of residents in an ecosystem.



Community information needs and trust in media

For this report, in order to document the degree to which residents' information needs are being met by the ecosystem's news and information providers, as well as levels of trust in media, we relied on survey results from the Gallup/Knight American Views 2022: Part 2.²⁶ We pulled responses from each state ecosystem (and MSAs for Detroit and Chicago), and analyzed responses to seven questions gauging the degree to which respondents agree that local news is able to reliably meet their information needs and that local news cares about their best interests, as well as the frequency and formats they access news. It is worth noting that this survey will not be repeated in the future and thus we will be unable to document change over time.

²⁶ In previous ecosystem assessments, we relied on the 2019 Pew State of Local News survey results. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/feature/local-news-habits/>.



Civic engagement and democracy

For this report, in collaboration with Democracy Fund, we added a new set of indicators to assess the health of civic engagement and democracy in each ecosystem. We continued to look at voter turnout in the most recent election, as well as the percentage of registered eligible voters. To this we added the [Cost of Voting Index](#) (COVI), which scores the ease or burden of voting by state.²⁷

While the original framework included voter turnout, there is evidence that access to quality local information influences other forms of civic engagement, such as participation in local political meetings or contacting a public official, and those indicators have been added here.²⁸ It also includes additional indicators about press freedom — drawn from [the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#) — assessed according to instances of physical intimidation and regulatory incidents, access to legal resources for journalists, and regulatory policy, as well as local institutional accountability.²⁹

We also searched for information about hyperpartisan and pink slime outlets in each ecosystem in order to better understand the quality of information available within the ecosystem and whether there were outlets with partisan ties. Hyperpartisan news sites are outlets that appear to be local news sources, with names such as East Michigan News or Washington D.C. Business Daily. However, outlets often do not disclose partisan funding or lean, and they are “often funded and operated by government officials, political candidates, PACs, and political party operatives,” according to [researchers](#) Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli.³⁰ Pink slime journalism refers to a broader set of news sources that can include hyperpartisan outlets. [Pink slime outlets](#) masquerade as local news sources, can have undisclosed partisan ties, and can rely on content that is AI generated or aggregated from other websites.³¹ We relied on a 2020 map of hyperpartisan outlets from Mahone and Napoli, reports of such outlets in existing ecosystem studies, and information from stakeholders, but we know that the landscape of hyperpartisan and pink slime outlets has likely shifted since the time when the resources we relied on were compiled, and it is unlikely we have captured everything.

27 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

28 We relied heavily on Harvard’s Cooperative Election Study (CES) survey to document local civic engagement. Cooperative Election Study: <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

29 “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

30 Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you.” NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

31 Scott A. Leadingham, “Pink Slime Journalism: Separating Ethical News From Propaganda,” *Freedom Forum*, <https://www.freedomforum.org/pink-slime-journalism/>.

Interviews

We conducted approximately five interviews with stakeholders in each ecosystem representing at least four different stakeholder groups: journalism, community, funders, and backbone institutions. Interviewees were compensated for their time with a stipend. Interview protocols can be found in Appendix 3, and a full list of interviewees is in Appendix 4. Because there were such a small number of interviews in each ecosystem, we have included paraphrased information that is not always attributed and/or was shared on background to ensure that interviewees could be candid about the strengths and challenges in their ecosystems.

1. **Backbone institution:** In ecosystems where there is a backbone institution that serves the broader media ecosystem by distributing funds, catalyzing collaboration, and bringing community members and journalists together, we interviewed a representative of the organization.
2. **Journalism:** We interviewed working local journalists, often in a leadership role of an organization. We prioritized speaking with journalists working outside of legacy print and broadcast TV newsrooms.
3. **Community:** We spoke to at least one person in every ecosystem who could represent community perspectives, often someone working formally in a community-based organization.
4. **Funder:** We interviewed local funders, including those working in family foundations, community foundations, and private foundations.

While interviews were crucial in providing broader context to the quantitative and qualitative data we collected, as well as in providing a deeper view into some of the trends found in the data, we recognize that they represent only a small number of perspectives and experiences in each ecosystem.

Arizona

Arizona

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Arizona news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Arizona has a diverse and growing population and, as a state located on the U.S.-Mexico border, a large Spanish-speaking population. Nearly a third of the state identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and we found more outlets serving Hispanic and Latino audiences (15) than in any other ecosystem in this report, but the number still doesn't reflect the makeup of the state.¹ There is also excitement about increased investment in local news in the state, including through the new Press Forward Local chapter in southern Arizona. However, stakeholder conversations and quantitative data point to major challenges around trust in news, gaps in coverage including a need for more civic news and Spanish-language reporting, and press freedom issues related to information access.

Arizona received significant national attention during the 2022 election cycle, with a spotlight on the gubernatorial race, in particular, and a slew of voting-related litigation making its way through the courts. Midterms voter turnout was higher in Arizona than it was across the U.S. overall.² However, stakeholders noted that some Arizonans feel they do not have the ability to make a difference on the state, national, or even local level, and other communities feel they are frequently overlooked or taken for granted by politicians. One stakeholder felt that political polarization and fragmentation has made it harder for organizers and community members to build large coalitions in the way they have in previous years. A lack of timely or actionable news and information may also be preventing Arizonans from getting involved in local civic and community issues. Data from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study (CES) survey

¹ "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Arizona," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AZ/PST045223>.

² "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

shows that participation in many non-voting forms of civic engagement is fairly low in Arizona, sometimes dropping slightly below the equivalent national numbers.³ But information from stakeholders demonstrated how existing quantitative data does not capture every way Arizonans are participating — interviewees described other ways community members are getting involved in civic issues, including through text banking and signing petitions, that are not measured in the CES survey.

Quantitative data shows trust in local news outlets in Arizona is far below the national levels, particularly when it comes to misinformation. Gallup/Knight survey data shows that less than 27% of respondents from Arizona agreed that local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public, compared to 44% for U.S. respondents overall.⁴ A stakeholders described how Arizonans are very cautious about what local news sources they put their trust in, and interviewees from news organizations said they have worked hard to earn the trust of their audiences through community listening, transparency, and face-to-face interaction. Lack of trust in media has also led to journalists being shut out of covering communities and being criticized by individuals on both ends of the political spectrum, stakeholders said.

Given this context, the fraught political environment, and the coming national election, newsrooms are being especially thoughtful about how they prepare their reporters to cover certain events. Beyond challenges with on-the-ground reporting, journalists have also faced barriers to information access and have often had to rely on suing for information from local governments and agencies. In order to ensure journalists can do accountability reporting and continue to cover local issues, the news ecosystem may need more resources for legal support for accessing public information as well as safety training and best practices for newsrooms.

Stakeholders described geographic, topic-area, and language gaps in the Arizona information ecosystem. Many stakeholders identified that Arizona is lacking adequate Spanish-language coverage, particularly in areas beyond major cities. And coverage in Spanish is disappearing in some parts of the state — the Arizona Daily Star, which covers Tucson and southern Arizona, recently cut their Spanish-language publication, and new and existing bilingual or Spanish-language outlets are working to fill gaps.⁵

Amid concerns about shrinking newsroom staff and declining coverage across the state, funding for local news

3 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.” Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

4 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

5 Arizona Daily Star, “Gracias por ser parte de la comunidad La Estrella de Tucson,” La Estrella de Tucson, last modified April 25, 2023, https://tucson.com/laestrella/noticias/gracias-por-ser-parte-de-la-comunidad-la-estrella-de-tucs-n/article_ad3aa672-e386-11ed-9810-4b7438c531db.html.

in Arizona is receiving new attention. The Community Foundation for Southern Arizona conducted its first round of grantmaking to local news outlets this year after a group of community members began working to find ways to combat the decline of local news in 2023.⁶ As startup organizations take root in Arizona and others work to increase sustainability and expand their reach, it's important that the ecosystem continues to emphasize community engagement in order to build a solid foundation of trust with Arizona audiences. Even as outlets work to fill gaps — including providing the kind of timely and solutions-oriented civic news that communities need to get involved — they may need support to ensure they have the staff and resources for community engagement. As outlets shrink and face challenges with trust and sustainability, it will be important to look to the specific solutions that have proven successful for news and information providers in the state. The ecosystem needs a more granular analysis of gaps that takes coverage area into account as well as comprehensive assessments of community information needs.

This chapter presents Arizona at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

6 “Local News Initiative of Southern Arizona,” Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, <https://cfsaz.org/localnewsinitiative/>.

Opportunities

Support for Spanish-language media:

Stakeholders noted that greater investment is needed in Spanish-language media given that there are few organizations covering communities outside of Arizona's cities. Primarily English-language outlets might benefit from more resources for translation and support for hiring and retaining bilingual journalists.

Building trust:

Quantitative data shows particularly low levels of trust in local news among Arizonans. Greater investment and support for news organizations to develop or scale up community listening and transparency practices may help local news outlets build more trust with Arizona audiences. An in-depth evaluation of trust and information needs across the state could help local newsrooms understand where they need to fill gaps and build stronger relationships in their communities.

Press freedom and safety training:

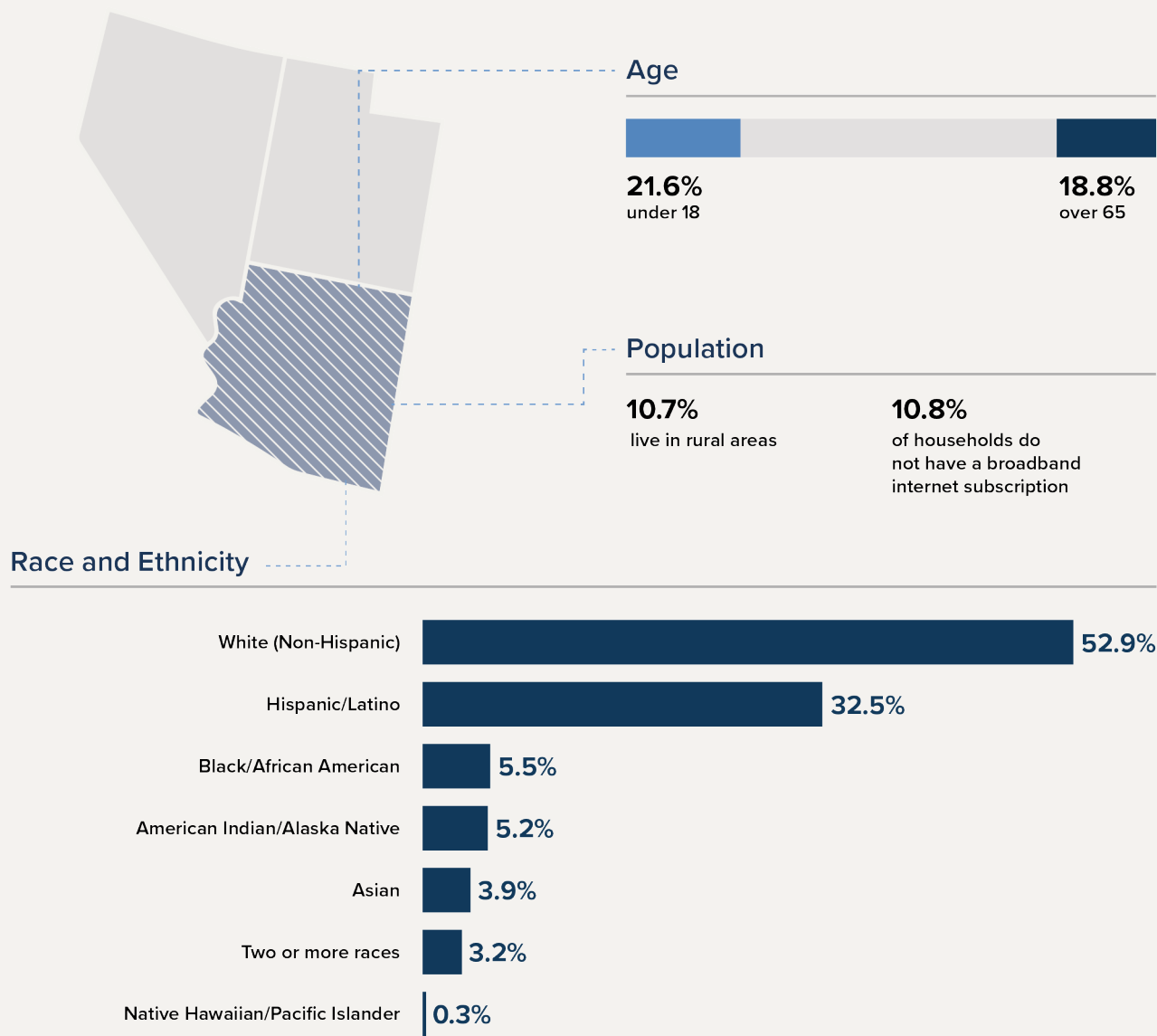
Greater access to legal support for information access issues could help news outlets ensure they are able to do accountability reporting and keep their communities informed about local issues. Journalists and newsrooms could also benefit from access to safety training and best practices — one interviewee highlighted how journalists at their organization have received this training already.

Arizona at a Glance

Topline indicators about Arizona’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

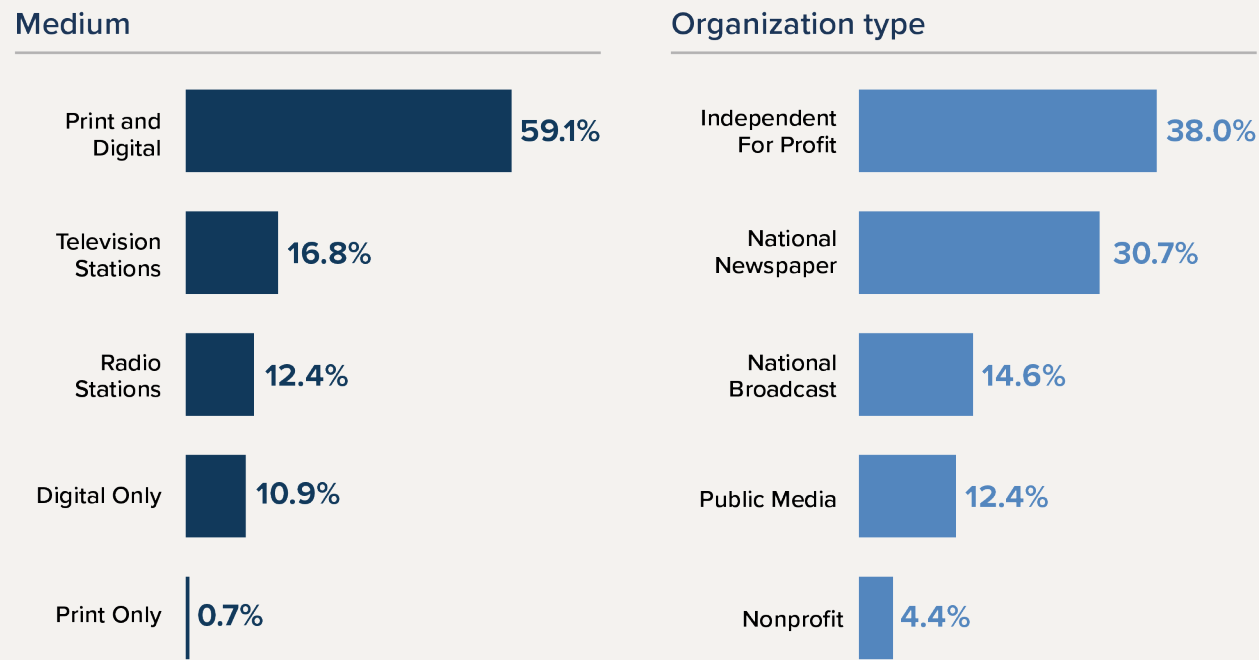
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



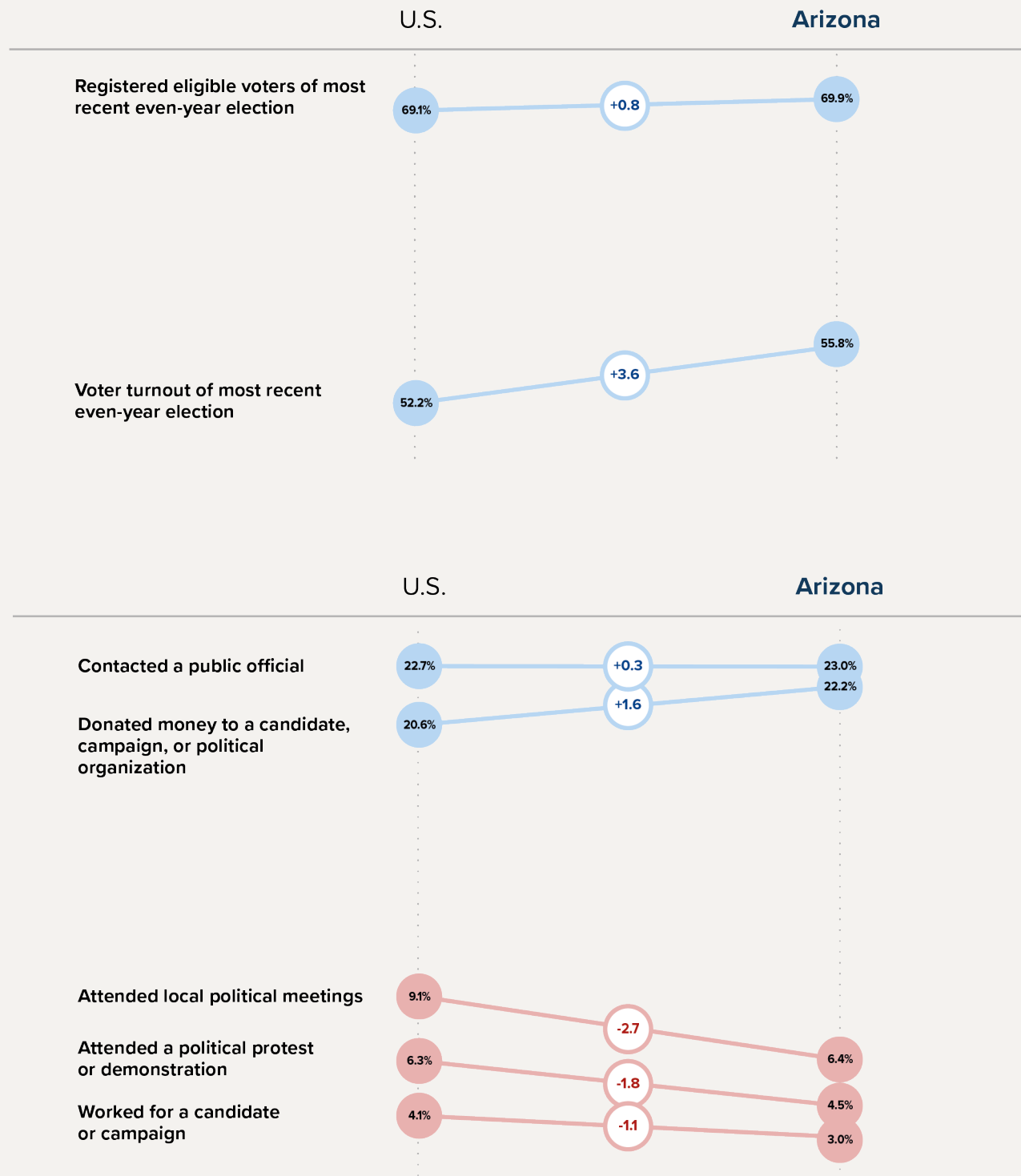
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders’ Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Arizona Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Arizona to dig deeper into the current state of Arizona’s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about how the newsroom Arizona Luminaria is working to meet community information needs.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Arizona.

Arizona became a battleground for election litigation before and after the 2022 midterms. Democracy Docket, which tracks election-related litigation, listed 20 cases for Arizona alone in 2022, with most attempting to restrict voting access or voting protections in some way.⁷ By contrast, we found only 16 court cases in Democracy Docket’s database for the other 9 ecosystems in this report combined across the same time period.⁸ None of the lawsuits that would restrict voting access or protections in Arizona were successful — and, in fact, the five lawsuits that sought to expand or protect access were all successful.⁹ But the high volume of cases helps illustrate the polarized legal environment in which Arizonans cast their votes in 2022.

While voter turnout and the percent of registered eligible voters in Arizona is slightly higher than nationally, other data on civic engagement is more mixed in terms of how Arizonans compare to U.S. residents overall. Voter turnout for the 2022 midterm elections was 55.8% in Arizona, compared to 52.2% nationally, and nearly 70% of eligible voters in Arizona were registered at the time of that election. This is despite Arizona’s relatively high Cost of Voting Index (COVI)

⁷ “Court Cases,” Democracy Docket, <https://www.democracydocket.com/cases/>.

⁸ Democracy Docket, “Court Cases.”

⁹ Democracy Docket, “Court Cases.”

score (0.25), a value that indicates the difficulty or ease of voting based on local election laws and policies.¹⁰

Disaggregated data from the 2022 Harvard CES survey, which included questions about non-voting forms of civic engagement, shows that Arizonans surveyed are slightly more engaged than national averages when it

comes to donating money to a candidate or political organization and contacting a public official.¹¹ However, the national numbers are low — only about 20% of CES respondents reported donating money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization in the past year — so the fact that the proportion of Arizonans is slightly higher might not indicate robust and broad-reaching participation in civic engagement.¹² Other forms of civic engagement fall below the national levels. In comparison to all surveyed U.S. residents, a slightly smaller proportion of surveyed Arizonans reported attending a local political meeting (6.4%), attending a protest (4.5%), or working for a candidate or campaign (3.0%).¹³

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	Arizona	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	6.4%	-2.7 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	22.2%	1.6 ▲
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	4.5%	-1.8 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	23.0%	0.3 ▲
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.0%	-1.1 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,625

Stakeholders said there are a number of potential barriers to civic engagement in the state. One interviewee noted that many residents are retirees or only live in Arizona seasonally. Sometimes those residents are not as invested in local issues since they continue to follow news and events from their previous or primary states of residence. Stakeholders in the southernmost part of the state said that civic engagement is sometimes higher on the local level since community members do not feel they have the ability to effect change on the state or national level — especially because they are not in Phoenix or Maricopa County, which get more attention in national media and politics. Others noted that the news and information environment is a factor, meaning that there is a lack of timely, actionable news and information. Irene Fischler McKisson, co-founder of the bilingual nonprofit news source Arizona Luminaria, said that they heard from communities that they were not getting the news they needed to get involved. “They were looking for stories that helped them have a voice in what was happening and were frustrated by news coverage

“They were looking for stories that helped them have a voice in what was happening...”

Irene Fischler McKisson,
co-founder of Arizona Luminaria

10 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.” Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.
 11 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”
 12 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”
 13 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”

that either came too late for them to do something or didn't offer them a way to do something or were really focused on the problem and not on potential ways forward," she said. Language is another big challenge when it comes to civic engagement, Fischler McKisson said, with limited Spanish-language local news options in the state.

Maritza Félix, founder and director of the nonprofit news outlet Conecta Arizona, highlighted that the state's Latino community can feel like they are taken for granted, and that politicians and other people in power sometimes assume incorrectly that the only issue they care about is immigration. A more fragmented organizing landscape has also had an impact on civic engagement. Félix observed that organizers haven't been able to come together in the same way that they did in 2010 — an election year and the year when the governor signed the controversial anti-immigration law SB 1070 into law, lawmakers attempted to ban the teaching of Mexican American studies in the state's public schools,¹⁴ and communities were contending with Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who, among other legal actions against him, was sued¹⁵ for discriminatory practices. In 2010, community stakeholders' ability to come together made them a powerful force, but they have since lost that unity, Félix explained. "Those community organizations that were activists, faith groups, entrepreneurs, business owners, students, whatever, they haven't found the way to work together again for a cause," she said. In many cases, organizations have merged, changed their mission, or leadership has moved in different directions since that time, Félix explained. Other stakeholders listed additional reasons why grassroots organizing might look different compared to 2010, including that communities made significant progress in that year, that the Legislature is now more evenly split between the parties compared to 2010, and that some activists from the previous decade have since been elected to public office or have moved into other institutional roles.

Félix also said that growing polarization poses a challenge — and one that is likely applicable beyond the Arizona news and information ecosystem. "We don't know how to debate with people who have different opinions than ours," she said. "The internet has made it really easy for us to find

"The internet has made it really easy for us to find our echo chamber, so we're always going to find something that is going to back up our opinions, and it's going to create disengagement with the other different points of view."

Maritza Félix,
founder and director of Conecta Arizona

¹⁴ Hank Stephenson, "What Arizona's 2010 Ban on Ethnic Studies Could Mean for the Fight Over Critical Race Theory," Politico, Politico LLC, last modified July 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/11/tucson-unified-school-districts-mexican-american-studies-program-498926>.

¹⁵ "Federal Court Rules Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio Violated U.S. Constitution," ACLU, American Civil Liberties Union, last modified May 24, 2013, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-court-rules-arizona-sheriff-joe-arpaio-violated-us-constitution>.

our echo chamber, so we're always going to find something that is going to back up our opinions, and it's going to create disengagement with the other different points of view.” When people feel they are not being seen or heard, she added, they disengage.

Some stakeholders felt that civic engagement was relatively high in their community. Fischler McKisson said Arizona Luminaria asked about civic engagement in their community listening work and recent reader survey and heard about numerous ways people are getting involved — from signing a petition to text banking for local or national elections, activities that are not necessarily captured by CES survey questions. Fischler McKisson said they also heard how people’s engagement shifts when their life shifts and they have less time or flexibility to participate — for example, when someone welcomes a new child to their family. Arizona Luminaria also heard a distinction between the way people thought about civic or community engagement versus politics. “People, when you ask them about politics, feel a certain way, when you ask them about community engagement, feel a certain way,” she said. “And the politics question, they often came back to money — that politics was community engagement, but there was money that corrupted it or money that made people make different decisions.”

Stakeholder interviews demonstrate the complexities of quantifying civic engagement and how Arizonans may be getting involved in ways that are not well captured by existing data sources and that they may not be participating at a consistent level throughout their lives. There may also be some Arizonans who would like to get involved or see change but who do not have the information or resources they need to get involved — or who feel that taking action will not make a difference.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in Arizona and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press’s ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Stakeholders identified some widespread and systemic issues regarding press freedom in Arizona. Similar to other ecosystems, stakeholders said that access to public information was the biggest challenge for newsrooms, largely because it could be so inconsistent. Some agencies or institutions — such as the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and their subcontractors — can be complicated to navigate, and some cities are better than others about fulfilling information requests. Arizona Luminaria has had to make many FOIA requests to certain agencies in order to get information for their coverage, which they are able to do because they have access to a pro bono lawyer through the Reporters

Committee for Freedom of the Press, Fischler McKisson said. However, not every organization has those resources. Access to officials is also inconsistent. Getting comment from state legislators has been fairly easy for Conecta Arizona, according to Félix, but the transportation department has not been responding to requests from Arizona Luminaria, Fischler McKisson said. Part of the problem is that there have been so many long-standing gaps in the news ecosystem that some agencies have not had a journalist come around and ask questions for years, and they no longer have institutional knowledge about how to interact with the media, Fischler McKisson explained.

Arizona Luminaria has also taken some measures to ensure the safety of their journalists. Their reporters have received safety training through the International Women’s Media Foundation, and the outlet is thinking carefully about how to send out reporters, especially as election season approaches. For example, Fischler McKisson said they do not send reporters to protests on their own because it is not safe.

Arizona has had some regulatory and physical intimidation incidents involving journalists in 2022 and 2023, with the latter mostly occurring while journalists were covering protests. As of this writing, the Press Freedom Tracker includes six physical intimidation incidents: three where [journalists were detained at protests](#), one where a journalist was [arrested](#) at a protest, one where a journalist was [arrested](#) while filming police, and one where a journalist was [detained](#) while reporting outside of a bank.¹⁶ Regulatory incidents include a [restraining order](#) that an Arizona state senator successfully filed against a reporter, though this was later overturned, and a [denial](#) by the Arizona Department of Corrections of The Arizona Republic's request to witness executions on multiple occasions.¹⁷

Hyperpartisan news outlets have a significant presence in Arizona. A 2020 map of hyperpartisan news outlets by researchers Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli shows 14 outlets in the state, all of which are conservative-leaning.¹⁸ However, this map has not been updated recently, and more research is needed to ensure that there is an accurate count. More recent research helps provide a snapshot of some outlets, though it is not comprehensive — in 2022, Axios reported on a network of liberal-leaning hyperpartisan news outlets in Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, New Hampshire, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin.¹⁹ Understanding the distribution of hyperpartisan outlets and how much Arizonans are relying on them for news could help stakeholders understand the gaps in the ecosystem, issues around trust and misinformation, and where greater access to nonpartisan news sources is needed.

¹⁶ “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

¹⁷ U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker.”

¹⁸ Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you.” NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

¹⁹ Lachlan Markay and Thomas Wheatley, “Democrats’ swing-state local news ploy,” Axios, last modified October 6, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/06/democrats-local-news-david-brock>.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Arizonans' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

Responses to the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey from Arizona indicate that Arizonans have lower trust in their local news outlets than all U.S. residents surveyed across nearly all dimensions. The proportion of Arizonans who feel local news has the resources and opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly is the same as that of U.S. residents surveyed, at 65.0%.²⁰ However,

a smaller proportion of Arizonans expressed trust in news across the other four dimensions compared to all U.S. residents surveyed.²¹ Trust in the integrity of local news outlets is particularly low — only 26.8% of surveyed Arizonans agreed or strongly agreed that local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.²²

The data indicates widespread concern about misinformation and bias in local news, and stakeholder interviews suggested some potential reasons why and some possible ways to build trust. Arizonans sometimes run into the hyperpartisan news sources in the state and are unsure whether to trust those. In conversations with community members, Fischler McKisson said she hears that they're looking for a news source they can trust, but they're extremely

Information Providers and Community	U.S.	Arizona	Difference from U.S.
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	65.0%	0.0
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	43.1%	-8.9 ▼
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	45.5%	-7.5 ▼
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	34.2%	-12.8 ▼
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	26.8%	-17.2 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 123

²⁰ "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%206%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

²¹ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2."

²² Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2."

cautious because they do not want to put their trust in the wrong source. “We have found that talking to people one-on-one like that is a really good way to get past that because, you know, a human on the other side, people are happy to see that,” Fischler McKisson said. Arizona Luminaria began publishing in 2022 and was launched, at least in part, in response to some of these concerns about trust, Fischler McKisson said. While other stakeholders were unsure how to capture what trust in news looks like across the entire state, some highlighted the importance of transparency in reporting. Félix, founder of Conecta Arizona, said her organization does not take trust for granted. She said they have gained the trust of Hispanic and Latino communities in the state by creating space to have difficult conversations and by being transparent about their finances and opening their books, auditing their sources for reporting, and emphasizing community listening.

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	22.8%	10.6%	0.8%	23.6%	42.3%
A website or app	39.0%	15.4%	8.1%	13.8%	23.6%
A radio station	20.5%	18.0%	4.1%	20.5%	36.9%
A TV station	49.6%	13.8%	4.1%	13.8%	18.7%
Direct communication with people in your area	26.8%	30.9%	7.3%	15.4%	19.5%
A magazine	1.6%	10.7%	10.7%	18.0%	59.0%
A social media platform	35.8%	12.2%	6.5%	10.6%	35.0%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 123

Given the especially low levels of trust in local news among Arizonans, further investigation is likely needed, especially more granular data on what trust looks like for communities of color in the state and across different geographic areas. There is no recent, comprehensive study exploring why Arizonans have such low trust in local news relative to residents of other U.S. states.

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	Arizona	Difference from U.S	
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	4.9%	1.9	▲
From TV	31%	28.7%	-2.3	▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	58.2%	0.2	▲
From a radio	7%	8.2%	1.2	▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 123

While Arizonans are less reliant on TV for most of their news relative to the national numbers — about 29% of those surveyed said they get *most* of their news from TV — it remains a go-to *daily* news source for 50% of surveyed Arizonans.²³ The large percentage of surveyed Arizonans who rely on a TV station for daily news could also indicate a large focus on national broadcast news, as this survey question was not specifically about local news.

23 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

While a slightly larger percentage of Arizonans reported getting most of their news from a printed newspaper or magazine (4.9%) than surveyed U.S. residents overall (3%), nearly 40% said they get news through a website or app daily, and 58.2% reported using digital means to get most of their news.²⁴ Similar to many other states, Arizona is experiencing a shift to greater reliance on digital sources for news.

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Arizona.

While no organizations have shared a recent information needs assessment for Arizona, stakeholders spoke about the gaps they see throughout the state. Stakeholders said that Arizona needs more investment in Spanish-language news, particularly since national affiliates often don't cover rural areas. They noted how this could be a barrier to greater civic engagement, especially since Spanish-speaking communities have shared with some stakeholders that they prefer to read highly technical reporting about laws or healthcare in their first language.

While every county in Arizona has at least one local news source, it should be noted Arizona has only 15 counties, and some span several thousand square miles. It's clear there are still gaps in local coverage for many communities, particularly those beyond Maricopa County, home to Phoenix, stakeholders said, and this needs study that is more granular than county-level accounting of news

sources. Stakeholders shared examples of how a lack of local news has had an effect on civic engagement and elections. Fischler McKisson, the co-founder of Arizona Luminaria, highlighted the impact that national TV news coverage had on the 2022 election, when gubernatorial

While every county in Arizona has at least one local news source, it should be noted Arizona has only 15 counties and some span several thousand square miles.

24 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2."

candidate Kari Lake was covered by national outlets like CNN or MSNBC nearly every day. “She lost the election, but down ballot from her, there were many other people who have the same stances who got elected,” Fischler McKisson said. “A lot of that was because you could see that Arizonans were watching cable news and didn’t have a local source of information.”

Fischler McKisson also shared how she heard during community listening that community members were looking for more in-depth, nuanced, and actionable stories as well as more reporting on topics like education, equity issues, housing, and local or regional climate stories.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Arizona. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the report page.](#)

We found 137 news outlets in Arizona, most of which are print and digital publications.²⁵ Notably, Arizona is one of two states in this report with more outlets owned by national newspaper or broadcast companies than independent local owners. The state also has a relatively large number of television news outlets (20), which might indicate why half of Arizonans who responded to the Gallup/Knight American Views Survey said they got daily news from TV.²⁶ We also found a large number of outlets serving communities of color (41) compared to other ecosystems in this report, including newsrooms serving Asian or Asian American, Black, Hispanic or Latino, and Indigenous communities in the state. However, they are often still not proportionate to the size of populations within the state. And, of course, a large number of community media outlets does not mean there are no geographic or topic-area gaps.

²⁵ We searched databases and resources from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, and local broadcast affiliate lists.

²⁶ Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

While the State of Local News Project showed no change in the number of outlets in Arizona from 2022 to 2023, stakeholders noted that many local papers are being bought up by national companies, and some are reducing staff or coverage. So, even though newsrooms may not be closing in Arizona at rates similar to other states, they might be producing less local coverage. For example, staff at the Arizona Daily Star has shrunk, with local news outlets reporting nearly 25% of the newsroom was laid off at the outlet in 2023, following a previous bout of layoffs and buyouts.²⁷

Stakeholders described a dearth of Spanish-language coverage, particularly in the southern part of the state, relative to the size of Arizona's Hispanic and Latino population. The Arizona Daily Star cut its Spanish-language publication, La Estrella, in 2023.²⁸ While there are some bright spots in this area — including Conecta Arizona, Arizona Luminaria, and The Arizona Republic's sister publication, La Voz Arizona — stakeholders noted that there are still many gaps since they are not able to cover the entire state. Conecta Arizona has been trying to expand coverage into the southern part of the state after the recent closure of a Spanish-language outlet there. We found 15 outlets geared towards the Hispanic and Latino communities in the state, including national Spanish-language broadcast affiliates that stakeholders said typically do not cover rural areas.

We also found eight outlets serving Indigenous communities in the state, though this number likely excludes tribal newsletters and newspapers. While these can be important news sources and sometimes the only source of local

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of Organizations	137	
Population per Organization	52,201	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	15	10.9%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	81	59.1%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	1	0.7%
Radio Stations	17	12.4%
Television Stations	23	16.8%
Organization Type		
Independent For-Profit	52	38.0%
National Broadcast Chain	20	14.6%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	42	30.7%
Nonprofit	6	4.4%
Public Media	17	12.4%
Community Media		
African American / Black	5	
Hispanic / Latino	15	
Asian / Asian American	11	
Indigenous / Native American	8	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

27 Dylan Smith and Paul Ingram, "Nearly 25% of Arizona Daily Star newsroom laid off," TucsonSentinel.com, published April 24, 2023, https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/local/report/042423_star_layoffs/nearly-25-arizona-daily-star-newsroom-laid-off/.

28 Arizona Daily Star, "Gracias por ser parte de la comunidad La Estrella de Tucson," La Estrella de Tucson, last modified April 25, 2023, https://tucson.com/laestrella/noticias/gracias-por-ser-parte-de-la-comunidad-la-estrella-de-tucs-n/article_ad3aa672-e386-11ed-9810-4b7438c531db.html.

news specifically for Indigenous communities, it should be noted that they are sometimes affiliated with or run by tribal governments and, therefore, are often not fully independent news sources. Some news outlets in the state have expanded coverage of tribal communities in recent years. The Arizona Republic established a dedicated Indigenous affairs beat in 2021.

Many organizations — especially small or rural newsrooms as well as those serving people of color — are under-resourced, and journalists are stretched thin, as is the case in many news ecosystems included in this report.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	7.3%			3.6%	
Print and digital	27.7%		30.7%	0.7%	
Print only	0.7%				
Radio	1.5%				10.9%
Television	0.7%	14.6%			1.5%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Arizona ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

There are no statewide assessments of newsroom diversity or source diversity for Arizona. However, Gannett newsrooms in the state have released newsroom demographic data for the past few years. In 2020, Gannett committed to gender and racial parity in its newsrooms by 2025 and announced plans to release staff demographics each year. We found staff diversity data from 2022 published by The Arizona Republic. The newsroom has seen increases in journalists of color since 2020, including a growing number of Hispanic or Latino journalists, though the percentage of Hispanic or Latino journalists at the outlet in 2022 was still smaller than the size of that community within the state at that time.²⁹

29 Greg Burton and P. Kim Bui, “The Arizona Republic is committed to diversity, both in its coverage and its newsroom,” AZCentral, [www.azcentral.com](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona-republic/2022/07/27/arizona-republic-releases-2022-newsroom-diversity-figures/10165240002/), <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona-republic/2022/07/27/arizona-republic-releases-2022-newsroom-diversity-figures/10165240002/>.

Case Study – Arizona Luminaria

How a bilingual news outlet is working to meet community information needs.

Co-founders Irene Fischler McKisson, Dianna Nájuez, and Becky Pallack started the bilingual nonprofit digital news outlet Arizona Luminaria in 2022. The outlet focuses on five broad areas: education, equity, the environment, voting, and community, which includes coverage of topics such as transportation and housing. Arizona Luminaria also offers coverage in both Spanish and English, meeting a critical need given that 19.8% of the state’s population speaks Spanish at home and considering that some Spanish-language news sources in the state have shrunk or disappeared over the years.³⁰



Michael McKisson

From left to right: Chelsea Curtis, Michael McKisson, Becky Pallack, John Washington, Irene Fischler McKisson, Carolina Cuellar, Dianna Nájuez, Beatriz Limón.

The founders worked in the Arizona news and information ecosystem for decades prior to launching Arizona Luminaria, and they were conscious of gaps in counties beyond Maricopa County, where the state capital, Phoenix, is located. With that in mind, Arizona Luminaria is focused on southern Arizona, though it brings in statewide context and covers statewide stories that impact residents of southern Arizona, Fischler McKisson said.

The direction of the outlet has been informed by community listening throughout its more than two years of existence and even prior to its launch. The team heard that communities were looking for timely, in-depth, and nuanced news stories. “We are thoughtfully and specifically trying to cover topics before a decision is made and to do that really frequently and close a lot of loops,” Fischler McKisson said.

Their decisions about how to provide Spanish- and English-language content have, similarly, been informed by community listening, Fischler McKisson said. Because of this, the outlet offers Spanish and English coverage together on the homepage, rather than in separate sections, and they do some reporting originally in Spanish that is translated to English and some originally in English that is translated to Spanish. As of spring 2024,

30 “Arizona,” United States Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile/Arizona?g=040XX00US04>.

Arizona Luminaria has seven full-time employees, including four who are bilingual. Community members said they often feel more comfortable reading stories about highly technical topics in their first language, Fischler McKisson said, and the bilingual nature of the outlet has allowed them to share and discuss stories with family members who may read one language but not the other. According to Fischler McKisson, Arizona Luminaria is the only text-based source of Spanish-language local news in Pima County, the southern Arizona county that spans more than 9,000 square miles and is home to over a million Arizonans, about half of whom reside in the county seat of Tucson.³¹

Beyond filling gaps, the outlet is also working to build trust with communities that have historically not been served by the media or who have been subject to harmful reporting. “There are a lot of communities in southern Arizona who feel like they don’t need to look at the media because the media doesn’t cover their communities in a way that reflects who they are,” Fischler McKisson said. The outlet has been especially cautious in its approach to covering these communities and

“There are a lot of communities in southern Arizona who feel like they don’t need to look at the media because the media doesn’t cover their communities in a way that reflects who they are.”

Irene Fischler McKisson,
co-founder of Arizona Luminaria

ensuring they are doing respectful and equitable reporting, she said, and this has included looking at the work that grassroots organizations have done when it comes to providing solutions-oriented and actionable coverage of issues. “We are doing a lot of work around making sure that we are looking at the work those communities have already done and not coming in and starting here when they have done 20 years of work up to this point,” she said.

Reporter Chelsea Curtis, who is Diné, is currently engaged in a project about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Transgender People (MMIWG2T) in Arizona, creating a database of Indigenous people who have gone missing or were murdered, and writing in-depth profiles of some of those impacted. In February, Curtis chronicled her experience working on the project thus far, including challenges with seeking public records, and asked for community input and information. “What I’ve learned to be true from my career as a journalist so far is that data can drive change,” Curtis wrote. “Still, data is not without its limitations. And it certainly is far from comprehensive when people from underrepresented communities are misrepresented or excluded altogether.”³²

31 “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pima County, Arizona; Tucson city, Arizona,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/pimacountyarizona,tucsoncityarizona/PST045223>.

32 Chelsea Curtis, “Data that drives change: MMIWG2T Reporter’s Notebook,” Arizona Luminaria, last modified February 26, 2024, <https://azluminaria.org/2024/02/26/data-that-drives-change-mmiwg2t-reporters-notebook/>.

Arizona Luminaria has seen the impact of building a news source around information needs, centering community voices, and producing work for and by communities that are often underrepresented in the media. The outlet's audience has quadrupled since last year, Fischler McKisson said, and they have been able to increase the size of their reporting staff and expand the topics they cover. And as their audience has grown, readers have continued to invest in financially supporting the outlet. Luminaria has seen a 56% increase in end-of-year fundraising from individual donors from 2022 to 2023.

Acknowledgements

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Chicago

Chicago, IL

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Chicago news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Chicago is home to a diverse, innovative, and influential local news ecosystem with particular strength in collaborative accountability journalism, especially around elections and local policy, as well as a large contingent of community and hyperlocal media. While there is a great deal of philanthropic investment in Chicago, sustainability remains a challenge, especially for small media organizations. And while there is some disagreement about whether Chicagoans are civically disengaged, as evidenced by low voter turnout, or highly engaged, as evidenced by social mobilization, the Gallup/Knight American views survey suggests Chicagoans have a high level of trust and confidence in the media compared to the U.S. as a whole.¹ Research suggests that this high level of trust is a direct result of the strong information ecosystem that directly serves local residents' information needs.

Chicago is the third largest city in the U.S. and is racially and ethnically diverse. While the white population is the largest of all racial and ethnic groups residing in Chicago, comprising about one-third of the population, the Black or African American population is about 15 percentage points higher than the U.S. as a whole, and the Hispanic or Latino population is about 10 percentage points higher.² However, Chicago's Black population is highly concentrated in a small number of areas, making Chicago one of the most segregated cities in the U.S.³ The city's poverty rate, 16.5%, is about five percentage points higher than that of the U.S., despite the fact that the median household income is only

1 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

2 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Chicago city, Illinois," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/chicagocityillinois,US/PST045223>.

3 Alden Loury. "While Things Have Improved, Chicago Remains the Most Segregated City in America." WBEZ, June 19, 2023. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicago-remains-the-most-segregated-big-city-in-america/2ec026b3-b11b-4c68-872b-3a1011b6f457>.

slightly below the national average.⁴

Local media in Chicago has received a great deal of philanthropic investment, as local news has received more than \$40 million in support since 2020, according to the Media Impact Funders' Candid database. Notably, investment has come from both local and national foundations. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Chicago Community Trust, the Field Foundation, and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation are among the largest local funders of local news. The Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation are national funders that have invested at least \$1 million since 2020.⁵ The widespread and substantial support speaks to the innovation of many local news organizations in Chicago, as the support is meant to scale operations and serve as an example of what high impact and civically oriented local news looks like. Some examples include City Bureau, Block Club Chicago, The TRIIBE, the Invisible Institute, and the Chicago Reader.

Public media has also historically received a great deal of philanthropic investment in Chicago, and it currently plays a significant role. In 2022, Chicago Public Media acquired the Chicago Sun-Times, the second largest legacy daily newspaper in the city.⁶ As acquisitions and mergers become a more common way of maintaining high quality local news in an environment where sustainability is a constant challenge, this move is another example of how Chicago's local news ecosystem is innovating. Mergers, however, do not make news organizations invulnerable, as recent layoffs at Chicago Public Media attest.⁷

Voter turnout in Chicago is lower than the national average, which could partially be a product of a political environment dominated by one party.⁸ Non-voting civic engagement indicators used elsewhere in this report aren't available at the city level. Using the indicators for Illinois as a proxy, engagement metrics are all lower than the national average, with four- to five-percentage-point differences in those who donated to a political campaign and those who have contacted public officials.⁹

Low voter turnout and low volunteerism was the basis of a 2010 study about civic health in Chicago that stated

4 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Chicago city, Illinois."

5 Foundation Maps, by Candid. Media Impact Funders. Accessed 2024.

6 The largest daily newspaper in Chicago is the Chicago Tribune, owned by hedge fund Alden Global Capital.

7 McKinney, Dave. "Chicago Public Media Announces 14 Layoffs, End of Vocalo Radio Broadcast." Chicago Sun-Times, April 3, 2024. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2024/04/03/wbez-cpm-chicago-public-media-vocalo-matt-moog-vocalo>.

8 "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

9 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

the city's civic health was "on life support."¹⁰ However, the stakeholders interviewed for this chapter had different perspectives, and more recent research that broadens the understanding of civic engagement beyond voting, especially among communities of color, challenges the notion of a disengaged population. Civic disengagement among communities of color in Chicago (which comprise two-thirds of the city), can be attributed to structural inequities in health care, education, employment, policing, and investment/disinvestment more than apathy.¹¹ Indeed, for the most part stakeholders view active and organized communities in Chicago. Moreover, the stakeholders we talked to are associated with local media, which likely plays a role in this perception.

Some of the most notable news organizations in Chicago are tailored toward increasing civic engagement, participation in government decision making, and government accountability. City Bureau's Documenters program, for example, trains and pays community members to attend and summarize open government meetings. Injustice Watch is a local nonprofit news organization that covers the courts in Cook County. And the Better Government Association is focused on government transparency. These examples demonstrate that civic participation isn't a residual outcome for many local news organizations in Chicago, but the entire purpose of their work. This alignment has also facilitated collaboration across newsrooms that, unsurprisingly, often focuses on elections and local government.

This chapter presents Chicago at a glance with topline information about the city's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

¹⁰ Chicago Civic Health Index, 2010. McCormick Foundation, 2010. <https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2010ChicagoCHI.pdf>.

¹¹ "Changing the Frame: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens." Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, July 2022. https://www.cct.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/IRRPP_300dpi_Civic-Engagement-Through-A-Racial-Equity-Lens.pdf.

Opportunities

Shared resources:

While Chicago is highly collaborative, there are still opportunities to share backend resources — such as accounting, fundraising capacity, and grant writing — that could also contribute to the overall health of the local news. The Chicago Independent Media Alliance (CIMA) has a history of providing non-editorial shared resources, and has already done work in the ecosystem offering collaborative fundraising for small independent outlets. City Bureau has also served as a fiscal sponsor for some local outlets. Both of these organizations could thus be well positioned to offer additional backend support.

Continued local support:

Chicago is home to journalism funders that fund nationally and local journalism organizations that receive philanthropic support from outside of Chicago. Local funding for more local news organizations, especially small community and hyperlocal media, would bring more news organizations into the philanthropic fold. Chicago's Press Forward local chapter is primed to take advantage of this opportunity. Press Forward Chicago's first round of funding gave \$1.6 million to 13 local news organizations.¹²

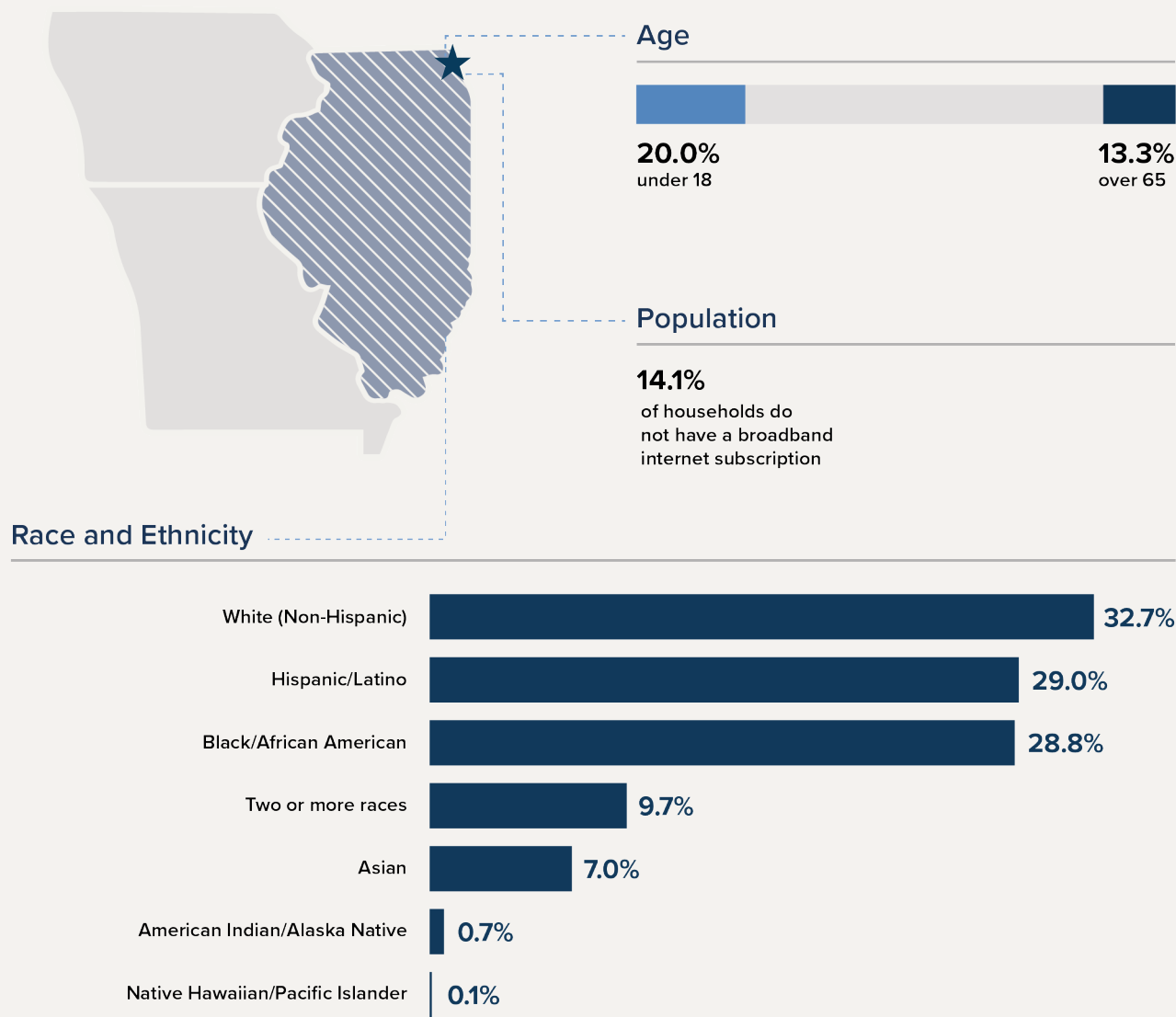
¹² "More than \$1.6 Million in Grants to 13 Local News Organizations." The Chicago Community Trust, May 23, 2024. <https://www.cct.org/press-releases/more-than-1-6-million-in-grants-to-13-local-news-organizations/>.

Chicago at a Glance

Topline indicators about Chicago’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

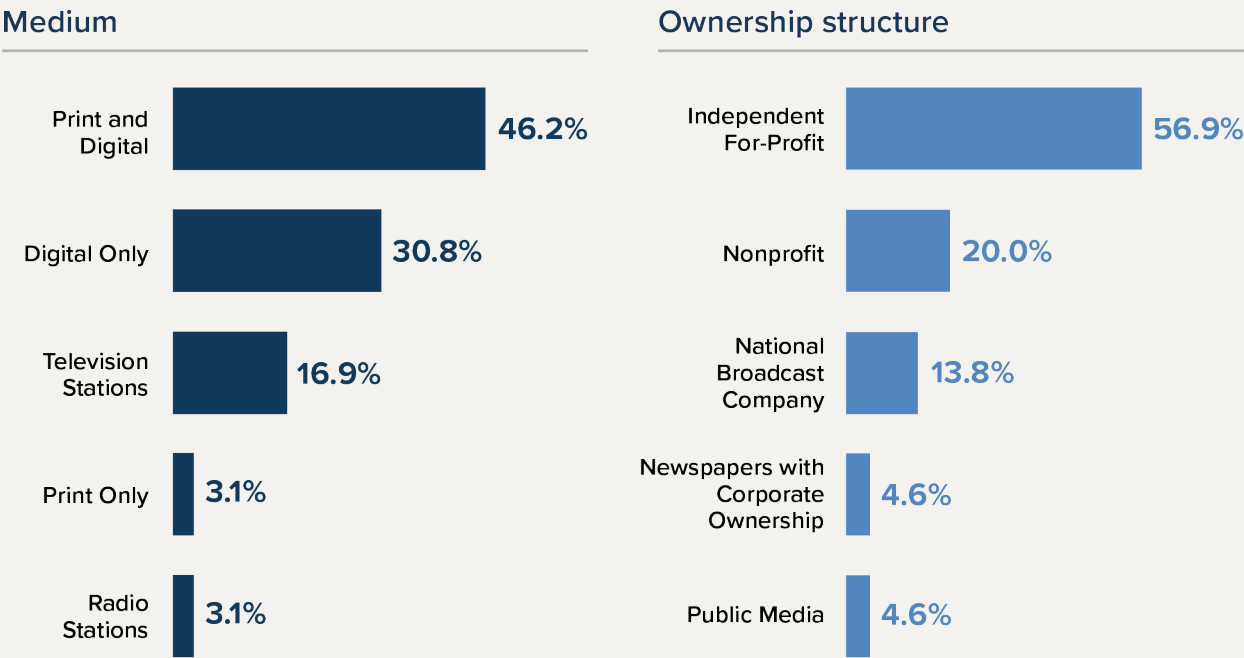
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



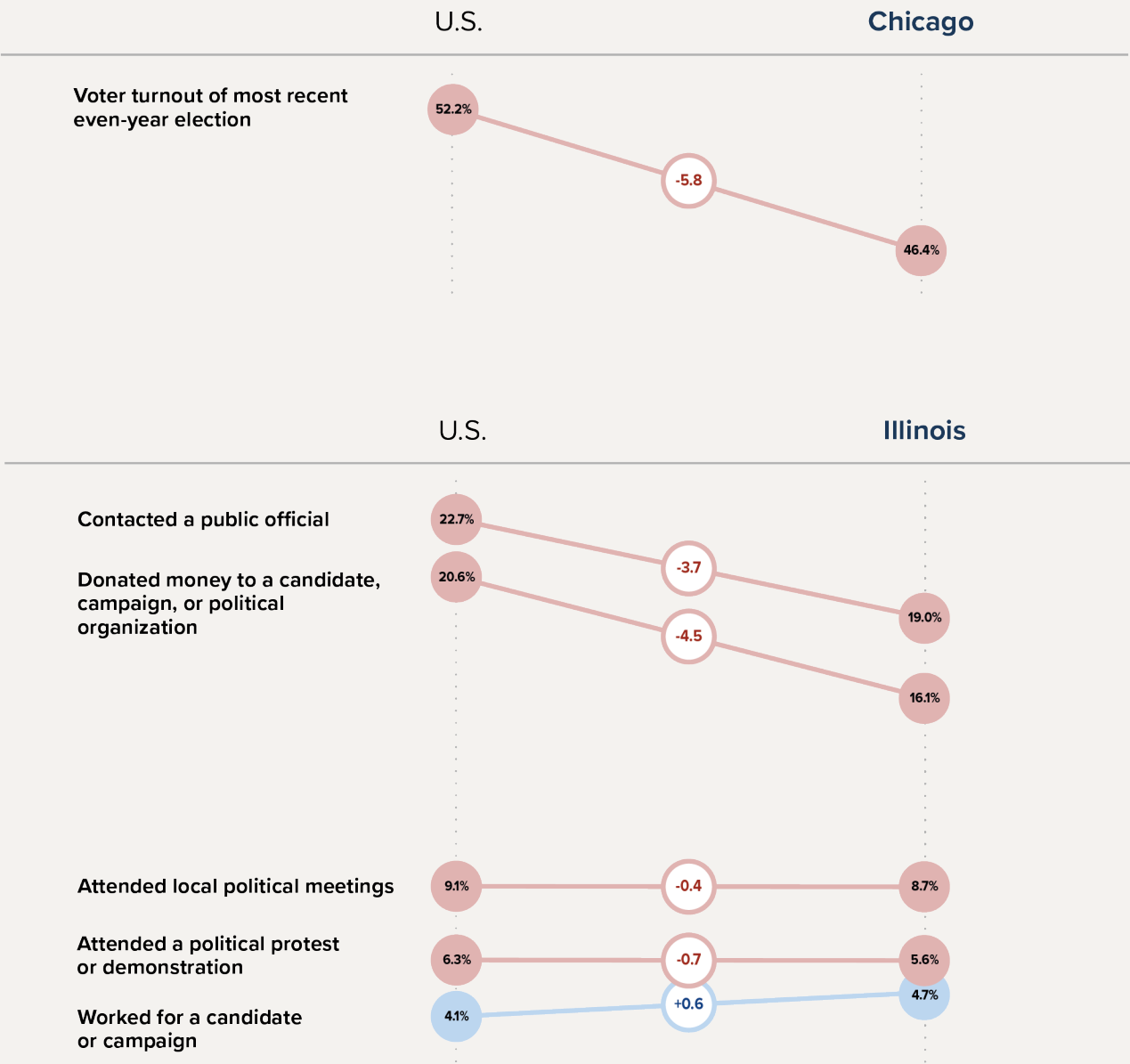
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders’ Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Chicago Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Chicago to dig deeper into the current state of Chicago's news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about The TRiIBE.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Chicago.

Based on voter turnout and indicators from the Harvard Cooperative Election Study (CES) used throughout this report, civic engagement is lower than average in Illinois.¹³ But additional contextual factors, alternative indicators, and the perspective of local stakeholders suggest much more active communities in Chicago.

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	Illinois	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	8.7%	-0.4 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	16.1%	-4.5 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	5.6%	-0.7 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	19.0%	-3.7 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	4.7%	0.6 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 2,231

It is generally easy to vote in Chicago or Illinois, as the state's Cost of Voting Index (COVI) score is -1.21, making it one of the states with the fewest voting barriers. Nevertheless, voter turnout has been low in Chicago.¹⁴ The 2022 midterm election

¹³ Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

¹⁴ Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

was almost six percentage points below the national average.¹⁵ More strikingly, the 46.4% turnout of registered voters in the city was about 14 percentage points lower than the 2018 midterm elections, when it was 60.7%.¹⁶ While the decline was substantial, most places saw decreased turnout from 2018 to 2022, as the turnout among eligible voters in 2018 was the highest since 1914.¹⁷ One stakeholder attributes low voter turnout for general elections to single party dominance, noting that “primaries are where the fights happen.” But even turnout for primary elections hasn’t been strong.¹⁸ Early reports of the March 2024 primary were described as “shockingly low,” ultimately ending at just over 20% of registered voters.¹⁹

Indeed, low voter turnout was a major basis of a 2010 study sponsored by the McCormick Foundation that decried the state of civic health in Chicago and its adjacent suburbs, noting that its major finding was “the failure of the region to prepare its youngest citizens for their adult civic responsibilities.”²⁰ In addition to voting, the report identified four additional measures of civic engagement, including volunteering, community problem solving, expression of political voice (such as contacting public officials or attending public meetings), and financial contributions to political candidates. These measures are similar to the ones used throughout this report, and while we don’t have figures for Chicago, the numbers for Illinois do in fact suggest that civic engagement is low.

The authors of the 2010 study point to factors such as unemployment, economic recession, and, especially, lack of civic education as reasons for the disengagement. The recommended remedies all include some form of educating and engaging Chicago youth.²¹

A 2022 report sponsored by The Chicago Community Trust and conducted by the University of Illinois Chicago’s Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP), attempts to add additional context to these figures, as well as broaden the scope of civic engagement activities to gain a more accurate understanding of civic health in Chicago. It views civic engagement simply “as the collective participation of individuals in society to promote

15 “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

16 “Proclamation of Final Results for the November 8, 2022 General Election in the City of Chicago.” Chicago Board of Election Commissioners, November 19, 2022. <https://chicagoelections.gov/news/proclamation-final-results-november-8-2022-general-election-city-chicago>.

17 Hannah Hartig, Andrew Daniller, Scott Keeter, and Ted Van Green. “Voter Turnout, 2018-2022.” Pew Research Center, July 12, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/07/12/voter-turnout-2018-2022/>.

18 Mike Miletich, “Illinois Saw Fourth Lowest Midterm Turnout in Past 40 Years.” WGEM, December 6, 2022. <https://www.wgem.com/2022/12/07/illinois-saw-fourth-lowest-midterm-turnout-past-40-years/>.

19 Mack Liederman, “Shockingly Low Voter Turnout So Far in Chicago, Officials Say.” Block Club Chicago, March 19, 2024. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2024/03/19/voter-turnout-sleepy-so-far-in-chicago-officials-say/>.

20 Chicago Civic Health Index, 2010.

21 From 2012–2013, the McCormick Foundation gave at least \$2.9 million for civic education and engagement programs, and they played a role in the 2015 passage of the civics education bill, which requires students pass a civics class in order to graduate high school. “McCormick Foundation Commits \$1.5 Million to Civic Education, Engagement Programs.” *Candid. Philanthropy News Digest*, March 17, 2012. <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/mccormick-foundation-commits-1.5-million-to-civic-education-engagement-programs>; Illinois Senate Passes Landmark Civics Legislation 46-7-2. Press Release, Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, May 30, 2015.

the public good.”²² Rather than educational failures, the report identifies narrow definitions of “volunteering” and structural inequities around race as primary causes of low civic engagement by traditional measures, and it considers other activities common in communities of color as strong indicators of civic engagement. Notably, these indicators are about collective action, rather than individual activities such as voting. These activities include social movement organizing (especially for immigrants’s rights, labor, and education justice), the growth of tax-exempt nonprofits, and block party density (drawn from the number of requested block party permits). By these measures, civic engagement appears to be growing stronger in Chicago, as each one has grown since around 2010.

The complicated and mixed view of civic engagement was reflected in our conversations with stakeholders. Jhmira Alexander — president and executive director of Public Narrative, a nonprofit focused on media literacy and amplifying community voices — said that civic duty isn’t prioritized as much as it once was, and that’s because the connection between civic responsibility and actionable change isn’t always clear, which disincentivizes participation. She gave voting as an example of a civic duty or action that communities of color don’t always feel provides a return.

Morgan Elise Johnson — publisher of The TRiBE, a digital media organization focused on Black Chicago — described Chicago as highly civically engaged, and she attributed it to “our city’s organizers and our media communities.” Reflecting the IRRPP research, Johnson cited organizations such as the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (CAARPR) and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition that have regular community meetings that not only represent civic engagement, but also teach residents how to get more involved. For instance, CAARPR holds conversations about resident court watching as a way to be engaged and hold local officials accountable.

Johnson also identified a feedback loop between these types of civic organizations and local media, which highlights organizing and action as a defining characteristic of Chicago’s local news ecosystem. News organizations like Injustice Watch, the Invisible Institute, and the Better Government Association focus on equity and institutional accountability. Their missions fit the “racial equity lens” of civic engagement proffered by the IRRPP research. City Bureau, a formative organization for Chicago’s news ecosystem with national influence, similarly embodies collective participation and power-building through its programming and journalism. This is particularly true with the Documenters Network, which currently has 18 programs nationwide that train and pay residents to attend and summarize public meetings, in addition to its Chicago program. Additionally, City Bureau and the Invisible Institute won a Pulitzer Prize for an investigation into Chicago police’s violations of state law and police procedure.²³ Chicago media itself complicates the narrative of disengagement while also providing pathways for civic participation and accountability work.

22 Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, “Changing the Frame: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens.”

23 “City Bureau and Invisible Institute Win 2024 Pulitzer Prize in Local Reporting for ‘Missing in Chicago.’” City Bureau, May 6, 2024. <https://www.citybureau.org/notebook/city-bureau-and-invisible-institute-win-2024-pulitzer-prize-in-local-reporting>.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in Chicago and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the city, which we define as the press’s ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Chicago is home to notorious political corruption.²⁴ It might be surprising, then, that Chicago has relatively few press restrictions, and stakeholders indicate that government records are relatively accessible, resulting in an environment with rich accountability reporting. However, there are exceptions. Tracy Baim — owner and cofounder of the Windy City Times, a longstanding LGBTQ newspaper, and former publisher of the Chicago Reader — notes that while local government is relatively transparent, local journalists have to struggle to access information related to the Chicago Police Department. Morgan Elise Johnson notes that while The TRiIBE does not typically submit FOIA requests, it has had success getting access to aldermen, the mayor’s office, and even the police department.

Chicago media is collaborative, especially regarding democracy issues such as elections and government accountability. During the 2019 mayoral election, 10 news organizations in Chicago joined together to centralize information about the election. The product was a website, Chi.vote, that amplified each organization’s election coverage, included voter guides for all municipal elections, and tracked results as they came in.²⁵ Lori Lightfoot won the mayoral election, and seven of the 10 participating news organizations turned their collective effort from providing election information into accountability and scrutiny of the new administration. The result was the Lens on Lightfoot project, facilitated by the Institute for Nonprofit News.²⁶ The yearlong collaborative captured how the collaborative nature of Chicago media works to maintain democratic principles of engagement and holding government accountable.

While the formal collaboration didn’t continue, it contributed to the growth of Chicago media and its importance to the city. Johnson attributed a part of The TRiIBE’s growth as a media organization to its participation in the Chi.vote and Lens on Lightfoot collaboratives, and she notes that Injustice Watch’s guide to judicial elections is shared widely among Chicago media.

24 Mack Liederman, “Chicago Is Most Corrupt City 4 Years Straight as Trial of Powerful Alderman Begins.” Block Club Chicago, November 7, 2023. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2023/11/07/chicago-is-most-corrupt-city-four-times-straight-as-trial-of-powerful-alderman-begins/>.

25 “These Chicago News Orgs Worked Together to Create a Voter Guide.” Lenfest Institute, n.d. <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/solutions-resources/these-chicago-news-orgs-worked-together-to-create-a-collaborative-voting-guide/>.

26 “Lens on Lightfoot: Accomplishments, Impact and Areas of Improvement. The Institute for Nonprofit News. <https://inn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Lens-on-Lightfoot-reach-report.pdf>.

Alexander from Public Narrative stated that the “short, quick, and intentional” coordinated efforts surrounding elections are precisely the types of activities that can have immediate impact. A March 2024 reflection by City Bureau’s editorial director, Ariel Cheung, summed up the value of collaboration in Chicago’s local news ecosystem: “The Chicago journalism community is collaborative and close-knit in ways that benefit not just us, but the city we cover at large.”²⁷

“The Chicago journalism community is collaborative and close-knit in ways that benefit not just us, but the city we cover at large.”

Ariel Cheung,
City Bureau’s editorial director

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Chicagoans’ perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey “Trust, Media and Democracy” asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

The Gallup/Knight American views survey suggests Chicagoans have a high level of trust and confidence in the media compared to the U.S. overall. Most notably, about 60% agree that “local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly,” the second highest level of agreement among all questions and the highest among those that pertain to the trustworthiness of local

Information Providers and Community	U.S	Chicago	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	66.2%	1.2 ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	56.8%	4.8 ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	60.8%	7.8 ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	56.8%	9.8 ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	54.1%	10.1 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 74

27 Ariel Cheung, “A Crash Course in Collaboration.” City Bureau, March 1, 2024. <https://www.citybureau.org/note-book/a-crash-course-in-collaboration>.

media.²⁸ Additionally, 54.1% agree that “local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public,” which is about 10 percentage points higher than that for all survey respondents.²⁹ By every measure, Chicagoans have a more positive feeling toward local news than respondents from the U.S. as a whole.

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	31.1%	27.0%	10.8%	6.8%	24.3%
A website or app	31.1%	16.2%	13.5%	17.6%	21.6%
A radio station	25.7%	21.6%	9.5%	27.0%	16.2%
A TV station	48.6%	12.2%	9.5%	17.6%	12.2%
Direct communication with people in your area	31.1%	32.4%	8.1%	14.9%	13.5%
A magazine	9.5%	17.6%	16.2%	21.6%	35.1%
A social media platform	43.2%	10.8%	2.7%	21.6%	21.6%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 74

When asked about perceptions of trust in local news, stakeholders generally stated that trust is high, with caveats. Baim said that the level of trust depends on “who’s talking.” While it might be low for the city’s largest legacy paper, the Chicago Tribune, it is high for other large entities such as WBEZ and the Chicago Sun-Times (which was acquired by WBEZ in 2023). Baim also singled out several community and hyperlocal outlets as having earned trust. She attributed the trust to strong relationship-building. “Nobody would recognize the publisher of the Tribune,” she stated, but they would recognize publishers embedded in the communities they serve. Alexander echoed this sentiment, saying that she does not believe there’s “trust in media as a whole,” but that it’s strong for certain newsrooms.

Chicagoans rely heavily on television to get news on a daily basis, and high percentages also get daily or weekly news from newspapers, radio, and websites. However, a large percentage of Chicagoans also use alternative means. The second most common form of daily news

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S.	Chicago	Difference from U.S.
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	2.8%	-0.2 ▼
From TV	31%	36.1%	5.1 ▲
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	54.2%	-3.8 ▼
From a radio	7%	6.9%	-0.1 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 74

28 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

29 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

consumption is social media, at 43%, and 63% of Chicagoans get news from “direct communication with people” either daily or weekly.³⁰ A 2024 study by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University found that two-thirds of Chicagoans use a smartphone to get local news compared to 52% who watch television for news.³¹ This shift reiterates the necessity of strong hyperlocal news organizations, and it also suggests that Chicago’s practices of community organizing might also be a means for disseminating information.

The frequent reliance on social media for getting news is not lost on Chicago’s news providers. Johnson from The TRIIBE states that, in efforts to expand their audience, “they’ve kind of accepted that not everyone will read our website.” Rather than using social media as a way to promote stories from the website, they use it to reach people — typically young — who get their news from social media. It’s worth noting that The TRIIBE also has an annual print product, and that’s meant to reach older audiences, a cohort also outside of the organization’s current audience.

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members’ information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Chicago, including gaps and opportunities identified in recent assessments.

Chicago’s local news ecosystem has been the subject of several studies that address community information needs since 2018. A common theme among them is segregation in the city and related misrepresentation of communities in the media, particularly of the South and West Side and the Black communities that reside there.

The McCormick Foundation funded two studies analyzing the local news ecosystem and information needs, which were led by the Center for Media Engagement (CME) at the University of Texas at Austin. In the first, conducted in 2017 and published in 2018, CME partnered with City Bureau and found that people on the South

30 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

31 “Shift to Smartphones from TV and Print in Full Swing.” Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern, 2024. <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2024/shift-to-smartphones-from-tv-and-print-in-full-swing.html>.

and West Side “felt underrepresented or poorly represented in Chicago media.”³² CME and City Bureau also found that residents of those regions were “most interested in getting involved with Chicago news organizations.”³³

A follow up study in 2020 analyzed news content to determine whether or not this sense of underrepresentation was reflected in coverage. CME scraped text from over 5,000 articles from 21 different news outlets over the course of two weeks in 2019 and analyzed the text to correlate topic and region. The study found that the North/Downtown region was mentioned more frequently than the South and West Side (the study separated Chicago into three regions: North/Downtown, South Side, and West Side), indicating that the feeling of underrepresentation was valid. They also found that crime was mentioned more frequently in coverage of the West Side than in articles that mentioned the other two regions.³⁴ Notably, crime was the most common theme across all news outlets and regions analyzed, and the first study showed that residents in all regions said “crime and law enforcement” was the most important issue facing their neighborhood, suggesting a possible feedback loop.³⁵

Segregation in Chicago was also a theme in Democracy Fund’s 2018 assessment, “The Shape of Chicago’s Media Ecosystem and Possible Path’s Forward,”³⁶ as well as in an analysis of the digital media landscape conducted in 2019.³⁷ In DF’s ecosystem assessment, the authors wrote that “The reality of segregation must inform every conversation we have about how to reevaluate the process of media making, sharing and funding across Chicago’s journalism landscape.”³⁸ While that continues to be true, the intervening years suggest that Chicago has made progress in this area, as the number of media rooted in and meant to serve communities in the South and West Side has grown. The combination of need and energy identified in CME’s 2018 study might have contributed to the development of organizations like City Bureau and Block Club Chicago, as well as to their funding. Ensuring that this media is sustainable remains a crucial consideration for the future, and it’s a driver for initiatives such as Press Forward Chicago’s initial commitment of \$10 million for local news in Chicago.³⁹

32 “Chicago News Landscape.” The Center for Media Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, January 10, 2018. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/chicago-news-landscape/>.

33 “Chicago News Landscape.” The Center for Media Engagement.

34 “Chicago Media Mapping.” The Center for Media Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, August 20, 2020. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/chicago-media-mapping/>.

35 “Chicago Media Mapping.” The Center for Media Engagement.

36 Sheila Solomon and Andrea Hart. “The Shape of Chicago’s Media Ecosystem and Possible Paths Forward.” Democracy Fund, Revised June 2018. https://localnewslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Democracy-Fund_Chicago-Media-Ecosystem_final.pdf.

37 “Chicago Local Digital News Landscape Analysis.” McCormick Foundation, 2019. <http://documents.mccormickfoundation.org/pdf/Chicago-Digital-News-Landscape-Analysis.pdf>.

38 Solomon and Hart. “The Shape of Chicago’s Media Ecosystem and Possible Paths Forward.”

39 “Press Forward Chicago Launches with \$10 Million in Commitments to Revitalize Local News. MacArthur Foundation,” Press Release, November 3, 2023. [https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-chicago-launches-with-\\$10-million-](https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-chicago-launches-with-$10-million-)

Changing contexts has also contributed to shifting information needs. In April 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic dominated just about every aspect of life, City Bureau interviewed 18 Chicagoans to understand

Information needs change as everyday needs change.

their information needs. Their interviewees said they “wanted resources that could meet their basic needs, including food access, housing, financial stability, wellness and/or health care, and education and/or childcare.”⁴⁰ While the sample was much smaller than the previous study that identified crime and law enforcement as the major information need, this analysis might reflect a turning point with how Chicagoans perceive local media and its purpose. Similarly, Maudlyne Ihejirika, journalism and storytelling program officer at the Field Foundation, noted that grant requests for initiatives about migrant populations in Chicago have “exploded” in recent years. Thus, information needs change as everyday needs change.

Ihejirika identified a potential gap in Spanish-language media, noting the struggles outlets in Spanish have faced in attaining sustainability, though there appears to be resilience here as well. In 2019, the Chicago Tribune shut down its Spanish language newspaper;⁴¹ but in 2020, the Chicago Sun-Times launched a bilingual vertical, *La Voz*. Additionally, longstanding outlets like *La Raza* continue to provide Spanish language news to the substantial Hispanic and Latino populations of Chicago, and new digital outlets like *Cicero Independiente* reflect Chicago’s strength in hyperlocal media. These complement broadcast media like *Telemundo* and *Univision*.

Chicago’s local news ecosystem is set to overcome historical and structural barriers and meet the information needs of all communities. There’s a reason why it’s a bellwether for local media innovation.⁴² Still, an updated analysis of the information needs of Chicago residents based on community listening would provide an even greater understanding of the ecosystem’s successes and challenges that would be instructive in Chicago and beyond.

in-commitments-to-revitalize-local-news.

40 Ellie Mejía. “Understanding Grassroots Information Systems and Needs in Chicago.” City Bureau, June 17, 2020. <https://www.citybureau.org/notebook/2020/6/17/understanding-grassroots-information-systems-and-needs-in-chicago>.

41 Dan Tucker. “Chicago Spanish-Language Newspaper Hoy to Shut Down.” WBEZ, November 14, 2019. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicago-spanish-language-newspaper-hoy-to-shut-down/0475ea99-824b-4236-bb87-f4a913b3ba45>.

42 Deborah Douglas. “How Chicago Is Reimagining the Future of Local News as Papers Decline.” *The Guardian*, June 23, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jun/23/chicago-reimagines-future-of-local-journalism-as-papers-decline>.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Chicago. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

Our research identified 65 news outlets in Chicago representing all forms of media and organization types. Print is well represented in the ecosystem, as 46.2% of all news organizations have a print and digital product, while 30.8% of organizations are digital only. While over half of news organizations are independent, for-profit entities, Chicago is rich in nonprofit media, which make up 20% of the news organizations we identified. Public media has a strong presence as well, and has taken on even more importance in the ecosystem since Chicago Public Media's acquisition of the Chicago Sun-Times. Another legacy newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, owned by Alden Global Capital, continues to be a major source of news for Chicagoans, although the stakeholders we spoke with often identified it as the source with the lowest level of trust.

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	65	
Population per organization	42,252	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	20	30.8%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	30	46.2%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	2	3.1%
Radio stations	2	3.1%
Television stations	11	16.9%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	37	56.9%
National broadcast chain	9	13.8%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	3	4.6%
Nonprofit	13	20%
Public media	3	4.6%
Community Media		
African American/Black	10	
Hispanic/Latino	7	
Asian/Asian American	8	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Stakeholders identified financial sustainability as a major issue among Chicago's independent and nonprofit media. Ihejirika said that, while the news ecosystem in Chicago is thriving and information needs are mostly being met, many outlets “are struggling to reach sustainability and are often one grant away from closure.” Stakeholders uniformly suggested that Chicago media, especially the independent and nonprofit organizations that dominate the landscape, are well positioned to meet information needs and, importantly, know how to do it in terms of community engagement and editorial practices. However, they need support in other areas. Baim identified shared resources for backend support — such as technical support, grant writing and other fundraising activities — that would help support information providers on their path to financial sustainability. Small startup organizations have neither the need nor the means to employ backend support full time, but shared support could have an impact for many.

Large organizations face different pressures, but they similarly face financial challenges. Chicago Public Media laid off 14 staffers in April 2024, and as part of the layoffs, it discontinued its radio broadcast of Vocalo, a 24-hour R&B, jazz, and hip hop radio station geared toward young communities of color. Also in April 2024, the Chicago Tribune announced layoffs of 200 employees at its Chicago-based printing plant as it moved its printing operations to a Chicago suburb.⁴³

Chicago has local support in the form of collaboratives and influential organizations designed to support local news sustainability. Baim, along with numerous outlets, organized the launch of the Chicago Independent Media Alliance (CIMA) in 2019. The alliance includes over 60 organizations in the city, and one of its primary services is a collaborative fundraising program. Since launch, it has raised over \$700,000 for community-centered news organizations in Chicago.⁴⁴ In 2024, Public Narrative, another backbone organization dedicated to providing training and resources to journalists and community members, assumed stewardship of CIMA. One of Public Narrative and CIMA's hallmark projects is the Chicago Media Guide, a thorough database of Chicago media and professionals.⁴⁵

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	12.3%			18.5%	
Print and digital	40%		4.6%	1.5%	
Print only	3.1%				
Radio					3.1%
Television	1.5	13.8%			1.5%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

43 Sun Times Wire, “Tribune Publishing to Lay Off Nearly 200 Workers as Printing Operations Prepare for Move to Schaumburg.” Chicago Sun-Times. February 21, 2024. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/business/2024/02/21/tribune-publishing-lay-offs-printing-operations-move-schaumburg>.

44 “Public Narrative to Assume Stewardship of Chicago Independent Media Alliance from RICJ.” Chicago Reader, February 16, 2024. <https://chicagoreader.com/reader/press-releases/public-narrative-assume-stewardship-of-cima/>.

45 Chicago Media Guide. Public Narrative. <https://www.chicagomediaguide.org/>.

City Bureau is another organization that has not only been influential in shaping the Chicago local news ecosystem, but has also had an impact on the idea and practice of local journalism nationally. City Bureau's premise is that information equity can be reached by providing people with the tools necessary to engage with and influence issues important to their community. City Bureau co-founder Darryl Holliday captured this sentiment in a 2021 article for the Columbia Journalism Review, titled "Journalism is a public good. Let the public make it."⁴⁶ In Chicago, City Bureau advances its mission through their public newsroom, Documenters program, and civic reporting fellowships, each of which is dedicated to participating in community-centered information systems, though they provide different degrees of training and knowledge. Nationally, the growth of the Documenters Network is evidence of City Bureau's approach finding purchase outside of Chicago. The Documenters Network won a \$10 million Stronger Democracy award in 2022, which is supporting the program's national growth.⁴⁷

The Chicago local news ecosystem also benefits from the presence of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Medill's Local News Initiative is specifically meant to provide information, resources, and research to the field at large about challenges and solutions for local news. The initiative's research included the survey that found a shift toward smartphones in how Chicagoans get local news.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Chicago ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

There are no ecosystem-wide assessments of organizational diversity in Chicago. However, equity efforts and diversity tracking are evident in a few instances, especially among legacy media.

In 2022, the Chicago Sun-Times published the breakdown of gender and race/ethnicity among staff, broken down by department and seniority.⁴⁸ The report stated that the Sun-Times is "committed to transparency and diversity,"

46 Darryl Holliday. "Journalism Is a Public Good. Let the Public Make It." Columbia Journalism Review, December 15, 2021. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/journalism-power-public-good-community-infrastructure.php.

47 "City Bureau Receives \$10 Million Award to Strengthen Democracy by Expanding Documenters Project." City Bureau, July 7, 2022. <https://www.citybureau.org/notebook/2022/7/7/city-bureau-receives-10-million-award-to-strengthen-democracy>.

48 "2022 Sun-Times Newsroom Diversity Report." Chicago Sun-Times, April 22, 2021; updated February 28, 2022. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/pages/newsroom-diversity>.

although the report did not include any analysis of the figures. The data shows that nearly all departments are predominantly male, white, and generally not reflective of the diversity of Chicago. The report was last updated one month after Chicago Public Media acquired the Sun-Times, in February 2022. Other efforts among legacy media include content audits at the Sun-Times and WGN-TV, integrating inclusivity into editorial decision-making at the AP, and mapping subscribers by zip code by the Chicago Tribune.⁴⁹ These initiatives date back to at least 2021, and the impact of the work is not public, nor is it known if the efforts are still underway.

It is important to note that places like the Sun-Times, the Tribune, and WGN-TV require accountability initiatives to have diverse workplaces and equitable editorial practices because of how they developed — they are trying to undo or modify institutionalized practices, from hiring to content production. That’s not the case among much of Chicago’s community-centered media, many of which originated with equity as a core principle.

49 Kathy Lu. “What Inclusion Looks Like in 4 Chicago Newsrooms.” Poynter. December 7, 2021. <https://www.poynter.org/from-the-institute/2021/what-inclusion-work-looks-like-in-4-chicago-newsrooms/>.

Case Study - The TRiIBE

A community-focused news organization grows in the collaborative environment that supported its development.

The TRiIBE is a for-profit digital media organization that launched in 2017. With a full time staff of eight and a cadre of contributing writers, photographers, and illustrators, its primary audience is Black Chicagoans. As a community media organization, The TRiIBE is the type of organization that can, and does, exist in many other news and information ecosystems. However, it has been indelibly shaped by the city and news and information environment of Chicago.



Keeley Parenteau / Columbia Journalism Review
Morgan Elise Johnson (left) and Tiffany Walden, co-founders of The TRiIBE.

The TRiIBE's mission is to “reshape the narrative of Black Chicago.” Publisher and co-founder Morgan Elise Johnson said that this means creating digital media that works against the notion that Chicago is defined by violence — “violence” being a dog whistle for Black Chicago. These narratives came from both national and local media, and she and her co-founder, Editor-in-Chief Tiffany Walden, sought to challenge local media to think differently about, for example, crime reporting in Chicago. Johnson said that she feels The TRiIBE has had an impact in this regard. In terms of its content production, The TRiIBE produces and publishes original journalism, video documentaries, and creative writing, often, but not exclusively, about culture and Chicago residents. The outlet highlights how information providers can identify the need for local narrative change, leverage their expertise (Johnson's background is in documentary film), and find an audience.

Johnson's background in documentary film has also influenced The TRiIBE's decision to operate as a for-profit organization. She said that she's seen philanthropic priorities pivot away from funding documentary companies, while at the same time has seen media companies shift their priorities, even if subtly, to fit the current philanthropic objectives. For her and Walden, operating as a for-profit organization is about autonomy: “It's our dream, and we want the freedom of making it into whatever we want it to be,” she said. In an environment where nonprofit status is seen as the “future” of news, it is crucial to acknowledge viable

alternate pathways.⁵⁰ “I am interested in building products that our audience believes in,” Johnson said. “I think it will keep us accountable.”

The TRiBE’s origin is also a direct product of the supportive and collaborative nature of Chicago’s news and information ecosystem. Co-founders Johnson and Walden were working as freelancers at the Chicago Reader when they conceptualized The TRiBE. They pitched and launched a series for the Reader called The Block Beat, which would cover Chicago art and artists. The Reader published the articles under The TRiBE banner, which Johnson says was a way for them to market themselves and also receive income important for launching the company. Baim inherited the relationship when she became publisher of the Reader in 2018 and said that she “loved the relationship.” “It made total sense and really helped both media companies,” Baim said. The Reader could have viewed the publication of a vertical under the name of a different organization as providing undue support to a potential competitor, but it instead saw it as a way to support a young organization filling a gap in the information ecosystem. “If not for this collaborative spirit,” Johnson said, “I don’t know if we’d be here.”

50 Brian Eule. “Why All of Us Need to Give to Nonprofit News Outlets.” The Chronicle of Philanthropy, August 30, 2023. <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/why-all-of-us-need-to-give-to-nonprofit-news-outlets>.

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We relied on the insight, expertise, and feedback of local stakeholders in order to write this chapter. Thank you to Jhmira Alexander, Tracy Baim, Maudlyne Ihejirika, and Morgan Elise Johnson.

Colorado

Colorado

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Colorado news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Colorado's local news ecosystem is characterized by statewide connection across a variety of organization types and strong support networks. It is home to nonprofit and public media organizations that aim to serve the entire state, and news organizations themselves share resources and services, indicating a high level of collaboration among Colorado media. Despite this strong support, newsrooms face capacity and staffing challenges that put the information needs of communities, especially those outside of the Denver metro area, at risk. In particular, the relatively sparsely populated areas in the Rocky Mountain region and the Eastern Plains would benefit from greater connection and mutual support. Civic participation in Colorado is relatively strong, although there are clear opportunities for improvement. Voter turnout in Colorado is regularly higher than the national average, and turnout in the 2022 midterm election was nine percentage points higher.¹ However, other forms of civic participation, such as attending public meetings and contacting public officials, were about even with the U.S.²

Colorado is not as racially or ethnically diverse as the U.S. as a whole. Colorado's white population is 66.5%, about eight percentage points higher than that of the nation.³ The second largest group is the Hispanic or Latino population, which comprise 22.5% of Colorado's overall population, which is three percentage points higher than the U.S.⁴ The

1 "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

2 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

3 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Colorado," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CO/PST045223>.

4 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Colorado."

American Indian population is also slightly larger than national averages, 1.7% compared to 1.3%.⁵ We identified 10 organizations whose target audience are Hispanic and Latino Coloradans. While this means the large population is being served, the number of organizations is equal to or smaller than other ecosystems in this study that have a smaller Hispanic and Latino population.

The median household income in Colorado is 16.6% higher than the national average; however, there are geographic and population disparities.⁶ Wealth is concentrated in the foothills along the I-25 corridor — which includes the Denver and Colorado Springs metro areas, which hold about two-thirds of Colorado’s population — as well as in the smaller mountain towns in western Colorado.⁷ The median household income is much lower in the less populated rural regions in the southwestern plains. Moreover, median household income for the Hispanic and Latino communities, the state’s largest non-white population, is about 33% lower than the white population.⁸ Overall, there is less income inequality in Colorado than the U.S. The state’s Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality drawn from census data, is lower than the U.S. as a whole. Colorado is also one of two states, Delaware being the other, in which income inequality has decreased from 2008 to 2022.⁹

Colorado’s news ecosystem has undergone dramatic change since the state’s largest paper, The Denver Post, laid off 30 newsroom staffers in early 2018, leading the newspaper’s editorial board to decry the paper’s hedge fund owners, Alden Global Capital, and make a plea to save The Denver Post.¹⁰ While it wasn’t the first round of layoffs at the paper, it was the largest staff reduction. The editorial board’s renouncement garnered national attention, elevating the existential threat hedge fund ownership poses to local news. Several months after the layoffs, former Denver Post staffers formed a new digital news outlet, The Colorado Sun, funded by a blockchain-backed startup. The next year, the Colorado Media Project (CMP) formed as a backbone organization and grantmaker to support the health of the local news ecosystem, with support from the Colorado-based Gates Family Foundation and Democracy Fund, among others. CMP soon catalyzed the creation of the Colorado News Collaborative (COLab), a nonprofit organization that serves as a resource hub for Colorado newsrooms. It also developed a close working relationship between itself, COLab, and the Colorado Press Association (CPA). These three entities have functioned as the core backbone organizations in the state since 2019. The innovative and collaborative spirit evident in the emergence of each of them captures the strength of the local news ecosystem. Philanthropic investment in local news in Colorado is quite high, with the per capita investment from 2020 through 2022 being

5 United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Colorado.”

6 United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Colorado.”

7 United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Colorado.”

8 HDPulse: An Ecosystem of Minority Health and Health Disparities Resources. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Created July 10, 2024. <https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov>.

9 Conor Gowder, “Useful Stats: Income Inequality Across the States.” The State Science and Technological Institute, January 24, 2024. <https://ssti.org/blog/useful-stats-income-inequality-across-states>.

10 The Denver Post Editorial Board. “As vulture capitalists circle, the Denver Post must be saved.” The Denver Post, April 15, 2019. <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/04/06/as-vultures-circle-the-denver-post-must-be-saved/>.

\$3.05, the highest among the ecosystems analyzed in this study.¹¹ While much of that investment has come from out of state, CMP's current support and relationships with important local foundations — most notably the Colorado Health Foundation, the Colorado Trust, Gates Family Foundation, and the Rose Community Foundation — have localized the support of journalism in Colorado. The National Trust for Local News also has a presence in Colorado. In 2021, it acquired Colorado Community Media, keeping local ownership of 24 newspapers that serve large regions surrounding the Denver metro area.¹²

Colorado is also notable for its strong public media organizations that seek to provide news to the entire state. Colorado Public Radio and Rocky Mountain PBS carry signals that reach every part of Colorado, although they don't necessarily have a permanent presence in regions other than southern Colorado and the western slope. Both organizations also have working relationships with news outlets throughout Colorado, some of which are facilitated by the state's backbone organizations, while others are independent relationships. Another organization, Rocky Mountain Community Radio (which also operates in New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming), shares a reporter for rural climate issues, a managing editor, and a digital editor among its 21 participating stations.

Colorado is home to a handful of left and right leaning partisan outlets, although it does not appear to be a defining characteristic of the ecosystem. Partisan journalism has commingled with key elements of journalism in the state. In early 2024, the board president of the Colorado Press Association resigned his post as a result of his role as editor of the conservative Rocky Mountain Voice. This connection came to light from a story by a progressive news outlet, the Colorado Times Recorder, which does not disclose its donors.¹³ The Rocky Mountain Voice was founded by a former Republican candidate for governor with the explicit intent to elect Republicans in Colorado.¹⁴

Voter turnout and registration is higher in Colorado than the national average, and Colorado's Cost of Voting Index (COVI) score of -2.15 is one of the lowest among U.S. states, indicating fewer barriers to voting relative to many other states, according to an analysis of state election laws and policies.¹⁵ The gap between turnout among white voters and the rest of the population, however, is larger than the national average.¹⁶ Colorado was also one of 17 states to see midterm

11 Foundation Maps, by Candid. Media Impact Funders. Accessed 2024.

12 James Anderson, "New Deal: Colorado-national Consortium Buys Community Papers." Associated Press, May 3, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/colorado-business-79cab45456d50238d192240c1a1047f>.

13 Corey Hutchins, "Colorado Press Group's Leader Resigns Following 'Recent Stories.'" Inside the News in Colorado (Substack), March 29, 2024. <https://coloradomedia.substack.com/p/colorado-press-groups-board-leader>.

14 Corey Hutchins, "The Liberal Media in Colorado." Inside the News in Colorado (Substack), March 22, 2024. <https://coloradomedia.substack.com/p/the-liberal-media-in-colorado>.

15 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

16 Chase Woodruff, "Colorado's Racial Voter-turnout Gap Persists, Census Data Shows." Colorado Newslines, September 15, 2022. <https://coloradonewslines.com/2022/09/15/colorado-racial-voter-turnout-gap/>.

turnout among non-white voters decrease from 2018 to 2022.¹⁷ And based on the other civic participation measures used throughout this report, such as attending public meetings and contacting public officials, civic participation in Colorado is only on par with the rest of the nation. High turnout overall, along with the reported high interest in governance, local stakeholders identified, could be an opportunity to engage residents in other forms of civic participation. A local community journalism

program similar to City Bureau's Documenters Network, which trains and pays residents to attend and write about public meetings, operated for about a year but appears to have flagged. Still, the project, the Citizens Observers Project from the League of Women Voters of Larimer County, was a result of coordinated effort from backbone organizations focused on local media, chiefly CMP. CMP also provided a grant to the Colorado League of Women Voters to iterate on the previous model with other local chapters.

Stakeholders indicate that press freedom is relatively strong in Colorado. The state has a local attorney from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press local initiative (half of the position is underwritten by CMP and Gates Family Foundation, while the other half is supported by national sources), and Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition is a local resource committed to government transparency and information access. As in other places, however, there have been challenges to the state's open records law. A bill written to curb "abuse" of the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) passed the statehouse but didn't make it past the senate. The bill would have delayed required response times and potentially added costs to the requests.¹⁸

This chapter presents Colorado at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

The gap between turnout among white voters and the rest of the population however, is larger than the national average. Colorado was also one of 17 states to see midterm turnout among non-white voters decrease from 2018 to 2022.

17 William H. Frey, "Commentary: New Voter Turnout Data from 2022 Shows Some Surprises, Including Lower Turnout for Youth, Women, and Black Americans in Some States." Brookings Institution, May 18, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-voter-turnout-data-from-2022-shows-some-surprises-including-lower-turnout-for-youth-women-and-black-americans-in-some-states/>.

18 Jeffrey A. Roberts, "Colorado Lawmakers Remove 'Vexatious' Requester Provision from Bill That Lengthens CORA Deadlines." Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition, April 20, 2024. <https://coloradofoic.org/colorado-lawmakers-remove-vexatious-requester-provision-from-open-records-bill/>.

Opportunities

Bolstering connection:

The major opportunity is in maximizing the infrastructure and connection that already exists, as Colorado has strong support networks and established institutions that are positioned to take even more advantage of a highly collaborative environment. CMP is currently considering how its support of public media and other organizations, such as Rocky Mountain Community Radio, can be used to strengthen the ecosystem as a whole through shared services and capacity building. This would be particularly needed for getting resources to places outside of Denver, particularly small towns in the Rockies and the less wealthy counties in the Eastern Plains and southern Colorado.

Civic engagement:

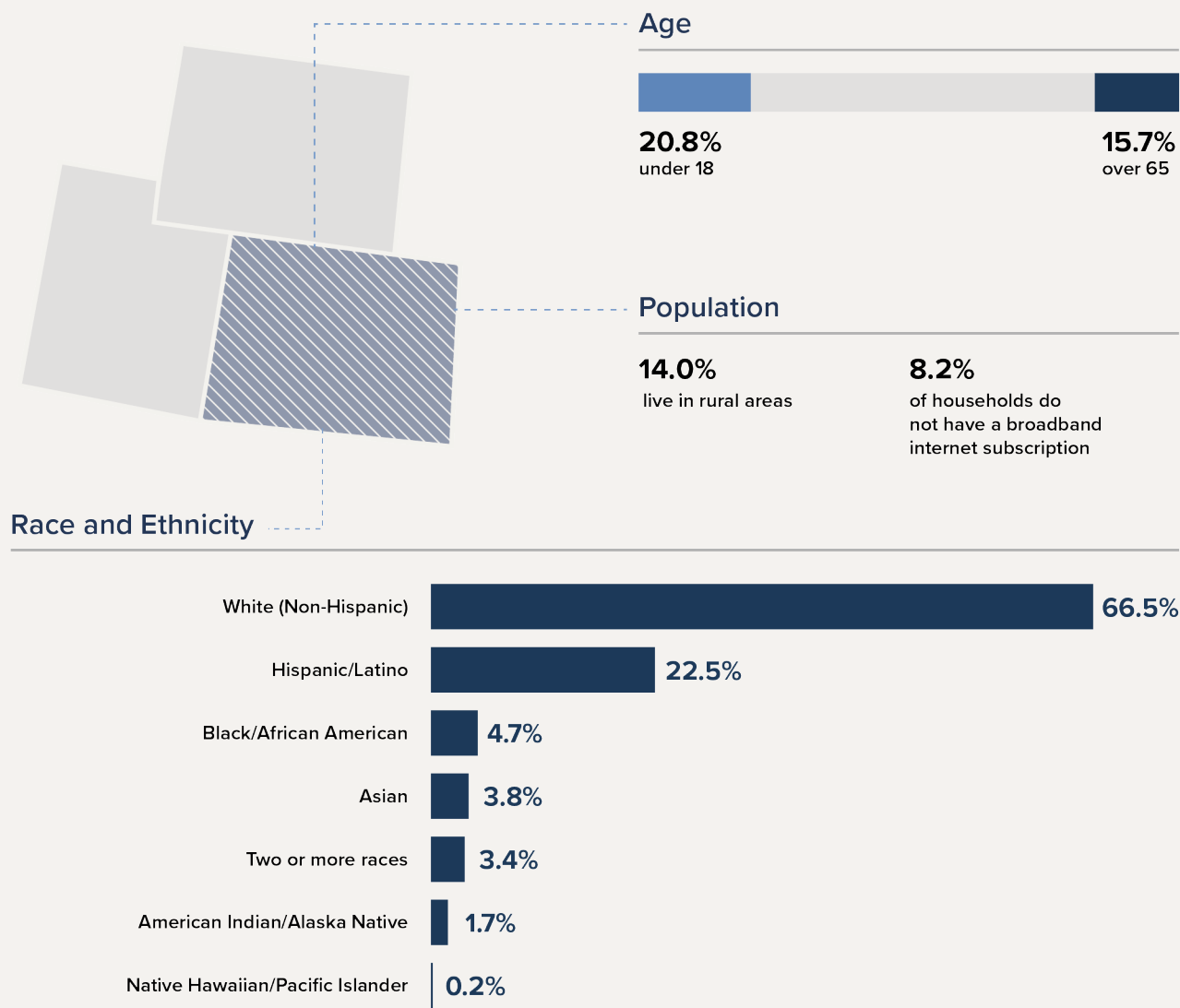
While Colorado had one of the highest voter turnout rates of all U.S. states for the 2020 presidential election, other civic engagement indicators are on par with the U.S. as a whole. An increase in high quality, civically-oriented local news paired with innovative engagement strategies would likely foster increased civic participation beyond voting, particularly outside of the Denver metro area. Moreover, considering that the racial gap in voter turnout was higher in Colorado compared to the national average, civic participation strategies aimed at communities of color that also include providing critical information for voting would also strengthen the ecosystem.

Colorado at a Glance

Topline indicators about Colorado’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

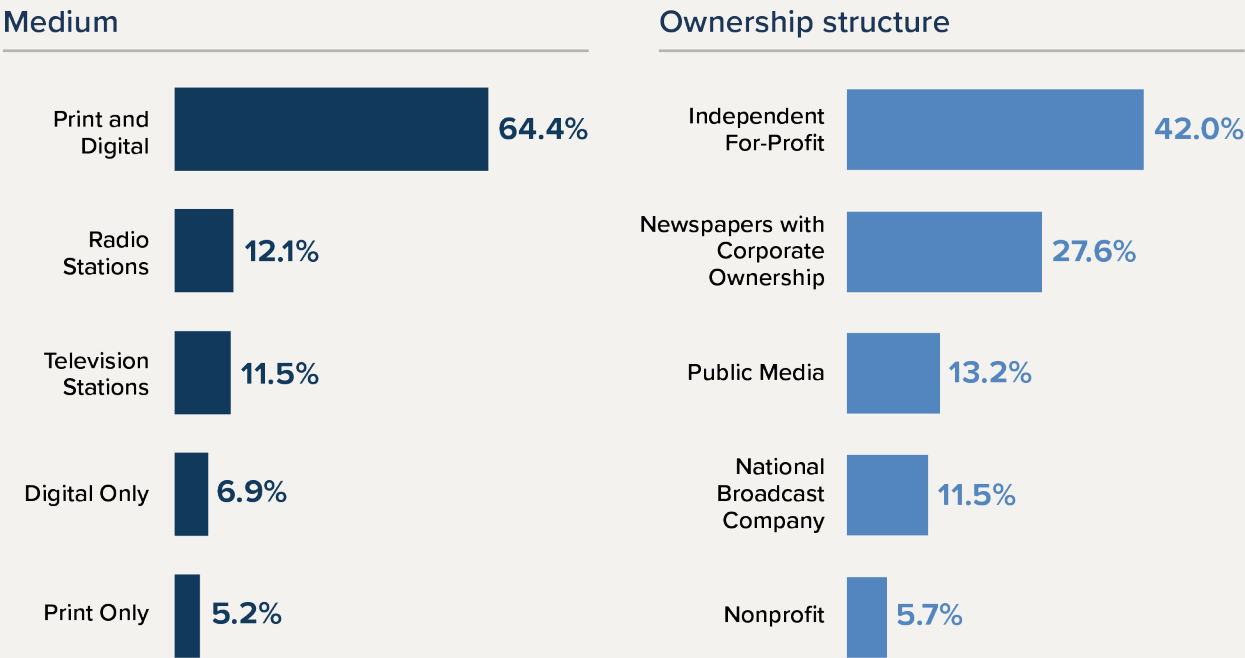
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



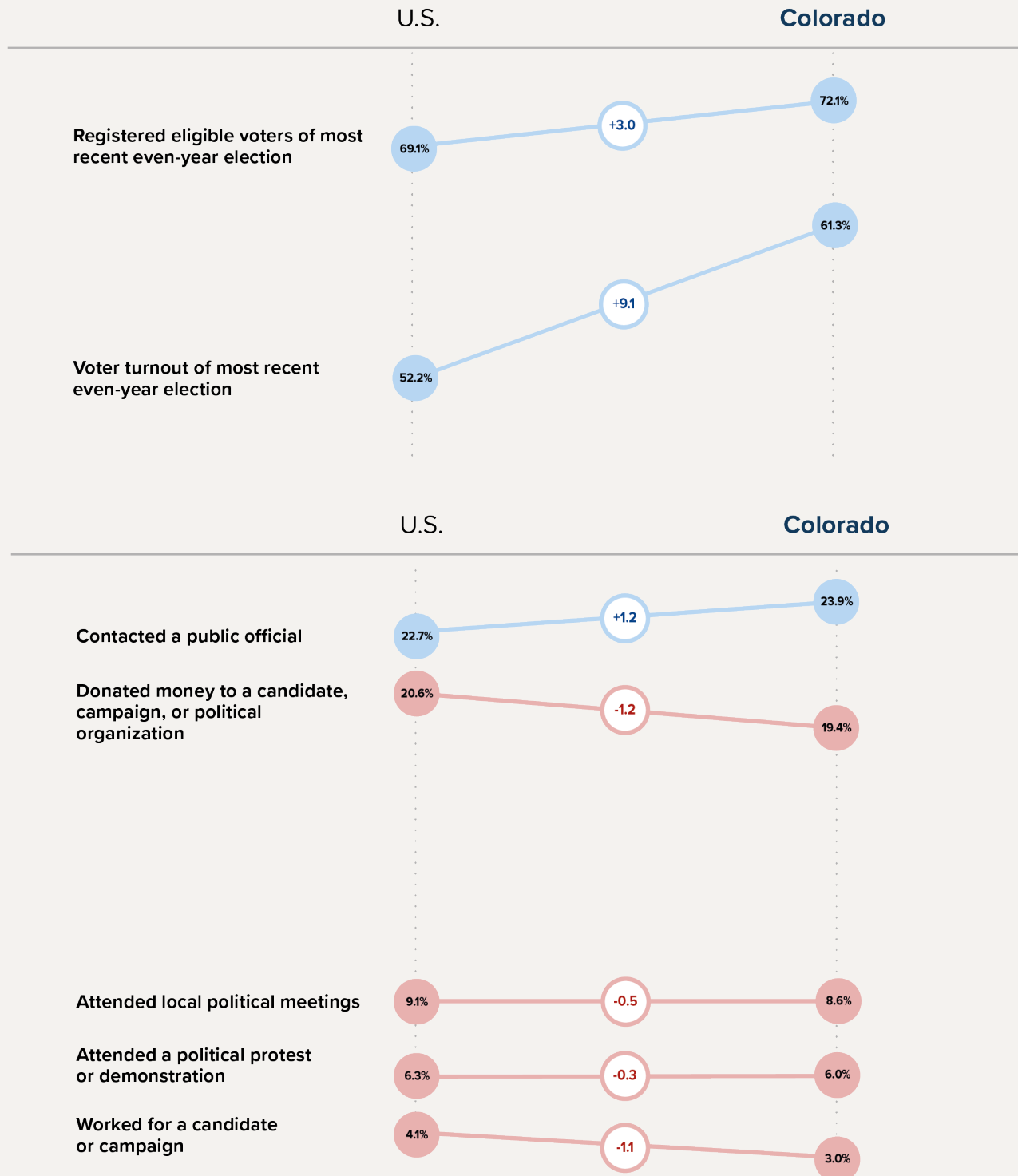
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders’ Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Colorado Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Colorado to dig deeper into the current state of Colorado’s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about the nonprofit weekly newspaper, *The Sopris Sun and El Sol del Valle*.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Colorado.

Colorado has higher voter registration and turnout than the national average. Turnout in the 2020 election was nine percentage points higher than the U.S. overall and among the highest in the country.¹⁹ It is not surprising that Colorado is also one of the easiest places to cast a ballot. The Cost of Voting Index (COVI) takes into account election laws and policies to determine accessibility of voting, with lower values indicating higher accessibility. Colorado’s score of -2.15

is the fifth lowest in the U.S.²⁰

Despite these indicators, stakeholders don’t necessarily perceive high levels of engagement among the populace, even in terms of voting. Indeed, while voter turnout overall is regularly high in

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	Colorado	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	8.6%	-0.5 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	19.4%	-1.2 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	6.0%	-0.3 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	23.9%	1.2 ▲
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.0%	-1.1 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,042

19 “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.
20 Schraufnagel, Pomante, and Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.”

Colorado, there was a gap of about 19 percentage points between the turnout among white non-Hispanic voters and all other population groups in the 2020 presidential election.²¹ Mike Williams — Executive Director of Citizens Project, a Colorado Springs based nonprofit focused on civic engagement — works to engage communities of color in El Paso County to combat this gap. He describes the state of civic engagement in Colorado as “low, but increasing.” One of Citizens Project’s activities is to distribute voter guides and candidate surveys about local elections, either in the form of pamphlets or digitally through QR codes. The initiative is in response to the community need he and his organization identified to provide reliable election information that people trust, especially for communities of color. It’s also in response to the closing of Colorado Springs’ long-standing alt weekly in 2023, which previously provided a means for freely distributing such information.²²

Beyond voting, Colorado is about average in terms of civic engagement according to the metrics we used for this study, which included activities such as attending public meetings and contacting public officials.²³ This conforms with the perspective we heard from stakeholders. One person said that civic engagement tends to be low because of a generally high quality of life — Colorado ranks ninth in the nation in the Well-Being Index — and state budgets get passed without drama, which has resulted in complacency and the feeling that civic engagement isn’t necessary to improve daily life.²⁴

Corey Hutchins, co-director of the Journalism Institute at Colorado College in Colorado Springs said that “not a lot happens politically that slips under the radar” when it comes to state politics. Other activities such as county commissions and city council meetings, however, receive less attention. Because of that, Colorado could be a good candidate for a Documenters program — a program that trains and pays residents to attend and summarize public meetings for community consumption. Given the state’s high voter registration and turnout, the environment appears ripe to activate a moderately engaged populace in other areas of civic life. CMP supported the League of Women Voters of Larimer County in Northern Colorado to develop a local version of the program called the Colorado Citizen Observers Program (the Documenters program also supported the effort), which covered select public meetings from September 2022 until August 2023, although there has not been any public activity since.

Given the state’s high voter registration and turnout, the environment appears ripe to activate a moderately engaged populace in other areas of civic life.

21 Woodruff. “Colorado’s Racial Voter-turnout Gap Persists, Census Data Shows.”

22 The alt weekly, The Colorado Springs Independent, re-opened in 2024 under new ownership. Ben Trollinger. “Editor’s Note: The Newspaper of Eternal Return.” Colorado Springs Independent, May 16, 2024. <https://csindy.com/editors-note-the-newspaper-of-eternal-return/>.

23 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”

24 Community Well-being Index: Colorado. Sharecare, 2024. <https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com/interactive-map/?default-State=CO>.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in Colorado and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Press freedom is strong in Colorado when it comes to government transparency, with the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA), the statute that declares public records available to anyone, journalists and residents alike. Additionally, Colorado has local institutions that support press freedom. The Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition (CFOIC) is an advocacy organization that provides information and resources meant to preserve government transparency. A dedicated attorney from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press' Local Legal Initiative also supports Colorado newsrooms (CMP supports this attorney).

Still, Hutchins stated that some provisions in Colorado still prevent access, despite relatively strong open records laws. One states that if someone says they believe releasing certain records would be “contrary to the public interest,” they can be withheld.²⁵ The broad provision could be particularly detrimental as state politics becomes more and more defined by one party, reinforcing the need for the local resources noted above.

Two high profile incidents attempting to silence the press have also garnered national interest, both of which required support from Colorado's freedom-of-the-press infrastructure. In January 2024, the Ouray County Plaindealer, a weekly newspaper serving a small community in the San Juan Valley, published a front page story about an investigation into a sexual assault that took place in the chief of police's home. On the day of publication, someone unconnected to the alleged perpetrators stole every issue of the paper because of the story.²⁶ The Plain Dealer printed additional copies of the paper, so the act didn't silence the story. And it in fact received additional donations after the event. Then, in April 2024, the state GOP kicked a Colorado Sun politics reporter out of its assembly “after being told the chairman doesn't like her reporting.”²⁷ Sandra Fish, the reporter, was later reinstated. Both events underscore the need for legal infrastructure and support for local journalism, even in environments where press freedom is not the major source of concern for practicing journalists.

25 “Guide to Colorado's Open Records and Open Meetings Laws.” Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition. <https://coloradofoic.org/open-government-guide/>.

26 Amanda Holpuch, “Newspapers Stolen After Reporting on Rape Investigation at Police Chief's Home.” New York Times, January 21, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/21/us/newspaper-stolen-ouray-colorado.html>.

27 Jennifer Brown, “Colorado Sun Politics Reporter Kicked Out of GOP State Assembly.” Colorado Sun, April 6, 2024. <https://coloradosun.com/2024/04/06/colorado-republican-party-kicks-out-colorado-sun-reporter/>.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Coloradans' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual-level, and integrity.

According to the Knight/Gallup American Views survey, Colorado residents have a less positive view of journalists and information providers relative to the U.S. as a whole. The perspective of Colorado residents indicates a lack of trust in the news, as well as a lack of perceived relevance. Less than half of Coloradans agreed that "local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need," indicating a perception that local news is not serving communities and is, therefore, not relevant to daily life.²⁸ Only 38.1% of Coloradans agreed that "local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public," revealing a lack of trust. While this result is lower than the national average, it should be noted that the national average is still just 44%.²⁹

Information Providers and Community	U.S	Colorado	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	64.6%	-0.4 ▼
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	45.1%	-6.9 ▼
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	52.2%	-0.8 ▼
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	43.4%	-3.6 ▼
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	38.1%	-5.9 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 113

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	Colorado	Difference from U.S
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	1.8%	-1.2 ▼
From TV	31%	24.8%	-6.2 ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	67.0%	9.0 ▲
From a radio	7%	6.4%	-0.6 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 113

28 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

29 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

More than 96% of Coloradans own a computer and more than 91% of households have a broadband internet subscription, both higher than the U.S. as a whole.³⁰ Those factors likely contribute to the news consumption habits of Coloradans. About two-thirds of Coloradans primarily get their news online, nine percentage points higher than the U.S., and 75% of Coloradans get their news from a website or app at least monthly.³¹ A smaller portion of Coloradans get their news primarily from television than all surveyed U.S. residents, but it is still easily the second most common medium for getting news. In terms of daily news consumption, Colorado is about on par with the U.S. for use of websites or apps.³²

Colorado newsrooms are successful at generating small donations. The #newsCOnneeds campaign, led by CMP on a yearly basis since 2018, has been a source of local fundraising for a small subset of Colorado newsrooms. It's a matching campaign that has recently also included fundraising training for participating newsrooms. About 25 newsrooms participate in the campaign each year, and the initiative has raised about \$2.8 million for local newsrooms since its launch. The effort is similar to the national NewsMatch campaign. One notable difference is that #newsCOnneeds participants don't need to be nonprofits.

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	28.6%	17.9%	4.5%	26.8%	22.3%
A website or app	43.8%	19.6%	10.7%	12.5%	13.4%
A radio station	27.9%	18.0%	6.3%	26.1%	21.6%
A TV station	41.6%	15.9%	12.4%	16.8%	13.3%
Direct communication with people in your area	19.6%	28.6%	20.5%	18.8%	12.5%
A magazine	2.7%	9.8%	8.9%	30.4%	48.2%
A social media platform	28.6%	17.9%	5.4%	21.4%	26.8%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 113

30 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

31 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

32 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Colorado, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent ecosystem assessment.

Backbone organizations in Colorado have worked to create more access to local news for all communities in Colorado, and they've also supported newsrooms in developing community engagement practices. For instance, CMP has supported developing community listening and engagement among Colorado newsrooms. One area of support was focused on elections reporting, with the goal to develop engagement plans for the 2024 election and improve the quality of election coverage in response to community information needs. The project included participation from 13 newsrooms, all but two of which were located outside of the Denver area. Additionally, COLab, Colorado Public Radio, and more than 50 additional Colorado newsrooms are participating in Voter Voices, a project designed by COLab and CPR. The project started in April, 2024 with a survey asking Colorado voters what issues they were most concerned with, and the overall project aims to develop election coverage driven by Colorado communities.³³

The Voices Initiative, a project supported by Free Press based on its work in New Jersey and North Carolina, was developed to identify ways to create more access to local news for more Colorado communities. With the support of CMP, Free Press, and the Colorado Health Foundation, COLab worked with community liaisons from communities of color throughout Colorado to understand their relationship with local news. The work resulted in four reports —

The common recommendations and calls to action were to increase staff diversity and equitable practices in Colorado newsrooms, strengthen and/or build relationships with communities of color, and to build power within communities.

³³ Megan Verlee, "CPR and Other Colorado Newsrooms Need Your Help to Cover This Year's Election." Colorado Public Radio, April 2, 2024. <https://www.cpr.org/2024/04/02/voter-voices-2024-election-survey/>.

one each for Black,³⁴ Hispanic and Latino,³⁵ Indigenous,³⁶ and Asian and Pacific Islander communities.³⁷ The common recommendations and calls to action were to increase staff diversity and equitable practices in Colorado newsrooms, strengthen and/or build relationships with communities of color, and to build power within communities.

Melissa Milios Davis, former Director of the Colorado Media Project, states that in response to the calls to action, CMP has made 73 Advancing Equity grants totaling \$998,090 to strengthen service to Colorado's communities of color, non-English speaking residents, and rural residents.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Colorado. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the report page.](#)

Colorado has a rich and diverse collection of news organizations. Impact Architects' manual research identified 174 organizations that produce local news. Community media has a significant presence as well, with 17 organizations covering Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American communities, 10 of which are dedicated to Hispanic/Latino communities, the second largest population group in the state.

IA partnered with CMP from late 2023 to early 2024 to research the state of capacity building and shared services in Colorado. Part of the research included gaining a deep understanding of the needs and challenges of information providers throughout the state. Capacity in terms of human resources as well as sustainability

34 "The Time is Right Now: A Call to Action for Antiracist and Just Local News." News Voices: Colorado Black Voices Working Group, September, 2021. <https://colabnews.co/the-time-is-right-now-report/>.

35 "Think Big, Act Now: A Call to Action from Latinx Coloradans for Equitable and Just Local News." Latinx Voices Working Group, November, 2021. https://colabnews.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/latinx_voices_report_final-reduced.pdf.

36 "Reach, Representation, and Respect: Recommendations to Improve Relations between Indigenous Communities and Local News in Colorado." Indigenous Working Group, May, 2023. https://colabnews.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/COLAB-002-Voices-Initiative_Indigenous_screen.pdf.

37 "Fighting to be Seen: A Call from Colorado's AANHPI Communities for Equitable and Just Local News." AANHPI Working Group, February, 2023. https://colabnews.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/COLAB-001-Voices_AANHPI_r9-compressed_1.pdf.

in terms of revenue and organizational resilience are the major challenges facing Colorado newsrooms. Rising printing costs, declining advertising revenue, costly and opaque software as part of digital transformation, staff recruitment and retention, and, ultimately, the ever present danger of burnout were the major, specific concerns. Colorado's strength in collaboration and connection runs through the resources offered by its backbone organizations, as is evident throughout this report. The resources contribute to the overall strength of the ecosystem, but organizations can't always take advantage of the support offered due to a lack of internal resources and capacity. Taking further advantage of the existing connections and collaborative spirit can strengthen the diverse ecosystem further.³⁸

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	174	
Population per organization	33,182	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	12	6.9%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	112	64.4%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	9	5.2%
Radio stations	21	12.1%
Television stations	20	11.5%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	73	42%
National broadcast chain	20	11.5%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	48	27.6%
Nonprofit	10	5.7%
Public media	23	13.2%
Community Media		
African American/Black	2	
Hispanic/Latino	10	
Asian/Asian American	5	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

About 64% of outlets in Colorado are print and digital, and IA identified only 12 digital only outlets. The Gallup/Knight American Views survey cited earlier in this chapter indicates that about half of Coloradans get news from newspapers at least weekly. In 2022, The National Trust for Local News (NTLN) and CMP identified that the lack of accessibility to reliable printing options could be a problem for the Colorado news ecosystem. NTLN, CMP, COLab, and CPA formed a working group to surface options and solutions for addressing the potential problem. While the group was convening, Gannett closed its printing operation in Pueblo, located in southern Colorado, which served more than 50 local news organizations. The working group's report identified three possibilities for reducing short to medium term pressures for Colorado newsrooms, and Colorado's

38 Eric Garcia McKinley, "Assessment of Colorado Media Project's Capacity Building and Resource Sharing Investments." Impact Architects, May, 2024. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b48d905c258b4f9cb79f8d3/t/66466c629a401d-507d7d7cb9/1715891298301/2024+CMP+Impact+Architects+Report+-+Capacity+Building.pdf>.

backbone organizations immediately acted on one of them: They purchased a printing press, with CMP organizing the funding and NTLN making the purchase.³⁹ The facility is located in Denver and will be used by Colorado Community Media newspapers, which serve Denver and adjacent regions, and will be available to others as well.⁴⁰

Colorado is strong in statewide public media, and Rocky Mountain Community Radio supports an array of radio stations that serve small communities in the Rockies. However, communities in the Eastern Plains have fewer local news options, and, in July 2024, three newspapers in the region went out of business.⁴¹

Community media is mostly composed of organizations that serve Hispanic and Latino communities. Colorado has four Spanish-language newspapers (La Voz Colorado, El Sol del Valle, El Comercio de Colorado, and La Prensa de Colorado) and six Spanish language television broadcasters, including two Telemundo stations that serve the state’s two major metro areas in Denver and Colorado Springs.

IA identified only a handful of nonprofit news organizations, comprising 5.7% of all outlets. A notable statewide nonprofit is Chalkbeat, which provides free, high quality journalism about education and the education system in Colorado. There are also signs of nonprofit transition. In December 2023, The Colorado Sun, which launched as a public benefit corporation, attained full nonprofit status.⁴² Other newsrooms that transitioned from a for-profit model to nonprofit since 2022 include the Aurora Sentinel, which is located in the Denver metro area, The Crestone Eagle, Ark Valley Voice, and The Sopris Sun, which all serve small mountain communities.⁴³ Part of The Sopris Sun’s reinvention also included launching El Sol del Valle, the Spanish-language version of its weekly newspaper.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	2.3%	0.6%	0.6%	3.4%	
Print and digital	34.5%	0.6%	27%	2.3%	
Print only	5.2%				
Radio					12.1%
Television		10.3%			1.1%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

39 “The Future of Printing in Colorado: Working Group Findings and Exploration of Solutions.” Colorado Media Project, Fall 2023. <https://coloradomediaproject.com/latest-news/2023/9/future-of-printing-white-paper>.
40 Corey Hutchins, “The National Trust for Local News Buys a ‘Mission-driven’ Printing Press in Colorado.” Nieman Lab, March 13, 2024. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2024/03/the-national-trust-for-local-news-buys-a-mission-driven-printing-press-in-colorado/>.
41 Corey Hutchins, “‘Heartbreaking’: 3 Eastern Colorado Papers Closing, ‘Things Have Run Their Course.’” Inside the News in Colorado (Substack), July 24, 2024. <https://coloradomedia.substack.com/p/heartbreaking-3-eastern-colorado>.
42 “It’s Official: The Colorado Sun is Nonprofit.” Colorado Sun, December 5, 2023. <https://coloradosun.com/2023/12/05/colorado-sun-nonprofit/>.
43 Corey Hutchins, “Hutchins’ Year in Review: The News Behind the News in Colorado’s Media World in 2022.” Colorado Sun, January 2, 2023. <https://coloradosun.com/2023/01/02/colorado-media-hutchins/>.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Colorado ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

Some Colorado newsrooms have undertaken efforts to publicize diversity of staff and news sources, and backbone organizations have provided resources to improve equity in Colorado. Since 2022, CMP's Advancing Equity in Local News (AELN) has made \$1.8 million in grants to Colorado newsrooms to improve diversity in newsrooms and equitable reporting. Many of the grants are meant to provide funds for paid internships for young journalists of color, while others are designed to strengthen relationship building. For example, the purpose of an AELN grant to Chalkbeat was to support Chalkbeat's relationship-building efforts with its Spanish-speaking audience and to build internal capacity to create more resources for that audience.⁴⁴

Colorado Public Radio tracks the diversity of its sources and publishes its results. The most recent report, from December 2023, showed some progress from its early reports — the percentage of white sources quoted fell from 76% to 68% — but the organization still identified a need to include more Hispanic and Latino voices.⁴⁵ All newsrooms in the Chalkbeat network use a source diversity tracking tool, although their results are not public.⁴⁶ To assist in source diversity, COLab keeps a public source directory called Amplify. Journalists can search for potential sources by location and area of expertise, among other categories.⁴⁷

Anecdotally, stakeholders said that newsrooms in Colorado are not as diverse as they should be. The little public information available about the actual breakdown compared to the population appears to support that position. The Denver Newspaper Guild wrote that in 2020, 11% of non-management staff at The Denver Post identified as Hispanic or Latino, about 10 percentage points lower than the population of the state. The disclosure was part of a commitment from staff in 2021 to diversify the newsroom and coverage, although it is not clear what progress has been made.⁴⁸

44 "Announcing \$350,000+ in Grants to Advance Equity and Inclusion in Local Newsrooms Across Colorado." Colorado Media Project, January 24, 2023. <https://coloradomediaproject.com/latest-news/2023/1/24/announcing-advancing-equity-in-local-news-grantees-2023>.

45 "Colorado Public Radio Diversity Source Report for 2023." Colorado Public Radio, n.d. <https://www.cpr.org/colorado-public-radio-diversity-source-report-for-2023/>.

46 Source Diversity Tracking Tool. Chalkbeat, n.d. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/source-diversity-tracking-tool/>.

47 Amplify Colorado: An Online Guide to Help Newsrooms Find Diverse Sources and Community Members to Find Local Reporters. Colorado News Collaborative. <https://colabnews.co/amplify-colorado/>.

48 "Long Overdue: Denver Post Union Commits to Diversifying Newsroom, Coverage. Denver Newspaper Guild, March 31,

Finally, a 2023 working group coordinated by Colorado’s backbone organizations yielded a report about workforce pathways meant to diversify the pipeline of journalists in Colorado.⁴⁹ The report includes an analysis of a pilot project about supporting a diversified pipeline through a summer internship program, as well as a variety of models that have worked in other parts of the country.

2021. <https://denvernewspaperguild.org/long-overdue-denver-post-union-commits-to-diversifying-newsroom-coverage/>.

49 Corey Hutchins, “Workforce Pathways for Local Journalism in Colorado: Working Group Findings and Exploration of Solutions.” Colorado Media Project, April 2024. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b48d905c258b4f9cb79f8d3/t/6621a3b67d589b36bbfa3341/1713480632772/2024-04+CMP+Colorado+Journalism+Workforce+Pathways.pdf>.

Case Study – The Sopris Sun and El Sol del Valle

How a community worked to fill the gaps after the closure of their local paper.

In 2008, the Carbondale Valley Journal closed its doors after 34 years in operation, leaving the roughly 6,000 residents of the high-altitude Rocky Mountain town of Carbondale without a newspaper. However, just months after this closure, a group of residents including former journalists and board members at the Carbondale Valley Journal founded a new nonprofit weekly newspaper to serve Carbondale and the greater Roaring Fork Valley, The Sopris Sun. The founding of the paper in 2009 was described as an “experiment” designed to succeed by “its ultra-local focus and powerful community support.”⁵⁰ Relying mostly on freelancers, The Sopris Sun has consistently produced weekly journalism for communities in the Roaring Fork Valley, a mountain region that in addition to Carbondale includes Aspen, Rifle, and Glenwood Springs. The Sopris Sun reports that it distributes 3,500 copies of the paper to 80 locations.

In 2021, The Sopris Sun announced that future editions of the newspaper would include a Spanish-language section, under the name El Sol del Valle.



Eleanor Bennett / Aspen Public Radio

...the project was meant to both translate some articles from The Sopris Sun into Spanish, but also to produce original reporting in Spanish that might or might not be translated into English in turn. This meant that El Sol del Valle was not just a replication of The Sopris Sun, but rather had its own editorial priorities.

50 “The (Sopris) Sun also rises: small town Carbondale, Colorado, loses one newspaper only to have residents join together to launch their own,” Mackenzie Cotters. *American Journalism Review* 31.3, June-July 2009. https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA202350146&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&link-access=abs&issn=10678654&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=nysl_oweb&isGeoAuthType=true&aty=geo.

Editor-in-Chief Raleigh Burleigh wrote that the addition was meant to further the organization’s mission to “inform, inspire, and connect” community members in its coverage area.⁵¹

Notably, the project was meant to both translate some articles from The Sopris Sun into Spanish, but also to produce original reporting in Spanish that might or might not be translated into English in turn. This meant that El Sol del Valle was not just a replication of The Sopris Sun, but rather had its own editorial priorities.

Collaboration is one of the hallmarks of the Colorado news and information ecosystem. And, indeed, collaborative efforts greatly contributed to the evolution of El Sol del Valle. In early 2022, The Sopris Sun developed a relationship with the Aspen Daily News to distribute El Sol del Valle as an insert in its pages and complement already existing Spanish-language journalism at the paper. The Colorado Media Project then supported a broader regional partnership that included eight organizations to further develop El Sol del Valle as a source for Spanish-speakers in the Roaring Fork Valley. An additional 2023 grant from CMP’s Advancing Equity in Local News initiative allowed El Sol del Valle to hire its first full-time editor. And as of June 2024, El Sol del Valle began operating as a standalone weekly product. It remains under The Sopris Sun nonprofit.⁵²

The Sopris Sun and El Sol del Valle encapsulate many of the movements, and challenges, of local journalism over the past 15 years. The nonprofit was born out of a newspaper closure, and its community-centered journalism has allowed it to maintain a strong presence in multiple small communities in Colorado’s western slope. Community listening informed the launch of a Spanish-speaking product, and support from statewide backbone organizations such as the Colorado Media Project and the Colorado News Collaborative have helped it grow.

51 Raleigh Burleigh, “Introducing: el Sol del Valle.” The Sopris Sun, March 3, 2021. <https://soprissun.com/introducing-el-sol-del-valle/>.

52 Raleigh Burleigh, “A New Sol Rises.” Sopris Sun, June 7, 2024. <https://soprissun.com/a-new-sol-rises/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20with%20support%20from,Fork%20Valley’s%20Spanish%2Dspeaking%20residents.>

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Georgia

Georgia

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Georgia news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Georgia has a wide array of community news and information providers, growing infrastructure to support local news, and some signs of increased civic engagement, including greater attention to and high participation in the most recent presidential and midterm elections. However, quantitative data and information from local stakeholders indicated issues around trust in media in the state. Additionally, many news organizations are clustered in and around metro Atlanta, but other parts of the state, and rural communities in particular, are often not as well served. And while the state has received significant attention in conversations about national elections, and stakeholders noted that residents do rally around national issues, they also felt that civic engagement overall was not particularly high. Nonprofit news outlet Atlanta Civic Circle reported on a disparity in participation in national and local contests, citing local Atlanta races where participation has declined in recent years.¹ Declining local election participation amid increased national turnout could suggest that Atlanta residents are more focused on national news and issues or that local stories are often placed in a national context.

Georgia's electorate was key in determining control of the Senate in the 2022 midterm election, and voters set an all-time high for early voting turnout in the state.² However, researchers noted a widening racial gap in voter turnout — the Brennan Center for Justice published research showing turnout among non-white voters in Georgia fell in the 2022 midterms.³ Other measures of civic engagement, including data from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study

¹ Ryan Zickgraf, "What's missing in the praise for Georgia voters' big turnout in 2022," Atlanta Civic Circle, <https://atlantacivic-circle.org/2023/05/30/whats-missing-in-the-praise-for-georgia-voters-big-turnout-in-2022/>.

² "Georgia Voters Set All-Time Midterm Early Turnout Record," Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Georgia Secretary of State, published November 5, 2022, <https://sos.ga.gov/news/georgia-voters-set-all-time-midterm-early-turnout-record>.

³ Sara Loving and Kevin Morris, "Georgia's Racial Turnout Gap Grew in 2022," Brennan Center for Justice, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/georgias-racial-turnout-gap-grew-2022>.

(CES), show non-voting civic participation in the state just below national levels.⁴ Stakeholders said that Georgians are not always consistently engaged on the national or local level, but noted that participation varies widely across different geographic and demographic communities in the state.

Quantitative data and conversations with local stakeholders suggest Georgians may also not be getting the information they need to encourage greater civic participation due to a lack of local coverage for their area, distrust of their existing local outlets, or distrust of the media more broadly.

Georgia is a diverse state, with nearly one-third of residents identifying as Black or African American, compared to 13.6% nationally, according to data from the 2022 American Communities Survey.⁵ Georgia also has a large Hispanic or Latino population at 10.5%, though this is smaller than the national average.⁶ The state has many community news and information providers, ranging from legacy newspapers serving Black and African American audiences to digital-only newsletters to local Facebook groups with thousands of members. We found 43 community news and information sources in our research, though we know that existing lists and databases do not capture every outlet — especially when it comes to community media — so this count is not comprehensive.⁷ Stakeholders noted that non-traditional community news sources are often under-resourced and have sometimes been overlooked or excluded from conversations about collaboration, funding, or other ecosystem-wide topics. With that in mind, the ecosystem might benefit from further research to identify and understand what news sources communities are relying on in order to ensure they are included in important conversations and in lists of local news organizations in the state. Many community news sources in Georgia got their start on social media and may not fall into traditional format categories like newspapers or broadcast media.

Community news and information providers have often gotten their start because their founders noticed gaps in the news landscape, stakeholders noted. Some Georgians do not have high levels of trust in local media — particularly when it comes to legacy news outlets — due to harmful coverage of their communities. In some cases distrust or disenfranchisement is driven by a continued feeling that reporting on issues important to some communities is not fair or depicts those communities negatively, or that outlets are primarily focused on garnering clicks rather than providing information most needed by their audience.

4 Schaffner, Brian, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.” Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

5 “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Georgia,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA/PST045223>.

6 United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Georgia.”

7 We searched databases and resources from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, and local broadcast affiliate lists.

Additionally, while Metro Atlanta and cities in the state are often better-served, rural communities receive less coverage, and outlets based in those areas have difficulty recruiting talent. Roughly a quarter of Georgia's population resides in rural areas, almost six percentage points more than the national figure.⁸ Some of Georgia's rural counties lack robust county government websites, potentially contributing to a lack of access to information that might help residents stay up to date about local issues and motivate them to get involved.

Despite these challenges, Georgia's ecosystem has seen a number of new projects and networks spring up in recent years. Organizations like 285 South, a publication that started on Substack and covers immigrant and refugee communities in metro Atlanta, and Pasa La Voz Savannah, a nonprofit Spanish-language outlet, have worked to fill gaps in the ecosystem and meet their audiences where they are. Georgia Trust for Local News, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Local News, launched in January 2024 and is working to support and revitalize 19 local newspapers in middle and south Georgia. Georgia Trust launched a new outlet, The Macon Melody, in June. The Georgia ecosystem is supported by the Georgia News Collaborative for editorial collaborations, as well as The Pivot Fund, an Atlanta-based funder and backbone organization. The Pivot Fund conducted a landscape analysis for the Georgia news ecosystem in fall 2023, in partnership with the Georgia News Collaborative.

This chapter presents Georgia at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

8 "Urban and Rural," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

Opportunities

Support for community information providers:

Non-traditional, startup, and small community media outlets might benefit from more formal networks and collaboratives. This could allow for more shared learning that could be beneficial for sustainability and audience growth. It might also help ensure outlets are not passed over in conversations about major funding initiatives in the state. Additional cataloging of these kinds of information providers and inclusion in databases of news sources could help increase their visibility among local news consumers and national funders.

Meeting community information needs and building trust:

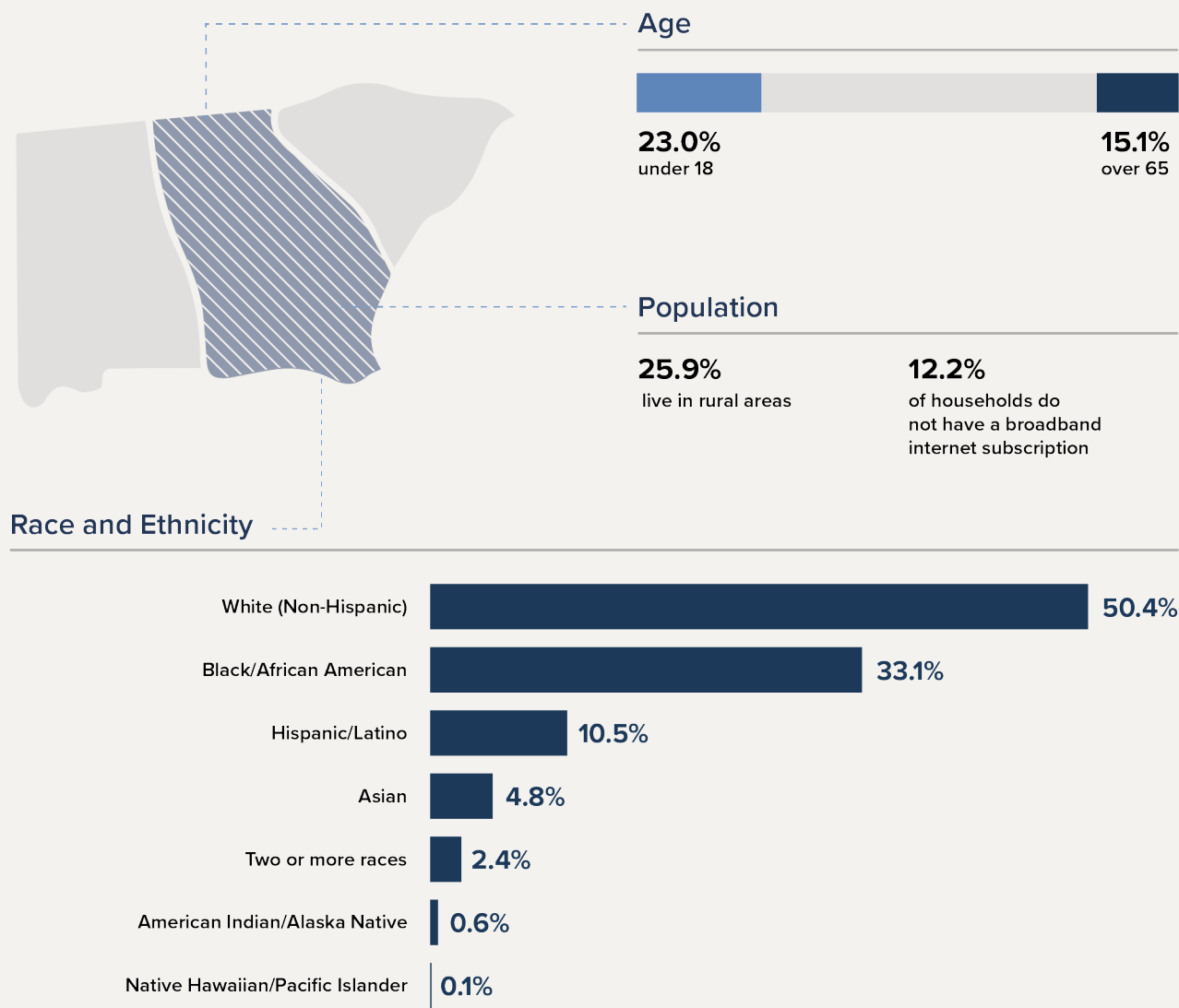
Stakeholders highlighted how existing local news outlets often do not serve Black Georgians and other communities of color, and in some cases perpetuate negative stereotypes about communities through their coverage. These issues highlight the need for more — and more support for — media for and by communities of color. Additionally, conducting public, ecosystem-wide community listening and information needs assessments could help all information providers, including legacy news organizations that have harmful past or present relationships with their communities, better understand how to build relationships with disenfranchised communities.

Georgia at a Glance

Topline indicators about Georgia’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

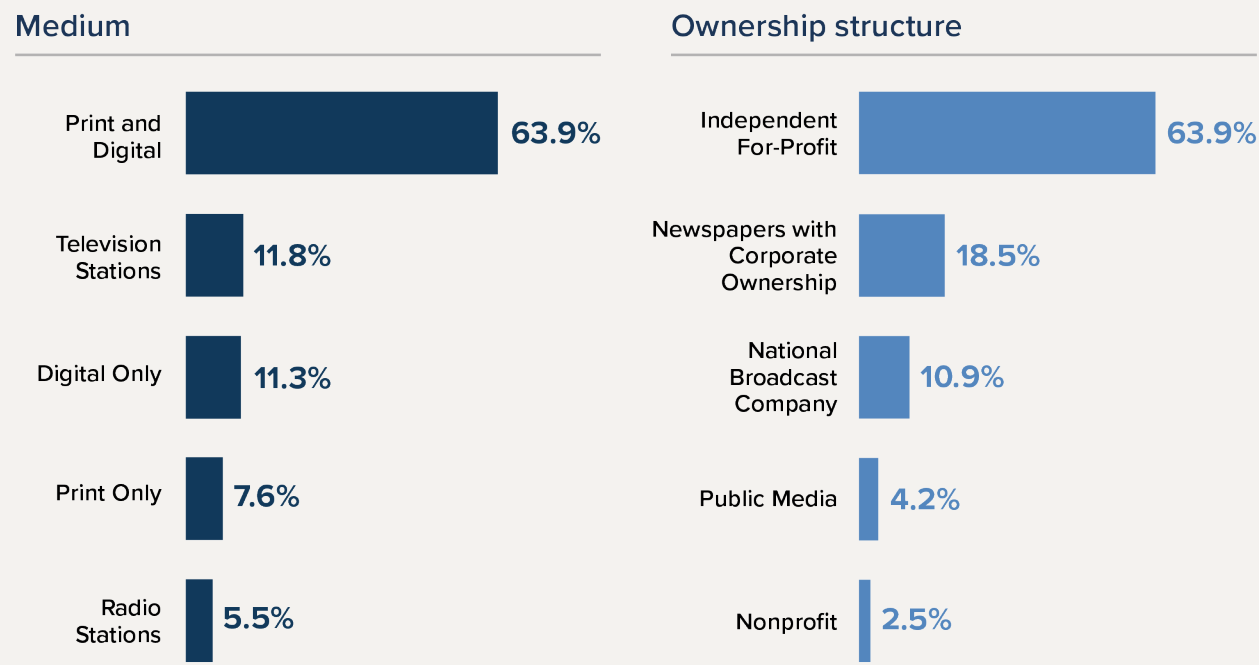
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



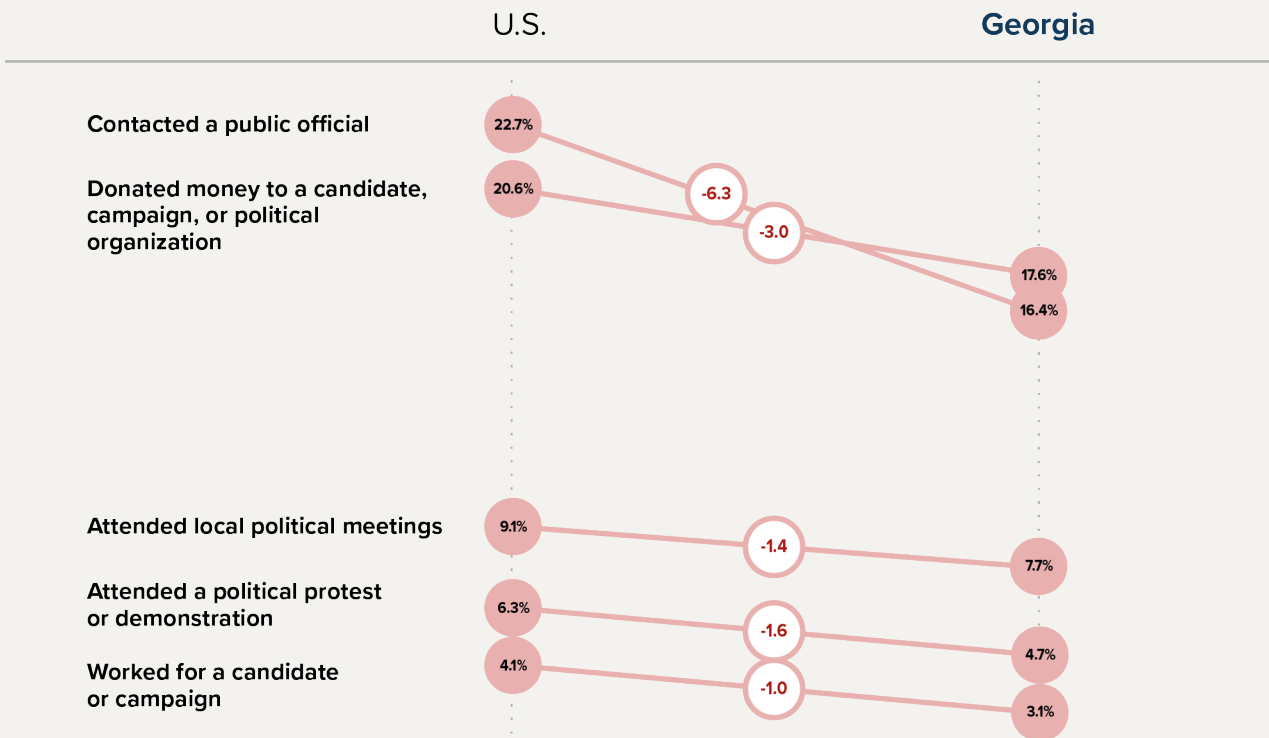
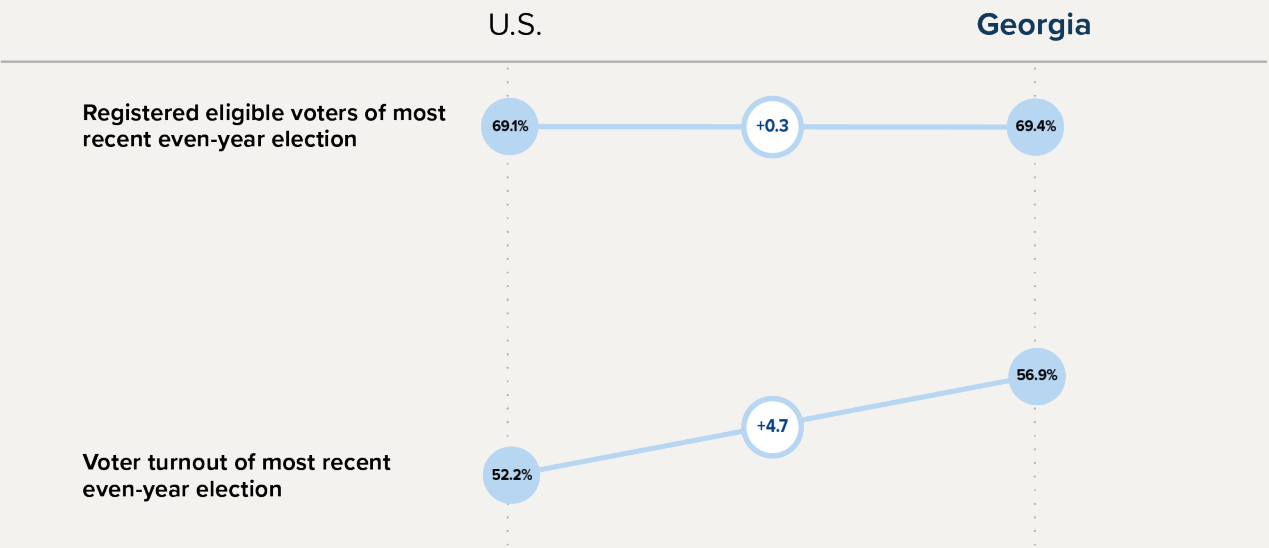
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Georgia Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Georgia to dig deeper into the current state of Georgia’s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about Pasa La Voz, a nonprofit Spanish-language news outlet that first launched on Facebook and now also reaches audiences through its website and WhatsApp group.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Georgia.

Georgia’s voter turnout in the 2022 midterm election was nearly five percentage points higher than the national turnout, although other measures of civic engagement in the state fall just below national averages.⁹ However, it’s worth noting that national measures of civic engagement set a low bar, and Georgia’s Senate contest in 2022 was closely watched across the country due to its potential to determine control of the Senate. Increased attention to Georgia on the national political stage could explain the increase in voter turnout for the midterm election.

Nearly 57% of Georgia citizens voted in the 2022 midterm elections, almost five percentage points higher than the national turnout for that election.¹⁰ The percentage of registered eligible voters in Georgia (69.4%) is similar to the national number (69.1%).¹¹ Georgia’s high voter turnout in 2022 is particularly impressive as Georgia’s cost of voting index value is 0.48, indicating that voting in Georgia is more difficult than in many other U.S. states based on an

⁹ “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

¹⁰ United States Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022.”

¹¹ United States Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022.”

analysis of the state’s election laws and policies.¹² In 2021, the Georgia legislature passed SB 202, a bill that was criticized and challenged by civil rights groups and the Department of Justice, who said its provisions would make it more difficult to vote and could disproportionately impact voters of color.¹³ The law made it illegal to

provide food or water to people waiting in line to vote (though this was blocked for the 2024 election by a federal court ruling in 2023¹⁴) and limited absentee voting options, among other changes.¹⁵

Civic and community engagement	U.S.	Georgia	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	7.7%	-1.4 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	17.6%	-3.0 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	4.7%	-1.6 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	16.4%	-6.3 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.1%	-1.0 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,988

In terms of non-voting forms of civic engagement like attending local political meetings, attending protests, and working for a campaign, Georgia residents participate at rates close to the national average. However, significantly fewer surveyed Georgia residents (16.4%) said they had contacted a public official in the past year compared to a national percentage of 22.7%, and only 17.6% donated money to a candidate or political organization, compared to 20.6% of all surveyed U.S. residents.¹⁶ A 2023 assessment of civic health in Georgia, published by the National Conference on Citizenship, ranked Georgia in the middle of the 50 states and D.C. when it came to indicators such as donating to a political organization, voter turnout, and attending a public meeting.¹⁷ According to the report, Georgia falls below national averages for many metrics related to discussion of political issues, donating time or money, and helping or spending time with community members.¹⁸ The report also suggests that Georgians are engaging with news related to civic issues at low levels relative to other U.S. states. Georgia ranks 51st out of 51 in terms of whether residents “frequently read, watch, or listen to news or information about political, societal, or local issues,” according to the report.¹⁹

Stakeholders shared that, while there may not be a sustained, high level of civic engagement every day, Georgia residents come together around national cultural and political issues. Stakeholders described Georgia communities

12 Schraufnagel, Scot, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

13 Aaron Mendelson, “Voting rights under attack in Georgia as state turns purple,” *The Center for Public Integrity*, October 6, 2022, <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/elections/who-counts/voting-rights-under-attack-in-georgia-as-state-turns-purple/>.

14 “Federal Court Sides with Civil Rights Groups and Lifts Georgia’s Ban on Line Relief and Birthdate Requirement on Absentee Ballot Envelopes for 2024 Elections,” *ACLU, American Civil Liberties Union*, published August 18, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-court-sides-with-civil-rights-groups-and-lifts-georgias-ban-on-line-relief-and-birthdate-requirement-on-absentee-ballot-envelopes-for-2024-elections>.

15 Mendelson, “Voting rights under attack in Georgia as state turns purple.”

16 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”

17 “2023 Georgia Civic Health Index,” *National Conference on Citizenship*, published December 13, 2023, p. 6, <https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-Georgia-Civic-Health-Index.pdf>.

18 National Conference on Citizenship, “2023 Georgia Civic Health Index,” p. 6.

19 National Conference on Citizenship, “2023 Georgia Civic Health Index,” p. 6.

organizing in summer 2020 following the murder of George Floyd and again in 2020 and 2022 around the election. On the local level, some stakeholders said that Georgians are not regularly engaged across the board, but they will turn out for public meetings or seek other avenues for ensuring their voices are heard for the issues that impact them and their communities. Other stakeholders noted challenges with working across organizations and building cross-sector coalitions. “I think the engagement level is high, but I also think it’s highly siloed, unfortunately,” said Staci Fox, president and CEO of Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. She also described shifts in the landscape of civic engagement due in part to cycles of giving, noting that giving ramps up during an election cycle and falls during off years, sometimes preventing organizations from building on their work year over year. “There’s not equitable investment off cycle to allow people to sustain work, and so we’re dealing with that right now — a lot of leadership changes have happened, a lot less resources to work with, and it kind of feels a little bit to me like starting over,” she said.

Unsurprisingly, civic engagement varies across different geographic and demographic communities. One stakeholder described strong civic engagement in their metro Atlanta community, with residents participating in neighborhood meetings and engaging with community Facebook groups that provided information on how to get involved. However, they noted that fragmented information infrastructure is a challenge and can result in people not getting information they need to be more civically engaged on the local level.

We did not find comprehensive quantitative data regarding the impact of a fragmented information infrastructure in Georgia, and more research is needed to determine how this is affecting information access and what resources are needed to strengthen and raise the profile of existing information providers. However, we found some evidence of fragmentation and inconsistencies in the information infrastructure when we collected data on a sample of Georgia county government websites.²⁰ For example, the government website for Calhoun County — located in southwestern Georgia and home to a little under 17,000 people, including a large Hispanic or Latino population (27.3%)²¹ — does not include any information about past or upcoming public meetings and no details about local committees or boards, though the county appears to share more information on its Facebook page. The website also does not include built in translation resources. In Echols County — which is home to just under 3,700 residents and also has a large Hispanic or Latino population

20 In addition to a county with a large metro area, a county with two news outlets, and a county with one news outlet, our analysis included nine counties with zero outlets according to the State of Local News Project as of Jan. 5, 2024. We analyzed the county government websites for the following counties: Banks, Calhoun, Dade, Echols, Fulton, Glascock, Haralson, Macon, McIntosh, Monroe, Terrell, and Twiggs.

21 “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Calhoun County, Georgia,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/calhouncountygeorgia/PST045223>.

(30.4%)²² — the government website similarly includes little information that would allow residents to engage in local decision-making, though it does list contact information for elected officials. Some county government websites, such as the one for Glascock County — home to less than 3,000 people²³ — appear to have no recent information about the local government. Information on government sites for other sampled counties varied in terms of the amount of materials published before and after meetings, the accessibility of meetings and meeting materials, the timeliness of meeting material publication, and the amount of detail provided about local representatives and representative bodies. Most, however, at least included the dates and times for county commissioners meetings.

Considering this environment, residents might not know where to look for information about their local governments, and journalists and other information providers might struggle to create guides for accessing resources with so much variability from community to community. One stakeholder pointed to the number of counties in Georgia as a challenge when it comes to reporting on local government. Georgia has 159 counties, the second most of any state in the country, and navigating the different structures and systems for each is time-consuming and difficult for journalists.

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Stakeholders described a variety of barriers to civic engagement, including infrastructure issues like insufficient public transportation, high poverty rates, illiteracy, and economic barriers. Stakeholders also noted the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities and, in some cases, how legacy media contributed to this disenfranchisement. One stakeholder described how the Albany Herald published negative coverage of the majority Black residents of Albany who showed up at a public meeting and expressed their disagreement with how their local representatives planned to use federal pandemic aid dollars. The representatives ended the meeting and later held a new one, which community members were barred from attending, the stakeholder said. This incident highlights a continued need for information providers that amplify Black voices, especially in towns and cities where existing outlets exclude Black community members and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

²² “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Echols County, Georgia,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quick-facts/fact/table/echolscountygeorgia/PST045223>.

²³ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Glascock County, Georgia,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quick-facts/fact/table/glascockcountygeorgia/PST045223>.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in Georgia and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Georgia journalists and other residents have faced structural challenges to press freedom and information access. Similar to other legislatures included in this report, Georgia's General Assembly exempted itself from the state open records act, according to reporting from Axios.²⁴ Stakeholders noted that Georgia's open records laws are not the strongest, and that access to public records varies significantly depending on the municipality or agency in question. Rural areas are often unable or slow to fulfill records requests due to understaffing or inexperience, stakeholders said.

A search of the Press Freedom Tracker for incidents from 2022 and 2023 pulled up four instances of physical intimidation and five regulatory incidents.²⁵ These incidents ranged from injury and detainment of reporters at protests to subpoenas of reporters and news outlets during the grand jury investigation into alleged election interference on the part of the Trump campaign.

Journalists have also been arrested or detained while covering protests against the proposed Atlanta police training facility, sometimes referred to as "cop city." A filmmaker arrested in 2021 while filming a protest outside a city councilmember's home filed a lawsuit against the city and the police.²⁶ In 2022, another filmmaker was detained by police while filming a protest to protect forested area that would be cut down to make way for the new training facility.²⁷ The filmmaker filed a lawsuit against the city and several police officers in 2023, alleging that officers pressured him to show them or delete his footage.²⁸ And also in 2022, a freelance photojournalist was arrested while photographing the detention of training facility protestors at a Georgia State University construction site.²⁹ He filed a lawsuit against university police and the construction company in July 2024.³⁰ Access to information about the training facility has effectively been reduced in other ways besides arrests and detentions of individual journalists. In May 2024, the dean of the University of Georgia's law school ordered the school's first amendment

24 Thomas Wheatley, "Georgia transparency law exempts General Assembly," Axios Atlanta, Axios Media, last modified March 14, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/local/atlanta/2024/03/14/georgia-open-records-foia-transparency>.

25 "The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker," U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

26 "Filmmaker arrested at 'Cop City' protest, sues Atlanta and police," U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/all-incidents/filmmaker-arrested-at-cop-city-protest-sues-atlanta-and-police/>.

27 "Filmmaker detained, pressured to delete footage," U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/all-incidents/filmmaker-detained-pressured-to-delete-footage/>.

28 U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, "Filmmaker detained, pressured to delete footage."

29 Rob DiRienzo, "Photojournalist sues GSU police after they arrest him for taking pictures," Fox5 Atlanta, FOX Television Stations, published July 8, 2024, <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/photojournalist-sues-gsu-police-after-arrest-him-taking-pictures>.

30 DiRienzo, "Photojournalist sues GSU police after they arrest him for taking pictures."

clinic, which provides free legal assistance to journalists and newsrooms, to stop work related to public records law, according to The Guardian.³¹ This work included a lawsuit against the Atlanta Police Foundation — the organization behind the police training facility — filed by a local news outlet and a research organization after their information requests went unfilled.³²

While just one hyperpartisan news outlet, the conservative outlet Georgia Business Daily based in Atlanta, is listed on a 2020 map by researcher Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, local stakeholders have indicated that “pink slime” outlets are a problem in Georgia.³³ According to the 2023 Georgia News Landscape Analysis, there are 30 sites in Georgia owned by Metric Media,³⁴ a network of news organizations that a Tow Center investigation found “promotes interests of advocacy groups without explicit disclosures” and often doesn’t cover important local events.³⁵ Updated mapping of “hyperpartisan” and “pink slime” outlets across the ecosystems might be useful for understanding and comparing the landscape of partisan news sources. However, pink slime outlets often rely on aggregated information from other websites or AI-generated content, allowing them to operate with little to no staff and to be run by organizations based outside of the areas they supposedly cover.³⁶ This could make it tricky to maintain up-to-date lists of pink slime outlets since they can launch — or shut down — quickly relative to regular news outlets.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Georgians’ perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey “Trust, Media and Democracy” asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual-level, and integrity.

31 Timothy Pratt, “University of Georgia pulls out of ‘Cop City’ lawsuit requesting public records,” The Guardian, Guardian News & Media Limited, last modified May 17, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/17/university-of-georgia-cop-city-lawsuit>.

32 Pratt, “University of Georgia pulls out of ‘Cop City’ lawsuit requesting public records.”

33 Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you.” NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

34 Jean Marie Brown, Tracie Powell, Jessica Leigh Lebos, and Sheena Louise Roetman, “Georgia News Landscape Analysis,” The Pivot Fund, published April 30, 2023, pp. 10–13, <https://thepivotfund.org/georgia-news-landscape>.

35 Priyanjana Bengani, “Advocacy groups and Metric Media collaborate on local ‘community news,’” Columbia Journalism Review, last modified October 14, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/community-newsmaker-metric-media-local-news.php?preview=true.

36 Scott A. Leadingham, “Pink Slime Journalism: Separating Ethical News From Propaganda,” Freedom Forum, <https://www.freedomforum.org/pink-slime-journalism/>.

The vast majority of Georgians feel that local news outlets are equipped to report stories accurately and fairly, but fewer feel they reliably deliver the information they need, care about them and their communities, and are unbiased.³⁷

Disaggregated data showed that nearly three quarters of Georgians surveyed — nine percentage points more than the national percentage — feel that local news has the resources and opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.³⁸ However, Georgians' trust in local news falls below the national figures across the other four dimensions measured in the survey. Trust in the integrity of local news providers is particularly low, with less than 40% of Georgians surveyed saying that local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.³⁹ Given that stakeholders described some issues around historical or present-day disenfranchisement of communities by legacy outlets, it is perhaps unsurprising that measures of trust — especially regarding perceived media bias — fall below the national figures.

Information providers and community	U.S	Georgia	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	74.0%	9.0 ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	50.9%	-1.1 ▼
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	59.9%	-2.1 ▼
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	42.4%	-4.6 ▼
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	39.0%	-5.0 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 177

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	Georgia	Difference from U.S
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	1.7%	-1.3 ▼
From TV	31%	36.4%	5.4 ▲
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	54.3%	-3.7 ▼
From a radio	7%	7.5%	0.5 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 177

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	20.0%	17.1%	8.6%	22.3%	32.0%
A website or app	34.7%	19.7%	9.2%	17.3%	19.1%
A radio station	29.9%	17.8%	6.9%	15.5%	29.9%
A TV station	50.6%	16.5%	6.3%	14.2%	12.5%
Direct communication with people in your area	28.5%	28.5%	12.8%	14.0%	16.3%
A magazine	1.1%	6.9%	14.4%	24.7%	52.9%
A social media platform	38.5%	16.7%	5.7%	9.2%	29.9%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 177

37 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

38 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

39 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

Similar to news consumers nationally, Georgia residents often rely on television for getting their daily news, though in even greater numbers. Just over half of Georgians surveyed rely on a TV station for staying up-to-date on news on a daily basis, compared to 47% of people nationally, and nearly three quarters of surveyed Georgia residents reported relying on TV news at least monthly.⁴⁰ Additionally, 36.4% of Georgians surveyed said they get most of their news from TV.⁴¹ Georgians also rely significantly on digital means for getting news — a little more than a third of those surveyed said they rely on a website or app for news on a daily basis, and 38.5% of those surveyed said they use a social media platform for staying up-to-date daily, numbers that are in line with the national percentage.⁴² More than half of Georgians surveyed get most of their news online, compared to 58% of people surveyed nationally.⁴³

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Georgia, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent landscape analysis.

Additional research assessing how Georgia residents access news and information similarly found an increasing reliance on digital and non-traditional formats. While there are no recent, publicly available ecosystem-wide information needs assessments for Georgia, a fall 2023 landscape analysis by The Pivot Fund — which supports BIPOC-led community news organizations with funding, training, and capacity building — provides insight into the ways Georgians are seeking news and information. The report found that those under age 50 are more often turning to digital means for accessing news, such as a smartphone or computer, rather than print or broadcast options.⁴⁴ The report also detailed the findings from a 2021 media consumption poll of registered voters aged 18 to 39, highlighting how respondents are often not relying on traditional platforms

40 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

41 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

42 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

43 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2.”

44 Brown et al., “Georgia News Landscape Analysis.” p. 3.

to access news and information.⁴⁵ The largest number of respondents said they got information about their communities by word of mouth from family or friends, followed by Facebook, the report said.⁴⁶ A majority of Black respondents and 42% of white respondents cited social media as the type of media they most commonly used to get information about their communities.⁴⁷ The report also details a number of information providers that are based on or got their start on social media platforms, many of them on Facebook.⁴⁸ When it comes to meeting Georgia audiences where they are, it's clear that providing news and information on social media is an important need in the ecosystem.

Many Georgia communities are lacking digital or print newspapers and broadcast media. The State of Local News Project's 2023 map shows 21 counties in Georgia with no local news source and 116 counties with only one, though it should be noted this map may not be comprehensive and likely does not include informal or non-traditional news sources like community Facebook groups.⁴⁹ Some communities have local news sources, but the outlets are not seen as non-partisan or are not engaged with and connected to the community.

Stakeholders noted that some areas in the state have newspapers that provide content that feels disconnected from the audiences they serve or that has disenfranchised parts of their communities. Stakeholders described some outlets that had a poor relationship with communities of color, with one stakeholder noting that a community member had described news in their city as predatory and destructive. The state's flagship paper, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, has also faced recent challenges with trust among community members that help highlight historical issues, particularly when it comes to the paper's relationship with communities of color. The AJC and its owners have drawn criticism for their support and coverage of plans for the police training facility referred to as "cop city" by critics. The president and publisher of the AJC wrote an [op-ed](#) in the paper advocating for the new training facility in December 2023.⁵⁰ The AJC is owned by Cox Enterprises, which is a financial contributor to the organization behind the facility, the Atlanta Police Foundation, through its charitable arm.⁵¹ These connections have created a perception among some audience members that the paper supports the project and is contributing to suppression of opposition to the facility.

45 Brown et al., "Georgia News Landscape Analysis." p. 5–9.

46 Brown et al., "Georgia News Landscape Analysis." p. 5.

47 Brown et al., "Georgia News Landscape Analysis." p. 5.

48 Brown et al., "Georgia News Landscape Analysis." p. 5–9.

49 "Georgia," Local News Initiative, Northwestern University, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/state-localnewslandscape?state=GA&stateCode=13>.

50 Andrew Morse, "Opinion: Atlanta, we need the new public safety training center," The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, last modified December 2, 2023, <https://www.ajc.com/opinion/opinion-atlanta-we-need-the-new-public-safety-training-center/VVG5FA7QLFG23EIKPL5JTGSB6Q/>.

51 "The Battle Over 'Cop City,'" The New Republic, last modified October 11, 2023, <https://newrepublic.com/article/176032/battle-cop-city-atlanta-climate-justice>.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Georgia. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

Georgia’s news and information ecosystem has a mix of independent digital and print news, nonprofit outlets, broadcast and public media, and papers owned by national newspaper brands. Independent for-profit print and digital outlets account for the largest piece of Georgia’s ecosystem, with nearly half of Georgia news sources falling into this category. Most of Georgia’s local news and information providers are independent for-profits, nonprofits, or public media — only about 18.5% of Georgia outlets are newspapers with corporate ownership, and 10.9% are national broadcast chain affiliates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many outlets in Georgia are clustered within the metro Atlanta area, with fewer — and sometimes no — outlets in counties outside of it. Stakeholders felt that Atlanta’s ecosystem was fairly robust, and noted that it includes a number of community media outlets, but that these outlets are often under-resourced. For local newsrooms across the state, shrinking staff size and more limited resources are a challenge, particularly in areas where a single news outlet with only a few reporters is tasked with providing coverage for multiple counties. Even papers in Georgia’s smaller cities — like the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer, a McClatchy paper that stakeholders said was once seen as a “behemoth” in the southwestern part of the state — have similarly shrunk. One significant staffing challenge for papers outside of metro Atlanta is acquisition of new talent. Stakeholders said it can be hard to get trained reporters to move for journalism jobs in rural parts of Georgia, and it can also be difficult to find or train contributors among local community members. One stakeholder described how they have learned they cannot pull from the talent pool in Atlanta, or even tap unemployed journalists in the city, because those journalists often don’t want to move to more rural parts of Georgia, especially areas where racial tensions are high. Instead, the stakeholder said they had to recruit talent from rural communities with slightly bigger markets.

One important piece of supporting the local news ecosystem in Georgia is getting buy-in from local funders. “It’s been really, really hard to get Georgia funders to support Georgia newsrooms. They don’t understand why they should support journalism,” said Tracie Powell, founder of The Pivot Fund. “Now we’re seeing more of that, but we need to channel those dollars to hyperlocal newsrooms.” Powell highlighted not only the critical role local funders can play in supporting newsrooms as they work to increase capacity and revenue, but also how that support can impact local communities more broadly. When The Pivot Fund helped Davis Broadcasting, the oldest Black radio network in the state, hire their first digital sales manager, they saw the newsroom generate \$100,000 in new revenue within one year, Powell said. And, in addition to training the network’s sales team on digital products, The Pivot Fund found that the new digital sales manager was working with the local small businesses that advertised with the network to help facilitate their digital transformation.

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of Organizations	238	
Population per Organization	45,008	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	27	11.3%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	152	63.9%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	18	7.6%
Radio stations	13	5.5%
Television stations	28	11.8%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	152	63.9%
National broadcast chain	26	10.9%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	44	18.5%
Nonprofit	6	2.5%
Public media	10	4.2%
Community Media		
African American / Black	17	
Hispanic / Latino	6	
Asian / Asian American	20	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Trust is another major challenge within the Georgia news ecosystem, and the specific issues around trust look different for different communities. For some, newspapers have disenfranchised segments of their audience because of how they have portrayed them historically. Sonam Vashi, an Atlanta-based journalist and co-founder of Canopy Atlanta who now works at City Bureau as the director of Documenters Network Success, spoke about listening sessions she conducted in primarily working class Black and Brown neighborhoods in Metro Atlanta. “Pretty regularly, we just heard that there was distrust of media writ large, partially because narratives about those communities were usually very negative, usually about crime in the area, usually about abandoned and vacant properties — things that residents also wanted to see addressed in meaningful ways, but the narrative health of these communities, I would say, was not great,” Vashi said. In other cases, trust intersects with visibility and brand awareness for local media. Caleb Slinkard, executive director of

the Georgia Trust for Local News, said that “It’s hard to build trust in a news organization when people don’t really know where the news is coming from,” given people’s reliance on Facebook and other platforms for information.

Georgia has a small set of nonprofit outlets, comprising about 2% of the information providers in the state ecosystem. Many are based in metro Atlanta and have coverage focused primarily on that area, such as Atlanta Civic Circle and Canopy Atlanta. But others, like Georgia’s States Newsroom affiliate, Georgia Recorder, and DeKalb County-based Georgia Health News are located in metro Atlanta but have a statewide scope. The Georgia ecosystem has seen investment in the form of a number of reporting and journalism support projects in recent years, including the formation of the Georgia News Collaborative, the launch of the Georgia Trust for Local News in January 2024, and

the creation of Atlanta Documenters, part of City Bureau’s Documenters Network, launched by Canopy Atlanta in 2022. Georgia also has many small startup or social media-based news sources. Stakeholders said these kinds of outlets often need sales support, management assistance, and leadership and other kinds of training.

While there are a number of community news and information sources in Georgia, particularly in metro Atlanta, many of these organizations do not have the funding and resources they need to ensure sustainability, stakeholders said. They are also often not connected to each other through formal networks or collaborations, and are not always included in conversations about major funding initiatives or other journalism projects that English-language and general news organizations within the state are often part of. One stakeholder also noted that there are tensions between legacy media — including legacy media geared towards communities of color — and non-traditional information providers in the ecosystem. Legacy outlets sometimes view non-traditional news outlets as biased because their approach to coverage of communities can differ from journalism’s traditional emphasis on objectivity.

“Pretty regularly, we just heard that there was distrust of media writ large, partially because narratives about those communities were usually very negative, usually about crime in the area, usually about abandoned and vacant properties — things that residents also wanted to see addressed in meaningful ways, but the narrative health of these communities, I would say, was not great.”

Sonam Vashi,
Co-founder of Canopy Atlanta and Director of Documenters Network Success, City Bureau

Georgia’s community media ranges from traditional print or digital newspapers to Facebook groups to locally owned and operated broadcast stations. Seeing a need for timely Spanish-language news during hurricane season, Elizabeth Galarza started the nonprofit news outlet Pasa La Voz Savannah on Facebook to serve Spanish-speaking communities that were not receiving critical information. The outlet now has a website where it posts articles and video content.

Other communities have worked to fill information gaps using social media. Facebook groups like “Indians in Cumming, Ga.” and “Indians in Atlanta” serve as important information sources for Indian diaspora communities and have attracted thousands of members.⁵²

Communities of color are also served by more traditional formats like print or broadcast media. Many of these outlets are based in or focused on Atlanta, including the Atlanta Daily World, which serves the Black community in the city, and Atlanta K, which provides Korean-language news coverage. Others are located in cities across the state like Columbus or Savannah, but we found few community newspapers outside of metro areas.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	9.2%			2.1%	
Print and digital	45.4%		18.5%		
Print only	7.6%				
Radio	1.7%			0.4%	3.4%
Television		10.9%			0.8%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Georgia ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

While there are no recent statewide newsroom diversity assessments for Georgia, some outlets have released journalist diversity information or published source diversity tracking data. In 2020, Gannett committed to gender

52 Brown et al., “Georgia News Landscape Analysis,” p. 7.

and racial parity in its newsrooms by 2025 and announced plans to release staff demographics each year. We found staff diversity data from 2022 published by two Gannett newsrooms in Georgia: Savannah Morning News and the Augusta Chronicle. Savannah Morning News saw increased diversity in their staff in 2022,⁵³ while the Augusta Chronicle did not compare staff demographics to previous years but noted the paper still had work to do in order for staff demographics to reflect the demographics of their coverage area.⁵⁴

WABE, a PBS and NPR affiliate in Atlanta, tracks their sources and most recently published a report for October through December of 2023. The report compares WABE's source diversity data to metro Atlanta demographics, showing that WABE relies on a greater percentage of white and Black sources and more male sources than are reflected in the metro Atlanta community.⁵⁵

53 Jill Nevels, "Inclusivity, diversity in coverage, staff are priorities for Savannah Morning News," Savannah Morning News, [www.savannahnow.com](https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2022/07/27/diversity-coverage-staff-priority-savannah-morning-news/10154185002/), published July 27, 2022, <https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2022/07/27/diversity-coverage-staff-priority-savannah-morning-news/10154185002/>.

54 John Gogick, "Efforts to diversify The Augusta Chronicle newsroom, news coverage continue," The Augusta Chronicle, [www.augustachronicle.com](https://www.augustachronicle.com/story/news/local/2022/07/27/efforts-diversify-augusta-chronicle-newsroom-coverage-ongoing-amid-progress/10151093002/), published July 27, 2022, <https://www.augustachronicle.com/story/news/local/2022/07/27/efforts-diversify-augusta-chronicle-newsroom-coverage-ongoing-amid-progress/10151093002/>.

55 "Source Tracking," WABE, last modified January 10, 2024, <https://www.wabe.org/app/uploads/2024/01/2023-Q4.pdf>.

Case Study – Pasa La Voz Noticias

A Spanish-language community news and information source working to meet audiences where they are.

Amid gaps in the Spanish-language news offerings in Georgia, particularly when it came to timely information during hurricane season, Elizabeth Galarza founded Pasa La Voz in 2018. The outlet started on Facebook and focused heavily on providing critical news and information on a platform that was accessible to those who had just arrived in the U.S. Even as Pasa La Voz has grown, finding ways to meet audiences where they are continues to be central to the outlet’s mission.



Fernando Soto

Pasa La Voz Noticias team with community members representing Latinos in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Savannah, GA.

Now, as a nonprofit news outlet with its own website and a team working to provide coverage to local audiences, Pasa La Voz has continued to find alternative means to reach Spanish-speaking communities. It has continued to rely on Facebook and, similar to Spanish-language outlets in other states such as Enlace Latino, the news source has a WhatsApp group where staff can share critical news more quickly. It’s also allowed them to provide timely information to audience members who work irregular hours or otherwise might not have access to news throughout the day. As of this writing, the outlet is also working to launch a new version of their site with built-in translation options for English, Korean, and Portuguese.

“To me, in Georgia, I feel like there’s really not enough being invested, not enough news media or organizations in the state of Georgia, because there are so many counties that are left out,” Galarza said. While her outlet covers communities along the eastern side of Georgia and into the Carolinas, she said there is often no other local information source for Spanish-speaking communities to turn to, and there are many farm workers, for example, who must rely on Facebook for information.

The outlet has worked hard to build trust with their audience, Galarza explained, centering community information needs and serving as an informal resource coordinator for people who message them looking for information or help. “The news that we do, it’s what matters to our community,” Galarza said. She and her team try to put themselves in the shoes of those they are serving. “What would I need if I had just arrived to Savannah from Central America and I have nothing,” she said. “I have no language, and I have no money. What

do I need to know?” The outlet tries to include links to or information about resources and assistance in all of their coverage, Galarza said, and inform readers about their rights.

The outlet’s role as an informal hub for coordinating resources and information reflects the trust they have built with their audience.

“They come to us for everything, and when I say everything, it’s like everything,” Galarza said. They often receive direct messages from community members asking for help with anything from tracking down a stolen car to questions related to immigration. “We try to find the time, anyone from the team, to respond to those messages, to reply, because they have the need,” she said. “There’s no one else who they can go to.” In those cases, Pasa La Voz staff will send information about resources or phone numbers for local organizations that can help. “If I can take a minute of my day to help, I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Galarza said. “That’s how I feel. I know a lot of people and mentors and people I have talked to think different, but that’s because they don’t know, really, the need out there.”

The outlet also provides information in video format, recognizing that a portion of their audience may not have had opportunities to attend school and cannot read, Galarza said. They also work to avoid using unnecessarily complex language throughout their reporting for the same reasons.

Conversations about immigration are at the forefront in both Georgia and the U.S. more broadly, especially heading into the 2024 election. In Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp signed HB 1105 into law in May. The new bill, which would cut state funding for local law enforcement if they do not check detainees’ immigration status and notify federal officials when undocumented immigrants are arrested, rose to prominence following the killing of 22-year-old Augusta University student Laken Riley.⁵⁶ As the bill has progressed through the statehouse, Pasa La Voz has been focused on keeping their audience informed, combating misinformation about the bill, and looking for ways to inform Georgia residents broadly about the important and often overlooked role immigrants play in their communities.

Galarza has seen an environment of increased tension when it comes to discussing immigration, including racist and anti-immigrant sentiment. Amid this environment, Pasa La Voz is slated to release a series of videos — titled *Vida Inmigrante*

“The news that we do, it’s what matters to our community... What would I need if I had just arrived to Savannah from Central America and I have nothing?”

Elizabeth Galarza,
Founder, Pasa La Voz

⁵⁶ Stanley Dunlap, “Kemp signs bill into law forcing sheriffs to enforce federal immigration law,” Georgia Recorder, last modified May 1, 2024, <https://georgiarecorder.com/2024/05/01/kemp-signs-bill-into-law-forcing-sheriffs-to-enforce-federal-immigration-law/>.

or Immigrant Life in English — that highlights how immigrants are contributing to local communities. The series will shadow local business owners or employees throughout their day, allowing them to tell the stories of how they arrived in the U.S. and what they are doing now, from start to finish. Galarza hopes this will disrupt some of the misinformation she has seen in Georgia. “I want them to know that, yes, we are here, we work, we provide, we create jobs,” she said. “I want people to be able to see that other side of what the misinformation is. I want to tell them the truth.”

Acknowledgements

We relied on the insight, expertise, and feedback of local stakeholders in order to write this chapter. Thank you to Staci Fox, Elizabeth Galarza, DuBose Porter, Tracie Powell, Caleb Slinkard, and Sonam Vashi.

IMPACT ARCHITECTS

Michigan and Detroit

Michigan and Detroit

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Michigan and Detroit news and information ecosystems. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Michigan's news and information ecosystem is home to strong statewide digital media, public media, and national newspaper chains. Detroit, specifically, has a strong local news ecosystem and is home to innovative journalism organizations and collaboratives entirely built around meeting the information needs of Detroiters. While civic engagement and voter turnout is high in Michigan overall, turnout is much lower in Detroit. However, a recent survey shows that active voters in Michigan are civically engaged in a variety of other ways. Finally, Michigan has many "pink slime" news outlets that take advantage of trust in local news for partisan aims. These factors make Michigan an important site for the intersection of strong, high quality local news and civic participation.

Michigan is the tenth largest state by population in the U.S., and Detroit is the 14th largest metro area.¹ As a state, Michigan is less urban than the U.S. as a whole, with 73.5% of the population living in an urban area, compared to 80% of the U.S.² While broadband access information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau indicates Michigan is on par with the U.S., stakeholders we spoke with said that rural areas of Michigan, particularly those in the Upper Peninsula, suffer from a lack of access. In fact, while Detroit has made progress in broadband penetration in recent years, the percentage of homes with access is 8.4 percentage points below that of Michigan and about nine percentage points below the U.S. as a whole.³

1 "Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas Population Totals: 2020-2023." United States Census Bureau, Population Division. March 14, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html#v2023>.

2 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan." United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan,MI/PST045223>.

3 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

Michigan is less racially and ethnically diverse than the U.S., with about 75% of its population identifying as white, non-Hispanic.⁴ Every other racial or ethnic group — as defined by U.S. Census categories — is smaller than the U.S. as a whole, with the exception of the Black population, which roughly matches figures for the U.S. However, two-thirds of Black Michiganders reside in the Detroit-Warren-Dearborn metro area. Indeed, Detroit's population is 77.8% Black, the highest of any city in the U.S., and it is the largest majority Black city in the country.⁵ Both Detroit and the Detroit metro area are among the most segregated cities and metro areas in the country.⁶

Additionally, the city of Dearborn's Arab American population exceeds 100,000, and the city itself is majority Arab American, adding to the diversity of the Detroit metro area, as well as the potential for specific information needs and forms of civic engagement.⁷ The Detroit-Warren-Dearborn metro area has one community news outlet for Arab American news, which focuses on local, national, and international news.

There's also a marked contrast between Michigan overall and Detroit specifically with respect to median household income, poverty rate, and education. Michigan's poverty rate is about two percentage points higher than the U.S., while both median household income and the percentage of the population with a Bachelor's degree are slightly lower.⁸ Zooming in on Detroit, the city's poverty rate is among the highest in the country with nearly one third (31.5%) of residents living in poverty.⁹ The city's median household income is 68% lower than the U.S. and 59% lower than Michigan.¹⁰ And 16.9% of Detroit residents hold a Bachelor's degree, compared with 31.1% of Michigan residents overall.¹¹ The differences between Michigan as a whole and Detroit as a city are products of deindustrialization, segregation, and disinvestment. Some of the most significant local news efforts in Detroit are meant to provide information to combat these structural factors.

There is strong philanthropic support for journalism in Michigan, especially in Detroit. With the exceptions of Chicago and Washington, D.C., from 2020 through 2022, more money was invested in local journalism per capita in Detroit, \$4.68, than any other ecosystem in this study.¹² The per capita investment in Michigan was higher than the median, which is particularly notable for such a populous state. Local funders who have contributed more than \$1 million to journalism since 2020 include

4 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

5 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

6 Caroline Llanes. "Detroit Ranked as One of the Most Segregated Cities in the Country." Michigan Public, June 21, 2021. <https://www.michiganpublic.org/families-community/2021-06-21/detroit-ranked-as-one-of-the-most-segregated-cities-in-the-country>.

7 Sally Howell and Amny Shuraydi. "A Brief History of Dearborn, Michigan – the First Arab-American Majority City in the U.S." The Conversation, February 12, 2024. <https://theconversation.com/a-brief-history-of-dearborn-michigan-the-first-arab-american-majority-city-in-the-us-216700>.

8 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

9 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

10 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

11 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan; Detroit city, Michigan."

12 Foundation Maps, by Candid. Media Impact Funders. Accessed 2024.

The Kresge Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The former primarily contributed to nonprofit digital media such as Planet Detroit and Bridge Michigan, while the latter primarily supported Michigan Public, an NPR affiliate based at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Other notable local funders include the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, The Skillman Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, a relatively new funder to journalism, will host the Press Forward chapter for northern Michigan.

In Michigan overall, trust in local news is roughly on par with the national average, using measures such as reliability, commitment to community betterment, and fairness.¹³ However, in Detroit trust is well below both Michigan's and the national average, suggesting a severe lack of trust.¹⁴ Upon closer look, stakeholders suggest that the situation is complex and that there's a lack of trust in legacy media — such as the two daily newspapers, the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News — because of historical harm and misrepresentation of city residents for a suburban audience. Stakeholders indicate that trust is higher among local media embedded in Detroit communities, which is evident in monetary support and direct involvement, such as in Outlier Media's Detroit Documenters program, part of the City Bureau network that trains and pays community members to cover local public meetings. These activities might not be captured, or even considered, in surveys about trust in local media.

By all metrics we used in this analysis, with the exception of voter registration and turnout, civic engagement is relatively low in Michigan.¹⁵ Michigan's large rural populations might contribute to this relatively low level of engagement as measured by attending public meetings, donating to political campaigns, and attending public protests. Additionally, we found that the counties in Michigan that lack local news also don't provide pathways for engagement through their municipal websites, which could also be a factor in low levels of civic engagement. Research commissioned by Outlier Media about civic participation and voting reflects much of the polling for Michigan, but there are key differences. Voter turnout in Detroit is much lower than Michigan overall, for example, and Detroiters are similarly less inclined to donate to political campaigns.¹⁶ However, support in time and money to charitable and religious organizations indicates a different type of engagement characteristic of the city.

This chapter presents Michigan and Detroit at a glance with topline information about their communities, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

13 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%206%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view>.

14 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

15 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.” Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

16 “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

Opportunities

Increase coverage and audience engagement in rural areas:

More than a quarter of Michigan residents live in a rural area, and Michigan has multiple statewide news organizations with widespread presence, even if they don't necessarily touch every part of the state.

Leveraging statewide media assets to provide deeper, community-based coverage in Michigan's rural areas, especially in the Upper Peninsula would help meet the information needs of all Michigan residents.

Developing and understanding trust in local news:

Trust in the media in Detroit is much lower than the rest of Michigan, despite the fact that Detroit is home to service-oriented information providers that are intentional about understanding and meeting community needs. There are opportunities to ensure that these providers reach more Detroiters than they currently do to build greater trust, particularly because there are proven models already in place. At the same time, there's an opportunity to reflect on common metrics for understanding trust in local news given longstanding distrust in legacy media and the presence of service-oriented information providers that operate like traditional "local news."

Encourage civic participation through voting in Detroit:

There are examples of civic participation in Detroit, but voter turnout in 2022 was low compared to the state.

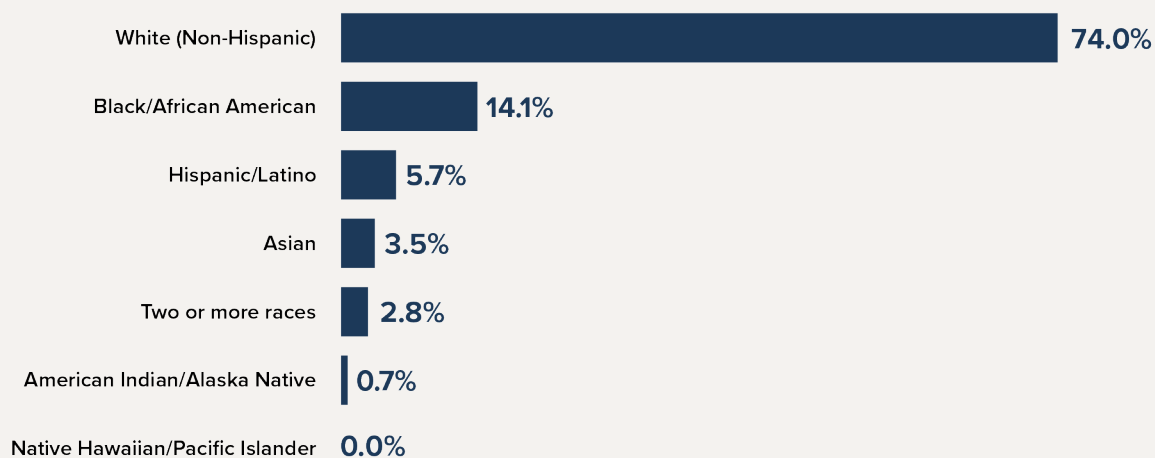
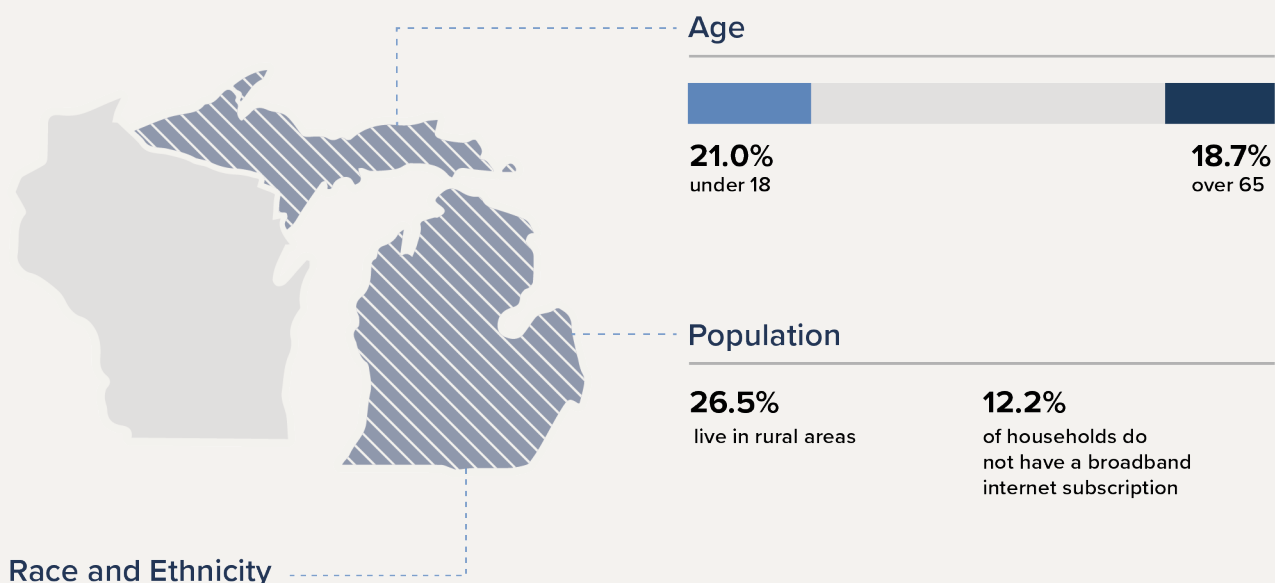
If civic knowledge is a reason why it is low, creating voting guides about the logistics of voting (such as checking registration, how to vote by mail, etc.) is an easy opportunity to encourage greater turnout. If the issue is more about Detroiters' lack of faith in the system, highlighting and strengthening Detroit's robust accountability journalism is a long-term opportunity to show the impact of voting.

Michigan at a Glance

Topline indicators about Michigan and Detroit's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

Community Indicators

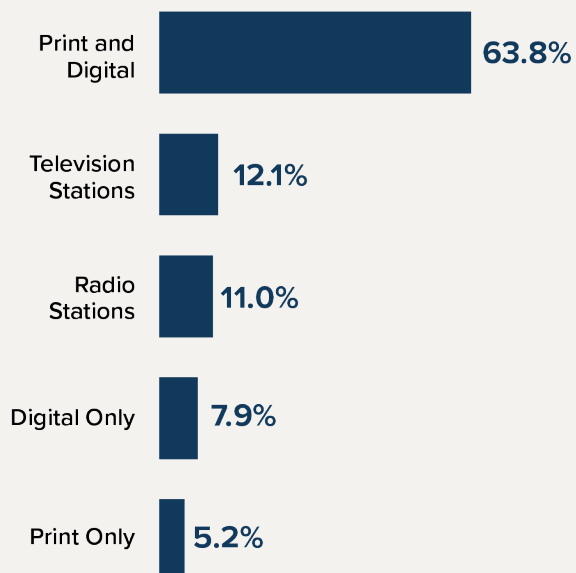
Community indicators are from the state's U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



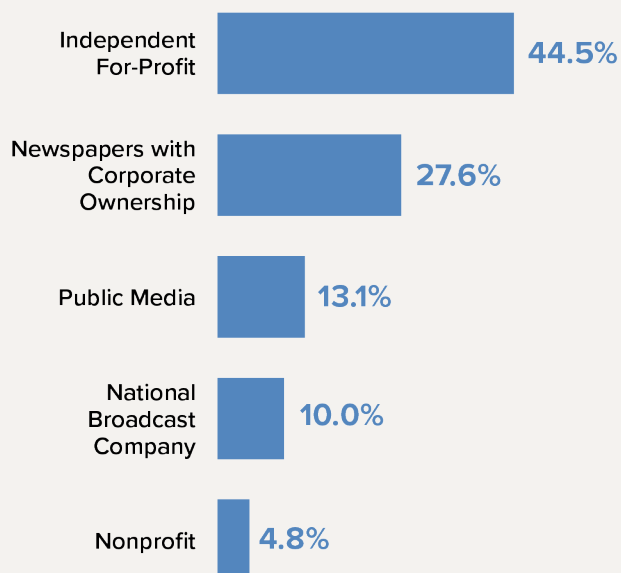
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).

Medium

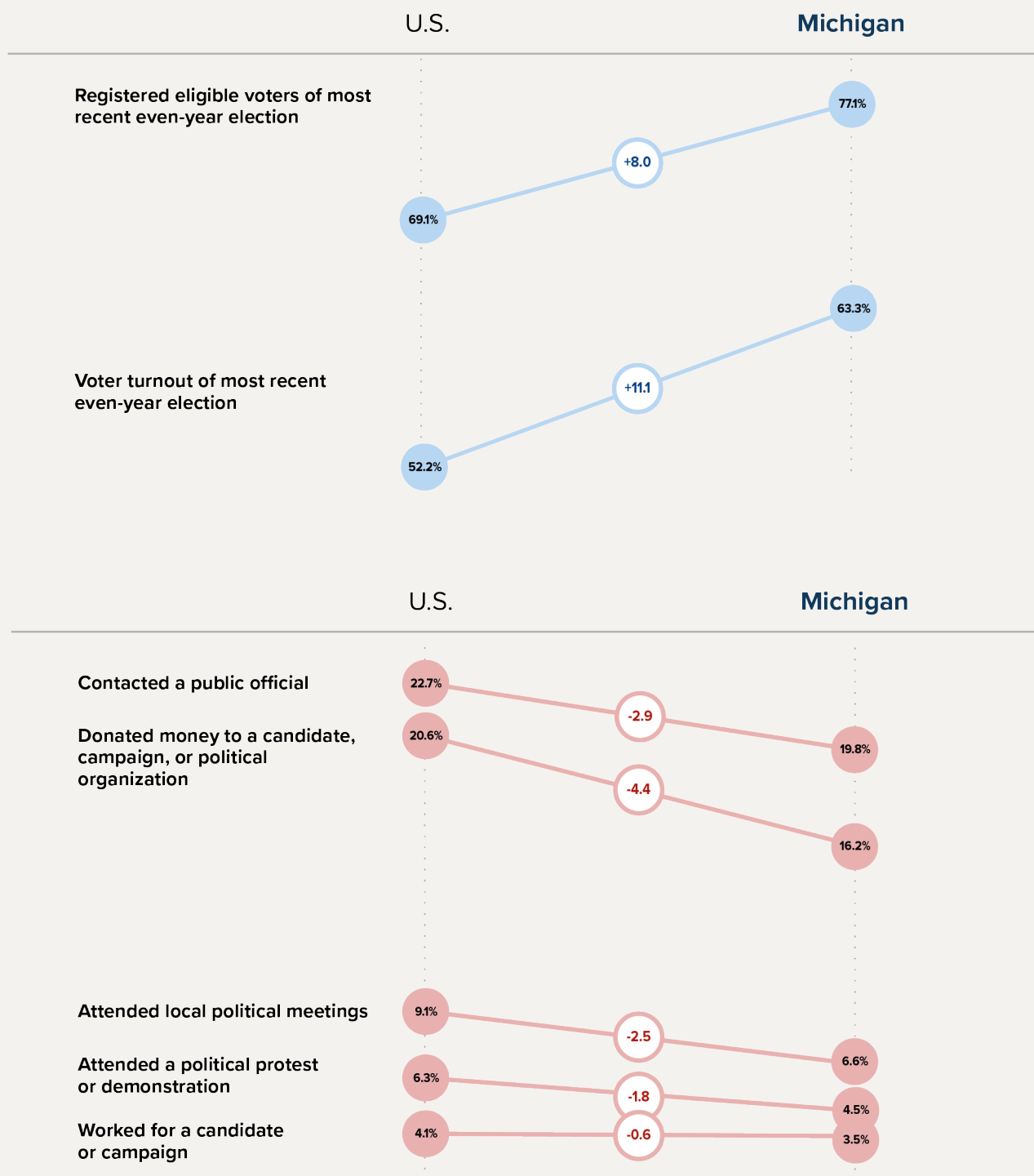


Ownership structure



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).

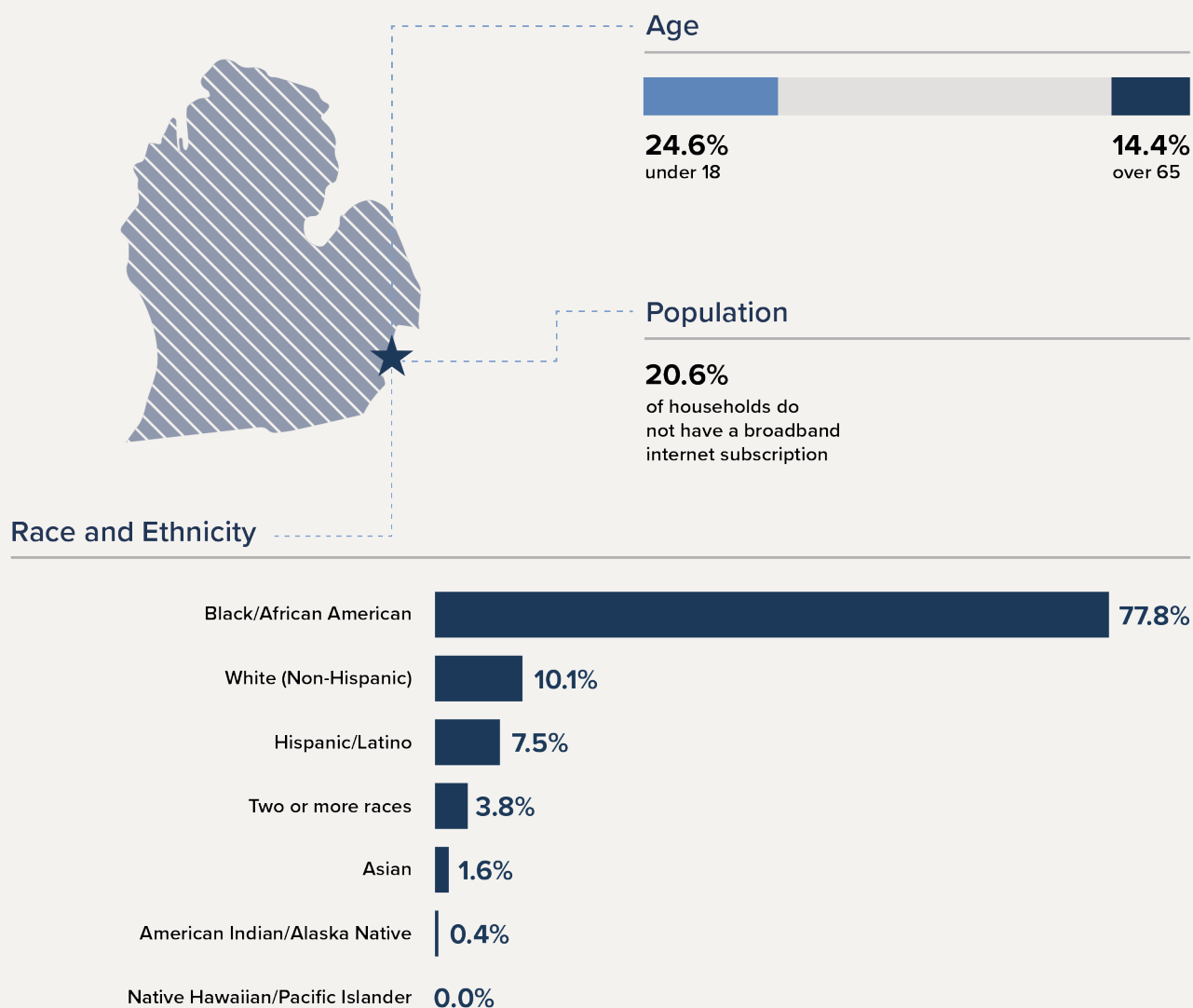


Detroit at a Glance

Topline indicators about Michigan and Detroit's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

Community Indicators

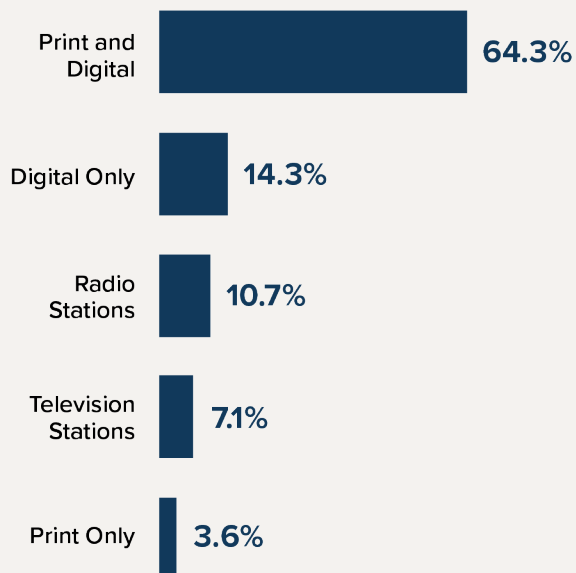
Community indicators are from the state's U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



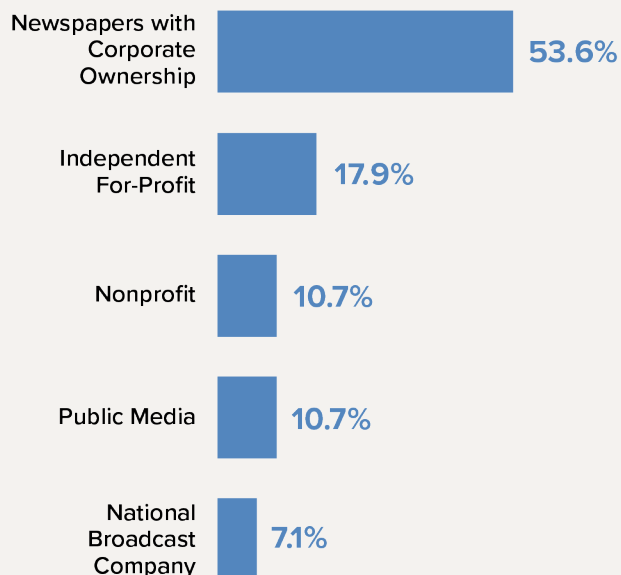
Detroit Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).

Medium

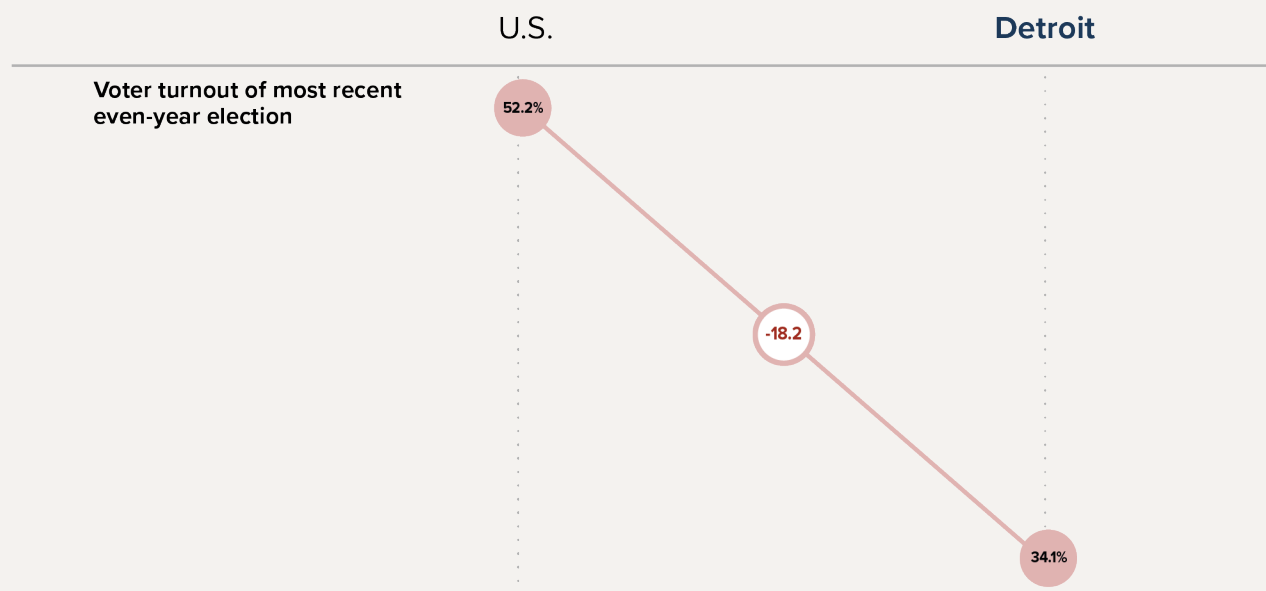


Ownership structure



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Michigan and Detroit Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Michigan and Detroit specifically to dig deeper into the current state of Michigan and Detroit's news and information ecosystems. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about the Documenters programs in Detroit and Grand Rapids.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Michigan and Detroit.

Indicators from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative

Election Study (CES) used throughout this

report show that civic engagement is lower

in Michigan than in the U.S. in general.

Alternative polling that addresses many of

the same civic engagement activities found

that Detroit residents differ in a few key ways,

suggesting that they are both more and less

engaged than Michigan depending on how one

measures civic engagement. Additionally, there is a marked difference between voter turnout in Michigan and Detroit.

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	Michigan	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	6.6%	-2.5 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	16.2%	-4.4 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	4.5%	-1.8 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	19.8%	-2.9 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.5%	-0.6 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,953

Voter turnout for the 2022 mid-term election in Michigan was 63%, 11 percentage points higher than the U.S. overall.¹⁷ The ballot also included a race for governor, which might have contributed to the relatively high turnout. However, turnout in

¹⁷ "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

Detroit was much lower than both Michigan and the U.S., with only 34% of registered voters in the city casting a ballot in the midterm election.¹⁸ In terms of access to the polls, Michigan's Cost of Voting Index score is 0.20, which ranks 26th among the 50 states and suggests that voting access in Michigan is neither restrictive nor as easily accessible as some other states.¹⁹

In early 2024, Outlier Media commissioned the University of Michigan's Detroit Metro Areas Communities Study (DMACS) initiative to include a survey panel with questions meant to help understand various elements of civic engagement in Detroit. The questions were similar to those asked in Outlier Media's regular information needs survey, but the academic rigor behind the survey means more reliable, and more useful, results. The results provide insight into Detroiters and voting. While 70% of respondents said they will "definitely" vote in the 2024 general election, many were uncertain, and four percent said they will "definitely not" vote.²⁰ Among those who said they will definitely not vote or expressed uncertainty ("probably will" or "probably will not vote"), they said that their main reasons were lack of faith in the system, logistics, and dissatisfaction with the presidential candidates. It is notable, however, that the survey was fielded in early 2024, before President Joe Biden opted not to run for reelection, so sentiment may have shifted. Sample responses include:

Lack of faith

- I don't think my vote matters.
- I feel like my opinion doesn't matter.
- I don't get involved a lot and just don't feel it counts.

Logistics

- Work and sitter.
- Work schedule.
- Don't know if I am registered.
- I will vote if I'm able to.
- Because they sometimes don't tell us where to vote at

Dissatisfaction with candidates

- I don't support either party; nor do I live by the 'lesser of two evils' philosophy.
- Have little confidence in either candidate.²¹

This survey reveals some opportunities where local journalism can play a role in encouraging civic engagement through voting. One opportunity for journalism is with respect to the logistics of voting: Voting guides with information about early voting, voting by mail, securing registration information, and details about poll openings are easy to package and provide a public

18 City of Detroit Election Summary Report. January 12, 2023. <https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2023-01/2022%20Election%20Summary%20Report%20%20Signed%20-%20Official%20Results.pdf>.

19 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

20 Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, June 14, 2024. https://outliermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/0617_out_SurveyDMACS_Wave19Toplines.pdf.

21 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022"; Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

service that affirms the democratic process. It is more difficult for journalism to tackle Detroit residents' lack of faith in the system, at least in the short term. In this respect, journalism's civic function is less about persuading non-voters that their vote does matter, but rather holding government accountable and demonstrating the real life impact of decisions made by elected officials. Speaking to the value of the survey results for Outlier Media and Detroit newsrooms in general, Alvarez said that it is "clear that there are accountability gaps here that local news needs to step in to fill," particularly when it comes to the responsiveness of local officials.

And finally, there's an underlying cynicism about political participation and the democratic system in the dissatisfaction with presidential candidates that poses a challenge local journalism might not be equipped to address, at least in isolation.²² The specific opportunity might be in informing residents that there are also important local matters on the ballot. Some of the responses might have been different if the upcoming election weren't a presidential election. As one person responded: "I don't believe the vote matters or the system works the way they teach us it does. I do, however, believe it has an impact on a local level so I do plan on becoming more involved in voting in state and local municipalities elections."²³

Several of the DMACS questions are similar to the engagement metrics from the CES survey we use throughout this report that are only available at the national and state level. Taken together, there are both similarities and differences between Michigan and Detroit. For Michigan, civic engagement is about even or lower than average when compared with the U.S. The biggest discrepancy is in monetary contributions to a candidate, campaign, or political organization, where Michigan is five percentage points below the U.S.

According to the DMACS survey, 15% of Detroiters "contacted a public official to express [an] opinion on a political issue," while seven percent participated in a protest, which is roughly the same as Michigan (based on the CES survey).²⁴ The biggest discrepancy between Michigan and Detroit residents is with respect to monetary contributions to a political campaign or candidate: 21% of Michiganders made contributions according to CES data, compared with only eight percent of Detroiters

"I don't believe the vote matters or the system works the way they teach us it does. I do, however, believe it has an impact on a local level so I do plan on becoming more involved in voting in state and local municipalities elections."

Participant,
Detroit Metro Areas Communities Study

²² The survey was fielded before President Biden opted not to run for re-election.

²³ Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

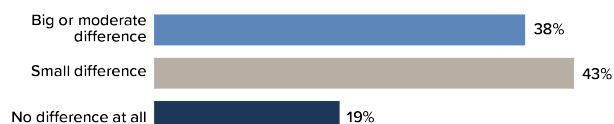
²⁴ Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

in the DMACS survey.²⁵ This low level of engagement in politics correlates to low voter turnout.

On the other hand, 24% of Detroiters said they “attended a meeting about an issue facing your community,” 15 percentage points higher than for Michigan as a whole.²⁶ And the DMACS survey suggests that Detroiters are willing to contribute financially to non-political groups. The survey found that 41% of Detroiters contributed money to charitable organizations, while 37% contributed either time or money to religious organizations.²⁷ While we don’t know how these numbers compare to Michigan overall, it is clear that Detroiters are willing to contribute time and money to organizations that are important to them — there just seems to be disenchantment with the electoral process.

Several additional survey results indicate that there’s an opportunity for local journalism interested in supporting civic participation. First, 41% of Detroiters affirmed that they “want to be more involved” in their communities, while 47% said “maybe.”²⁸ Jesse Holcomb — associate professor of journalism and communication at Calvin University, located in Grand Rapids — said that apathy was a barrier to civic engagement because it’s “costly to give up time to make community better through government.” Showing how people can be more involved in communities, as well as why it matters and what it yields, either from within or from outside of government channels, can be a way to harness the apparent willingness for Detroiters to become more civically

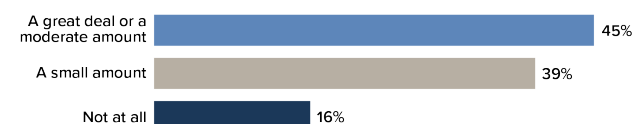
How much a difference do you believe you can make in Detroit?



How much do you believe your local representatives care about what you think is important for Detroit?



How much can people like you affect what the local government in Detroit does?



There are opportunities for increasing civic engagement across all these answer groups, with local journalism working to show how one can make a difference, conveying why it matters, and holding officials accountable for being responsive to community efforts.

²⁵ Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

²⁶ Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022”; Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

²⁷ Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

²⁸ Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

engaged. Additionally, the majority of people in Detroit believe at least a little bit that they can make a difference in their communities and affect local government.

There are opportunities for increasing civic engagement across all these answer groups, with local journalism working to show how one can make a difference, conveying why it matters, and holding officials accountable for being responsive to community efforts. It's still important to acknowledge that about one-fifth of Detroiters believe they can't make a difference.²⁹ This group may or may not be harder to reach or persuade, and one way for local journalism to play a role could be to discover why this group feels this way.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in Michigan and Detroit and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

In general, both Michigan and Detroit provide relatively good access to information in terms of government records and clear pathways for residents to engage. However, Michigan's governor and legislature are exempt from FOIA requests, making it difficult for journalists and residents to gain access to records that typically help fight corruption and hold the most powerful offices in the state accountable. State legislators have long attempted to change the law, and in March 2024, a bill made its way out of the Michigan Senate committee that would expand FOIA to include the governor and state legislature.³⁰ Max White, digital executive producer at local television station 7 News Detroit, said that the legislation still might not go far enough, as it includes too many exemptions. White himself has worked to expand the law as a former board member of the Detroit chapter of the Society for Professional Journalists. Additionally, White said that he worked to expand public awareness and involvement, specifically that "you don't have to be a journalist to file FOIA."

In an audit of the websites of counties with zero, one, or two total news outlets (according to the State of Local News Project's database), we found that information about public meetings is spotty. We reviewed six county websites: four with no news outlets, one with one outlet, and one with two. All websites provided contact information for public officials, as well as the dates and times of public meetings. We judged that the information was easily findable for five out of the six counties. However, other pathways for engaging with public meetings were not as accessible. Only two out of the six

29 Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. University of Michigan, 2024.

30 Anna Liz Nichols. "FOIA Expansion to the Governor and Legislature Makes It Out of Michigan Senate Committee." Michigan Advance, March 13, 2024. <https://michiganadvance.com/2024/03/13/foia-expansion-to-the-governor-and-legislature-makes-it-out-of-michigan-senate-committee/>.

counties posted minutes of past meetings, while three out of the six provided a virtual option or recorded meetings. And while all counties posted times and dates of public meetings, only half included meeting agendas prior to the meeting.

Public meetings are well covered in Detroit and Grand Rapids, in large part because both cities are home to Documenters programs. Detroit was one of the first expansion sites for the network coming out of Chicago, and the city's program remains quite active.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Michiganders' and Detroiters' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

The Gallup/Knight American views survey suggests that trust in media for Michigan as a whole is on par with the U.S. The biggest discrepancy is four percentage points regarding the reliability of local news to deliver needed information, and that result shows that Michiganders are more trusting than the U.S. as a whole. However, the results for the Detroit-Warren-Dearborn metro area are starkly different and suggest a severe lack of trust in local news among Detroiters. The largest discrepancies — 21 percentage points — are in the two questions where trust was the lowest for all surveyed U.S. residents: whether or

Information Providers And Community	U.S	Michigan	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	66.7%	1.7% ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	55.7%	3.7% ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	54.6%	1.6% ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	48.6%	1.6% ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	44.3%	0.3% ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 183

Information Providers And Community	U.S	Detroit	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	62.3%	-2.7% ▼
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	36.2%	-15.8% ▼
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	39.1%	-13.9% ▼
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	26.1%	-20.9% ▼
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	23.2%	-20.8% ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 70

not local news cares about communities and whether or not local news intends to mislead or misinform the public.³¹

When asked about trust, stakeholders provided a more complicated view than that presented in the Gallup/Knight survey data. In general, stakeholders agreed that Detroiters are apprehensive

about sharing their stories with legacy media in the city, particularly the two legacy newspapers, the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News, because of historical misrepresentation of city residents and perceived misconstrual of the city for suburban audiences. Sarah Alvarez, founder and editor-in-chief of Outlier Media, believes that trust in Outlier Media is high, but that in general “there’s hesitancy among Detroiters to trust the news with their own stories.” But stakeholders overall perceive a great deal of trust in local media organizations that are rooted in community and have done work identifying and meeting information needs. Natalie Fotias, vice president of communications at The Skillman Foundation, said that the community engagement activities done at outlets like Outlier Media, Bridge Detroit, and Chalkbeat Detroit have helped cultivate trust between Detroiters and these news organizations. White of 7 News Detroit, which is owned by Scripps Media, pointed to a company-wide initiative to increase local presence in communities and add

journalists to enhance trust. Scripps CEO Adam Symson indicated the company found that “enhanced trust and viewership lies simply in the company’s presence among [communities].”³²

While television is a major way residents of Michigan stay up to date on news, they rely on TV news slightly less than U.S. residents overall, and both Michiganders and Detroiters get most of their news online. In Michigan, the percentage of residents who get most of their news online is 11 percentage points higher than that of U.S. residents overall, and in Detroit the number is about six percentage points

“There’s hesitancy among Detroiters to trust the news with their own stories.”

Sarah Alvarez

Founder and editor-in-chief of Outlier Media

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S.	Michigan	Difference from U.S.
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	2.2%	-0.8 ▼
From TV	31%	26.3%	-4.7 ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	69.3%	11.3 ▲
From a radio	7%	2.2%	-4.8 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 183

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S.	Detroit	Difference from U.S.
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	2.9%	-0.1 ▼
From TV	31%	30%	-1.0 ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	64.3%	6.3 ▲
From a radio	7%	2.9%	-4.1 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 70

31 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%206%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

32 “Scripps Commits to Boost – And Better – Its News Coverage.” TVNewsCheck, May 25, 2023. [https://tvnewscheck.com/journalism/article/scripps-commits-to-boost-and-better-its-news-coverage/.](https://tvnewscheck.com/journalism/article/scripps-commits-to-boost-and-better-its-news-coverage/)

higher. The figures from Michigan might be a reflection of strong statewide digital media, and this reinforces the need to identify and address any regions that lack access to broadband internet.

Over 60% of Michiganders and Detroiters get news at least weekly from direct communication with others, which is about as much as those who get news online at least weekly.³³ Newspaper consumption appears slightly higher in Detroit than in Michigan overall, which could be a product of Detroit having two daily newspapers.

It's also notable that about as many Michiganders get daily news from a social media platform as from television or a website. For Detroit, more people get daily news from social media (49%) than any other medium.³⁴ Fotias noted how some nonprofit newsrooms are using social media in increasingly engaging and informative ways “from sharing videos where editors respond to reader inquiries with unbiased facts to simply making an effort to reach young people where they are, with journalistic integrity.” Research suggests that young people get news from social media, but they don't necessarily trust it, so there's an opportunity to populate the spaces with high quality information.³⁵

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
Michigan					
A newspaper	26.0%	17.7%	7.2%	19.3%	29.8%
A website or app	42.1%	18.6%	9.8%	18.0%	11.5%
A radio station	22.5%	24.7%	6.6%	20.9%	25.3%
A TV station	42.6%	14.8%	10.9%	20.2%	11.5%
Direct communication with people in your area	25.1%	37.2%	14.2%	10.4%	13.1%
A magazine	2.2%	10.9%	15.8%	26.2%	44.8%
A social media platform	44.3%	13.7%	6.6%	16.4%	19.1%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 183

Detroit					
A newspaper	30.9%	22.1%	5.9%	17.6%	23.5%
A website or app	42.9%	20.0%	8.6%	12.9%	15.7%
A radio station	30.0%	21.4%	8.6%	20.0%	20.0%
A TV station	42.9%	12.9%	11.4%	24.3%	8.6%
Direct communication with people in your area	25.7%	35.7%	17.1%	8.6%	12.9%
A magazine	4.3%	12.9%	21.4%	25.7%	35.7%
A social media platform	48.6%	8.6%	8.6%	11.4%	22.9%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 70

33 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

34 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

35 Peter Suci. “Teens Increasingly Rely on Social Media for News – But They Don't Trust It.” Forbes, July 22, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2022/07/22/teens-increasing-rely-on-social-media-for-news-but-they-dont-trust-it/?sh=38e-88ca519ff>.

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Michigan and Detroit, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent ecosystem assessment.

Detroit has the benefit of being home to Outlier Media, a national leader in the information needs space. Outlier was founded on the premise that the role of local journalism is to identify and meet the needs of community members. Alvarez developed Outlier's model as a John S. Knight fellow at Stanford University in 2015. The work identified a resource need among Detroiters (quality housing, especially among renters) and the best way to communicate information to them (text message). From 2016 until its most recent report in 2022, Outlier developed and refined a methodology for identifying resource and information gaps and shaping its journalism practices to fill them.³⁶

In Detroit, understanding information needs is an ongoing process. Outlier's most recent inquiry indicated that Detroiters need more information that would help them address income inequality, such as finding work, meeting basic needs, and accessing services.

Rather than focusing on deficiency, Srbinovich recommends starting with asset mapping to see what infrastructure already exists, and then build relationships from there.

Because Outlier regularly seeks out information from the community, it is able to adapt its information services. As of this writing, Outlier provides information about housing, utilities, transportation, local government, arts and culture, and community. Outlier's influential approach has been adapted by several other news organizations throughout the country, including Documented in New York City and El Tímpano in Oakland.

It is important to note that when Outlier reaches out directly to Detroiters, it asks about resource gaps rather than information gaps. "It is more difficult for individuals to identify their information gaps than their resource needs,"

³⁶ Sarah Alvarez. "Information Needs in Detroit." Outlier Media, June 2022. https://outliermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Detroit-Information-Needs-2022_Final.pdf.

Alvarez wrote, “and that difficulty is a foundational barrier that prevents people from meeting their resource needs.”³⁷ Moreover, Outlier’s focus is on the Detroit proper rather than the metro area because of the income gap between Detroit and its surrounding suburbs. As the report indicates: “Higher-income people and communities simply have fewer resource and information gaps. News and information sources typically cater to higher-income individuals, creating and exacerbating info gaps.”³⁸ A similar approach should at least be considered by anyone seeking out the information needs of communities.

To identify the information needs for the rest of Michigan, we relied more on known infrastructure gaps and perceived lack of coverage rather than intentional assessment. Still, stakeholders identify common themes. Michelle Srbinovich, vice president of growth investments at the American Journalism Project and former general manager at WDET, noted that there’s a disconnect between the city and the Detroit suburbs in terms of coverage and fulfilling information needs. Greater alignment and collaboration across news organizations statewide could help close that gap. Additionally, Srbinovich said that “nobody has stepped up to understand the needs of the rural areas in the Upper Peninsula.” Rather than focusing on deficiency, Srbinovich recommends starting with asset mapping to see what infrastructure already exists and then building relationships from there. Outlets like Bridge, MLive, and Michigan Radio already aim to cover the entire state, so supporting connections between those newsrooms and existing community assets could be mutually beneficial.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Michigan and Detroit. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the [More Resources](#) section of the [report page](#).

Our research identified 290 news organizations in Michigan and 28 serving Detroit (with some overlap). There’s a wide variety of media and business types throughout the state. Print and digital media is the most prominent, as independent for-profit print and digital media comprises 35.9% of the news organizations we identified across Michigan. Print and digital

³⁷ Alvarez. “Information Needs in Detroit.”

³⁸ Alvarez. “Information Needs in Detroit.”

newspapers with corporate ownership also have a significant presence, comprising 27.6% of the outlets we identified. In Detroit, print and digital independent for-profit, digital nonprofit, and public radio each comprise about 10% of news outlets. Print and digital newspapers with corporate ownership, however, are most prevalent. Gannett has a particularly large presence, as it owns both the Detroit Free Press as well as a wide collection of papers that serve Detroit suburbs. Additionally, a joint operating agreement between the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News means that Gannett owns a majority of business operations for the two newspapers. Aside from the joint operating agreement, the Detroit News is owned by MediaNews Group (Alden Global Capital).³⁹ Given that national newspaper chains own and operate such a large

proportion of outlets in Michigan, it's not surprising that stakeholders identified staff reductions as a challenge. Gannett, for example, reduced staff by about 50% nationally from the time of its 2018 merger with GateHouse Media to 2023.⁴⁰

There's a relatively small presence of community media in Michigan. We identified one Arab American news outlet, Arab American News, that covers national and global issues but also provides local journalism for the Dearborn area. Detroit is home to two outlets focused on the Hispanic or Latino population, a Black radio station, and print outlets specifically serving Black Detroiters.

While we did not include “pink slime” outlets — which portray themselves as legitimate local news but often have partisan ties and publish aggregated or AI-generated content — when we compiled our list of information providers, it is worth noting that there are many in Michigan. Metric Media, a network that a Tow Center investigation found “promotes interests of advocacy

Information Providers	Michigan	Detroit
Number of organizations	290	28
Population per organization	34,749	22,825
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	23	4
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	185	18
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	15	1
Radio stations	32	3
Television stations	35	2
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	129	5
National broadcast chain	29	2
Newspapers with corporate ownership	80	15
Nonprofit	14	3
Public media	38	3
Community Media		
African American/Black	9	3
Hispanic/Latino	9	2
Asian/Asian American	2	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

39 Jordyn Grzelewski. “Detroit News, Free Press Printing Plant Sold to Ohio Developer.” The Detroit News, March 13, 2023. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/2023/03/13/gannett-sells-sterling-heights-printing-plant-to-ohio-developer/70004284007/>.

40 Sara Fischer and Kerry Flynn. “Gannett Shed Nearly Half its Workforce Since GateHouse Merger.” Axios, March 7, 2023. <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/07/gannett-changes-leadership-workers>.

groups without explicit disclosures” and often doesn’t cover important local events,⁴¹ publishes 39 websites in Michigan, and in May 2024 one million Michiganders received a newspaper in the mail called “The Michigan Independent” that they didn’t subscribe to.⁴² Reporting from MLive.com shows that the ownership can be traced to a Democratic super PAC and that, while the staff on its website appear to be credible journalists, only one is based in Michigan.⁴³

MICHIGAN	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	3.4%			4.5%	
Print and digital	35.9%		27.6%	0.3%	
Print only	5.2%				
Radio					11%
Television		10%			2.1%
DETROIT	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	3.6%			10.7%	
Print and digital	10.7%		53.6%		
Print only	3.6%				
Radio					10.7%
Television		7.1%			

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Journalism organizations in Michigan frequently work together, and there are several ongoing collaboratives that include sharing resources and co-creating content. The Southwest Michigan Journalism Collaborative, which is supported by the Solutions Journalism Network, brings together media, education, and community organizations to advance solutions journalism surrounding equity and mental health.⁴⁴ The collaborative includes 12 organizations, representing digital, student, and community media. Another solutions-oriented collaborative is the New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative, which is also supported by the Solutions Journalism Network.⁴⁵ This ongoing collaborative includes about two dozen news and community organizations and initially focused on caregiving, with plans to expand coverage to health equity in western New York and eastern Michigan, including Detroit. The Great Lakes News Collaborative, supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, focuses on climate change, pollution, and infrastructure around the Great Lakes and includes The Narwhal, a Canadian news organization focused on climate change.⁴⁶

41 Priyanjana Bengani, “Advocacy groups and Metric Media collaborate on local ‘community news,’” Columbia Journalism Review, last modified October 14, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/community-newsmaker-metric-media-local-news.php?preview=true.

42 Rose White. “A Newspaper Delivered to 1 Million Michigan Mailboxes Might Be ‘Pink Slime.’” MLive.com, May 14, 2024. <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2024/05/a-newspaper-delivered-to-1-million-michigan-mailboxes-might-be-pink-slime.html>.

43 White. “A Newspaper Delivered to 1 Million Michigan Mailboxes Might Be ‘Pink Slime.’”

44 About the Southwest Michigan Journalism Collaborative. 2023. <https://swmichjournalism.com/about/>.

45 About the New York & Michigan Journalism Collaborative. 2024. <https://nymisojo.com/about-the-new-york-michigan-solutions-journalism-collaborative/>.

46 Great Lakes News Collaborative. 2024. <https://www.greatlakesnow.org/great-lakes-news-collaborative/>.

Outlier Media leads the Collaborative Detroit Newsrooms (CoDe) network in Detroit, the most active collaborative in the city.⁴⁷ The nine partners run the gamut of media models and include digital media (Bridge Detroit, Chalkbeat Detroit, Planet Detroit) an alternative weekly (Detroit Metro News), legacy media (the Detroit Free Press), public radio (WDET, Michigan Public), and television (7 News Detroit). The diverse partners ensure that the news consumption habits of the city are accounted for. The partners share resources and collaborate on stories to ensure that the city's reporting capacity is used most effectively.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Michigan and Detroit ecosystems to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

There are no ecosystem-wide assessments on newsroom or source diversity in Detroit or Michigan, but there is some public data for single newsrooms. The Detroit Free Press released its most recent staff diversity report in 2022, which found that about 64.4% of staff identified as white, 16.9% as Black, 11% as Asian, and 1.7% as Hispanic or Latino.⁴⁸ Using the demographics of the Detroit metro area as a comparison, the Black and Latino populations are underrepresented (20.3% and 4.7%, respectively), while the Asian population (4.8%) is overrepresented. The figures show drastic underrepresentation when compared to the city of Detroit, which has a Black population of 77.8%.

In 2021, Michigan Radio released results from a source diversity analysis. The data included three months' worth of content. Michigan Radio compared the results to state demographics and concluded that "Michigan Radio is doing very well in its effort to represent the diversity of our state."⁴⁹ In the sample, white sources were underrepresented compared to state demographics, while Black and Asian sources are overrepresented. It also claims that Hispanic or Latino sources, 3%, are overrepresented, although the 2022 American Communities Survey indicates that the population is 5.7%. The post on the analysis states that a follow-up would be available in July, although it does not appear that it was published.

47 Our Newsroom Partners. Outlier Media, 2024. <https://outliermedia.org/about/newsroom-partners/>.

48 Peter Bhatia. "Diversity/inclusion Is an Internal and External Responsibility at Free Press." Detroit Free Press, July 27, 2002. <https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/2022/07/27/free-press-diversity-report/10158356002/>.

49 Vincent Duffy. "Michigan Radio News Sources Match the Diversity of Michigan's Population." Michigan Radio, April 5, 2021. <https://www.michiganpublic.org/station-news/2021-04-05/michigan-radio-news-sources-match-the-diversity-of-michigans-population>.

The language around Michigan Radio's results raises an issue around benchmarks. It is clear that the goal for the source diversity analysis was to closely reflect state demographics, which ultimately means that the benchmarks are numbers. While state, region, or city demographics provide important context for source diversity, using them as benchmarks might not lead to structural or cultural change within legacy newsrooms, and if source diversity tracking ever ceases, a key piece of accountability and intentionality might be lost.

Case Study – Detroit and Grand Rapids Documenters

Civic participation and mutual support are the core of Michigan’s two Documenters programs.

City Bureau’s Documenters Network

foregrounds civic participation in its mission and activities. It trains and pays residents to cover underreported public meetings. The program was developed by City Bureau in Chicago, and its premise is simple: Access to and dissemination of information that could impact the daily lives of community members should be available to everyone. While the activities and premise are straightforward, the potential for impact is expansive when it works as intended. Documenters in a given community become well versed in local government processes, gain insight into decision making, understand how residents can play a role in that decision making, and then become part of the democratic process more actively. Documenters also learn basics of journalism and, because they are by definition already rooted in the communities, and become trusted messengers for critical information. Documenters have covered thousands of public meetings and, in places like Detroit, contribute reporting to local news outlets.



Illustration courtesy of CityBureau/Detroit Documenters

There are two Documenters programs in Michigan. Detroit’s program launched in 2019 and since 2021 has been hosted by Outlier Media. It was the first program established outside of Chicago. The site and host made sense for the program’s expansion, as Detroit, like Chicago, is home to innovative public service journalism, and Outlier seemed to be a place well suited for a Documenters program to thrive. Indeed, the program in Detroit remains highly active, producing notes from community meetings and original reporting not just for Outlier Media, but Outlier Media’s local journalism partners in the Collaborative Detroit Newsrooms (CoDe) network. In April 2024, representatives from the Detroit Documenters spoke about their experience building trust and civic engagement at the International Journalism Festival in Perugia, Italy.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Detroit Documents. “Bringing It All Back Home.” Outlier Media, April 24, 2024. <https://outliermedia.org/news-letter/bringing-it-all-back-home/>.

The Documenters program in Grand Rapids is younger, launching in mid-2023, but maintains the same mission as the rest of the Documenters Network, which as of this writing includes 19 cities. The program is hosted by The Raptidian, which is part of the Grand Rapids Community Media Center. The Raptidian describes itself as “Grand Rapids’ citizen journalism program and dedicated hyperlocal news hub.”⁵¹ While still new, Grand Rapids Documenters have, on average, covered at least one public meeting a week since July, 2023.

Additionally, the Documenters programs in Detroit and Grand Rapids maintain a relationship and use their collective energy to gain deeper knowledge about government processes and local issues that often go uncovered. For instance, in March 2024, the two programs visited the state capitol in Lansing, observed open sessions and committees, and spoke with a statehouse reporter from Bridge Michigan.⁵² These activities illustrate the blend of civic engagement and the practice of journalism that defines all Documenters programs.

51 The Raptidian. 2024. <https://grcmc.org/raptidian#region-168-296>.

52 Laura Herberg. “Reporter’s Notebook: The Documenters Take a Day Trip to Lansing.” Outlier Media, May 29, 2024. https://outliermedia.org/detroit-grand-rapids-documenters-lansing-state-capitol/?mc_cid=08d660ed7f&mc_eid=648dae57ad.

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IMPACT ARCHITECTS

New Jersey

New Jersey

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the New Jersey news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

New Jersey's news ecosystem is rich in hyperlocal journalism and journalism focused on communities of color, and the state has a strong infrastructure of support systems dedicated to creating a thriving environment for news and information. However, stakeholders indicate that the state's position next to two major media markets create unique challenges. Specifically, broadcast media, a major source of news for many New Jerseyans, is owned and frequently produced out of state. Additionally, it has created challenges for New Jersey residents to connect to local government at the state and municipal levels, as coverage of New Jersey local government is often overshadowed by civic issues in the adjacent markets of New York and Philadelphia. This relative lack of local civic news could also contribute to the state's relatively low levels of civic engagement, as measured by the metrics used throughout this report. Aside from attending public meetings and donating to political campaigns, civic participation in New Jersey is lower than the U.S. as a whole, and voter turnout and registration is roughly on par with national averages.

New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the union, with over 90% of New Jersey residents living in an urban area, and it is more diverse than the U.S. as a whole as well.¹ Compared to the U.S., New Jersey's white population is about six percentage points lower, while its Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino populations are two to three percentage points higher.² New Jersey's Asian population is four percentage points higher than the U.S.³ These

1 "Urban and Rural," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

2 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Jersey," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NJ/PST045223>.

3 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Jersey."

populations are well served by community media based on evidence we collected through our approach as well as a more expansive methodology developed by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University that identified over 140 community media organizations.⁴

Median household income in New Jersey is 36% higher than the national average and, based on 2022 Census figures, is the highest in the nation.⁵ However, racial disparities exist. The median household income for New Jersey's white and Asian populations are higher than the state median, while median household incomes are lower for its Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino populations.⁶ In terms of income inequality overall, New Jersey's Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality drawn from census data, is roughly on par with that of the U.S., and, like the coefficient for the U.S., has trended towards greater inequality over the past 15 years.⁷ Stakeholders tended to describe New Jersey as a "rich" or "wealthy" state in the sense that there are resources in the state that can be used to support local journalism to a greater extent than they currently are.

New Jersey's news ecosystem lacks in two key areas: broadcast journalism and philanthropic investment. More than half of New Jerseyans get daily news from television, while 30% do so from radio, but broadcast media is almost entirely based outside the state, typically in the two major media markets that border it, New York City and Philadelphia.⁸ In 2011, Governor Chris Christie sold New Jersey's public radio licenses to WNYC in New York and WHYY in Philadelphia. Ownership of the television station was transferred to WNET in New York.⁹ While the ownership transition didn't result in a complete void, as NJ PBS and NJ Public Radio launched on the same signals in 2011, the ownership structure and layoffs that accompanied the initial transition have meant less production of broadcast local news for New Jersey residents that continue to persist.

Compared to other ecosystems in this study, philanthropic investment is low given New Jersey's high median household income and population size. Its dollars invested per capita from 2020 through 2022 is on par with less populated and much less wealthy states, while similarly situated states invest nearly three times as much per capita. Moreover, the

4 Advincula, Andy. "The State of Ethnic and Community Media in New Jersey." The Center for Cooperative Media, May 2023. https://centerforcooperativemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ECM_report_MAY2023_links.pdf.

5 United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Jersey."

6 Colleen O'Dea "Census Shows NJ Had Highest Median Household Income of Any State in 2022." NJ Spotlight News, September 18, 2023. <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2023/09/asian-black-hispanic-median-household-income-2022-seniors-child-poverty-poverty-rate-official-poverty-limit/>.

7 Conor Gowder, "Useful Stats: Income Inequality Across the States." The State Science and Technological Institute, January 24, 2024. <https://ssti.org/blog/useful-stats-income-inequality-across-states>.

8 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%206%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view>. Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2."

9 Baxter, Christopher. "NJN Signs Off Toda, Leaving 130 People Out of Work." NJ.com, June 20, 2011. https://www.nj.com/news/2011/06/njn_signs_off_today_leaving_13.html.

Dodge Foundation, historically a substantial funder for local news in New Jersey, has undergone a strategy shift to focus explicitly on racial justice and less direct investment in local news.¹⁰

New Jersey is notable for the strong support systems for local journalism. The Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) at Montclair State University offers programmatic support and ad hoc services to local information providers. It also facilitates connection among organizations in New Jersey, primarily through the NJ News Commons, a membership based network. New Jersey is also home to the Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC), which is the only nonprofit grantmaker for local news that is funded by state tax dollars. NJCIC is currently the largest funder of local news in New Jersey. NJCIC is not only unique in that it is a grantmaker funded by tax dollars, but also that its sole mandate is supporting local news and information in New Jersey.

The civic engagement metrics we use throughout this report indicate that, overall, engagement in New Jersey is roughly on par with national averages. Stakeholders attribute a lack of information around government processes as a potential reason why engagement isn't higher. Nevertheless, attendance of public meetings is the one metric that is higher in New Jersey when compared to the U.S. as a whole.¹¹ While we cannot attribute a cause for this, it is worth noting that since 2015, Free Press's News Voices: New Jersey has been bringing communities and newsrooms together to strengthen the relationship between civic engagement and local journalism.¹² The early work, in fact, led to the legislation that created the Civic Information Consortium. This grassroots work was not atypical of New Jersey, which suggests that alternative metrics for civic engagement, such as working with neighborhoods to solve problems or contributing to non-political charitable organizations, might show greater engagement, as is demonstrated in this report's Chicago chapter. In terms of voter registration and turnout, New Jersey is roughly on par with the national average. New Jersey's Cost of Voting Index (COVI) score, which is based on an analysis of state laws and policies, is -0.57, meaning that while there are places with fewer restrictions to voting, the state in general has few barriers that make it difficult to vote.¹³

There are restrictions in other areas that could stymie civic participation, as well as the production of local journalism. In June 2024, Governor Phil Murphy signed legislation that will change elements of New Jersey's Open Public Records Act (OPRA), making access to information more difficult and costly for both journalists and the public at large. The legislation includes

10 "New Look, Bold Vision: Our Commitment to a Just and Equitable New Jersey," Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, May 9, 2022. <https://www.grdodge.org/news/new-look-bold-vision-our-commitment-to-a-just-and-equitable-new-jersey/>.

11 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

12 "News Voices: New Jersey," Free Press, n.d. <https://www.freepress.net/issues/future-journalism/local-journalism-news-voices/projects/news-voices-new-jersey>.

13 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

provisions that allow increased fees and open requesters up to being sued.¹⁴ The bill was moving through the legislature during this research. At the time, stakeholders noted that while attempts to change the law were not new, the momentum for this bill was worrying, not just for freedom of the press in New Jersey, but also for civic life and engaging with state and municipal governments.

This chapter presents New Jersey at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

14 "New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy Signs Controversial Public Records Bill Into Law. Here's What It Means," Associated Press, June 5, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/opra-bill-signed-into-law-new-jersey/>.

Opportunities

Hyperlocal civic media:

New Jersey is rich in print, hyperlocal, and community media. Supporting these and additional information providers to more directly engage with New Jersey's 563 municipalities could potentially enhance civic engagement in the state, while also filling an information gap that seems to have been created by the dominance of the New York and Philadelphia media markets.

Private funding:

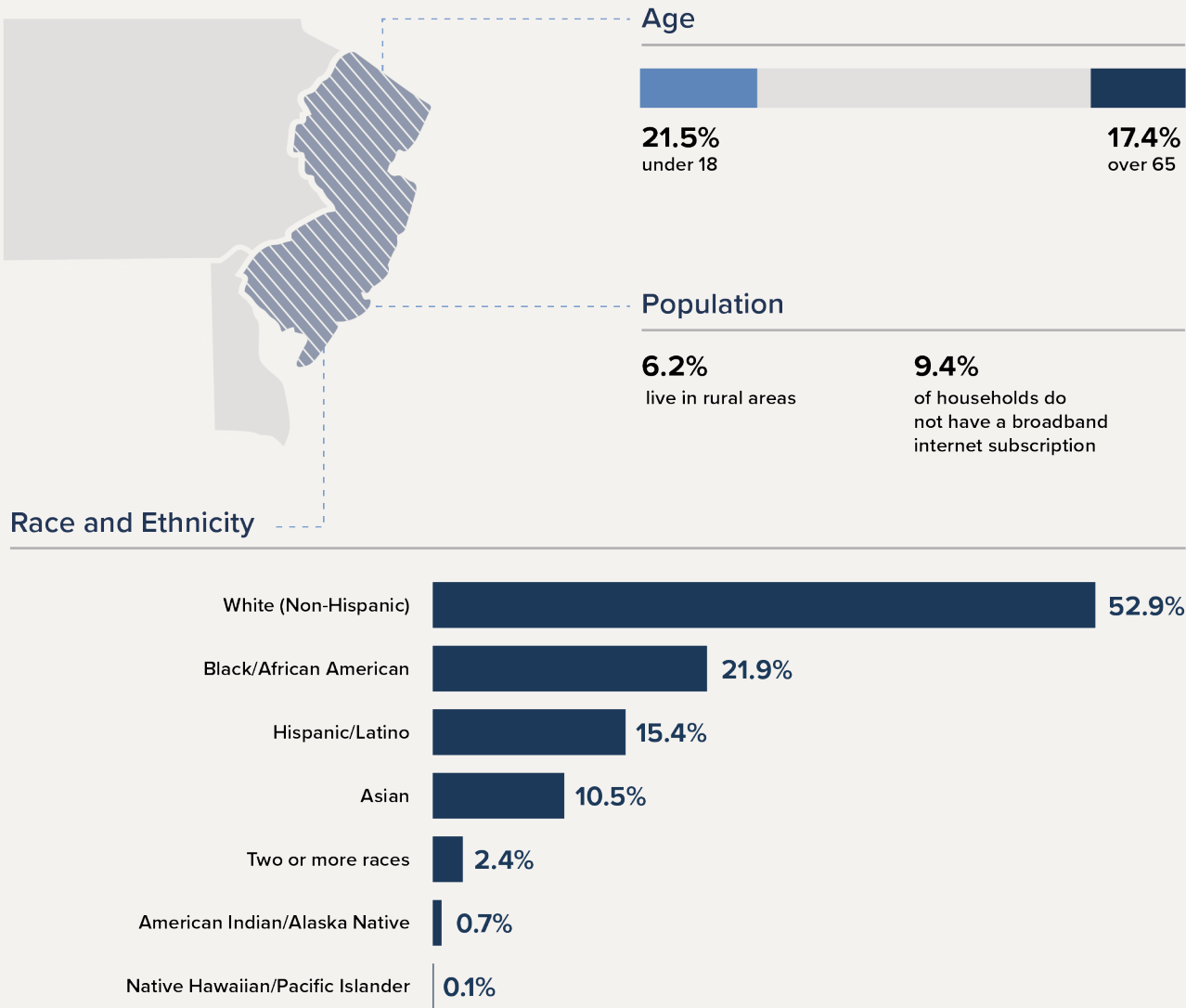
While New Jersey is one of the few states with a dedicated public funding source for news in the form of the Civic Information Consortium, private funding for local news is lacking. Supporting the recently announced Press Forward local chapter would help meet the need for more local funders focused on journalism.

New Jersey at a Glance

Topline indicators about New Jersey’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

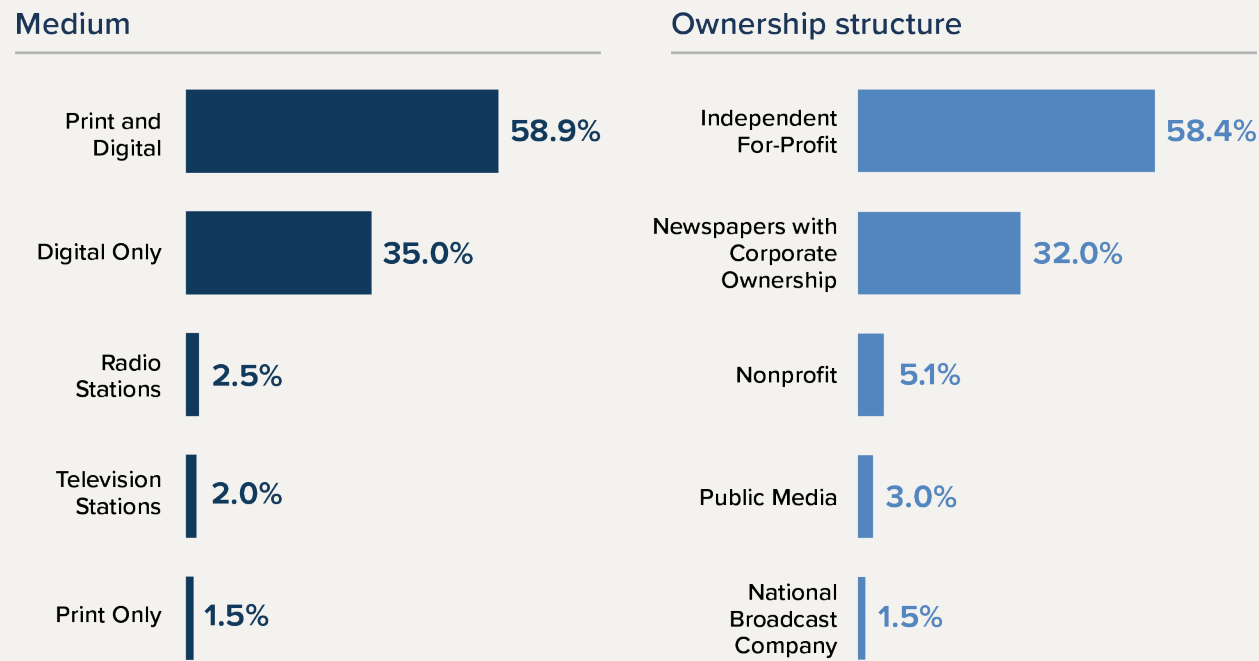
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



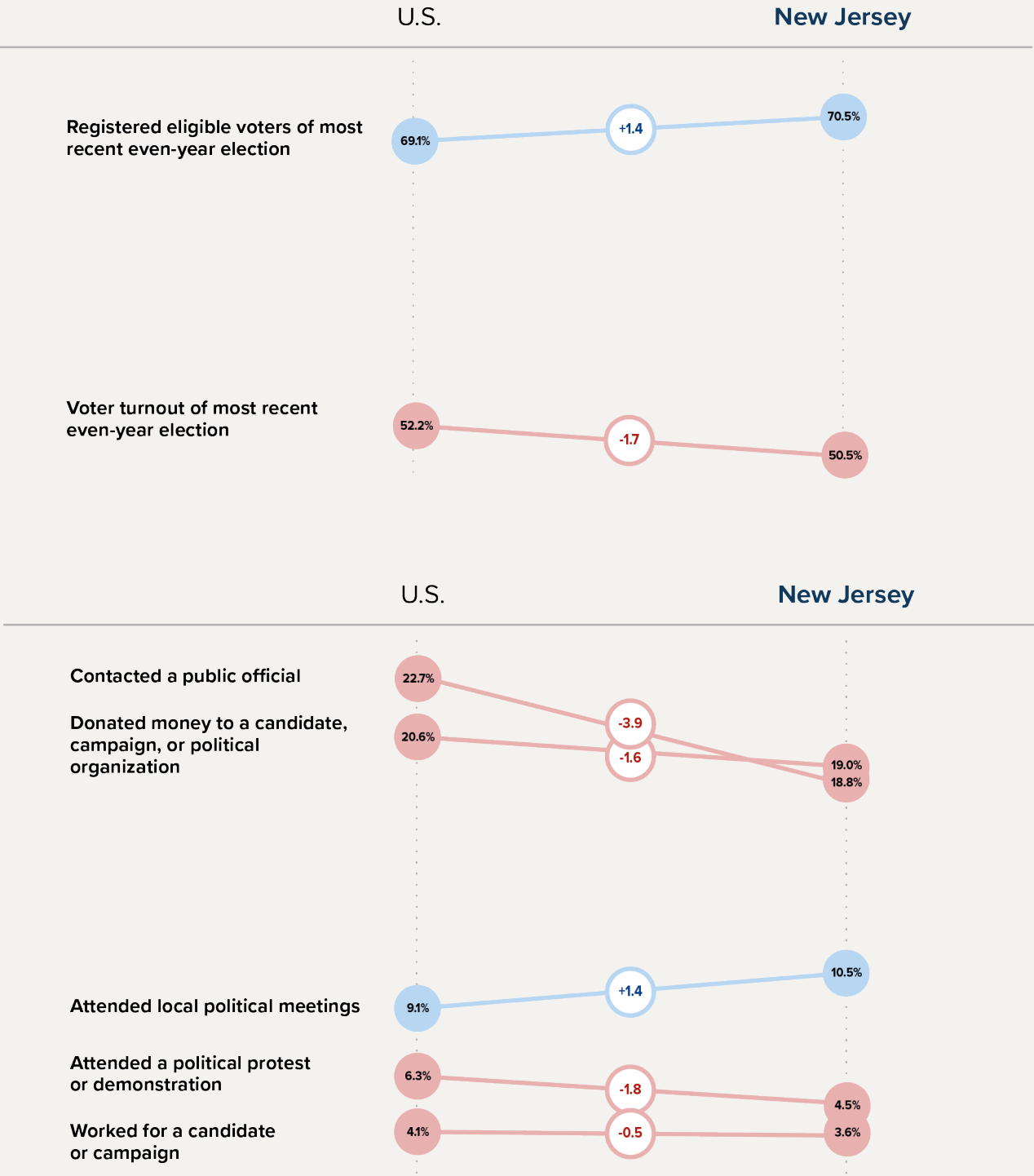
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders’ Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



New Jersey Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of New Jersey to dig deeper into the current state of New Jersey’s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about the Fueling Community Journalism Through NJ Community Colleges program.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in New Jersey.

New Jersey’s position next to the major media markets in New York City and Philadelphia poses challenges to civic engagement and means that local politics — especially at the state, county, and township level — receive less attention from residents. And according to various measures, civic engagement in New Jersey is on par with national averages. However, civic engagement and participation in New Jersey will likely increase over the long term as local reporting continues to strengthen as a result of the Civic Information Consortium’s prioritization on civic information and engagement through its funding efforts.

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	New Jersey	Difference from U.S.	
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	10.5%	1.4	▲
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	19.0%	-1.6	▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	4.5%	-1.8	▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	18.8%	-3.9	▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.6%	-0.5	▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,573

New Jersey’s voting patterns fit national trends. Voter turnout in New Jersey for the 2022 midterm election was 50.5%, whereas it was 52.2% for the nation, a difference of 1.7 percentage points. Similarly, voter registration

is in line with the nation, as 70.5% of eligible residents are registered to vote compared to 69.1% for the nation.¹⁵ Voting is also accessible in New Jersey, as indicated by its low COVI score, -0.57. COVI scores take into account election laws and policies to determine accessibility of voting, with smaller values indicating higher accessibility.¹⁶

... there's an opportunity for local newsrooms in New Jersey to improve civic participation, specifically by addressing the human impact of decisions made by local agencies.

While voting patterns fit the national average, other measures of civic participation differ. While stakeholders offered a variety of perspectives about civic engagement in New Jersey and what barriers might be in place that could impede participation, they all agreed that the challenges in finding coverage of local political issues is linked to the middling civic engagement in the state. Both Stefanie Murray, director of CCM, and Krystal Knapp, founder of local news organizations Planet Princeton and The Jersey Vindicator, cited a lack of information about public meetings. “People sometimes have a hard time navigating government websites and finding information, or even understanding how they can submit a public records request or what their rights are at a meeting,” Knapp said. She went on to say that there’s an opportunity for local newsrooms in New Jersey to improve civic participation, specifically by addressing the human impact of decisions made by local agencies.

Similarly, Murray suggested that the level of civic engagement could be influenced by the quality of local news. Speaking from a personal perspective, she said that the weekly print newspaper in her municipality includes information about zoning boards, planning commissions, township meetings, and board meetings. This, in turn, encourages civic engagement for her and her family. But while New Jersey is strong in hyperlocal news, not every community has a source like this. Additionally, Murray stated that while hyperlocal news in New Jersey is good at providing information at the municipal level, coverage of county-level decision-making is severely lacking.

From the perspective of someone outside of the journalism industry, Hera Mir, a communications strategist at local think tank New Jersey Policy Perspective, stated that barriers for civic engagement in New Jersey have the same roots as a core issue about media. “There’s not enough investment in grassroots community organizing in New Jersey. Similar to what happens with the media, the money flows toward New York and Philly,” they said. And, as a result, Mir said “people don’t know what’s going on in their local communities.”

¹⁵ “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

¹⁶ Schraufnagel, Pomante, and Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.”

But there are activities that can change the landscape. NJCIC has become the most prominent journalism funder in New Jersey, but its primary mission is to foster civic engagement, and its grantees tend to be hyperlocal, community-oriented, and geared toward providing actionable civic information. For example, a 2023 grant to the digital news organization Atlantic City Focus was “to fund a project to create a Civic Engagement Guide for Atlantic City that provides residents with a comprehensive directory of information on local elections, community resources, and leadership.” Another went to the Montclair State University Foundation to create a statewide voting guide in 2023. NJCIC is also managing New Jersey’s Documenters programs, part of City Bureau’s Documenters Network, which trains and pays local community members to attend and summarize public meetings. The program in New Brunswick is hosted by coLAB Arts, while the one in Newark is hosted by the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice — two civically minded nonprofits, not news organizations.

“There’s not enough investment in grassroots community organizing in New Jersey. Similar to what happens with the media, the money flows toward New York and Philly.”

Hera Mir,
Communications strategist, New Jersey Policy Perspective

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in New Jersey and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press’s ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Over the course of our research, a bill was making its way through the New Jersey Legislature that would alter the Open Public Records Act (OPRA), the mechanism by which residents request and access government information. All stakeholders mentioned the bill, and in particular the chance that it might pass, as a worrying sign for the freedom of the press in New Jersey. The legislature passed the bill in May 2024, and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed it into law in June.¹⁷

¹⁷ “New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy Signs Controversial Public Records Bill Into Law. Here’s What It Means,” Associated Press, June 5, 2024.

The Associated Press summarized the changes, which include: “a provision that permits commercial interests to pay up to twice the cost of producing records; language that authorizes agencies to bring a case to state court against requesters determined to be interrupting ‘government function’; and the end of the requirement for towns to pay attorneys’ fees

in court cases they lose over records requests.”¹⁸ The AP noted that the last provision in particular could make it too costly for journalists and other members of the public to challenge government entities in an effort to secure records. Indeed, Knapp noted that she’s sued several times in her career for wrongful denial of public records and has won every time. Prior to the bill’s passage and signing into law, she said that if it did pass, “the chances of me getting a lawyer to represent me to challenge records denials will be very small.”

“...overall press freedom is pretty good in our state, but it’s trending away from that.”

Stefanie Murray,
Director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University

The development that eventually came to pass was a major reason why, when asked about the state of press freedom in New Jersey, Murray said that “overall press freedom is pretty good in our state, but it’s trending away from that.” Despite the change to the open records law, other aspects that Murray cited as strengths persist, in particular the presence of advocates and first amendment attorneys committed to government transparency. Additionally, she cited several recent wins from news organizations that allowed them to access public records. It’s not clear how the change to the law would have altered those wins if it were in effect, but each stakeholder was worried about the possibility of the legislation passing at the time of our conversations.

Other press freedom issues stakeholders mentioned might not be specific to New Jersey. Ayinde Merrill, program officer at NJCIC, noted that questions of press freedom for small, hyperlocal outlets that NJCIC frequently supports aren’t really about access to information. Instead, their concerns are more about having protections to continue producing meaningful local journalism without fear of reprisal. He gave an example of a grantee, a small outlet based in the northern part of the state, that covers development in a community and is worried that it might get sued by a big developer as a result of accountability journalism, even without grounds. This example underscores the need for access to legal support for small organizations, which almost universally don’t have in-house counsel and must find it elsewhere.

¹⁸ Mike Catalini, “New Jersey Lawmakers Pass Overhaul of State’s Open Records Law.” Associated Press, , May 13, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/new-jersey-open-public-records-act-opra-e001b82836c2eddc70899d0d91ad9ffe>.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand New Jerseyans’ perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey “Trust, Media and Democracy” asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

According to the Knight/Gallup American Views survey, New Jersey residents have a positive view of journalists and information providers, at least relative to opinions expressed by the nation as a whole. Most notably, 56.3% of New Jersey residents either agree or strongly agree that “local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.”¹⁹ This can be taken as an indication of the belief among residents that local journalism can promote civic engagement and well-being. It is likely also a reflection of the abundance of hyperlocal news outlets in New Jersey.

About half of New Jersey residents either agree or strongly agree that “local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.”²⁰ This result is an indication of trust for local news. While it is a good sign for New Jersey that affirmative responses are about six percentage points higher than the national average, it is a discouraging sign for trust in local news as a whole that the national average is so low.²¹

Information Providers and Community	U.S	New Jersey	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	57%	-8% ▼
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	53.1%	1.1% ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	56.3%	3.3% ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	50.0%	3.0% ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	50.8%	6.8% ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 128

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	New Jersey	Difference from U.S
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	9.4%	6.4% ▲
From TV	31%	30.5%	-0.5% ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	53.9%	-4.1% ▼
From a radio	7%	6.3%	-0.7% ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 128

19 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”
20 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”
21 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

In the 2022 Knight/Gallup American Views survey, 30.5% of surveyed New Jersey residents reported getting most of their news from television.²² Television is also the most common source of accessing news on a daily basis, with more than half of New Jerseyans doing so on a daily basis, and over 80% doing so at least monthly.²³ However, given the lack of local ownership among broadcast media, this suggests that New Jerseyans lack adequate local information to inform action. One could view the landscape of broadcast media in the state of New Jersey, with a population of over nine million, as similar to that of a small to midsize town whose broadcast media comes from the nearest metro area. This is a weak link in the chain between local news and journalism serving as a catalyst for civic engagement among residents.

However, the survey also shows that 9.4% of New Jersey residents get most of their news from printed newspapers or magazines.²⁴ That figure is more than six percentage points higher than the national average and is 4.5 percentage points higher than other ecosystems in this study.²⁵ This reflects the state's strength in hyperlocal print journalism, as well as the relative abundance of print journalism in the state.

However, the survey also shows that 9.4% of New Jersey residents get most of their news from printed newspapers or magazines. That figure is over six percentage points higher than the national average and is 4.5 percentage points higher than other ecosystems in this study. This reflects the state's strength in hyperlocal print journalism, as well as the relative abundance of print journalism in the state.

Among New Jerseyans who use social media for news, they do so with high frequency — 53% do so at least weekly. However, a full 38% of residents say they never use social media for news.²⁶

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	34.4%	17.2%	5.5%	16.4%	26.6%
A website or app	40.6%	15.6%	4.7%	15.6%	23.4%
A radio station	30.5%	22.7%	3.9%	20.3%	22.7%
A TV station	56.3%	16.4%	9.4%	10.2%	7.8%
Direct communication with people in your area	22.7%	32.0%	15.6%	15.6%	14.1%
A magazine	4.7%	14.1%	14.1%	31.3%	35.9%
A social media platform	40.6%	11.7%	3.9%	6.3%	37.5%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 128

22 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

23 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

24 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

25 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

26 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in New Jersey, including gaps and opportunities identified in recent assessments.

New Jersey is home to a great deal of activity dedicated to understanding and strengthening the local news ecosystem, including identifying information needs among community members. Much of the work comes from the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, which over the past several years has published an analysis of community and ethnic media²⁷ in New Jersey and a set of case studies about information needs among three New Jersey communities.²⁸ Additionally, both CCM and Rutgers have published detailed ecosystem maps. CCM's ecosystem map identifies over 600 news outlets (far more than our manual research) that are either based in New Jersey and produce local news, are based in New Jersey but don't produce local news, or are based in surrounding states (New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware) and produce and distribute local news for New Jersey.²⁹ It shows that the northern and southern parts of the state have far fewer news outlets than central New Jersey. The ecosystem map at Rutgers is coded by topic — such as “business” or “health” — and counts distinct news articles online to show where access to topical journalism is abundant or lacking.³⁰ There are numerous ways to use public resources for identifying information needs in New Jersey.

Even so, stakeholders identified additional information needs that are not immediately evident in existing research. They indicate that New Jersey lacks government coverage at all levels, from the statehouse to city council meetings throughout the state. They mostly attribute this lack to the contraction of local media and the loss of journalistic capacity throughout the state. The Documenters programs in New Brunswick and Newark can help fill this gap.

Funding and sustainability are major challenges for small news organizations in New Jersey, and NJCIC and CCM are leading the way in meeting these challenges. Merrill described the work as “left hand/right hand,” wherein NJCIC is in

27 Advincula, “The State of Ethnic and Community Media in New Jersey.”

28 Sarah Stonebly, “Information Needs Assessments in Three New Jersey Communities.” The Center for Cooperative Media, March 2023. <https://centerforcooperativemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GNI-info-needs-stonbely-march2023.pdf>.

29 “Local News Map - NJ.” The Center for Cooperative Media, n.d. <https://newsecosystems.org/njmap/>.

30 “ComLab: Mapping Local News Environments.” Rutgers School of Information and Communication, n.d. <https://mediaecosystems.rutgers.edu/map-view/>.

the funder role and CCM provides research, ecosystem mapping, training, and programmatic support for newsrooms. Through their work together, they are able to gather information about challenges and needs. To meet the challenge of funding and sustainability beyond providing direct dollars, NJCIC recently contracted Blue Engine Collaborative to put 21 hyperlocal newsrooms through an accelerator program for organizational sustainability, which will also come with \$10,000 in funds to support participants in upgrading their technology and enhancing their overall sustainability. Knapp, who is participating in the program for The Jersey Vindicator, called it “the most powerful” program she’s been a part of “in a long time.” How successful the program ultimately is for the 21 newsrooms, and how much of a role the \$10,000 incentive plays, will be instructive for New Jersey as well as other ecosystems that face the same challenge.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in New Jersey. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

Collaboration and strong hyperlocal and community media are hallmarks of New Jersey’s news ecosystem. Impact Architects’ manual research into news providers in New Jersey identified 196 organizations that provide local news, including 25 community media organizations that serve New Jersey’s Hispanic and Latino, Black, and Asian communities. The TAPinto network — founded in New Jersey but now with a presence in New York, Pennsylvania, and Florida — is representative of the hyperlocal nature of many news outlets in New Jersey, as 26 locations in New Jersey have a TAPinto franchise.³¹ The TAPinto franchise model, however, means that there’s no centralized quality control among properties, which sometimes operate as news aggregators. One stakeholder in New Jersey said that they frequently find their own journalism republished on TAPinto pages.

The dominant organization types are independent for-profits and newspapers with corporate ownership, the latter of which is a product of the TAPinto network and the collection of Advance Media newspapers in the state.

31 “About TAPinto.” TAPinto: Your Neighborhood News Online, n.d. <https://www.tapinto.net/pages/about-tapinto>.

Advance newspapers, such as The Times of Trenton and The Star-Ledger, are centralized at NJ.com. New Jersey has relatively few nonprofit news organizations given the number of news providers, although there has been growth in this sector. The Community Info Coop, for example, is an organization dedicated to equitable and solutions-oriented journalism that recently formalized a nonprofit news organization, The Jersey Bee. And in 2023, Knapp, founder of the hyperlocal outlet Planet Princeton, launched The Jersey Vindicator, a statewide investigative news organization.

Notably, four of the nine nonprofit, non-public media newsrooms in New Jersey are community media outlets. Two notable and recently formed organizations are Public Square Amplified and Five Wards Media. Both are Newark-based and are meant to center the voices of Black residents. Moreover, both emphasize community-powered journalism and target young people. Public Square Amplified ran a community journalism pilot class in 2023 designed to train community members in basic journalism practices. The effort exemplifies the strengths of the New Jersey ecosystem in that it is hyperlocal, community-centered, and entrepreneurial.

New Jersey is rich in community and ethnic media. Stefanie Murray of CCM indicated that while she feels as if trust in news is low throughout the state regarding mainstream media, it is high among community and ethnic media. Indeed, a poll commissioned by NJCIC found that nearly 80% of New Jerseyans at least moderately trust their local

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	197	
Population per organization	47,152	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	69	35%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	116	58.9%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	3	1.5%
Radio stations	5	2.5%
Television stations	4	2%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	115	58.4%
National broadcast chain	3	1.5%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	63	32%
Nonprofit	10	5.1%
Public media	6	3%
Community Media		
African American/Black	6	
Hispanic/Latino	11	
Asian/Asian American	7	
Arab/Arab American	1	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

...while [Murray] feels as if trust in news is low throughout the state regarding mainstream media, it is high among community and ethnic media...

news, with 16% saying they trust it “a great deal.”³² Like other media, community and ethnic media is particularly strong in digital and print, with local Telemundo and Univision stations serving Hispanic and Latino communities the only Spanish-language broadcast options for local news.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	17.3%		13.2%	4.6%	
Print and digital	39.6%		18.8%	0.5%	
Print only	1.5%				
Radio					2.5%
Television		1.5%			0.5%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

New Jersey is home to several journalism collaboratives and networks. Aside from CCM (including the South Jersey Information Equity Project, mentioned below) and NJCIC, the Corporation for New Jersey Local Media (CNJLM) is a network that facilitates collaboration. CNJLM, a public benefit corporation, assumed ownership of New Jersey Hills Media Group and its 13 local news organizations in 2022.³³ The ownership model follows a growing trend of safekeeping ownership in the interest of community need, with other examples being the National Trust for Local News’ acquisition of newspapers in Colorado, Georgia, and Maine; the Lenfest Institute’s acquisition of The Philadelphia Inquirer and subsequent transition into a nonprofit; and The Salt Lake Tribune’s transition to nonprofit status.

Along with CCM, the Solutions Journalism Network, and other local news organizations, CNJLM is managing the NJ Stormwater Matters collaborative. The project seeks to advance discussion and solutions regarding stormwater management in New Jersey. It’s the type of project that takes advantage of the state’s collaborative spirit and strong support organizations.

NJCIC, CCM, and CNJLM are the most notable journalism support organizations, and there’s a strong culture of these organizations working together to advance the health of New Jersey’s news ecosystem. In addition to fostering collaboration and providing resources to news and information providers, these organizations, particularly NJCIC and CCM, also conduct research and polling meant to benefit the news ecosystem as a whole. In addition to the research and resources mentioned throughout this chapter, CCM also offers ad hoc support, can help connect journalists to legal support, and offers resource guides through its website.

32 “Press Release: Most New Jerseyans Have Trust in Their Local News, New Poll Shows.” New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, July 15, 2024. <https://njcivicinfo.org/2024poll-press-release/>.
33 “Making History.” Corporation for New Jersey Local Media, n.d. <https://newsweneed.org/>.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the New Jersey ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

CCM surveyed news providers to understand the racial and ethnic makeup of news leaders in New Jersey, among other topics, and the report is [available upon request](#). While the survey was not representative, the findings regarding the racial and ethnic makeup of newsrooms echoed national research in that newsroom staff on the whole is less diverse than the communities they cover, and that Black and Hispanic/Latino journalists are particularly lacking in New Jersey newsrooms. One effort that is already working to diversify the field is the South Jersey Information Equity Project, a project of CCM and the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists. The project targets an underserved portion of the state, as CCM determined based on its ecosystem mapping, and fills the void by giving reporting fellowships to local Black journalists. This program could contribute to a long-term solution by providing a pipeline of well-trained reporters.

Additionally, CCM and NJ Advance Media maintain a diverse sources database.³⁴ While there's no public record of source audits or active source tracking taking place, New Jersey newsrooms are able to search the database to identify potential sources based on location and area of expertise.

34 "Diverse Sources N.J." NJ Advance Media and the Center for Cooperative Media, n.d. <https://www.diversesourcesnj.com/>.

Case Study – New Jersey Council for the Humanities: Fueling Community Journalism

Community members are empowered to participate in their local news ecosystems.

Fueling Community Journalism Through NJ

Community Colleges is an initiative of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and the Journalism + Design lab at the New School and is funded by NJCIC.³⁵ The program supports free, noncredit community journalism classes at four community colleges situated across the state. These include Sussex Community College, situated in northwest New Jersey; Middlesex College, in central New Jersey and spanning farmland to suburbs adjacent to Staten Island; Mercer County Community College, in the central portion of the state and home to Trenton, the state capital; and Atlantic Cape Community College in Cape May in southern New Jersey. The northern and southern community journalism programs are in the less populated areas of the state, and none of the programs are in counties adjacent to New York City or Philadelphia.



Thomas Edison State University

Pictured from the left are New Jersey Council for the Humanities staff: Angela Speakman, director of Development and Communications; and Gigi Naglak, director of Grants & Programs, and Thomas Edison State University staff: John Thurber, vice president for Public Affairs; Ana Berdecia, director, Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children; and Joseph Youngblood II, vice provost and dean, John S. Watson School of Public Policy.

... anyone, with some basic training, can be an information provider for their community.

The purpose of the program is to bolster local news ecosystems by providing interested community members with the knowledge and skills to practice journalism. Its premise is that anyone, with some basic training, can be an information provider for their community. The program is non-prescriptive, so each community college runs its course in its own way. And as the courses are taught by professionals with networks in journalism, they also connect community members with local journalists to discuss basic practices.

³⁵ Disclosure: Impact Architects is the evaluation partner for this project.

The programs are not designed to create a pipeline to formal degree programs in journalism, although that is an option. They are designed to facilitate participation in the local news ecosystem in any way one chooses. For instance, the program at Mercer Community College required the publication of an article in the school newspaper, The College VOICE, in order to earn a certificate. And at least one person who earned a certificate has subsequently published in the local digital news outlet, Mercer Me.³⁶ Certificate-holders from other programs are exploring other ways to provide essential information to their communities, especially those who might not be tech savvy or don't have access to reliable internet, such as seniors.

The program is still early, so it's not clear how many participants will ultimately contribute to their local news ecosystem. Even those who aren't active, however, will still learn basic information about newsgathering and production that should build trust and highlight the crucial role of local journalism.

36 Jackie Fuccillo, "Hopewell Valley Board of Education Recognizes Retirees, Updates as School Year-End Approaches." Mercer Me, May 26, 2024. <https://mercerme.com/hopewell-valley-board-of-education-recognizes-retirees-updates-as-school-year-end-approaches/>.

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New Mexico

New Mexico

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the New Mexico news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

New Mexico is home to strong local ownership of news outlets, has a foundation of collaboration, and shows signs of civic engagement above the national average. However, it also has major news and infrastructural gaps that prevent it from fully serving the state's diverse and rural populations.

New Mexico is home to a large Indigenous population and more than half of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, yet its news outlets do not appear to reflect the demographic makeup of the state.¹ Our research found few Indigenous-serving outlets and only four Spanish-language outlets.² While this indicates that community media in the state is sparse, especially considering the population, it also suggests that New Mexicans who are part of these communities may be relying on less traditional news and information providers that are not captured by existing public data sources focused on traditional media. More research is needed to further explore the existing means of accessing news and information among New Mexico's communities of color.

New Mexico is also one of the largest states by area in the country, yet it has a relatively small population. Many outlets, including the state's investigative news sources, are located in cities like Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Las Cruces. Some of the most rural counties in the state have less than one person per square mile, and many communities do not have reliable broadband access, so rural outlets face a unique set of challenges in reaching their audiences. Just over 18% of New

¹ "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Mexico," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NM/PST045223>.

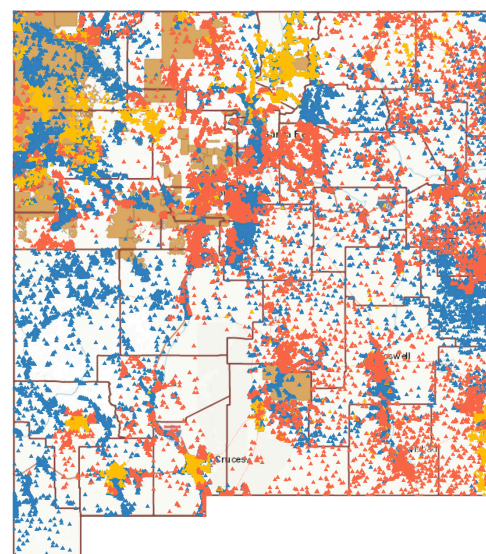
² We searched databases and resources from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, and local broadcast affiliate lists.

Mexican households do not have a broadband internet subscription,³ and the state broadband map, which shows households that are served, underserved, or unserved, shows many clusters of underserved households in the Navajo Nation.⁴ This suggests a need for more innovation in the area of non-digital news and information dissemination and greater investment in digital accessibility across the state.

New Mexico is a politically and civically engaged state, with voting access, voter turnout, and civic participation largely in line with or higher than national averages. Additionally, in interviews with stakeholders, we heard that New Mexicans have unusually good access to their local representatives and congressional delegation, in part due to the state's relatively small population. However, some stakeholders described apathy among residents about being able to create real change with their actions, a statement we heard in many of the ecosystems included in this report. It's also worth noting that national figures for civic engagement and participation are fairly low — around 6% of all respondents to the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study (CES) survey said they had attended a political protest or demonstration, for example — so clearing that bar may not be indicative of robust civic engagement and broad participation in democracy.⁵

Access to local news has the potential to help more New Mexicans follow the issues they care about and help catalyze civic engagement — the state has a news outlet dedicated to statehouse reporting, a set of strong investigative nonprofits, and majority independent ownership of local papers — but subscription costs, lack of internet access, low visibility of some news outlets, and limited options for non-English news is likely preventing information from reaching some communities. Additionally, a sense that not all New Mexicans are reflected in the work and makeup of newsrooms may hinder trust and community buy-in for local news sources.

This chapter presents New Mexico at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.



● Served by broadband
● Underserved ● Unserved

Source: New Mexico Broadband Map,
NM DoIT Office of Broadband Access and Expansion

3 “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Mexico,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NM/PST045223>.

4 “New Mexico Broadband Map,” NM DoIT Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, <https://nmbbmapping.org/mapping/>.

5 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.” Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

Opportunities

Indigenous media:

New Mexico has opportunities for more investment in local news by and for Indigenous communities. Further research is needed to determine what outlets already exist — particularly non-traditional news sources in rural and tribal communities — and how best to support them to ensure their sustainability.

Spanish-language news and other media serving Hispanic and Latino communities:

Stakeholder conversations and publicly available data revealed few Spanish-language or bilingual media offerings in the state. More research is needed to understand where Hispanic and Latino communities are getting local news and information as well as how to strengthen existing information providers. There may also be opportunities for new Spanish-language outlets in the state, especially considering the results of a survey published by the New Mexico Local News Fund that found a desire for more Spanish-language news and a willingness to pay for that news among many surveyed residents.⁶

Collaboration:

There are opportunities to formalize editorial collaboration between larger outlets in the state and small, hyperlocal, very rural, or community outlets. In addition to building capacity and networks for smaller organizations, this could help ensure that local stakeholders are more involved when their communities are covered by statewide outlets. Networks like the Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative have the potential to further fill gaps in coverage and reach communities that have little or no accessible local news.

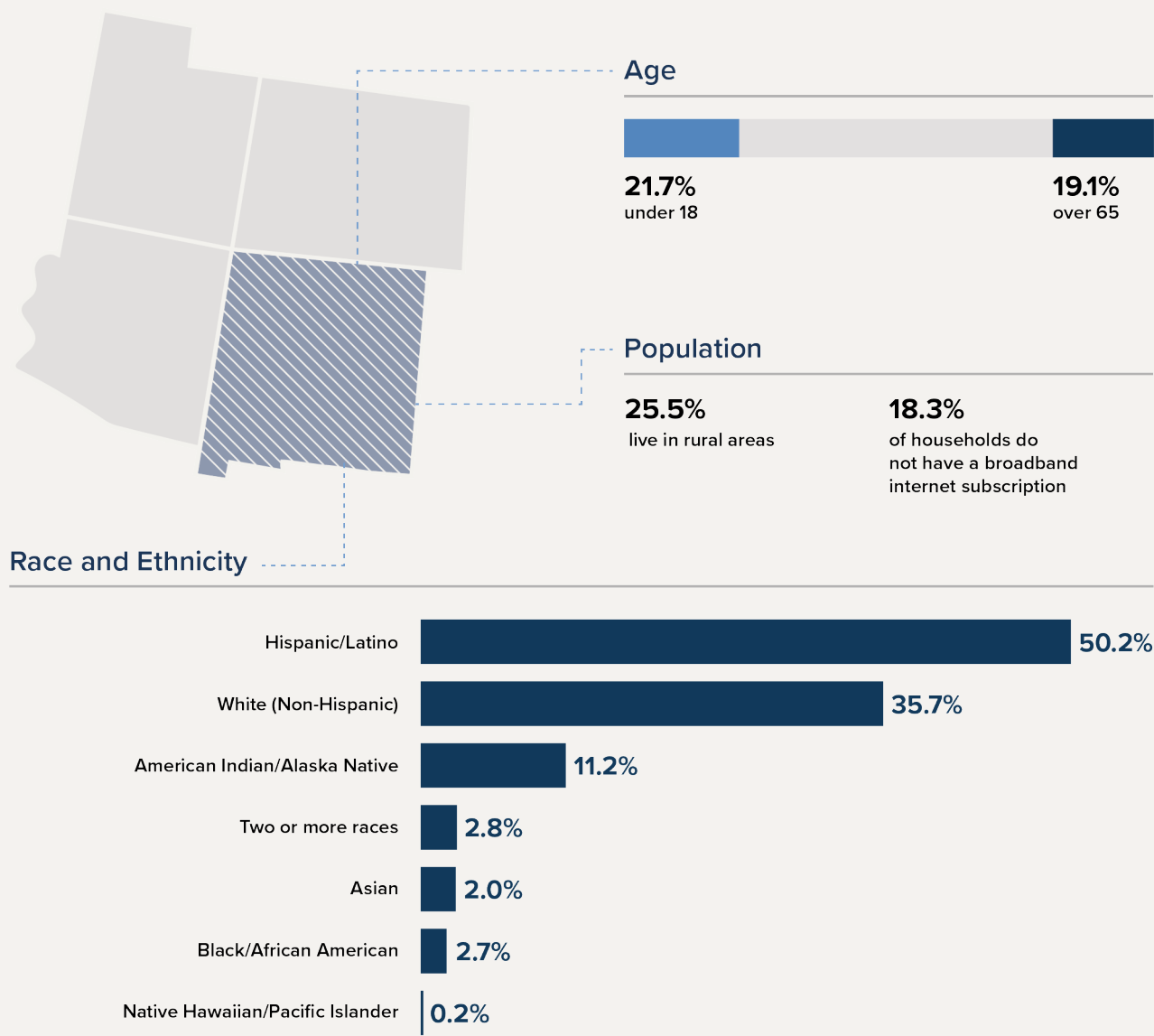
6 “New Mexican’s Views Regarding Spanish Language Media in the State of New Mexico,” BSP Research, last modified November 10, 2021, <https://www.nmlocalnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Key-Findings-BSP-Research.pdf>.

New Mexico at a Glance

Topline indicators about New Mexico’s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

Community Indicators

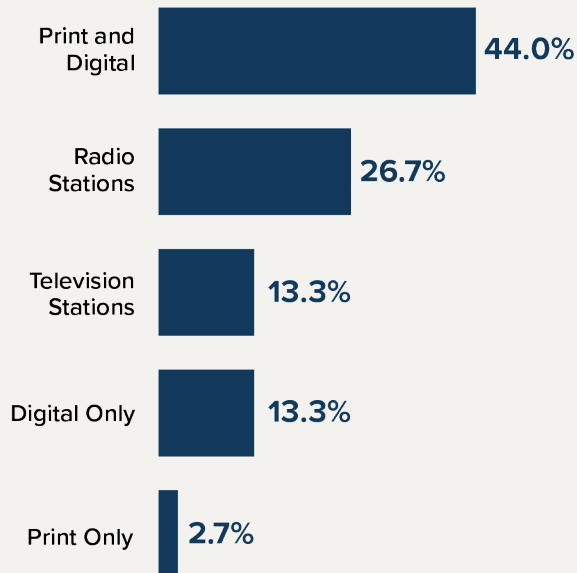
Community indicators are from the state’s U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



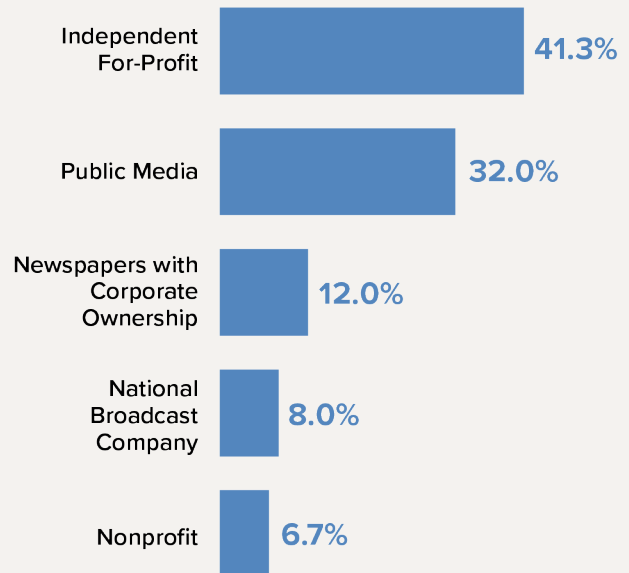
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).

Medium

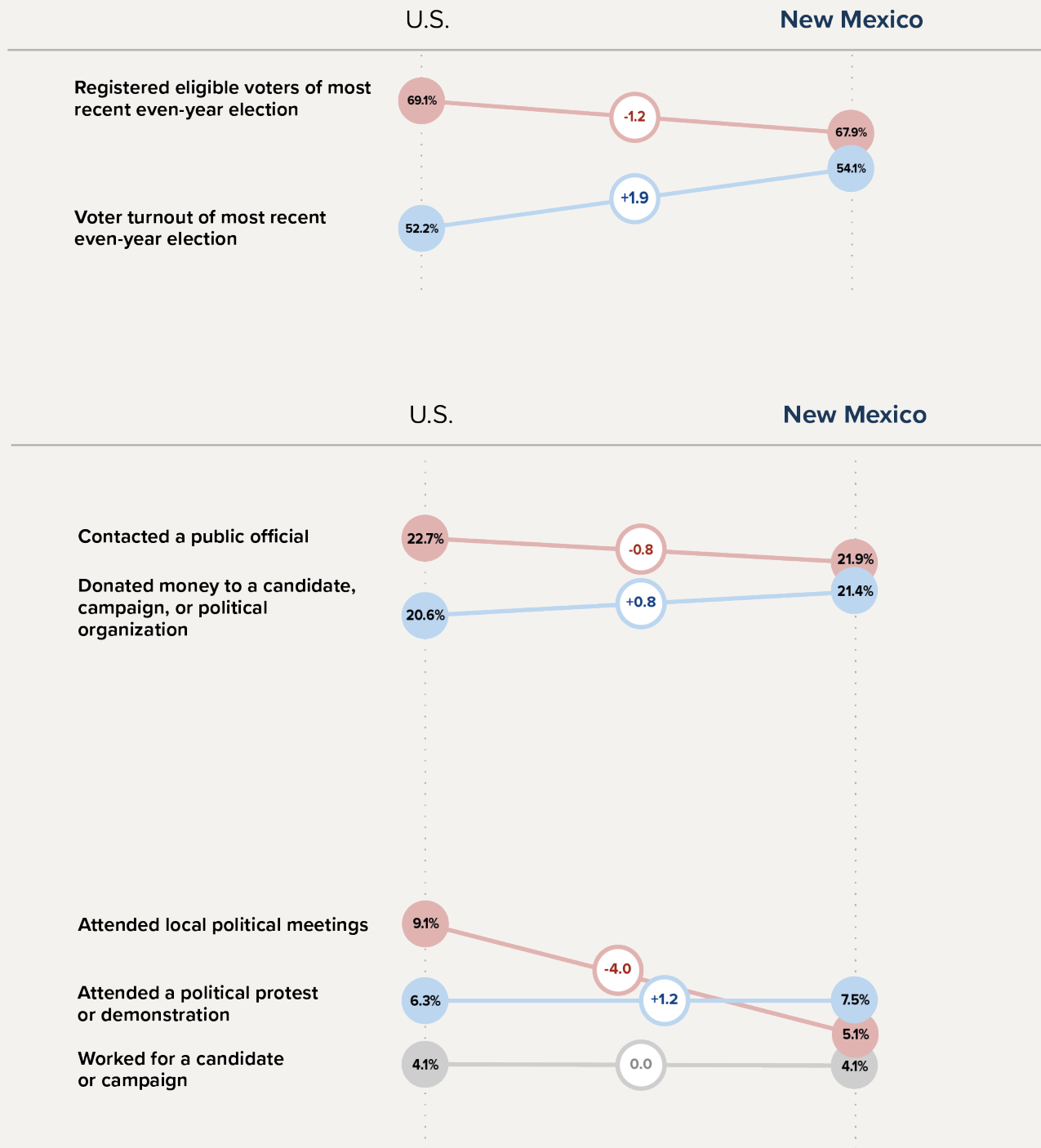


Ownership structure



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



New Mexico Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of New Mexico to dig deeper into the current state of New Mexico’s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about the innovative digital news outlet serving the small, mountain community of Cloudcroft.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in New Mexico.

New Mexicans are slightly more civically engaged than U.S. residents on average when it comes to donating money to a campaign or political organization or attending a demonstration. But the national numbers set a low bar, and the New Mexico figures are still quite low — less than a quarter of New Mexicans surveyed in the 2022 CES reported donating, 7.5% reported attending a demonstration, and 4.1% reported working for a campaign.⁷ Only about 5% attended a local political meeting, a smaller proportion than the national average of 9.1%.⁸

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	New Mexico	Difference from U.S.	
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	5.1%	-4.0	▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	21.4%	0.8	▲
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	7.5%	1.2	▲
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	21.9%	-0.8	▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	4.1%	0.0	

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 415

7 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”
8 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”

At 54.1%, voter turnout for the 2022 midterms was slightly higher than the national turnout of 52.2%, though New Mexico had a slightly lower percentage of registered eligible voters for that election (67.9%) compared to the national numbers (69.1%).⁹ New Mexico has a relatively low cost of voting score — -0.19 — as calculated by the Cost of Voting Index, which considers state election laws and policies to determine the difficulty or ease of voting there.¹⁰ However, this measure does not capture all potential barriers to voting, such as distance from the polls or lack of information about candidates.

Stakeholders' views on civic engagement and access to government officials were mixed. A few noted that, perhaps because of the state's relatively small population and the fact that the state legislators are volunteers, residents have fairly good access to their representatives, including their entire congressional delegation. Stakeholders also noted that it's often fairly easy to interact with state legislators. "Because we're a small population state, our state legislators seem accessible and responsive," said Rashad Mahmood, executive director of the New Mexico Local News Fund. "Legislators representing rural areas are on the front lines of the local news crisis, and when we approach them about helping support local news they've been enthusiastic."

When it comes to engagement with national-level politics and government, however, there are different challenges. One stakeholder said their perception was that, despite good access to the congressional delegation, there was widespread apathy when it came to residents believing they could catalyze change on the national level, though they noted this was not a phenomenon limited to New Mexico. Though we heard similar claims regarding civic engagement in other ecosystems in this report, and stakeholders did not cite specific quantitative evidence, Pew Research Center has conducted polling on perception of government and politics on the national scale that aligns with stakeholders' statements. A 2023 survey found that only 4% of respondents felt the political system is working extremely or very well, 65% always or often felt exhausted when thinking about U.S. politics these days, and more and more Americans have unfavorable views of both political parties.¹¹

Another stakeholder noted that vulnerable or disenfranchised populations, such as undocumented residents of the state, might be more at risk than other groups when it comes to contacting public officials and participating in other forms of civic engagement.

9 "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

10 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

11 "Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics," Pew Research Center, last modified September 19, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/>.

Despite a shared sense that New Mexicans often have good access to their representatives, stakeholders disagreed about levels of participation in civic engagement more broadly. While one said civic engagement was very high, another felt civic engagement was fairly thin in the state apart from organizing around individual issues such as reproductive rights.

Stakeholders attested to the importance of access to reliable news about local government to boost public meeting attendance and uproot misinformation.

They also noted that even in parts of the state with good coverage, cost could still prohibit access. Pat Davis, owner and CEO of the newspaper publishing company CTRL+P, served on the Albuquerque City Council for eight years and started the nonprofit statehouse news outlet New Mexico Political Report during that time. Davis said he saw the same people showing up to council meetings and noticed a lack of

access to reputable coverage. “The majority of our city makes less than \$40,000 a year,” he said. “They can’t afford a \$200 subscription to read a newspaper about what is coming or did happen at the city council.”

“The majority of our city makes less than \$40,000 a year,” he said. “They can’t afford a \$200 subscription to read a newspaper about what is coming or did happen at the city council.”

Pat Davis,
Owner and CEO of CTRL+P

Digital accessibility is also a significant challenge in the state that intersects with news and information distribution. Stakeholders frequently cited geography and infrastructure as some of the biggest barriers when it comes to equitable information access in New Mexico. Many of New Mexico’s information providers are clustered in the northern half of the state in the Albuquerque and Santa Fe metropolitan areas, though some still provide statewide coverage.¹² The New Mexico Department of Information Technology’s broadband map shows that large swaths of the state are underserved or unserved.¹³ According to data from the American Communities Survey, only 81.7% of New Mexico households have a broadband internet subscription, nearly seven percentage points below the national average, and 91.0% of households have a computer, compared to 94.0% of households nationally.¹⁴

¹² “New Mexico,” Local News Initiative, Northwestern University, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/state-localnewslandscape?state=NM&stateCode=35>.

¹³ “New Mexico Broadband Map,” NM DoIT Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, <https://nmbbmapping.org/mapping/>.

¹⁴ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Mexico,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NM/PST045223>.

Due to sparse or completely absent county government websites, combined with fewer local news sources based in rural counties and a large percentage of households without reliable broadband access, some New Mexicans may not be receiving the information that would result in their participation in civic engagement and government decision-making. County government websites vary significantly in the amount of information they provide about local decision-making and policy, upcoming and past meetings, and the role of different departments and officials. For example, in De Baca County, which has a population of 1,693 people, there appears to be no county government website at all.¹⁵ Websites also vary in terms of their accessibility for people who speak languages other than English. Of the 12 New Mexico county government websites we analyzed, some had options for translating the text of the website to languages other than English, but none had built-in translation options for public meeting materials like agendas and minutes or for meeting recordings.¹⁶ Given the large Hispanic or Latino population in the state and the small number of local Spanish-language news sources, more resources are needed to ensure that New Mexicans who speak Spanish or other languages have access to information about local decision-making and officials.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in New Mexico and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Overall, most stakeholders felt press freedom was not a major challenge in New Mexico. Open records laws are strong in the state, interviewees said, and journalists and their work is supported by the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government. The Press Freedom Tracker listed zero incidents in the state in 2022 and 2023.¹⁷ While there may not be widespread structural barriers to press freedom in the state, one stakeholder said they did hear about individual incidents — which the interviewee chalked up to a combination of “small town” politics, ignorance of the law, and a lack of watchdogs — such as voting on items that were not on the meeting agenda, voting by secret ballot, or telling reporters that they cannot record public meetings.

¹⁵ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: De Baca County, New Mexico,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/debacacountynewmexico/PST045223>.

¹⁶ In addition to a county with a large metro area, a county with two news outlets, and a county with one news outlet, our analysis included all the counties with zero outlets according to the State of Local News Project as of Jan. 5, 2024. We analyzed the county government websites for the following counties: Bernalillo, Catron, Colfax, De Baca, Doña Ana, Grant, Harding, Luna, Mora, Quay, Roosevelt, and Torrance.

¹⁷ “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

Though New Mexico may not have widespread challenges to press freedom, hyperpartisan news sources could increase the prevalence of biased coverage and misinformation, particularly in areas where there is little to no competition from other local news sources. A 2020 map of hyperpartisan news outlets by researchers Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli shows seven in the state of New Mexico, located in Albuquerque, Bernalillo, Clayton, Farmington, Gallup, Las Cruces, and Santa Fe.¹⁸ This is slightly more than the median for the 11 ecosystems in this report, though not nearly as high as the 40 outlets recorded in Michigan and North Carolina, respectively. Stakeholders also felt that the state did not have major problems with [pink slime](#)¹⁹ journalism — outlets that publish low quality, often partisan stories that appear to be local news at first glance — in comparison to other states, but one stakeholder did describe how, in the absence of access to news about local issues and government, residents turned to blogs and other information sources that often contained inaccurate information.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand New Mexicans' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

The survey shows that New Mexicans generally have a more positive view of local news than U.S. residents overall. For all but one statement, a greater proportion of surveyed New Mexicans agreed or strongly agreed with the statements indicating trust compared to surveyed U.S. residents overall. The survey results also indicate that many New Mexicans trust in the competency of local news sources — three quarters of New Mexicans surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly," compared to 65% of U.S. respondents overall.²⁰

18 Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, "Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there's one near you." NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

19 Annie Aguiar, "An illustrated guide to 'pink slime' journalism," Poynter, last modified October 5, 2023, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/media-literacy/2023/pink-slime-journalism-local-news-deserts/>.

20 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

However, while a greater proportion of surveyed New Mexicans indicated trust across the five dimension compared to all surveyed U.S. residents, trust in local news nationally across these dimensions is perhaps not high — only 44% said local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.²¹ Additionally, while 57.5% of surveyed New Mexicans felt that local news cares about the impact their reporting has on their community, only 40.0% agreed or strongly agreed that local news cares about the best interest of individual readers, viewers, and listeners.²² The proportion falls below the 47% of all surveyed U.S. residents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.²³

Information Providers and Community	U.S	New Mexico	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	75.0%	10.0 ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	57.5%	5.5 ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	57.5%	4.5 ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	40.0%	-7.0 ▼
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	52.5%	8.5 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 40

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	New Mexico	Difference from U.S
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	2.6%	0.4 ▲
From TV	31%	35.9%	4.9 ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	61.5%	3.5 ▼
From a radio	7%	0.0%	7.0 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 40

These results indicate that New Mexicans feel that local news sources have the resources they need to meet their communities' information needs, but many distrust whether news sources have the best interests of individual news consumers in mind. These survey results may reflect the limited community media offerings relative to the size of the state's Hispanic or Latino and Indigenous populations, in addition to the concern raised by stakeholders about needing more reporters from local communities to report on those communities. Roberta Rael is the director and founder of Generation Justice, a multiracial, multicultural youth-led multimedia journalism project that is focused on helping young people hone their reporting and leadership skills and develop a media justice framework. Rael highlighted another challenge that may impact trust — that the mainstream media model typically focuses on short soundbites and interpretation of community members' words rather than allowing New Mexicans to tell their own stories. "What we offer in training young people from a media justice perspective is that we're not going to interpret the voices and the stories of our community," Rael said. "We are offering them the airtime so that they have the

21 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

22 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

23 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

opportunity to tell their own story in their own voice and their own perspective. And if they have a call to action, they can do that on our media outlet.”

The state ecosystem may benefit from additional community listening and engagement opportunities to help determine what news consumers need and why one particular dimension of trust is lower than the national number, as well as to help build relationships with community members and organizations.

The Gallup/Knight survey also provided insight into how Americans access the news. New Mexicans rely heavily on broadcast television for news on a daily basis. This is similar to the national breakdown — 52.5% of those surveyed reported relying on a television station daily to stay up-to-date on news.²⁴

Regarding the format where New Mexicans get most of their news, the state data looks similar to the national data. While more than half of surveyed New Mexicans rely on TV news daily, respondents reported getting more of their news online than from TV, similar to the national breakdown.²⁵ Few people — both nationally and specifically in New Mexico — reported getting most of their news from a printed newspaper or magazine.²⁶

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	25.0%	22.5%	7.5%	17.5%	27.5%
A website or app	40.0%	12.5%	7.5%	12.5%	27.5%
A radio station	22.5%	17.5%	5.0%	22.5%	32.5%
A TV station	52.5%	15.0%	5.0%	20.0%	7.5%
Direct communication with people in your area	22.5%	27.5%	15.0%	15.0%	20.0%
A magazine	2.5%	7.5%	17.5%	25.0%	47.5%
A social media platform	32.5%	12.5%	10.0%	10.0%	35.0%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 40

²⁴ Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

²⁵ Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

²⁶ Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in New Mexico, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent ecosystem assessment.

While there has not been a recent statewide information needs assessment conducted in New Mexico, conversations with community stakeholders and information from a 2021 ecosystem assessment for southern New Mexico, conducted by the New Mexico Local News Fund, provide some insight into gaps and opportunities in the state. Despite investment in nonprofit, investigative, and community news outlets throughout the state, New Mexico still has limited Spanish-language local news offerings and gaps in coverage of communities of color in the state. There are opportunities for more Spanish-language local media and more media serving Hispanic and Latino communities broadly given that roughly

half the population of New Mexico identifies as Hispanic or Latino. Census data shows that 24.7% of New Mexico residents speak Spanish, though about two thirds of this group indicated they also speak English very well.²⁷ A 2021 assessment of the local news ecosystem in southern New Mexico noted that communities of color remained underserved, a sentiment echoed by the stakeholders interviewed for this report. The report detailed the concerns of local community members in the southern half of the state — Black residents described feeling like their communities were only covered in the context of crime or sensationalizing stories and that local media was not working to serve as a bridge for the community.²⁸ We found only one news outlet in the state specifically geared toward serving the Black community — UpLift Chronicles, a newspaper published by New Mexico Black Leadership Council.

Despite investment in nonprofit, investigative, and community news outlets throughout the state, New Mexico still has limited Spanish-language local news offerings and gaps in coverage of communities of color in the state.

27 “Language Spoken at Home,” United States Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=New%20Mexico%20language>.

28 Diana Alba Soular and Dolores M. Bernal, “Southern New Mexico News & Information Ecosystem Report,” published July 2021, <https://www.nmlocalnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Southern-New-Mexico-Report.pdf>.

Stakeholders also detailed challenges regarding accessibility and trust, including that traditional media training results in prioritization of soundbites that are not representative of New Mexican's views and voices when it comes to nuanced issues. Stakeholders also noted that legacy media is not widely trusted by New Mexicans. The locally-owned Albuquerque Journal — and its editorial board in particular — has developed a reputation for leaning conservative, which interviewees said has led to decreasing trust among readers in the fairly liberal city of Albuquerque and may have even contributed to the departure of some of the outlet's reporters.

There are opportunities for greater investment in Spanish-language news in New Mexico. The 2021 Southern New Mexico News & Information Ecosystem Report noted that metro-area Spanish-language broadcasters based in the northern half of the state often did not provide much local coverage for residents of southern New Mexico.²⁹ The report noted other challenges with existing local news infrastructure beyond the small number of outlets, including a lack of awareness of Spanish-language news, digital and cost accessibility issues, and concerns among Spanish-speaking residents that local outlets were not covering the issues relevant to them.³⁰ In 2021, the New Mexico Local News Fund partnered with BSP Research to survey Spanish-speaking communities on their views about Spanish-language local news, finding an interest in more Spanish-language local coverage and that 40% of Spanish-speaking New Mexicans would be willing to pay a small subscription or membership fee for such content, according to the research firm's sampling.³¹

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in New Mexico. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

29 Soular and Bernal, "Southern New Mexico News & Information Ecosystem Report."

30 Soular and Bernal, "Southern New Mexico News & Information Ecosystem Report."

31 "New Mexican's Views Regarding Spanish Language Media in the State of New Mexico," BSP Research, last modified November 10, 2021, <https://www.nmlocalnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Key-Findings-BSP-Research.pdf>.

New Mexico has a mix of large legacy papers, nonprofits, and small digital or print newspapers. Local ownership has remained strong — we found only 15 outlets affiliated with national newspaper and broadcast chains in the state,³² a smaller proportion than many of the other ecosystems in this report, compared to 31 for-profit newsrooms with in-state ownership and five nonprofit outlets. But even as many news sources remain in the hands of New Mexicans, some family-owned papers have faced challenges in recent years. The Albuquerque Journal has had to conduct layoffs and cuts. Papers owned by national chains have also been hollowed out. According to one stakeholder, there were five Gannett-owned papers in the state that had only a few reporters among them and a single editor for the entire state. El Rito Media purchased three of the papers in May 2024 as part of its work in “saving local newspapers.”³³ El Rito was founded by a group of investors, many of whom have ties to the state Republican Party and the oil and gas industry.³⁴ The company’s primary investor is Harvey Yates, Jr., an oil and gas magnate and frequent advocate for the industry whose oil company, Jalapeño Corp., made large contributions to Republican candidates in the state in 2021 and 2022, according to [reporting from Searchlight New Mexico](#).³⁵

New Mexico has a number of small, local papers covering rural communities. But some of the smallest of these papers, with only one or two staff members, can face closure when leadership moves on or struggle to stay on top of news

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	75	
Population per organization	28,234	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	10	13.3%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	33	44.0%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	2	2.7%
Radio stations	20	26.7%
Television stations	10	13.3%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	31	41.3%
National broadcast chain	6	8.0%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	9	12.0%
Nonprofit	5	6.7%
Public media	24	32.0%
Community Media		
African American/Black	1	
Hispanic/Latino	4	
Asian/Asian American	0	
Indigenous/Native American	6	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

32 This list was compiled prior to the sale of five Gannett-owned papers to a locally-based media company.

33 “El Rito Media acquires 3 New Mexico Newspapers,” Rio Grande Sun. Published May 8, 2024. https://www.riograndesun.com/news/el-rito-media-acquires-3-new-mexico-newspapers/article_c6d2d9f0-0d66-11ef-9d73-2b217689a497.html.

34 Alicia Inez Guzmán, “Magnate opus: The power plays of Harvey Yates,” Searchlight New Mexico, last modified September 8, 2022, <https://searchlightnm.org/magnate-opus-the-power-plays-of-harvey-yates/>.

35 Guzmán, “Magnate opus.”

stories when their consistent contributors retire. Pat Davis, CEO and owner of CTRL+P, which acquired and publishes three small community papers, explained how the challenge with getting someone to cover local town council meetings was not money but the pipeline. “The older people are not going to stay out late anymore to go to those meetings or to get in the car and do the in-depth investigative work that’s required to understand,” Davis said. “And we don’t have enough young people coming through the pipeline.”

Davis and others — such as Rael of Generation Justice and Gwyneth Doland, a journalist and professor of practice in the Journalism Department at UNM — are working to train a new generation of journalists. “...we’re really focused on young people of color, on BIPOC folks, getting the skills and being nurtured in the skills that are necessary to become really great journalists, really great storytellers, as well as other arenas that the young people choose to go into,” Rael said of Generation Justice’s work.

For the past five years, UNM and the New Mexico Local News Fund have partnered to place fellows in local newsrooms, with money raised by the New Mexico Local News Fund to pay fellows’ salaries. “We started this program to give students and graduates the kind of practical experience they needed and take the risk element out of it for the news organizations,” said Doland, who runs the New Mexico Local News Internships and Fellowships program. The program has been successful, Doland explained — fellows are often hired by their host newsrooms. Davis’ papers have benefitted from this program, he said, but they recently decided to expand fellowship opportunities for CTRL+P’s outlets. They started recruiting students in their last year of journalism school, paying them as full-time reporters, and pairing them with a coach. Half of the journalists working at Davis’ papers are in their last semester of journalism school or their first year out of school, he said.

Even with the presence of robust efforts to strengthen the pipeline, pay remains a major challenge when it comes to recruiting and retaining journalists in and from New Mexico. At 17.6%, New Mexico has one of the highest poverty rates of any state in the U.S.³⁶ Median household income is \$54,020, well below the national average of \$75,149.³⁷ “We have a student population who is very focused on lifting themselves and their families out of poverty, and journalism is not the number one way that they see to do that,” Doland said.

“We have a student population who is very focused on lifting themselves and their families out of poverty, and journalism is not the number one way that they see to do that.”

Gwyneth Doland,
Professor of practice in communications & journalism, University of New Mexico

³⁶ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Mexico,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NM/PST045223>.

³⁷ United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Mexico.”

Despite large Indigenous and Hispanic or Latino populations in the state, there are few Spanish-language and community-serving local news sources in New Mexico. The state has three Spanish-language television stations — two Univision affiliates and a Telemundo affiliate — all of which are based in Albuquerque or Santa Fe. The 2021 ecosystem assessment for southern New Mexico lists Camino Real Media, located in Doña Ana County, as the only Spanish-language local news publication covering communities in the southern half of the state.

Though New Mexico has one of the largest Indigenous populations in the country, we found few news outlets specifically serving Indigenous communities. In general, news and information providers for and by Indigenous communities do not appear to be consistently cataloged in existing databases. Though stakeholders identified five tribal radio stations and noted that the Gallup Independent and Navajo Times cover New Mexico's Indigenous communities, we found only two outlets when we explored existing databases of broadcast, print, and digital media. One is KTDB, which broadcasts in and around Pinehill, NM and is owned by the Ramah Navajo School Board Inc. The other is KCIE, which is owned and operated by the Jicarilla Apache Tribe and broadcasts from Dulce, NM. The station, which first went on air in 1990, broadcasts national and local news, educational programming, and music.³⁸

According to stakeholders, some news sources for and by Indigenous communities are affiliated with tribal governments, but these do not always have editorial independence. There are also some local papers that have bureaus or reporters dedicated to covering Indigenous communities, such as the Gallup Independent. Navajo Times also provides some local New Mexico coverage, though it is based in Arizona. Some community members are also working to fill gaps in the information ecosystem, including Sherry Bellson, who recently launched the first independent news outlet serving Zuni Pueblo, a community on the western edge of New Mexico home to roughly 6,000 people.³⁹

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	6.7%			6.7%	
Print and digital	32.0%		12.0%		
Print only	2.7%				
Radio					26.7%
Television		8.0%			5.3%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

38 "History," KCIE Radio, <https://www.kcieradio.com/history/>.

39 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Zuni Pueblo CDP, New Mexico" United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/zunipueblodpnewmexico,US/PST045223>.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the New Mexico ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

Newsrooms have not recently published staff demographics or shared findings from source diversity audits, but stakeholders noted that diversifying staffing at local news organizations is an area of opportunity. Stakeholders shared how news organization staff doesn't always reflect the New Mexico community — where the majority of residents are people of color. One publisher said that, while a diverse set of communities fall within the coverage area of their newspapers, including several pueblos, nearly all of their staff are white. Another stakeholder said they felt diversity among reporters in the state was fairly good, but it was lacking at the leadership and executive level.

Stakeholders also pointed to issues with the pipeline, including a sense that local New Mexicans are often not the ones reporting on their communities. Some said they struggled to hire staff that reflected the communities they reported on because there weren't enough New Mexicans of color coming through the pipeline. Other stakeholders expressed a different but related problem: that a traditional media model was still prevalent at many New Mexico outlets, which might be discouraging New Mexicans from a broader variety of background from pursuing media if they felt traditional media values and training did not align with their lived experiences or upheld a dominant and incomplete narrative.

In many cases, stakeholders pointed out, the lack of diversity in New Mexico's newsrooms means that stories for or about communities of color are often not reported by people from those communities. When reporters do not have a deep understanding of the issues a community faces, it can mean that things get missed, a stakeholder said.

The lack of diversity in New Mexico's newsrooms means that stories for or about communities of color are often not reported by people from those communities.

Case Study - The Cloudcroft Reader

Providing critical local news to a small mountain community

Concerned about transparency and accountability for local government, and noting a need for high quality local information, Chris Hearne started the Cloudcroft Reader in 2023. The Substack-based local news source serves the village of Cloudcroft, located in the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico and home to 750 residents, in addition to surrounding unincorporated communities.⁴⁰ Other than a monthly visitors guide, the community has no other source of local news, according to Hearne.



The Cloudcroft Reader
Chris Hearne.

Hearne has a background in media. He started a city magazine in Austin in the '80s and a weekly in Houston in 1989. He splits his time between Houston and Cloudcroft, where he has been coming for the past 40 years. "As I spent more time here, I became increasingly interested in the issues that really affect the long-term health of the community — the governance, water, utilities, roads, all the infrastructure sort of issues," Hearne said. "My kids will be here 50 years from now, so the health of the community matters to me today and tomorrow."

Throughout the year since it was founded, the Reader has covered those issues, including when the new mayoral administration discovered accounting issues and missing tax filings that had occurred under the previous administration. The Reader has also worked to provide its audience with information about fires — susceptibility, mitigation, and procedures should a fire occur — particularly amid growing concern after a fire in nearby Ruidoso killed two people and destroyed hundreds of homes in summer 2024. In addition to keeping audiences up to date on civic and infrastructure news, the Reader highlights "faces and places" in the community, featuring the stories of local residents and their businesses.

The Reader has also worked to build community buy-in and trust in ways that are different from many news organizations. "We publish emails when we have a story we think is worth somebody's time," Hearne said.

⁴⁰ United States Census Bureau, "Cloudcroft village, New Mexico."

“We’re not trying to monetize web traffic. Therefore, we’re not inundating people with a lot of things to get them to click on the site. We’re just giving them the stories when we have it, which is at least once a week.”

Though Cloudcroft only has several hundred residents, there’s still a lot to cover. “We sometimes say it’s a little village, but big stories. And it’s really vital to people, particularly since there’s no real trustworthy source of reporting, so there’s a hunger for it. I think that’s one reason why we’ve been able to kind of grow as quickly as we have,” Hearne said. The outlet is moving to a membership model and ran a successful pledge

campaign in August. They’ve also received support from LION Publishers and the New Mexico Local News Fund. They’re also working to build their brand through events, with plans to host a community forum on fire, with five speakers providing information on everything from government mitigation efforts to insurance.

Hearne said the Reader is focused on being a fact-based news source without a political agenda. They also quote sources at length — while the traditional journalism model might have produced articles that were about 20% quotes and 80% the reporters’ interpretations, the outlet has flipped that balance, Hearne said. They are focused on having community members tell their own stories in addition to pointing readers to meeting recordings and other sources where they can hear information for themselves. Hearne said he’s heard from community members that the existence of a reliable, fact-based source of local news and information in Cloudcroft has helped reduce the foothold of misinformation that often spreads on Facebook or other social media.

Similar to other stakeholders in New Mexico and across the ecosystems in this report, Hearne said talent is a major challenge for news organizations — finding people with an understanding of journalistic principles and a commitment to fair reporting can be difficult, especially as it’s often hard to make a living in journalism. “The number one priority needs to be in helping fund the reporters who really drive the coverage,” he said. With a small team — composed of Hearne and Senior Editor Hannah Dean — and the help of technology that allows for more efficient workflows, the Reader has been able to build strong community relationships.

The Reader’s early success highlights how local news can function as a critical public service for local communities. “We’re like a utility company,” Hearne said. “We’re like the folks who bring propane gas up here to cabins. We’re providing a service that people value and that enriches the community.”

“We sometimes say it’s a little village, but big stories. And it’s really vital to people, particularly since there’s no real trustworthy source of reporting, so there’s a hunger for it.”

Chris Hearne,
Editor of the Cloudcroft Reader

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North Carolina

North Carolina

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the North Carolina news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

North Carolina is a geographically and demographically diverse state, with a large rural population and rapidly growing metro areas. The state's news ecosystem has not been immune to challenges facing many parts of the U.S., including decreased local ownership of legacy media and shrinking newsroom staff and resources. Stakeholders described geographic gaps in news coverage, with news outlets concentrated in urban areas like Charlotte and in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Research Triangle. Quantitative measures of civic engagement in the state indicate that it is lower than the national average, and interviewees highlighted barriers to civic information and participation. And, in a decision that has significant implications for government transparency and information access, the North Carolina legislature altered the state's open record laws in 2023, giving themselves greater power to determine what is considered a public record. Despite these and other challenges, the state has seen promising collaborations and the emergence of new nonprofit and independent startup news organizations, in addition to innovative means of reaching and engaging underserved audiences.

North Carolina — the second largest state included in this report, based on its population — has a significant urban-rural divide. One third of North Carolinians live in areas classified as rural, according to data from the U.S. Census, compared to a fifth of the U.S. population overall.¹ North Carolina's population is growing, particularly in and around the Research Triangle, the part of the state between Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill that is home to three major research universities. From 2020 to 2023, the Raleigh-Durham-Cary metropolitan statistical area grew by 5.6%, the

¹ "Urban and Rural," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

tenth fastest rate in the nation during that period, according to Axios, while counties in the rural northeast of the state have seen their populations decrease.² Stakeholder interviews and analysis from the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media (CISLM) at the UNC Hussman School demonstrate that residents in parts of the state further from metro areas are typically served by fewer local news sources than those living in and around the state's metro areas.³

North Carolina is politically diverse and currently has a divided state government, with a Republican-controlled statehouse and a Democratic governor. Voting data and information from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study (CES) shows that civic engagement in the state is relatively low — only 6.2% of surveyed North Carolinians reported attending a local political meeting, compared to 9.1% of all survey respondents nationally.⁴ Stakeholders described uneven participation around civic issues, and some attributed these issues to a lack of information about how to get involved and of awareness about existing resources.

The legislature's 2023 decision to exempt itself from the state's public records laws has the potential to further decrease access to important information about the government, politics, or civic issues.⁵ Research tracking civic and government information access following the change could help journalists and other open government stakeholders understand the change's impact, identify where it creates or exacerbates gaps, and work to identify solutions that ensure North Carolinians receive the information they need.

While stakeholders, prior ecosystem studies, and data we gathered for this report show that North Carolina has followed trends of decreased local ownership and financial challenges for many local newsrooms, new partnerships and news organizations have worked to fill gaps and find solutions to distribution challenges throughout the state. Nonprofit and startup newsrooms have made strides in filling topic-area and geographic gaps in coverage. The ecosystem has also seen critical innovation when it comes to Spanish-language news and information, which stakeholders identified as a gap. North Carolina Local News Lab Fund, a funder that invests in network-building and supports news and information providers throughout the state, helped facilitate collaboration between a broad set of organizations and stakeholders to provide timely Spanish-language information about extreme weather

2 Zachery Eanes, "The Triangle suburbs continued to see rapid growth in 2023," Axios, Axios Media, last modified March 15, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/local/raleigh/2024/03/15/the-triangle-suburbs-continued-to-see-rapid-growth-in-2023>.

3 Callan Hazeldine, Elizabeth Thompson, Clay Williams, and Jessica Mahone, "Local News for Whom? A News Media Census of North Carolina," UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, <https://www.cislm.org/research/nc-news-information-census/>.

4 Schaffner, Brian, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

5 Will Doran, "NC legislature to keep itself exempt from public records laws, top Senators indicate," WRAL News, Capitol Broadcasting Company, Inc., published May 2, 2024, <https://www.wral.com/story/nc-legislature-to-keep-itself-exempt-from-public-records-laws-top-senators-indicate/21411290/>.

events to farmworkers across the state. The partnership could serve as an important model for future cross-sector collaboration.

This chapter presents North Carolina at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

Opportunities

Collaborations across the rural-urban divide:

Many rural communities remain underserved by news and information providers relative to populations in metro areas. Researchers at CISLM have worked to quantitatively identify where these geographic gaps exist. Drawing on this work, newsrooms and other stakeholders can work to build capacity to reach these areas as well as conduct community listening and engagement work to better understand information needs and how best to distribute information.

Understanding trust:

While limited quantitative data for North Carolina suggests that trust in local news is relatively high compared to the national average, the state would benefit from a more granular analysis that takes into account the wide geographic, demographic, and ideological diversity in the state. News organizations can better focus their resources on building trust if they have more information about where and why trust is low. Ensuring that communities have strong relationships with local news and information providers may also be critical for misinformation disruption and ensuring that communities are informed about local issues rather than just national ones, especially given the significant presence of hyperpartisan news sources in the state.

Learning from cross-sector collaboration:

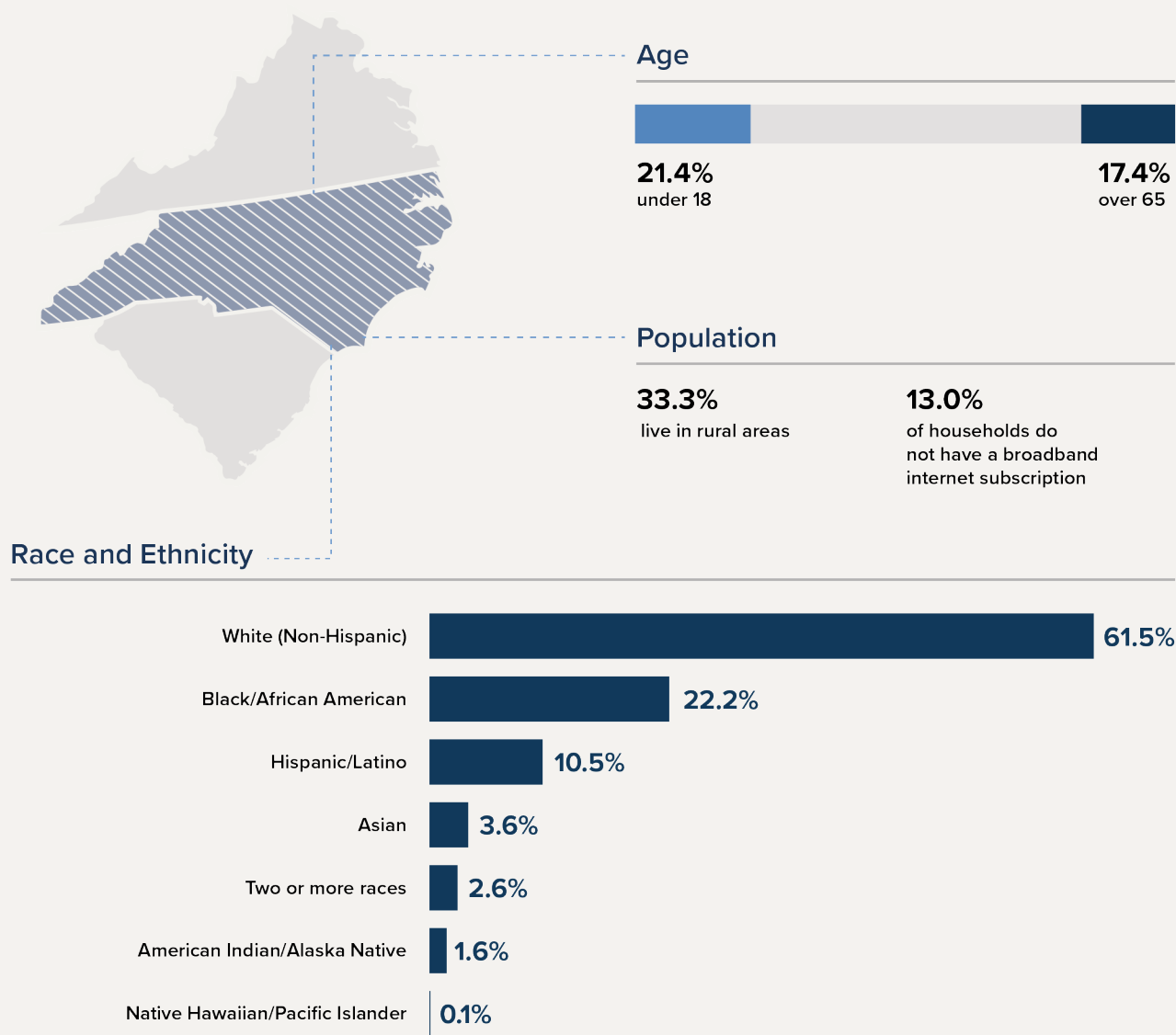
Partnerships between community organizations, a tech company, and newsrooms has allowed for the development of critical information infrastructure for Spanish-speaking farmworkers throughout North Carolina. Further exploration of opportunities for similar collaboration could help ensure that newsrooms and other stakeholders can better meet community information needs.

North Carolina at a Glance

Topline indicators about North Carolina's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

Community Indicators

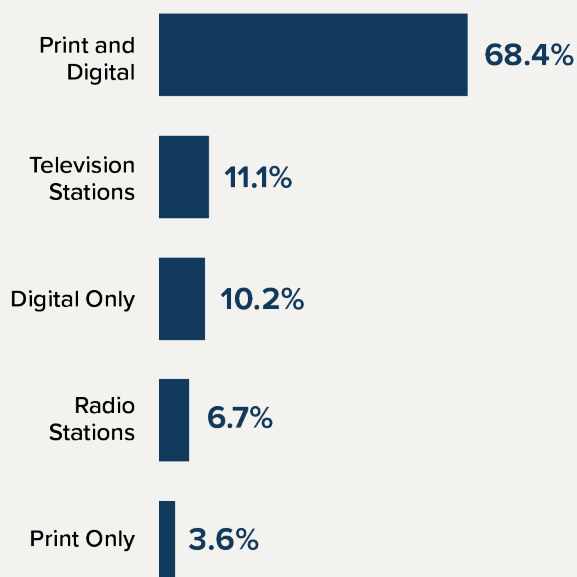
Community indicators are from the state's U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



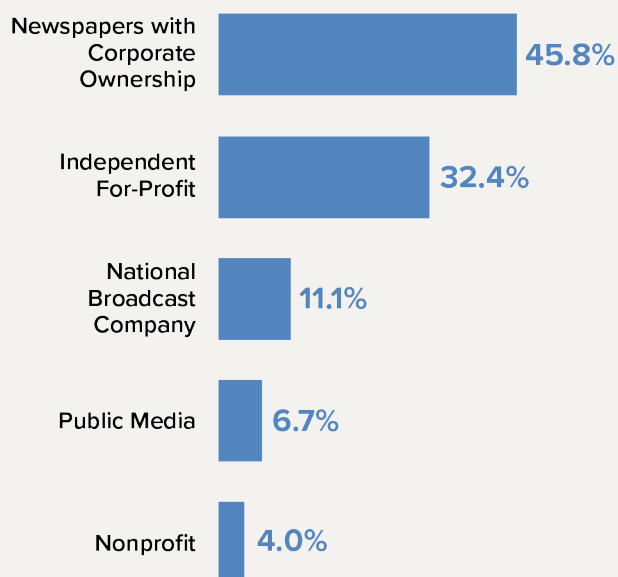
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).

Medium

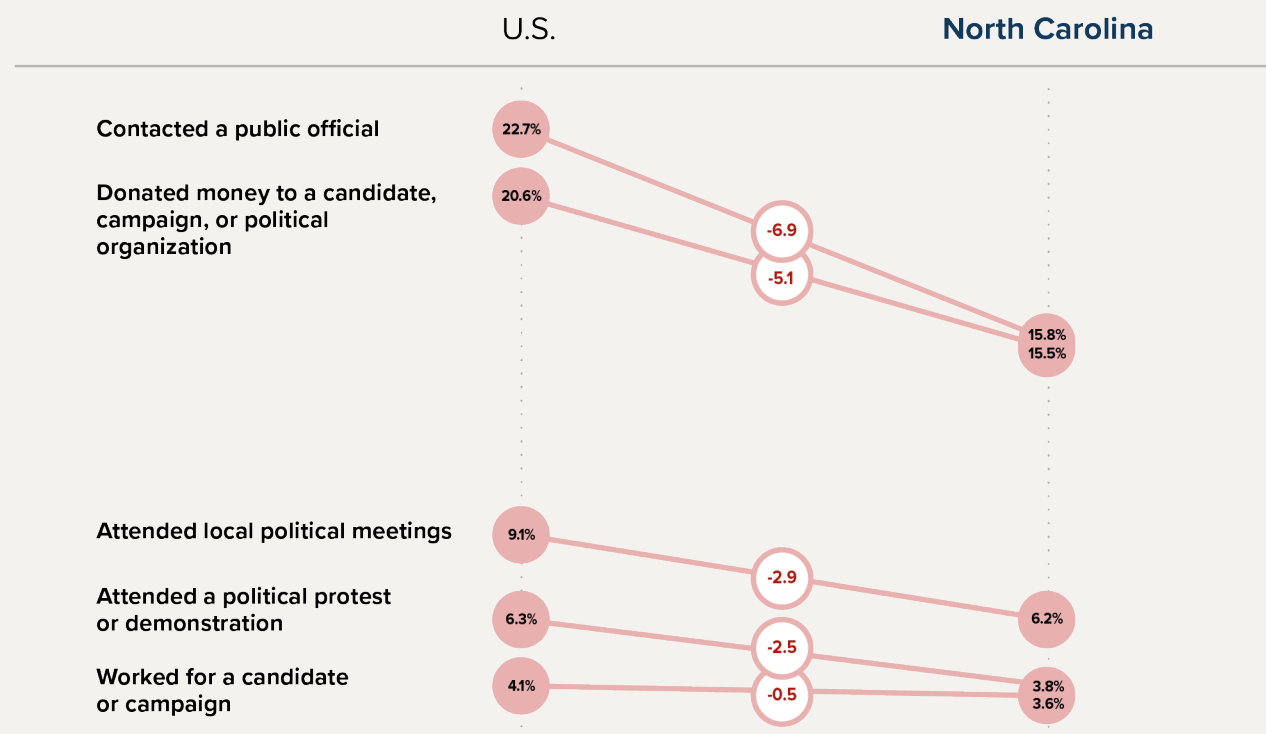
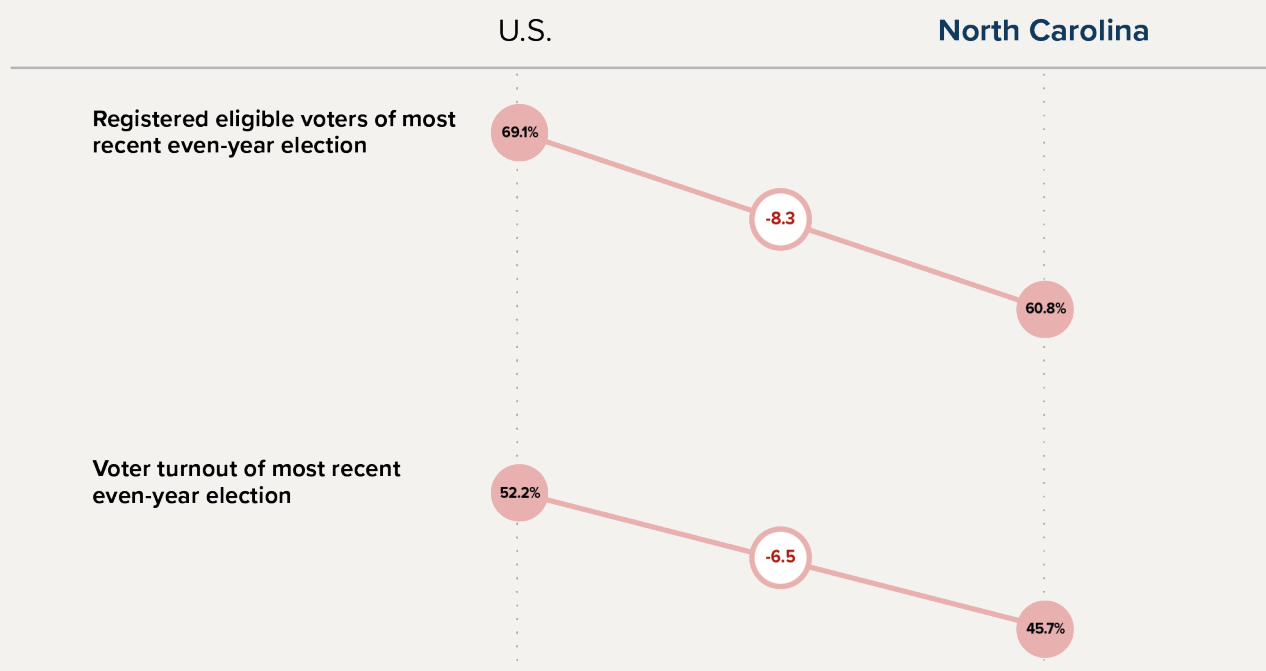


Ownership structure



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



North Carolina Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of North Carolina to dig deeper into the current state of North Carolina's News & Information Ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about changes to North Carolina's public records laws.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in North Carolina.

North Carolina is one of ten states with a divided state government, with residents electing a Democratic governor and a Republican-controlled statehouse.⁶

Donald Trump won North Carolina in

2016 and 2020, but the state elected

and re-elected its Democratic governor,

Roy Cooper, in the same years. But

despite this evidence of split-ticket voting,

data for North Carolina shows that participation in voting and non-voting forms of civic engagement is low

relative to the national numbers. For the 2022 midterms, voter turnout (45.7%) and the percentage of registered

eligible voters (60.8%) fell far below the national levels (52.2% and 69.1%, respectively).⁷ The Cost of Voting

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	North Carolina	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	6.2%	-2.9 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	15.5%	-5.1 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	3.8%	-2.5 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	15.8%	-6.9 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	3.6%	-0.5 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 1,993

⁶ "State government trifectas," Ballotpedia, https://ballotpedia.org/State_government_trifectas.

⁷ "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

Index (COVI), which calculates the difficulty or ease of voting in a state based on its election laws and policies, gave North Carolina a score of -0.15 in 2022, indicating that it was easier to vote in the state than in most other U.S. states.⁸

Data from the 2022 Harvard CES survey suggests that non-voting forms of civic engagement in North Carolina also fall below U.S. averages. The percentage of North Carolinians who reported contacting a public official (15.8%) or donating money to a campaign, candidate, or political organization (15.5%) is especially low, falling 6.9 and 5.1 percentage points below the percentages for all surveyed U.S. residents.⁹ The difference between surveyed North Carolinians and all survey respondents is smaller for other forms of civic engagement measured in the CES survey, but the percentages for all survey respondents are already low. Only 6.3% of all surveyed U.S. residents reported attending a political protest, march, or demonstration, for example.¹⁰

The 2024 North Carolina Civic Index, an assessment of civic health published this spring, reinforced many of the findings we drew from the CES data. The state ranks 42nd out of 51 for donations to political organizations, with 6.9% of respondents donating \$25 or more compared to 9.4% for the U.S. overall.¹¹ The report also stated that North Carolina ranks 47th for public meeting attendance and 51st out of 51 for engaging with local public officials.¹² The report also included metrics for news consumption, and the state falls below the national average for reading, watching, or listening to news or information related to political, societal, or social issues.¹³ North Carolina is relatively strong when it comes to helping out neighbors, participating in groups, and cultivating relationships with family, friends, and communities, the report said.¹⁴

Data suggests that relatively few North Carolinians are highly engaged with civic issues. Additional research on civic engagement that is repeatable, measures a greater variety of civic engagement activities, and is tailored to North Carolina's diverse landscape could provide insight into how engagement varies throughout the state as well as the impact of shifting demographics.

8 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. "Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

9 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." *Harvard Dataverse*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

10 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

11 "2024 North Carolina Civic Health Index," National Conference on Citizenship, published May 7, 2024, p. 5, <https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/NC-CHI-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

12 National Conference on Citizenship, "2024 North Carolina Civic Health Index," p. 5.

13 National Conference on Citizenship, "2024 North Carolina Civic Health Index," p. 5.

14 National Conference on Citizenship, "2024 North Carolina Civic Health Index," p. 4.

In interviews, stakeholders acknowledged that civic engagement varies significantly in different parts of the state and across different communities, and they were hesitant to try to characterize what civic engagement looks like throughout all of North Carolina. Many spoke about their local area or highlighted specific challenges they have noticed.

Lizzy Hazeltine, director of North Carolina Local News Lab Fund, said that civic engagement is uneven throughout the state. Regarding the relationship between journalism and local government accountability, she has seen people mobilize and speak up at local government meetings using local reporting about issues that affect their daily lives. “Creating visibility of county- and city-level policymaking and function is turning into different kinds of action, including people exercising the right to complain, the right to be on the record, and take direct action in a variety of different forms.” Hazeltine said.

Ju-Don Marshall, president and CEO of Charlotte-based public radio station WFAE, said that when she first came to Charlotte in the '90s, she noticed the city and Mecklenburg County more broadly seemed uniquely aware of their past. “It was aware of the effects of segregation, of housing instability, of the lack of economic mobility, even in the 90s,” Marshall said. “And it was trying to be better than its past would dictate.” In 2014, researchers from Harvard and UC-Berkeley published a study that ranked Charlotte as having the worst economic mobility of the 50 largest metro areas in the U.S.¹⁵ Marshall, who returned to Charlotte in 2017, found the community was mobilizing to solve the issue at every level, forming private-public partnerships and building relationships between community and civic groups. One of the most compelling parts of this process was the amount of community input at every level, Marshall said, though it hasn’t always been perfect. Charlotte’s population has grown rapidly, and there has been an increasing sense that native-born Charlotteans are being left behind as new residents come in, she explained. Still, Charlotte is different from the other cities she has lived in that it has created opportunities for people at every level to have conversations about making the city better, she said.

At the same time, stakeholders pointed to trust, reach, and visibility of resources for civic information as challenges. Marshall described how, even though WFAE has been creating voter guides in Spanish and English for the past five years, they have sometimes received feedback from community members who were not aware of the resource. Reach and visibility is a challenge when it comes to ensuring communities are getting the civic information they need to participate, and that can be especially difficult for smaller newsrooms who might not have many — or any — staff dedicated to community engagement.

15 Steve Harrison and Lisa Worf, “Updated Chetty study data paints a surprising picture of economic mobility in Mecklenburg County,” WFAE 90.7, WFAE, <https://www.wfae.org/race-equity/2022-03-01/updated-chetty-study-data-paints-a-surprising-picture-of-economic-mobility-in-mecklenburg-county>.

Other stakeholders highlighted similar issues regarding information about how to participate in civic engagement and democratic processes. Tracy Mosley serves as the director of communication and outreach at NC Counts Coalition, a nonprofit established in 2017 to help increase participation in the 2020 census that now works to create a more equitable and just state. Mosley pointed to the flow of information and the way that it's presented as the biggest challenge when it comes to civic engagement, saying she thinks many people may not understand the "rules of engagement" for democracy. "I don't know if all North Carolinians understand what their voice really means and how powerful it is or the process and power of contacting their leadership to express your concerns or opinions. I don't see media outlets covering this type of information or promoting people-power in this way," she said. She also highlighted the erosion of civics education in schools as a challenge.

Maru Quintero, communications and outreach manager at NC Counts Coalition, described several challenges faced by those in the immigrant community when it comes to civic engagement. Navigating a governmental and political system different from their previous countries, a lack of trust in the process, a belief among undocumented residents of North Carolina that they are not allowed to have a voice, and language can be barriers, she said.

Ebony West, a North Carolina resident and senior program associate for elections and voting at Democracy Fund, said some people may not be civically engaging because they are focused on meeting their basic needs.

"You need to put food on your table. You're not thinking about going to your city council meeting," West said. As in other states, apathy is a challenge as well, with people feeling they can't make a difference, but

West also highlighted another reason North Carolinians might not be engaging. "I think

there are a lot of folks who we are deeming as apathetic right now in this time who actually are not apathetic," West said. "They're deeply engaged, but deeply disillusioned with their options."

"I think there are a lot of folks who we are deeming as apathetic right now in this time who actually are not apathetic. They're deeply engaged, but deeply disillusioned with their options."

Ebony West,
Senior program associate for elections and voting, Democracy Fund

Our analysis of a sample of county government websites indicated some gaps in the civic information landscape, including that some of the sites did not provide information that residents would need to attend public meetings. Mecklenburg County's website was one of the most accessible, especially regarding county commissioners meetings. The meetings were recorded and had captions that could be translated into other languages. Mecklenburg's website was also the only one of all those we analyzed for this report that included ASL interpretation for commissioners meetings.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in North Carolina and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the state, which we define as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

In fall 2023, the North Carolina legislature passed legislation that effectively reduced access to public records. State legislators exempted themselves from North Carolina public records law in changes that were built into the state budget.¹⁶ The decision was criticized by journalists, the ACLU of North Carolina,¹⁷ and leadership at the North Carolina Open Government Coalition, with stakeholders highlighting how the changes will decrease transparency and public access to information. “Many of us are concerned about the practice of the people’s business in public and the workings of the legislature, me included. It’s a concern for individual people and also for reporters who are seeking to make sense of fast-moving state level policy, especially around the budget,” Hazeltine said.

Stakeholder information and data from the press freedom tracker provides a window into decentralized threats to press freedom in the state. Hazeltine shared that some of North Carolina Local News Lab Fund’s grant partners have seen mobilization of white supremacist groups in response to reporting they have undertaken. Hazeltine also described how they’ve seen a need among their grant partners for protective equipment like helmets, flak jackets, and gas masks for covering protests and other mobilizations of people in the last few years. Ignorance about press protections has also sometimes led to the wrongful arrest of journalists exercising their rights, Hazeltine said.

The Press Freedom Tracker, which maintains a database of incidents that infringe upon press freedom, includes five incidents in North Carolina from the beginning of 2022 through the end of 2023. These include two incidents where [journalists were assaulted](#) in the course of their reporting, a case in which a judge [seized the notes](#) of a Greensboro News & Record reporter and placed her under a gag order while she was sitting in on juvenile court proceedings, and repeated instances in which a judge [barred](#) media from publishing about a former student suing the UNC system, though this order was later lifted.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan, “NC lawmakers are chosen by the people, but the people can’t see all that they’re doing,” The Raleigh News & Observer, last modified January 10, 2024, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/article283197598.html>.

¹⁷ “ACLU of North Carolina Rejects Proposed Change in Public Records Law,” ACLU of North Carolina, published September 20, 2023, <https://www.acluofnorthcarolina.org/en/press-releases/aclu-north-carolina-rejects-proposed-change-public-records-law>.

¹⁸ “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

The presence of hyperpartisan news outlets also provides insight into what kinds of information residents may be receiving about state politics and government. And, alongside a study of news outlets in the state, it may help researchers and stakeholders understand the health of the information ecosystem and what areas might be at higher risk for mis- and disinformation, especially in the absence of a nonpartisan source of local news. A 2020 map of hyperpartisan news outlets by researchers Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli shows 40 such outlets spread throughout North Carolina counties, putting the state on par with Michigan as the ecosystems with the largest number among those included in this report.¹⁹ Further research is needed to ensure the current count of hyperpartisan outlets is up to date since ecosystem studies for other states described some that may not have existed when the 2020 mapping project was published, and it is possible the number has changed. The large number of hyperpartisan news outlets increases the likelihood that residents could come across them when searching for local news, which might be of concern if they are not aware of the outlets' partisan lean or financial ties.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand North Carolinians' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual-level, and integrity.

Data from the Gallup/Knight American Views survey shows that trust in local news among North Carolinians is generally higher than that of all U.S. residents surveyed. For the question assessing trust in local news organizations' integrity, 49.7% of North Carolinians surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that "local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the

Information Providers and Community	U.S.	North Carolina	Difference from U.S.
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	68.3%	3.3 ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	51.6%	-0.4 ▼
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	58.4%	5.4 ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	50.9%	3.9 ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	49.7%	5.7 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 161

¹⁹ Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, "Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there's one near you." NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

public.”²⁰ While this percentage may still be smaller than ideal, it is 5.7 percentage points higher than the percentage of all U.S. survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement (44%).²¹ And while the state has relatively high numbers across most of the five dimensions, trust is still not widespread as the numbers range from just under 50% to just under 70%.²² Local news may not be meeting all communities’ information needs — the percentage of North Carolinians who felt local news could be relied on to deliver the information they needed (51.6%) was slightly smaller than that of all survey respondents (52%).²³

Trust in local news is uneven and complex, stakeholders said. As an African American woman, Marshall explained, she has seen the media fail to accurately cover communities of color throughout the country. “I’ve lived my lifetime with a certain distrust of media, even as a person who’s in media, because I’ve seen the flawed, the faulty, the lack of context reporting that furthers harm instead of bringing the solution,” Marshall said. Lack of trust in the media is nothing new, and North Carolina is not immune to national trends, she said, but right now it seems like distrust has reached a fever pitch because “everyone has a microphone,” making it harder for most people to distill what the facts really are. WFAE has worked to combat distrust through community engagement work, asking residents how the station can better serve them, in addition to gathering feedback through surveys and listening sessions, Marshall said.

Mosley described trust in outlets where the same personalities have been reporting or on air for 25 or 30 years and have become familiar to their audiences. In other ecosystems included in this report, stakeholders generally described low or declining trust in legacy news outlets, particularly among communities that have historically been underserved by them, but stakeholders in Arizona similarly described how established journalists sometimes lent new outlets greater credibility.

Quintero highlighted how Spanish-language news consumers differ from the English-language market. During the pandemic, many put their trust in social media for news, Quintero said. She also described how North Carolina’s news ecosystem is not sufficiently developed to cover everything, and immigrant communities often turn to news from their previous countries. “I think the reason behind that is they are living check by check, so they don’t have the chance to get involved in what is happening,” she said.

Information from stakeholders further highlights a need for more granular research on trust that takes into account the varying news habits in different communities and the fact that the state is ideologically diverse.

20 “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy,” Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view>.

21 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

22 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

23 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

Further research could improve researchers' and newsrooms' understanding of how communities have become disenfranchised by local news and what issues or topics they see as key areas for further reporting.

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	24.7%	17.1%	5.7%	20.9%	31.6%
A website or app	34.8%	27.1%	7.1%	9.0%	21.9%
A radio station	31.2%	17.2%	8.9%	18.5%	24.2%
A TV station	47.2%	21.4%	3.8%	11.3%	16.4%
Direct communication with people in your area	22.9%	36.3%	11.5%	15.3%	14.0%
A magazine	1.9%	10.2%	19.1%	18.5%	50.3%
A social media platform	34.0%	19.5%	2.5%	8.8%	35.2%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. *n* = 161

Similar to other ecosystems included in this report, more North Carolinians reported relying on a TV station for getting their news on a daily basis (47.2%) than on any other format.²⁴ Gallup/Knight data also shows high levels of reliance on digital means of accessing news daily. A majority of surveyed North Carolinians said they get most of their news “online using a computer, smartphone, or app,” though the percentage dips below that of all surveyed U.S. residents.²⁵ Slightly more North Carolinians reported getting most of their news from TV (36.5%) compared to all survey participants (31%), while only 1.9% of surveyed North Carolinians said they get most of their news from a printed newspaper or magazine, compared to 3% of all surveyed U.S. residents.²⁶

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S.	North Carolina	Difference from U.S.
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	1.9%	-1.1 ▼
From TV	31%	36.5%	-5.5 ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	54.5%	-3.5 ▼
From a radio	7%	7.1%	0.1 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. *n* = 161

24 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

25 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

26 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in North Carolina, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent ecosystem assessment.

In 2017, Democracy Fund published a North Carolina news ecosystem analysis, researched and written by Fiona Morgan in consultation with Melanie Sill. The report highlights trends that have continued over the past several years, including shrinking metro newsrooms and decreases in local ownership.²⁷ The report also points to a need for more in-depth reporting on local politics and government, as well as “stories about common threads of issues like living wage ordinances, gentrification, urban planning, and economic development that look across local communities and at state policy for solutions.”²⁸

More recently, CISLM published a North Carolina News Media Census. Findings included geographic gaps — the eastern part of the state has access to the fewest outlets and received the least reporting of all regions in the state, according to the report.²⁹ Researchers conducted in-depth mapping of outlets that reported on each of North Carolina's 100 counties and the number of outlets each county had access to. They found “45 counties that were reported on by 50% or less of the outlets they had access to.”³⁰ The report demonstrates that even though many North Carolinians may have access to news sources, outlets are not always publishing local coverage that is relevant to the communities they reach.

Hazeltine described a breakdown in locally relevant information in eastern North Carolina and rural central North Carolina, in particular. “The further you get from a major metro area, the less likely you are to have news reported for specifically you or about the place you live that you can use in your day-to-day life,” she said.

Regarding news geared towards Hispanic and Latino communities in the state, Quintero identified geographic gaps. “There are two main media outlets; one covers the Triangle and surrounding areas, and its competitor covers Charlotte and the areas

27 Fiona Morgan and Melanie Sill, “Learning from North Carolina,” Democracy Fund, published December 1, 2017, https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2017_Local_News_Ecosystem_Report__NC_vFinal.pdf.

28 Morgan and Sill, “Learning from North Carolina,” p. 4.

29 Hazeldine, Thompson, Williams, and Mahone, “Local News for Whom?”

30 Hazeldine, Thompson, Williams, and Mahone, “Local News for Whom?”

surrounding it, leaving lots of areas without any Hispanic or Latino media coverage across the state,” she explained. “So I think it’s a matter of the companies to invest in trying to be a better outlet for the whole state,” she said. Regarding print, she described pockets here and there throughout the state and said that digital and radio are everywhere. Quintero also described topic-area gaps in coverage for the state’s Hispanic and Latino communities. A lot of coverage is focused on crime and safety, and only one outlet provides a lot of information related to civic engagement, she said.

“The further you get from a major metro area, the less likely you are to have news reported for specifically you or about the place you live that you can use in your day-to-day life.”

Lizzy Hazeltine,
Director, North Carolina Local News Lab
Fund

Stakeholders also highlighted infrastructure, in addition to accessibility of language, as barriers to accessing local news. Broadband is a critical factor in determining the access communities have to local news, particularly given that a third of North Carolina residents live in rural areas and considering that digital appears to be the preferred format for many North Carolinians. Mosley said she’s also not sure local journalism is geared towards the widest audience when it comes to the accessibility of the language used in stories.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in North Carolina. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

We found 225 news and information providers in our research, including a large number of newspapers owned by national chains. Of the news sources we found, 45.8% were newspapers with corporate ownership, just under a third (32.4%) were independent for-profits, and 4.0% were digital only or print and digital nonprofit outlets. The large number of newspapers with corporate ownership is in line with findings in previous analyses of the North Carolina news ecosystem that found decreases in local ownership.

Stakeholders described dwindling news and information resources throughout North Carolina, but they also described bright spots, including strong public media and the creation of nonprofit news and community media outlets that have worked to fill key gaps. Marshall said newspapers have long been “king” in North Carolina, but she highlighted how many newsrooms in the state have seen staff or resources shrink. She worked at The Charlotte Observer — which was purchased by Knight Newspapers in 1954 and then by its current owner, McClatchy, in 2006³¹ — when it had around 300 staff, but the organization has shrunk significantly since then.³² These trends extend beyond The Observer, Marshall said. Other organizations have reduced their staff or have worked to lower operational costs by cutting print editions or resources.

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	225	
Population per organization	46,397	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	23	10.2%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	154	68.4%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	8	3.6%
Radio stations	15	6.7%
Television stations	25	11.1%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	73	32.4%
National broadcast chain	25	11.1%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	103	45.8%
Nonprofit	9	4.0%
Public media	15	6.7%
Community Media		
African American/Black	16	
Hispanic/Latino	13	
Asian/Asian American	4	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

North Carolina has had a strong history of independent presses, Hazeltine said, such that the North Carolina Press Association used to hold a summer camp in conjunction with its annual meeting because so many attendees were families who owned newspapers. Hazeltine also described a strong set of public media outlets throughout North Carolina, and the legacy of Black and Brown presses in the state.

We identified 16 organizations geared towards serving Black and African American communities in North Carolina. And there are several organizations providing Spanish-language news, though stakeholders identified gaps. Nonprofit news outlet Enlace Latino NC, which is based in Raleigh but covers news throughout the state, has worked to build relationships with its audiences and distribute news through alternative means, including its WhatsApp community. The state has also seen the emergence of startups and nonprofit news organizations, such as North Carolina Health News, Queen City Nerve, and Carolina Public Press. North Carolina has strong commercial media, Hazeltine said,

31 Charlotte Observer Administrator, “About Us,” The Charlotte Observer, last modified February 8, 2024, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/customer-service/about-us/>.

32 “Contact Us,” The Charlotte Observer, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.charlotteobserver.com/customer-service/contact-us/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1717696923940842&usg=AOvVaw0bNlbgAPP0J8ePVGRai9DZ>.

though it has seen the impact of changes in ownership and delocalization of decision-making.

Marshall described the state’s local news ecosystem as healthy overall, but said they still lack the full news coverage that they need. WFAE, for example, has just six reporters tackling an overall coverage area of 32 counties, she explained. “It’s wholly impossible to do justice to the people who live in each of those counties, and the full repertoire of news and information that they need from us,” she said. “And I think that’s reflected across the state. We have areas of concentration, but there definitely are news deserts where we, the media, need to do a better job of fulfilling those needs, and we’re not there yet.”

“We have areas of concentration, but there definitely are news deserts where we, the media, need to do a better job of fulfilling those needs, and we’re not there yet.”

Ju-Don Marshall,
President and CEO, WFAE

West said that even though the state has robust and diverse media, funding is a challenge. There are not many funders of local news in the state, West said. Black-led media, media led by other people of color, and rural media continue to be under-invested in, she said. “I think you’ll find tons of various media, mediums, local news infrastructure within more urban and suburban areas in the state, but as you get to more rural parts of the state — eastern and western North Carolina — it gets few and far between, and it’s not always factual,” she said.

Collaborations within the ecosystem highlight ways that news outlets and other organizations are working together to ensure that communities are receiving the critical news coverage they need. After seeing how farmworkers in eastern North Carolina lacked timely Spanish-language information about Hurricane Florence in fall 2018, organizations came together to create a system for information distribution that would better meet the needs of those communities. Statewide and community-based organizations that served as trusted messengers, Student Action with Farmworkers, tech developer Code the Dream, and newsroom partners joined forces to find solutions.³³ “When Florence hit, many farm workers in

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	5.8%		0.9%	3.6%	
Print and digital	25.3%		42.7%	0.4%	
Print only	1.3%		2.2%		
Radio					6.7%
Television		11.1%			

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

33 “How a network developed channels to deliver Spanish language emergency alerts on extreme weather and COVID-19,” North Carolina News Lab Fund, last modified February 10, 2022, <https://www.nclocalnews.org/updates-blog/case-study-saf>.

eastern North Carolina didn't even know it was happening," Hazeltine said. Now organizations have created a system of real-time alerts and a network to get the word out through in-person channels, she said.

This work highlights the important role of collaborations among a broad variety of organizations — not just news organizations — and how they can help fulfill community information needs and develop distribution channels that meet audiences where they are. The collaboration serves as a useful model for future partnerships within the North Carolina ecosystem and beyond.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the North Carolina ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

CISLM and the NC Local News Workshop at Elon University published a statewide assessment of newsroom diversity in 2022. Their findings are based on 152 responses to a survey of individuals and 36 responses to a survey of organizations that provided demographic data for 633 employees.³⁴ The researchers noted that the conclusions they can draw from the data are limited due to the number of responses. Data from participating newsrooms shows that staff and leadership at those outlets does not reflect the demographics of North Carolina overall. Researchers found that 71% of staff and 75% of leadership from participating newsrooms is white.³⁵ Another 23% of staff and 18% of leadership from participating newsrooms is Black.³⁶ Only 6% of staff and 6% of leadership at participating newsrooms identified as Hispanic or Latino.³⁷ However, demographics for local news organizations could be reflective of the makeup of their specific communities — the published data is not broken down by organization or location. And, as the researchers noted, the data does not provide a comprehensive view of newsroom diversity for every outlet in the state.

While we did not find a published statewide analysis of source diversity, we did find that WFAE began conducting internal tracking of their sources in 2020.³⁸

34 Elizabeth Thompson, Jessica Mahone, Jordan Davis, "Who Works in North Carolina's Newsrooms: Data from Organizational and Individual Surveys," UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, <https://www.cislm.org/research/ncdiversityaudit/2022-diversity-audit-report/>.

35 Thompson, Mahone, and Davis, "Who Works in North Carolina's Newsrooms."

36 Thompson, Mahone, and Davis, "Who Works in North Carolina's Newsrooms."

37 Thompson, Mahone, and Davis, "Who Works in North Carolina's Newsrooms."

38 "Case Study: The diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) series," Institute for Nonprofit News, published April 13, 2021, <https://inn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Final-Source-Tracking-Case.pdf>.

Case Study – Changes to Public Records Law

The impact of legislators' decision to exempt themselves from state public records law.

In fall 2023, changes to North Carolina's public records laws went into effect, giving legislators power to determine whether a record was public. The changes were written into the 2024 state budget and became law without Gov. Roy Cooper's signature on October 3.³⁹

Though state legislators were already designated as custodians of their own records, they previously had to claim an exemption to the state's public records law if they did not want to release records, according to reporting from The Raleigh News and Observer.⁴⁰ However, part of the budget bill amended the law,⁴¹ outlining legislators' power as custodians of documents:



Matt Ramey / WUNC
North Carolina legislature.

- Each legislator, while in office and after leaving office, shall be the custodian of all documents, supporting documents, drafting requests, and information requests made or received by that legislator while a legislator.
- A legislator, while in office or after leaving office, shall not be required to reveal or to consent to reveal any document, supporting document, drafting request, or information request made or received by that legislator while a legislator.⁴²

While the changes to the public records laws are significant on their own, stakeholders also noted that they are part of a larger trend in the state. "I think that these changes are part of a bigger movement towards more opacity and less transparency in government at all levels," said Ely Portillo, executive editor at WFAE. Portillo,

39 Colin Campbell, "Gov. Cooper says he'll let new North Carolina budget become law without his signature," WUNC North Carolina Public Radio, last modified September 22, 2023, <https://www.wunc.org/politics/2023-09-22/23-nc-budget-roy-cooper-signature-law>.

40 Kyle Ingram and Dan Kane, "NC lawmakers would be able to keep more records secret with new provision in state budget," The Raleigh News and Observer, last modified January 17, 2024, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/article279555444.html>.

41 Vaughan, "NC lawmakers are chosen by the people, but the people can't see all that they're doing."

42 General Assembly of North Carolina, An act to make base budget appropriations for current operations of state agencies, departments, and agencies, Session Law 2023-134, HB259, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2023/Bills/House/PDF/H259v7.pdf>.

who has worked in journalism in Charlotte for 15 years, said that he has seen it become increasingly difficult to talk to and get information from state and local government officials as well as public safety entities like the police.

Access to records of state legislators' communications is critical for understanding who is contacting legislators, what kind of pressure they are receiving from constituents, and what lobbyists or industry

representatives are speaking with them, Portillo explained, and it's played an important role in past reporting. When the legislature was considering HB2 in 2016 — a bill restricting bathroom use by sex assigned at birth⁴³ — journalists were able to report on what legislators were saying about the bill and how they were conceptualizing it behind closed doors, Portillo said. This included reporting on disparaging remarks now-Congressman Dan Bishop made about LGBTQ rights advocates and other opponents of the bill.⁴⁴

"And that all came to light through public records requests," Portillo said. "A lot of that will not happen the next time there's a big, statewide controversial issue like that."

"I think that these changes are part of a bigger movement towards more opacity and less transparency in government at all levels."

Ely Portillo,
Executive editor, WFAE

43 General Assembly of North Carolina, An act to provide for single-sex multiple occupancy bathroom and changing facilities in schools and public agencies and to create statewide consistency in regulation of employment and public accommodations, Second Extra Session 2016, HB2, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v3.pdf>.

44 Stephen Peters, "New Emails Reveal North Carolina HB2 Author Compared LGBTQ Advocates to Taliban," Human Rights Campaign, The Human Rights Campaign, published June 10, 2016, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-emails-reveal-north-carolina-hb2-author-compared-lgbtq-advocates-to-tal>.

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IMPACT ARCHITECTS

Oklahoma

Oklahoma

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the Oklahoma news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

Oklahoma's news ecosystem shows signs of strong collaboration with the goals of filling information gaps, building trust, and understanding community needs. However, newsrooms throughout the state — and particularly in rural areas — are shrinking as journalists retire or leave the field, and stakeholders described a need for more reporting for and by communities of color in the state, especially when it comes to tribal affairs. Voting and non-voting forms of civic engagement in the state are also lower than the national average, and our research shows potential gaps in local government information that could contribute to confusion about how to participate.

Voter turnout data for the 2022 midterms and civic engagement data from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study (CES) show that voting and other forms of civic engagement, like participation in public meetings or contacting local officials, are lower in Oklahoma than in the U.S. overall.¹ Stakeholders highlighted some potential reasons why community members may not be voting or otherwise participating in civic engagement, including a feeling that their vote or action will not make a difference and confusion about how to vote. Our analysis of a sample of local county government websites in the state found that three of the six counties we looked at do not appear to have any website.² Lack of awareness about the local civic and government news that does exist — combined with shrinking capacity for local reporting in communities throughout the state — could be contributing to lower levels of civic engagement. Oklahoma has one of the largest Indigenous populations of any U.S. state,³ with 9.5% of residents identifying as

1 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

2 In addition to a county with a large metro area, a county with two news outlets, and a county with one news outlet, our analysis included all the counties with zero outlets according to the State of Local News Project as of Jan. 5, 2024. We analyzed the county government websites for the following counties: Beaver, Delaware, Harmon, Harper, Oklahoma, and Roger Mills.

3 Ana I. Sánchez-Rivera, Paul Jacobs and Cody Spence, "A Look at the Largest American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and

American Indian or Alaskan Native, according to data from the 2022 American Communities Survey.⁴ Reporting in Indigenous communities is complex due to differing press freedom protections among the sovereign governments in Oklahoma. Because most research on information needs and news consumption habits has been statewide, the ecosystem would benefit from further analysis of information needs within Indigenous communities in order to ensure that the stories that are important to individual communities are being told and to better understand any gaps related to coverage, staffing, and trust.

Communities of color in Oklahoma may not have consistent access to relevant news about issues that affect them and their communities. Interviewees described limited and often negative portrayals of Indigenous communities in mainstream outlets, as well as a sense that journalists sometimes “parachute” into those communities to do reporting. Interviewees also noted that outlets serving Black communities are largely based in the state’s metro areas, meaning Black residents of more rural communities may not have local news reported by and for them. And interviewees said more resources are needed to provide Spanish-language coverage within the ecosystem, including greater access to translation resources for English-language outlets.

One stakeholder described how news organizations throughout Oklahoma are seeing their editorial staff shrink, even as local ecosystem research has indicated to them that there is greater need for journalists to participate in and engage with their community in order to build trust. And while more than 35% of Oklahomans live in areas classified as rural based on the Census Urban Areas dataset, compared to 20% of people nationally, organizations in rural communities are particularly under-resourced.⁵ For example, one interviewee described how two outlets that are 60 miles apart share a single reporter. Journalists are also leaving the field for reasons ranging from low pay to burnout from reporting within an environment that some interviewees said can feel hostile to the media. It is clear that many newsrooms would benefit from added capacity, the ability to pay higher wages, and access to mental health and training resources. And the ecosystem as a whole would benefit from additional research on where resources are most needed and how existing organizations can serve as ecosystem builders.

The nonprofit Oklahoma Media Center is already serving as a hub for collaboration, research, and resources

Villages in the Nation, Tribal Areas and States,” United States Census Bureau, published October 3, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-aian-population.html>.

4 “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Oklahoma,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/OK/PST045223>.

5 “Urban and Rural,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

within the ecosystem. In addition to publishing analyses of news consumption and needs within the state, the center has supported community engagement projects and trainings centered around building trust. OMC recently facilitated extensive research on trust in news and information in the state and has since awarded grants to 12 local outlets for projects designed to help enhance trust.⁶ Other organizations have partnered to try to find solutions for some of the major challenges within the Oklahoma media ecosystem. Local public radio station KOSU is partnering with Oklahoma State University and the Cooperative Extension Service to set up a community journalism program in the state.

This chapter presents Oklahoma at a glance with topline information about the state's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

6 "Oklahoma newsrooms completing data-driven projects to enhance trust," Oklahoma Media Center, published May 24, 2024, <https://oklahomamediacenter.com/2024/05/local-newsrooms-reveal-lessons-learned-from-collaborative-engagement-experiments/>.

Opportunities

Research and support for Indigenous media needs:

Oklahoma is home to 39 tribes. More research is needed about how the needs of Indigenous communities are being met by existing news outlets, what information sources these communities already rely on, and how journalists from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous media can work to cover stories that are most important to those communities. Outlets within the ecosystem have worked to increase coverage of Indigenous affairs in recent years, but interviewees felt that this was an area that required further investment, and some noted a negative relationship between Indigenous communities and reporters perceived as “parachuting” into those communities.

Supporting Spanish-language and Black media:

There may be a need for greater research and support for Spanish-language and Black news and information sources outside of the Tulsa and Oklahoma City metro areas. Outlets geared towards serving Black communities and Spanish-language outlets tend to be clustered within those metro areas. For Spanish-speaking audiences, there are opportunities to support collaboration or resources that allow for translation of English-language reporting. This could help ensure greater access to relevant local news for communities outside of Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Talent pipeline:

The Oklahoma information ecosystem is struggling with journalists leaving the field, leaving few experienced mid-career journalists in the sector. Newsrooms need more resources to ensure they can pay editorial staff a living wage in order to attract and retain talent.

Building trust:

Drawing on academic research and polling about news habits and trust in Oklahoma, OMC funded projects at 12 news organizations in the state. Projects ranged from developing an ambassadors program (Enid News & Eagle and NonDoc) to creating a training program for citizen journalism work (VNN).⁷ This work could serve as a model for other ecosystems as they work to put research on trust in news into action. Exploring the short- and long-term impact of the current projects could help journalists, researchers, and funders understand what works and where additional investment is needed to sustain or expand projects focused on building trust in local media.

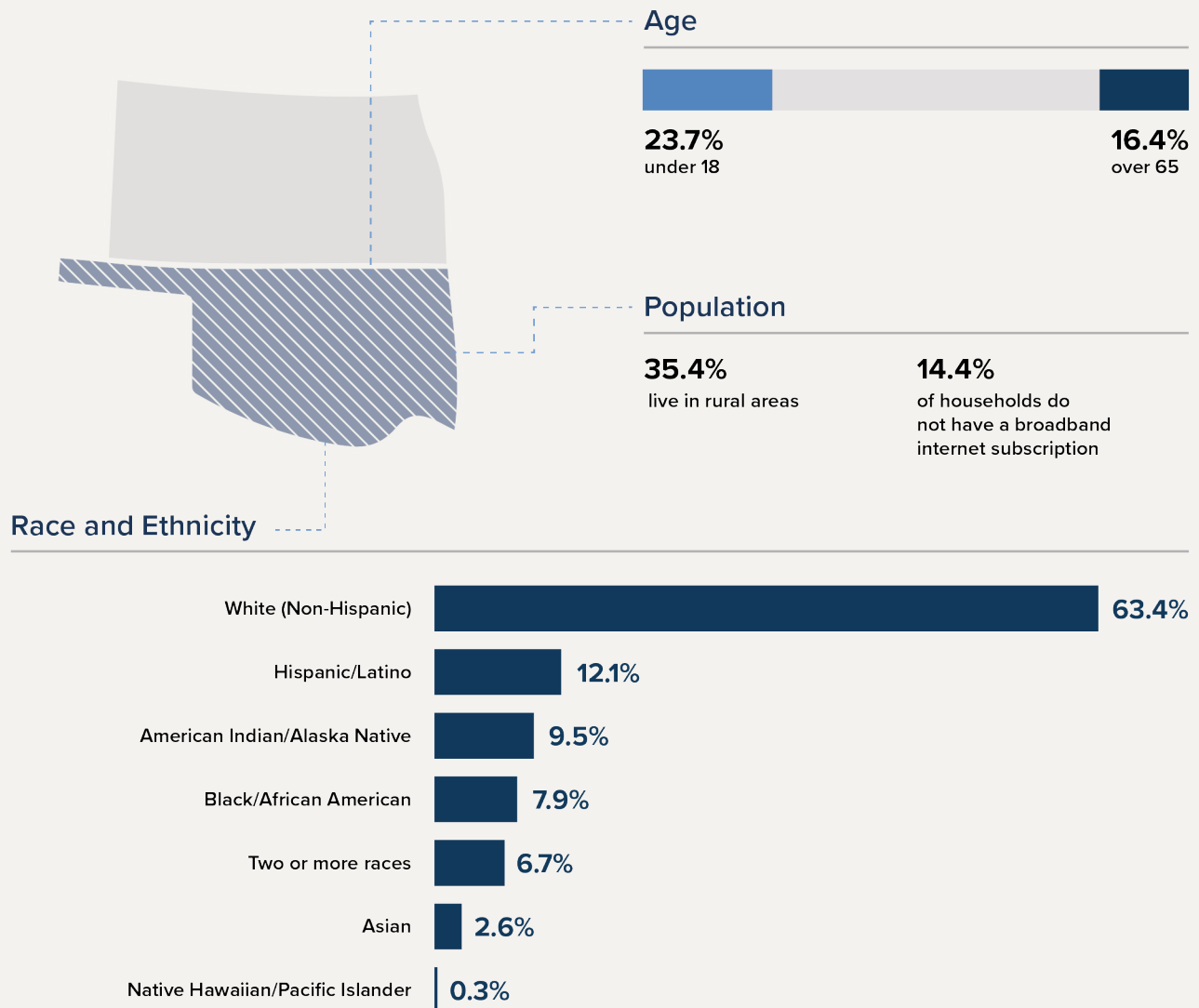
7 Oklahoma Media Center, “Oklahoma newsrooms completing data-driven projects to enhance trust.”

Oklahoma at a Glance

Topline indicators about Oklahoma's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

Community Indicators

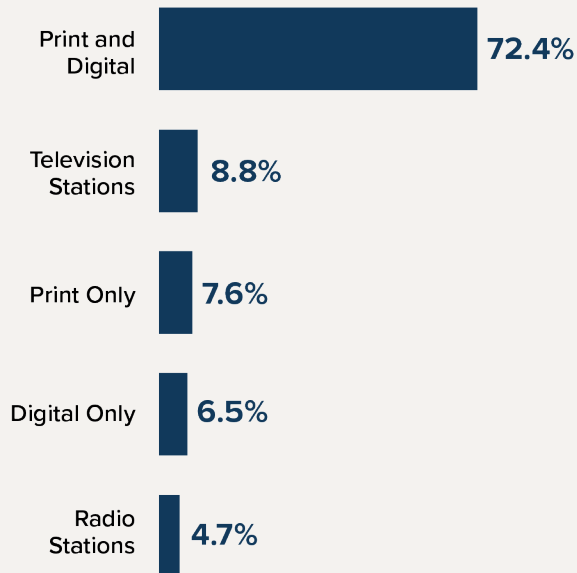
Community indicators are from the state's U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



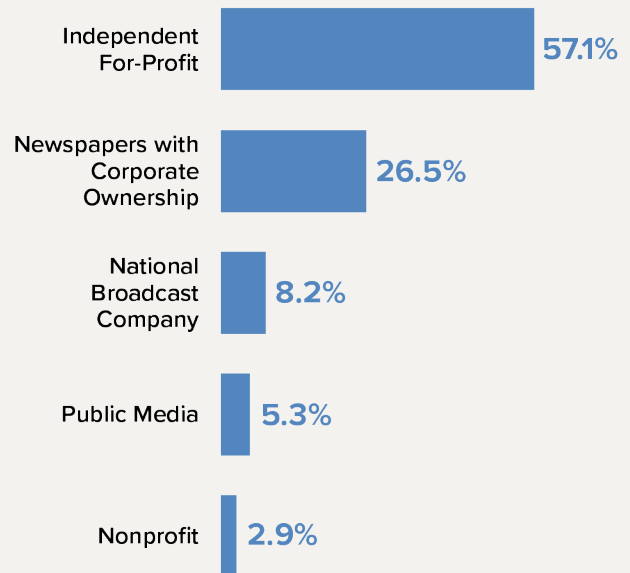
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).

Medium

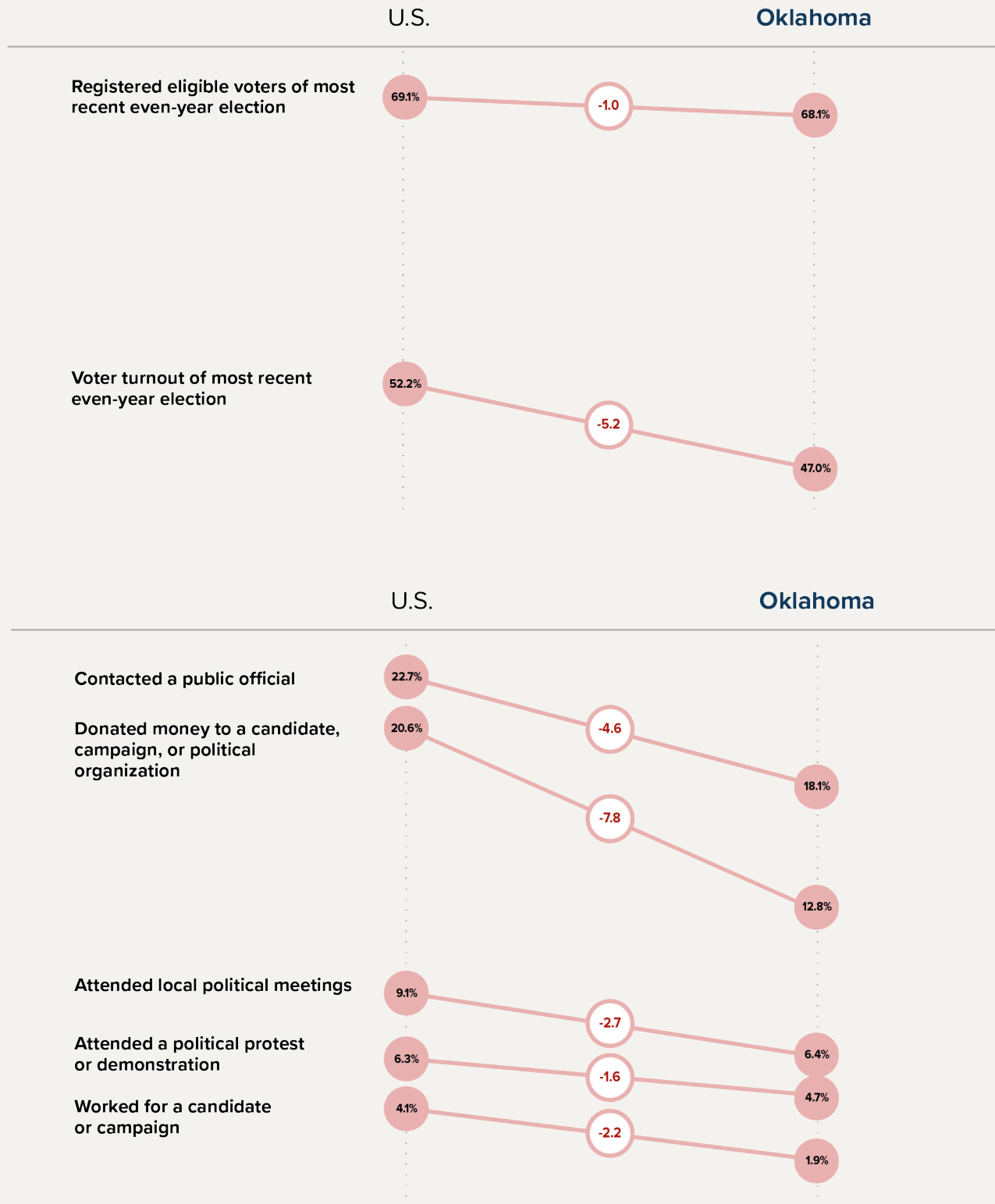


Ownership structure



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



Oklahoma Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of Oklahoma to dig deeper into the current state of Oklahoma’s News & Information Ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about public radio station KOSU’s work to develop a community journalism program.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in Oklahoma.

Data measuring civic engagement in

Oklahoma shows that participation

is generally below national levels.

Using data from the 2022 Harvard CES

survey, we found that the proportion

of surveyed Oklahomans that have

attended a local political meeting,

donated to a campaign or political

organization, attended a protest or demonstration, contacted a public official, or worked for a candidate or

campaign is smaller than the proportion of people who have done so nationally.⁸

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	Oklahoma	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	6.4%	-2.7 ▼
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	12.8%	-7.8 ▼
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	4.7%	-1.6 ▼
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	18.1%	-4.6 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	1.9%	-2.2 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 686

In addition to civic engagement activities measured in the CES survey, voter turnout for the 2022 midterm elections (47.0%) fell below national turnout (52.5%).⁹ Stakeholders described a number of reasons why Oklahomans in their communities may not

⁸ Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, “Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022.”

⁹ “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

be voting or participating in civic engagement, including that people feel apathetic about voting and civic participation, feel that their vote does not count, believe that the system is rigged, or are confused about the voting process. While stakeholders did not point to Oklahoma-specific data on the scope or impact of apathy in their communities, we heard similar claims regarding apathy and civic engagement in other ecosystems in this report. Pew Research Center has conducted polling on perception of government and politics on the national scale that aligns with stakeholders' statements. A 2023 survey found that only 4% of respondents felt the political system is working extremely or very well, 65% always or often felt exhausted when thinking about U.S. politics these days, and more and more Americans have unfavorable views of both political parties.¹⁰

Regarding confusion about the voting process, stakeholders noted that local media organizations do put out voting guides that help familiarize readers with candidates, positions, and how to vote, but these guides are clearly not reaching all Oklahomans. Beyond access to information about voting and candidates, there may be significant structural barriers to voting and civic engagement in some Oklahoma communities. The Cost of Voting Index (COVI), which considers state election laws and policies to determine the difficulty or ease of voting there, gave Oklahoma a relatively high score in 2022 (0.88), indicating that voting in the state is more difficult than in many other U.S. states.¹¹ Additionally, in our analysis of a sample of county government websites

in the state, we found three counties that did not have a website at all as of January 2024, potentially making it challenging for residents to know when, where, and how to participate in public meetings and other events — or even how to contact their local officials. Geography may be another challenge. More than a third of Oklahomans live in rural areas, a much larger proportion than the 20% for the U.S. overall.¹² This might mean longer travel times to polling places, public meetings, or community events, especially considering that in-person participation may be the only option for some official meetings given the lack of government websites and meeting live streams in some Oklahoma counties.

More than a third of Oklahomans live in rural areas, a much larger proportion than the 20% for the U.S. overall. This might mean longer travel times to polling places, public meetings, or community events, especially considering that in-person participation may be the only option for some official meetings.

10 “Americans’ Dismal Views of the Nation’s Politics,” Pew Research Center, last modified September 19, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/>.

11 Scot Schraufnagel, Michael J. Pomante, and Quan Li. “Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21, no. 3 (2022): 220–28. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2022.0041>.

12 United States Census Bureau, “Urban and Rural.”

Media and Democracy

This section explores the nuances of Press Freedom in Oklahoma. We define press freedom as the press's ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation. We also explore the role of media in democratic institutions in Oklahoma.

We assessed press freedom according to instances of physical intimidation and regulatory incidents, access to legal resources for journalists, and regulatory policy, as well as local institutional accountability. Interviewees shared some issues regarding press freedom in the state, with some describing a feeling that news organizations were working within a hostile environment. Others felt press freedom in the state was fine but described how it can be demoralizing for journalists at under-resourced local news organizations who feel underappreciated by the communities they serve.

Rachel Hubbard, executive director of the public radio station KOSU, noted that it is difficult for journalists to continue working in an environment where they feel they are under attack and where organizations wonder whether they might be sued. Hubbard said some journalists have left the field because it has been too hard to continue doing work in that environment. “It’s that constant drip, drip, drip that really affects the mental health of a lot of reporters,” Hubbard said.

Press freedom in Oklahoma is also complex because the state is home to Indigenous communities with their own sovereign governments. Tribal governments often have different laws for press freedom than the rest of the state. Shannon Shaw Duty, editor of the Osage News, said she feels press freedom throughout the state is generally fine, noting that The Oklahoman and the Tulsa World frequently take state officials to task. “I think the press freedoms that are lacking are within the tribal communities,” Shaw Duty said.

There is a long history of community members fighting for press freedom protections in the Osage Nation, Shaw Duty said. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP) published a primer on press freedom for 38 federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma, noting that 28 explicitly protect press freedom, and 32 have a records access provision, though many only apply to tribal citizens.¹³ While most tribes have a published news and information source, many of these news sources are not independent as they are part of the tribal government, according to RCFP.¹⁴

The Indigenous Journalists Association (IJA) has also published a number of resources for press freedom, including

¹³ “Press Freedom & Freedom of Information in Oklahoma Indian Country,” Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, <https://www.rcfp.org/resources/okla-indian-country-press-freedom/#:~:text=The%20Chickasaw%20Nation,-Tribe's%20website%3A%20https&text=www.chickasaw.net-,Press%20freedom%3A%20The%20tribal%20constitution%20includes%20press,in%20its%20bill%20of%20rights>.

¹⁴ Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, “Press Freedom & Freedom of Information in Oklahoma Indian Country.”

detailed explanation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and how to file a FOIA request,¹⁵ as well as a list of essential elements for a tribal free press.¹⁶ Given these limitations for tribal publications, taken together with the fact that Shaw Duty and other interviewees we spoke to about the Oklahoma news ecosystem noted that coverage of the tribes in statewide and local outlets is often sparse, it is likely Indigenous communities in the state experience limited coverage and there are possible accountability gaps with respect to coverage of tribal institutions.

“There’s a lot going on within the tribes that I think is newsworthy,” Shaw Duty said, citing multimillion dollar gaming operations and their impact on the local and state economies as one example. “I think that the coverage of them has improved, but it’s not great, and I feel like if each tribe had free press abilities for their publications, I think it would just change a lot going on within the communities in Oklahoma.”

Regarding local outlets’ role in holding Oklahoma officials accountable, interviewees said organizations in the state do a good job of holding the Legislature accountable, but coverage holding government agencies accountable is less consistent. There are also inconsistencies in coverage across the state, as rural communities are significantly less covered than metro areas. Interviewees also noted that vague open records laws impede journalists’ ability to get information they need to do their jobs. There is no specific time limit for fulfillment, interviewees said. News organizations frequently have to sue to get access to records, Hubbard said. The amount of time it takes to get records is inconsistent, and KOSU has some requests they have been waiting on for years, Hubbard explained.

“I think that the coverage of them has improved, but it’s not great, and I feel like if each tribe had free press abilities for their publications, I think it would just change a lot going on within the communities in Oklahoma.”

Shannon Shaw Duty,
Editor of the Osage News

An incident in 2023, which received coverage from local and national outlets, provides an example of how local reporting did not lead to accountability, though it did raise awareness and result in a call for action within the local community. The Press Freedom Tracker, which catalogs press freedom incidents in the U.S. ranging from arrests to chilling statements, includes two physical intimidation incidents in Oklahoma from 2022 through 2023.¹⁷ One of these incidents was related to a recording in which the county sheriff and other officials from McCurtain County, located in the southeast corner of

¹⁵ “Freedom of Information Resources,” Indigenous Journalists Association, IJA, <https://indigenousjournalists.org/freedom-of-information-resources/>.

¹⁶ “Free Press Elements for Tribal Media,” Indigenous Journalists Association, IJA, <https://indigenousjournalists.org/programs/red-press-initiative/free-press-elements-for-tribal-media/>.

¹⁷ “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

Oklahoma and home to a large Indigenous population (18.2%),¹⁸ allegedly made racist remarks and joked about killing journalists at the local paper, the McCurtain County Gazette-News.¹⁹ An investigation into the sheriff did not result in his removal, and another local reporter shared on Twitter that the Gazette-News reporter who broke the story about the local officials' conversation was relocating to Tulsa to protect his family.²⁰ More recently, the Gazette-News reported that the sheriff lost the Republican primary in June.²¹ The incident highlights how local journalists are playing an important role in bringing issues to light, but they are only one part of the process that leads to accountability.

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand Oklahomans' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

While Oklahomans have greater trust in their local news sources than the U.S. average, less than half of those surveyed expressed trust in the integrity of local news sources, according to data from the Gallup/Knight American Views survey.²² Only 46.6% of surveyed Oklahomans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public" — though this was a slightly higher proportion than that of all surveyed U.S. residents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.²³

Interviews also complicate the picture of the higher-than-average levels of trust indicated by the Gallup/Knight data. Hubbard, the executive director of KOSU, said Oklahomans have greater trust in local news when they can

18 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: McCurtain County, Oklahoma," United States Census Bureau, , <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/mccurtaincountyoklahoma/PST045223>.

19 Molly Young, "Full audio released of Oklahoma sheriff discussing killing journalists," The Oklahoman, [www.oklahoman.com](https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/state/2023/04/20/full-audio-released-of-oklahoma-sheriff-discussing-killing-journalists-mccurtain-county/70132913007/), published April 20, 2023, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/state/2023/04/20/full-audio-released-of-oklahoma-sheriff-discussing-killing-journalists-mccurtain-county/70132913007/>.

20 "Oklahoma public officials accused of discussing killing local journalists," U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/all-incidents/oklahoma-public-officials-accused-of-discussing-killing-local-journalists/>.

21 Gazette Staff, "Republicans Oust Sheriff; Hill Wins Democratic Nod," McCurtain County Gazette News, last modified June 21, 2024, <https://mccurtaingazettenews.com/republicans-oust-sheriff-hill-wins-democratic-nod/>.

22 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view.>

23 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

see reporters working in the community and have the opportunity to meet them. However, editorial staff is shrinking at many local outlets, and it is becoming more and more challenging for community members to interact with reporters. “The other challenge that we have is that as we have fewer and fewer people that are able to regularly be in these communities — even if they’re not reporting a story, being present at church services or community events or festivals, those sorts of things where people can just see that you’re out and about — we face a challenge as it relates to the political tenor in the state and the malignment of media in general,” Hubbard said. Hubbard noted that this is a national issue, but explained that the persistent narrative that

the media are liars really impacts reporters across the spectrum of news sources. KOSU has faced a number of issues in the past several months, she said, including a press conference in which a public official said the media was lying about issues regarding a teacher bonus program.²⁴ The story was broken by an Oklahoma Watch education reporter and another education reporter whose position is funded by the StateImpact collaboration between local public radio stations, including KOSU.²⁵

Hubbard also noted that she often hears from community members that they trust her although they do not trust the national media. This might explain why the Gallup/Knight data shows trust in local news in Oklahoma is relatively high compared to the U.S. overall, despite challenges for reporters on the ground. In fact, the Gallup/Knight data shows that trust in national news is much lower than trust in local news among Oklahomans — just 22.4% of Oklahomans surveyed said national news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public — but those numbers align with levels of trust in national news across all surveyed U.S. residents.²⁶ This suggests there are opportunities to reach audiences that feel disenfranchised by or distrustful of national media via local news sources, but that local outlets need more resources to establish robust community engagement practices.

Information Providers And Community	U.S	Oklahoma	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	65.5%	0.5 ▲
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	56.9%	4.9 ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	56.9%	3.9 ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	53.4%	6.4 ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	46.6%	2.6 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 58

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S	Oklahoma	Difference from U.S
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	1.8%	-1.2 ▼
From TV	31%	38.6%	7.6 ▲
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	59.6%	1.6 ▲
From a radio	7%	0.0%	-7.0 ▼

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 58

24 Erin Christy, “State Superintendent Ryan Walters holds news conference to target journalists,” 2 News Oklahoma, Scripps Media, Inc, last modified February 1, 2024, <https://www.kjrh.com/news/local-news/state-superintendent-ryan-walters-holds-news-conference-to-target-journalists>.

25 Erin Christy, “State Superintendent Ryan Walters holds news conference to target journalists.”

26 Knight Foundation, “American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy.”

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	21.1%	15.8%	3.5%	15.8%	43.9%
A website or app	44.6%	17.9%	7.1%	14.3%	16.1%
A radio station	26.3%	17.5%	5.3%	21.1%	29.8%
A TV station	46.4%	19.6%	10.7%	10.7%	12.5%
Direct communication with people in your area	21.4%	44.6%	5.4%	16.1%	12.5%
A magazine	3.6%	3.6%	10.7%	30.4%	51.8%
A social media platform	39.3%	14.3%	7.1%	7.1%	32.1%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 58

Oklahomans most frequently rely on television, a website or app, or social media for getting their news on a daily basis. The data aligns with national findings about the formats communities rely on most for getting daily news. Nearly 60% of Oklahomans surveyed get most of their news online, and nearly 39% get most of their news from TV.²⁷ The data indicates that digital formats are a key way that Oklahomans are accessing news. Greater investment in ensuring accessibility, such as improved access to broadband, could help more Oklahomans stay up to date about their communities. A little more than 14% of Oklahoma households do not have a broadband internet subscription, according to American Communities Survey data.²⁸

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in Oklahoma, including gaps and opportunities identified in a recent ecosystem assessment.

The Oklahoma Media Center, which supports innovation and collaboration among news organizations across the state, published a study on local news habits and trust in fall 2023. The report includes deep qualitative investigation into a sample of seven counties with limited television and/or newspaper access. The researchers found that Oklahomans rely most on social media and word of mouth for news, results that are similar to the findings of the 2022 Gallup/Knight survey, though more people reported

²⁷ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

²⁸ United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Oklahoma."

relying on TV news in that study.²⁹ The discrepancies between the two studies could be explained by shifts in Oklahomans' local news habits, the differences between the questions asked in each, or that the researchers for the 2023 study collected the names of news and information sources mentioned by participants and categorized them themselves, rather than asking participants to identify the format they relied on as in the 2022 Gallup/Knight poll. Additionally, an earlier phase of research that included a survey of 500 registered voters in the state found that the largest percentage of participants (66%) relied on television for their news.³⁰

Participants in phase II research also expressed a need for more election information, opinion or editorial content, and regional or statewide coverage instead of hyperlocal or national, researchers wrote in the 2023 study.³¹ Participants also identified local coverage of crime, politics, education, and environmental issues as gaps, according to the researchers.³² The researchers suggested a need for greater investment in disseminating news and information on social media, and a need for sustained community engagement in order to build trust.³³ However, as highlighted by interviewees, greater investment in digital means for accessing news will likely require investment in broadband infrastructure to ensure digital access is equitable. Some organizations have experimented with alternative formats for distribution, including sharing information via text message, but this requires additional staff capacity, stakeholders said. Ensuring sustained community engagement will also require increased capacity at small outlets that are currently under-resourced and underfunded.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in Oklahoma. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

29 Rosemary Avance and Allyson Shortle, "Oklahoma's News Media Ecosystem Phase II Research: Status and Suggestions for Local News," Oklahoma Media Center, published September 2023, <https://oklahomamediacenter.com/news/oklahomas-news-media-ecosystem-phase-ii-research-avance-shortle-2023/>.

30 "2023 Impact Report," Oklahoma Media Center, published February 12, 2024, <https://oklahomamediacenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/OMC-2023-Impact-Report.pdf>, p. 8.

31 Avance and Shortle, "Oklahoma's News Media Ecosystem Phase II Research," p. 26.

32 Avance and Shortle, "Oklahoma's News Media Ecosystem Phase II Research," p. 26.

33 Avance and Shortle, "Oklahoma's News Media Ecosystem Phase II Research," p. 34–36.

Oklahoma’s news and information providers sit around the median for the ecosystems included in this report. We found 169 local information providers in our research, 123 of which are print and digital newspapers, alt weeklies, or magazines. Despite indications that many Oklahomans rely heavily on television news to stay up to date on their local communities, one stakeholder said that stations often do not provide much local coverage, at least among TV news offerings in Tulsa. While Oklahoma has a larger number of organizations per capita (about one per 23,430 people) than the other state ecosystems explored in this report, interviewees noted that, similar to other states, many are concentrated in metro areas. News outlets are much more sparse in rural communities, and rural areas get inconsistent coverage from regional or statewide outlets. “From my perspective, I’m seeing local news disappear,” said Shaw Duty, the editor of the Osage News. Shaw Duty lives in Pawhuska, Oklahoma where the population is less than 3,000. “I know that I am also seeing a lot of news startups around the country, bigger cities, et cetera, but for rural areas like this, it’s a news desert,” she said. “It really is.”

Some stakeholders identified that the ecosystem lacks a strong contender for a statewide news outlet of record. While one stakeholder identified the nonprofit outlets in the state as a major strength, saying that those organizations have worked to fill the gaps left by legacy media, they also noted that none of them have been able to grow or scale to fill the role of newspaper of record. Interviewees described how many outlets in the state are small or shrinking, and a large number of stories are missed due to lack of reporting capacity. Even the large metro papers in the state, The Oklahoman and the Tulsa World, have seen their staff shrink significantly in the past two decades.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	3.6%			2.4%	
Print and digital	45.6%		26.6%	0.6%	
Print only	7.7%				
Radio					4.7%
Television		8.3%			0.6%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Hubbard at KOSU has found that while the radio station has historically been a more niche news provider, they have increasingly found they are serving as a frontline news source. The outlet has stepped into more of a leadership role in the ecosystem, working to identify and fill gaps and partner with other organizations in the state. However, Hubbard said they have concerns about the health of their funding pipeline, similar to public media across the U.S. They are raising more money than ever, but from fewer people.

Stakeholders identified significant challenges related to the talent pipeline and leadership among the state’s news organizations. The ecosystem suffers from an experience gap in which there are many reporters who are new to the field and a contingent of very experienced reporters, but there are fewer experienced, mid-career reporters, one stakeholder explained. Others described a dearth of leadership as experienced journalists retire and longstanding outlets are bought or outcompeted by national chains. Some also expressed a sense that the seasoned journalists in the state are not stepping up to lead change and meet the current needs in their communities and are instead holding out until retirement.

As far as the needs of news and information providers in the state, most need more funding for hiring and retaining staff, said Tyler Tokarczyk, a senior program officer at the Inasmuch Foundation, which funds the Oklahoma Media Center and local nonprofit news outlets in Oklahoma, in addition to other funding priorities in the state and nationally. “We’ve all been there before. When you don’t have capacity, it’s hard to take the time to think strategically or think beyond just what you have to do that day,” he said. He also noted the importance of thinking about how to support the mental health of journalists and ensuring that journalism offers careers with advancement opportunities and a living wage that can support reporters and their families. Interviewees also expressed a need for more — and better — coverage of Indigenous

“I know that I am also seeing a lot of news startups around the country, bigger cities, et cetera, but for rural areas like this, it’s a news desert.”

Shannon Shaw Duty,
Editor of the Osage News

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	170	
Population per organization	23,290	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	11	6.5%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	123	72.4%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	13	7.6%
Radio stations	8	4.7%
Television stations	15	8.8%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	97	57.1%
National broadcast chain	14	8.2%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	45	26.5%
Nonprofit	5	2.9%
Public media	9	5.3%
Community Media		
African American / Black	3	
Hispanic / Latino	10	
Asian / Asian American	1	
Indigenous / Native American	4	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

communities in the state. The state has strong Indigenous-owned news outlets, such as Mvskoke Media, the Osage News, and Verified News Network, and local and statewide outlets have worked to increase reporting over the years, but there are still gaps. KOSU hired a reporter to cover Indigenous affairs in 2019, though that reporter has since left for a national publication but remains in Oklahoma. The station hired a new Indigenous affairs reporter in April.³⁴ Interviewees said The Oklahoman and the Tulsa World have also hired Indigenous affairs reporters, and the nonprofit outlet NonDoc has increased its coverage. Interviewees specifically highlighted a need for more coverage of Indigenous communities by people from those communities. “Native issues are seldom covered, and when they are it is often through negative or inaccurate reporting. Local television and print organizations ‘parachute’ into Native communities when needed, but do not put in the work to build meaningful connections on a consistent basis,” said Brittany Harlow, a journalist and co-founder of the independent, Indigenous-owned outlet Verified News Network.

Oklahoma also has a set of outlets geared towards Black communities in the state, including The Oklahoma Eagle and The Black Wall Street Times. KOSU has worked to establish and provide editorial support to “Focus: Black Oklahoma.” The podcast and radio show provides coverage of news and public affairs topics relevant to African American and BIPOC communities in Oklahoma, according to the show’s website.

The state also has a mix of local Spanish-language publications, such as El Latino American and La Semana, and national broadcast affiliates of Telemundo, Univision, and Estrella. Most of these community news sources are located in Oklahoma and Tulsa County, and stakeholders said the ecosystem needs more Spanish-language news and translation resources for outlets without bilingual reporters.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the Oklahoma ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

We found no recent statewide diversity data regarding Oklahoma journalists, but Gannett newsrooms in the state released demographic information as part of the company’s 2020 promise to diversify their journalists. The

34 KOSU News and Sarah Liese, “KOSU welcomes Sarah Liese as Indigenous Affairs reporter,” KOSU, published April 29, 2024, <https://www.kosu.org/news/2024-04-29/kosu-welcomes-sarah-liese-as-indigenous-affairs-reporter>.

Oklahoman released newsroom diversity data in 2021 and 2022, stating they had largely seen increased racial and gender diversity compared to the year before.³⁵ Newsroom leadership, however, saw some decreases — fewer women in leadership in 2022 and a drop in leaders identifying as Native American in 2021 followed by an increase in 2022 that still fell below the 2020 levels.³⁶ Though 7.7% of newsroom leadership in 2020 identified as being two or more races, there were zero people who identified as such in those roles in 2021 and 2022.³⁷

While there have been efforts to cover Indigenous affairs at outlets in Oklahoma, interviewees said there is still a need for more Indigenous reporters covering Indigenous communities. One interviewee noted that a dedicated Indigenous affairs beat at one Oklahoma outlet had traditionally not been very successful because the journalists were viewed as outsiders, and critical coverage of the tribes could sometimes be viewed as bashing Indigenous communities.

35 “The Oklahoman’s staff became more diverse in 2022,” The Oklahoman, [www.oklahoman.com](https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/2022/07/27/the-oklahoman-newsroom-diversity-census-2022/65382879007/), last modified July 27, 2022, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/2022/07/27/the-oklahoman-newsroom-diversity-census-2022/65382879007/>.

36 The Oklahoman, “The Oklahoman’s staff became more diverse in 2022.”

37 The Oklahoman, “The Oklahoman’s staff became more diverse in 2022.”

Case Study – KOSU

How a public radio station is working to support the Oklahoma local news ecosystem

Amid shrinking staff and decreased coverage within Oklahoma’s news ecosystem, local public radio station KOSU has stepped into a leadership role, working to identify and build towards solutions. While public radio was once a more “niche” type of local news provider, the station has increasingly moved towards serving as a frontline news provider, said Rachel Hubbard, KOSU’s executive director. Hubbard has been working in news and information in the state for more than 20 years. She described a widening experience gap in the state as seasoned journalists have retired or left the field for reasons ranging from struggling to work in an environment where the media is often maligned to increased ownership of local papers by national newspaper companies.



Phil Shockley

“It’s an incredibly challenging environment because we continue to lose journalists across the system.”

Rachel Hubbard,
Executive director of KOSU

“It’s an incredibly challenging environment because we continue to lose journalists across the system,” Hubbard said. “We have eight people in our newsroom right now, and that puts us as one of the largest newsrooms in the state.” The newsroom is now fully staffed at eleven people in addition to three reporters that are part of the StateImpact collaboration between public radio stations in the state.

KOSU has estimated that the local news ecosystem loses about 63,000 stories a year based on estimated journalists who have left the field and an average of 150 stories per journalist annually. The calculation is based on anecdotal data, KOSU’s headcount, and data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Amid this environment, local stakeholders have worked to find ways to both engage Oklahomans in reporting on their communities and find ways to cover stories that might otherwise slip through the cracks.

KOSU, Oklahoma State University (OSU), and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) are working to create a community journalism program in which local residents would be trained to document community meetings and events. This coverage would not just be submitted to KOSU but could be used to support participants' local news providers, Hubbard said. They have developed a curriculum and identified some pilot counties for the project, Hubbard said, and they are currently working to identify key community partners. "The thing that has surprised us so far are the number of retired newspaper owners or reporters in small communities who are raising their hands to help," she said.

Acknowledgements

We relied on the insight, expertise, and feedback of local stakeholders and community members in order to write this chapter. Thank you to Rob Collins, Shannon Shaw Duty, Brittany Harlow, Rachel Hubbard, Hermione Malone, Thomas McGeeveran, and Tyler Tokarczyk.

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C.

We collected quantitative data and interviewed local stakeholders for 10 news and information ecosystems, including eight states (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan with a focus on Detroit, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) and two cities (Chicago and Washington, D.C.). This report is an analysis of the baseline health of these news and information ecosystems, with a focus on the intersection of media and democracy. This chapter lays out the findings for the D.C. news and information ecosystem. For a detailed explanation of overall research methods and limitations, see the Introduction.

Summary

D.C. is a unique city, balancing its role as the seat of the federal government and its identity as a major city with its own local affairs. The population of the district is majority made up of people of color, and nearly half the city identifies as Black or African American, according to 2022 American Communities Survey data.¹ There is also significant socioeconomic diversity — while the median household income in D.C. was \$101,722 in 2022,² the city has some of the highest income inequality in the country.³ Data shows relatively high levels of civic engagement among residents and a high degree of trust in local news sources. However, D.C.’s unique status also brings unique challenges — from greater focus on the federal compared to the local, complex local governance, a lack of federal representation, and the challenges of reporting on a diverse and socioeconomically stratified city.

Recent layoffs and closures of news organizations across the ecosystem, paired with what we heard in stakeholder interviews, indicate that many local news outlets in the district are struggling to stay afloat. Additionally, there is a dearth of research on community information needs and the state of the local news ecosystem in D.C., making it challenging to understand and fill gaps. Local news outlets across the D.C. information ecosystem have faced challenges in the past few years, with a number of outlets cutting or reducing their print editions. The ecosystem was rocked by buyouts at The Washington Post in fall 2023, which particularly

¹ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: District of Columbia,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/DC/PST045223>.

² United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: District of Columbia.”

³ Conor Gowder, “Useful Stats: Income inequality across the states,” State Science and Technology Institute, last modified January 25, 2024, <https://ssti.org/blog/useful-stats-income-inequality-across-states>.

impacted the paper's metro desk,⁴ followed by WAMU's announcement that it planned to close its digital publication, DCist, and lay off several staff members in 2024.⁵ And while trust in news is relatively high in D.C. — with 56.5% of surveyed D.C. residents, compared to 44% of all U.S. residents surveyed, expressing trust in the integrity of local news in 2022 Gallup/Knight polling — stakeholders noted that some neighborhoods in D.C. are not served by existing outlets, and have likely become disenfranchised by harmful coverage of their communities that focuses primarily on crime and safety.⁶ However, stakeholders cautioned that they only had anecdotal and qualitative data on gaps and needs in the local news ecosystem. Comprehensive research is needed to get a more granular picture of trust in the ecosystem, to understand what information needs are not currently being met, and to clarify where D.C. residents are getting much of their news.

Likely due to the fact that D.C. is the seat of power for the federal government and home to many politics- and policy-focused organizations, both quantitative data and information from stakeholders indicate that civic engagement in D.C. is relatively high. As many stakeholders put it, it's impossible to avoid politics and civic engagement in D.C. Voter turnout was higher in D.C. than it was nationally in the 2022 midterms⁷ — notably, there was also a mayoral election that year — and data on civic engagement shows D.C. residents participate at higher levels than U.S. residents on average when it comes to attending local political meetings, donating to campaigns or candidates, attending protests, and working for a candidate or campaign.⁸ However, this data may reflect residents' high levels of engagement with national or issue-specific topics. The field would benefit from research that is more tailored to the unusual civic landscape in D.C., taking into account residents' proximity to the federal government, high racial diversity in the city, and significant income inequality.

While news and information providers play an important role in keeping residents up to date about civic information, closures and shrinking capacity at local news organizations could have a significant impact on coverage. Stakeholders said neighborhood listservs and blogs have helped fill gaps and provide hyperlocal news for their communities, but those kinds of information providers are often volunteer-run, lack resources, and may not have broad visibility as they are often not counted in national databases of news sources.

4 Cuneyt Dil, "Washington Post buyouts hit local coverage," Axios D.C., Axios Media, last modified October 18, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2023/10/18/washington-post-buyouts-metro-desk>.

5 Andrew Beaujon, "DCist Has Been Shut Down Again, This Time by WAMU," Washingtonian, published February 23, 2024, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2024/02/23/dcist-will-be-shut-down-again-this-time-by-wamu/>.

6 "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," Knight Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, published February 15, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/#:~:text=Only%2026%25%20of%20Americans%20have,53%25%20hold%20an%20unfavorable%20view>.

Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2."

7 "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022," United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>.

8 Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Marissa Shih. "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022." Harvard Dataverse, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>.

Despite the decline in local news in the city, stakeholders identified bright spots, including high levels of enthusiasm and engagement with local issues among residents. Former DCist staff have announced plans and have been fundraising for the launch of a new worker-led local news outlet called The 51st this fall.⁹ The city council is tapped into the issues facing local news outlets and is considering a policy that could help financially support local news through a government-funded voucher program.¹⁰

Ultimately, while D.C.'s local news outlets have unusual opportunities to tap into national resources and organizations based in D.C., above-average levels of trust in local news, and relatively high interest in civic issues, many lack the resources to do so. And, importantly, D.C. does not have a backbone organization that can serve as a central hub for resources and training, ensure equal distribution of funds, and help coordinate collaboration.

This chapter presents D.C. at a glance with topline information about the District's community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting, then dives deep into each of these areas, pulling on both quantitative data and information gathered through interviews and primary research.

Ultimately, while D.C.'s local news outlets have unusual opportunities to tap into national resources and organizations based in D.C., above-average levels of trust in local news, and relatively high interest in civic issues, many lack the resources to do so.

⁹ "Ex-DCist Reporters Launch Worker-Led News Outlet," City Cast DC, published July 16, 2024, <https://dc.citycast.fm/podcasts/ex-dcist-reporters-launch-worker-led-news-outlet>.

¹⁰ Anna Brugmann and Mark Histed, "BRUGMANN/HISTED: There is a Local News Crisis in the District, The Council Can Help Fix It," The Washington Informer, published April 4, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/dc-local-journalism-funding-act/>.

Opportunities

Supporting Black media:

With 45.0% of D.C. residents identifying as Black or African American, D.C.'s news ecosystem does not appear to reflect the makeup of the city.¹¹ Stakeholders noted that outlets serving Black or African American communities in D.C. have decreased over the years. More shared resources and support for news outlets serving Black residents could help broaden outlets' reach and, critically, bring in audiences that have historically been underserved by legacy news outlets or disenfranchised due to negative coverage.

Supporting Latino-serving media:

Nearly 12% of D.C. residents identify as Hispanic or Latino.¹² We found only five outlets serving this community, most of which are national broadcast affiliates, and stakeholders identified Spanish-language news as a gap in the ecosystem. Further research is needed to understand information needs when it comes to in-language content, what information sources Hispanic and Latino communities already rely on for local D.C. news, and where there are coverage gaps. Previous research has indicated that while Spanish is the most common language among outlets serving Latino communities, bilingual and English-language outlets also serve an important role, especially for Hispanic and Latino news consumers who are U.S. born, millennial or younger, and bilingual.¹³

Ecosystem research and resources:

One of the major challenges in understanding the gaps in the D.C. local news ecosystem is a lack of comprehensive, granular data on challenges, needs, and trust. Access to ecosystem-wide data could help news organizations understand how to better meet audience needs, and it could help funders, support organizations, and researchers better understand what areas need more support.

¹¹ United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: District of Columbia."

¹² United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: District of Columbia."

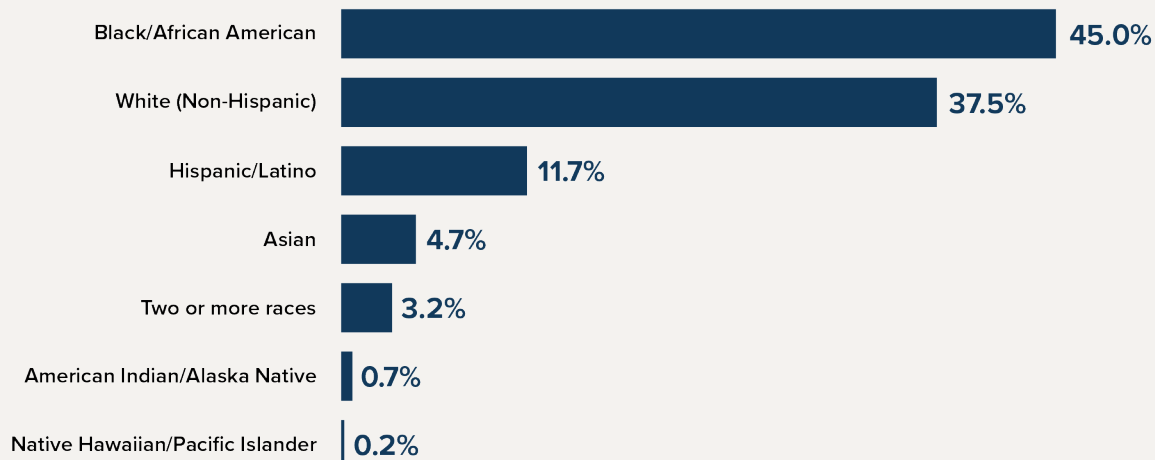
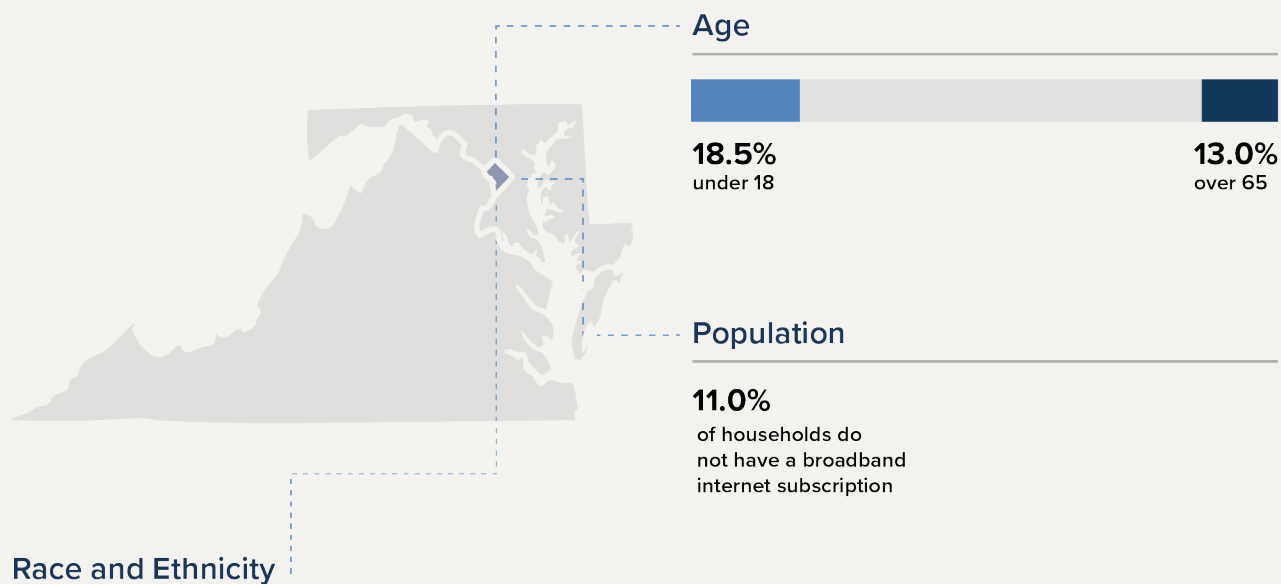
¹³ "Language," the City University of New York Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, published June 2019, <https://thelatinomediareport.journalism.cuny.edu/language/>.

Washington, D.C. at a Glance

Topline indicators about D.C.'s community, information providers, and civic engagement and voting to provide broad context for its local news and information ecosystem.

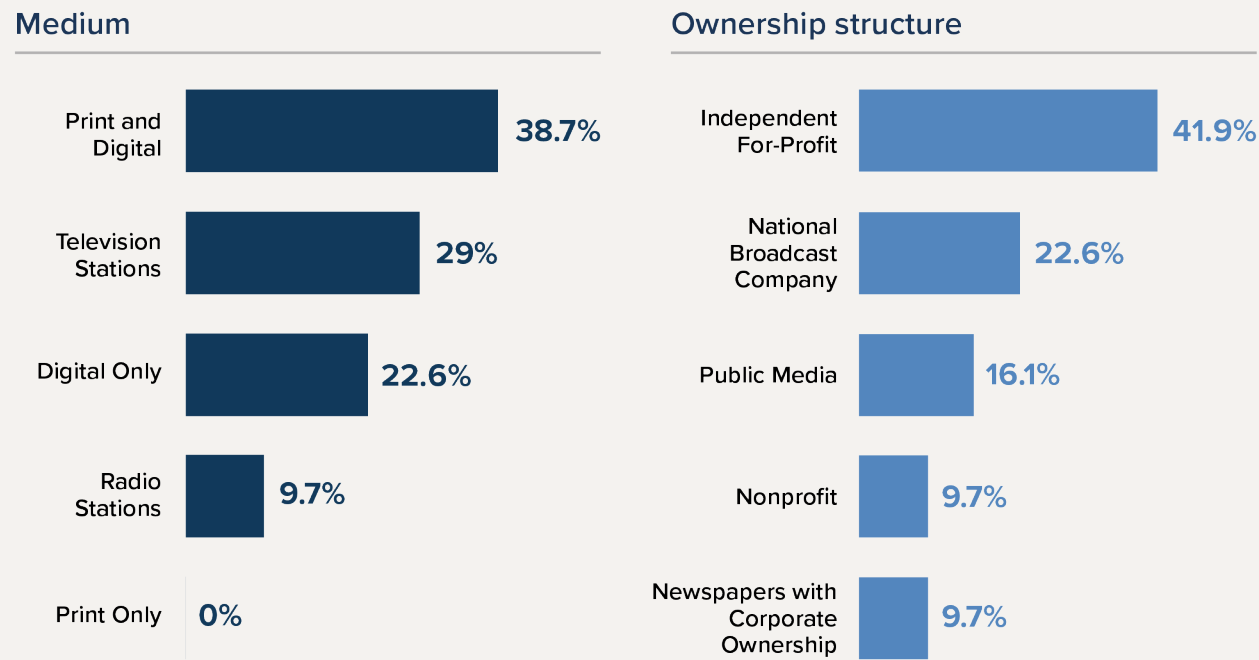
Community Indicators

Community indicators are from the state's U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and U.S. Census Urban and Rural [data](#).



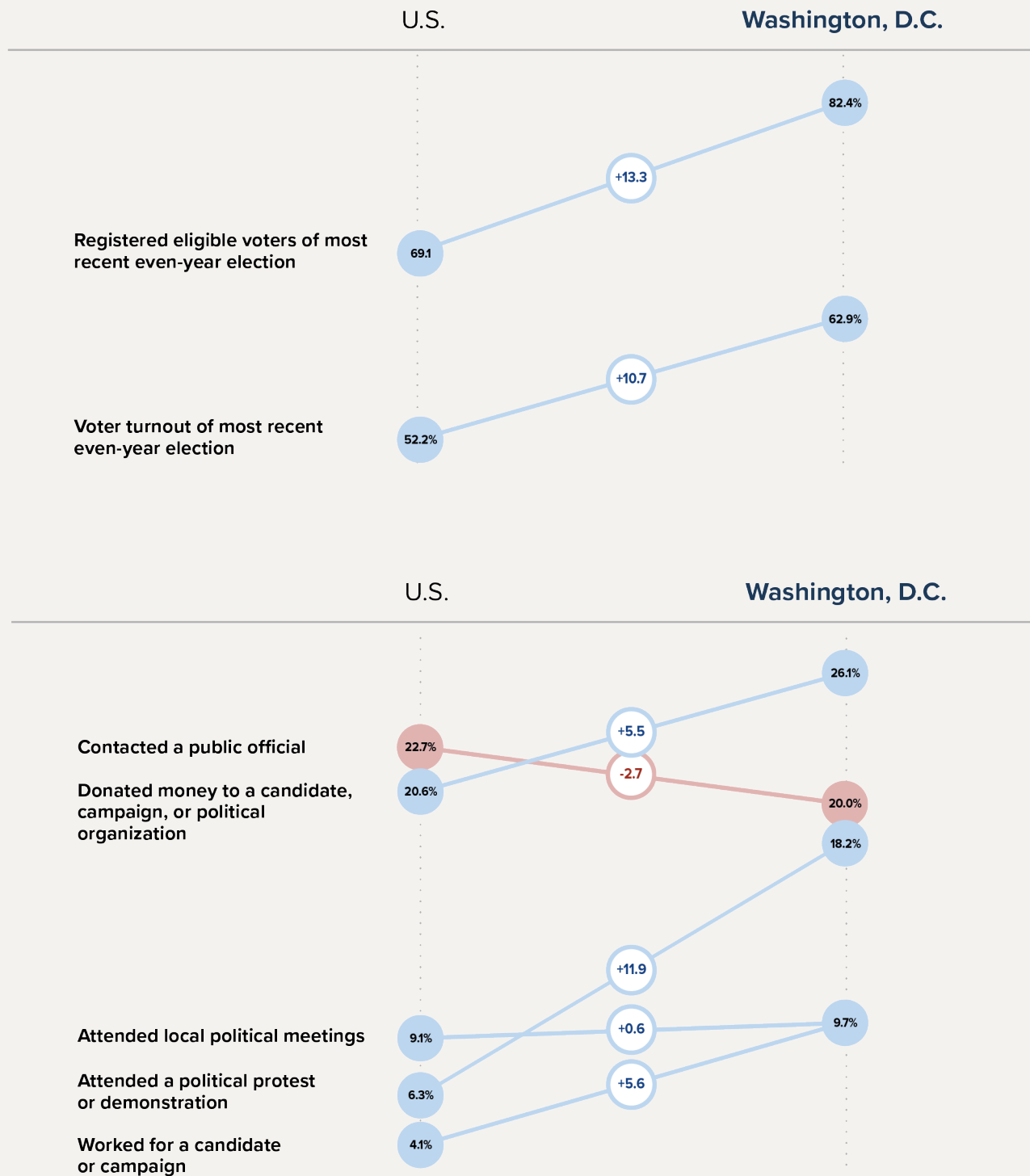
Information Providers

Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#).



Civic Engagement and Voting

Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



D.C. Deep Dive

The following sections present quantitative information from a variety of publicly available data sources and qualitative information gathered through primary research and interviews with residents of D.C. to dig deeper into the current state of D.C.'s news and information ecosystem. Our findings are presented by category: civic engagement, media and democracy, information providers and community, community information needs, information providers, and diversity in newsrooms. We also present a case study about HumanitiesDC’s community journalism program.

Civic Engagement

Research shows that civic engagement, including but not limited to voting, is correlated with access to quality local news and information. In this section, we rely on 2022 Harvard CES survey data, the Cost of Voting Index, voting registration and turnout data, and primary research to document the current state of civic engagement in D.C.

As the center of federal politics and government for the United States, D.C. is unique in many respects, but especially when it comes to civic engagement. As stakeholders put it, there is no way to avoid politics and civic engagement as a D.C. resident — even district license plates nod to residents’ efforts to secure D.C. statehood and full congressional representation, calling out “taxation without representation.” While D.C. does elect a delegate to the House of Representatives, a shadow representative, and two shadow senators, none of them can vote on bills, and their primary focus is advocating for D.C. statehood and home rule.¹⁴ Despite a lack of true federal representation, D.C. has strong voter registration and turnout numbers: 82.4% of eligible voters were registered as of the 2022

Civic and Community Engagement	U.S.	D.C.	Difference from U.S.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	9.1%	9.7%	0.6 ▲
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	20.6%	26.1%	5.5 ▲
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	6.3%	18.2%	11.9 ▲
% who contacted a public official	22.7%	20.0%	-2.7 ▼
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	4.1%	9.7%	5.6 ▲

Data is from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study. n = 165

14 “DC Governance,” State of Washington, DC, DC.gov, <https://statehood.dc.gov/page/dc-governance>.

midterms, compared to 69.1% nationally, and 62.9% of those registered voted in that election, compared to 52.2% nationally. While the Cost of Voting Index (COVI) does not give D.C. a score assessing the ease or difficulty of voting, the district has passed some fairly inclusive voting laws. It is one of three U.S. states and territories where people convicted of felonies maintain their right to vote, even when in prison,¹⁵ and the city council passed a measure allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections, which the House voted to block.¹⁶

Regarding non-voting forms of civic engagement, data from the 2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study shows that a higher proportion of D.C. residents participate compared to U.S. residents overall for most categories measured.¹⁷ Nearly three times as many D.C. residents (18.2%) reported attending a political protest, march, or demonstration than overall survey participants (6.3%).¹⁸ The higher number is likely in part a reflection of the fact that D.C., as the nation's capital, is often the site of major protests. D.C. is also the only city for which we have CES data — our Chicago and Detroit analyses rely on statewide data. The percentage of D.C. residents who reported working for a candidate or campaign (9.7%) and who donated money to a campaign, candidate, or political organization (26.1%) are also higher than the percentage for all survey participants (4.1% and 20.6%, respectively), again likely reflecting D.C. residents' proximity to the seat of the federal government.¹⁹ Interestingly, the percentage who reported attending a local political meeting (9.7%) is only slightly higher than the percentage of all survey participants (9.1%), and fewer D.C. residents reported contacting a public official (20.0%) than survey participants overall (22.7%).²⁰ The latter number may reflect, in part, that D.C. does not have full representation in Congress. But the relatively average number for local political meeting attendance combined with the low number for contacting public officials could also indicate that, while D.C. residents may be more engaged with national politics or issue-specific movements, they may not be much more engaged with local politics than other U.S. residents.

It's worth noting that the CES survey does not cover all forms of non-voting civic engagement, such as phone banking or canvassing, nor does it capture the fact that many D.C. residents work for the government or in roles adjacent to or supporting public officials. A more comprehensive and D.C.-specific survey of civic engagement and participation in democracy is needed to better understand the ways D.C. residents are involved, especially

15 Hayley Starshak, "It's easy to vote in Washington, D.C., but it still doesn't count," The Center for Public Integrity, last modified October 6, 2022, <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/elections/who-counts/its-easy-to-vote-in-washington-d-c-but-it-still-doesnt-count/>.

16 Meagan Flynn, "House votes to block noncitizen voting in D.C. elections — again," The Washington Post, last modified May 23, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-v/2024/05/23/house-vote-dc-noncitizen-voting/>.

17 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

18 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

19 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

20 Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Shih, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022."

to help differentiate between engagement with national politics and issues versus local ones.

“The local totally gets swallowed up in the federal,” said Anna Brugmann, policy director at the D.C.-based coalition Rebuild Local News,

which advocates for public policy to support journalism. In D.C., local issues get less airtime and less support from those equipped to address them, such as philanthropists or organizers, Brugmann explained.

“The local totally gets swallowed up in the federal.”

Anna Brugmann
Policy director at Rebuild Local News

Stakeholders generally described high levels of civic engagement in their communities, pointing to attendance at community meetings and briefings, participation in neighborhood events, and easier access to public hearings due to remote options introduced during the pandemic. However, interviewees acknowledged that they could not speak to all D.C. neighborhoods and that there are many reasons why it might be challenging for D.C. residents to participate. “The first thing for people to really be able to become civically engaged is making sure that their most basic needs are covered so that they have the space and bandwidth and time and de-stressed selves to be able to say, ‘Okay, what else can I become engaged with?’” said Rebecca Lemos Otero, executive director of HumanitiesDC, which seeks to uplift the humanities to create more equitable and culturally rich communities. The organization recently started a community journalism program that supported local residents in reporting and writing a story, many of which were then published in local news outlets.

“The first thing for people to really be able to become civically engaged is making sure that their most basic needs are covered...”

Rebecca Lemos Otero
Executive director of HumanitiesDC

Another potential barrier to some kinds of civic engagement, including public meeting participation and contacting public officials, is that local representation in D.C. is complex and can be difficult to navigate. One stakeholder said that communities sometimes lack information about how to get involved or lack clarity about the power of local officials. This lack of clarity extends especially to the responsibilities and powers of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs), hyperlocal bodies composed of biannually elected commissioners whose role, according to the D.C. government, is “to be their neighborhood’s official voice in advising the District government (and Federal agencies) on matters that affect their neighborhoods.”²¹ D.C. has 46 ANCs, each of which are divided into Single Member Districts that elect a single commissioner to serve on their local ANC body.²² There is significant variability among ANC websites, and some appear

21 “Advisory Neighborhood Commissions,” DC.gov, <https://anc.dc.gov/page/about-ancs>.

22 DC.gov, “Advisory Neighborhood Commissions.”

to have vacant positions. Since the bodies are so hyperlocal, moving a few blocks might place residents in a different ANC. ANCs are distinct from the city council, for which residents elect at-large members and a representative serving each of D.C.'s eight wards. The D.C. government website offers an address lookup tool that tells residents their ward, ANC, and Single Member District.²³ However, residents may not be aware of the existence of this tool, how they are represented locally, and where to find information about meetings or other ways to get involved.

Other potential challenges stakeholders described included concerns about physical safety while participating in neighborhood or community events. Crime and public safety has been a contentious and complicated issue across the U.S., and especially in D.C. This year, the city council passed the “Secure D.C.” bill, which attempts to curb crime through higher penalties and reversing some police and criminal justice reforms, among other policies.²⁴ Some residents were also engaged in a recall campaign against the Ward 6 city councilman due to his support for progressive crime policies, though the recall has since failed to make it on the ballot.²⁵ While conversations about crime and safety have galvanized some D.C. residents to become more active in community issues, it also may be reducing participation in some forms of community and civic engagement if residents do not feel physically safe going out in their communities.

Media and Democracy

This section explores the relationship between the media in D.C. and democratic institutions. A key way we explore this is through press freedom in the District, which we define as the press’s ability to access government information and to conduct its work without physical harm or intimidation.

Stakeholders did not feel that there were widespread or systemic issues with press freedom in D.C., though they noted that it can sometimes be difficult to reach public officials or get access to public information. One benefit of being in D.C. is that locally-based watchdog organizations are often connected with local media outlets and are helpful resources when it comes to accountability reporting, explained Denise Rolark Barnes, publisher of The Washington Informer, a Black- and woman-owned news outlet serving African American audiences in the DMV.

23 “Locate Your SMD and ANC,” Office of Planning, DC.gov, <https://dcgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/lookup/index.html?appid=12bb36e8b77a4a8780125e77e990b146>.

24 Jenny Gathright, “Your Questions About The Massive D.C. Crime Bill, Answered,” DCist, published February 20, 2024, <https://dcist.com/story/24/02/20/secure-dc-crime-bill-frequently-asked-questions/>.

25 Meagan Flynn, “Campaign to recall D.C. lawmaker Charles Allen fails to qualify for ballot,” The Washington Post, published August 12, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/08/12/dc-recall-effort-charles-allen/>.

The Press Freedom Tracker, which maintains a database of incidents related to press freedom, includes 19 incidents for D.C. from 2022 through 2023.²⁶ This large number mostly reflects incidents that arose for journalists covering national issues, rather than D.C.’s restrictions on local reporting. As in many of the other ecosystems included in this report, D.C. journalists have been detained or injured while covering protests.²⁷ Many of the other incidents are subpoenas of journalists or newsrooms for footage related to the January 6 insurrection trials.²⁸ Others are due to statements or legislation introduced by members of Congress that undermine press freedom for journalists beyond D.C., but are recorded for D.C. due to Congress’ location.²⁹ For example, the tracker includes a November 9 [incident](#) in which Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton called on the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate a number of national news outlets, claiming they allegedly employed Hamas-affiliated journalists in Gaza.³⁰ Cotton’s claim was categorically denied by the outlets.³¹

While D.C. is home to some legacy outlets with a specific ideological alignment, such as the conservative Washington Times, it does not appear to have a significant number of hyperpartisan or “pink slime” news sources. Hyperpartisan news sites are outlets that appear to be local news sources, with names such as East Michigan News. However, outlets often do not disclose partisan funding or lean, and they are “often funded and operated by government officials, political candidates, PACs, and political party operatives,” according to [researchers](#) Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli.³² Pink slime journalism refers to a broader set of news sources that can include hyperpartisan outlets. [Pink slime outlets](#) masquerade as local news sources, can have undisclosed partisan ties, and can rely on content that is AI generated or aggregated from other websites.³³ While other ecosystems in this analysis, such as North Carolina and Michigan, have a large number of hyperpartisan outlets, a 2020 map from researchers Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli shows just one such outlet in D.C.: Washington D.C. Business Daily.³⁴ However, further research is needed to ensure the current count of hyper-partisan outlets is up to date since ecosystem studies for other states described some that may not have existed when the 2020 mapping project was published.

26 “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

27 “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

28 “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

29 “The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/>.

30 “Senator calls on Justice Department to investigate news outlets,” U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, last modified November 9, 2023, <https://pressfreedomtracker.us/all-incidents/senator-calls-on-justice-department-to-investigate-news-outlets>.

31 U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, “Senator calls on Justice Department to investigate news outlets.”

32 Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you.” NiemanLab, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

33 Scott A. Leedingham, “Pink Slime Journalism: Separating Ethical News From Propaganda,” Freedom Forum, <https://www.freedomforum.org/pink-slime-journalism/>.

34 Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you.”

Information Providers and Community

In this section, we analyzed survey data and information from interviewees to better understand D.C. residents' perception of local news organizations. The 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey "Trust, Media and Democracy" asked a series of questions about perception of media and how respondents access the news. The survey showed that negative views of American media have grown since Gallup/Knight began tracking them in 2017, and assessed trust in local and national media across five dimensions: competency, reliability, benevolence on a societal level, benevolence on an individual level, and integrity.

Trust in local news is generally much higher among D.C. respondents to the 2022

Gallup/Knight American Views survey

compared to the overall U.S. numbers. In

particular, the percentage of D.C. residents

who felt that "local news cares about how

their reporting can affect their community

broadly" and the percentage who felt

"local news cares about the best interest of

readers, viewers, and listeners" were each

about 11 percentage points higher than that of all survey respondents.³⁵ D.C. residents also expressed relatively high

trust in the integrity of local news — 56.5% of D.C. respondents agreed that "local news does not intend to mislead,

misinform, or persuade the public," compared to just 44% of all people surveyed.³⁶

Interestingly, only 57.3% of D.C. respondents, compared to 65% of all survey respondents, agreed or strongly agreed

that "local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly."³⁷ That number is also low

in comparison to other cities in this analysis. In Chicago 66.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the

statement, and 62.3% of surveyed Detroiters agreed or strongly agreed.³⁸ Considering the higher-than-average

levels of trust across the other four survey questions, this number suggests that D.C. residents are more aware of the

challenges the industry faces — such as the decline of local news outlets and limited capacity or resources at many

small news organizations — than U.S. residents overall, potentially due to residents' proximity to a large number of

national news outlets, journalists, and other organizations that work within the industry.

Information Providers And Community	U.S	D.C.	Difference from U.S
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.	65%	57.3%	-7.7% ▼
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.	52%	57.3%	5.3% ▲
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.	53%	64.1%	11.1% ▲
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.	47%	58%	11% ▲
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.	44%	56.5%	12.5% ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 131

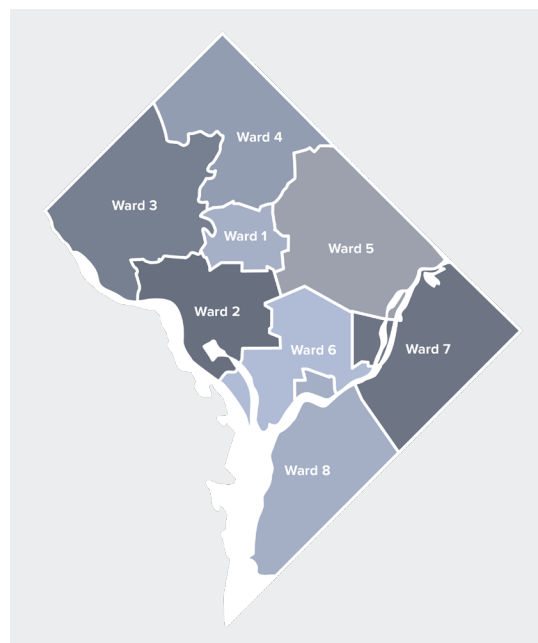
³⁵ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

³⁶ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

³⁷ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

³⁸ Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

Local stakeholders described challenges with trust in local news that are similar to those of many communities across the U.S. Rolark Barnes noted that communities nationally are hearing negative narratives about the media, including that the media should not be trusted. She said she was surprised to see how widespread distrust has become. Other stakeholders noted how, in the current political environment, trust in news must be earned, and news organizations cannot take it for granted. One stakeholder described how residents feel abandoned by legacy news sources in the city, such as The Washington Post, but acknowledged that this might look different across different demographics. Residents of Wards 7 and 8 likely never felt served, they said. The two wards, located in the eastern part of the city, are primarily made up of Black or African American residents — 88.67% of Ward 7³⁹ and 88.06% of Ward 8⁴⁰ identifies as such. Median household income for the two wards is roughly half that of the city overall,⁴¹ and the wards are often seen as being the least served by city resources and having the least access to goods and services like [grocery stores](#).⁴²



2022 Ward boundaries [D.C. Wards map](#)
Source: D.C. Office of Planning

Lemos Otero, whose organization ran a community journalism program that was open to residents from all over the city but took place in Ward 8, said feedback they received during that program was that people did not feel like they were part of the journalistic process or that their community was represented positively in coverage. “I don’t like to simplify, you know, just say seven and eight, but the truth of the matter is that, traditionally, media that has represented the neighborhoods in those areas has usually either focused more on violence or lack of resources and tensions that that produces,” Lemos Otero said. While that is important to cover, Lemos Otero said, it often doesn’t capture how those communities feel about the place where they live and how it influences their lives, and it does not include what those communities find positive about their neighborhoods or what they would like to see there.

Other stakeholders also attested to how trust looks different across different neighborhoods and demographic groups in the city. One shared how trust is high in certain communities, particularly those that are highly

39 “Summary Data for Ward: Ward 7,” DC Health Matters, last modified April 2024, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/demographicdata?id=131494>.

40 “Summary Data for Ward: Ward 8,” DC Health Matters, last modified April 2024, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/?module=demographicdata&controller=index&action=index&id=131495§ionId=>.

41 “Households/Income Data for Ward: Ward 7,” DC Health Matters, last modified April 2024, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/demographicdata?id=131494§ionId=936>; “Households/Income Data for Ward: Ward 8,” DC Health Matters, last modified April 2024, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/?module=demographicdata&controller=index&action=index&id=131495§ionId=936>.

42 Amanda Michelle Gomez and Dee Dwyer, “Voices Of Wards 7 And 8: What One Grocery Store Serving Thousands Means To The Community,” DCist, last modified October 10, 2023, <https://dcist.com/story/23/10/10/dc-voices-ward-7-8-giant-closing/>.

educated and higher income, but they are sometimes quick to criticize news outlets without digging deeper into issues faced by outlets and the industry more broadly. For example, residents in one stakeholder's community were critical of Washington City Paper's decision to eliminate its print edition, but that did not translate into taking action to support the alt weekly or better understand its financial situation.

In which format do you get most of your news?	U.S.	D.C.	Difference from U.S.
From a printed newspaper or magazine	3%	4.6%	1.6% ▲
From TV	31%	22.3%	-8.7% ▼
Online using a computer, smartphone, or app	58%	63.1%	5.1% ▲
From a radio	7%	10.0%	3.0% ▲

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 131

While trust in local news is high in D.C. relative to the national averages, information from stakeholders points to major challenges, particularly when it comes to building trust with and ensuring news is reaching communities that have historically been marginalized or overlooked by media in the city. Additional study of trust in news in D.C. could help clarify how trust looks different across different communities and neighborhoods. Additional data could help inform the way journalists approach reporting on and engaging with different communities in the city, and it could also help identify where community listening is most needed and how news sources can better meet community information needs in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Data from the Gallup/Knight survey also shows where D.C. residents get their news. As in many other ecosystems included in this report, a large proportion of surveyed D.C. residents reported relying heavily on a TV station for staying up-to-date on news on a daily basis.⁴³ Interestingly, fewer D.C. residents reported getting most of their news from TV (22.3%) compared to all survey respondents (31%).⁴⁴ A slightly larger percentage of D.C. respondents reported relying on print for most of their news than all survey participants.⁴⁵ As in many ecosystems, most news consumers are getting news through digital means — 63.1% of D.C. respondents said they get most of their news online, compared to 58% of all survey respondents.⁴⁶

How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
A newspaper	40.8%	23.8%	9.2%	10.8%	15.4%
A website or app	45.4%	20.8%	6.9%	13.1%	13.8%
A radio station	31.5%	20.0%	9.2%	17.7%	21.5%
A TV station	40.5%	22.1%	9.2%	13.0%	15.3%
Direct communication with people in your area	21.5%	37.7%	12.3%	16.2%	12.3%
A magazine	6.2%	16.2%	21.5%	30.0%	26.2%
A social media platform	37.7%	21.5%	5.4%	10.8%	24.6%

Data is from the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey. n = 131

43 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

44 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

45 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

46 Knight Foundation, "American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."

Community Information Needs

A critical aspect of the health of a local news ecosystem is the degree to which all community members' information needs are being met. Currently, there is not a national or local survey that is repeated regularly to document the degree to which community information needs are being met. Organizations like Outlier Media and the Listening Post Collective, among others, have conducted deep, qualitative community information needs assessments in the communities they serve. In this section, we explore information needs in D.C.

There is no recent, public information needs study for D.C., which is a significant challenge when it comes to identifying gaps in the news ecosystem. Stakeholders were careful to qualify their answers regarding information needs, noting that they could only answer anecdotally, qualitatively, or based on what they saw in their neighborhood.

Brugmann noted a need for an education-focused newsroom and more coverage of local government and local environmental issues. Development and growth are undercovered, she said, and issues like gentrification and affordable housing also need more reporting.

Beyond topic- area gaps, stakeholders highlighted geographic gaps, noting that northwest D.C. is fairly well served, but communities in the northeast quadrant and to the east of the Anacostia River are not. Stakeholders generally highlighted how no outlet in the city has the capacity to cover all of D.C.'s neighborhoods. And some also noted a need for a strong source of general news about the city, especially as The Washington Post appears to be less and less focused on local coverage both in how it has staffed its metro desk and the coverage the paper is producing, stakeholders said.

Stakeholders also said that news and information often feels geared towards D.C. residents, but not necessarily D.C. locals.

D.C. has a lot of transplants, Brugmann explained, with many people moving to the city for work or school. News and

information typically feels geared towards the middle class and up, she said, and the needs and perspectives of lower income or marginalized communities are often left out.

Stakeholders also said that news and information often feels geared towards D.C. residents, but not necessarily D.C. locals.

As one stakeholder noted, D.C. would likely benefit from a major hub providing support to news outlets and journalists, sharing resources and research, and coordinating collaboration. Such an organization could help organize information needs research and community listening efforts that would help information providers and other stakeholders better understand the local news ecosystem.

Information Providers

In this section, we aim to provide an overview of the landscape of information providers in an ecosystem, particularly journalism organizations. We relied on databases from the State of Local News Project, the Center for Community Media, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, local broadcast affiliate lists, and interviews to identify journalism organizations in D.C. We manually identified the platform(s) and business model for each organization. Based on research, we assume that the more diverse an ecosystem is with respect to the number and types of information providers, the more healthy the ecosystem. A full [list of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the report page.](#)

Despite the presence of many national news outlets and journalists, local news in D.C. is in decline, stakeholders said. “I wouldn’t say that in a place like the nation’s capital that we have a news desert, but things are drying up,” Rolark Barnes said. She described how local daily news and the Black press have dwindled over the past six decades.

The ecosystem has taken a particular hit in the past few years, with buyouts at The Washington Post in fall 2023⁴⁷ and WAMU’s decision to close the digital local news site DCist and lay off 15 staff members in February 2024.⁴⁸ Other outlets have taken different measures to cut costs, such as reducing printing. Washington City Paper, the city’s alt weekly, moved to digital only in 2022, sunseting its free print publication and laying off four staff members, following a previous reduction to monthly printing in 2020.⁴⁹ Street Sense,

Information Providers	Number	Percentage
Number of organizations	31	
Population per organization	22,243	
Medium		
Digital only (including email newsletters)	7	22.6%
Print and digital (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	12	38.7%
Print only (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	0	0%
Radio stations	3	9.7%
Television stations	9	29.0%
Organization Type		
Independent for-profit	13	41.9%
National broadcast chain	7	22.6%
Newspapers with corporate ownership	3	9.7%
Nonprofit	3	9.7%
Public media	5	16.1%
Community Media		
African American/Black	4	
Hispanic/Latino	15	

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

47 Will Sommer and Elahe Izadi, “Washington Post will offer buyouts to cut staff by 240,” The Washington Post, last modified October 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2023/10/10/washington-post-staff-buyouts/>.
48 Andrew Beaujon, “DCist Has Been Shut Down Again, This Time by WAMU.”
49 Avery Kleinman, “Staff And Locals React To End Of Washington City Paper Print Edition,” DCist, last modified April 4, 2022, <https://dcist.com/story/22/04/04/washington-city-paper-ends-print-edition/>.

a nonprofit news source covering housing and homelessness, reduced printing in 2023 due to funding challenges.⁵⁰

We found 31 local news sources in D.C. in our research, more than a third of which are print and digital publications like newspapers, alt weeklies, or magazines.

However, stakeholders noted that many

D.C. communities have neighborhood listservs or blogs that they rely on for local news and information, and these are often not included in industry-wide databases of news and information providers. While these are vital sources of hyperlocal neighborhood information, stakeholders said they are often volunteer-run projects started by community members who do not have access to journalism training and other resources.

While stakeholders noted there are some strong outlets serving Black or African American communities, such as The Washington Informer, there are still relatively few outlets considering that nearly half of D.C. identifies as Black or African American. Spanish-language news is similarly limited, according to stakeholders; although we identified five outlets in our research, most of these are national broadcast affiliates rather than locally-owned and operated news sources. D.C. does have news sources serving other communities, including the Washington Blade, a longstanding outlet serving LGBTQ+ audiences in the district. And as previously mentioned, there are many hyperlocal or neighborhood-specific news sources in the city, though further research is needed to understand where these information sources exist, what falls within their coverage area, and what kinds of coverage they provide.

While stakeholders were quick to note that local news outlets in the city are struggling, they also said that there are bright spots and unique opportunities in the district. For one, the presence of so much national media could create opportunities for mentorship or collaboration between national newsrooms and local ones, stakeholders said. And while national news and issues tend to draw focus in D.C., local journalists and newsrooms are in unusually close proximity to national journalism funders and support organizations headquartered in D.C. Democracy Policy Network has worked to push for policy that would financially support local news outlets in D.C. through a local news voucher program,⁵¹ and city council members introduced a bill that would allow D.C. voters to allocate government-

“I wouldn't say that in a place like the nation's capital that we have a news desert, but things are drying up.”

Denise Rolark Barnes
Publisher of The Washington Informer

⁵⁰ Nick Pasion, “Street Sense Will Print Less Often,” *Washingtonian*, published July 25, 2024, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2023/07/25/street-sense-cuts-print-frequency/>.

⁵¹ Bruggmann and Histed, “BRUGMANN/HISTED: There is a Local News Crisis in the District, The Council Can Help Fix It.”

funded news coupons to outlets of their choice.⁵² The program would serve as an additional revenue stream for local news sources. The bill was still awaiting a committee hearing as of June.

	Independent for-profit	National broadcast chain	Newspapers with corporate ownership	Nonprofit	Public media
Digital only	16.1%			6.5%	
Print and digital	25.8%		9.7%	3.2%	
Print only					
Radio					9.7%
Television		22.6%			6.5%

See the Methodology in chapter one for information on how this list of providers was compiled.

Diversity in Newsrooms

In order to effectively meet community information needs and to be trusted by community members, newsrooms must reflect the lived experience and heritage of their audiences. We scanned the D.C. ecosystem to determine whether newsrooms have conducted staff demographic surveys and, if so, published the results. We also consulted with stakeholders to determine the degree to which they observe newsrooms being reflective of the communities they serve.

While there has not been a recent, publicly shared assessment of newsroom diversity across D.C. news outlets, The Washington Post published demographic data for all employees in June 2023. It should be noted that The Post provides national coverage, and the data is not broken down by desk, so we were unable to consider the metro desk specifically. However, The Post provides a useful example of how newsrooms might track this data across several years.

While The Post is still majority white in terms of its organization-wide staff, at least as of June 2023, the paper has seen the overall number of employees of color increase since 2018, the first year for which they show data.⁵³ However, the percentage of Black or African American employees organization-wide has decreased each year since 2018, and only 17.0% of organization-wide employees and 9.7% of newsroom employees identified as Black or African American in 2023.⁵⁴

52 Sara Fischer and Cuneyt Dil, “Scoop: D.C. lawmakers to introduce new bill funding local news via vouchers,” Axios, last modified October 20, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/20/local-news-vouchers-bill-dc>.
53 Washington Post staff, “The Washington Post’s Workforce Demographics,” The Washington Post, last modified July 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2023/07/27/workforce-demographics/>.
54 Washington Post staff, “The Washington Post’s Workforce Demographics.”

We also did not find publicly available analyses of source diversity among newsrooms in D.C. Given what stakeholders shared about geographic gaps in coverage and how some communities feel they have not been involved in reporting about their neighborhoods, such analyses could be beneficial for understanding what voices outlets are prioritizing in coverage of topics such as crime and safety, housing and homelessness, and poverty.

Case Study – HumanitiesDC’s Community Journalism Program

Sharing stories for and by D.C. communities

While D.C. is a hub for national and international media, and the city is frequently in the spotlight due to its role as the location of the federal government, local news organizations covering the city and its residents have, in many cases, faced financial challenges that threaten their existence, with some outlets conducting layoffs or buyouts, eliminating or reducing print editions, or closing altogether.

“A lot of national and international media pays attention to what happens in the city at a kind of government, federal level. But the city itself, the access that it has to media seems to be shrinking,” said Rebecca Lemos Otero, executive director of HumanitiesDC.

HumanitiesDC, the National Endowment for the Humanities-affiliated council for the District, works to connect people to the humanities and use the humanities as a development tool, explained Lemos Otero. Recognizing an environment of decreased local coverage and that storytelling about D.C. communities was often not by those communities, HumanitiesDC started their community journalism program in spring 2023, drawing on open-source materials from the New School’s Journalism + Design Lab.

For the program's pilot year, 12 people from across the District met in Ward 8 for training from a professional journalist. The program followed a syllabus, and participants practiced interviews and covering public events. The participants then began working on their own stories and received support in writing and pitching those to local D.C. publications.



HumanitiesDC

“There's definitely parts of the city that do not get represented as much, and if they do, it's, again, not necessarily from the community member's perspective.”

Rebecca Lemos Otero
Executive director of HumanitiesDC

In feedback during the program, participants shared how they often felt left out of the reporting process when news outlets covered their communities or that the reporting they saw did not reflect what they felt needed coverage. “There's definitely parts of the city that do not get represented as much,” Lemos Otero said. “And if they do, it's, again, not necessarily from the community member's perspective.”

Participants in HumanitiesDC's community journalism program selected a topic of their choice, with many highlighting personal or community connections and experiences in their work. Topics ranged significantly, Lemos Otero said, from reporting on how D.C. Public Schools teachers are supporting migrant students to a story about Black joy and love through the lens of letters a participant discovered between her grandparents. Stories were published in outlets including 730DC and Washington City Paper, and HumanitiesDC also collected them in a [zine](#).⁵⁵

The program highlights how community journalism can strengthen the local news ecosystem, providing a pathway for communities to participate in coverage and adding community-centered stories that are often challenging for small or understaffed outlets to devote resources to. “A few media outlets were really excited and interested, and particularly one was like, ‘You know, we don't have the staff to cover some of these more intimate stories,’” Lemos Otero said. ““This is kind of like, they get to tell their story and share it, and we get to have content that really feels like it speaks to our readers and adds value.””

A second cohort began working in spring 2024, and HumanitiesDC hopes to continue and potentially grow the community journalism program in the future.

55 “Curious Minds Zine,” HumanitiesDC, published in 2024, <https://indd.adobe.com/view/f907bf5c-2f4b-4eed-87fa-b84f50a1ff99>.

Acknowledgements

We relied on the insight, expertise, and feedback of local stakeholders in order to write this chapter. Thank you to Denise Rolark Barnes, Anna Brugmann, Angelica Das, and Rebecca Lemos Otero.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Definitions and Data Sources

Community Indicators: We relied on the U.S. Census Bureau [QuickFacts](#) page and [U.S. Census Urban and Rural data](#).

Information Providers: Data for information providers is an aggregation of information from the [State of Local News Project](#), the [Center for Community Media](#), [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), [National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#), local broadcast affiliate lists, and Media Impact Funders' Candid [database](#). A full [list](#) of included information providers is in the More Resources section of the [report page](#).

Civic Engagement and Voting: Civic engagement data is from the [2022 Harvard Cooperative Election Study](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).

Backbone institutions: Backbone institutions are organizations that have deep relationships across the ecosystem, provide training, coordinating, and networking support, and can serve as a first point of entry for new journalism funders, often resulting in more equitable distribution of funds across the ecosystem.

Hyperpartisan news outlets: Hyperpartisan news sites are outlets that appear to be local news sources, with names such as East Michigan News or Washington D.C. Business Daily. However, outlets often do not disclose partisan funding or lean, and they are “often funded and operated by government officials, political candidates, PACs, and political party operatives,” according to [researchers](#) Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli.

Pink slime journalism: This [refers](#) to outlets that masquerade as local news sources, can have undisclosed partisan ties, and can rely on content that is AI generated or aggregated from other websites.

Press freedom: The level of press freedom (or repression) is based on instances of physical intimidation and regulatory incidents, access to legal resources for journalists, and regulatory policy, as well as local institutional accountability.

Appendix 2: Local News & Information Ecosystem Framework, 2024

Indicator	Definition	Data Sources
Community Indicators		
Population & Population Characteristics		
Population	Total Population	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% under 18 years	Percent of population under age of 18	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% 65 years and over	Percent of population under over age of 65	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% population living in urban areas	Percent of population living in an urban area	U.S. Census Bureau Urban and Rural
% White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	Percent of population identifying as white	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% Black or African American alone	Percent of population identifying as Black or African/American	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% American Indian and Alaskan Native alone	Percent of population identifying as Native American	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% Asian alone	Percent of population identifying as Asian or Asian American Pacific Islander	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	Percent of population identifying as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% Two or More races	Percent of population identifying as two or more races	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
% Hispanic or Latino	Percent of population identifying as Hispanic/Latinx	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Computer & Internet Use		
Households with Computer	Percent of households with a computer	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Broadband Access	Percent of households with a broadband internet subscription	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Education		
High school graduate or higher	High school graduate or higher High School Graduates include people whose highest degree was a high school diploma or its equivalent, people who attended college but did not receive a degree, and people who received an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or professional or doctorate degree.	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Bachelor's degree or higher	Percent population who have received a bachelor's degree from a college or university, or a master's, professional, or doctorate degree	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Income & Poverty		
Median Household Income	Median Household income of population	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Per Capita Income	Per Capita income of population	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts

Indicator	Definition	Data Sources
Poverty Rate	Poverty rate of population	U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
Gini coefficient	Gini coefficient from 2022 ACS	U.S. Census Bureau Map
Resources & Infrastructure		
Institutions of higher education	Number of post-high school institutions of higher education, including trade schools.	NCES, Cities NCES, States
Population per Institution	Population divided by number of universities in the community	
Libraries	Number of libraries, library branches, and bookmobiles in the community	Local Library.gov
Population per Library	Population divided by number of libraries in the community	
Community indicators		
Community well-being	Community well-being in terms of individual and social factors.	Well-Being Index
Prior Information Needs Study	Presence of any prior information needs study	Manual Research
Prior Ecosystem Study	Presence of any prior information or journalism ecosystem studies	Manual Research
Information Providers		
Number of Organizations	Number of journalism organizations based within the community	State of Local News Project , the Center for Community Media , Corporation for Public Broadcasting , National Federation of Community Broadcasters , local broadcast affiliates (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, Fox, Telemundo, and Univision)
Population per Organization	Number of journalism organizations in the community divided by the population	
Distribution Medium		
Print (newspapers, alt weeklies, monthly magazines)	Percentage of journalism organizations in the community that are print first, such as newspapers, alt weeklies, and monthly magazines	
Television Stations	Percentage of journalism organizations in the community that are broadcast television stations (stations registered with ACM, CPB, and network stations)	
Radio Stations	Percentage of journalism organizations in the community that are broadcast radio stations (public media registered with NFCB and CPB and network stations)	
Digital only (including email newsletters)	Percentage of journalism organizations in the community that only have a digital presence — either a website, social media, or email newsletter	
Business Model		
Nonprofit	Indicates 501(c)3 status, not included as NPR/PBS affiliate or community broadcast media	

Indicator	Definition	Data Sources
Public Media	NPR/PBS affiliate, community broadcast media	
National Broadcast Chain	Network-affiliated radio and television	
Newspapers with Corporate Ownership	Owned by a multi-state organization, such as McClatchy, Gannett, Alden, etc.	
Independent For-Profit	Unaffiliated with a broader entity and does not identify as a 501(c)3 organization	
Community Serving Media		
African American / Black	Number of media outlets in community produced for and by the African American, Black, Afro-Caribbean community	
Hispanic / Latino	Number of media outlets in community produced for and by the Latinx or Hispanic community, or in Spanish	
Asian / Asian American	Number of media outlets in community produced for and by the Asian or Asian American community	
Indigenous / Native American	Number of media outlets in community produced for and by Indigenous and Native American communities	
Hyperlocal	Number of media outlets produced for and by a hyperlocal community	
Other	Number of media outlets in community produced for and by community important to your context	
Ecosystem Diversity		
Journalist Diversity	Publicly available census of journalists in an ecosystem and/or specific outlets within past two years	Manual Research
Source Diversity	Racial and gender diversity of sources quoted in the journalistic output of the community in the last 12 months	Manual Research
Collaboration	Instances of collaborations in the community over the last 12 months	Manual Research, Collaborative Journalism Database
Journalism Funding		
Philanthropic Dollars over the previous three years	Number of philanthropic dollars invested in media and information in the community over the previous three years (e.g. if recording in 2020, 2017-2019)	Foundation Center - Media Impact Funders (Journalism News and Information)
Funders	Number of philanthropic funders invested in media and information in the community over the previous three years	Foundation Center - Media Impact Funders (Journalism News and Information)
Recipients	Number of recipients of philanthropic funding for media and information in the community over the previous three years	Foundation Center - Media Impact Funders (Journalism News and Information)
Invested Per Capita	Population divided by number of philanthropic dollars invested in media and information in the community over the previous three years	

Indicator	Definition	Data Sources
Community information needs and trust in media		
Representation		
Local news has the resources & opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly.		2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Local news can be relied on to deliver the information I need.		2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Local news cares about how their reporting can affect their community broadly.		2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Local news cares about the best interest of their readers, viewers, and listeners.		2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Local news does not intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public.		2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Information needs and access		
How often, if at all, do you use each of the following for staying up-to-date on news?	Newspaper, website or app, radio station, TV station, direct communication with people in your area, magazine, social media platform	2022 Gallup/Knight survey
In which format do you get most of your news?	Printed newspaper/magazine, TV, Online, Radio	2022 Gallup/Knight survey
Democracy Indicators		
Institutional Accountability		
Local gov't staffing	Number of positions in local government that are not filled	Manual research
Availability of information about local leaders	Are board/committee members' names and bios on local website? Are board and committee descriptions on local website?	Manual research, municipality websites
Civic & Community Engagement		
Availability of public meeting materials	Are boards/committees making minutes, agendas, and other materials available before/after meetings?	Manual research, municipality websites.
Accessibility of public meeting materials	Are meeting materials in accessible language, offered in languages other than English, in video/audio form, offered with closed captioning, etc.?	Manual research, municipality websites.
% who attended local political meetings (such as school board or city council)	Percent of survey respondents who attended a local political meetings (such as school board or city council meeting) in the past year (CC22_430, <1>)	Harvard Cooperative Election Study
% who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization	Percent of survey respondents who donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization in the past year (CC22_430, <6>)	Harvard Cooperative Election Study
% who attended a political protest, march or demonstration	Percent of survey respondents who participated in any rallies or protests in the past year (CC22_430, <4>)	Harvard Cooperative Election Study

Indicator	Definition	Data Sources
% who contacted a public official	Percent of survey respondents who contacted elected officials, either offline or online, in the past year (CC22_430, <5>)	Harvard Cooperative Election Study
% who worked for a candidate or campaign	Percent of survey respondents who said they worked for a candidate or campaign in the past year. (CC22_430, <3>)	Harvard Cooperative Election Study
Voting		
Cost of Voting Index (CoVI)	An index of scores for the ease/burden of voting by state	COVI
Registered eligible voters of most recent even-year election	Percent of registered eligible voters of most recent even year election	Voter registration and turnout by state
Voter turnout of most recent even-year election	Percent of population participating in most recent presidential, midterm, or local municipal elections	Voter registration and turnout by state
Voting and election litigation	Number of court cases fighting voter suppression or expansion tactics by state, Jan. 2022 to now	Democracy Docket
Press Freedom		
Physical intimidation	Number of incidents of physical intimidation of journalists from 2022 through 2023	U.S. Press Freedom Tracker
Access to legal resources for journalists	Number of organizations in the area providing free legal support to newsrooms or journalists	Manual research: Free Expression Legal Network, Local Legal Initiative attorneys from RCFP, Legal Clinic Fund
Regulatory incidents	Number of regulatory incidents that restrict media operations and/or production abilities from 2022 through 2023	U.S. Press Freedom Tracker
Regulatory policy	Number of bills proposed that would restrict media operations and/or production abilities	Manual research
Partisan Outlets		
Number of hyperpartisan outlets	Number of hyperpartisan outlets in the area	Hyperpartisan outlet map

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol

Questions for backbone organizations:

1. What role do you play in your local news ecosystem?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your local news ecosystem?
3. What characteristics make them strong or weak?
4. What are the gaps?
5. What other resources or support would local news organizations need to better meet community needs?
6. What are the characteristics of a healthy ecosystem?
7. Do you have processes in place for identifying ecosystem needs?
8. What kinds of measures of success do you look at for understanding the health of a local news ecosystem?
9. What are the major questions you have about healthy local news ecosystems that influence what you support?
10. Have there been notable collaborations among information providers and/or community engagement efforts that demonstrate the health of the news ecosystem?
11. How would you describe trust in news in your community?
12. How would you describe the state of press freedom in your state / city in terms of access to information, intimidation, or other press restrictions?
13. How do you see your community participate in civic engagement or government decision-making on either the local or national level?
14. What are some of the barriers or challenges STATE / CITY communities face when it comes to civic engagement or taking part in government decision-making?
15. In your region, what is the significance of the non-media information institutions in a local news ecosystem?
16. What kinds of resources or support would these places need to better meet community needs?
17. Who else should we talk to?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Questions for local funders:

1. What role do you play in your local news ecosystem?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your local news ecosystem?
3. What characteristics make them strong or weak?
4. What are the gaps?
5. What other resources or support would local news organizations need to better meet community needs?
6. What are the characteristics of a healthy ecosystem?
7. Do you have processes in place for identifying ecosystem needs?

8. What kinds of measures of success do you look at for understanding the health of a local news ecosystem?
9. What are the major questions you have about healthy local news ecosystems that influence what you support?
10. Have there been notable collaborations among information providers and/or community engagement efforts that demonstrate the health of the news ecosystem?
11. How would you describe trust in news in your community?
12. How would you describe the state of press freedom in your state / city in terms of access to information, intimidation, or other press restrictions?
13. How do you see your community participate in civic engagement or government decision-making on either the local or national level?
14. What are some of the barriers or challenges STATE / CITY communities face when it comes to civic engagement or taking part in government decision-making?
15. In your region, what is the significance of the non-media information institutions in a local news ecosystem?
16. What kinds of resources or support would these places need to better meet community needs?
17. Who else should we talk to?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Questions for community advocates:

1. Can you briefly describe your organization and role, as well as the role you and your organization play in the local news ecosystem?
2. Could you describe the landscape of local news in your community?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your local news ecosystem?
4. What are the major challenges in terms of ensuring equitable access to information in your community?
5. How do you get relevant news or information in your community/city/state?
6. How well are the information needs of your community met by the existing news and information infrastructure, and how have they evolved over time?
7. Do you have processes in place for identifying these needs?
8. Have there been notable collaborations among information providers and/or community engagement efforts that demonstrate the health of the news ecosystem?
9. How would you describe trust in news in your community?
10. How would you describe the state of press freedom in your state / city in terms of access to information, intimidation, or other press restrictions?
11. Any examples that stand out?
12. How do you see your community participate in civic engagement or government decision-making on either the local or national level?
13. What are some of the barriers or challenges STATE / CITY communities face when it comes to civic engagement or taking

part in government decision-making?

14. In general, do you think local government in your state / city is held accountable for its actions and responsive to residents' needs?
15. How do you think about the connection between civic engagement and information in your community?
16. How would you describe the state of civic engagement and civic participation in your state / city?
17. In general, do you think local government in your state / city is held accountable for its actions and responsive to residents' needs?
18. What role do you see local media playing in holding elected officials to account?
19. In general, how easy is it for people to participate in or learn more about local government in your state / city?
20. In your region, what is the significance of the non-media information institutions in a local news ecosystem?
21. What kinds of resources or support would these places need to better meet community needs?
22. Who else should we talk to?
23. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Questions for journalists and/or those in journalism organizations:

1. Could you describe the landscape of local news in your community?
2. What are the strengths of your local news ecosystem?
3. What are the weaknesses of your local news ecosystem?
4. What role do you play in your local news ecosystem?
5. How well are the information needs of your community met by the existing news and information infrastructure?
6. How have they changed over time?
7. Do you have processes in place for identifying these needs?
8. Have there been notable collaborations among information providers and/or community engagement efforts that demonstrate the health of the news ecosystem?
9. How would you describe trust in news in your community?
10. What are your processes for building trust with communities?
11. How do you see your community participate in civic engagement or government decision-making on either the local or national level?
12. What are some of the barriers or challenges STATE / CITY communities face when it comes to civic engagement or taking part in government decision-making?
13. In general, do you think local government in your state / city is held accountable for its actions and responsive to residents' needs?
14. In general, how transparent is local government in terms of information access?
15. In general, how much access does local media get to local elected officials?
16. How has local media played a role in holding elected officials accountable in your community?

17. How would you describe the state of press freedom in your state / city in terms of access to information, intimidation, or other press restrictions?
18. Can you provide any illustrative examples about the state of press freedom?
19. How do you get relevant news or information in your community/city/state?
20. What are the major challenges in terms of ensuring equitable access to information in your community/city/state?
21. How do you think about the connection between civic engagement and information in your community?
22. How would you describe the state of civic engagement and civic participation in your state / city?
23. In general, do you think local government in your state / city is held accountable for its actions and responsive to residents' needs?
24. What role do you see local media playing in holding elected officials to account?
25. In general, how easy is it for people to participate in or learn more about local government in your state / city?
26. Who else should we talk to?
27. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Appendix 4: Interviewees

We relied on the insight, expertise, and feedback of local stakeholders in order to write this chapter. Thank you to the following for generously contributing to this project. Interviewees were offered a stipend in exchange for their time.

Jhmira Alexander, Public Narrative
Sarah Alvarez, Outlier Media
Tracy Baim, Windy City Times
Denise Rolark Barnes, The Washington Informer
Sherry Bellson, Get Involved Zuni
Anna Brugmann, Rebuild Local News
Rob Collins, Oklahoma Media Center
Angelica Das, Democracy Fund
Melissa Milios Davis, Colorado Media Project
Pat Davis, CTRL+P
Gwyneth Doland, University of New Mexico
Shannon Shaw Duty, Osage News
Brittany Harlow, Verified News Network
Chris Hearne, Cloudcroft Reader
Rachel Hubbard, KOSU
Rashad Mahmood, New Mexico Local News Fund
Ju-Don Marshall, WFAE
Malcolm McClain, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
Ayinde Merrill, NJ Civic Info Consortium
Hera Mir, New Jersey Policy Perspective
Tracy Mosley, NC Counts Coalition
Stefanie Murray, Center for Cooperative Media
Maritza Félix, Conecta Arizona
Natalie Fotias, The Skillman Foundation
Staci Fox, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute
Elizabeth Galarza, Pasa La Voz
Lizzy Hazeltine, North Carolina Local News Lab Fund
Jesse Holcomb, Calvin University
Kelly Huber, formerly Community Foundation for Southern Arizona

Corey Hutchins, Colorado College

Maudlyne Ihejirika, The Field Foundation of Illinois, Chicago Sun-Times

Morgan Elise Johnson, The TRIIBE

Krystal Knapp, Planet Princeton

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