

AGORA JOURNALISM CENTER REPORT

Shifting Practices for a Stronger Tomorrow

LOCAL JOURNALISM IN THE
PACIFIC NORTHWEST (2019)

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OREGON

School of Journalism
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Foreward

In late 2017 the Agora Journalism Center published a [study](#)¹ exploring the state of local journalism in the Pacific Northwest. Authored by Damian Radcliffe, the lead researcher of this new paper, it explored the journalistic mission and changing practices at 10 newsrooms in the region.

The report found that – despite a challenging financial backdrop – newsrooms were actively embracing concepts of engaged journalism, new revenue models, as well as the storytelling opportunities afforded by digital platforms. The tone was one of cautious optimism.

Given the pace of change across the media landscape, coupled with increasing levels of interest in the health of local journalism across the United States, we felt that it was important to revisit this arena and update this story.

We also recognized that there was considerable value in bringing together a community of practice, and indeed that this is an important function for public institutions - like the University of Oregon – to fulfill.

With that in mind, in March 2019, the Agora Center hosted a one day workshop for 28 news organizations from across Oregon and Washington (including one covering the wider Western United States). Split into three groups, attendees dived into the topics first explore in 2017: business and revenue models, changing journalistic practice and the practice of engagement.

The fruits of these updated discussions will be represented in a series of White Papers authored by Damian and some of the graduate and undergraduate students who were involved in the day. They will be published over the course of the next few months.

For the Agora Center, driven by our mission to drive transformational advancements in journalism and communication to enhance public knowledge, and to enrich civic life for all community members, understanding this landscape matters, because understanding – and facilitating - healthy democratic communities is at the heart of our work.

In this report you will be able to read how newsrooms are adapting to address the realities of the journalism industry in 2019. Their experiences, and the solutions they are deploying, are not unique to the Pacific Northwest. We hope that news organizations in the United States and beyond will benefit from these insights.

We look forward to your thoughts on the ideas outlined in this report.

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Executive Summary

Doing more with less: seven practical tips for local newsrooms everywhere

By Jaycie Schenone and Damian Radcliffe

Building a sustainable model of audience supported, public-interest journalism is not easy.

The story of [declining advertising revenues](#)², relationships with [third party platforms](#)³ and the reality of [smaller newsrooms](#)⁴ is well told. Addressing this new reality may feel daunting, not least because [it will involve](#)⁵ changing journalistic approaches and traditional work practices, but it cannot be avoided.

In a bid to explore these challenges, on 1st March 2019, senior editors and journalists from 28 local news organizations in the Pacific Northwest convened for a one-day conference hosted by the Agora Journalism Center in Portland, Oregon, to discuss the challenges - and opportunities- for their industry.

Here are seven practical takeaways for local newsrooms based on a roundtable conversation focused on changing journalistic practice:

1. Content doesn't need to be perfect to be valuable

A key theme for this group focused on how to best serve groups that have too often been left out of the news. For far too long communities, ranging from indigenous groups to Latino communities, as well as African-Americans, women and LGBTQ, have been absent from both our newsrooms and our reporting.

Serious efforts need to be made to hire reporters - be they staffers and/or freelancers - that truly represent these communities in the newsroom and to tell their stories. However, our group felt, too often newsrooms wait for the perfect hire, or the right resources, to address this issue. Sometimes this means waiting a long time, perhaps too long, to make a move.

[John Schrag](#)⁶, the Executive Editor of Pamplin Media Group, suggested that doing something was often better than doing nothing. One option his group is exploring is - in the absence of a Spanish speaker, or budget for translation services - using [Google Translate](#)⁷ for some of their stories. "We have really good content," he said, "and we can't share it with those people that can't understand [English]."

The software isn't perfect, Schrag acknowledged, but the Latino communities that Schrag has approached with this content recognized - and appreciated - the sentiment behind these efforts

2. Share resources within a city not just a company

Across the Pacific Northwest, some local newsrooms have joined forces to report within their community, sharing bylines and workloads instead of competing for the scoop.

[Rattled: Oregon's Concussion Discussion](#)⁸, a joint project of InvestigateWest, Pamplin Media Group and the Agora Journalism Center, is a good example of this.

The initiative - supported in part by grants from Meyer Memorial Trust and the Center for Cooperative Media - partnered with the Solutions Journalism Network and others to tell the story about the impact of concussion on Oregon teens. The series conducted the first-ever analysis of high school sports concussions in Oregon, a condition which across the U.S. affects one in five American teens.

Many newsrooms increasingly recognize the [importance of collaboration](#)⁹. [Morgan Holm](#)¹⁰, SVP and Chief Content Officer at OPB, discussed sharing their drone with other news organizations, a practical example of resource sharing which goes beyond human capital, allowing other newsrooms to access this technology and its visual storytelling potential.

3. Proximity Matters

Local journalists can quite easily bump into the people they are reporting on. Sources and subjects of stories may be a journalist's neighbors, their children's teachers, or the people standing in line behind them at the grocery store.

Because of this, local journalists enjoy a unique vantage point for understanding the communities that they report on, and leveraging this to help [engender trust](#)¹¹ in the wider profession.

This is an asset that local newsrooms need to emphasize more, employing the tools of [engaged journalism](#)¹² to unlock benefits which can help both the business model and content creation.

“Local journalists enjoy a unique vantage point for understanding the communities that they report on.”

“We want a reporter from that community,” [Carl Segerstrom](#)¹³, an Assistant Editor at [High Country News](#)¹⁴, said when discussing how they want to approach stories. This means “putting the affected voices at the center of the story rather than reporting from outside the community.” It’s an approach others, such as the [Seattle Globalist](#)¹⁵, have also sought to deploy, working - wherever possible - with people directly from the communities they are reporting on.

4. Ask your audience what they want to know

Engagement with audiences - in both [real life and online](#)¹⁶ - has taken some reporters to unexpected places and helped increase traction for publishers on digital platforms.

There are a variety of ways to reach audiences for content input, including events, comments pages (still very popular and a source of discussion at our conference), Facebook Live and Reddit style AMA’s.

In Seattle, KUOW Public Radio [asked their audience](#)¹⁷ to propose potential questions that reporters would answer and then ran a poll on social media to determine the winner. The results took them to the [bottom of Lake Washington](#)¹⁸ and went viral.

What's On The Bottom Of Lake Washington? Planes, Trains And ...

BY Sarah Waller AUG 17, 2014 at 6:42 PM



What's on the bottom of Lake Washington? Listener Merry McCreery wanted to know.

For KUOW Public Radio's Local Wonder project, I embarked on a strange journey that took me to the heart of this vast lake that separates Seattle from the Eastside. What I learned was astonishing, often gross and, on occasion, heartbreaking.

On a recent evening, I hopped a boat with five scuba divers who have mapped the whole lake floor with sonar. We shoved off from the Magnuson Park boat launch.

Mike Racine, our captain, pointed to a map of the lake on a computer screen. It was covered with hundreds of markers, called targets. Each one represented an object of interest detected by their sonar. We headed out to check out target 590, a spot they've never explored before.

"When I'm out here, sometimes I imagine what it would be like if there was no water in Lake Washington," Racine said. "What would you see?"

Image via KUOW Public Radio

It was a story, [Deborah Wang](#)¹⁹, a reporter and host at KUOW Public Radio, said, the newsroom would never have typically considered covering. Yet, their audience loved it.

“When you start having fun with your reporting, your reporting sounds better on the air,” she said. Engaging with your audience in this way is just one way to inject new life - and different ideas - into your newsroom.

5. Pull back the curtain

Rebuilding trust with audiences is a necessity for many newsrooms. Without it, building (paying) audiences and turning the tide against the “fake news” narrative will be extremely difficult.

This matters not just for the financial health of the journalism industry, but in ensuring a healthy democracy where a vibrant, free press helps to ensure that the information needs of communities are met.

“We have to stop assuming people know how we do our jobs,” [argues](#)²⁰ The Trusting News Project. “Instead, we need to actively work to earn trust from our communities by telling them why we’re worthy of their time, trust and support.”

Activities which can help address this goal include, but are not limited to, sharing the [story behind the story](#)²¹, finding opportunities for audiences to get to know who reporters are (like the Seattle Times’ “[Behind the Byline](#)²²” series), as well as using spaces like events, [social media](#)²³ and [podcasts](#)²⁴, to [share insights into editorial processes and decisions](#)²⁵.

6. Understand the value of longitudinal reporting

Cable news, push notifications, news apps and social media mean that the news is always at our fingertips. These technologies have also pushed newsrooms to break the news as early as possible. After all, no one wants to be outscopied.

But, some news organizations and audiences are recognizing that this isn’t always the right approach. The [emergence](#)²⁶ of the [Slow News](#)²⁷ movement, coupled with the growth of solutions journalism, as well as [key tenets of engaged journalism](#)²⁸ such as listening, inclusivity and relationship building, are just [some](#)²⁹ of the reporting approaches which newsrooms are using to do things differently.

“Rebuilding trust with audiences is a necessity for many newsrooms.”

Alongside these changing practices, long-form and longitudinal reporting – offering deep-dives into issues which matter to your community are also part of the secret sauce of delivering journalism that matters.

[Lynn Jacobson](#)³⁰, the Deputy Managing Editor at the Seattle Times referred to “taming the beast” by recalibrating their story mix to more effectively blend breaking news stories with longer, richer, pieces of reporting.

This type of in-depth content is a key plank in the Times’ move towards a subscription based business model. Jacobson cited [Education Lab](#)³¹, an ongoing project looking at local education issues and solutions, as just one example of where the Seattle Times is putting this principle into action.

7. Embrace partnerships

When local newsrooms are looking for partners, they often think of funders and other newsrooms. Higher education providers may be an underutilized resource. Some have access to assets (including equipment, as well as a body of young, motivated journalists) that smaller organizations may not have access to.

In Oregon, the [Snowden Internship Program](#)³² partners with news organizations across the state, partially funding the salary of young journalists for the summer.

Elsewhere, news outlets in the region have found success working with ProPublica, Report for America, Hearken, the Solutions Journalism Network and other organizations. Through these partnerships they have been able to access funding, journalists, and insights into new ways of doing things.

Newsrooms have a choice, Malheur Enterprise’s [Les Zaitz](#)³³ said. “Create change or have change be put against you.”

What our conversation showed is that through partnerships, changing approaches to reporting, as well as being prepared to experiment, newsrooms in the Pacific Northwest are actively seeking to change what they do and how they do it.

The lessons from their journey are potentially valuable to journalists across the country and beyond. It’s going to be fascinating to see where this evolution takes them next.

Introduction

It is a truth, universally acknowledged that the journalism industry is plagued by declining public trust³⁴, political instability³⁵ and loss of revenues³⁶. This truth is so well fixed in the minds of media watchers, that there is a widespread recognition that for newsrooms to survive, they need to adapt and evolve³⁷.



*Local Journalism Roundtable - Changing Journalistic Practice Group
Image via Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

As many newsrooms across America continue to shrink, and the power of digital platforms (especially as vehicles for advertising revenue³⁸) continues to grow, journalists and media organizations need to make the most of these new digital realities. As Dr. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford, has acknowledged³⁹: “I think that we accept the fact that whatever local journalism is in the future, it won’t be what it was.”

This not only means embracing new platforms and storytelling tools like Facebook Live, Instagram Stories and podcasting. It also means understanding the increasingly interconnected nature of changing journalistic practice and the business models which underpin this industry⁴⁰.

In an era where subscriber-led income becomes increasingly important to publishers, so the relationship between the content that audiences consume and the ability to convert this into reader-driven revenue⁴¹ will only become more prevalent.

It is, partially, against this backdrop that we have seen the rise of engaged journalism⁴². Newsrooms and media organizations recognize the importance of driving loyalty to their products and reducing churn, as well as the storytelling potential which can be unlocked by interacting – and listening - to audiences both online and in real life⁴³.

In March 2019, 28 reporters and editors from a wide range of Pacific Northwest media organizations gathered in Portland, Oregon, to discuss the state of local journalism in the Pacific Northwest.

Splitting into three groups, each cohort focused on a particular element of this landscape: business and revenue models, engaged journalism and changing journalistic practice. They were joined by faculty, graduate and undergraduate students from the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) at the University of Oregon, bringing the total participants for the day to 50.

Participants in each conversation discussed challenges, potential solutions, and shared ideas about their experiences.

This is the first in a series of reports stemming from that day. It summarizes the key ideas and case studies shared by the group which focused on changing journalistic practice. Where appropriate, it also adds further context to those conversations, often based on the work produced by these outlets.

The paper will be followed later this year by additional reports looking at engaged journalism and efforts by news outlets in the region to “make media pay.”

List of participants: Roundtable on Changing Journalistic Practice

Industry *(roles and titles correct at the time of the event)*

Venice Buhain - Editorial Director, The Seattle Globalist

Holly Dillemoth - Reporter, Herald and News

Morgan Holm - Senior Vice President, Chief Content Officer, Oregon Public Broadcasting

Lynn Jacobson - Deputy Managing Editor, The Seattle Times

Kevin Max - Founder, Chief Content Officer, Statehood Media

John Schrag - Executive Editor, Pamplin Media Group

Carl Segerstrom - Assistant Editor, High Country News

Amanda Waldroupe - Freelance Journalist, President of SPJ Oregon

Deborah Wang - Contributing Reporter, Editor, Host, KUOW Public Radio

Les Zaitz - Editor and Publisher, Malheur Enterprise

University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication

Facilitators

Nicole Dahmen - Associate Professor

Damian Radcliffe - Professor of Practice, Carolyn Chambers Professor of Journalism

Brent Walth - Assistant Professor

Graduate Rapporteurs

Destiny Alvarez - Journalist

Alex Powers - Journalist

Undergraduate Reporters

Shawn Medow - Journalist

Jaycie Schenone - Journalist

Brandon Taylor - Journalist

Emerging Themes

This paper focuses on how the work produced by journalists in the Pacific Northwest, and the newsrooms they inhabit, is developing to meet the realities of the journalism industry in 2019. Five key themes emerged during our roundtable discussion:

1. Making the most of limited resources

Organizations big and small are increasingly looking at opportunities for collaboration, partnerships and shared content, both in response to resource challenges *and* to broaden the scope of their coverage.

2. Efforts to reach underserved communities

Engaging with minorities - and telling a wider range of stories and experiences - is an issue for many news organizations in the region, and one they are keen to address. This requires using a wide range of engaged journalism techniques, as well as a recalibration of resources and mindsets.

3. Broadening newsroom diversity

Across the U.S. newsrooms are often criticized, rightly, for being too male, too white⁴⁴ and too urban⁴⁵. Creating a working environment that promotes inclusiveness should not just address these concerns internally, but also consider how freelance journalists (and the pool they are drawn from) can further support these diversity efforts.

4. Building trust and credibility

Organizations and journalists need to do more than just deliver valuable journalism. Great output alone will not be enough to restore faith in the profession. If news outlets want to change perceptions about the journalism profession and broaden their user base, they will need to be more transparent and engage with a wider potential audience.

5. Doing things differently

Changing traditional practices won't happen overnight. Yet, adjusting to market shifts is crucial for survival. Prioritizing in-depth and impactful reporting, using metrics to help focus on specific audiences, and telling different types of stories – as well as delivering them in fresh formats - can all help journalists and media organizations reinvigorate their output and their newsrooms.

In this report we explore these ideas in more detail, showing how news organizations in the Pacific Northwest are addressing these considerations.

1. Managing Resources

With newsrooms often under pressure to do more with less, the allocation and balance of newsroom resources is critical. For newsrooms in the Pacific Northwest, large and small alike, this means exploring partnerships, prioritizing in-depth coverage, exploring opportunities for engagement and re-evaluating where journalists spend their time.

As, Les Zaitz, editor and publisher at the [Malheur Enterprise](#)⁴⁶ (Vale, Oregon), explained: “All of us have resources, but it’s a matter of how we use those resources.”

1.1 Prioritizing Available Resources

The pivot to subscriptions, and the [move away](#)⁴⁷ from chasing large-scale online traffic, has led to some news organizations prioritizing newsroom resources to focus on where they can have the most impact.

[The Seattle Times](#)⁴⁸ (Seattle, Washington), is “dialing way back” on high school sports coverage, for example, to reallocate journalists to public service stories. “What are you not doing because you’re sending three reporters and three photographers to [high school] football games every Friday night?” asked the paper’s deputy managing editor [Lynn Jacobson](#)⁴⁹.

Traditional reporting practices can be hard to break, but at a time of diminished resources (with most newsrooms smaller than they were at the start of the decade) being able to make these tough calls about the beats you cover is essential.

“Being able to make these tough calls about the beats you cover is essential.”

1.2 Collaboration

[Amanda Waldroupe](#)⁵⁰, a freelance journalist and President of [SPJ Oregon](#)⁵¹, was just one participant who highlighted the importance of [collaboration](#)⁵² in these resource-strapped times.

“Getting multi[ple] news outlets to work on one big project together... That’s a good way to respond to shrinking newsrooms and layoffs. Divide the labor and draw on people’s strengths,” Waldroupe advised.

“There is competition for attention,” said Morgan Holm, the SVP Chief Content Officer for [OPB](#)⁵³ (Portland, Oregon), “but collaboration doesn’t destroy that.” Highlighting the potential of content shot using drones, Holm offered to share resources. “OPB is willing to put a drone in the air if another [news organization] puts a reporter on the ground,” he said.

Small local publications are also making moves to collaborate more. [Holly Dillemath](#)⁵⁴, a reporter for the [Herald and News](#)⁵⁵ (Klamath Falls, Oregon), shared how the paper had begun a partnership with a local radio station. “We’re looking for ways to freshen things up,” Dillemath said.

In a similar vein, KUOW - a National Public Radio member station in Seattle, Washington - seeks to work with younger listeners, as part of their work in the community.

As their website explains, through a program called [RadioActive](#)⁵⁶, “young people discover public radio journalism and gain access to the skills, community and institutional resources that spur their growth as media makers. Through their stories, listeners of all ages gain a deeper understanding of young people whose voices are rarely heard by the greater public.”



*Local Journalism Roundtable, Changing Journalistic Practice Discussion
Image via the Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

1.3 Partnerships and Gateways

A number of news organizations are turning to grant-funded positions, and partnerships, to expand their coverage, or coverage of specific beats.

The Malheur Enterprise, a weekly newspaper in Eastern Oregon, is just one publication in the Pacific Northwest actively seeking these opportunities to help expand [newsroom capacity](#)⁵⁷. This summer the paper hosted [two interns](#)⁵⁸ as well as a Report for America-funded, Spanish-language reporting position. Editor and publisher, Les Zaitz outlined how the Report for America supported [position](#)⁵⁹ could help the paper better access the region’s Latino community, a cohort that is typically underrepresented in their coverage.

News organizations in the region can also benefit from the work being undertaken by news outlets who operate outside of the traditional daily news cycle.

[High Country News](#)⁶⁰ (Paonia, Colorado), is one such example; a nonprofit news organization covering stories for, and about, the American West. They syndicate content for free through a publisher [partnership program](#)⁶¹. Carl Segerstrom, assistant editor for the publication, shared how they had become a gateway to relevant regional coverage for other papers.

“Once our story is out there anyone else can run it,” he said. “It brings value to our news organization and allows other organizations to benefit as well.”

“We want to look at these issues that are region wide, from a local scope,” Segerstrom said. Examples of stories covered by High Country News in the past few months include: how Indigenous nation treaties [factor into climate change](#)⁶² (which ran in the Seattle-based [Crosscut](#)⁶³), as well as an exploration of the importance of [biodiversity](#)⁶⁴ and immigration ([several](#)⁶⁵ [stories](#)⁶⁶ in the latter category were [shared](#)⁶⁷ by The Marshall Project).

High Country News also participates in the [Solutions Journalism Network](#)⁶⁸ and partners with smaller newspapers, as well as larger outlets, so that even the smallest newsrooms can harness their work.



*The Malheur Enterprise is a small weekly newspaper located in the agricultural town of Vale, east of Ontario, Ore.
Image via [E.J. Harris/East Oregonian via AP](#)*

2. Serving Underserved Communities

Representation in journalism - both in terms of newsroom personnel and in breadth of reporting - remains a critical issue⁶⁹ that many media organizations are facing.



*Pamplin Media executive editor John Schrag (center)
Image via the Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

In the Pacific Northwest, participants in our roundtable said their papers often struggle to access, reach and engage with Latino audiences in Oregon; an issue they are all keen to remedy.

John Schrag, the executive editor of [Pamplin Media Group](#)⁷⁰ (Portland, Oregon), argued traditional ways of reporting on these communities need to change. “Publications often miss the mark when they try and create separate coverage in Latino communities,” Schrag said. “They’re people, they live in the same community, and they want to know about the same things.”

For newsrooms, several key questions need to be addressed, including:

- How do journalists cover these communities?
- Who are they reporting for? Are news outlets trying to reach the community at large, these specific under-reported communities, or a combination of both?
- And allied to all of this: who are the people producing these stories?

In tackling these questions, newsrooms are not just thinking about personnel, but also their whole approach to newsgathering and community engagement.

2.1 Engagement with Communities

Journalists should take the time to step out of their traditional reporting habits and identify opportunities to engage with underrepresented parts of their communities.

To do this, journalists need to ask: What isn't being covered? And how can we, as journalists, better cover the lives and support their information needs?

“[We need to be] reflective and honest about those communities and give them the same things we are giving the privileged,” said Malheur Enterprise’s Les Zaitz.

Getting to know leaders within underrepresented community groups, and attending group-hosted events, is one way to develop these relationships and unearth these stories.

Alongside this, newsrooms also need to consider the balance of their coverage, avoiding traditional narratives and offering a more balanced view (e.g. through the [deployment of solutions journalism](#)⁷¹ and by using some of the techniques encouraged by [engagement journalism](#)⁷²) about the realities of life in these communities.

However, editors (and journalists) need to [recognize](#)⁷³ that doing this means avoiding “[parachute journalism](#)⁷⁴.” Cultivating genuine, and meaningful, relationships takes time.



*KUOW Public Radio⁷⁵ reporter and host Deborah Wang
Image via the Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

Auditing, and systematically reflecting who you are talking to, is also a good habit to get into. During summer 2019, ABC News in Australia [launched](#)⁷⁶ the 50:50 Project to achieve equal representation of women and men in their content by the end of next year. Similarly, The Financial Times is actively rebranding their opinion section to include and appeal to more [female voices](#)⁷⁷. Many other [organizations](#)⁷⁸ are doing something similar.

Local organizations can replicate these efforts. At KUOW Public Radio (Seattle, Washington), reporter and host Deborah Wang said her organization uses a form/checklist to gauge source demographics, in order to create an accurate representation of the community in their work.

2.2 Attitudes to Coverage

Accurately reporting on underrepresented communities requires journalists to actively engage with these groups. That means seeking out their views, and their guidance, with both sourcing and fact-checking stories.

Les Zaitz, editor and publisher for the Malheur Enterprise stated that engaging with underserved communities is increasingly important. “As journalists we need to remove as many barriers as we can,” Zaitz said. “It’s a fundamental responsibility of us all.”

[Kevin Max](#)⁷⁹, the founder and chief content officer for [Statehood Media](#)⁸⁰ (Bend, Oregon), highlighted the importance of figuring out how to engage. “We hire local photographers and writers in those communities,” Max said. “We were never going to come in and say ‘this is how we’re doing [i.e. covering] your community.’”

OPB’s Morgan Holm argued that there’s also a business imperative to addressing this issue. “By shifting our perspective, it gives us a competitive advantage,” he said.

Underserved audiences can be a source for new, fresh, stories, as well as a means to ensure journalistic narratives better reflect the complexities of the world around us. Engaging with these groups, in turn, should ensure that coverage is distinctive as well as fair, accurate and multi-faceted.

2.3 Whose Story Is It Anyway?

Journalists do not have to be a part of a community to represent, and report, on them accurately. However, having a reporter on the ground that understands, is trusted by - and often comes from - that community can help to reduce coverage gaps and bring to light stories that matter.

As [Venice Buhain](#)⁸¹, editorial director for [The Seattle Globalist](#)⁸², (Seattle, Washington), reminded us, there are many people who do not see their reality in the media. Given this, it’s not surprising that some audiences have low levels of trust in journalism, or that [large numbers](#)⁸³ simply choose to ignore the news media altogether.

One way to remedy this, Buhain suggested, is to hear from people impacted by events and developments, rather than simply recapping what has (or might) happened. It also means reporting positive stories, and not just covering “crisis all the time” she suggested.

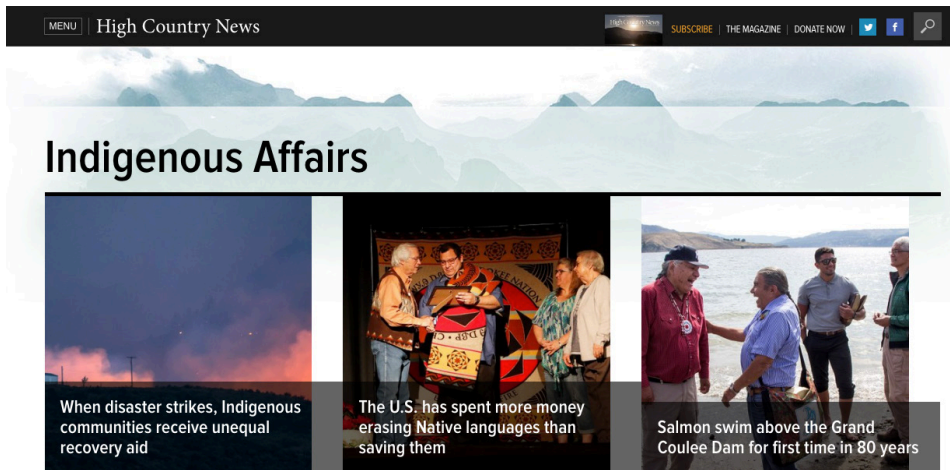
The group also discussed giving people in underrepresented communities power over how they are covered.

Carl Segerstrom, an assistant editor for High Country News, talked about “centering voices” and noted their experience creating a dedicated Indigenous Affairs desk led by three editors, two of whom, Tristan Ahtone⁸⁴ and Graham Lee Brewer⁸⁵, are native journalists.

Stories produced by the desk in recent months include features exploring [missing and murdered indigenous women](#)⁸⁷, [problems with furthering stereotypical media portrayals](#)⁸⁸, and the challenges that [indigenous immigrants face at the border](#)⁸⁹.

Segerstrom said putting native [voices at the center](#)⁹⁰ of their coverage, and in positions of editorial power, had been very effective for their reporting. “A big thing we talked about [is] not reporting about a community, but for and from that community,” he said. “We want a reporter from that community putting the affected voices at the center of the story, rather than reporting [on it] from outside the community.”

“There are many people who do not see their reality in the media. Given this, it’s not surprising that some audiences have low levels of trust in journalism.”



High Country News Indigenous Affairs Home Page
Image via [High Country News](#)⁹¹

3. Ensuring Newsroom Diversity

Diversifying newsrooms goes [beyond hiring demographics](#)⁹². It means editors and executives coming together to create inclusive work environments that foster new conversations and learning. It may also mean working with people from outside professional journalism to use their skills, and experience, to help tell great stories.

3.1 Promoting Inclusiveness and Supporting Journalists of Color



*Editorial director for The Seattle Globalist, Venice Buhain (left), shares ideas
Image via the Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

Venice Buhain, editorial director for The Seattle Globalist, (Seattle, Washington), said she believes in an inclusive work environment that creates opportunities for journalists from diverse backgrounds, and that there is a hunger for information about underserved communities.

Buhain heads an apprenticeship program whose applicants don't have to be in school or have published work to apply. "We don't limit it to a traditional news person," Buhain said. "We look for people who might have not seen themselves as a journalist or a subject of a journalist."



2017 The Seattle Globalist Youth Apprentices
Image via [The Seattle Globalist](#)

The [program](#)⁹³ aims to bring diverse voices into storytelling and train them in journalism. Successful alumni include [Vice Indonesia](#)⁹⁴ contributor Alia Marsha and [Esmey Jimenez](#)⁹⁵, who now reports on immigration issues for KUOW.

“Mentored by professional Seattle-based journalists and writers,” their website notes, “apprentices will receive in-depth training in effective reporting, writing, interviewing, photography, video and radio.”

Apprentices have had the opportunity to cover a wide array of stories including a Seattle office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement [activism vigil](#)⁹⁶, and [Portraits of Resilience](#)⁹⁷.

Buhain said including voices of color is important in the newsroom, but so is supporting them.

The Seattle Globalist relies on a lot of freelancers, most of whom are people of color from marginalized groups. They often explore the communities they come from, Buhain said.

“Newsrooms should not just support journalists of color by recruiting them. They also need to find ways to let them know the newsroom is theirs and a place where they belong.”

However, while that can give them the inside track on specific issues, this brings challenges with it too. “We’ve had people come through our program and say it’s really hard to cover this sort of thing,” Buhain said. “And it is hard because for them it [is] like talking to their family. There’s a big emotional component.”

As a result of covering stories that you are often close to, Buhain said that it’s important for newsrooms to teach journalists resilience, an idea echoed by many others around the table.

Newsrooms should not just support journalists of color by recruiting them⁹⁸. They also need to find ways to let them know the newsroom is theirs and a place where they belong⁹⁹. Moreover, it’s also incumbent on editors to ensure that these journalists do not get pigeon-holed. For the sake of their mental health, and to help them become better journalists, they must cover a wide variety of stories, and not just about minority issues and communities¹⁰⁰.

3.2 The Value of Freelancers



*Freelance reporter and president of SPJ Oregon Amanda Waldroupe (center)
Image via the Agora Journalism Center and Erika Berardi*

In an era of budget cuts and reduced resources, the role of freelancers can be a tricky one for many newsrooms to negotiate. On the one hand, freelance budgets may be among the first to be cut. On the other, some outlets rely more on freelancers, seeing this as a potential workaround to hiring (or being unable to hire) more staffers.

Against this complicated backdrop, freelance journalists can, nonetheless, be an untapped resource for enhancing newsroom diversity. Making an effort to broaden the range of freelancers you work with, and the stories newsrooms commission them to cover, is one way to bring different voices into your coverage.

The founder and chief content officer for Statehood Media, Kevin Max, said his organization has been successful in [utilizing freelancers](#)¹⁰¹. According to Max, “50 to 65 percent of our work is from freelancers... They provide necessary perspectives and fill coverage needs.”

Freelance journalists can also be valuable assets in diversifying a newsroom because they may have more specialist knowledge and skills than in-house reporters. They may work to a different rhythm too; although their understanding of the inner machinations of a specific newsroom will be different from those who are inside it 24/7.

Amanda Waldroupe, a freelance reporter with bylines in [The New York Times](#)¹⁰², [The Guardian](#)¹⁰³ and [The Oregonian](#)¹⁰⁴, said one of the drawbacks of working in a newsroom is the overwhelming pressure to share content on social media which drives traffic to stories. Waldroupe said that as a freelancer, “I spend the majority of my day writing and reporting, and that’s not something that I feel happens in newsrooms today.”

3.3 Appreciating Specialization

Journalists increasingly need to be able to shoot video, take pictures, fly drones, code, scrape data, host engagement events, or provide solutions angles in their reporting. These are all specializations which can play a key role in diversifying a newsroom - bringing different skills and insights to the table - and creating distinctive, high-quality news and information.

Freelance journalists, as well as staffers, need to have (and develop) these skills. Given the pace of change across the communications landscape, newsrooms should encourage, and provide training, for both in-house journalists and freelancers in order to ensure that they continue to expand their knowledge and reporting capabilities.

As Kevin Max reminded us, specializations matter. “We’ve always needed people that are specialists in different areas,” he said. And that’s not likely to change any time soon.

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Image via [1859 Magazine](#)



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

School of Journalism and Communication

4. Building Trust and Credibility

Trust in journalism has ebbed and flowed¹⁰⁵ in recent years. The causes of this are complex and myriad. Trust levels can be determined by people’s life experience, such as how/where people grew up and their demographic affiliations, as well as how they identify politically¹⁰⁶. But it may also be a consequence of a more complex information environment.

Audiences have access to tremendous amounts of misinformation¹⁰⁷ at the touch of a button. In a world of information proliferation, the concept of being a “paper-of-record,” may feel outdated. Journalists and news outlets certainly need to earn trust. They cannot take it for granted.

Statehood Media’s Kevin Max expressed the view that the journalism industry, and journalists in general, struggle to market themselves properly. “We ask kids to go out and spend a ton of money to get journalism degrees and then we don’t do anything about it after,” Max said.

Max cited the difference between journalism and other professions, such as law and accounting, where a lot more “noise” is made about the qualifications of personnel practicing these trades. “Why are we doing that to ourselves?” he asked.

In response to this, and wider conversations among the group about trust in the media, there was a recognition that newsrooms need to be more open, engaged, and transparent¹⁰⁸. Many are making concerted efforts to deliver on these aspirations.

***“ Journalists
and news outlets
certainly need to
earn trust. They
cannot take it
for granted.”***

4.1 Ensuring Transparency

In the past, news organizations held stories close. The fear of being scooped led to secrecy around reporting and an opaqueness that left some audiences questioning the methods of the press. That opaqueness still exists¹⁰⁹. As, of course, does a desire not to be scooped.

Nonetheless, in a polarized political climate¹¹⁰ with trust in the media near all-time lows, being upfront and transparent about reporting methods becomes increasingly important. Without it, we may not be able to arrest the negative attitudes towards journalism - and journalistic techniques - prevalent with some constituencies.

One space where inter-newsroom transparency can be seen is in large-scale, often collaborative¹¹, investigative work. John Schrag, the executive editor of Pamplin Media Group, highlighted how his teams had partnered with the Agora Journalism Center¹² and InvestigateWest on a large investigative project¹³ examining traumatic head injuries among high school athletes in Oregon.

In undertaking this project, they shared with their audience ambitions for the initiative, as well as work in progress¹⁴, a move which Schrag hoped would engender trust and potentially tease out further sources and case studies. “We no longer have to keep secret what our plans are,” he said. “When we did our concussion series, we announced it six months before we published our first story.”

Focused on what school sports coaches have done to comply with strict return-to-play protocols imposed by Oregon lawmakers in 2009, the series allowed organizations to combine resources to tell an important story on a scale which otherwise would not have been possible.

Features such as: “Missing the trainer”¹⁵, “On top of the world. Until one too many concussions”¹⁶ and “Solving the funding puzzle”¹⁷ are just a few examples of the stories produced through this partnership.



Image via [InvestigateWest](#)

4.2 Peeking Behind the Curtain

While larger organizations have more capacity to set aside resources to create new ways to reach audiences and rebuild credibility, smaller shops may not have the same capacity to do this. Nonetheless, it is important for them to do so.

Les Zaitz, editor and publisher of the Malheur Enterprise, and the founder and editor for the [Salem Reporter](#)¹¹⁸, regularly writes “Behind the Story” pieces, such a profile of on an [Oregon legislative executive](#)¹¹⁹.

During the roundtable discussion, Zaitz contended that it’s important to tell readers what is going on, how organizations are reporting certain issues, and to avoid relying on the audience blindly trusting that journalists are doing everything right.

The Seattle Times is another outlet actively seeking to humanize elements of its work through their [Behind the Byline series](#)¹²⁰. These articles aim to help readers to get to know the journalist behind the news, by profiling Times personnel such as video editor [Corinne Chin](#)¹²¹ and [Traffic Lab](#)¹²² reporter [Mike Lindblom](#)¹²³.

Holly Dillemath, a reporter for the Herald and News in Klamath Falls, said “I am really interested in finding ways to make sure people trust us,” highlighting how journalists at her paper are harnessing Twitter, sharing what they’re [covering the next day](#)¹²⁴, [where they’ll be](#)¹²⁵ as well as [incorporating video](#)¹²⁶ and other multimedia elements into their work.

Latest Headlines



March 12, 2019 at 6:00 am

Behind the Byline: Meet news researcher Miyoko Wolf

In our 13th edition of Behind the Byline, our interview series helping you get to know the journalists who bring you the news, we talk...

LOCAL NEWS



December 24, 2018 at 6:00 am

Behind the Byline: Meet Traffic Lab reporter Mike Lindblom

In our 12th edition of Behind the Byline, our series helping you get to know the journalists who bring you the news, we talk to...

The Seattle Times Behind the Byline homepage

Image via [The Seattle Times](#)

4.3 Local Journalism’s Secret Sauce

At the local level, small newsrooms often have a closer connection to their audience, due to the fact that they live and work in the same place.

“Being a rural reporter, you run into these people in the store,” Herald and News’ Holly Dillemath said. “You’ll most likely see five of them before you get home.”

Small-town reporters appreciate that they may have public interactions with the people they report on. That proximity to the audience, arguably, builds in some accountability whereby community journalists can’t hide behind a screen or avoid the subjects of their work.

Proximity alone, however, is not enough to engender trust. Morgan Holm, SVP and Chief Content Officer for Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) suggested that newsrooms also need to tell stories differently if they wish to remain relevant and to have an impact.

Rebuilding trust in journalism starts with the public understanding what journalism is, and what it can do, he argued. “People will lie, fake, cheat. What do we have? Facts,” Holm said. “We have the ability to marshal facts and make a difference in communities.”

According to Holm, one of the key ways OPB has sought to marshal facts and deliver value to their audience is through [longitudinal reporting](#)¹²⁷. “It’s creative thinking,” Holm said. “It’s taking a different perspective.”

Recent examples of OPB’s efforts include “[Bundyville: The Remnant](#)¹²⁸,” a seven-part podcast series “that explores the world beyond the Bundy family and the armed uprisings they inspired,” and “[Class of 2025](#)¹²⁹,” a multimedia series following a group of Oregon students from first grade to graduation.



Image via [OPB](#)¹³⁰

5. Doing Things Differently

Rebuilding trust, however, is likely to require more than increasing transparency and producing good work. It may also mean that journalists need to do some things differently. Partly, this is a response to changing audience habits, but it's also a recognition that the pressures on newsrooms are likely to require changes in journalistic practice too.

In some instances, this means looking at new formats to engage audiences.

The Herald and News, in Klamath Falls, for example, has introduced “a “sneak preview of stories to be found in the next day’s newspaper edition” via their short “[Tomorrow’s Headlines Today](#)”¹³” podcast.



*Herald and News “Tomorrow’s Headlines Today.”
Image via [Herald and News](#)*

Deborah Wang, a reporter and host at KUOW Public Radio argued that journalists need to start questioning some traditional journalistic conventions. “Do we need we need a newscast at the top of the hour,” she asked. “We’ve been doing [certain] things for so long,” she said, “do we continue to use these formats because we have been doing things for so long or because they work?”

The group offered some suggestions to this philosophical question, which included exploring the opportunities afforded by metrics, working more closely with audiences and piloting new (sometimes imperfect beta) approaches to their work; all with the goal of breaking existing newsroom paradigms.

5.1 Media Metrics

With digital platforms changing the way people consume media, metrics and audience data are becoming increasingly important. Some newsrooms exclude their staff from that information¹³², preferring frontline journalists focus on reporting. Other organizations have started to involve their staff in the conversations about data.

Herald and News' Holly Dillemath advocated that smaller newsrooms discuss the business side with their journalists, including sharing metrics¹³³ and other relevant performance data. Co-locating editorial and business teams, so that they sit side by side and not in different parts of the building, was one suggestion that she offered to help bridge this gap.

Lynn Jacobson shared how The Seattle Times has used metrics to shape their reporting strategies¹³⁴, and as part of their efforts to drive subscriptions. Speaking to their wider business model, Jacobsen observed that: "We wanted to build relationships with readers that were so strong and so valuable that readers were willing to pay for them."

As a result, the Times' reporters are focusing more on the metrics¹³⁵, and telling stories that can help convert more casual consumers into subscribers.

Jacobson, the deputy managing editor for the Times, admitted that sharing these insights (subscription data and the route to subscription) had received a mixed reaction in the newsroom, but that this data was an important way of shaping their coverage.

"If something is not doing well and it's not mission critical then we have to stop doing that and focus on something that is more central to our readers," Jacobson said.

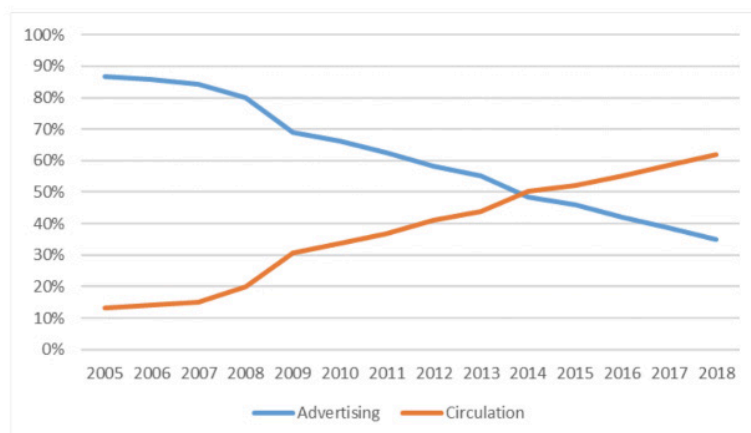
According to Jacobson, this has meant placing a greater emphasis on deeply-reported, high impact, and visually rich stories. "We're not feeding the beast, but we're taming the beast with longer, richer enterprise reporting," she said.

Recent work from The Seattle Times exemplifying this approach includes Project Homeless¹³⁶, an "initiative that explores and explains the region's complex, troubling problem of homelessness," Her Story is Our Story¹³⁷, a video series "about women and female-identifying members of our community... that redefine the hero's journey through the experiences, lives and lenses of women," and detailed reporting into "How Boeing, FAA certified the suspect 737 MAX flight control system¹³⁸."

"If something is not doing well and it's not mission critical then we have to stop doing that and focus on something that is more central to our readers."

Revenue Contribution

AUDIENCE AND ADVERTISING REVENUE TREND, 2005-2018



Seattle Times Digital Subscription Growth 2013-2018

Image via [Monday Note](#)¹³⁹

Founder and chief content officer for Statehood Media, Kevin Max, also emphasized the detail, and value, that metrics can deliver to newsrooms.

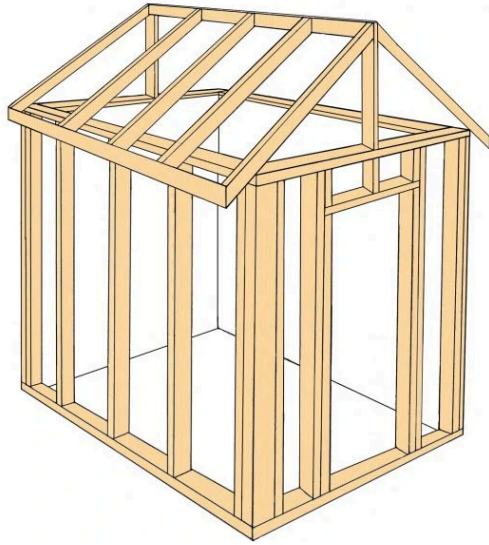
“The tools for building and delivering things to audiences [through social media](#)¹⁴⁰ is so great,” he said, noting the ability to target specific audiences on these platforms, as well as the ability to know more about them.. “Being able to know an audience ... about who these people are is very valuable if you can use the tools that feed the information back to you.”

According to Max, metrics can help publications identify opportunities for both content and revenue generation. After all, advertisers want to be associated with successful content, material which either reaches a certain number of eyeballs, or which is closely aligned with their brand.

Metrics therefore can be used not just to shape strategies for future content (as at The Seattle Times) but also to help publishers harness their archive and more [evergreen material](#)¹⁴¹. Evergreen content requires minimal updating, isn’t beholden to the whim of news cycles (remaining relevant for longer), and has a [strong SEO value](#)¹⁴².

As an example, Max highlighted how [1859 Magazine](#)¹⁴³, a Statehood Media publication, ran an article in January 2018 on [building an outdoor sauna](#)¹⁴⁴. A year on, it continues to be a consistent performer for them. Max said because they look at the metrics for their publications, they were able to identify this story as one that received 50 to 100 clicks a day.

This story “consistently gets all of this traffic,” Max said. “Then we think who are the advertisers that would be interested in aligning their brand with something like this.”



1859 Magazine's "How to build your own outdoor sauna" story
Image via [1859 Magazine](#)

5.2 Ceding Some Control to the Audience

Historically, many newsrooms have “played God” determining the issues that get covered and the questions that get asked. At some outlets, however, that is starting to change.

Hearken, a “tech-enabled consultancy” designed to “help newsrooms and content creators of all kinds shift their processes and practices to work for the information age,” ([and](#)¹⁴⁵ the subject of a [previous](#)¹⁴⁶ [Agora report](#)¹⁴⁷), is just one player advocating for a different approach. “Listen to your audiences first, not last,” they contend in their [Twitter bio](#)¹⁴⁸. “Makes for better everything and makes money.”

Putting elements of this into practice, Seattle based public radio station KUOW asked listeners to pose - and vote - on questions that they would like the newsroom to cover.

Contributing reporter, editor and host, Deborah Wang, said the stories which stemmed from this audience engagement, such as “What’s on the bottom of Lake Washington?”, not only allowed reporters to cover interesting topics (and ones that they might not have explored otherwise), which also resonated with audiences.

“The stories we did got people really excited and these were the best reporting stories on our website,” Wang said. “They blew up. We never have stories go viral and these went viral.”

Carl Segerstrom, an assistant editor for High Country News, shared the value of working for a publication which works outside of the daily news cycle, giving journalists more time to [listen](#)¹⁵⁰ to their audience, helping to ensure that they are covering what’s important in a community.

Last summer, for example, High Country News' Indigenous Affairs desk reached out to indigenous communities asking them to [pitch](#)¹⁵¹ stories, demonstrating a different approach to the typical model for finding enterprise stories.

Examples of recent indigenous affairs stories covered by High Country News include a collaboration with [BuzzFeed News](#)¹⁵² on [Navajo voters fighting to be heard](#)¹⁵³, how [tribal enterprises are filling gaps in financial deserts](#)¹⁵⁴ and how [Indigenous educators are fighting for accurate historical representations in California](#)¹⁵⁵.

5.3 “Going for It”

Not every journalistic innovation will be perfect. Many changes may be implemented on a trial and error basis, and our discussants suggested that this approach should start in - and be encouraged by - journalism education.

“The younger generation needs to be willing to fail,” said Executive editor for Pamplin Media Group John Schrag, recognizing at the same time that efforts to experiment and innovate must be supported by management.

As an example of how his papers have sought to adopt a more experimental mindset, Schrag shared how, in an effort to reach underserved communities, Pamplin has started using Google Translate to produce Spanish language content for the Latinx population in their coverage area.

One key reason for doing this, Schrag argued, was that he didn't know how long they might have to wait until they had the resources (funding or personnel) to offer Spanish-language news more comprehensively. As a result, an imperfect solution was better than no solution at all.

Deborah Wang agreed that experimentation needs to be in journalism students' DNA. KUOW is a smaller newsroom that is typically well supported, she argued, and this means that they are fortunate to have the opportunity to try new things.

One successful example of this has been the development of “an Amazon beat,” which included exploring what happens when Amazon moves into a town. The idea morphed into a podcast, [Prime\(d\)](#)¹⁵⁶, with local roots (KUOW is based in Seattle, Amazon's home town) and national recognition.

“We are a local operation,” Wang said, but - acknowledging the wider reach of the podcast - “it looks great when your reporters have a national profile. That adds to your value locally.”

“The younger generation needs to be willing to fail.”

6. Conclusion

Local news outlets across the country, and around the world, have faced multiple challenges in recent years.

Changes to traditional business and revenue models, evolving consumer behaviors, as well as new digital tools and fresh approaches to the practice of journalism, have all had an impact on newsrooms.

The pace of change shows no signs of letting up; and therefore it's important for organizations - as well as journalism schools - to discuss and make sense of these developments. As we have seen in this paper, there's an increasing willingness to do this.

In sharing the experiences of outlets in the Pacific Northwest, we hope to contribute to a wider discussion about the future of local journalism.

This includes an honest conversation about the challenges facing the sector, as well as some potential solutions and remedies which news organizations can put into place to help ensure their resilience and (dare we say it) prosperity.

Local news media continues to play an important role in supporting the information needs of communities, as well as the wider news industry. As a result, understanding newsroom realities matters to policy makers, funders, citizens and journalists alike.

We really appreciated the honesty and willingness of participants at this industry roundtable to share their experiences with us. We hope you do too.

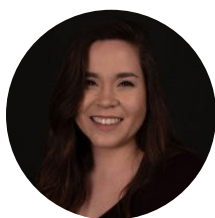
About the Authors



Damian Radcliffe is the **Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, and a Professor of Practice, at the University of Oregon**. Alongside holding the Chambers Chair at the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC), he is also a **Fellow** of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an **Honorary Research Fellow** at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies, and a fellow of the Royal

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An experienced digital analyst, consultant, journalist, and researcher, Damian has worked in editorial, research, policy, and teaching positions for the past two decades in the UK, Middle East and USA. This includes roles in all media sectors (commercial, public, government, regulatory, academic, and nonprofit/civil society) and all platforms (print, digital, TV and radio).



Destiny Alvarez is a **freelance journalist based in Portland, Oregon**. She graduated from the **University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication** (SOJC) with a Master's in Journalism in 2019. Alvarez was the 2019 Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning student-led SOJC publication **Flux Magazine**.

Alvarez served as the Spring 2019 **Demystifying Media** Intern and the 2019 **Charles Snowden Program for Excellence in Journalism intern** for **The Register-Guard** in Eugene, Oregon. Alvarez graduated from the **University of Idaho** with a B.S in Journalism in 2017. She is a happy plant mom, journalist and coffee enthusiast.



Alex Powers is a **freelance multimedia journalist based in Eugene, Oregon**. He graduated from the **University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication** with degrees in journalism and sociology in 2018 and a master's degree in journalism in 2019.

He reported the news for community dailies in Coos Bay and Klamath Falls before returning to school in the Willamette Valley. Alex was a photojournalist and copy editor for the SOJC's award-winning, student-led publication **Flux**. He is co-authoring a podcast on language, identity and place to be published by the end of the summer.



Jaycie Schenone is a project coordinator for ESPN Films and ESPN+ Original Content in New York City. She graduated from the [University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication Honors Program](#), in spring 2019, with a focus in documentary production and women gender studies.

During her time at the SOJC, she served as the Executive Producer of the student-run television program, [Duck TV](#), and was the Multimedia/Video Editor for [OR Magazine](#), an award-winning interactive magazine.

Schenone interned at the [PBS affiliate KCTS 9](#) and [Crosscut News](#) in Seattle Washington with the arts and culture department, and the ABC affiliate [KEZI 9](#) in Eugene, Oregon with the sports department.



Kelly Kondo is a Master's student in the Advertising and Brand Responsibility program at the University of Oregon. She graduated from the [University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication](#) with a Bachelor's of Science in Advertising. Kondo is a freelance designer and an art director for the SOJC's student-run advertising agency [Allen Hall Advertising](#).

Kondo formerly worked as the art director for the [Daily Emerald](#), an independent student-run media organization. During her time at the Emerald, her work was featured as a finalist for the [Associated Collegiate Press Design of the Year](#) award.

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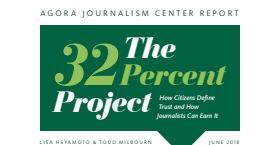
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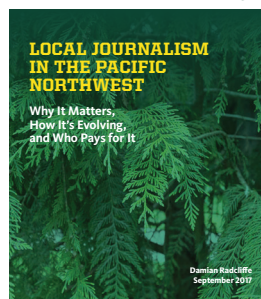
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Footnotes

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