

## ***“The Oregon information industry is in peril...”***

In April 2021, those seven words opened a request to the Oregon Community Foundation from a group of Oregon journalists, asking for a meeting to discuss potential solutions to “a burgeoning crisis of facts.”

We would like to say that nearly two years later the crisis is over. But, in fact, it’s grown worse, as legacy for-profit newsrooms continue to face unprecedented economic obstacles and misinformation disrupts Oregon communities and public agencies.

We reached out to OCF because we were troubled by our industry’s inability to deliver news about critical public systems in a way that connects our citizenry in a shared experience. From rural areas with no news coverage at all to diverse communities with little relevant engagement, the decline of trusted local journalism is allowing misinformation to spur a dangerous foothold, filling the void that real news once filled.

This month, Oregon News Exploration will wrap up Oregon’s most comprehensive analysis of newsroom challenges, consumer attitudes about news and information, and exposure to misinformation. We conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of Oregon journalists and, through the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, extensive surveys of more than 2,100 Oregonians across the state. **Our research draws a clear line from the decline of journalism to the crisis in community confidence in the institutions that impact their daily lives.** This connection is particularly acute among rural and BIPOC Oregonians. Among our key findings:

### **Oregonians value and rely on local news, but many see bias and neglect**

We’ve been encouraged to learn that news consumers in Oregon, like those elsewhere, are still **most likely to get information about their communities from local media outlets.** We also found that **Oregonians trust those sources of information more than people in other regions** of the country, presenting a significant opportunity here. That trust increases in places where local journalists are present and visible. Yet many Oregonians, unaware of the economic forces at work, **equate the declining news coverage as bias.** Others say Oregon media often misunderstands their political views, economic status, race, ethnicity or gender. Another troubling finding is that Oregonians are habituated to misinformation, expressing a passive acceptance that is deeply worrisome as the state’s information ecosystem erodes.

### **Oregon journalists see compounding problems but few solutions**

Our in-depth interviews with Oregon journalists revealed deep concerns about their ability to secure a fact-based narrative in the communities they serve. **The deterioration of local news is driving readers toward national and increasingly polarizing forums** and, in the absence of local objective, factual reporting, **disinformation and misinformation are thriving** on platforms such as Nextdoor and Facebook Local. In October, the Agora Journalism Center published [a detailed and disturbing assessment](#) of “Oregon’s News & Information Ecosystem” showing that news “deserts,” based on geography, are growing, particularly in rural Oregon and the edges of suburbia. And across the state, gaps are widening in the coverage of key topics, ranging from climate change and public safety to health care and public schools.

## **BIPOC communities face additional challenges**

Some legacy news organizations serving BIPOC communities are in their twilight years and young BIPOC journalists are not finding other, established media outlets capable of stewarding the historic and evolving mission of the ethnic press. Those issues are exacerbated by barriers to diversity and inclusive coverage inside legacy Oregon newsrooms, most of which are disproportionately staffed by white journalists and led by leaders who are at a loss as to how to change that. As a result, many Oregon journalists of color are striking out on their own but lack resources and support. Others are leaving the state or the profession.

## **Responding to the challenges**

In short, our research shows **a clear and escalating pattern of fracturing communities in Oregon**. As information ecosystems collapse, national media fill the void with increasingly polarizing narratives about our world, and social media gain ground, allowing misinformation a dangerous foothold. Whole communities are being excluded from a shared narrative of Oregon. The challenges are profound and grow more so every month without a strong, united response. Fortunately, our research also indicates a willingness among Oregon news media to innovate and engage more deeply with communities to stem this troubling tide.

Across the media landscape, there are strong indicators that our effort to seed a new nonprofit whose mission is to amplify and augment the resources of existing news organizations and coordinate shared efforts can be successful. These include innovations like new “hyper-local” news outlets filling information gaps in communities like Philomath, Yachats and Gales Creek; increased attention to indigenous peoples of Oregon, paid internships to high school journalists from underrepresented communities and public discussions about how Oregonians engage with media. In Bend, the Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism is addressing rural newsrooms’ needs for guidance and support.

These efforts build on Oregon journalists’ strong track record of working collaboratively on statewide reporting efforts. All of that is to be applauded and supported. But it is not enough. In our next phase of research, Oregon News Exploration will be developing new collaborative systems that focus on three ambitious goals:

- Addressing gaps in existing news coverage and deepening reporting on critical topics, building on a collaborative spirit.
- Diversifying journalism’s ranks by developing better recruitment strategies for Oregon newsrooms and training reporters and editors toward more inclusive newsrooms and communities.
- Working in innovative ways to combat misinformation.

Over the next several months, we will explore best practices in each of these areas to inform responses tailored to Oregon. This current focus of fostering a more civil society based on shared facts is not unprecedented. Similar efforts are underway in several states. We are glad that Oregon lawmakers have recognized the challenges facing our industry and the impact they have on the democratic process and, through House Bill 2605, are considering creative, meaningful responses. We look forward to the conversation and stand ready to assist you.

## ***About the Oregon News Exploration leadership team:***

- **Mike Green** is a co-founder of Common Ground Conversations on Race in America and the chief strategist for the National Institute of Inclusive Competitiveness. He has been a consultant to educational, governmental and nonprofit institutions and is a leading national voice on issues of economic inclusion in the innovation economy. He is also an award-winning print and digital journalist with 18 years of experience who led digital media innovation for Dow Jones Local Media Group, including five years as content editor for the Ashland Daily Tidings.
- **Emily Harris** is a journalist with experience locally, nationally and internationally – reporting, writing, hosting, producing, editing, teaching, managing collaborations and researching new funding models. Emily has reported for new outlets including NPR, OPB, and The Center for Investigative Reporting and teaches journalism at the University of Oregon. She grew up in Portland and serves on Oregon's Public Records Advisory Council and the non-profit Open Oregon.
- **John Schrag** is executive editor of the Pamplin Media Group, which includes the Portland Tribune and two-dozen community papers throughout Oregon, overseeing group-wide projects within the company and collaborations with outside news partners. He previously worked as a reporter and editor for Willamette Week and The Chicago Reporter, an investigative magazine focusing on race and equity.
- **Lee van der Voo** is a journalist with 20 years' experience in the Oregon market. She is the former managing director of the nonprofit newsroom InvestigateWest, where she coordinated and managed collaborative news projects in Oregon, wrote grants to support them, and represented InvestigateWest's journalism in Oregon to funders and to the public. She now leads investigations at Civil Eats.