

PHILANTHROPY ADDRESSING A LOCAL PRESS IN DECLINE

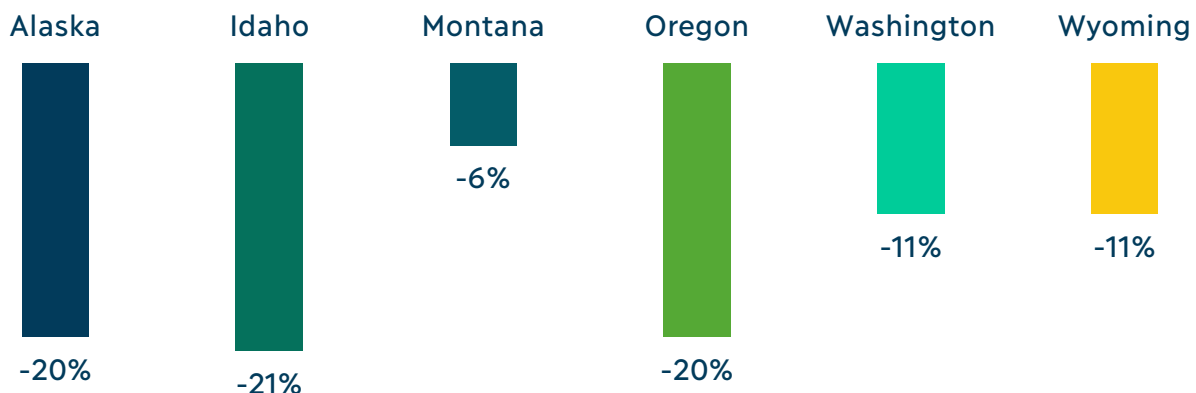
As a part of our Democracy Lens tools, for each state in our region, we report a data snapshot and case studies (called Bright Spots) about philanthropy's role in democracy. You can access all these data and Bright Spots on the [Democracy Northwest webpage](#).

The news plays a core role in people's lives. Across the United States, much of the news the public receives comes from newspapers, which raise attention to community issues as well as distill national topics to the local level. Studies show that news, especially local news, is associated with higher levels of civic engagement and government accountability.¹

Despite these benefits, over 2,000 of the 9,000 newspapers in the United States in 2004 no longer exist. Mostly weekly local papers, as well as some daily papers, have closed their doors and over half of local journalist positions have gone with them. With this, many of the remaining outlets lack the capacity to maintain prior levels of in-depth reporting.² This trend has likewise impacted the the Northwest states, where the number of newspapers declined from 463 in 2004 to 398 in 2019. Many counties in the region have at most one local paper – sometimes none.³



Change in the Number of Northwest-Based Newspapers, 2004-2019⁴



The Yakima Free Press Campaign: Founding and Challenges

In Central Washington, the [Yakima Free Press Campaign](#) aims to address the journalistic decline in the rural Yakima Valley. The campaign – a collaboration between the Yakima Valley Community Foundation, Yakima-Herald Republic and Microsoft – advocates for local news as essential to enhancing democracy by keeping residents informed and connected to key issues that affect their communities, such as local updates on crises like Missing and Murdered Indigenous People or the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ These updates, in addition to being a living record of the area’s history, can strengthen democracy by increasing transparency and accountability between local governments and their constituents.⁶

Founded in 2021, the campaign faces multiple challenges in reversing the local news decline. One difficulty is that many people may not understand the full value of local journalism. According to Sharon Miracle, CEO of the Yakima Valley Community Foundation, people get more news now from major news entities with advertising business models, while local journalism lacks the resources to adapt quickly and loses traction. Miracle says it is hard to reconcile the need for news with the reality that the free press is not free to produce – news organizations require enough resources to provide quality reporting and stay in business.⁷

Accessibility is another core challenge in Yakima Valley. In addition to being spread out across a rural area, some residents may not be literate or speak much English. Yani Cisneros, chair of the Central Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and bilingual small business support specialist of the Yakima Valley Development Association, is a first-generation immigrant from Mexico who has often acted as her family’s translator. She noted that the number of Spanish-language media outlets is extremely limited in the area, despite half the population being Hispanic. As a result, many residents may not find their communities sufficiently represented in the local news.⁸

Growing an Inclusive News Ecosystem with Philanthropic Support

To increase the quality and quantity of journalism in the region, the campaign formed a learning component with news organizations, where funders worked with local outlets like the Yakima Herald, El Sol and Radio KDNA to increase the business savviness and software tools available to the local news ecosystem. The campaign also held three community listening sessions to learn more about people’s news preferences and feedback, and each of the sessions drew around 40-50 residents.⁹ Additionally, the work is guided by a diverse advisory group that has met periodically to review content and share ideas on fundraising and building community connections.¹⁰

As of early 2022, the project has yielded in-depth stories on underreported issues, including a [project focused on information and stories about Missing and Murdered Indigenous People](#),¹¹ which has been well-received by community members. Miracle noted that as the campaign continues to be refined, it hopes to quickly raise \$250,000 that Microsoft will match, which would support paywall-free news across topics like health, education, government relations and more across a variety of platforms. The campaign is also working to sustainably fund three journalists to lead the work, as well as a bilingual journalist to produce Spanish-language

content.¹² Cisneros, who is a member of the campaign’s advisory group, believes this is a step in the right direction toward a more inclusive and diverse media landscape. She hopes to see this work extended to include more video journalism and enhanced article translation services to further increase news access.¹³

Both Miracle and Cisneros believe there is a role for philanthropies in preserving and improving local journalism to raise awareness on societal problems and solutions in a culturally sensitive and unbiased manner. Philanthropies have become an increasing source of sustainability for local news;¹⁴ in 2019, for example, funders provided nearly \$7 million in grants for media purposes in Washington, primarily for nonprofit journalism.¹⁵ Overall, the Yakima Free Press Campaign hopes to be adapted as a funding model for other communities to implement across the country.¹⁶

Key Takeaways

- In-depth local journalism is a key component of an informed populace. However, the industry has struggled financially, with many outlets closing or downsizing.
- Philanthropic support can help the industry recover and enhance their coverage to be more inclusive of community needs.

Endnotes

1. *American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Gallup, 2020; Miami: Knight Foundation, 2020), 4, 27, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2020-trust-media-and-democracy/>; Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee and Dermot Murphy, “Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 135, no. 2 (February 2020): 445-467; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfineco.2019.06.003>; Penelope Muse Abernathy, *News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 8, <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/>.
2. Abernathy, *News Deserts*, 11.
3. Penelope Muse Abernathy, “The Expanding News Desert,” University of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism and Media, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/>.
4. Abernathy, “Expanding News Desert,” accessed April 15, 2022..
5. “Yakima Free Press Campaign,” *Yakima-Herald Republic*, last updated 2022, <https://yakimafreepress.org/>.
6. Sharon Miracle, online video interview with author, February 28, 2022.
7. “Miracle, interview.
8. Yani Cisneros, online video interview with author, March 16, 2022.

9. Miracle, interview.
10. Miracle, interview; Cisneros, interview.
11. “The Vanished,” *Yakima-Herald Republic*, accessed May 5, 2022, <http://www.thevanished.org/>.
12. Miracle, interview.
13. Cisneros, interview.
14. Mark Glaser, “How Philanthropy Became a Growing Revenue Stream for Local News,” Knight Foundation, August 19, 2021, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/how-philanthropy-became-a-growing-revenue-stream-for-local-news/>.
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16. Miracle, interview; Cisneros, interview.