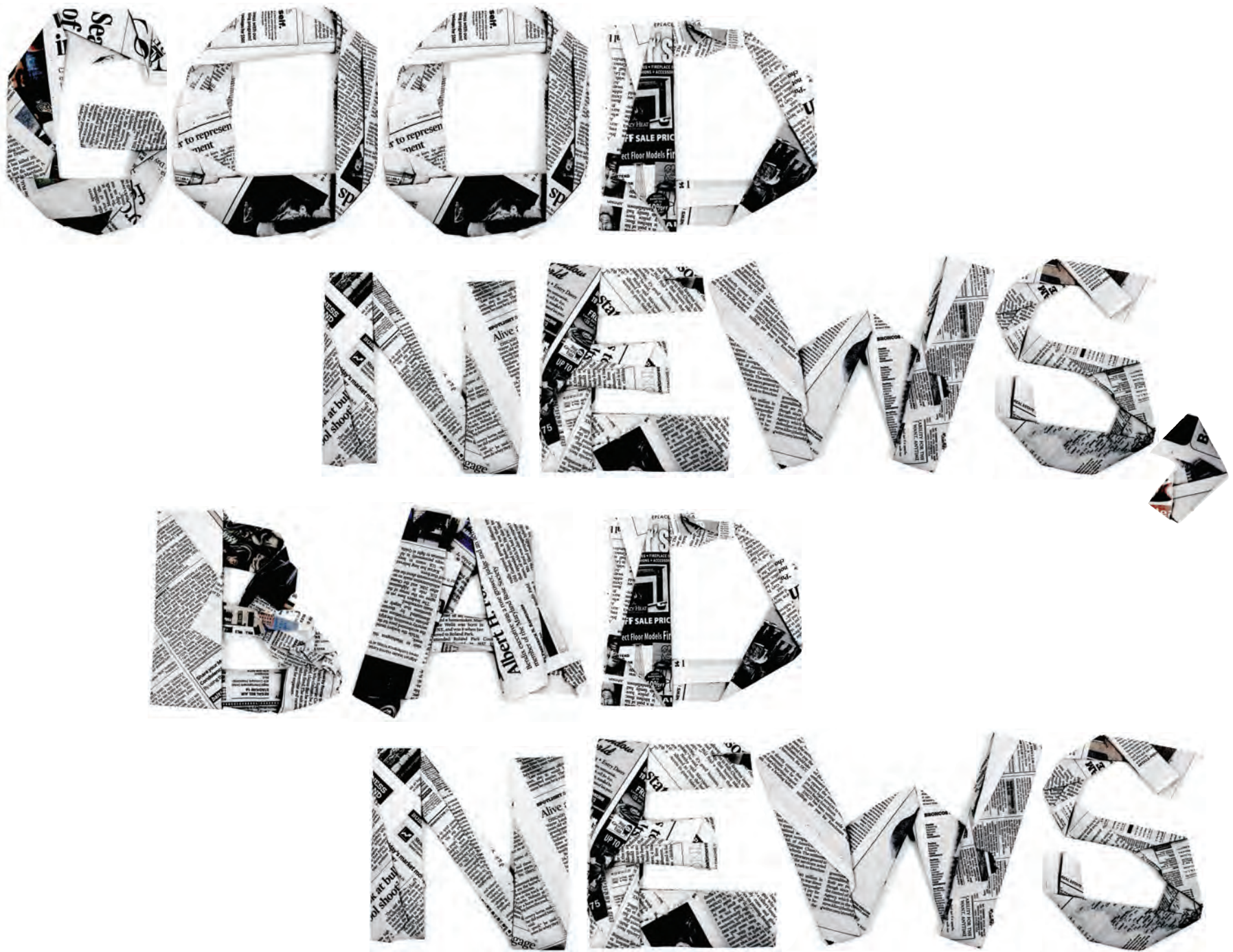


High Country News

For people who care about the West



As the media landscape shifts, will journalists adapt fast enough?

... An in-depth look at **survival strategies** ...

Plus: The rise of the Alt-American West **in the age of untruth**



A cutout of Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper looks out from the office of *Westword* Editor Patty Calhoun.
LUNA ANNA ARCHIE/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Editor's note

Enemy of the people

The first half of my journalistic career was spent abroad, much of it in Cambodia, a Southeast Asian country reeling from decades of war and corruption. The country is run by elites under the patronage of Prime Minister Hun Sen, a strongman who has clung to power for nearly four decades through the brutal suppression of all who oppose him.



Hun Sen was a soldier in the Khmer Rouge, the communist guerillas who killed some 2 million of their countrymen, especially those they labeled "enemies of the people," a term coined by Vladimir Lenin. Hun Sen's rule is violent, but he is also a skilled demagogue who uses the media to ridicule opponents, subtly encouraging others to attack his foes. His people have thrown grenades into opposition rallies and murdered labor leaders, environmentalists and, yes, journalists — eight of them since 1994.

I have never lived in a scarier place, so you can imagine how I feel today hearing the president of the United States call American journalists the "enemies of the people." Of Donald Trump's many documented falsehoods, this is the most dangerous. And it has had real consequences. In June, a gunman walked into the *Capital Gazette*, in Annapolis, Maryland, and killed five people, four of them journalists. In October, an ardent Trump supporter mailed 13 bombs to critics of the president, two of them to CNN. Just as in Cambodia, we cannot ignore the political environment in which these attacks take place.

The U.S. media is taking a beating, even as it struggles to survive in the age of the internet. Many local papers are folding, creating "news deserts" that further erode democratic processes. This issue, the last of the year, is dedicated to examining the impact of these deserts, while highlighting the stubborn media "blooms" that point the way toward a brighter future. We hope readers will be inspired to support good journalism and denounce attacks on the press, wherever they occur. At a time when the leader of the free world is undermining the press, journalists need defense, not derision.

The Founding Fathers understood the importance of journalism. Thomas Jefferson hoped for a republic "governed by reason and truth," brought about by "the freedom of the press." Because the press is "the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions," he reasoned, it needs our protection. "A popular Government," James Madison wrote, "without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both." It is up to all of us to ensure that this prologue is never written, and to fight the true enemy of the people: attacks on truth itself.

—Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief

On the cover

Original lettering by
Japheth Crawford



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Kenny Still Smoking touches the tombstone of his 7-year-old daughter, Monica, who disappeared from school on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in 1979. DAVID GOLDMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

84 Percent of permits for major water-polluting facilities in Oregon that are outdated.

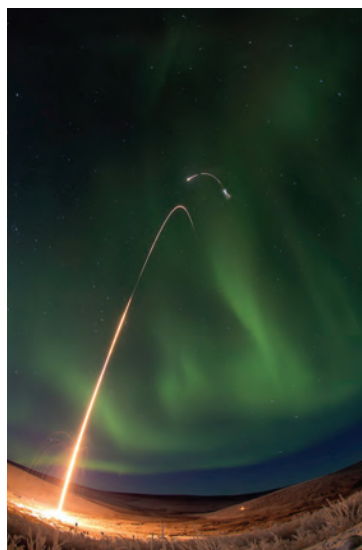
20 Number of years some permits have been in place. (They're supposed to be renewed every 5 years.)

On Nov. 20, a state court approved a consent decree between environmental groups and Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality, forcing the state to meet a timeline for issuing updated water pollution permits. The new permits will hold municipal and industrial polluters to modern water-quality standards, doing away with expired permits that, in many cases, sanctioned higher levels of contamination than updated permits would allow. **CARL SEGERSTROM**

Read more online: hcne.ws/update-permits

A rocket launches into the northern lights from Poker Flat Research Range near Fairbanks, Alaska, where research could be hampered by increased drilling in the Beaufort Sea.

JAMIE ADKINS/
NASA



Offshore oil drilling could hamper Arctic aurora research

On dark, clear winter nights in Fairbanks, Alaska, the northern lights often arc across the sky like curtains blown by a cosmic breeze. Sometimes, that spectacle becomes a scientific laboratory, when researchers launch rockets into the aurora borealis to study the forces that form it. Now, a federal push for more offshore Arctic oil drilling is threatening that research. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is planning to sell drilling leases off Alaska's northern coast next year. But NASA officials are worried: Expanded drilling would mean more people and property at risk of being hit by a motor or payload plummeting from the sky, and that could limit rocket launches. **EMILY BENSON**

Read more online: hcne.ws/aurora-research

Two countries, one border and their shared pollution

Cross-border water pollution between Tijuana and South San Diego is not new, but in recent years, the problem has grown worse. The reasons are complicated: Tijuana's topography has steep hillsides and canyons that drain towards the border; local factories get away with illegal dumping; there is aging wastewater infrastructure and inadequate garbage collection. In the U.S., cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency have prevented improvements to the Borderlands' sewage system. Over the years, both countries have signed numerous agreements to facilitate collaboration, but the solutions have been slow to materialize.

Meanwhile, beaches near the border are routinely closed, surfers often get sick, and most of the garbage cleanup is done by volunteers. In February 2017, disaster struck: A winter storm cracked sewer pipes and manhole covers in Tijuana, sending more than 200 million gallons of untreated sewage across the border.

Last March, Imperial Beach, Chula Vista and the Port of San Diego sued the federal government, arguing that its failure to do more to mitigate the problem violated U.S. environmental laws. The San Diego chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, an environmental nonprofit, also sued — and this September, so did the state of California. **SARAH TORY** Read more online: hcne.ws/shared-sewage



Drone footage from March 2017 shows a sewage plume spreading across Imperial Beach, California. ZACH WICK/YOUTUBE CAPTURE

Trending

How the Indigenous bison bar was appropriated

To hear the food industry tell it, the bison bar — a trendy, protein-dense snack — has an undisputed origin story. It was invented in 2011 by Katie Forrest and Taylor Collins, vegan endurance athletes who turned to meat to power their punishing training regimen. Epic Provisions was acquired by General Mills for \$100 million. But there's a problem with the idea that it's an entirely new product: It isn't true.

Back in 2006, social entrepreneurs Mark Tilsen and Karlene Hunter started making the Tanka Bar, the first commercial meat and fruit bison bar, on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. They hoped to create something — produced by Native people — to help reduce the reservation's unemployment rate and restore the buffalo's place in Oglala Lakota life.

But Tanka's role in popularizing the bison bar has been largely ignored. Though the company has had modest financial success, it has never attracted the funding and media attention that Epic has. **MARILYN NOBLE/NEW FOOD ECONOMY**

You say

STEVE JONES: "I've tried both and much prefer Tanka. It's actually delicious. Epic, not so much."

BETHANN GARRAMON MERKLE: "Just read this phenomenal piece, and sent it to our local co-op. Hope they switch products!"

Read more online: hcne.ws/bison-bar and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

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IT'S ALL PARTISAN NOW

I feel compelled to comment on Monica Gokey's article, "Is sporting a Patagonia fleece now a political statement?" (HCN, 12/10/18), which I found curious on many fronts. If "it's a cardinal sin for reporters to display anything that might lead sources to believe we are anything but neutral parties," then your considerations need to go much, much deeper than displaying a "fashion faux pas" Patagonia label. Spandex, for example, is manufactured by Invista, owned by Koch Industries. Many mobile devices, consumer electronics, and medical devices come from Molex Inc., also owned by Koch Industries. Idaho's newly elected governor, Brad Little, R, received donations from the National Rifle Association. Why would Patagonia's owner, Yvon Chouinard, not have the same right to support the candidates he believes in?

Mary Ann Kruse
Bend, Oregon

PREPARING FOR FIRE

I'm an expat in Australia living in the mountains in a very similar area to the California foothills but with far fewer people. My wife and I battled and survived a 2.5-million-acre forest fire in 2003 ("How to prepare for a wildfire," HCN, 12/10/18). There is no evacuation plan on Earth that could have handled what happened in Paradise, California. Once the fire is burning, it's too late. Making your home and community defensible and/or evacuating the moment a fire is reported is the only solution — sadly, one that most folks ignore until it's too late, with tragic results. Those of us who live in Australia understand this; my American compatriots must try and learn from others. Australia's Country Fire Authority has an incredible website with great information specifically geared to making your home defensible, and we now volunteer for this fire service. Leaving when the fire is licking your town's toes is way too late, and the kind of panic visible in the photos of the burned-out vehicles illustrates why.

Jeffie Aronson
Anglers Rest, Victoria, Australia



PATAGONIA'S PLASTICS

Yes, microplastics are pervasive ("Welcome to the Plastocene," HCN, 11/26/18). Here is a quote from the Patagonia ad in the same issue: "The newest addition to the Patagonia Workwear line, our Steel Forge Denim blends 92% organic cotton with 8% Dyneema®, a fiber that's light enough to float on water but 15 times stronger than steel." Perhaps HCN and outdoor enthusiasts should start as the article hints by encouraging Patagonia and other recreation retailers to exclude plastics.

Michael Newsom
Portland, Oregon

BOB BOARDMAN WAS NO 'TOURIST'

On Oct. 16, 2010, my friend Bob Boardman was killed by a mountain goat in Olympic National Park. Bob, an experienced mountaineer, had lived for 34 years on the Olympic Peninsula and had hiked and backpacked extensively in the park. To dismiss him as a "tourist" ("Heard Around the West," HCN, 10/29/18) is far from the truth. Actually, Bob was a hero that day, bravely attempting to deflect the aggressive behavior of a large wild animal away from his wife and a friend. Referring to Bob as a tourist also plays into the National Park Service's rewrite of the story: that Bob's death was an unfortunate freak accident that could neither have been foreseen nor prevented. In fact, the Park Service already knew about the aggressive nature of this animal; it had logged 63 complaints from visitors, but, largely ignoring its own policies, did almost nothing — certainly nothing effective — to remove or mitigate the hazard. Of course, had the goats never been intro-

duced, or had they been successfully removed from the park in the 1990s, my friend Bob might still be alive.

Tom Binh
Methow Valley, Washington

BIGHORNS DESERVE BETTER

I recently retired from the U.S. Forest Service, with many years as the lead wildlife biologist on the Rio Grande National Forest. I worked extensively with bighorn sheep issues in southwest Colorado, including some of the herds mentioned in HCN's article, which also share our landscape ("The Big Threat to Bighorns," HCN, 9/3/18). It is widely recognized that the introduction of diseases continues to be the primary threat to many bighorn sheep herds in Colorado. However, applying known science that addresses this issue has been challenging. In my experience, information has been intentionally manipulated or cherry-picked to portray a desired conclusion or outcome. The article is therefore timely in highlighting a story that applies throughout southwest Colorado.

Threats occur on both sides of the Continental Divide, where many herds function as interconnected populations. Multiple landownerships are involved, including individual Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management units that may not evaluate threats in a consistent manner. While improvements have been made by vacating or adjusting allotment boundaries, high-risk areas remain, due to both species grazing in close proximity and/or a failure to address potential bighorn sheep forays. This risk is further complicated by trailing and the fact that stray domestic sheep are a common occurrence. It is therefore difficult to achieve the significant linear distances needed to achieve effective separation.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are local icons of the wild that contribute greatly to the economic, social and aesthetic values of Colorado. Appropriately addressing their long-term persistence will require a renewed commitment to scientific integrity, transparency, inclusion of key biologists and stakeholders, and an awareness of the greater connected landscape of southwest Colorado.

Randal W. Ghormley
Del Norte, Colorado

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High Country News is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) independent media organization that covers the issues that define the American West. Its mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the region's diverse natural and human communities. (ISSN 0191/5657) is published bi-weekly, 22 times a year, by High Country News, 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO

81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions. 800-905-1155 | hcn.org

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What you lose when you lose local news

Where newspapers decline, people are less likely to vote and more likely to polarize

BY EMILY BENSON

In November 2016, as election results began rolling in, the maps showing state-by-state Senate and presidential wins started to look like they were plotting the same race. By the time the final votes were counted, it was clear: Every state that held a U.S. Senate election favored the same political party in both contests. No state that went for Hillary Clinton elected a Republican senator; no state that went for Donald Trump elected a Democrat.

It was a stark display of the nation's growing polarization, marking the highest percentage of states with a straight-ticket senator-and-president outcome in a century.

Now, new research suggests America's increasing partisanship may be related to a monumental shift in the nation's media landscape over the past three decades. As local newspapers shrink and close, people interested in the news are left more reliant on national outlets. As a result, they become more disconnected from their own communities and elected officials, less interested in voting — and more politically polarized. Without a revival of support for local journalism, experts say, that trend may be difficult to turn around.

For a decade or so, researchers have found that when the public lacks access to information about local issues, democracy itself suffers. When local print news coverage drops, residents are less likely to participate in civic activities, like contacting public officials or joining a community association; less knowledgeable about the candidates for their U.S. House district; less able to hold municipal officials accountable, leading to economic inefficiencies; and, ultimately, less likely

to vote. "When that coverage goes away, people don't turn out to participate," said Sarah Cavanah, a professor of mass media at Southeast Missouri State University. In November, a new study published in the *Journal of Communication* revealed an even further-reaching effect: After a newspaper in their community shuts down, those who do vote are more likely to cast a straight-ticket ballot, just as they did in 2016.

Local news lets people know the individual priorities and goals of local candidates — what they stand for specifically, not just how closely they hew to the party line. In other words, it keeps voters from relying exclusively on partisan cues when they're marking their ballots, said Joshua Darr, a professor of political communication at Louisiana State University. Darr, who led the *Journal of Communication* study, focused on straight-ticket voting because it's a good gauge of political polarization. Other scholars have cited factors as varied as economic inequality and top-down pressure on politicians from party leaders, for example, to explain America's growing partisanship. Darr and his colleagues wondered if the loss of local news could have something to do with it, too.

To find out, the researchers analyzed how often voters in 66 counties across the country that had recently lost a newspaper split their votes for senator and president in the 2012 election. They found nearly 2 percent more straight-ticket voting in such counties compared to similar ones that hadn't lost newspapers. That may seem like a small effect; after all, other factors also affect voting behavior, like education, political party affiliation and church attendance. But even small shifts can swing elections. This year, for example, a difference of just a quarter of

a percentage point, or about 700 votes, brought Democrat Ben McAdams victory over Republican Mia Love in a race to represent Utah in Congress.

"(Local news sources) just need to keep existing," Darr said. "If they can do that, they'll help stem the tide of this polarization that seems to have really taken over politics in recent years."

That bulwark has weakened as protections for local news itself have eroded. Rules like lower mail rates for periodicals and the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970, which allowed competing newspapers to share some resources, helped ensure that communities had access to diverse sources of local news. But those policies aren't as powerful in an era dominated by digital media, and updates like net neutrality, which would help safeguard access to independent media, are far from universally supported. "So it's not necessarily accidental that there's a crisis in the functioning of state and local politics now," said Lee Shaker, a professor at Portland State University who studies media and politics. "We simply stopped, as a nation, working to make sure that those processes function."

At the same time, we stopped subscribing to local newspapers, shoving the industry off an economic cliff. "Fundamentally, the public needs to value and seek this information," Shaker said. Without support from readers, bolstered by policies recognizing the importance of local information, local news media will be hard-pressed to help keep in check the bitter partisan animosity splitting the country today. "I don't see a good future for us if we end up having nationalized politics," Cavanah said. "And we might end up with that, if we don't have a quality local news ecosystem." □

Podcasts that fill the gap

Threshold

thresholdpodcast.org

Independent, in-depth narrative storytelling on how "humans are changing — and being changed by — the planet." Funders include Montana Public Radio and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. The first season is dedicated to the American bison, including the possibility of free-roaming herds returning to the West, the notorious slaughter of Yellowstone bison, and tribal work on bison restoration.

Mountain & Prairie

mountainandprairie.com/podcast

Conservationist Ed Roberson interviews innovators of all stripes who are "shaping the future of the American West" — ranchers, writers, athletes, artists, conservationists, entrepreneurs. Funded by listeners, Mountain Khakis and Palmer Land Trust, its recent guests include Montana rancher-activist Alexis Bonogofsky, historian Sarah Dant and best-selling author Hampton Sides.

Go West Young Podcast

westernpriorities.org/category/podcast

This podcast is produced by Aaron Weiss of the Center for Western Priorities, a project of the Resources Legacy Fund, which focuses on conservation and equity. Current episodes include advice on whistleblowing from former Interior Department climate scientist Joel Clement, the Navajo Nation's post-coal future, and the battle to save the Land and Water Conservation Fund.



City councils, public forums, Forest Service briefings, transportation meetings in California, Arizona, Oregon, Washington and South Dakota.

Patty Calhoun has hope

The journalism of Denver's Westword

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO



“Patty Calhoun embodies what journalism used to aspire to become.”

—Colorado Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper, a longtime friend

Patty Calhoun is ready to rumble. The founding and current editor of *Westword*, Denver's alternative weekly, just walked through the paper's annual Tacolandia festival in front of Denver's Classical-style City Hall to watch a *lucha libre* match. Around her, over 3,000 people enjoy the *delicias* of more than 40 Mexican food vendors on an overcast but balmy August Sunday afternoon.

Nearby, *Westword* publisher Scott Tobias talks with vendors to make sure they're happy. (They are.) The photographer snaps pictures of attendees that will appear the next day on *Westword's* website as a slideshow; the social media team tweets and Instagrams and shoots video.

Calhoun, meanwhile watches masked Mexican wrestlers leap off top ropes toward their opponents as a multicultural crowd cheers.

“Last time I saw them, I thought, ‘I so want to do this,’” Calhoun says, biting into a sweetbread taco. “It’s just like fighting an editor or writer or publisher. It’s all performance. It’s a foregone conclusion, but you have to do it.”

She returns to Tacolandia's VIP area to grab a margarita with friends, but the crowd keeps stopping her. “Love your work, Ms. Calhoun!” shouts one man along the way. “Keep killing it!” says another. Another woman congratulates her on running *Westword* for 30 years.

“It’s actually been 40,” Calhoun responds.

It’s actually been 41.

In an era where alt-weeklies are dying and daily newspapers continue to see their influence erode, *Westword* occupies a special place in American journalism. Its mix of investigative stories, cultural coverage, snarky humor and articles that frequently go viral has created something almost unheard of in the industry today: stability, and a widespread respect bordering on civic reverence.

It’s healthy even as its ostensible daily rival, the *Denver Post*, publishes editorials begging its “vulture capitalists” owners to sell the paper to local buyers. *Westword* remains “very, very strong” with “a big profit,” according to Tobias. That’s thanks in part to Colorado voters, who legalized marijuana in 2012 and opened a spigot of cash that doesn’t show any signs of

stopping — cannabis-related ads now comprise about 35 percent of the paper’s revenue.

“We make jokes about how we should put bumper stickers on our cars that show everyone what feeds our families,” says a *Westword* staffer. “Early on, it was ‘Futon sales feed my family,’ then ‘Sex ads feed my family.’ Now, it’s ‘Marijuana ads feed my family.’”

That’s despite the fact that *Westword's* marijuana coverage is fairly modest: a weekly product review, an advice column, and occasional news coverage — all of which tend to get lost in the daily wave of news, food and music stories. Nevertheless, marijuana industry leaders know that if they want to connect with the Mile High City, they need to go with *Westword*.

That’s because in an era where many publications skew partisan or go niche to survive, *Westword* still tries to cover everything and anything in greater Denver. In the process, it appeals to the multiple strata of the city in a way few other metro papers in America can claim.

Calhoun and two of her former Cornell University dorm-mates started *Westword* in 1977, as the winds of Watergate blew through the nation and stoked the alt-press along the way. The partners soon departed, leaving Calhoun as the sole boss until she sold it to what eventually became the largest chain of alt-weeklies in the United States. At first, *Westword* was ostracized for publishing outrageous stories deemed inappropriate by journalism schools and politicians alike. But eventually, Calhoun and her crew — with their prodigious knowledge and output on everything from sexual assault cover-ups at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and environmental racism to the history of Buffalo Bill’s Mexican restaurant and the rise of Colorado’s craft-beer industry — forged a publication that told the tale of Denver in all its breathtaking highs and embarrassing lows.

“I was already interested in the West,” Calhoun says; in high school, she wrote a paper on Montana that inspired her father to buy land there and build a cabin that the family still owns. “I liked Cornell, but I didn’t like the East Coast obsession with pedigree. The West has that promise for people who wanted to do their own things. You are what you do, not where you came from.”

“Patty Calhoun embodies what journalism used to aspire to become,” says Colorado Democratic Gov. John

Hickenlooper, a longtime friend who, when he was mayor, appeared on *Westword's* cover dressed in a zoot suit. “Relentless and principled, she (can) also be ruthless in the pursuit of the truth, especially if she smelled a cover-up or just simple lying.”

That kind of respect comes from some former targets, too. “It doesn’t go into a stereotype into what an alt-weekly should be,” says Tom Tancredo, a retired Republican congressman, who describes the paper’s coverage of his long, controversial career as “fair.” “I think that the *Denver Post* has maybe three or four years, and it’ll be gone. And I bet you *Westword* will still be there.”

“THIS IS HOW MUCH CONTROL I HAVE,”

Calhoun cracks over the phone a couple of weeks after Tacolandia. “I’m cancelling our staff meeting today. My managing editor is already running late. The layout editor has to leave because her chicken just died, and she has to deal with the chicken.”

From her small office, crowded with back issues, bullhorns, an empty tequila bottle shaped like a Tommy gun and local art that includes a sawed-off mannequin, she is editing a column on marijuana. You can hear the quick keyboard clicks as she rewrites a sentence. Then, silence.

“I have to tell my pot critic that what they wrote makes no sense, which is usually the case,” she finally says. “Or, it can be me. I’m still into Cheech and Chong jokes. That’s no longer current. That’s a beat I get schooled in *all the time*.”

Calhoun is tall, with long blond hair and piercing blue eyes. The 64-year-old always wears long skirts, cowboy boots or flip-flops, and some form of turquoise jewelry, and carries herself like a cross between legendary journalist Nellie Bly (a personal hero) and Annie Oakley — crusading, but not showy, with the personality of a cool aunt who never married because she’d rather travel the world. She gets up at 5 every morning and, for three hours, edits stories scheduled for the web that day, then spends the rest of the day working on the print edition and her own articles. She tries to write at least one story a week, across different sections, but ultimately follows her own breaking-news clock. In an eight-day stretch in September, for instance, she penned 1,000-plus word pieces on the Colorado gubernatorial race, the closing of a dive bar, a quick profile of a nonprofit, and a review of a just-opened hiking trail on top of a former nuclear power plant.

Gustavo Arellano is a features writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and the author of *Taco USA: How Mexico Food Conquered America*.

Patty Calhoun, founder and editor of *Westword* in Denver.
LUNA ANNA ARCHER/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

PODCASTS ...

The Modern West themodernwest.org

This Wyoming Public Media podcast covers Western news, cultural stories, interviews, oral histories and more. Recent episodes include the fight to make land conservation a priority, the climate-change-induced migration of birds of prey, and how women are redefining what it means to live in the West.



Open Spaces wyomingpublicmedia.org/programs/open-spaces-podcast

Also by Wyoming Public Media, this covers news and public affairs topics of concern to Wyoming and the entire West. Recent episodes included the reduced transparency in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the legacy of Matthew Shepard's murder, whether the presence of grizzly bears affects the outfitter and guide industry, and an interview with U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.



Range: Stories of the New American West rangepodcast.org

Hosted by journalists Julia Ritchey and Amy Westervelt, *Range* incorporates humor, music and commentary to cover the "stories, issues, and trailblazing entrepreneurs of the New American West." Recent topics include the challenges a new clothing company faced in manufacturing in the region, affordable housing in resort towns, and West Coast women in high tech.



“There are more media voices now. That will make things tougher on Westword to be the alternative voice. That’ll be a challenge.”

—David Milstead, business columnist for Canada’s *Globe and Mail* and president of the Denver Press Club

Marijuana posters line the walls of a *Westword* ad designer’s work area. Although *Westword*’s coverage of the topic is minimal, marijuana ads provide a lot of the ad revenue.

LUNA ANNA ARCHHEY/
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

“One time, I asked Patty to look at a cover story I was editing,” says *Westword*’s managing editor Ana Campbell, who’s been at the paper for two years. “All of a sudden, she said, ‘Don’t you just love it when you fall asleep, and see how editing a story will come out?’ And I said, ‘Patty, only *you* would dream that.’”

Or only a *Westworder*. The paper’s editorial staff hoards over a century of Denver newspaper experience in three people alone: Calhoun (the *Denver Post* has had 14 editors-in-chief during her reign), staff writer Michael Roberts (who joined as a music editor in 1990), and Alan Prendergast, who has written for the paper since 1984. He brought *Westword* acclaim with his coverage of the aftermath of the Columbine massacre and his deep dives into Colorado’s federal Supermax prison.

“The production manager has been here 25 years,” Calhoun says. “The business manager, I hired him 37 years ago.

Where would you rather be than in Denver, Colorado? And if you’re there, where would you rather be working than at *Westword*?”

But the paper isn’t an ossuary, either. It maintains a reputation as a launching pad for young writers; the *Washington Post* just hired one of its former interns.

“People still come up to me and ask me about stuff I wrote at *Westword*,” says Adam Cayton-Holland, star of TruTV’s *Those Who Can’t* and a staffer from 2004 to 2009 who wrote a humor column called “What’s So Funny.” “To come up in an environment like that is incredible. Rarely was I just handed assignments. I was expected to bring stuff in.”

Not bad for a paper that, like its city, has known boom-and-busts with the regularity of the Broncos in the Super Bowl.

Two alt-weeklies were already in town when *Westword* put out its first issue, a debut that saw most of the issues piled

in Calhoun’s garage because no one knew how to do circulation. Their first office was on the second floor of a Victorian-era building where prostitutes once plied their trade. (“Even without taking inflation into account, they made more money than we did,” Calhoun commented in a 20th anniversary reminiscence in 1998.)

“It was a smaller city then,” she says. “You would go knock (on) the door at a business for a sale, and there would be a sign that said ‘Gone skiing.’ I have not gotten a ‘Gone skiing’ message for a long time.”

In 1983, Calhoun sold the paper to Jim Larkin and Michael Lacey, owners of the *Phoenix New Times*, because she wanted to focus on writing and was tired of the business side of things. The new owners upped publication to a weekly and allowed Calhoun to hire staffers. “We were a hard-drinking, hard-reporting crew,” says Prendergast. “The dailies were contemptuous of us. It was difficult to get respect or recognition, but that was okay. We weren’t following daily rules, or taking a story and turning it into mush.”

With the *Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* locked in a newspaper war, *Westword* grabbed attention with stories that its rivals didn’t dare report. In 1986, Calhoun revealed that the president of a group of suburban newspapers had killed his mother, father and sister as an 18-year-old, yet never disclosed his past to readers or mentioned that he had changed his name.

Newspapers across the country and local leaders tut-tutted about the piece’s relevance. They howled three years later, when *Westword* published a bombshell: Sal Aunese, the University of Colorado Buffaloes’ star quarterback, who was dying of cancer, had had an out-of-wedlock child with the daughter of head coach Bill McCartney, who had built a cult of personality, not just around his powerhouse program but also his unapologetic evangelical Christianity.

The story seems tame nowadays, but back then, it created a nationwide scandal. Editors for the *Post* and *News* blasted *Westword* in the national press, which parroted their disgust. “It was ugly and sensational,” the *Miami Herald* wrote. “If there was a way of treating the matter in a tasteful way as a significant news story, (*Westword*) did not find it.”

McCartney was even less charitable. In his 1994 biography, he confessed that biblical verses given to him by a stranger just before the article hit “arrived just in time to save two lives. They saved mine from a possible death penalty or life-sentence in prison. And they saved the life of the (*Westword* reporter) I would surely have tried to kill.”

Advertisers pulled out; the paper received multiple bomb threats. (During one, *Westword* staffers crossed the street to drink beers. That’s where Calhoun





met Hickenlooper, who complained to her about the regulations the city was imposing on his brewpub.) To this day, Calhoun defends the Aunese story.

"That was a story that had been talked about in newsrooms around the state but never published," she says. "The media was an old boys' network. Question then became, 'Why didn't they report it?'"

"More importantly, we never got a request for a retraction. Not one."

Respect and revenue came as Denver roared into the 1990s with the redevelopment of its downtown and the debut of the Colorado Rockies, its baseball team. Long-vacant warehouses became concert venues, apartments, restaurants — and they needed a place to advertise.

"It was a great time to be a sales rep," says Tobias, who started in 1993. "We sold *Westword* as a lifestyle resource. As salespeople, we killed it."

That cushion allowed the paper to continue to pursue ambitious stories. It discovered that the Department of Justice had ignored a secret grand jury's finding of environmental crimes at the former Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant. Reporter Michael Roberts — who, while serving as the paper's music editor, once had a music promoter "threaten to throw me through a glass plate window" for writing a negative calendar pick — earned praise for a media criticism column. The paper won a James Beard award for restaurant criticism in 2003, thanks to Jason Sheehan's sprawling, acerbic reviews.

At its height in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Westword* had an editorial staff of about 20, and regularly clocked in at 160 pages a week, making it one of the fattest alt-weeklies in the country. It ran two features a week, along with a full-page editorial cartoon and Calhoun's own column, simply titled "Calhoun," which saw her opine on everything from political

corruption to badly planned municipal New Year's Eve festivities. But the rise of the internet began to chip away at *Westword's* revenue stream, just as it did with every newspaper.

"It was a slow slide until 2008," she said. "But it was a very fast slide after."

"SO YOU'LL TOTALLY LOVE THIS," Calhoun tells her colleagues on the James Beard Journalism Awards Committee during a meeting this fall in New York City. "So I'm on the bus (into Manhattan), and Roberts calls me. 'Hey, I want to do a story on Deborah Ramirez,' " the second woman who accused Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual harassment last fall. "And I think, 'Fuck, she's from Colorado. There goes *my* day.' Thank God the bus had WiFi."

Calhoun travels a lot nowadays — to awards committee meetings, luncheons and panel discussions around Denver, road trips with friends (she and her friends own World's Wonder View Tower, a Depression-era roadside attraction in eastern Colorado said to be the highest point between Denver and Chicago). But with her laptop, she never stops working. So she can't imagine retirement.

"First, I'd have to clean my office," she says. "I'd have to find out what I'd like to do next. And I still don't know that."

Westword has weathered its past decade better than its peers. It made national news again in 2009 after putting out a call for a pot critic ("Our first applicant replied within five minutes — fast work for a stoner," Calhoun wrote soon after. "Our first media response came a few minutes later — *really* fast work for a journalist.")

But soon after, the paper got caught up in the controversy surrounding Backpage.com, a website owned by its then-parent company Village Voice Media that critics accused of abetting human

trafficking. National and local advertisers dropped the paper, and *Westword* had to lay off staffers. The shrinkage hasn't stopped; it combined its music and arts editor position two years ago. Last year, Prendergrast left after his job was turned into a web-first writer slot. There are now 10 full-timers left in editorial.

The paper itself has also shrunk; an October issue was 72 pages, with 31 devoted to marijuana ads. Circulation is now 50,000, down from 110,000 just a decade ago. While the *Rocky Mountain News* closed in 2009, nonprofit news agencies like the *Colorado Sun* and *Colorado Independent* are now nipping at the hard news *Westword* once had a monopoly on.

"It's not as robust as it used to be, but I don't think people pick up *Westword* and shake their head at the memory of what it used to be," says David Milstead, a business columnist for Canada's *Globe and Mail* and president of the Denver Press Club, which elected Calhoun into its Hall of Fame in 2007. "But there are more media voices now. That will make things tougher on *Westword* to be the alternative voice. That'll be a challenge."

Westword remains unfazed. During a fundraiser last summer, Colorado Republican gubernatorial candidate Walker Stapleton denounced it as "phony news." Calhoun had recently confronted him at a public event for not responding to Michael Roberts' repeated requests for an interview; she wrote that Stapleton "looked at me the way a bull calf must regard a castration knife."

"I find the news about journalism in the rest of the country incredibly depressing," Calhoun says. "Papers that started when we started are closing. We grew up together. So I'm focusing on what we're doing, because we have more control than the forces around the country. *Westword*, I'm hopeful." □

Staff writer Michael Roberts, left, started in 1990 as *Westword's* music editor. Managing editor Ana Campbell, center, is a new recruit, with just two years onboard. Alan Prendergrast, right, had been with *Westword* since the mid-'80s, writing some of the paper's biggest stories, before leaving last year when his job turned into a web-first writer slot.

LUNA ANNA ARCHIEY/
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

PODCASTS ...

Desert Oracle
desertoracle.com/
radio/

This podcast grew out of a self-published print quarterly by

political blogger Ken Layne, originally distributed only near his home in Joshua Tree, California.

"The Voice of the Desert" examines the ways wild, harsh landscapes inspire people, from the mythic to the macabre to the mundane. The zine has a cult following, and the new podcast, notes *New York Magazine's* Heather Havrilesky, is "moody, concise, hilarious and really fucking weird."

Media Indigena
mediaindigena.com

This Indigenous current-affairs podcast is funded solely by listeners. Based in Canada, its mission is to "share stories which keep Indigenous peoples alive, in every sense of the term." The

last few episodes feature discussion of a not-guilty verdict for the white man who killed a young Native named Colten Boushie, an arts exhibit spanning 300 years of colonialism, and why it's misleading to call Native languages "lost or dying."

outLANDish
yourforestsyourfuture.org/listen.php

A partnership headed by the U.S. Forest Service, this podcast is part of the agency's "Your Forests Your Future" initiative, which aims to increase the relevance of public lands. Recent stories include the great American through-hikes, animal migrations and discoveries made in glaciers.

JODI PETERSON

Web Extra

See more and link to podcasts at hcn.org

Indigenous comics push back against hackneyed stereotypes

The 'noble savage' in comics is dead. Long live the Dakwākāda Warriors

BY TRISTAN AHTONE

In 2016, Cole Pauls released *Dakwākāda Warriors*, a Southern Tutchone language-revival comic that stars two Native "Power Rangers" — Wolf and Raven — who battle an evil pioneer and a cyborg Sasquatch. In the original comic, inspired by the Northwest Coast legend "Raven Steals the Sun," Raven seeks to protect the sun from the villains, Cyber Nā'ī and Space Kwāday Dān, who plot to steal it in order to thaw out the woolly mammoths frozen on one of Jupiter's moons and use them to attack the Earth. The comic's reception was so good that Pauls released a sequel in 2017, followed by a third issue, *Dakwākāda Warriors III*, this year. A Tahltan First Nation comic artist, illustrator and printmaker from the Yukon Territory, Pauls holds a BFA in Illustration from Emily Carr University. His other comics include the series *Pizza Punks* and *Astral Projection Comix*. High Country News spoke with Pauls about his work and his vision of how comics and Indigenous storytelling traditions can work together as Native communities access new ways to tell their stories. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

High Country News: Do you see a lot of people retelling traditional stories in Indigenous comics?

Cole Pauls: I would say there's not a lot of us doing that. I feel like a lot of legends and First Nations stories are protected — they're stories that have been told for generations, and then we weren't allowed to share them. I feel like people

Tristan Ahtone is a member of the Kiowa Tribe and associate editor of the *High Country News* tribal affairs desk. [@tahtone](#)



COLE PAULS

try to stay really true to what an elder said because their voice is really precious, so I haven't seen a lot of people doing a retelling of an Indigenous story. But I'm definitely not the only one; there have got to be others, like the *Moonshot Indigenous Comics Collection*. Those anthologies have some stories that are traditional Native folklore, and I think some of them are riffing and retelling comic versions.

HCN: Do you think there's any sort of danger to reimagining these stories?

CP: I think it's important to establish where you're coming from when you're doing something like that. Someone who doesn't know the story may not realize what

you've included versus what was in the original story. I do think it's important to show your roots and tell people where you're coming from. I wrote *Dakwākāda Warriors* for Yukon Indigenous kids, essentially. I wanted an Indigenous youth from the Yukon — specifically Southern Tutchone — I want the kids in my hometown to read this book and be like, "Wow, I have an identity."

HCN: Are you seeing a change when it comes to Indigenous representations in comics, zines and other graphic forms?

CP: For sure. I think that in the society we live in today, we have access to this sort of information through the internet, and a lot of people are becoming more aware. I think that's something that's very unique to today's culture, that we're able to do that. I read Michael Yahgulanaas's *Red: A Haida Manga* when it first came out in 2009, and that blew me away, that someone would make a First Nations comic book. And then I read Gord Hill's *500 years of Indigenous Resistance*, and I was like, "Whoa, this is like a textbook." It wasn't just a silly comic.

HCN: I think of ledger drawings (narrative drawings traditionally made on paper, cloth or hide) and I think of my tribe and the ledger drawings we did. When you see them, you realize they're telling a story visually and often in sequence, and I think an argument could be made that Indigenous people pioneered that.

CP: I totally agree. A totem pole can tell a whole family story, and the same with a button blanket. It can explain someone's entire clan. Masks, too; a lot of masks are only worn when they're performed with certain songs, because they're half the story. Comics are storytelling, and so is singing, and so is a huge long-house mural — it's portraying a story. [Read more online: hcn.ws/cole-pauls](#)

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LIVING BENEATH THE COLORADO PEAKS
Betsy and Bud Knapp with Sarah Chase Shaw
288 pages, large-format: \$70. Knapp Press, 2018.

What's next after you've conquered the luxury magazine publishing world and managed major philanthropic endeavors? For Bud and Betsy Knapp, publishers of *Bon Appétit* and *Architectural Digest*, the answer was clear: Buy a ranch in the Vail Valley, build an exquisitely crafted lodge and cabins, raise organic vegetables — and then, write a book about it.

Living Beneath the Rockies, written by the Knapps with Sarah Chase Shaw, walks readers through the couple's vision for their mountain property and determination to develop in concert with the landscape. With stunning imagery from the Colorado Rockies and designs based on legendary alpine lodges, the book is something to drool over.

Most of us mere mortals can never dream of owning this kind of land, but Knapp Ranch has done well by the local community, welcoming artists, encouraging research on conservation, ecology and climate change, and hiring a full crew to tend the grounds and gardens. **CARL SEGERSTROM**

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Lanterns at Knapp Ranch provide just enough illumination to mark the trail without obscuring the crystalline brilliance of the Milky Way overhead.
TODD WINSLOW PIERCE

Clearing fog from a late autumn storm, right, reveals fresh snow on New York Mountain above Lake Creek Valley. Far right, a red fox traverses the boundary between aspen forest and open meadow.

TODD WINSLOW
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 Bill Mitchem | Rangely, CO
 Sharon Moddelmog | Arvada, CO
 Ann Moore | Albuquerque, NM
 Mary Moran & Dennis Silva | Moab, UT
 Tish Morris | Albuquerque, NM
 Betty Moseley | Fort Collins, CO
 Kim-Nora Moses | Porlock, England
 William Mueller | Layton, UT
 Earl E. Myers | Arvada, CO
 James C. Nelson | Magdalena, NM
 Pamela Nelson | Warner Springs, CA
 Bonnie & Kiyoshi Nishikawa | Carson City, NV
 Lori Sandstedt | Morrison, CO
 Ann Northrup | Moab, UT
 James & Gail Nystrom | Elk River, MN
 Greg Parsons | Wheat Ridge, CO
 Karrin Peterson | Redmond, WA
 Kirk Peterson | Oakland, CA
 Susan B. Peterson | Salt Lake City, UT
 William Porter | Las Vegas, NV
 Julia & Greg Powell | Salida, CO
 Michael Powers | Berkeley, CA
 Merton Preston | Santa Rosa, CA
 Nicholas Psarakis | Colorado Springs, CO
 Steve Reed | Draper, UT
 Brian & Carol Reid | Tucson, AZ
 Josh Rice | Woody Creek, CO
 Bruce Richardson | Boulder, CO
 Matilda Rickard | Goodyear, AZ
 Carol Rigmark & Thomas A. Byrnes | Corrales, NM
 Marianna Riser | Novato, CA
 Gerry A. Roberts | Arvada, CO
 Jacquelyn Robins | Albuquerque, NM
 Clint Rogel | Spokane, WA
 Pat & Pam Rollison | Saratoga, WY
 Edward Romero | Santa Fe, NM
 Carl Romnes | Dulce, NM
 John Rosenberg | Tumwater, WA
 Jacqelen Ruben | Woodland Hills, CA
 Sheryl Russell | Rio Rancho, NM

Kurt Rusterholz | St. Paul, MN
 Liz Ryan | Santa Cruz, CA
 Bruce & Jill Sanchez | Seattle, WA
 Mark Saurer | Park City, UT
 Max & Gene Schloemer | Reno, NV
 Angie Schmidt | Cheyenne, WY
 William Schmidt | Centennial, CO
 Norm Schoenthal | Billings, MT
 Ian & Alisa Schofield | Park City, UT
 Angeline Schrater & Richard White | Durango, CO
 Margo Schueler | Berkeley, CA
 Carol J. Schultz & Craig Adams | San Diego, CA
 Buz & Judith Sellers | Colorado Springs, CO
 Aaron Setran | Davis, CA
 Eddie Shaw | Pittsburgh, PA
 Ron Shaw | Lander, WY
 Kirk Sherrill | Fort Collins, CO
 William Shipp | Huntington Beach, CA
 Patty Shreve | Salt Lake City, UT
 Jo Ann Silverstein | Boulder, CO
 Larry Simon | Pleasant Hill, CA
 Bruce & Barbara Sims | Huson, MT
 Tom Smith | Huntsville, AL
 Roz Spafford | Santa Cruz, CA
 William Spencer | Boulder, CO
 Gary & Mary Garrow Splittberger | Billings, MT
 John Stansfield | Monument, CO
 Tory Starr | Sacramento, CA
 Marilyn Starrett | Denver, CO
 Sara Steinhoffer | San Diego, CA
 Charlie Stinson | Weed, CA
 Harold H. Stowell | Tuscaloosa, AL
 Steven Strong | Bend, OR
 Gene F. Summers | Black Earth, WI
 Harry & MaryAnn Taylor | Wheat Ridge, CO
 Harold Teasdale | Marine on St. Croix, MN
 Gene & Deb Theriault | Casper, WY
 Brian Thomann | Littleton, CO
 Peter Thomas & Rosie Andrews | Berkeley, CA
 Richmond & Sarah Thomason | Chelsea, MI
 Bruce & Kathy Thompson | Arlington, WA
 Thomas R. Thompson | Santa Fe, NM
 Wayne Thompson | Tucson, AZ
 Nancy & Bill Tiederman | Bainbridge Island, WA
 William M. Tierney | McGrath, AK
 Jeremy Toby | El Granada, CA
 John & Carol Tone | Denver, CO
 The Torf Family | Evergreen, CO
 James & Gael Treible | Danville, CA
 Zack Tripp & Alia Strong | Carbondale, CO
 Joe Trudeau & Amber Fields | Prescott, AZ
 Teresa Urbanowski | Wheat Ridge, CO
 Theresa Vaughn | Denver, CO
 Joel G. Vignere | Lakeside, MT
 Don Wall | Ames, IA
 Edward Wallhagen | Albuquerque, NM
 Brad Webb | Bozeman, MT
 Joel Weeks | Livermore, CA
 Marvyl Wendt | Tucson, AZ
 Kath Weston | Charlottesville, VA
 Willow Canyon Outdoor Co. | Kanab, UT
 Nancy Wolff | St. Maries, ID
 Dave Worley | Reno, NV
 Randy & Dandrea Worrall | Ashton, ID
 Kon Wyatt | Golden, CO
 Bill Yake | Olympia, WA
 Lynn Yamaoka | Torrance, CA
 Gary Zadra | Superior, WY

Holidays and the ‘Northern Circle’

High Country News staff convened in Paonia, Colorado, for our annual holiday party Dec. 6. Those of us at our editorial satellite office in Gunnison were thrilled to visit our old roost — and to see so many friends and subscribers! It’s been c-c-c-COLD in Gunnison, so Paonia felt downright balmy, despite recent snowfall. We warmed up even more with drinks, snacks and great conversation, with folks from down the road and much farther away. The office was packed and warmly lit with Christmas lights and *luminarias*.

Hawker-in-chief **Brian Calvert** raffled off *HCN* water bottles, yearlong subscription vouchers and goat-imprinted socks. He also thanked our growing subscriber base for sticking with us through a volatile, crucial moment in American journalism — the subject of this issue. We’re grateful to all who read, support and write to us, and we enjoyed spending time with you at the party. And if you couldn’t make it, don’t worry; we saved you each a slice of pizza! We’re overnight shipping them straight to your mailboxes, so warm up your microwaves.

The Saturday after the party, Associate Photo Editor **Luna Anna Archey**, editorial fellow **Jessica Kutz** and editorial intern **Elena Saavedra Buckley** went cross-country skiing on Grand Mesa with friends. Luna tested out her new second-hand skis, while Jessica and Elena made their sticky rentals whiz along as fast as they could. The trio warmed up with buttered rum from the recently reopened Grand Mesa Lodge — highly

recommended if you’re in the area. The same weekend, they visited the Creamery Arts Center in nearby Hotchkiss for a fundraiser involving locally crafted ceramic bowls and many varieties of soup. Luna herself just finished making a few ceramic mugs — perfect, perhaps, for more buttered rum?

Associate Editor **Paige Blankenbuehler**’s piece “Cashing In On Standing Rock” (*HCN*, 4/16/18) was among the Institute for Nonprofit News’ “Best of Nonprofit News” this year. The feature detailed how funds raised by Veterans Stand for the #NoDAPL demonstrations in 2016 were squandered and misplaced. Congrats to Paige!

Recent visitors include **Doug Best** and **Denise Akert**, from Fairbanks, Alaska, who were delighted by the amount of winter sun Paonia gets. Doug, who lives in a cabin he built himself, recently upgraded his outhouse, replacing a porcelain seat he called “the Northern Circle” with a foam seat “to keep the cold off.” Doug shares his print subscription with Denise and her husband, and Denise, who is originally from Switzerland, purchased a gift sub for her brother, who still lives there. Thanks for your support!

We’re taking an issue break for the holidays, so you won’t see us in print until the New Year. Come January, we’ll have a new intern, new stories and an editorial Oregon meet-up in the works, so expect an exciting series of “Dear Friends”! We hope you have happy holidays and a restful New Year, and we’ll see you in 2019.

—*Elena Saavedra Buckley,*
for the staff



Publisher Paul Larmer attempts to wrap Editor-in-chief Brian Calvert’s extended remarks at the holiday party. LUNA ANNA ARCHHEY/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



Blooms in the Desert

As the ecosystem of news changes, will journalists adapt fast enough?



FEATURE BY
KENTON BIRD

fifteen years ago, *High Country News* sent its then-field editor, Ray Ring, out to investigate how well the West's local media were covering the region. Back then, the storms that have since buffeted the nation's media had yet to fully hit, but the warning clouds were on the horizon, and Ring, who had previously worked as a staff reporter on two daily newspapers, came back with some alarming news. "It's often said that we're in some golden Information Age," he wrote, "with more news available than ever before, thanks to cable TV, the Internet, specialty magazines and other burgeoning news sources. But the foundation of the news-gathering system, the daily papers, is shaky."

Today, the foundations are not just shaky; they are crumbling. More and

more communities are finding themselves without a daily newspaper, forced to rely on a single weekly or without any paper at all. These are the West's "news deserts," where local reporting is often sparse, inconsistent or completely nonexistent.

The Expanding News Desert, a report from the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina's School of Media and Journalism this year, found that the 11 Western states, plus Alaska and Hawaii, lost 48 dailies and 157 weeklies between 2004 and 2018. Forty-six counties in the region now lack a local newspaper. In some cases, the report notes, only "ghost papers" remain, mere shadows of their former selves. If this trend contin-

ues, observers ask, how will local journalism survive?

Even long-established legacy media are struggling, decimated by staff cuts imposed by corporate owners and private-equity firms in response to plummeting readership, declining ad revenue and the relentless push to maximize profits for owners and investors. In city after city, reporters struggle to meet deadlines with less time, fewer resources and increasing demands to file stories round-the-clock for social media and online editions. While good, sometimes outstanding work is still being done even at the hardest-hit newspapers, the bread-and-butter coverage of government, politics and public issues is already suffering, becoming thinner almost everywhere.

Deprived of the comprehensive local coverage that daily papers once provided, citizens are less informed and increasingly ill-equipped to hold their elected officials accountable. This kind of watchdog journalism was not common in many small towns and mid-sized cities, but the metro dailies once set the agenda for radio and television newsrooms, often leading the way in local coverage. Today, that is becoming increasingly rare.

"As newspapers vanish and readers drop off, an increasing number of Americans are living without a reliable and comprehensive source of local news," the University of North Carolina report warns. The report defines a news desert as "a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level." According to the UNC analysis, the Pacific and Mountain states now have 46 news deserts, a figure that includes 13 sparsely populated boroughs or census units in Alaska, which does not have counties. "Our sense of community and our trust in democracy at all levels suffer when journalism is lost or diminished," wrote Penelope Muse Abernathy, the Knight chair in journalism and digital media economics at UNC, who oversaw the research for the 104-page report and its accompanying website.

In the West, coverage is indeed shrinking. Wyoming and Arizona still have a newspaper in every county, but Colorado has four counties without newspapers, while Idaho has seven. In Idaho, weeklies in neighboring counties provide some local coverage, but the hometown, county-seat paper has vanished from the fast-growing state's rural areas. Meanwhile, many Western counties are at risk of losing their only remaining newspapers. The report identifies 185 such single-newspaper counties in the 13 Pacific and Rocky Mountain states — 34 of them in Montana alone.

The closure of three major metro dailies in the West — Denver, Colorado's *Rocky Mountain News*, Washington's *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and Arizona's *Tucson Citizen* — made headlines in 2009. (Though *The Post-Intelligencer* continues as an online-only publication, it does so with a skeleton crew, following layoffs earlier this year, making it what you might call the online ghost of the ghost of a newspaper.) Still, Denver and Seattle (and Tucson, to a lesser extent) have potentially high numbers of investors, donors, journalists and audiences to support new media startups. The West's small towns and rural areas lack that advantage. Instead, these communities risk losing critical information when a newspaper closes or merges with a neighboring county's publication. Few entrepreneurs or startup editors see their future in the Western news deserts.

The disappearance of traditional media has been somewhat buffered by the rise of digital-only news sites, un-

encumbered by the fixed costs of legacy media organizations and therefore less threatened by faltering revenue streams. "A range of entrepreneurs — from journalists at television stations to founders of digital sites — are experimenting with new business models and new ways of providing local news to hundreds of communities that have lost their local newspapers," Abernathy wrote. "Most ventures, however, are clustered around major metro areas." In contrast to the news deserts of the rural West, these media oases are reinventing journalism with a distinctive local flavor.



"It's not all doom and gloom," said Greg Hanscom, the former executive editor of *Crosscut*, an online news site that partners with Seattle's public TV station, and a former editor of *HCN*. "Hundreds of new models for journalism have sprung up."

Whether these startups will thrive, just get by or wither away remains an open question. Without them, however, the picture would be even grimmer. These outlets — old and new — have had to develop inventive survival strategies to bloom in today's harsh media landscape. Here, we present four of those strategies.

DIG DEEP, BUT DIG FAST

Les Zaitz thought he was done with daily journalism in 2016, when he retired from *The Oregonian*, where he'd been an award-winning investigative reporter. At the time, Zaitz, a Pulitzer finalist who reported huge stories for Oregon's largest newspaper, from the 1980 eruption to Mount St. Helens to more recent blockbusters on the emergence of Mexican drug cartels, told readers he was stepping away from the job to edit two family-owned weeklies from a remote ranch in

eastern Oregon.

He took over the *Malheur Enterprise* and reinvigorated the 109-year-old weekly with a commitment to local news, including the kind of hard-hitting reports rarely seen in small-town papers. But Zaitz's time in eastern Oregon's wide-open spaces turned out to be brief. In September, he launched an online news site, *Salem Reporter*, in Oregon's capital. "I didn't need another project, especially one 300 miles from my ranch," Zaitz told me recently. Then a prominent Salem businessman invited him to provide a new voice in the Willamette Valley, Or-

gon's population center. Now, Zaitz is overseeing three reporters and a state-house bureau, emphasizing the kinds of enterprise stories he once reported on for the *Oregonian*.

Publishing online enabled the *Reporter* to quickly find a foothold in Salem's media market at a time when *The Statesman Journal*, Salem's daily, has cut staff and scaled back coverage. Without the up-front costs of a traditional newspaper, *The Reporter* can offer \$10-a-month subscriptions, enabling it to fill in the news gaps left by *The Journal*, which is owned by the Gannett Company, a publicly traded national corporation with total assets last year of over \$2.5 billion.

"A startup is not necessarily encumbered by the costs of legacy publications, such as building and printing costs," said Damian Radcliffe, a journalism professor at the University of Oregon in Eugene, 66 miles from Salem. An online news site can be "agile in beats to cover and topics to explore" without the obligations of the paper of record, Radcliffe said.

Zaitz said he wants the *Reporter* to provide a blend of breaking news and

Please see Blooms, page 18

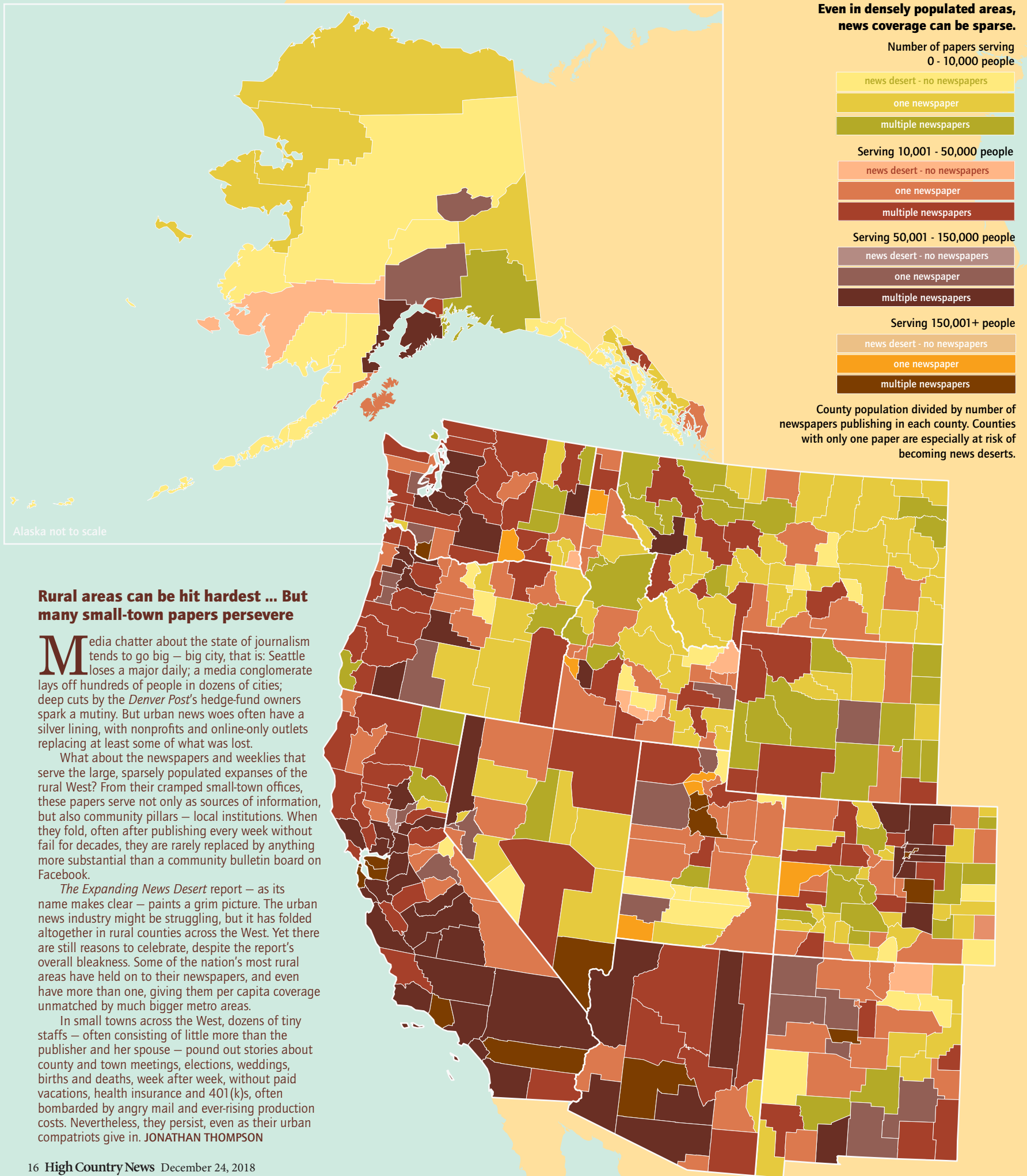
▲ Les Zaitz, longtime investigative reporter for *The Oregonian*, retired from his daily newspaper job, then went on to found an online news site, *Salem Reporter*. Here, he leads a training session for journalists on source development.

TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ
FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

◀ Vicki Rubin reads the final edition of the *Rocky Mountain News* in a Denver coffeeshop Feb. 27, 2009. The competing daily, *The Denver Post*, continues to publish, but has had major staff cuts.

MATTHEW STAYER/
BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

News deserts of the West



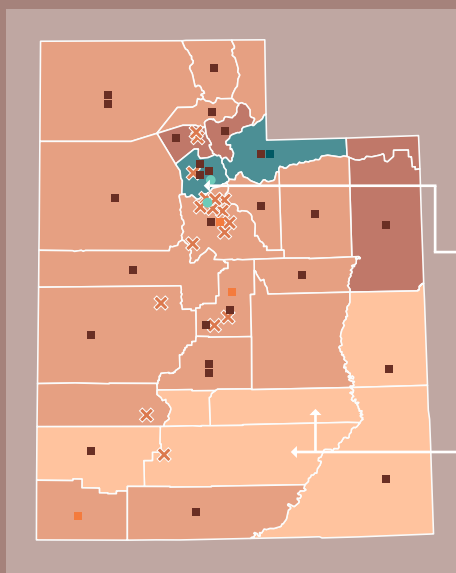
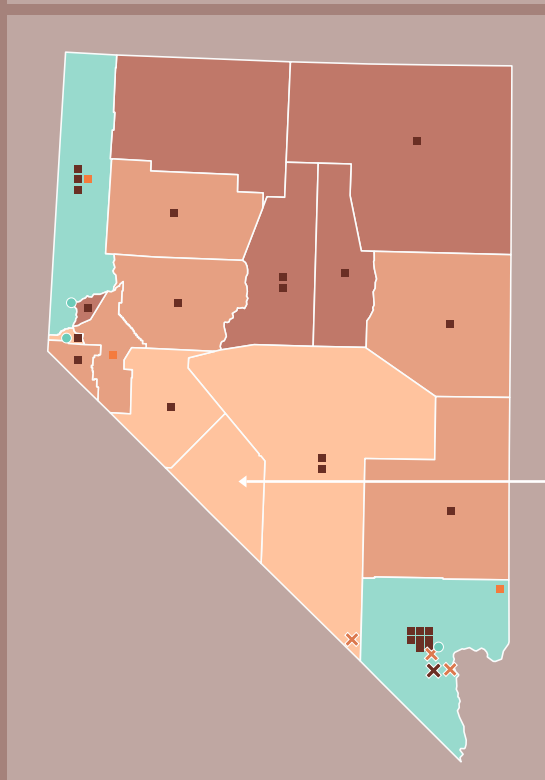
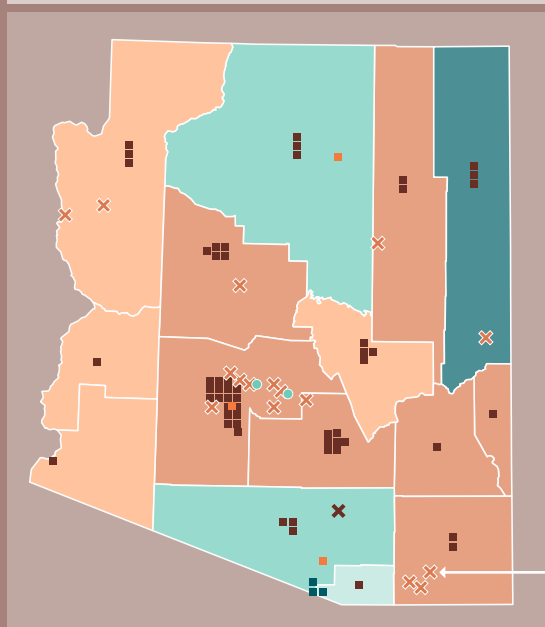
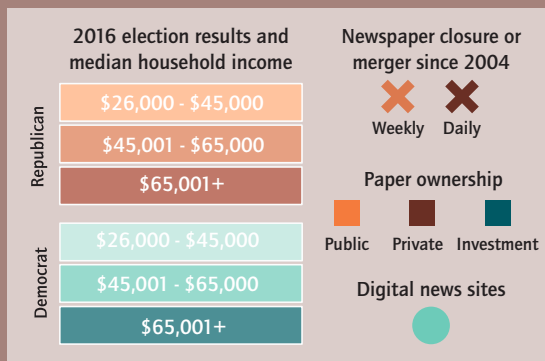
Rural areas can be hit hardest ... But many small-town papers persevere

Media chatter about the state of journalism tends to go big — big city, that is: Seattle loses a major daily; a media conglomerate lays off hundreds of people in dozens of cities; deep cuts by the *Denver Post*'s hedge-fund owners spark a mutiny. But urban news woes often have a silver lining, with nonprofits and online-only outlets replacing at least some of what was lost.

What about the newspapers and weeklies that serve the large, sparsely populated expanses of the rural West? From their cramped small-town offices, these papers serve not only as sources of information, but also community pillars — local institutions. When they fold, often after publishing every week without fail for decades, they are rarely replaced by anything more substantial than a community bulletin board on Facebook.

The Expanding News Desert report — as its name makes clear — paints a grim picture. The urban news industry might be struggling, but it has folded altogether in rural counties across the West. Yet there are still reasons to celebrate, despite the report's overall bleakness. Some of the nation's most rural areas have held on to their newspapers, and even have more than one, giving them per capita coverage unmatched by much bigger metro areas.

In small towns across the West, dozens of tiny staffs — often consisting of little more than the publisher and her spouse — pound out stories about county and town meetings, elections, weddings, births and deaths, week after week, without paid vacations, health insurance and 401(k)s, often bombarded by angry mail and ever-rising production costs. Nevertheless, they persist, even as their urban compatriots give in. JONATHAN THOMPSON

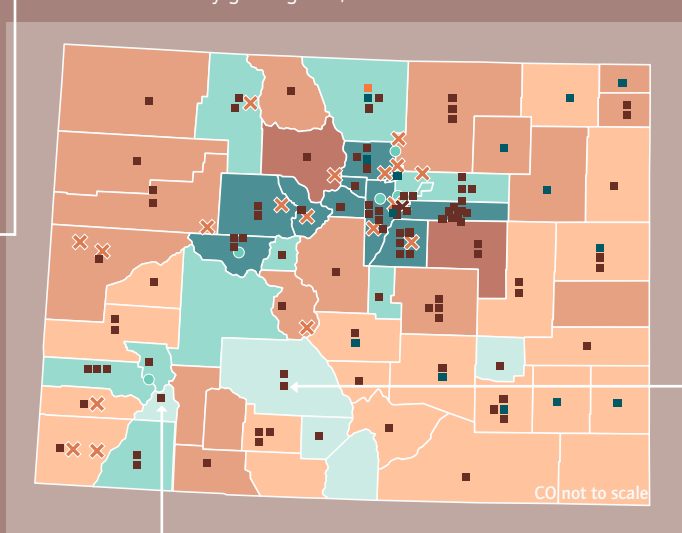


ARIZONA newspapers have taken a big hit in the last decade or so, with overall circulation sliding from 1.7 million to just 700,000.

Sometimes the death of a newspaper is celebrated as much as mourned. Witness the *Tombstone Tumbleweed*, which ceased publication in 2006 because owner Chris Simcox — founder of the Minutemen, a militant anti-immigration group, and now a convicted sex offender — was too busy harassing border-crossers and ginning up hatred to keep the paper running. Simcox, who purchased the paper in 2002, had transformed it into a mouthpiece for his "citizens border patrol" movement.

NEVADA: Circulation has remained steady at 1.3 million.

If numbers alone are any indication, Nevada's news industry is the West's healthiest. It lost only four newspapers, two weeklies and two dailies between 2004 and 2018, and its only news desert lies in Esmeralda County, which has less than one person per square mile. Newspaper circulation, meanwhile, held steady; weeklies lost a whopping 180,000 readers, a bad sign for rural areas, but dailies offset most of that by gaining 140,000 readers.



Where the news is drying up — and where it's not

UTAH's most populous county, Salt Lake, has only four newspapers, serving an average of 567,825 readers each, the lowest papers-per-capita in the West that's not considered a news desert.

Utah, with the nation's youngest population, lost 17 weeklies to closure or mergers in the last 14 years, and total overall circulation dropped by a whopping 45 percent, one of the steepest declines anywhere. The news industry officially dried up in a cluster of counties in southern Utah, but *The Insider* continues to publish weekly community news about Wayne and Garfield counties.

OREGON lost a total of 19 papers (17 weeklies and two dailies) and saw total circulation drop from 1.4 million to 790,000, or 41 percent.

Oregon has seen total newspaper readership plummet, but a number of online publications, mostly based in the Portland area, have cropped up to fill the void. The *Record-Courier* in Baker County ("From the Blue Mountains to Hells Canyon") unexpectedly fell silent in 2016 due to the publisher's failing health; it had been publishing since 1901.

NEW MEXICO lost two weeklies and three dailies and saw total circulation drop from 510,000 to 350,000 (30 percent).

Shrinking population — and revenues — left the *Raton Range* "saddled with so much debt that it would take the glory days of advertising revenue to pay it back," according to a letter from the publisher in 2013. Colfax County officially became a news desert when it shut down that year, but the *World Journal*, based just over the border in Colorado, is working to fill the void.

COLORADO: The top 25 newspaper owners nationally own 37 of the state's 121 papers.

Saguache County is large in area (3,170 square miles), small in population (6,100), and supports not one, but two newspapers. The *Saguache Crescent* is in its 137th year, and publisher, editor, reporter and pressman Dean Coombs continues to typeset the entire paper on a linotype, printing on an ancient letterpress from the cluttered offices on Saguache's main drag.

The weekly *Silverton Standard & the Miner* hasn't missed an issue since the first edition of the *La Plata Miner* rolled off the press in 1875. The paper survived the death of the mining industry and the resulting population plunge. It was bought by an outside media conglomerate in 2006, but local ownership resumed when the San Juan County Historical Society took over in 2009. It continues to serve as the paper of record for the county's 700 or so residents.

Newspaper closures, mergers and circulation 2004-2018

IDAHO

Lost 10 weeklies and one daily newspaper to closures or mergers. Newspaper circulation fell by 31 percent, from 410,000 in 2004, to 280,000 in 2018.

WASHINGTON

Lost 11 weeklies and three dailies. Circulation dropped from 2.5 million to 1.6 million, or 37 percent.

CALIFORNIA

Lost a total of 73 newspapers, (31 dailies and 42 weeklies). Circulation has plummeted from 13 million to 8 million.

WYOMING

Lost four papers, all weeklies. Circulation plunged 34 percent, from 240,000 to 150,000.

MONTANA

Lost three weeklies. Circulation dropped from 400,000 to 310,000.

ALASKA

Lost nine weeklies. and circulation dropped by more than half from 300,000 to 140,000. No online news organizations are based in Alaska.

Blooms, continued from page 15

enterprise stories. His three reporters — all new to Salem but with experience at Western newspapers — cover education, business, local government and state politics. “That’s the beauty of starting from scratch,” Zaitz said. “There’s no script for what we’re covering and how.”

The Reporter’s startup money came from a Salem real estate developer, Larry Tokarski, who reached out to Zaitz in 2017. “He asked me, ‘Why don’t you come back to Salem? We’re unhappy with the lack of local news.’” Zaitz accepted and began planning the *Reporter’s* online launch, which came on Sept. 17. “Readers have responded strongly to our brand of local journalism with encouragement, ‘Attaboys,’ and story tips,” Zaitz said. He is surprised by how many readers commit to the \$100 annual subscription fee, rather than the \$10 monthly charge. Zaitz declined to disclose the number of subscribers. However, he said, “since I planned on no paid subscribers for six months, we’re way ahead.”

A week after the *Reporter’s* debut, it joined a 4-year-old state capital bureau founded by two other Oregon companies, EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group. EO Media owns 11 newspapers, including *The Capital Press*, a regional agricultural weekly, and the *East Oregonian* in Pendleton. Pamplin owns the twice-weekly *Portland Tribune* and 24 other, mostly suburban, newspapers. Zaitz became the bureau chief. “The crew has already scored solid beats,” he said, citing stories about the Oregon secretary of State’s health issues and the two \$1 million campaign contributions a candidate for governor received.

Steve Bagwell, managing editor of the

Yamhill Valley News-Register in nearby McMinnville, has been closely watching. “My overall impression is that *The Reporter* is a much richer source of serious news content you can’t get elsewhere,” said Bagwell, an editor for *The Statesman Journal* in the 1980s. “Virtually all stories explore a serious news issue, and many of them appear to be exclusive.” *The Statesman Journal*, the established daily paper, relies instead on a much broader range of material, Bagwell said, including sports and feature content, and has made no noticeable changes in coverage in response to its new competition. Zaitz said, “I could be imagining this, but the local daily appears much quicker on the trigger on breaking news. Now, it feels more like a true horse race to see who can get there first.”

BREAK FREE, START FRESH

At nearly the same time *The Reporter* went live in Salem, *The Colorado Sun* debuted in Denver. *The Sun*, staffed by former reporters and editors of *The Denver Post*, joins a much more crowded media mix in Colorado’s capital city. The nonprofit *Sun’s* emergence was closely followed, because it began with a startup grant from the Civil Media Company, which describes itself as “the decentralized marketplace for sustainable journalism.” Civil’s public offering of cryptocurrency (called tokens) to support independent news ventures fell short of expectations in late October, but the company’s marketing director, Matt Coolidge, said that won’t affect funding for *The Sun* or a dozen other journalistic ventures supported by Civil. (None of the others are in the West.) Civil provided a startup grant to *The Sun* but is not involved in its operations. “We’re not looking for any

kind of profit from the *Sun*,” Coolidge said. “These are pure grants.”

The Sun must find its niche in a crowded marketplace, which includes *The Post’s* print and online editions, the established alternative weekly, *Westword* (see page 6); newer digital start-ups like *The Colorado Independent* and *The Denverite*, and specialty websites like *Chalkbeat Colorado*, which covers education, and *The Athletic*, which focuses on sports. Is there even room in the mix for another online publication? *Sun* Editor Larry Ryckman thinks so. “We decided early on that we are not trying to recreate *The Denver Post*,” said Ryckman, who leads a staff of 10 reporters and editors who left the *Post* this year. “*The Sun* aims to do deep, meaningful stories that others can’t do, or can’t do as much of because of staff cuts, or won’t do. Our focus is bringing understanding to people, places and politics of Colorado.”

University of Colorado journalism professor Pat Ferrucci says *The Sun* has so far succeeded in that goal. When a new outlet is started by people who formerly worked at legacy media organizations, they tend to imitate the coverage of their previous organization, he said. “From my reading of the first month of *The Sun*, they’re covering things a bit differently,” at greater length and with more context, Ferrucci said. For example, a feature about how Colorado’s ski resorts make snow during drought years connected an environmental issue to the state’s economy.

Meanwhile, *Denver Post* Editor Lee Ann Colacioppo says that while her paper has weathered some tough years, it continues to support one of Colorado’s largest news operations, and the paper is now filling vacant positions. “We are bringing in people who wanted to be at

Larry Ryckman, who started *The Colorado Sun* along with other former *Denver Post* reporters and editors, outside the downtown Denver building where he once worked. Earlier this year, the *Post* vacated the building and relocated to its printing plant in the suburbs. Below right, *Denver Post* Editor Lee Ann Colacioppo, center, talks with journalists in the *Post’s* new office.

LUNA ANNA ARCHIEY/
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS





Lynda Mapes, longtime environmental reporter for the *Seattle Times*, on a NOAA vessel with researchers who are studying southern resident killer whales in Central Puget Sound, November 2018. STEVE RINGMAN/THE SEATTLE TIMES

The Post and are excited to work at a paper of this size," she said.

The Post continues to excel in its coverage of Colorado politics, energy issues, housing and real estate and recreation, she said. Critical coverage of its owner, a hedge-fund company called Alden Capital, and the high-profile resignation of the paper's editorial-page editor, led to a per-

ception that *The Post* was dying. "We are anything but," Colacioppo said. "Being able to reimagine who we were brought new life to the place." The paper remains committed to covering breaking news and major enterprise stories, she said.

Corey Hutchins, journalist in residence at Colorado College, said that the new hires at the *Post*, especially those covering politics, led to better coverage of the 2018 election. "It's kind of a bizarre twist to the new startup story," said Hutchins, who writes about media issues for *Columbia Journalism Review* and *The Colorado Independent*. "In a weird way, the hedge fund that owns the *Post* is responsible for all this bloodletting inadvertently created *more* political reporting in Colorado."

Alden Capital, which operates newspapers through its Digital First Media company, has faced deep criticism, including vocal protests from former employees, for the deep cuts it has made to newsrooms. The UNC report, in a chapter titled "The Enduring Legacy of Our New Media Barons," documented Digital First's path of acquisitions, mergers, closures and cost-cutting. At last count, the company owns 158 newspapers in 12 states — down from 208 papers just four years earlier. California has 76 Digital First papers (23 dailies and 53 weeklies), the most of any state, while Colorado has eight dailies and eight weeklies. Company-wide circulation fell by one-third, from 4.6 million to 3.2 million, in that same period, according to the UNC report, as readers let subscriptions lapse or simply lost interest in

the slimmed-down product.

Ryckman says the *Colorado Sun* is eager to promote good local journalism "wherever we find it," even at his former employer, the *Denver Post*. "News is no longer a zero-sum game," he explained. "Complement is the new compete."

STAY TRUE TO YOUR ROOTS — AND YOUR BEATS

This summer, Lynda Mapes' beat took her from Puget Sound to the Palouse hills of eastern Washington. These two locations are linked by chinook salmon, essential food for the orcas of the Salish Sea. The chinook's spawning grounds are hundreds of miles inland, on tributaries of the Columbia and Snake rivers, so the fate of the salmon plays into a larger regional debate over agriculture, barge traffic on the rivers and hydroelectric power generation.

An environmental reporter for *The Seattle Times* since 1997, Mapes has considerable expertise about the region's endangered species and a rich network of sources to draw from. Since July, her coverage has focused on the plight of the southern resident family of orcas, iconic marine mammals that symbolize Seattle's special relationship to the Pacific Ocean.

So when Orca J35 — locally known as "Tahlequah" — carried her dead calf on her head for 17 days before rejoining her pod, Mapes was on the scene almost from the beginning, reporting from Friday Harbor on San Juan Island and racing to file stories across choppy waters, on small boats and ferries—even an inflatable

"We decided early on that we are not trying to recreate *The Denver Post*. *The Sun* aims to do deep, meaningful stories that others can't do, or can't do as much of because of staff cuts, or won't do."

—Larry Ryckman, editor of *The Colorado Sun*, started by former *Denver Post* reporters and editors



No News is Bad News for Public Health

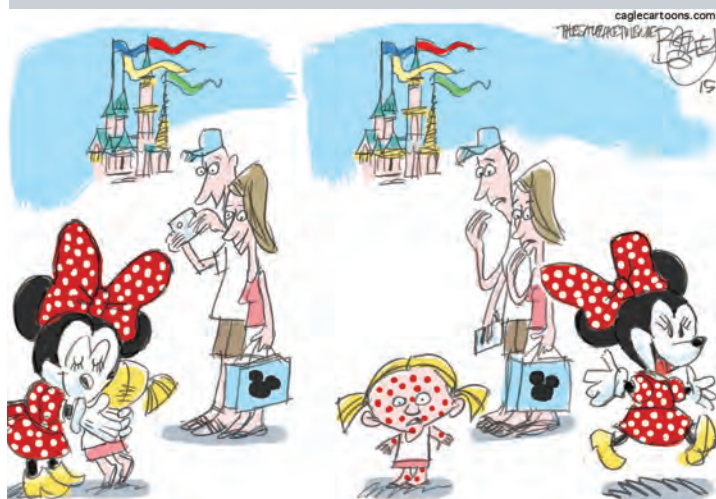
Every holiday season, tens of thousands of people flock to Southern California's Disneyland Resort to see the holiday light displays and the jolly costumed characters. But just days before Christmas 2014, an uninvited visitor stalked the park: measles. Within a month, more than 50 cases had spread across the nation. As public health experts worked to trace the outbreak, they looked to local news coverage to help understand how it spread.

"Local news agencies often know before a state department of public health does about an outbreak going on in their neighborhood," said Maimuna Majumder, a fellow at Harvard University's Health Policy Data Science lab, who used local media reports to track the measles outbreak and model the impact that vaccination rates had on its spread. As local newsrooms shrink and shutter, researchers have a harder time tracking outbreaks and communicating public health warnings.

Majumder's work is part of a 12-year-old program called Health Map, which scours the internet to provide up-to-the-minute information on disease outbreaks. During the 2014 measles outbreak, Majumder said, local media sources had more frequent counts on disease cases than public health agencies, and they gave researchers important context about the communities where outbreaks occurred. And after the Zika outbreak in 2016, researchers at Stony Brook University compared how *The New York Times* and *Tampa Bay Times* covered the spreading disease. They concluded that the local paper was more than twice as likely to provide readers with information about how to protect themselves from the disease.

In rural areas that already struggle with doctor shortages, the loss of rural news also cuts into readers' knowledge of important health issues. "When you talk about outbreaks, it's crucial local journalists get the information out," said Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at John Hopkins University Center for Health Security.

Without a local paper, more people are relying on social media. "There's no information vacuum in today's media world, because it's been filled with social media," said Yotam Ophir, a health communication researcher at University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. But that can be one of the biggest problems during disease outbreaks, because "social media during epidemics is full of misinformation and rumors." On the other hand, he said, "A responsible news reporter, who has dedicated her life to health reporting, can weed out misinformation." CARL SEGERSTROM



The *Salt Lake Tribune* included a Pat Bagley cartoon as part of its coverage of the Disneyland measles outbreak.

PAT BAGLEY/THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE VIA CAGLECARTOONS.COM

Zodiac raft. At times, she had to text her copy from a cellphone. ("I'm lucky; I don't get seasick," Mapes told me.)

Mapes was uniquely qualified to report on this story, says Don Shelton, *The Times'* executive editor. "Her coverage of the mother orca resonated locally, regionally and worldwide because of the depth of her knowledge and her hard work."

The enormous public interest in J35 and her calf kept Mapes on the story for weeks. Shelton said the orcas captivated readers around the world. From July 24 to Aug. 7, *The Times'* coverage drew 3.32 million page views, 1,273 story comments and 1.31 million interactions on Facebook.

But the work of a beat reporter is never done, and the death of a 3-year-old orca, J50, in mid-September — the third casualty in four months, renewed questions about the future of the Salish Sea's orca population, which has dropped to 74 individuals. To help readers better understand the decline, Mapes traveled to Garfield County in southeastern Washington. There, she examined the arguments for and against removing four dams on the lower Snake River, where salmon and steelhead populations — a major source of food for orcas — have fallen dramatically.

Interviewing representatives of farm groups, the Bonneville Power Administration and the Nez Perce Tribe, Mapes provided a comprehensive yet concise overview of the dams versus salmon debate. Climate change has contributed to declining salmon populations, she wrote, but the scientific consensus increasingly supports removing the dams.

Rocky Barker, an *HCN* contributor who recently retired after 22 years as an environmental reporter for *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise, closely follows Mapes' reporting. "The reason so many people care about the orcas is because of her amazing work," he said. "She is a great storyteller, knows her subject so well and puts in details that other people miss." Earlier this year, Barker and Mapes traveled around the Northwest together, giving programs titled "Tale of Two Rivers." Mapes described the removal of a dam on the Elwha River in western Washington, while Barker assessed the prospects for breaching the Snake River dams.

That kind of in-depth knowledge and beat reporting makes a difference. Rachel Clark, a writer and educator in Moscow, Idaho, praised Mapes' commitment to the orca story. "Because of her instrumental role at a large regional newspaper, she is able to reach the audiences necessary to generate the public outcry we need to save this highly endangered populations of whales — and the ecosystem they, and we, depend on."

And that kind of knowledge is hard-earned. Mapes spent five years as the Olympia correspondent for *The (Spokane) Spokesman-Review* before moving to *The Times* to cover science, the environment and tribal nations. The key to her success? "Being there, wherever 'there' is,"

she said. "It is the only way to ever really know anything. Otherwise, I feel like I am listening through a wall."

Mapes found the orca story particularly challenging. She spent hours on boats with whale-watching scientists, who had to be "the right kind of scientists for whom their work required getting close to the whales." Tahlequah's saga was emotionally and physically draining, too, she said. "All those stories were like that — chasing daylight and deadlines and cell service."

Beat reporting is fundamental to legacy media like *The Seattle Times*, which was founded in 1891 and is now the dominant newspaper in the Northwest, with a daily circulation of about 200,000 and a Sunday circulation of 270,000. It has been controlled since 1896 by the Blethen family, which owns 50.5 percent of the company's stock. Mapes praised the family's commitment to independent journalism. "It sounds corny, but local ownership is our secret sauce," Mapes said.

EMBRACE HEALTHY COMPETITION

Where the sagebrush of the Snake River Plain meets the foothills of the central Idaho mountains, a 21st century boomtown is the scene of the West's latest, and possibly last, showdown between two printed daily newspapers.

Unlike similar-sized cities, which have seen papers close, merge or slash news staffs, Idaho's capital city, Boise, is enjoying a journalism revival. The *Idaho Press*, based 21 miles away, in Nampa, has claimed a beachhead in Boise, challenging the long-dominant *Idaho Statesman* on its home turf.

"Only a handful of towns have competing dailies, and we're lucky to be one of them," says Seth Ashley, an associate professor of communication at Boise State University. Since June, several thousand Boise residents have snapped up \$10-per-month subscriptions for home delivery of the *Idaho Press*.

Boise and Nampa are part of the Treasure Valley, where nearly 40 percent of Idaho's 1.68 million people live, in two counties along Interstate 84. Boise was tagged by *Forbes* in early 2018 as the fastest-growing city in the United States, its growth driven in part by tech workers fleeing high housing prices elsewhere in the West.

The newspaper rivalry pits two national media chains against each other. California-based McClatchy acquired *The Statesman* in 2006 when it bought Knight-Ridder's 32 papers. The Seattle-based Pioneer News Group sold what was then the *Idaho Press-Tribune* and several other Idaho papers to the Adams Publishing Group of Minneapolis in 2017. (The West's only other similar two-newspaper city is Salt Lake, where the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Deseret News* share advertising, production and circulation staffs under one of the last joint-operating agreements in the country.)

A collaborative relationship between

The Statesman (founded in 1864) and *Idaho Press-Tribune* (whose history goes back to 1883) soured within a few months of *The Press-Tribune's* ownership change. Now, *The Press*, renamed in mid-summer as part of its planned expansion into Boise, aggressively promotes its six-day-per-week print edition with the slogan, "Local news worth holding." The seven-day-a-week *Statesman* emphasizes breaking news online while reserving its print edition for longer features and enterprise stories. So far, *The Statesman* enjoys a commanding lead in circulation, reporting 32,733 subscribers in September, compared to *The Press's* 18,064. But *The Press's* latest report showed it added nearly 3,000 more subscribers over the 12-month average.

Economic necessity drives each paper's strategy. After Adams bought *The Press-Tribune*, McClatchy asked the Nampa paper to lower the charge for printing the *Statesman*. When Adams refused, the *Statesman* found a new printer — the *Times-News* of Twin Falls, Idaho, owned by another chain, Lee Enterprises.

Printing in Twin Falls, 132 miles away, forced *The Statesman* to move up its deadlines. Any story coming in after 7:30 p.m. now must wait until the next print cycle. In sports-crazy Boise, where the Boise State Broncos finished their 2018 regular season with a 10-3 record, some readers complained that the outcome of late-night Saturday football games didn't appear in print until Monday. That may not have made a difference to the fans who watched the games live or followed online, but it likely didn't help print readership.

"People are agnostic to the way they get their news and information," says *The Statesman's* publisher, Rebecca Poynter, downplaying concerns about the earlier deadlines. "Where it's printed doesn't have any impact on the product."

Meanwhile, losing *The Statesman* contract left *The Press-Tribune* with surplus press capacity. *Press-Tribune* President and Publisher Matt Davison said his division president asked: "How are you going to make up the revenue?" That led to the decision to open a Boise bureau and hire Betsy Russell, one of the state's leading political reporters, to head it. "Betsy's hiring turned heads and made people realize that Adams was serious about covering Boise in a way they hadn't before," said Don Day, who edits *BoiseDev*, a website that covers business in the city. (Day licenses some *BoiseDev* content to the *Idaho Press*.)

Russell, who had served as a one-person Boise bureau for Spokane's *Spokesman-Review* since 1995, now supervises three reporters covering city government, county government and courts. "They're tearing it up," Russell says of her colleagues. "How many journalists can say they are part of a growing operation that's adding print subscribers every day?"

Three months after hiring Russell, *The Press* bought the 26-year-old *Boise*



Downtown Boise after the *Idaho Press*, from nearby Nampa, expanded into Boise and purchased the *Boise Weekly*.

JUSTIN BARNES/
UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO

Weekly, which has a prime downtown Boise location. *The Weekly* is now inserted into the Thursday edition of *The Press*. So far, *The Weekly* has kept an independent editorial staff, concentrating on arts and culture, while *The Press* focuses on government, politics and public issues.

Both publications see the competition as beneficial. "I love being in a vibrant media community — it keeps all of us on our toes," said Poynter, who arrived in Boise in April. Davison, at the helm of *The Press* since 2010, agrees. "Provide a great local news product and you will earn readers," he said. "Boise has welcomed us with open arms."

DESPAIR NOT

Which of these strategies will work best, or whether new models will appear and survive the encroaching desert, remains to be seen. But UNC's Abernathy is encouraged by the digital startups providing local news, with more than 500 identified in her team's report. Still, she notes that 90 percent of those are in metropolitan areas, where there are multiple news outlets to choose from — not in the rural areas, where local reporters are few and far between. It's not clear how many of the new digital startups and nonprofit news outlets are sustainable, particularly if they depend on subscriptions, donations, busi-

ness sponsorships and foundation grants.

In Arizona, where the Gannett-owned *Tucson Citizen* was a casualty of the recession, the online *Tucson Sentinel* is approaching its ninth anniversary. Editor and publisher Dylan Smith, who worked at the *Citizen* until May 16, 2009, the day it stopped printing, said it hasn't been easy. "Unlike the common perception of nonprofit news sites, we haven't got huge foundation support," he said. What the *Sentinel* has is support from readers, local donors and small businesses — "people who understand and appreciate good local journalism."

Smith is also a founder and board chair of LION, Local Independent Online News, whose annual conference in Chicago this fall attracted several hundred current and aspiring news entrepreneurs. Smith was heartened by the success stories he heard there. "One attendee was struck by how this conference is positive, with people looking to the future, while other industry conferences are stuck in a doom-and-gloom, how-do-we-survive mode." Smith doesn't deny the challenges facing the media today. But the payoff, he believes, is worth it. Journalists thrive on the sense of a job well done in the face of obstacles. As Smith puts it: "We've managed to punch above our weight, doing excellent reporting — kicking ass and taking names." □



IDAHO PHOTO SERVICES

Kenton Bird spent 15 years as a newspaper reporter and editor. He teaches journalism at the University of Idaho and is a former director of UI's School of Journalism and Mass Media.

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

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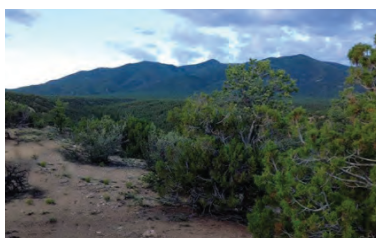
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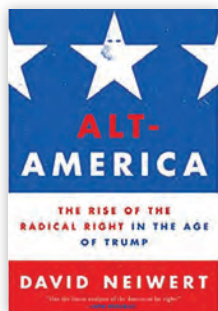
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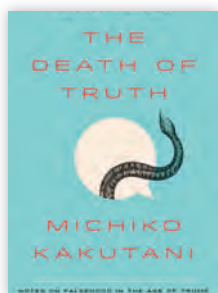
Welcome to the Alt-American West

Without facts, we're all tumbling through a kaleidoscope of realities

BY BRIAN CALVERT



Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump
David Neiwert
464 pages,
softcover: \$16.95
Verso; reprint edition, 2018.



The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump
Michiko Kakutani
208 pages,
hardcover: \$22
Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

"In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that 'facts' existed and were more or less discoverable. It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal, that totalitarianism destroys."—George Orwell

"Who cares whether they laugh at us or insult us, treating us as fools or criminals? The point is that they talk about us and constantly think about us."—Adolf Hitler

Last month, on the Friday after Thanksgiving, the federal government released the second volume of its *Fourth National Climate Assessment*, warning that global warming increasingly threatens our nation's environment, our health and our prosperity. When asked the following Monday to comment on the assessment, the product of 13 government agencies and 300 scientists, President Donald Trump said simply: "I don't believe it."

That same day, Alex Jones' conspiracy-fueled website, *Infowars*, cited a tweet by the president — "Brutal and Extended Cold Blast could shatter ALL RECORDS — Whatever happened to Global Warming?" — to attack the report, impugning its researchers as potential "connivers for the United Nations' carbon tax scam ... shilling to fund Agenda 21 totalitarianism hysteria." And just like that, the president had all the rhetorical cover he needed to justify his anti-environmental policies.

Welcome to Alt-America, a topsy-turvy world of conspiracy theories, half-baked ideas and "alternative facts," where trolls are real and news is fake, where facts don't matter, and lies don't either. This shadow realm was a favorite haunt of Donald Trump before he ran for president, and gained greater prominence with his election. We all live in Alt-America now, awash in its alternative realities, propaganda and the kind of doublespeak that George Orwell made famous in his 1949 novel, *1984*, so it's probably a good time to ask how we got here, and where it all leads.

In *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, journalist and author David Neiwert charts the emergence of alternative realities and their spread across extremist groups. This, he argues, primed the electorate for

the rise of Trump and has buoyed him ever since. Neiwert traces this contingent of the president's supporters back to the 1990s Patriot movement — a collage of antigovernment groups — and the rise of online misogynists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis and other manifestations of extremism.

From its beginning, the Patriot movement promoted white supremacy, Christian identity and conspiracy theories, fearing FEMA-sponsored concentration camps, black helicopter surveillance, a New World Order and chemtrails. Patriot ideology fractured like light through a prism with the rise of right-wing radio, conservative cable TV and the internet — what David Foster Wallace called "a kaleidoscope of information options." The more available these options became, the less the public was able to debate the facts. Ultimately, the improbable ideas of paranoiacs made their way into mainstream political conversations, online and at the table.

The Patriots and other fringe groups have since thrived. They have myriad manifestations — Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, sovereign citizens, border militias, constitutional sheriffs — but the movement still draws strength from "a deep vein of antigovernment sentiment that had been simmering among conservatives for many years," Neiwert writes. In August 2016, when candidate Trump suggested that the "Second Amendment people" do something about his opponent, Hillary Clinton, he was appealing to this group, showing that once-inconceivable political speech is now viable, even advantageous.

As Alt-America emerged, so did its Western corollary. Neiwert spends two full chapters on Patriot-supported stand-offs between the Bundys and the feds. He recalls the racist speeches of Cliven Bundy outside Bunkerville, Nevada, where the elder Bundy suggested "the Negro" may have been better off as a slave. Here, Neiwert correctly links the white supremacist roots of the Patriot movement to its resurgence under President Barack Obama, the nation's first black president. (Donald Trump's first foray into alt-politics was his relentless support of the so-called "birther" conspiracy, which claimed President Barack Obama was not a U.S. citizen.)

Neiwert links this kind of alternative thinking with Bundyism, the ideology that brought about the Nevada standoff; the siege of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon; the illegal "protest" ride of ATVs through Utah's Recapture

Canyon; and the militia-vs.-government conflicts over the Sugar Pine and White Hope mines, in Oregon and Montana.

These are all versions of alternate reality, self-reinforcing and powerful. "The Internet made possible alternative universes such as the one inhabited by the adherents of the Patriot movement, or Alex Jones's conspiracy milieu: constructed of fabrications based on fragments, interacting with others' shared realities but operating almost entirely within its own framework," Neiwert writes. "It began as a relatively small world limited largely to a fringe in the 1990s, but was resilient and grew steadily as the new century advanced. In the end, it gave birth not just to the alt-right but also to the much larger universe of Alt-America."

Where does this lead? Nowhere good. As journalist and literary critic Michiko Kakutani writes in *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, we now live in a place where "truth increasingly seems to be in the eye of the beholder, facts are fungible and socially constructed, and we often feel as if we've been transported to an upside-down world where assumptions and alignments in place for decades have suddenly been turned inside out."

This helps explain why, she writes, "47 percent of Republicans erroneously believe that Trump won the popular vote, 68 percent believe that millions of illegal immigrants voted in 2016, and more than half of Republicans say they would be okay with postponing the 2020 presidential election until such problems with illegal voting can be fixed," and why "25 percent of Americans believe that the 2008 (financial) crash was secretly orchestrated by a small cabal of bankers, 19 percent believe that the U.S. government had a hand in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and 11 percent even believe a theory made up by the researchers — that compact fluorescent lightbulbs were part of a government plot to make people more passive and easy to control."

These falsehoods gave rise to Trump, yes, but Trump is not the water, he's a big ol' catfish, and Kakutani gracefully describes the murky pond we all share with him. Some of this mental gunk comes from the passive intake of alternate reality through social media, but some is the active work of populists. One of their more insidious efforts, as Kakutani describes it, is "the populist Right's appropriation of postmodernist arguments and its embrace of the philosophi-

cal repudiation of objectivity — schools of thought affiliated for decades with the Left and with the very elite academic circles that Trump and company scorn.” These efforts “deny an objective reality existing independently from human perception” and have attacked scientific theories as socially constructed, “informed by the identity of the person positing the theory and the values of the culture in which they are formed; therefore, science cannot possibly make claims to neutrality or universal truths.”

When Trump says he doesn’t “believe” the U.S. government’s own climate assessment, he is asserting that his belief is what matters. It’s a common mode now, feeling over fact, part of mainstream Republican thought, and easy to spot. Consider the following exchange, recounted by Kakutani, between CNN anchor Alisyn Camerota and GOP operative Newt Gingrich, at the 2016 Republican National Convention.

“The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics which theoretically may be right, but it’s not where human beings are,” Gingrich said, in defense of Trump’s law-and-order remarks. “People are frightened. People feel that their government has abandoned them.”

When Camerota pointed out that statistics showing that the country was more

safe, not less, weren’t “liberal numbers,” but rather compiled by the FBI, Gingrich countered: “No, but what I said is equally true. People feel it.”

Here, then, is the real danger. Right now, we live in a country not only fueled by raw emotions, but steered by them as well. This can be dangerous on either extreme of the political spectrum, but today it’s coming from far-right populism. People *feel* that immigrants are taking jobs, that America is unsafe and sullied. They *believe* that America was once great, with its white ruling class and people in their proper places. They *feel* afraid, and so have thrown open the door to authoritarianism. This distortion permits the president to co-opt terms like “fake news,” or to attack journalists as “enemies of the people,” invoking, incredibly, a term used by Lenin, Stalin and the genocidal leaders of the Khmer Rouge, at no political cost. It emboldens a president who lies for the “same reason that Vladimir Putin lies,” according to journalist Masha Gessen: “to assert power over truth itself.”

Suddenly, comparisons to 1984 (Amazon’s bestselling book in the month before Trump’s inauguration) cut too close for comfort. Kakutani quotes 1984 at length, as it describes how “the party and Big Brother exert control over reality” by controlling speeches, statistics and records, so

that “no change in doctrine or in political alignment can ever be admitted. For to change one’s mind, or even one’s policy, is a confession of weakness. ... Thus history is continuously rewritten.”

Compare that fiction to reality, Kakutani suggests, when, after Trump’s Inauguration, “changes were being made to the climate change pages on the White House website,” as environmental activists “were frantically trying to download and archive government climate data — worried that it might be destroyed or lost or hidden by a hostile administration. Some of their fears were realized later in 2017, when the EPA announced that its website was ‘undergoing changes that reflect the agency’s new direction,’ including this Orwellian phrase: ‘updating language to reflect the approach of new leadership.’” Thus history is rewritten.

That was more than a year ago, a very long time in Alt-America. Today, the president doesn’t need to scrub information from his government’s websites. Why bother? *The Fourth National Climate Assessment* was required by law and therefore unavoidable, undertaken in good faith by public servants and scientists who still believe in facts and reality. None of that matters, though, because “I don’t believe it” is the only fact the great leader needs. □

A misinformation newsstand set up by the Columbia Journalism Review in the lead-up to the U.S. midterm elections aimed to educate news consumers about the dangers of actual “fake news.”

ANGELA WEISS/AFP/
GETTY IMAGES



The union wins in the end

How the Los Angeles Times went from union-busting to media role model



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY RUXANDRA
GUIDI

Harrison Gray Otis, the first publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* (known as the *Los Angeles Daily Times* in the 1880s), was widely known for his combative conservative politics and anti-labor views. The Ohio-born Republican and Civil War veteran, whose legendary motto was “You’re either with me or against me,” saw labor organizing as an obstacle to the success of his corporate holdings — and his adoptive city.

In 1910, Otis’ anti-union editorials and proclamations made him a highly visible target. In the early morning hours of an October day, a dynamite explosion destroyed about half of the paper’s headquarters in downtown Los Angeles. Twenty-one people were killed in the explosion and fire, including linotypers, telegraph operators and engravers.

The next morning’s headline exclaimed: “Unionist bombs wreck the *Times*.”

“I wanted the whole building to go to hell,” said J.B. McNamara, a member of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, which helped orchestrate more than 100 bombings targeting anti-union leaders across the country. “I am sorry so many people were killed. I hoped to get Gen. Otis.”

Today, 137 years after the paper’s founding, its employees have embraced the very philosophy that Otis fought so bitterly: Unionization. Cutbacks over the past two decades have emptied the newsroom, threatening the survival of one of the country’s most widely read legacy papers. The push for unionization could save reporters’ jobs, yes, but backers also hope it’ll help the paper better serve its city at a time of widespread declines in local news coverage.

“For the past 10 years, it’s been the workers, not the owners, who are preserving the legacy of the *Los Angeles Times*,” the paper’s national reporter, Matt Pearce, told the *Columbia Journalism Review*, a few months before the union was voted in. “We’re the dominant publication in the most populous, wealthiest state in the country, one that is driving the direction of the country in many ways.”

The city of Los Angeles was defined by its “open shops” — nonunionized workplaces — during the early part of the 20th century, with many crediting them for the fast growth and success of local industries, from manufacturing to film. The *Los Angeles Times* thrived, too: By 1995, the paper had won its 20th Pulitzer Prize. But as the new millennium dawned, it became clear that the old bonanza years were over. Growth slowed, and the paper’s staff shrank. In 2000, the *LA Times* announced its sale to media conglomerate Tribune Co. In response, the staff organized for job security and better pay; between 1990 and 2002, journalists tried to start a union six different times.

Longstanding resentments between reporters and the paper’s managers and owners fed the push for unionization. A rotating door of editors tried to reshape the newsroom even as owners announced hiring freezes and staff cuts. Then, in December

2017, Michael Ferro, the largest shareholder of Tronc, the former Tribune Co., gave himself a payout of \$5 million — which would have covered a year’s worth of salaries for more than 60 journalists — even as Tronc announced a new wave of layoffs. The much-publicized payout sent a clear signal that the constant downsizing had less to do with declines in revenue than with maximizing profits and keeping shareholders happy.

“Last year was the annus horribilis of the media industry here,” Carolina Miranda, co-chair of the *LA Times* Guild and a staff writer focused on the arts, told me. “The *LA Times* was under fire from Tronc, and the *LA Weekly* got sold and vaporized from one day to the next.” All this left scars on the city: “How do you have a major city function without a significant news organization covering it, and not just holding institutions accountable, but also doing the profiles and social critiques that make for a lively urban center?” she said.

So, for over a year, the majority of the *LA Times*’ 500 staff members came together to fight for the paper’s health as well as their own needs: job protections, better wages and wage equity for women and journalists of color — who were underpaid by thousands of dollars a year — along with a masthead that reflected the diversity of LA itself.

Last Jan. 4, 85 percent of the newsroom voted to form a union, and on June 18, Tronc sold the paper to Patrick Soon-Shiong, inventor of the cancer drug Abraxane and a philanthropist worth about \$6.8 billion. Soon-Shiong, who described the paper as “a shadow of its former self,” went on to hire more than two dozen new staffers, a move that even the union-hating Otis may well have supported.

The paper’s sale and the move to unionize represent important wins during a time of ever-tighter deadlines and a range of new challenges, with the White House loudly denouncing journalists as the “enemy of the people.” The *LA Times* journalists join the ranks of other unionized media, including *The New York Times*, Thomson Reuters, Time Inc. and *The Washington Post*. Other newsrooms from Wyoming and Montana to New York are in the middle of their own unionization fights.

And while the old newspaper glory days may be a thing of the past, reporters remain determined to do their jobs and keep the public informed. “Now we need to do a much better job communicating to readers what we do and what we need to serve them well,” said Miranda. “We really need to speak up.” □

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Ruxandra Guidi is a contributing editor at *High Country News*. She writes from Los Angeles, California.

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ALASKA

Tomasz Sulczynski's behavior after the recent 7.0 magnitude earthquake shattered the highway and sent his vehicle into an instantly created 10-foot sinkhole says a lot about the intestinal fortitude of Alaskans. The 46-year-old and his girlfriend, Rebecca Taylor, were making the four-hour drive from Homer to the airport in Anchorage when the earthquake struck. He held the wheel as everything rocked and rolled around them and gaping holes opened up. Sulczynski's reaction? "It was all so surreal and happened so fast," he told *The New York Times*, "there was no time to get scared." The couple abandoned their car, climbed out of the hole, picked their way across the highway, which had been reduced to a tumble of slanting concrete slabs, and calmly hitched a ride to the airport. They even made their flight. "Many in the state reacted gleefully to the story: That is so Alaskan." Sulczynski's description on Facebook was matter-of-fact: "Driving to Anchorage didn't quite go as planned!" The earthquake was the biggest to shake the state in 50 years.

ARIZONA

Sometimes elected officials say the strangest things. Now, thanks to the *Phoenix New Times*, we've learned that state Republican Rep. David Stringer dislikes anybody whose skin is not only dark to begin with but stubbornly stays that way. In a talk to university students recorded six months ago, the Prescott lawmaker complained that "African-Americans and other racial groups don't ... blend in" after coming to the United States and that, unlike immigrants of European descent, they "always look different." *The Arizona Republic* noted that Stringer has also been known to complain that "there weren't enough white kids to go around in the state's public schools." Stringer, who recently won re-election to the Arizona House, has called immigration "an existential threat."

COLORADO

A recent obituary in the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* tells the story of a kind, patriotic and pie-loving immigrant and her family. Nancy C. Walter, whose parents came to the U.S. from Italy, died recently in western Colorado, aged 95. She was the first in her family to be born in America. The oldest of eight, she had to leave



ARIZONA ... *para todos*. GREG WOODALL

high school before graduating to help support the family. Her obituary describes how she worked in an ammunition plant during World War II as a "Rosie the Riveter" and later became a beloved hostess at several restaurants, who always "made people feel important." "Nonna," as her grand-, great-grand- and great-great-grandchildren called her, finally earned her GED at age 67, though she didn't retire until she was 79. She made pies for her family and many friends, and loved "Jesus, dancing" and serving people "with love."

IDAHO

More than a dozen teachers and staff at Middleton Heights elementary school, 30 miles from Boise, Idaho, thought it would be hilarious if they donned stereotypical sombreros, mustaches, maracas and ponchos for Halloween, while others held up a cardboard wall that read:

"Make America Great Again." Once pictures of the stunt appeared on social media, district Superintendent Josh Middleton apologized publicly and placed the revelers on paid administrative leave, reports the *Washington Post*. "I want to say we are better than this," he said. Staffers were later reinstated, no longer in costume.

COLORADO

An anti-baby boom is stalking Colorado, or so says the *Denver Post*. Eschewing parenthood is a national trend, but Colorado's downturn happened faster than elsewhere, and the state now ranks eighth for the largest fertility rate decline. The paper queried 350 millennials to learn their reasons for remaining childless. By far the biggest concern was financial, followed by yearning for independence, worry about climate change, and the desire to reach personal goals such as career advancement and more education. Yet the apparent dip might just be delay, said demographer Jean Stevenson, who teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder. As one woman put it, "Maybe I'll hit 35 and think this is the biggest meaning in life and I don't want to miss out on that."

THE WEST

In the "Don't try this at home" category, a man housesitting for his parents in Fresno, California, made news last fall when he used a blowtorch to kill a nest of black widow spiders. The blowtorch ignited a fire that extensively damaged the 4,000-square-foot home, reports KSFN-TV. The blowtorch-wielder did not know that breeding spiders — a niche market, to be sure — can be surprisingly lucrative. In Washington state, the *Kitsap Daily News* reports that when Lauren Weiss posted on Facebook that she was selling young tarantulas, 15 people responded, a couple of them fellow tarantula hobbyists. Weiss said the fuzzy creatures — the arachnids, not the hobbyists — need little to be happy, just a misty environment and a crunchy "roach or a cricket once a week." In two years, she added, no tarantula had ever tried to bite her.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos [#heardaroundthewest](https://www.instagram.com/heardaroundthewest) on Instagram.



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