

COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT



ANNUAL REPORT | 2019

My work is
to...

LOVE:

How local media
inform people as to how
to meet others who share
COMMON CONCERNS.

My work is
to...
community.

FOCUS

My work is
to...
community.

My work is
to...
community.



LOCAL NEWS IS A PUBLIC GOOD.

This has been the mantra of the Colorado Media Project since we launched at the beginning of 2019 as a three-year campaign to rally community support for local news.

Our work in 2019 demonstrated that a broad range of community members care deeply about the future of local news. We also learned that news outlets ranging from legacy newspapers to digital start-ups hunger to build **capacity**, connect with **community**, and increase **collaboration**. CMP focused during the year on promoting these three 'C's.' What we observed and learned gave us hope, even as the skies around us darkened.

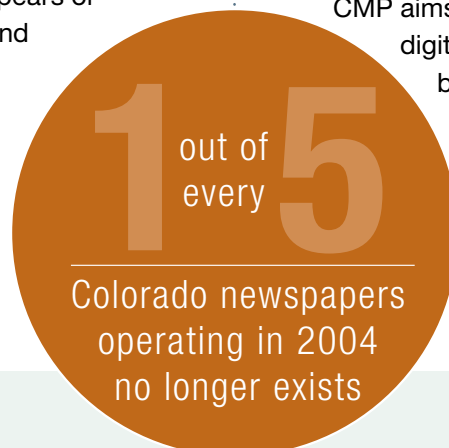
Research conducted over the past few years demonstrates why reliable, nonpartisan local news is so important to communities. When local news disappears or becomes unreliable, fewer people vote and run for office. Polarization increases. Misinformation abounds. We have all seen the impacts of these new realities play out in our fractured and increasingly polarized local and national politics.

In Colorado, nearly one out of every five newspapers operating in 2004 no longer exists. The number of

journalists working in the state declined by 44 percent between 2010 and 2018, even as the state's population surged and its economy boomed. Public relations professionals now outnumber journalists in Colorado by an estimated ratio of 10 to 1.

Despite these depressing developments, CMP's experiences over the past year leave us feeling optimistic about the future. That's because while the challenges to local news in Colorado are real, the will to surmount them remains strong.

CMP aims to help local news organizations, whether digital start-ups or legacy print publications, battle the headwinds and build toward a sustainable future. To do so, we believe, they must develop the capacity to sustain themselves; they must collaborate rather than compete; and they must strengthen connections with a more diverse range of communities to build trust in local news.





It's tough sailing, but 2019 produced a host of promising developments that we will highlight in this report.

First and foremost, local journalists produced compelling local accountability reporting in 2019. Examples include the Colorado Sun's "Parked" collaboration with more than a dozen newsrooms, exploring mobile homes as housing of last resort for low-income Coloradans; The Denver Post's Pulitzer-caliber investigation into suppressed court cases; and the Colorado Independent-Rio Blanco Herald Times investigative piece on an officer-involved shooting of a mentally ill man and its lasting impact on the town of Rangely.

These and other examples demonstrate that the journalism side of local news, despite significant gaps in coverage, is alive and kicking in Colorado. As newsrooms come together with each other and the communities they cover, coverage will grow even stronger.

It's the business side of local news that remains a major vulnerability. While there is no magical solution that will rescue local news from its very real financial and business challenges, focusing on those same three C's — **capacity, community, and collaboration** — shows us a viable way forward.

We've also learned that people in Colorado — journalists and community members alike — long to transform the relationships between newsrooms and communities, which would lead to greater trust in local news, and a broader reader base. In short, our experiences in 2019 showed that people want to be part of shaping the future of local news. Some examples:

- Our 19 CMP events in 2019 drew almost 1,200 participants, representing more than 120 journalism, philanthropy, advocacy, and community organizations ranging from Greater Park Hill News to the Colorado Forum to the Mexican Cultural Center. CMP events had an overarching focus: to explore new solutions and new ways to work together.
- Event participants demonstrated an eagerness to work together creatively on a variety of efforts, ranging from a joint membership project, to a Migrahack that developed story ideas on immigration issues, to workshops on how to combat disinformation campaigns.
- CMP newsletter subscribers more than doubled during 2019, to 1,376 by the end of November. Facebook and Twitter followers tripled.
- A growing number of local philanthropic funders stepped up to support CMP's efforts to strengthen local news. Gates Family Foundation, Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, Bohemian Foundation, and Rose Community Foundation, all made significant gifts to the project. National funders are also taking notice: Democracy Fund and Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, and Membership Puzzle Project are also supporting CMP.

In this annual report, we will highlight some of the efforts that embody each of the three C's — **capacity, community, and collaboration**. All of the projects CMP initiated contain elements of each of the three C's. But for simplicity's sake and to avoid redundancy, we will place each of our projects highlighted in this report under one heading only.

1 CAPACITY

With the decline of traditional advertising-driven business models for local news, Colorado's news organizations are in a struggle for survival. CMP works to help local news organizations develop sustainability and scale, to meet the information needs of Coloradans state-wide.

Several 2019 projects focused on building capacity and sustainability.



Colorado Public Radio acquires Denverite

In March, Spirited Media, the owner of Denverite, a three-year-old news site focused on coverage of Denver government and arts and culture, decided to sell its local news sites and contacted CPR to gauge interest.

“At CPR, it took us a few days to decide that the match made sense,” said Kevin Dale, executive editor of CPR news. “While the business-side executives worked out the details of the acquisition, Dave Burdick and I began plotting how the two newsrooms would come together.”

CMP helped broker the marriage, in part by lining up funding from the Gates Family Foundation and the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation so that the numbers worked for CPR.

“We see this as a chance to bring a unique, homegrown newsroom into mission-aligned local ownership, while also increasing CPR’s digital and reporting capacities — enabling both newsrooms to engage more Coloradans with high-quality local journalism,” CMP Executive Committee Member Melissa Davis, also a VP at Gates, said at the time.

Think of this deal as $1+1=3$. A strong local news site becomes sustainable, CPR gets stronger, and the Denver community gets enhanced coverage of crucial issues.

COLab at Rocky Mountain Public Media

Opening in mid-2020, COLab will be located in the Buell Public Media Center, Rocky Mountain Public Media’s new building in downtown Denver. At least 10 news and supporting organizations plan to share space and create a collaborative newsroom on the third floor:

- Associated Press
- Chalkbeat Colorado
- Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition
- The Colorado Independent
- Colorado Media Project
- Colorado Press Association
- The Colorado Sun
- KGNU Community Radio
- Open Media Foundation
- Rocky Mountain PBS

But these partners envision COLab will be far more than a shared working space for the organizations. As they work with other news organizations, COLab will become a hub of local news for the state. The new headquarters will also offer facilities and training for the broader community, including event space, production studios, and classrooms where Emily Griffith Technical College and the City and County of Denver will teach classes for creative industry jobs. CMP seeks to advance independent journalism through the COLab by leveraging a shared infrastructure that simultaneously supports back-office efficiencies for the partners as well as high-quality journalism for the state.

Local News is a Public Good

New ideas, new approaches, and new products and services are desperately needed to ensure the reimagining and very survival of high-quality journalism in Colorado, especially in underserved communities.

In October, CMP published a report, "[Local News is a Public Good: Public Pathways for Supporting Coloradans' Civic News and Information Needs in the 21st Century.](#)"

With this work, we sparked conversations at all levels on the proposition:

Free and independent local news is a public good that is vital to democracy, and all Coloradans, including community leaders, should seriously consider public support as one of the necessary vehicles to sustain and evolve local public-service journalism.

CMP recruited a varied and high-powered board of advisors to help guide this work, who concluded that public support can take many forms. Ideas put forward in the CMP report include:

- Empowering local communities and voters to raise local revenues to meet their information needs
- Creating and funding a state-level, public-private partnership to stimulate local media innovation
- Developing programs to help local media businesses transition to mission-driven models
- Increasing support for libraries and higher education to help meet basic community news and information needs
- Optimizing government transparency for civic engagement, by modernizing the ways state and local entities make information accessible to citizens and the news media.

Joint membership

As advertising revenue for local news continues to decline, many newsrooms are developing membership programs to boost audience engagement and solicit additional revenue from individual supporters.

Beginning in early summer, with financial and logistical support from the [Membership Puzzle Project](#), CMP launched a joint marketing and membership pilot project. We selected five news organizations representing a broad cross-section of media in the state to participate:

[Chalkbeat Colorado](#), a nonprofit news organization that covers education issues for Denver and Colorado.

[The Colorado Sun](#), a journalist-owned, Denver-based news outlet that strives to cover all of Colorado so that our state can better understand itself.

[Durango Herald](#), a family-owned newspaper founded in 1881, based in southwestern Colorado.

[Grand Junction Daily Sentinel](#), the largest newspaper in western Colorado, serving six counties.

[KDNK Community Radio](#), based in Carbondale, serves the Roaring Fork Valley and beyond with nine FM signals.

The spark for the project idea grew from research and design thinking workshops that CMP organized in summer 2018, which showed a large, untapped market of Coloradans interested in local news, and one million of them willing to pay for it.

A variety of pilot projects emerged. Some involved partnerships between participating organizations (Durango Herald-Colorado Sun and KDNK-Colorado Sun), as well as partnerships between a news organization and a nonprofit (Chalkbeat Colorado-RAFT). Some participating newsrooms, most notably KDNK, promoted other participants' membership programs. The Durango Herald launched its first-ever membership program, giving its readers a way to support the newspaper beyond purchasing a subscription.

All involved newsrooms reported an enhanced awareness of and appreciation for the importance of treating readers more like members with a common mission for strengthening the communities they live in. In 2020, CMP will publish a toolkit including lessons learned in the project and possibilities for future work.



#newsCOnneeds Year-End Matching Challenge

Increasing support from individual readers is vital for newsroom sustainability in the digital age. To help Colorado newsrooms master the art of year-end giving campaigns, CMP partners with the national NewsMatch program to offer local matches for newsrooms to leverage in their year-end giving programs. At the end of 2018, seven newsrooms raised more than \$50,000 on the launch date — dubbed #GivingNewsDay — alone.

Encouraged by the pilot's success, CMP expanded the program in 2019, offering \$5,000 matching gifts to 18 newsrooms, including nonprofit startups, community radio stations, and locally owned newspapers. In 2020, three Colorado funders pooled resources to support the program: Bohemian Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, and Rose Community Foundation. Between #GivingNewsDay (Dec. 3) and Dec. 31, all but three of the participating Colorado newsrooms met their full \$5,000 match, and in total the cohort raised \$177,482 between individual donations from 1,145 donors and matches from CMP and NewsMatch.

Supporting capacity-building through local events and travel grants

Finally, CMP helped a variety of newsrooms boost their capacity by funding travel to conferences and information sessions. This included CMP programs in Denver as well as out-of-state conferences.

With the help of PEN America, CMP funded travel for individuals from small newsrooms including the Ouray Plain Dealer, KZRA Radio in Alamosa, KUNC Community Radio in Greeley, and Noticias La Plata in Durango, to attend the Migrahack “unconference” in Denver in September.

Another local event that drew journalists from across the state and nation was led by First Draft News at University of Denver in November. This flagship training helped Colorado journalists learn how to detect, track and counter viral online mis- and disinformation. Some 50 local journalists attended, with healthy representation from such Colorado newsrooms as CPR, The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun, and 9News. Travel funds from CMP allowed representatives of the Trinidad Chronicle-News, the Arkansas Valley Voice in Salida, and KRCC Radio in Colorado Springs to participate in a November training on the spread of disinformation.



Local news organizations of the past thrived on competition. With fewer resources, the present and future of local news will survive through cooperation. CMP strives to be a connector, instigator, and resource-provider for collaboration among newsrooms. Here are key examples of how CMP fostered, supported, and documented collaboration.

2 COLLABORATION

Migrahack

In September, a two-day Migrahack event took place at the University of Denver. It brought together some 200 people — journalists, data scientists, web developers and community members — who collaborated on a range of projects. The goal? Bringing more contextualized, compelling, human-centered information on one of the most divisive issues of our time: immigration.

CMP started paving the way for the Migrahack in May, with a day-long journalism “unconference” named M3: Machine Learning, Migration, and Mountains. A partnership of CMP, [OpenNews](#), and the University of Denver, M3 drew journalists from states as far flung as Vermont and Florida. Many of them were data specialists, who attended the ‘unconference’ to share ideas and gain inspiration from one another. One M3 session focused on planning for the fall Migrahack.

The two-day Migrahack event itself took place at the University of Denver. It brought together some 200 people — journalists, data scientists, web developers and community members — who collaborated on a range of projects aimed at answering questions about immigration in the state.

One example of Migrahack’s impact: Beatriz A. Garcia, an immigrant who lives in Durango, found resources to communicate with others in her region via the recently created [Noticias La Plata](#), which uses Instagram as

a platform.

“Thanks to the tools that Migrahack instilled in us, *Noticias La Plata* is better positioned to serve its readership,” Garcia wrote on [Medium](#). “And personally, after my experience at Migrahack, I see our mission in La Plata County as more important than ever.”

Some compelling reporting emerged from the Migrahack, including a [Chalkbeat Colorado story](#) about a 15-year-old migrant who made his way through Central America and Mexico in search of his father in the U.S.; and a [Colorado Public Radio story](#) focused on unaccompanied minors readjusting to life in the U.S.

Collaboration case studies

CMP produced case studies of two notable journalism collaborations, both of which were conceived and driven by news organizations whose leaders recognized how much broader and deeper a project’s impact can be if newsrooms work together instead of competing.

The first was *Parked*, a project produced over two months and led by [The Colorado Sun](#). *Parked* was published on news websites across the state over three days in September. All told, 15 newsrooms participated, ranging from legacy newspapers like the Durango Herald to small weeklies like the Ouray County Plaindealer, to digital-only outlets like the Sun and the Colorado



Independent, to public radio stations across the state. *Parked* produced sweeping stories of statewide scope as well as more localized stories. One key learning highlighted in the case study, with implications for the future, was that it's difficult for one participating newsroom to act as project manager while also trying to produce content. Supporting a dedicated, independent project manager to coordinate future projects would save significant time and help ensure that deadlines are met and frustrations kept to a minimum.

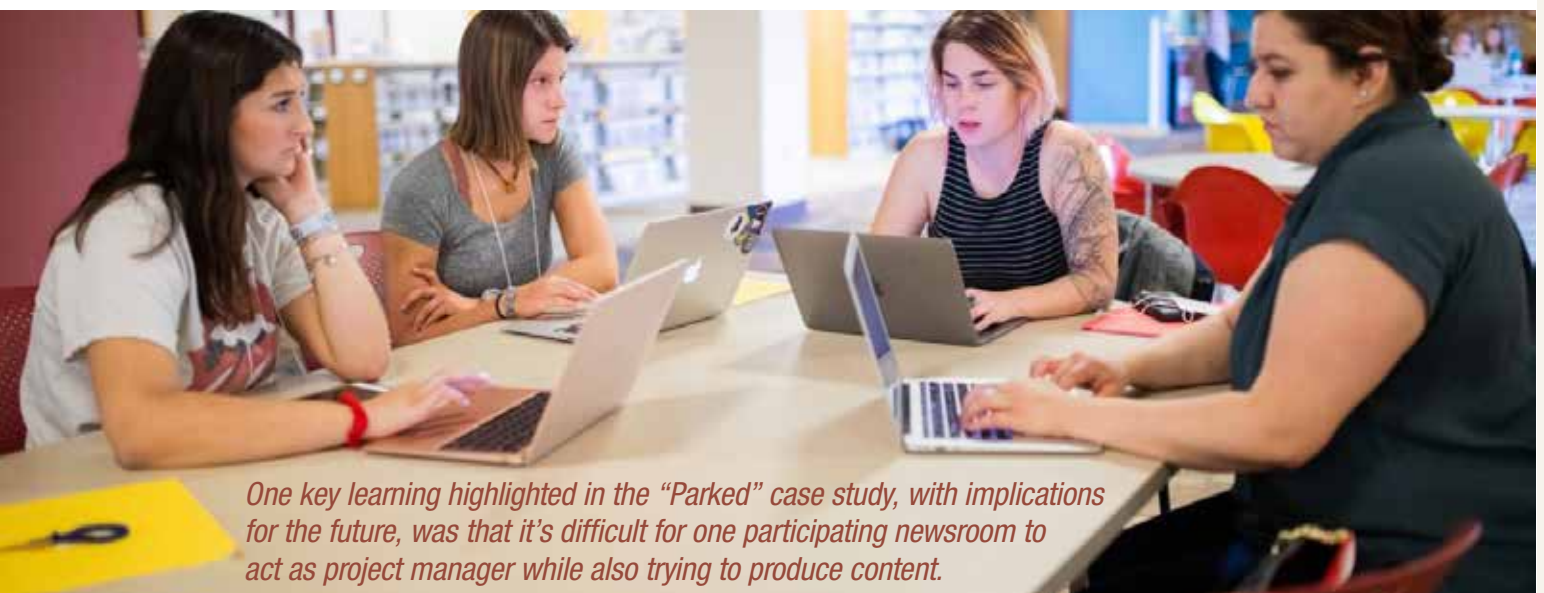
Despite some rough patches in execution, participating newsrooms viewed *Parked* as a triumph, and expressed eagerness to join future collaborations. The CMP case study can be found [here](#).

The second case study focused on a [collaboration between the Colorado Independent and the Rio Blanco Herald Times](#). This partnership produced a stirring, two-part series on a fatal police shooting of a mentally ill man in Rangely in December 2018. The stories combined the deep local knowledge of Herald Times Editor Niki Turner and the investigative reporting expertise of Colorado Independent Editor Susan Greene.

Despite some stonewalling by Rangely town officials, Turner and Greene probed deeply and uncovered a story devoid of heroes or villains. It's a sad tale of what happens when someone with severe mental illness ends up in a place where services are thin and law enforcement training proves insufficient to the task. The stories are a sterling example of how the most deeply reported stories uncover the fact that nothing is black or white, but shaded in gray. The CMP case study can be found [here](#).

Other collaborations

In the Capacity section of this report, we focused on joint membership, the merger between Denverite and Colorado Public Radio, COLab, and Newsmatch. While the main focus of these efforts was building capacity in the Colorado news ecosystem, they also represent strong examples of how working together lifts all boats. Similarly, a major initiative to promote enhanced arts and culture coverage in Colorado contains strong elements of capacity-building and collaboration. But its primary focus has been on building community, which leads us to our third and final 'C.'



One key learning highlighted in the "Parked" case study, with implications for the future, was that it's difficult for one participating newsroom to act as project manager while also trying to produce content.

3 COMMUNITY

Through events, communications, and other means, CMP seeks to broaden and deepen community support for local journalism, from philanthropy to individual donors to eager readers and consumers of news. Trust in news has declined nationally, but local news has remained more trustworthy than national news in the eyes of many people.



Still, there's much work to be done to build trust in local news, particularly among underserved communities, who too seldom see their concerns reflected in coverage, or their members represented on newsroom staff. CMP believes the best way to foster trust is for newsrooms to reach out to communities, truly listen to their concerns, and engage them in the storytelling that's at the heart of the best journalism.

In 2019, several CMP efforts had community engagement and community-building at their core.

Arts and Culture — Research and Product Design

As part of a major effort to understand gaps in arts and culture coverage, and with funding from the [Bonfils-Stanton Foundation](#), in summer 2019 CMP commissioned a statewide survey and conducted qualitative research to help answer some key questions:

How do Coloradans want to know about and engage with arts and culture in our state, and how can media outlets and art organizations serve those needs? How do underrepresented communities in particular feel they are being served by arts and culture organizations and media coverage of arts and culture?

One of the chief goals was to assist Rocky Mountain Public Media and Colorado Public Radio determining how they might expand their arts and culture coverage. You can examine the statewide survey results in detail [here](#).

The short answer: It's complicated. People feel overwhelmed by information, yet feel they aren't getting what they need from current sources. They long for a sense of community among artists, arts audiences, and arts funders, but struggle to figure out how to build it.

Additional insights from in-depth conversations with community members across the state, conducted together with our partners, suggest some ways forward.

A key component of the arts and culture project was community involvement. The project kicked off and concluded with well-attended community events. The kickoff event in June brought together about 40 people to receive training on conducting in-depth interviews with constituents to understand their interests, habits, and needs. This diverse group of interviewers then fanned out across Colorado to conduct in-person and phone interviews with almost 50 people over the summer. [Read this report](#) about what we learned from those interviews.

In early November, about 30 artists, journalists, and community members gathered at the Redline Gallery to devise solutions to issues raised in the research and interviews. And a culminating event at History Colorado in November featured presentations about research findings. At that event, Michael Gadlin, host of Rocky Mountain Public Media's Arts District, led attendees in a participatory art project – a collage made up of clippings from Colorado newspapers and materials from Colorado arts and culture events. The final artwork will hang in the new COLab newsroom.



Community Listening Session in Longmont

In October, nearly 70 residents, journalists, elected officials, community leaders and students packed a room at the Longmont Museum to imagine the future of local news.

The collective visioning process was part of “Local Voices for Local News,” an event organized by CMP and [Free Press](#), a national organization that helps bring newsrooms and communities closer together, to better meet local information needs. The gathering involved community members in outlining the sort of local journalism that would help their communities and the broader region thrive.

The idea of training community members in news production came up repeatedly. Attendees also discussed the need for equity, transparency, and resources for small local-media producers.

The event came on the heels of the Colorado Media Project's major report, “Local News is a Public Good,” (see more on this in the Capacity section) which makes the case for public policies to strengthen and transform civic media and local reporting across the state.



Local and National Advisory Committees

CMP formed two advisory boards in 2019, one local, one national. Members ranged from prominent journalists to philanthropists, nonprofit leaders, community advocates, and experts in local news sustainability.

The idea behind the advisory boards was to involve a broad range of people in the work of the Colorado Media Project, and to draw upon the collective wisdom of our advisors to keep our priorities focused on the most important issues.

CMP's advisors did more than dispense wisdom than on high. They got down in the trenches and helped recruit experts and participants to a number of our initiatives, most notably Migrahack and the public pathways work. The advisory boards provided essential help and counsel, and little of our work would have been possible without them. You can see a full list of our 2019 advisors on the last page of this report.

Informal Community-Building

Throughout the year, CMP hosted a series of evening happy hours at breweries across the metro area. There, journalists and community members could mingle and talk informally over delicious Colorado craft beers. We called these events “First Draft,” because the first beer was on us. The happy hours drew large crowds, fostered good conversations, and gave CMP a chance to partner with groups like Colorado Freedom of Information Coalition to co-host events.

2020

As we enter a new year and decade, CMP will focus on two major initiatives:



First is **supporting a new, mission-driven, collaborative newsroom for Colorado**. Opening in 2020, the COLab at Rocky Mountain Public Media's new downtown building will be a hub for this work, starting with the core group of 10 Colorado newsrooms and support organizations co-locating there. CMP is funding strategic and business planning for the future partners, who are setting the vision and goals for how they'll collaborate among themselves — and with news organizations and communities throughout the state. CMP also plans to invest in staffing and resources to support the new collaborative.

The second is **engaging more Coloradans in the future of local news and civic participation**. CMP will invest in seeding more local conversations and design thinking across the state about the future of local news. We'll focus on strengthening ties and building trust between newsrooms and communities so that more Coloradans have the information they need to participate in democracy and civil society. CMP will prioritize historically underserved communities (low-income, rural, racial, ethnic), with equity, access to economic opportunity, and broader civic engagement as driving values. We will also target communities identified as news deserts, or most at risk of becoming news deserts.

January 2020 will mark a transition for CMP, as its fiscal sponsorship moves from the University of Denver to the Rose Community Foundation. DU has been and will continue to be a valued programmatic partner in CMP's work. As a community foundation, Rose is ideally situated to handle incoming grants, and to manage contracts and partnerships.

In 2019, Coloradans learned more about the depth and breadth of our local news crisis, and demonstrated determination to surmount those challenges. In 2020, we expect to dive deep into some of the most promising strategies for developing a robust and sustainable local ecosystem across the Centennial State. We hope you will join us in this exciting work.

Colorado Media Project 2019

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