



Case Study

View from Denver

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AS DENVER'S MUNICIPAL elections approach, Kevin Flynn, a candidate for city council, checks his email updates with a growing sense of unease. With less than a week to go, only 16 percent of the mail-in ballots have been received, and some analysts are forecasting a low turnout for a mayoral race that could have a profound impact on the city's future.⁴⁵⁰ "I've found that a lot of people are unaware that there's an election next week," Flynn says. "That's a problem."⁴⁵¹

A council member since 2015, Flynn is running for reelection unopposed. He's a popular figure in his district, with an unusual backstory, having spent 27 years as a reporter at the *Rocky Mountain News*, covering city politics and other beats, until the daily ceased operations in 2009. "Now I'm one of the bastards I used to write about," he jokes.⁴⁵²

But Flynn doesn't see anything funny about disaffected and ill-informed voters, or the decline in local news coverage his city has endured in recent years. In particular, he finds the paucity of old-fashioned watchdog journalism—the routine scrutiny of government operations and public officials—to be downright unnerving. "It feels like we could all be getting away with murder right now," he says. "I don't like it at all."⁴⁵³

Flynn's discomfort reflects a wider concern about the paradox that Denver has become, a burgeoning city with a muted media presence. With one of the most superheated economies in the nation,⁴⁵⁴ the population (now 716,492 and climbing) has grown by 100,000 over the past seven years, while the surrounding metro area has swelled from 2.5 million to 3.2 million since 2010.⁴⁵⁵ At the same time, local print journalism has been gutted, from the shuttering of the *Rocky* to the relentless layoffs and greatly diminished output of the town's remaining daily, *The Denver Post*.

The dilemma: So many stories emerging

from so much growth—controversies over neighborhood-altering new developments, spiking home prices, gentrification, a multibillion-dollar marijuana industry,⁴⁵⁶ new tech ventures, surging traffic, environmental degradation, communities displaced or left behind by the boom—and so few outlets with the resources to tell those stories.

Media abhors a vacuum, and one response has been the launch of several new digital outlets and collaborative ventures aiming to fill the gaps in local and regional coverage. Most of the start-ups boast business models that don't depend on advertising revenue, relying instead on a combination of philanthropic grants, private sponsors, and reader donations. But these efforts come with questions about their long-term sustainability, the degree to which they're reaching their intended audience, and whether that audience is large enough and willing to pay enough to keep the coverage coming.

Despite the unknowns, it's clear that a major shift in local news is underway. It can't come soon enough for those observers who believe that a robust local press is key to an informed citizenry. "I think it's a crisis worse than the deficit," says Dennis Gallagher, a former Denver councilman, city auditor, and state lawmaker who remains active in city politics, advising one of the challengers in this year's mayor's race. "Jefferson said that no nation can be ignorant and free, and it's true. The press—even though they gouge people on their death notices—I can forgive that if they inform people about what's going on in government. That's what keeps our country together."⁴⁵⁷

FOR MUCH OF ITS HISTORY, Denver was a vibrant two-daily town. In the 1960s and '70s, the *Rocky* was the scrappy morning tabloid, the *Post* the establishment afternoon broadsheet. At their peak in the 1990s, the two papers competed strenuously for

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readers and scoops, loudly promoted their prize-winning muckraking series, and sent fleets of reporters to cover every Denver Broncos Super Bowl appearance. The news war had many benefits for readers, including incredibly cheap subscription offers. The competition was good for democracy, too. As the circulation lead shifted back and forth several times in the 1980s and '90s, both sides ramped up their reporting not only in the traditionally covered urban core, but also in suburban communities, where many newly arrived readers lived. Neither paper could afford to ignore issues of wide public concern, from toxic mine waste killing Colorado rivers to nepotism in the city administration. The quest for the greatest possible readership also encouraged lively and diverse opinion pages, reflecting the region's changing demographics and evolving political perspectives.⁴⁵⁸

But the growing expense of the news war caught up with both papers. In 2000, after years of losses, the *Rocky's* owner, E.W. Scripps Company, agreed to combine business operations with the *Post*. The two dailies continued to operate this way for another nine years, maintaining a collective newsroom of 500 journalists. But in 2009, after failing to find a buyer for the *Rocky*, Scripps shut it down.⁴⁵⁹ Denver joined the growing ranks of major American cities with only one daily newspaper.

Supposedly poised to dominate the market, the *Post* struggled, too. The industry was trending downward; revenues were plummeting, thanks to the defection of classified advertisers to Craigslist and the decimation of local retailers by the Great Recession and online competitors. Modest gains in digital revenue couldn't begin to make up the print losses. In addition, the *Post's* parent company, MediaNews Group, had taken on nearly a billion dollars in debt in an effort to build one of the largest newspaper chains in the country.⁴⁶⁰

Less than a year after the *Rocky* folded, MediaNews faced a reckoning with its lenders in bankruptcy court. A privately held hedge fund, Alden Global Capital, emerged with a commanding share of the company. Under its new owners, the *Post* is reportedly more profitable now than

it has ever been—but those profits have come from drastically slashing staff, selling off assets, hiking subscription and ad rates, and moving most of the paper's operations from downtown to the suburbs. Alden's strategy, which has generated protests at MediaNews papers across the country, is known as “harvesting cash”—a vampiric process of sucking all the value out of a company while investing as little as possible to keep it alive.⁴⁶¹

In the spring of 2018, as the *Post* staff was bracing for another round of layoffs, editorial page editor Chuck Plunkett led a remarkable mutiny, publishing a package of articles calling for Alden to sell the *Post* before it died of neglect.⁴⁶² The move drew national headlines but didn't stop the layoffs; the newspaper now has fewer than 70 journalists on staff⁴⁶³—less than one-third of what it had 10 years ago⁴⁶⁴—to cover a city that's 20 percent larger.⁴⁶⁵

Plunkett resigned a few weeks later and now heads a capstone program for journalism students at the University of Colorado. “To me, it looks like they're doing their best to hold on,” he says of the *Post*.⁴⁶⁶ “I don't see any innovation. I know they're working as hard as they can, but if you only have 70 folks, you can't do what you used to do. There is a sense that journalists are not minding the store in Colorado like we used to.”⁴⁶⁷

The current print edition of the *Post* is a lean, sometimes emaciated product. Breaking news is still paramount, but stories about education (particularly higher ed), labor, transportation, suburban government, and rural communities are sparse. Gone are the beat reporters who made the rounds of county meetings and sniffed out development controversies and sweetheart deals as they were unfolding—or put the fear of God in officials so they wouldn't dare attempt malfeasance. Gone are the cityside columnists who once offered historically informed commentary and insights on public policy controversies and helped readers navigate local elections. The sports section, a significant source of online traffic, remains a priority, while arts and culture coverage is mostly freelance. The once-celebrated “Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire” has become a whisper.



A Denver Post employee holds up a sign during a rally urging the paper's hedge fund owner, Alden Global Capital, to either invest in its news outlets or sell them.

LAST YEAR, 11 FORMER *Post* employees, including several veteran reporters and editors, left the paper to start a digital news outlet, The Colorado Sun. The venture is fueled by a two-year grant from Civil, a company that seeks to use cryptocurrency and blockchain technology to promote a network of independent newsrooms.⁴⁶⁸ Journalist-owned and void of ads or paywalls, the Sun aims to persuade readers to become regular donors of \$5 or more a month by focusing on the kind of narrative, contextual reporting that's getting harder to find at the local level.⁴⁶⁹

At present, the Sun produces only a handful of articles a day, but they tend to be longer, more nuanced takes on breaking news, what the legislature is up to, or growth-related issues in the region than can be found elsewhere. Sun staffer Jesse Paul says he's enjoyed the same kind of access to lawmakers and other public officials as he did when he had the state's largest newspaper behind him,⁴⁷⁰ and he points to several big stories that the fledgling operation has broken and other media have followed, such as an eye-opening report on a sputtering \$230 million state program that was supposed to improve reading proficiency for elementary school students.⁴⁷¹

The Sun is one of several emerging

online news ventures that are trying to woo an increasingly fragmented audience. Others include The Colorado Independent, a nonprofit run by former *Post* and *Rocky* columnists that serves up a progressive-tinged mix of public policy reporting and opinion; *Denverite*, a hyper-local news-you-can-use site focused on city and state government, development, and related issues that has had three owners in the past two years; and a host of smaller niche operations that cover politics, education, health, the energy industry, transit, or other topics.

All of these outlets have small staffs of around 3 to 12 people and extremely limited visibility in Denver's muddled media landscape. Only a small percentage of residents often get their local news from digital-first outlets.⁴⁷² None have anything close to the reach the *Post*—which, even after losing half its print readers in recent years, still claims more than a million weekly print and online readers.⁴⁷³ Nor can they touch the circulation of two other long-established local print publications: *Westword*, the venerable alternative weekly, claims 50,000 print readers a week,⁴⁷⁴ while *5280*, an upscale city magazine, reports 85,000 a month.⁴⁷⁵

Many of the digital outlets are reluctant to disclose their actual readership or subscription figures. A recent article in *5280* reported that the Independent claims 2,074 individual donors, compared with 1,200 paid members at *Denverite*.⁴⁷⁶ The Sun announced that it has 26,000 subscribers to its free newsletters and 5,400 paid members.⁴⁷⁷ A survey conducted last year by the Colorado Media Project indicated that although 39 percent of Coloradans pay for some of their news, only 6 percent of those appear willing to pay for a local digital outlet.⁴⁷⁸

BUT SOME OF THE DIGITAL PROJECTS are less interested in profit or total circulation than they are in engaging with a concerned audience of stakeholders. Chalkbeat, for example, is an intriguing nonprofit effort to revive and revamp the education beat, often one of the biggest casualties of the local news attrition. (Although there's been some turnover in the position, the *Post* still has a full-time

education reporter.) Forged out of the merger of a Colorado education news site with a similar site in New York City, Chalkbeat now has bureaus in seven states, supported largely by a web of foundations great and small, and provides more specialized education coverage than a traditional daily or TV station.

Chalkbeat's Colorado bureau has three reporters assigned to different beats and a bureau chief who covers statewide issues. Melanie Asmar, a former *Westword* reporter, covers Denver public schools and says that she's frequently the only reporter at school board meetings. Chalkbeat offers its stories without charge to other media organizations, and Asmar's work sometimes gets picked up by the *Post* or newspapers around the state. During a recent Denver teachers' strike, she was an invaluable resource to reporters helicoptering into the fray, the go-to expert who could explain the context of the dispute as negotiations stretched into the wee hours. She says she appreciates the opportunity to dive deeper into education issues than she would at a daily: "Chalkbeat is filling a need, and I'm so glad it exists. It makes my stories so much better, I think, than if I was at a general outlet."⁴⁷⁹

The tradeoff, perhaps, is that richly reported policy pieces are often more likely to connect with an audience of insiders than with the general public. Eric Gorski, Chalkbeat's managing editor for local news and a former *Post* reporter, notes: "School superintendents read us. Lawmakers read us. We want people to read our stories, but we also want our reporting to make a difference. We want it to move needles. It's going to be smaller than a general news outlet audience, but it's a pretty influential and powerful one."⁴⁸⁰

FOR THE CIVIC-MINDED, there are some aspects of Denver's new media ecosystem that compare favorably with the old. Unlike the *Post* and the commercial TV news stations, most of the new digital outlets are locally owned. Whether or not they are structured as nonprofits, they tend to be intensely focused on their readers (or "members") rather than on clicks or advertisers. And they are, perhaps, less likely to shy away from

complicated stories on daunting subjects.

A lot of traditional local news "has moved away from reporting on serious issues," says Justine Sandoval, a community organizing manager for NARAL Pro-Choice Colorado. "They concentrate on the controversy as opposed to the policy, and it's been a struggle to get people to pay attention to the issues." Sandoval sees the situation improving in Colorado, thanks in part to the emphasis on substantive reporting by Colorado Public Radio (CPR) and digital outlets such as the Sun and Denverite. But she also worries that older or less internet-savvy readers may not be exposed to those sources. "It's harder for the average person to access legit journalism now," she says.⁴⁸¹

The proliferation of niche outlets has been good news for state politics junkies, since there are now more journalists regularly covering the Colorado legislature than at any time since the 1990s. (One blogger recently tallied at least 17 reporters at the statehouse.)⁴⁸² But at a more local level, there are deficits in coverage that have deepened during the *Post*'s decline and are addressed only sporadically. "I don't think they have enough people to cover community and environmental issues," says Christine O'Connor, a veteran neighborhood activist who has expressed skepticism about several controversial projects embraced by city officials, from the redevelopment of a Superfund site to a proposal to bring the Winter Olympics to Denver. "The environmental stuff is just too damned difficult for most people."⁴⁸³

O'Connor is a fan of the work of Bruce Finley, who covers environmental news at the *Post* and does several comprehensive reports a year on subjects such as fracking emissions and the city's "green space crunch." "They're few and far between, but they're powerful when they come out," she says. "If there were more people like him, I think we'd be well served."⁴⁸⁴

But O'Connor laments the absence of reporters at most of the community meetings and planning hearings she attends. Although several outlets prominently covered the Denver's city council's approval of a new growth plan, called Denveright, she points out that the plan and related documents run close to 1,600 pages—and



there was little discussion in the media about just what those pages contain, or the small fraction of the city's residents who were actually involved in the outreach process or had any input on its provisions. Local journalists "are missing the level of frustration in the community with development," she says. "I don't think they're really out there talking to people. I think they get briefed by the mayor's group, and then they decide if they're going to meet with someone else."⁴⁸⁵

Sandoval believes the local media needs to devote more resources to economic issues. "People always want to know about taxes and revenue," she says. "I get these questions all the time: Where is that money going? What are the obstacles to why we can't spend it in different ways? I wish there was more coverage on those issues."⁴⁸⁶

Paul says that he'd like to see the Sun expand its reporting on several fronts once it's in a position to hire more reporters. "Transportation is not covered much by anybody, and it's a huge issue for Colorado," he says. "Law enforcement. The courts. The federal courts. It would be great to have a bureau on the eastern plains, a bureau in southern Colorado. Rural Colorado isn't getting much coverage."⁴⁸⁷

Important journalism is being done at several of the niche outlets, many of them digital first. It's not clear, though, that enough Denver residents have the inclination or the patience to seek out their news in an à la carte fashion, now that there's no single media source to rely on for comprehensive coverage. "There are more people sitting at the press table in the city council chamber on Monday night than there used to be," notes Councilman Flynn. "But that's too many places to go to find my news. I don't think a single one of my neighbors knows that coloradopolitics.com exists, or Denverite, or The Colorado Sun. There's not one clearinghouse for everything, and the knowledge of city affairs is suffering."⁴⁸⁸

Plunkett agrees. "Gone is the big newspaper-of-record role," he says. "I like the idea of a big news organization, so that when it does investigative reporting, stuff happens. When it weighs in on an issue,

people listen. When the neighborhood is experiencing a spike in homicides and people in the community don't want to talk, you need a paper that's got a strong enough recognized brand that it can go in, keep your name a secret, and get the truth out. That's what I worry about."⁴⁸⁹

The fragmented media marketplace compels consumers to rummage among several news sources to try to make sense of events, a time-consuming hunt that was particularly necessary during the 2018 election cycle. While the midterms were followed closely across the nation, Colorado's statewide races were haphazardly reported, particularly at the primary phase. The staff departures at the *Post* and the scramble among start-ups meant little consistency in how the campaigns were covered. "The race played out in quasi-silence, as significant differences between candidates went almost unremarked, important coverage appeared late, and most of it was placed in disparate locations," journalist Helen Thorpe pointed out in a column for *The Colorado Independent*. "If you were not paying close attention to several websites at once, you probably missed the entire show."⁴⁹⁰

Vigorous watchdog reporting can still be found in Denver, though with less frequency. Colorado Public Radio recently made a splash with a months-long investigation of the cozy relationships between the city administration and powerful lobbying firms.⁴⁹¹ The *Post* demonstrated that it could still make a difference by revealing that thousands of court cases across the state have been shielded from public view by judges' suppression orders, without any coherent rationale for such secrecy.⁴⁹² The Sun dove deep into the economics behind the lack of affordable housing in ski towns and maintains a Jared Polis Promise Tracker, which graphically portrays the new governor's progress (or lack thereof) in delivering on his 125 campaign promises.⁴⁹³ Leading up to the recent municipal elections, most news outlets managed to provide at least brief profiles of all the candidates in the crowded mayoral race, a distinct improvement over the chaotic coverage of the 2018 governor's race. (Despite the gloomy predictions of low turnout, a surge of late ballots made for one of

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“We had to be willing to have hours that didn’t produce anything because that’s what happens when you walk a beat,” says former journalist Kevin Flynn. “I see a lot of enterprise reporting now, and a lot of it is good. What I don’t see enough of is day-in, day-out beat reporting that leads to better enterprise reporting.”

the highest levels of voter participation in a Denver election in decades, with several contests close enough to trigger runoffs.)

Yet how many of these stories truly connected with readers? Some of the most powerful investigative reporting often arises out of community concerns, and the ability of journalists to tap into tips from informed sources and whistleblowers—a process that relies on the kind of persistent beat reporting that’s now in short supply. During his years at the *Rocky*, Flynn recalls, he spent many “unproductive hours” making the rounds of court and police documents and chatting up sources. Yet such routines greatly enhanced his reporting. “We had to be willing to have hours that didn’t produce anything because that’s what happens when you walk a beat,” he says. “I see a lot of enterprise reporting now, and a lot of it is good. What I don’t see enough of is day-in, day-out beat reporting that leads to better enterprise reporting.”⁴⁹⁴

LIKE DENVER’S LOCAL DAILIES, its commercial TV news stations have experienced years of turmoil, enduring budget cuts and consolidation while shifting from one conglomerate’s portfolio to another.⁴⁹⁵ While each station still occasionally tackles investigative stories, all rely heavily on safe and predictable local TV formulas: news about fires, crashes, and crime; feel-good pieces about organ donors or local charities; gotcha exposés that confront contractors over shoddy work or restaurant owners over bad health inspection reports.

But amid the predictable broadcast formulas, public television is thriving. The Denver metro area’s largest public broadcasting services receive most of the philanthropic money that’s been pouring into the state to support local news. Rocky Mountain PBS’s investigative news show, *Insight With John Ferrugia*, recently won an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award, and last fall its parent company, Rocky Mountain Public Media, broke ground on a \$34 million, 64,000-square-foot center that will house the news operations, KUVU public radio, community media studios, and collaborative spaces available to other local media enterprises.⁴⁹⁶

Colorado Public Radio, the region’s

premier NPR affiliate, has undergone an even more dramatic transformation, thanks to its ability to tap into major grants as well as its devoted listener base. CPR has beefed up its news coverage in many areas, including a new investigative team (sparked by an anonymous \$300,000 gift)⁴⁹⁷ and a “climate solutions” team (backed by a \$1.2 million grant).⁴⁹⁸ The entire operation has grown rapidly in recent years and now has close to 50 journalists on its payroll, with plans for a newsroom of 70 in the near future, which would give CPR a larger staff than the *Post*. It’s even moving its newsroom from the suburbs to downtown Denver, as if declaring that it’s ready to dethrone the ailing daily as the region’s dominant news organization.⁴⁹⁹

Last March CPR announced that it had acquired *Denverite*, which had struggled to find traction as a member-supported, for-profit outfit under its previous owner, Spirited Media.⁵⁰⁰ *Denverite* is transitioning to a nonprofit business model and will remain devoted to hyper-local news.⁵⁰¹ The move should increase the hyper-local news outlet’s visibility while aiding CPR’s efforts to enhance its digital presence among millennials. Working closely with the nonprofit media giant seems like a win-win for both sides, says former *Denverite* editor Dave Burdick, now the managing editor of digital operations at CPR. Partnering with CPR will not only increase the digital outlet’s visibility, Burdick explains, but also possibly help free up *Denverite*’s five-person staff to occasionally step away from the whirl of city council and county commissioner meetings to pursue more in-depth projects.⁵⁰²

While the acquisition was welcomed in most quarters, it also underscores the harsh economics of the new media environment. Corey Hutchins, who writes about media issues for *Columbia Journalism Review* and *The Colorado Independent*, described the move as a “bailout” in his weekly newsletter. “There are a few ways to look at that deal,” Hutchins says. “One is that maybe we never got to see the for-profit, hyper-local digital media experiment play out in Denver before the money to float it ran out. But maybe we did get to see that experiment play out, and it just wasn’t successful.”⁵⁰³



As Hutchins sees it, the takeover demonstrates the ascendancy of public broadcasting in Colorado media circles. Nationally, public television and radio receive the lion's share of the foundation money going to nonprofit media, a total of \$796 million from 2010 to 2015—almost as much as all the other nonprofit news outlets combined.⁵⁰⁴ (Local and state nonprofit news outlets collected just 5 percent of the grant money during that period, according to a study by Harvard's Shorenstein Center and Northeastern University.)⁵⁰⁵ CPR has a substantial development staff and devotes far more attention to fundraising than many of the digital start-ups, Hutchins notes. "It would be great if all the new ventures could find enough devoted readers to survive," he says. "But you have to wonder what happens when the grants run out."⁵⁰⁶

Many questions remain about the sustainability of Denver's experiments in local news. Are there enough foundations and private funders interested in supporting

public policy journalism to keep all the start-ups solvent? Are there enough consumers feeling generous enough to subsidize public radio's ambitious expansion as well as the various news sources that are adopting a similar audience-supported model? Can the niche outlets develop a significant following for specialized beat reporting and have the kind of impact that the daily paper once had? Will some of the outlets with like-minded missions ultimately merge, or will the market become more fragmented?

Some of the answers may surface in the next couple of years as the digital outlets seek a wider base of support. In the interim, Denver keeps growing, and so does its bureaucracy. In 2007, the former *Rocky* building was demolished to make way for a city jail. Since 2016, city agencies have subleased several floors of the former *Post* building, occupying office space where hundreds of reporters once roamed. As journalism recedes, government becomes ever more powerful.