

2021

Public Benefit Report

THE COLORADO SUN



About the Sun

The Colorado Sun began publishing as a journalist-owned digital news platform on September 10, 2018. Since its start, the Sun has aimed to produce journalism in a manner that is sustainable and encompasses the variety of voices and interests across the state.

According to the Sun's mission statement:

“The purpose of the Corporation is to produce high-quality, in-depth journalism that helps readers understand Colorado and their place in it, and to assure that this work is readily accessible to all potential readers in all parts of the state of Colorado.”

At the time of the last PBC report, in 2019, the Sun staff identified a few challenges that might hinder their ability to achieve its purpose. First, the Sun needed to find ways to invite more diversity into its newsroom as well as to find the best ways to stretch its resources so that its reporters could report on things happening in all parts of the state. This report evaluates the Sun's progress over the past two years in light of the organization's commitment to providing a public benefit. The Sun's recent acquisition of Colorado Community Media's 24 Denver-area newspapers, through an innovative vehicle called the Colorado News Conservancy (CNC), only raises the stakes for the Sun and its public mission.

The Public Benefit

Public Benefit Corporations in the state of Colorado must operate in a sustainable and responsible manner while generating positive impacts in their communities.

Colorado law requires that reports must be conducted, detailing the actions taken to pursue the Sun's purpose of public benefit, its successes in doing so, and any challenges encountered along the way. Although the state does not specify a required frequency, the Sun leadership hopes to complete a report annually—with the exception of 2020, when adjustments in response to the pandemic took priority over a report. Moving forward, according to Editor Larry Ryckman, "The Sun believes that it's important to report back to the public every year in the spirit of transparency and accountability." For this report, as well as the 2019 report, the Sun turned to the Media Enterprise Design Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder, which produced both reports as a public service and did not receive compensation for doing so. B Lab, a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting PBCs, provides tools used to assess the efficacy and impact of businesses like the Sun. Using its guidance, we narrowed down our assessment to the following areas: Governance, Company Culture, Collaboration, and the Colorado Public.

The Colorado Sun is administered by a team of journalists working to restore the health of the industry in their state. The Sun's newsroom promotes a cooperative environment, but it is still working to make up for the lack of representation of the diverse backgrounds of its readers. The CNC has and will continue to expand the Sun's horizons while enabling the Sun to offer its support and guidance to smaller newspapers in return. On the whole, at a time when journalism in the state of Colorado has been under threat by layoffs and closures, the Sun provides a valuable service through in-depth, high-quality reporting, and it has been rewarded for doing so by the support of its readership.

Governance

The Sun is owned by founder-employees, who have extensive backgrounds in Colorado journalism. Dana Coffield, Larry Ryckman, and Jennifer Brown make up the Executive Committee, which oversees daily operations and can make decisions that involve costs of less than \$5,000. Otherwise, decisions are voted on by all owners. The Sun strives to foster a democratic and collaborative work environment when it comes to making business decisions and the content it publishes. Articles are made available to the entire staff to read prior to publication, which invites more perspectives and feedback.

The future of the Sun's ownership structure and governance, however, is uncertain. There is currently not a mechanism by which new and future employees can become shareholders of the corporation. A continued commitment to broad-based employee ownership may require transitioning to a structure such as a cooperative or an Employee Stock Ownership Plan.



Larry Ryckman



Dana Coffield



Jennifer Brown

Governance

The Sun sustains itself with three primary revenue streams. “We think of our business as a three-legged stool,” says Senior Editor Dana Coffield. The first and most substantive leg is revenue from membership dues. The Colorado Sun does not have a paywall, to ensure its reporting is widely accessible, but readers can choose to pay a minimum of \$5 per month for a membership. Today, the Sun has nearly 14,000 paying members, accounting for approximately 80 percent of its revenues. The second leg of the stool is revenue from subscriptions to its premium newsletters. The Sun offers newsletters that are free to access, but for \$240 a year people can subscribe to a set of premium newsletters, including the Health and Environment newsletter launching this year. The Outsider, which discusses outdoor industry and adventure, and The Unaffiliated, which discusses politics, are two more examples of the Sun’s premium newsletters. Finally, the third leg of the stool consists of revenues from advertising, which the Sun refers to as sponsorships, and support from grants.

The Sun has cultivated an enviable position; 14,000 paying members is far more than the founders expected to have by now, says Coffield. “We think that’s the most resilient finance stream.” Still, one of their goals for the next 12 months is to diversify their funding sources. Coffield says the team hoped to hold more events to engage the public and attract donors, but they had to put that idea on the backburner as a result of the pandemic.

The Sun saw a dramatic increase in employees in the past 12 months, and this will continue to increase as a result of the CNC acquisition process. The Sun newsroom’s democratic environment is commendable, but the company faces serious questions about how and whether to maintain that as the newsroom grows and begins to include other newsrooms as well.

Company Culture

The staff in the Sun’s newsroom has nearly tripled in size since its founding. Starting this year, new hires outnumber owners. This growth has presented opportunities to diversify the newsroom’s perspectives. Among the original founders, a majority of them is white, and a majority is between the ages of 35 and 50. Some of the Sun’s recent hires include individuals who are Asian-American, bilingual, or LGBTQ+. The Sun has made important progress in diversifying its hiring, while its leaders recognize they face ongoing challenges if they are to attract a range of voices that represents the diversity of the state. For instance, greater Latinx representation in the newsroom seems essential to cover communities that account for a significant portion of the state population.

Newsroom diversity is a complicated challenge as the Sun cannot compel people to respond to its job postings, and diversity is a widespread challenge in the journalism industry, which has yet to cultivate and train an adequately diverse workforce. The company’s job postings state, “The Sun is a Public Benefit Corporation and an equal opportunity employer that is committed to building a newsroom that reflects the diversity of the community it serves. We welcome applicants from all life experiences and encourage members of traditionally underrepresented backgrounds to apply.” The Sun also offers fellowships and mentoring to local university students, helping them to attract younger people to the journalism industry, which will prove to be instrumental in sustaining journalism in Colorado as many newspaper owners in the state are of or approaching retirement age. This will also help them in attracting younger readers to the Sun’s website.

The Sun leaders work to maintain a welcoming, healthy work environment for their employees. The past year proved to be a mentally demanding time for reporters; from the wildfires sweeping across the state to the pandemic, to the multiple shootings in the Denver-Metro area, journalists from the Sun did extensive reporting. In response, the Sun facilitated mental health services for its staff.

Recent Hires



Olivia Sun

PHOTOGRAPHER

Sun is the newsroom's first staff photographer. She is tasked with capturing underserved communities. Audio and digital content is also essential for capturing younger audiences and navigating the digital age of journalism in general.



Shannon Najmabadi

REPORTER

Najmabadi is specifically tasked with reporting on rural communities in Colorado, which is where many of the state's news deserts are located. She covers topics such as economic recovery in the northeast, southeast, and Western Slope of Colorado.

Collaboration Over Competition

The Colorado Sun measures its progress in terms of how well it can fulfill its commitment to keeping the Colorado public informed. Not only do staff members consider how their practices can fulfill this commitment, but they also consider how they can use their resources to help smaller news organizations do the same. It is not uncommon for smaller papers, especially in rural parts of the state, to publish content originally written by the Sun. The Sun allows these papers to use its content for free. This allows smaller papers to focus their resources on more localized coverage, as the Sun can provide them with coverage of statewide issues that may be of interest to people in these areas.

According to Erin McIntyre, co-owner and Publisher of the Ouray County Plaindealer, “The Sun helps us have a cushion every week—if we need to fill pages and we don’t want to forgo the advertising (we never want to turn down revenue) we can still keep quality, relevant articles in the paper and fill that space with pertinent, interesting stories.” The Plaindealer is a smaller paper located on the Western Slope.

In addition to providing support for small newspapers, the Sun has also fostered meaningful relationships with larger news outlets across the state to reach big audiences about issues that they think the greater public should be aware of. One of its more recent collaborative projects is “[Parked](#),” in which Sun reporters partnered with various outlets across the state to talk about manufactured home parts, one of the last forms of affordable housing available for many Coloradans. They have partnered with 9 News to spread relevant information about issues in children’s residential treatment centers and also have a weekly hour-long slot on KUNC, a public radio station based in Greeley, to talk about news across the state.

The Sun’s success and growth allowed it to become both a cooperative and competitive participant in Colorado’s media ecosystem, pushing other prominent outlets to improve their own coverage.

Collaboration Over Competition

In May of 2021, the Colorado Sun partnered with the National Trust for Local News to purchase 24 small newspapers known as Colorado Community Media. This acquisition created the Colorado News Conservancy, in which the Sun will serve as a co-owner and a mentor for these smaller papers. The Colorado News Conservancy is a major achievement for Colorado’s media landscape and could be the basis for a model replicable elsewhere. Rather than allowing the newspapers to be purchased by a hedge fund or another entity that might not prioritize quality journalism, this also allows the papers to remain locally owned, in lieu of outsourcing labor from people not familiar with the community. The acquisition was intended to prevent the creation of new news deserts—areas where people don’t have access to the information required to be informed on events in their immediate communities.

While the Sun’s founders never envisioned acquiring print newspapers as being in line with the Sun’s purpose, they decided that this move would allow them to maximize the benefit they provide to the Colorado public.

Publications under the Colorado News Conservancy

- Arvada Press
- Brighton Standard Blade
- Brighton and Ft. Lupton Advertiser
- Canyon Courier
- Castle Pines News Press
- Castle Rock News Press
- Centennial Citizen
- Clear Creek Courant
- Commerce City Sentinel Express
- Denver Herald Dispatch
- Douglas County News Press
- Elbert County News
- Englewood Herald
- Fort Lupton Press
- Golden Transcript
- Highlands Ranch Herald
- Jeffco Transcript
- Life on Capitol Hill
- Littleton Independent
- Lone Tree Voice
- Northglenn/Thornton Sentinel
- Parker Chronicle
- South Platte Independent
- Washington Park Profile
- Westminster Window
- 285 Hustler

source: <https://coloradonewsconservancy.com/10>

The Colorado Public

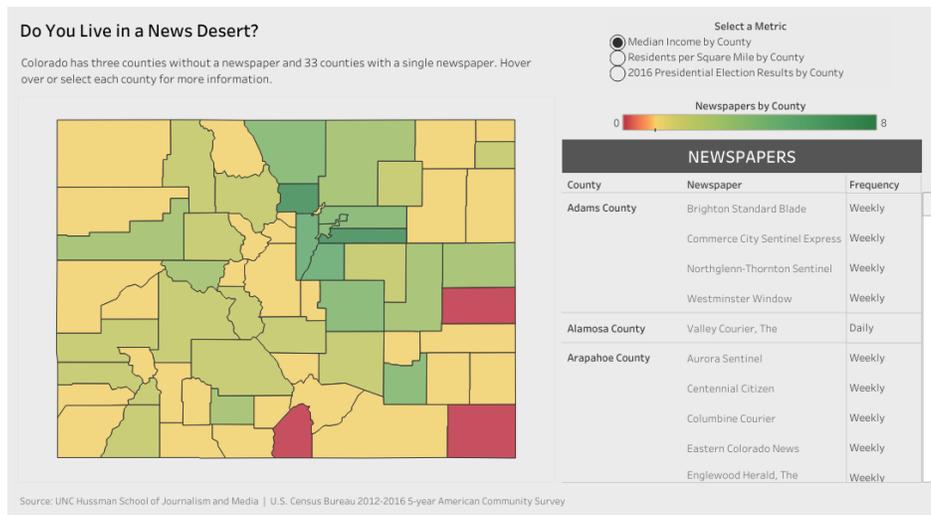
As implied in the Sun’s mission statement, readers should be the group that receives the most benefit from the work of the Sun. The Sun has utilized multiple avenues in pursuit of providing a public service over the past few years. Its distinctive business model helps hold staff members accountable to their audience above all else. As the Sun is mostly sustained by membership payments, journalists are motivated to report on issues important and interesting to their members.

According to Tim Regan-Porter, CEO of the Colorado Press Association, “Journalism throughout the state—and I think the Sun is a big part of this—has moved in a more serious direction. In some areas of the country, it is still much more clickbait-y.” Because of its membership model, the Sun staff tends to pay less attention to the number of web page views or clicks they receive and more attention to the average time spent reading an article; reading time is a better benchmark for evaluating how well they are engaging their audience. On average, people spend about three minutes reading a given article from the Sun, whereas they typically spend 45 seconds reading articles from sites of other major news sources in the state.

The Sun finds itself in a distinct position as a for-profit company whose main goal is to serve the public rather than maximizing earnings. “Because they are a Public Benefit Corporation and very mission-driven, I think that’s allowed them to not chase shiny objects that can sometimes be tempting in for-profit corporations,” says Regan-Porter. By maintaining the status of a PBC, the Sun is more easily able to home in on practices that drive it closer to its mission.

Sun reporters have made particular efforts to introduce themselves to members of communities that tend to receive little coverage in the media. When reporting on rural areas, the Sun provides context and big-picture analysis so that readers from across the state can understand how the effects of rural issues might connect to their own communities. All coverage by the Sun aims to use accessible language and provide context and explanations for terms and concepts that may not be in the average reader’s vocabulary. Journalists at the Sun seek to ensure that their readers know why they should care about what they are reading.

The Colorado Public



This map shows news deserts across the state. According to Laura Frank, the Executive Director of COLab, there are currently over 40 news organizations in Colorado with unstable ownership. The Sun's statewide reporting helps strengthen local news sources with limited resources.

Not all news deserts are rural, however. “Even in a city like Denver there are people who don’t see themselves reflected in news coverage or who don’t have access or whose communities aren’t covered,” says Regan-Porter. This underscores the importance of securing the future of the 24 newspapers in the CNC, which serve metropolitan Denver.

The Sun overhauled its website interface this past year to make it more easily accessible for readers with poor Internet access. This is an important step, particularly given that many parts of Colorado still lack adequate connectivity.

The Sun has been able to utilize multiple platforms to reach Coloradans. It hosts a daily podcast called “The Daily Sun-Up” which summarizes the important stories its reporters are covering that day. Additionally, the Sun is active on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which are key to reaching younger audiences. The staff hopes to improve their social media outreach in the future by making use of platforms such as TikTok. One question that guides their use of social media is how they can translate the reporters’ and the Sun’s account followers into paying members.

The Colorado Public

Meanwhile, the Sun has served an essential—and often neglected—role of informing Coloradans of the business of government. According to Jesse Paul, the politics reporter and an editor for the Sun, “My job is to hold powerful people accountable.” He reported, for instance, on the investigation of the Mesa County Clerk’s Office after a voting system breach. He has also worked with other journalists at the Sun to scrutinize Rep. Lauren Boebert’s ties to the oil and gas industry. Paul summarizes his goals this way: “Always strive for truth, make sure you turn over every rock, talk to more people than you need to, and be compassionate but unmerciful.”

According to Maria De Cambra, the Director of Communications and Community Engagement for Governor Polis’s office, the Sun’s staff is always responsible and respectful. “We understand the importance of their job and they understand what we are doing, and I think that was especially true during COVID,” says De Cambra. At the height of the pandemic, reporters from the Sun attended every press conference held by the governor’s office. They were able to effectively communicate complex information about the public health crisis. The Sun’s commitment to providing in-depth, high-quality, and accurate information means that it is not always the first to report a story, but particularly in a pandemic, that accuracy matters a great deal.

Journalists at the Sun have conducted two reader surveys in the past two years to gain a deeper understanding of the people they are writing for. “What’s Working,” a column by Tamara Chuang, is a prime example of efforts by the Sun to give audiences the information that best serves them. The column covers the intricacies of unemployment, helping the many Coloradans who lost their jobs during the pandemic navigate their reality. The Sun has likewise published many Q&A style stories to help answer the many questions that arise during such uncertain times.

Conclusion

The Sun has made impressive progress in its mission of providing a social benefit to the public of Colorado. The Colorado Sun is a credible, comprehensive news source that strives to include the diverse range of voices and interests throughout the state while also working to strengthen other media through collaboration. It is also pioneering new and potentially replicable models, such as a democratic newsroom, journalist ownership, and an acquisition supported through impact investment. Its rapid growth poses challenging questions about how to maintain its values and mission as operations expand. But at a time when high-road journalism has largely been contracting, this is a good problem to have.

**"WE WILL BE WHATEVER
COLORADO NEEDS US
TO BE."**

Larry Ryckman, Senior Editor & Co-Founder

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This report was prepared by Libby O'Neill, a research fellow at the Media Enterprise Design Lab.

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