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Center for
Rural Strategies

Revealing Rural Realities: What Fuels Inaccurate and Incomplete Coverage of Rural Issues?



A Note from the Authors

This research was conducted in the fall of 2019. Since then, the world has changed as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Our health is at risk, our lives have been upended, and longstanding, systemic issues affecting the lives of millions have been laid bare for all to see—including those facing rural regions and native nations in America.

As the pandemic continues, rural communities will likely face unprecedented challenges as a result of more elderly people in their communities, drastically limited access to hospitals and critical medical supplies, higher rates of serious, chronic medical conditions, and economies that are less diversified than urban communities—and that are still not fully recovered from the 2009 recession.¹

And in the midst of it all, national media companies are laying off employees and cutting print days for smaller publications.²

We knew last year that it was important to better understand and represent rural communities in news coverage, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made this work more urgent than ever before.

1 <https://lernercenter.syr.edu/2020/03/24/why-coronavirus-could-hit-rural-areas-harder/>

2 <http://irjci.blogspot.com/2020/04/lee-gannett-and-other-newspaper-chains.html>

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Introduction

The local hospital cuts its inpatient obstetric services—then shuttered altogether. A new restaurant opens just as a coal plant closes. A community-led initiative protects and restores a 10,000-acre tract of forested land adjacent to town. A timber mill reopens and creates a hundred new jobs. A community comes together to care for two children whose parents passed away. The girls volleyball team makes it to the state championships.

These are the stories of hope and heartbreak, progress and peril that rural residents and local journalists live and tell with nuance and affection.

Major national media outlets tell these stories too—especially since 2016. However, many rural residents and rural-based journalists maintain that much of the recent national coverage of rural America portrays rural areas inaccurately, with an over-reliance on stereotypes and broad generalizations that paint their communities with the same, simplistic and politicized brush.

As a result, accurate rural and Native American voices are missing from conversations about some of the most challenging issues of our time, from climate change to inequality—issues that inherently involve rural America.



Photo Courtesy of Wayne Fawbush

Nationally-focused organizations with deep roots in rural America, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG), the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and the Center for Rural Strategies (CRS) were acutely aware of the gap between rural realities and public perception. Working in partnership with Hattaway Communications, Aspen CSG, HAC and CRS sought to better understand the following questions:

- Why is there a chasm between how rural Americans feel about their communities and the stories that have captured and influenced national narratives and public perception of rural America?
- Why do the stories journalists want to tell fall flat unless they play into preconceived notions of what rural 'is' and 'is not'—or is this just a matter of perception?
- What barriers do talented, well-intentioned and hard-working national journalists face when reporting on the realities of rural America?
- What can be done to achieve more accurate and complete coverage of rural issues?

We aimed to explore these questions with the belief that reporting on the lived experiences of rural and Native Americans is a journalistic imperative, not only for the sake of reporting accurately on a large and diverse country but also for bridging political, social, and cultural divides within and between communities.

The insights and recommendations in this report are based on a series of in-depth interviews and an analysis of national and regional news coverage about rural areas over a 12-month period. Hattaway Communications conducted both the interviews and the analysis.

With an eye towards including a diverse array of geographies and media types, Aspen CSG, HAC, and CRS lent their rural know-how to identifying rural residents, local rural-focused journalists and national journalists covering rural issues, as well as recommendations of a couple of non-journalistic experts with important contextual knowledge in the realm of rural affairs and rural media. Hattaway Communications relied on the Aspen Institute's relationships with national media for recommendations of non-rural journalists and editors from national outlets who would indubitably have perspectives worth sharing. To provide the opportunity for full candor about the inner workings of newsrooms and the business of media today, all interviews were conducted on background.

The findings from this research underscore and articulate how ongoing changes in the structure and business of media and journalism contribute to the gap between rural realities and public perception of rural America. They also highlight the outsized role that social media is playing in shaping public perceptions. Interviewees shared their recommendations for overcoming the challenges they identified and for making the most of emerging opportunities. Accordingly, this report provides a set of recommendations that could result in better rural-focused journalism.



Methodology

This report draws on findings from In-Depth Interviews with rural experts, activists, and journalists, as well as a Media Scan that analyzes coverage of rural America in national and regional news media.



In-Depth Interviews

The Hattaway team conducted 15 interviews with rural experts and journalists from national and local outlets, including those who do and do not currently report on rural issues, from August 21 to December 6, 2019. The questions asked during these interviews were constructed with the goal of exploring the successes, opportunities, challenges, and barriers that local and national journalists experience when covering rural America. We included local journalists who report on the rural communities where they live, as well as urban-based journalists who cover rural America for larger, national outlets. All of the journalists with whom we talked are trusted with reporting on and talking about rural communities, people, and issues in a nuanced and in-depth manner.

We also spoke with 10 rural community members and rural advocates during the Center for Rural Strategies' "Rural Women's Summit", which was held October 27–29, 2019 in Greenville, South Carolina, to explore how coverage about rural America affects those who are from rural communities and/or currently live there. People who live in rural communities inherently have intimate knowledge of the communities where they live; we wanted to understand the difference between how rural residents view their communities compared to how the media often portrays them.

Overall, these hour-long, one-on-one conversations explored interviewees' experiences with and perceptions of the national media coverage of rural issues, including how they decide what stories to cover and publish, what they see as the biggest challenges for covering rural issues, and how media misrepresentation is affecting rural communities. We also asked our interviewees what advice they would give journalists seeking to do a better job of ensuring that their work accurately reflects rural realities.

NOTE: Because tribal communities are integral to rural America, we did our best to include Native voices and media outlets in our interviews. However, a full review of media coverage of Native Americans and tribal communities was beyond the scope of this project.



Media Scan

In addition to interviews, we conducted a Media Scan to assess the themes in news coverage and commentary that shape public perception of rural America and rural issues. This Scan provided information that enabled us to consider whether quantitative data points would corroborate or contradict what we heard from our interviews and added an additional level of insight into the drivers of national narratives about rural America.

For this analysis, our team selected two different samples of media content. The first sample was drawn from a selection of the **top U.S. media outlets** and comprised 150 validated and relevant articles that contained the keyword “rural.” The outlets included were the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Houston Chronicle*, *Fox News* (TV channel and website), *CNN* (TV Channel and website), *HuffPost*, the *New York Post*, and the *Seattle Times*.

The second sample of media content contained articles with the **highest social echo**—defined as the number of combined shares on Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit—from coverage published by U.S.-based media outlets over a year long period. This sample is comprised of 150 validated articles that contained the keyword “rural” near “United States,” “America,” or “U.S.”

Both samples were comprised of content published between **December 3, 2018** and **December 3, 2019**. The limited time period under review is a function of project budget and scope.

NOTE: A challenge to conducting this media scan on “rural” was that rural issues are not easy to find with a simple keyword search. Health stories typically use the word “health”; education stories use the word “education.” The range of issues, and thus key words that appear for rural places, is cross cutting. Adding to the challenge of reviewing rural media en masse, rural places have different names (e.g. New Knoxville, the San Luis Valley, Appalachia), and span across all fifty states; issues central to the rural experience in one place (e.g. wildfire, the sage grouse, heirs property) are not part of the rural experience in another rural place. This range makes identifying, aggregating, and tracking rural media—let alone analyzing it—difficult.



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



Common Terms and Definitions

Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter

Common Terms and Definitions

Local Journalist: Journalists who live in the community or region where they work and report for media organizations with a predominantly local or regional audience.

National Journalist: Journalists who work outside of rural-based or rural-focused outlets, with a particular emphasis on larger, more widely circulated, and urban-based outlets. Some examples include *USA Today*, National Public Radio, or the *Washington Post*.

Media: For the purposes of this report, media refers to any content from print, radio, television, or digital news outlets.

Rural: The definition of rural is an ongoing source of confusion. What counts as urban has changed over time. The Census has consistently defined the rural population as a “non-urban population.” Depending on which definition you use, the total rural population can range from 60 million (19.3%) (U.S. Census definition) to 46 million (14%) (OMB definition). For the purposes of this report, we are not concerned with a specific definition of rural, but importantly, when we say ‘rural’ we are referring to a rural that includes Tribal Nations and communities located in rural regions of the U.S. Instead of a specific definition of rural, we rely on our interviewees’ knowledge of rural and tribal communities to confer their personal experience, understanding and perceptions of the term. For the purposes of this report and any discussion of rural people, places, policy, and media, it is wise to acknowledge the core truth that rural conditions vary widely; the same holds true for the hundreds of Tribal Nations and communities in the U.S.



Photo Courtesy of Kedrick Moholt



Key Insights



Key
Insight

Structural challenges facing news media as a whole have had a disproportionate impact on rural reporting.

According to almost all of our interviewees, the changes in the media landscape have played a tremendous role in furthering the decline of rural voices and issues featured in local and national media. Over the past 15 years, changes in the media industry and landscape have caused more than one in five newspapers to close and over 500 newspapers to close or merge in rural communities specifically. At a time when digital technology makes it feasible for news and media organizations to operate just about anywhere, business models and industry trends have resulted in a media landscape that thrives increasingly in larger cities, while facing a greater threat of neglect or hollowing out elsewhere.

“Time and time again we’re going to places now where there isn’t a local paper, or even the papers online, and it’s a shadow of what it used to be. And that for me, that feels like it’s a national crisis.... The rural part of the country deserves every bit as close of scrutiny and care than those living in cities, and they’re not getting it at the moment.” — Editor at National Outlet



Key
Insight

Rural America is often misunderstood by non-rural journalists and audiences alike. There is, however, an enormous interest on the part of national journalists and their readers to learn about the issues that affect rural America and, ultimately, all of us.

Many interviewees said the 2016 presidential election was a clear reminder that covering rural areas more accurately was critical for reflecting the full diversity of the country. Because of this, many national outlets and journalists understand that there is a pressing need to report on the lived realities of rural America. Time and resource limitations, “parachute journalism,” and a lack of rural voices in newsrooms, however, complicate these efforts. Almost all the journalists and editors with whom we spoke highlighted the importance of bringing a human perspective to rural reporting, challenging negative stereotypes about rural America, and dedicating resources to tell the full stories of these communities. Stories that did so were well received by all audiences.

“To me, [rural stories] are such rich stories and that’s what we’re about as journalists is storytelling. Listeners, and readers and viewers, they’re going to like these stories. I don’t think it’s from a lack of interest on the part of other Americans. I think it’s, again, a lack of imagination, or creativity, or openness on the part of editors and producers and news executives.” — National Journalist



Key
Insight

Despite efforts by national outlets to report on the realities of rural America, there are still strained relationships and distrust among national media, local journalists, and rural communities as a result of post-2016 coverage.

Local journalists—and rural residents more generally—are distrustful of national outlets largely because of their perceived role in perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresenting rural issues. Following the 2016 presidential election, local journalists relayed that they were consistently contacted for stereotypical “rural” sources such as the farmer, coal miner, or Trump supporter, even when these people may not have reflected the zeitgeist of the community. Many interviewees expressed concern that quick-turnaround stories from national outlets ignored the diversity and nuance of rural America. Although national outlets are trying to remedy this relationship, years of oversimplified and negative narratives about rural areas have led to a lack of trust between national outlets and rural America.

“A lot of times what we experience when reporters call us, national reporters, is that they have a particular story in mind and they have certain people that they want to talk to like out-of-work coal miners, people who voted for Trump and have changed their mind. I mean, we get the same kind of requests a lot of times from national reporters. And no matter how many times we try to redirect them ... they just keep circling back to that story.”

— Communications Director at Rural NGO



Journalists and editors view coverage of rural areas as integral to strong national reporting, instead of as a traditional and distinct “beat.”

Through our conversations with journalists and editors, we found that “rural” is not covered as its own topical beat in the way that issues such as health care or education are. When asked what kinds of topics they would consider “rural issues,” most interviewees said many different issues could fall into that category. Several interviewees mentioned that what are sometimes thought of as “rural issues” significantly affect—or at least intersect with—issues in other parts of the country. These interviewees believed calling them “rural issues” inherently suggested that such issues were not relevant to other parts of the country, although they very much are.

“Rural issues in particular are so integral to understanding any particular problem. Because rural people are closer to public lands, they are closer to the environment, they are closer to the floods and the wildfires, and sea level rise a lot of times.... It’s really important to talk about rural issues because they’re no different challenges than New York or somewhere.” — Local Journalist



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



In-Depth Insights

Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter

1. Structural challenges facing news media as a whole have had a disproportionate impact on rural reporting.

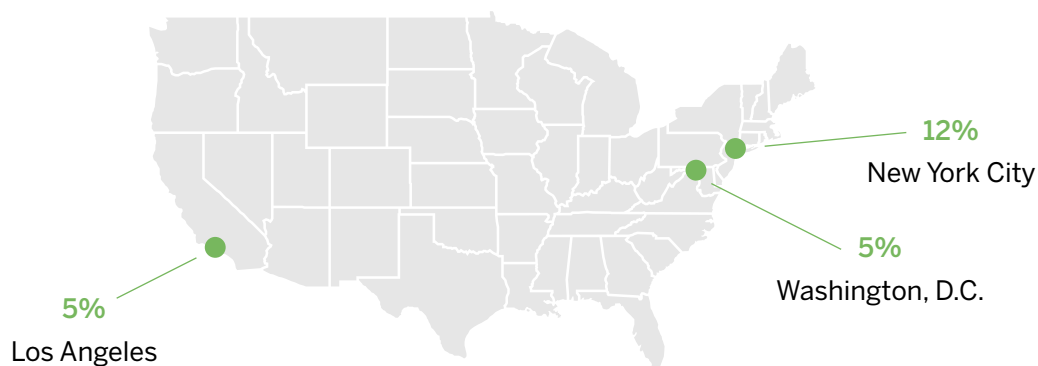
According to almost all of our interviewees, the changes in the media landscape have played a large role in furthering the decline of rural voices and issues featured in local and national media. At a time when digital technology makes it feasible for news and media organizations to operate just about anywhere, business models and industry trends have resulted in a media landscape that thrives increasingly in larger cities, while facing a greater threat of neglect or hollowing out elsewhere—with rural areas being the first ones affected.



The changes in the media landscape have played a significant role in deepening the decline of rural voices and issues featured in local and national media.

Over the past 15 years, changes in the media industry and landscape have caused more than one in five newspapers to close and over 500 newspapers to close or merge in rural communities specifically.

During this time period, the media as a business has been mirroring the broader economic trends that are challenging rural communities at large. Business models for digital news increasingly reward scale and affluence, so media organizations that have had success adapting to the industry's major challenges tend to operate at a national scale and concentrate themselves in the country's largest metropolitan areas.



*As of 2017, nearly one-in-five (**22%**) newsroom employees live in New York, Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. according to Pew Research Center.*

For these types of organizations—such as the *New York Times* and Vox Media—scale and consolidation means investing in growth and innovation. Meanwhile, scale and consolidation for smaller media organizations operating closer to rural communities have come primarily in the form of corporate mergers and purchases by private equity. These cases—akin to the GateHouse and Gannett merger or the ongoing acquisitions of Alden Global Capital—tend to drain wealth and reporting resources out of local communities, through cost reductions, layoffs, and worse. Because corporate mergers are primarily focused on the business management of media organizations instead of on solely their democratic imperative, these acquisitions have led to the loss of in-depth and vital reporting in these areas.

As a result, systemic problems—closures, the shrinking of time and resources for local coverage, and the consolidation of media outlets—have negatively influenced the variation and quantity of stories from and about rural areas that are published in both local and national media. Almost all of our interviewees, including those working at national outlets, pointed out that these changes have immensely affected rural coverage:

“Local journalism has really declined just in terms of the business model. I think as these papers shrink, hopefully you’re not going to get rid of the one guy you have covering city hall or the legislature. But [for] the person covering agriculture and/or the environment, it’s probably easier to justify getting rid of them.” — National Journalist

“Time and time again we’re going to places now where there isn’t a local paper, or even the papers online, and it’s a shadow of what it used to be. And that for me, that feels like it’s a national crisis.... The rural part of the country deserves every bit as close of scrutiny and care than those living in cities, and they’re not getting it at the moment.” — Editor at National Outlet

“If you really care about what’s going on in Paducah, Kentucky, you’re relying on the Kennett Paper that’s just bought by GateHouse, and he’s probably got three reporters left in the newsroom.” — Local Journalist

“[The decline in local reporting] means that a lot of these issues aren’t found or covered. ... I think larger news organizations are almost dependent on these local news organizations to cover these issues and find out some leads, and then the larger organization might come in with a greater number of resources to dive in more deeply or bring a heavy-hitter of a reporter or something to push it further.” — National Journalist



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative



The decline of local media has affected the way rural communities see themselves, their neighbors, and their relationship to the country more broadly.

Many of the rural people we interviewed told us that the negative narrative they hear about their communities from national media has affected the way they view themselves and the future of rural places. Due to the lack of local newspapers in many isolated places, rural community members are turning to larger, more urban-based outlets to receive their news. Many of our interviewees noted that not only does primarily receiving news from urban-based outlets affect the ability for local media to report on problems that are unique to a certain community, but it has also affected how these communities see themselves. While films, television shows, and other media have often traded in stereotypes, national news media outlets have had a large hand in reinforcing negative stereotypes about rural areas and the people who live there, if they cover rural at all.

Psychological research has demonstrated that how people see themselves represented influences personal development; thus, accurate, frequent, and positive representation is important for building up a positive sense of self, or in this case, a community. As one of our interviewees mentioned, the media has the ability to build up what people can imagine, and the decline of local newspapers has meant that there are fewer publications circulated in rural communities that are challenging the current, dominant national narratives being told about rural America.

“Because we don’t have as much connection through local media with each other in a community, those stories are coming from the top, from those big national outlets. [And] the result of those stories really does pit people against one another.... [For example], extractive industries have come into this place and they have tried to portray the people of eastern Kentucky as people who aren’t worth saving, and people who don’t have enough gumption to save themselves. And they’ve done that because they wanted to be able to easily exploit their resources in this place. So they’ve constantly used the media as a tool to be able to then come into the region and take everything from people.”

— Communications Director at Rural NGO

“Tech in rural is a concept that a lot of people can’t get their minds around.... [and] people aren’t believing that it’s possible because it’s not in their mental model or frame of reference. The way that people talk about rural doesn’t include that economic activity.... it’s just ag and poverty. That way of thinking of rural, and the possibility in rural, is a really big barrier to rural communities getting there. It’s hard for people to build up what they can’t imagine, and the media has constructed what rural people can imagine.”

— Rural Community Member



Finding

Direct funding programs or media collaboration facilitated by a national outlet can help to remedy resource shortages affected by the changing media landscape.

Several interviewees mentioned that some organizations and programs are providing direct funding to support local journalism. However, there is skepticism about the sustainability of this model.

“ProPublica has its local reporting network which supports investigative reporting in local news organizations.... They’re interested in all kinds of places, too. They’re off the coasts, they’re in rural communities, so that is a real boon and a real opportunity. And ... it’s all about funding. It’s somebody who’s got money willing to fund it.” — National Journalist

A few interviewees also mentioned the trend of media collaboration, in which a single parent company supports a number of smaller outlets. Although they recognized that there were benefits to this model, such as being able to draw on the parent company’s greater resources, there were also drawbacks, such as local outlets having to conform to standardized story formats, which limited the type of stories they could run.



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative

“We were able to work cooperatively at the national level to make sure that we had what we needed, and also to make sure that we could provide [help to] under-resourced organizations. We could lend a videographer to a very small newspaper that didn’t have its own video team if they needed it. We could even lend an editor ... to make sure that these great stories that were being reported in these smaller communities were able to be surfaced ... and to be able to be elevated so that they would work for a national level as well as a local level.”

— Editor at National Outlet

“[Different news organizations] don’t have common ownership, and also they don’t have common editing tools, and they may not have common news standards. You want to make sure that the reporting is vetted and to the highest possible level. And if you don’t know each other, it’s harder to do that.... [For example,] ProPublica is able to partner with all kinds of different organizations because everybody knows that ProPublica has a standard of quality, and they have a certain amount of control over the content and the quality of the content.” — Editor at National Outlet



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter

2. Rural America is often misunderstood by non-rural journalists and audiences alike. There is, however, an enormous interest on the part of journalists and their readers to learn about the issues that affect rural America and, ultimately, all of us.

Many interviewees said the 2016 presidential election was a clear reminder that covering rural areas more accurately was critical for reflecting the full diversity of the country. Because of this, many national outlets and journalists are committed to reporting on the lived realities of rural America. Time and resource limitations, “parachute journalism,” and a lack of rural voices in newsrooms, however, complicate these efforts. Almost all the journalists and editors that we spoke to highlighted the importance of bringing a human perspective to rural reporting, challenging negative stereotypes about rural America, and dedicating resources to tell the full stories of these communities. Stories that did so were well received by all audiences.



National journalists and editors recognize the importance of including rural perspectives in their reporting, especially post-2016.

Most journalists we spoke to at national outlets believed there was a genuine interest in rural stories at the editorial level, and none perceived they were discouraged from reporting on rural areas. Following the 2016 presidential election, national outlets quickly realized that covering rural areas more accurately was critical for reflecting the nation as a whole.

“I don’t think the word ‘rural’ had appeared in [my organization] in the lead-up to the 2016 election, probably didn’t at all. There was a big perception that the rural vote didn’t really matter anymore.... And then as soon as President Trump won there was intense interest ... what’s going on? And where are these voters coming from? And that whole fascination in trying to understand why a swath of the country could see the world so differently.” — National Journalist

“There’s never been a shortage of interest among the editors and shows [here] in the [rural] stories I’ve done, and audiences have responded, usually with surprise. They didn’t know these things and they were grateful to know about them.” — National Journalist



“Grandparents as Caregivers,” Creative Commons Attribution License



National journalists cite a lack of time and resources as a significant barrier to in-depth and frequent reporting, however many rural community members and journalists cite “parachute journalism” as the main cause for the misrepresentation of rural America in national outlets.

When asked why they did not report on rural areas more frequently or more in depth, given their interest in doing so, most national journalists said they simply lacked the time or resources to spend more than a day or two in an area. Nevertheless, local journalists and rural community members stressed that visiting a community for a short time isn't adequate enough to understand local dynamics and perspectives and be able to write an accurate story about it.

“The changing shape of news staff and the increasing focus on quick-turn pieces done from a central office instead of deeper reporter pieces done from the ground really hampers our ability to understand communities, whether they're urban or rural, that are placed outside of main newsrooms.”

— National Journalist

“[National reporters] have to parachute in from the coast, and grab as much as they can in the maybe two days they get on the ground, and get out. So they go to the café in town and interview the old white guys. Well, the old white guys don't really represent most of us anymore and they need to go to different places.” — Local Journalist

“A lot of [national] reporting about health care in rural areas doesn't look at history, context, or socio-economic factors. It mostly focuses on poor health epidemics. So, it will focus on diabetes, obesity, or poor dental care; [and] there is always a blaming of a community for failing to provide services, or blaming an individual for what they are experiencing without a larger context... [National reporters] will maybe get to the context of ‘there are not a lot of health care professionals in that area,’ but they never get to the context of why.”

— Rural Community Member



When non-rural outlets do spend time covering rural areas in depth and share stories that reflect the real experiences of rural Americans, those stories perform well with non-rural audiences.

When asked how well stories about rural communities perform—in terms of readership, views, shares, and other engagement metrics—most journalists said such stories perform well. National and local journalists alike noted that in their experience, their audiences wanted to hear more than the stereotypical stories about rural areas, such as the common trope about rural Trump supporters voting against their own interests.

“To me, they’re [rural stories] such rich stories and that’s what we’re about as journalists is storytelling. Listeners, and readers and viewers, they’re going to like these stories. I don’t think it’s from a lack of interest on the part of other Americans. I think it’s, again, a lack of imagination, or creativity, or openness on the part of editors and producers and news executives.” — National Journalist

“I think a story that gets more traction is one that surprises the reader or listener. Something that’s counterintuitive to the common perceptions or misperceptions of rural America. That, for instance, there are people of color here, or not everybody’s a farmer. Or, hey this small town actually does have a pretty good idea of what they want to do.” — Local Journalist

Journalists and editors suggested that two types of stories about rural areas perform especially well on a national platform: stories that show how events in one rural community connect to other communities or to the country as a whole, and stories with a strong human-interest angle that reveal local realities to people who aren’t familiar with rural America.



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative

“Some of my very favorite [stories] were simply ... reporting on the ground like, ‘Explain what life is like here.’ It gave you a sense of how this is a community that did not look at all, sound at all, or live in a world at all familiar to a typical *New York Times* reader.” — Editor at National Outlet

“[A good story] is about finding issues that connect with all these people on a broader level, but then adding an element of the personal. So it’s not just saying, ‘Hey this issue affects this crazy number of Americans.’ But here is ... the normal dude who’s being impacted and showing the impact on him ... then connecting that to a larger trend.” — National Journalist

“I think a good story, well told, with compelling characters is going to be received well. And it doesn’t matter what the subject is or who the people are, or where the location is.” — National Journalist

Interviewees did identify a few national outlets they believed were doing a good job reporting on rural issues, including the *Washington Post* and National Public Radio (NPR). Most felt these outlets have been successful where others have not because they allow their reporters to take the time they need to get beyond the surface of the story, or work closely with rural reporters to identify and report stories.

“The *Washington Post* for example does a good job of [reporting on rural America]. They had a push recently where they hired more national reporters ... and so they dedicated a reporter and time to doing those stories, and doing those stories thoroughly. And so they spent a lot of time in those communities doing the interviews that they needed to do, and exploring the concept as thoroughly as possible.” — National Journalist

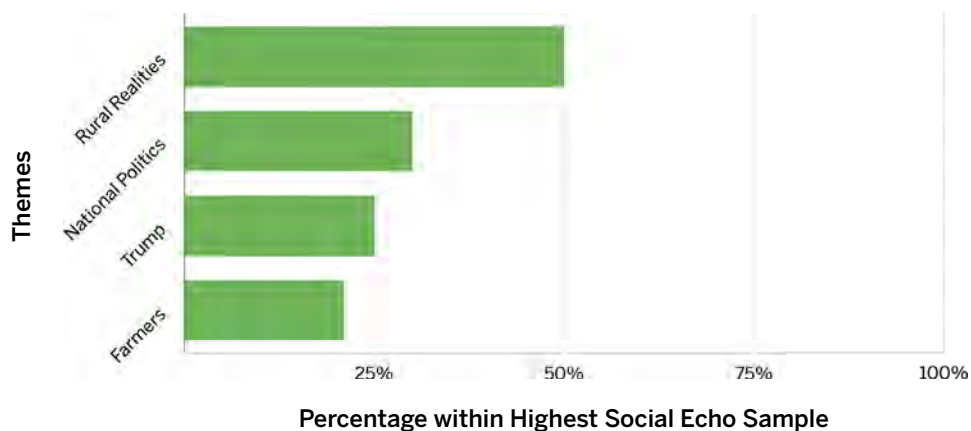
“[In my experience], NPR loves stories that surprise people, that challenge conventional wisdom, that certainly are stories that you’re not hearing anywhere else ... and the rural reporting gives [NPR reporters] the opportunity to go to places reporters weren’t necessarily going to at all or very much, and doing it in a systematic way and a thoughtful way.” — National Journalist



Media Scan Finding

Besides what we heard from journalists, our Media Scan supported the idea that in-depth reporting on rural realities resonates with non-rural audiences. When analyzing the coverage about rural areas with the **highest social echo**, half of those stories were focused on local trends and issues we categorized as Rural Realities, such as: the decline of medical centers in rural America, rising suicide rates, immigration, and small-town news. By comparison, stories about national politics and Donald Trump represented less than a third of the most-shared stories.

Coverage within Each Theme



**Notes: Some articles are coded under more than one theme. All are rounded to the nearest percent.*



Photo Courtesy of iStock

Rural Realities Example:

In Rural West Texas, Illegal Border Crossings Are Routine For U.S. Citizens



May 25, 2019, NPR

National Politics Example:

Still traumatized from 2016 loss, Democrats weigh how much to reach out to rural America



May 8, 2019, *Washington Post*

Trump Example:

Truckers and farmers who voted for Trump are starting to blame his policies for their economic woes



August 21, 2019, *Business Insider*

Farmer Example:

American farmer: Trump 'took away all of our markets'



July 31, 2019, *Yahoo! Finance*

Within our sample, the majority of the stories coded as “Rural Realities” were published by NPR, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. The **top article** among the most-shared stories coded as “Rural Realities”—a profile of a struggling farming family in Wisconsin—was shared more than 439,000 times across Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit.

Definition: Social echo is defined as the number of combined shares on Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit— from coverage published by U.S.-based media outlets over a year long period.

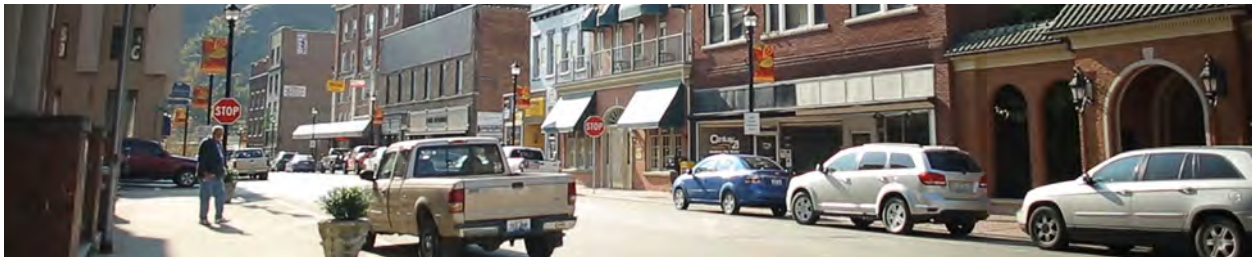


Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative

3. Despite efforts by national outlets to report on the realities of rural America, there are still strained relationships and distrust among national media, local journalists, and rural communities as a result of post-2016 coverage.

Local journalists—and rural residents more generally—are distrustful of national outlets largely because of their perceived role in perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresenting rural issues. Following the 2016 presidential election, local journalists relayed that they were constantly contacted for stereotypical “rural” sources such as the farmer, coal miner, or Trump supporter, even when these people may not have reflected the zeitgeist of the community. Many interviewees expressed that quick-turnaround stories from national outlets ignored the diversity and nuance of rural America. Although national outlets are trying to remedy this relationship, years of oversimplified and negative narratives about rural areas have led to distrust between national outlets and rural America.



Rural community members recognize that national outlets play a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes about rural communities and misrepresenting rural stories.

Because stories that play into stereotypes about rural people and places are the ones breaking through, local journalists and their communities think that national media is publishing mainly these types of stories, even if they are only a small subset of coverage.

“Writers from the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and the *New Yorker* were saying that we’re all racist in Iowa for electing Steve King and Donald Trump without knowing a thing about Iowa.... Steve King says something outrageous, and they say, ‘Oh. All Iowans must be racist.’” — Local Journalist

“Over time, the narrative of [Appalachia] has really been cemented by a lot of popular culture. Obviously, you can think of things like the movie *Deliverance*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, those kinds of things. And then the news media sort of picks up on that and ... [it’s easier to] come into the region looking for those stereotypical tropes than it is to think in a more complex way....”

— Communications Director at Rural NGO



Photo Courtesy of KOMUNews, Creative Commons Attribution License



Finding

Although national outlets seem to be moving away from stories that perpetuate rural stereotypes, these types of stories are disproportionately shared on social channels.

Journalists and rural community members expressed concern that, particularly after the 2016 presidential election, the majority of coverage about rural areas in national media perpetuated stereotypical depictions of rural Americans as backward, racist, and unintelligent. We consistently heard that rural coverage often talked about support for Trump among rural areas or highlighted farmers and the issues they face despite the fact that agriculture only employed just 6% of the rural workforce in 2017.

“I think in terms of the election in particular, [national journalists relying on stereotypes] was about needing an explanation for the dominant culture and for America as a whole for why Trump happened. And the easiest possible answer that they could come up with was that it was backwards, bigoted people who live in the South. And in particular, because central Appalachia is predominantly white, it was easy to put that onto this region, and say, ‘Here are these backward white people who obviously voted for this guy who is perpetuating some ideals of white supremacy.’”

— Communications Director at Rural NGO

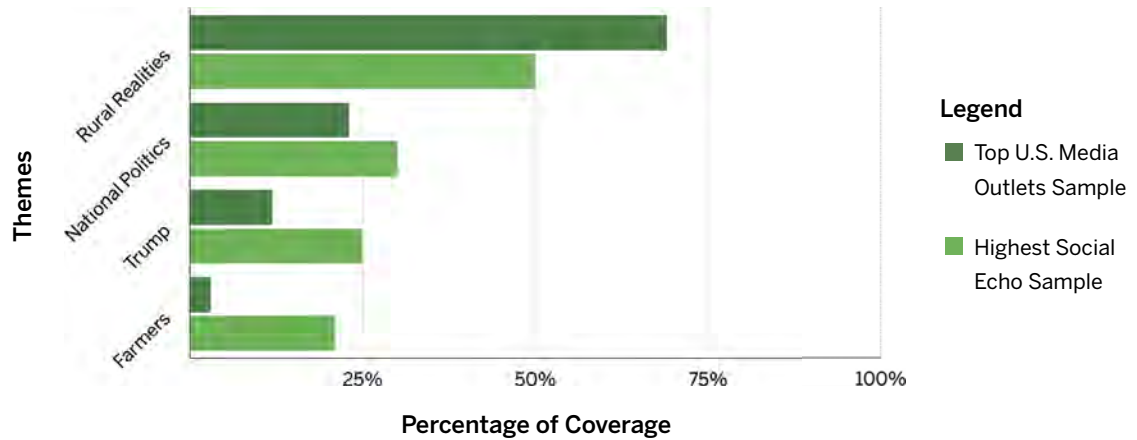


Media
Scan
Finding

Our analysis of news coverage about rural areas in the **top news outlets** over the 12-month period found that only 12% of coverage talked about Trump and rural communities. Instead, the majority of their coverage was about issues affecting local communities, such as hospital closures and natural disasters, and interesting “local color” stories.

In contrast, when looking at the articles with the **highest social echo**, we found that a quarter of the coverage talked about Trump and rural America—twice as frequently as he was mentioned in the sample of top news outlets. In addition, 21% of the 150 most-shared articles mentioned farmers, compared with only 3% of the articles from top news outlets. This suggests that although national outlets are now covering rural America in a more representative way than they may have been right after the election, stories that play into stereotypes of rural America still have traction on social media and may be disproportionately influencing the national conversation about rural areas.

Coverage by Each Theme across Samples



*Notes: Some articles are coded under more than one theme. All are rounded to the nearest percent.

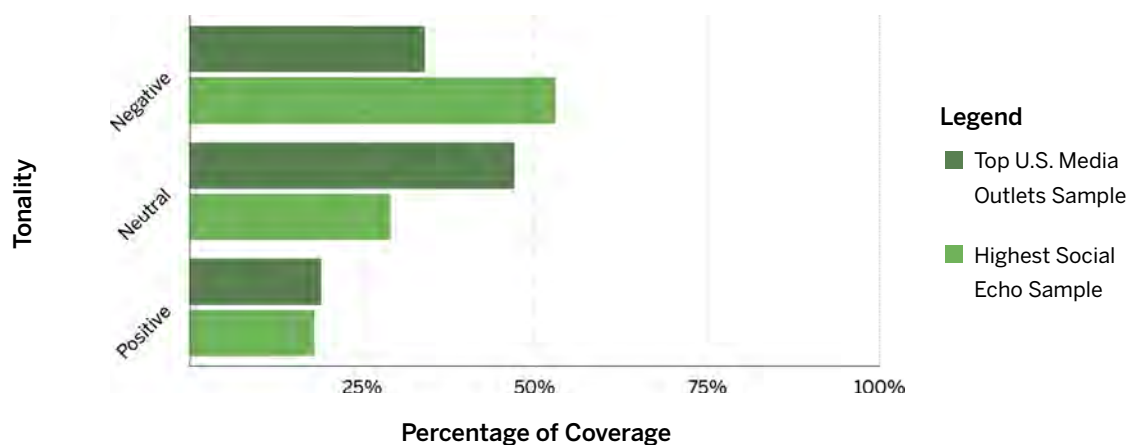


Media
Scan
Finding

Even though there is more coverage of rural realities, stories often portray only the negative components of rural life.

Although the stories coded as “Rural Realities” provided insights on daily life in rural America, many of them may actually be perpetuating the idea that rural communities are struggling places with few jobs or opportunities. When looking at the “Rural Realities” stories with the **highest social echo**, more than half were negative, with either the words “crisis” or “struggle” appearing in some headlines. Common negative themes were suicide rates, hospital closures, and other health-care inadequacies. Of the “Rural Realities” articles in the **top national outlets** sample, a third of the articles focused on the negative.

Tonality within “Rural Realities” Theme



*Notes: Pertains only to the “Rural Realities” subset.

Negative Example:

Residents suffer as Mississippi and 13 other states debate Medicaid expansion



November 4, 2019, *NBC News*

Neutral Example:

'We are not drag queens': For transgender people in 2019, a conflicted reality of breakthroughs, barriers



November 19, 2019, *USA Today*

Positive Example:

2 Nurses In Tennessee Preach 'Diabetes Reversal'



July 22, 2019, *NPR*



The lack of geographical representation in non-rural newsrooms affects coverage of rural America.

Many of the journalists and rural community members with whom we spoke pointed to an abiding problem that negatively affects the coverage of rural America—the lack of rural voices in newsrooms across the country. Because national journalists usually don’t represent the rural communities they are reporting on, they bring their own biases to their reporting, are less likely to have working relationships with local sources, and seldomly have a deep understanding of these areas. Additionally, many interviewees noted that lacking a familiarity of place means that important stories often go untold or are told without nuance.

“My production team are predominantly people who grew up in urban environments. They don’t have a huge amount of knowledge about what it is to live in rural areas and to grow up maybe poor.... Again, it’s breaking down this idea of, particularly national media, thinking that they can paint a story or a part of the country in one way, and it just feels out of kilter with what the lived reality is about.” — Editor at National Outlet

“Problem B is when you do have reporters there, too often you’ve got reporters who are not diverse enough in terms of mirroring what their communities are ... they’re coming from the outside. And so they don’t necessarily have the same level of understanding. I think when you have newsrooms that don’t mirror their communities, you miss a lot of stories.” — Editor at National Outlet



Photo Courtesy of iStock



Local journalists often distrust national journalists. They feel like they are being used to identify sources for stories national journalists have already decided to tell, and then don't feel properly credited or invited to collaborate on stories that are important to locals.

Many of the local journalists we interviewed mentioned they are often skeptical of the motives of national reporters and media outlets when they are interested in reporting on rural issues. Several local journalists mentioned that reporters at national outlets often contact them asking for specific sources that clearly would serve to corroborate the story the national journalist has already decided to tell before they even get there. For example, a national reporter might call in search of a local Trump supporter or a farmer, rather than to learn what's happening and what stories merit attention.

"I mean, I could talk for an hour about Ivy-Leaguers coming in and try to portray the pig farmer, but that's what it boils down to because that's the image that they want, and get me a farmer. I can't tell you how many.... I just had an email that I'm ignoring right now from a reporter who wants me to find a farmer for him to interview. Well, you know what? Farmers are 2% of Iowa's population." — Local Journalist

"After the election, if I had one call, I had 50 that was about, 'Can you help me explain the rural vote and what happened?' ... [Or] go find me somebody who's going to be hurt by Trump's policies, but voted for him." — Local Journalist

"A lot of times what we experience when reporters call us, national reporters, is that they have a particular story in mind and they have certain people that they want to talk to like out-of-work coal miners, people who voted for Trump and have changed their mind. I mean, we get the same kind of requests a lot of times from national reporters. And no matter how many times we try to redirect them ... they just keep circling back to that story."

— Communications Director at Rural NGO

A few local journalists also mentioned times in which their work was picked up by national outlets without giving the journalists proper credit, or instances of journalists from these outlets reaching out to ask for connections to sources so they could rewrite the piece themselves (again, without properly crediting the work). Although local journalists are happy to see their stories picked up and given a bigger audience, they are often frustrated that they have spent years talking about an issue and then national outlets report on the issue as if they are the first to uncover it.

“I couldn’t talk [my editors] into my first flooding story. Then, of course, they see it in the *New York Times* so then they’re interested, which is one of our biggest frustrations is that editors on the coast wait for the big boys and see what they do, and then they’ll have us do it.” — Local Journalist

“I tried to do a thing on rural issues for the *Chicago Tribune* that was Iowa-centric because this is the first-in-the-nation caucus state, but they rejected my work. Do they [the *Chicago Tribune*] realize that half their readers in the Western suburbs are Iowa ex-pats? No. They’re so consumed by themselves at the *Tribune* tower, they don’t even know who’s living in those suburbs. They can run something on the same topic from the *National Review* [and] I was writing on a similar issue with more competence, but because I was from Iowa, I was not the same as [nationally syndicated columnist] Jonah Goldberg.” — Local Journalist

“Case in point is the missing and murdered indigenous women. That’s all you hear about now but I actually began writing about this violence against Native women in the ’08 era, and it wasn’t really something that [got traction].... I mean we’ve been hollering about it forever.” — Freelance Photojournalist and Writer covering Native American people and Issues



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative

Although many journalists at national outlets claimed that lack of time or funding meant that rural issues couldn't be covered more in depth, freelance journalists and those at local outlets believed that claim was disingenuous. Several felt national outlets could find the resources to spend if they were motivated to do so, and others pointed out that national outlets could do more to connect with the local journalists already reporting on these stories and elevate their work, rather than spending resources to essentially redo what the local and freelance journalists have already done.

Because spending time and building relationships among rural community members was pointed to as critical for national journalists to do better reporting on rural areas, this strained relationship presents a significant challenge to reporting on rural areas.

“There’s no excuse for national news organizations not to be paying more attention and better attention to rural issues in rural places. There’s simply no excuse. They spend enormous amounts of money doing what everybody is doing and to me, that’s counterproductive.” — National Journalist



“Chalk Fairy,” Carl Sr., Flickr Creative Commons



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter

4. Journalists and editors view coverage of rural areas as integral to strong national reporting, instead of as a traditional and distinct “beat.”

Through our conversations with journalists and editors, we uncovered that defining “rural” as its own beat is not the same as topical beats such as health care or education. When asked what kinds of topics they would consider “rural issues,” most interviewees said many different issues could fall into that category.

“I love [covering rural] a lot but it also drives me crazy because it’s so huge. I think it impacts everything from criminal justice to immigration, to environmentalism, to politics. You can really say almost any subject and ultimately it has some tie to rural America, so it’s all relevant.”

— National Journalist

This meant that not only were interviewees unable to speak to another beat comparable to covering rural areas but also they noted that covering rural areas was far more complex than any other topical beat. Besides the diversity of topics the rural beat could include (health, education, energy, environment, technology, government, etc.), rural areas are diverse geographic areas that differ in meaningful ways—such that the issues affecting Appalachia are different from those that affect the Mountain West, and different still from those that affect Native American people and lands.

“Often the rural press doesn’t cover Indian Country for a whole lot of reasons. There’s not a lot of good data because we don’t produce the data, we don’t have the infrastructure to produce it. So often, for instance, we’ll get left out of crime rates in a county, and we may be the largest population in the county, but we’ll get left out because there aren’t any who have access to our data.”

— Freelance Photojournalist and Writer covering Native American people and Issues

“Rural means coal mines. Rural means small college professors and all those things. It means Latinos. It means Sudanese people and Asian people. We speak about 24 languages with another six dialects for 30 different languages in [my town].” — Local Journalist



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative

And finally, several interviewees mentioned that what are sometimes thought of as “rural issues” significantly affect—or at least intersect with—issues in other parts of the country. These interviewees believed calling them “rural issues” inherently suggested that such issues were not relevant to other parts of the country.

“What [national reporters] need to do is connect climate to rural issues to get people to pay attention and because it is the existential question of our time.... The land is in rural areas, and land use is the primary way to solve climate change problems, whether you’re installing wind turbines or solar panels or you’re sequestering carbon through plant life ... and the other issue ... is immigration. You hear a lot about refugees being locked in cages at the border, but you don’t hear a whole lot about what’s happening in the interior in rural communities, Dodge City, Kansas beef-packing.” — Local Journalist

“Rural issues in particular are so integral to understanding any particular problem. Because rural people are closer to public lands, they are closer to the environment, they are closer to the floods and the wildfires, and sea level rise a lot of times.... It’s really important to talk about rural issues because they’re no different challenges than New York or somewhere.” — Local Journalist



Photo Courtesy of Kertis Creative



Recommendations From Respondents

Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter

At the end of each conversation with rural community members, rural experts, and local and national journalists, we asked for recommendations to increase the quality and quantity of representative and nuanced stories about rural America in national media. We explicitly made sure to include this question at the end of each interview in order to generate ideas from those who are passionate about rural reporting and the people that live in rural communities. Each of our interviewees expressed the need for investing in local journalism and making sure that rural and tribal perspectives are fully voiced and heard. To fully reflect the diversity of our country and our democracy, all of our interviewees highlighted one main point: National media should accurately represent all of us; rural America, Tribal Nations and the people who call these places home are no exception. Here's what we heard.

Recommendations for Journalists

Focus on telling stories from rural areas or including a “rural perspective” in reporting, rather than advocating for more coverage of “rural issues.”

“I mean, part of it is trying to bust out the idea that so much of what we talk about is a rural issue or an urban issue. It’s not that. It’s just the fact that you’re approaching this particular story from a rural point of view. If you’re talking about crime, are you just going to have people from Chicago, and Boston, and New York participating in talking about crime? Or are you making space for the idea that you do have someone [in a rural community] who has absolutely as much concern about crime, but they just happen to live in a much more rural part of the country.” — Editor at National Outlet

Seek out a broad array of voices representative of the diversity of rural America in geography, race, ethnicity, culture, history, economy, and more.

“Just like what the struggles are for LGBTQ folks on the [reservation].... We live in the modern world and it’s not a very friendly place for LGBTQ people.... I want to hear about this person’s struggle and they really want to send a message to the people coming after them, other young people. How to navigate the world and how to gain strength.”

— Freelance Journalist covering Native American people and issues

Highlight the opportunities, innovation and positive aspects of rural America rather than focusing primarily on challenges facing these areas.

“But what you would want is for people to look at small towns for what they are, which are cool places to live. And much more diverse than cities to my way of looking, or my experience is that’s the case. And good places not only for people to grow up, but also good places for adults to live and prosper.” — Local Journalist

Recommendations for Editors

Commit to a consistent presence and build trust within local rural and tribal communities via lasting, mutually beneficial relationships.

“What we undertook this year is that we promised that wherever we went this year, we would go back to in 2020. So it’s a way of us trying to build a relationship with an area which is new to us, but also try and build some trust. The idea is that we’re just not going to turn up for a few days, get what we want and leave. We’re trying to be respectful and say, ‘This is part of a relationship. We look forward to seeing you again next year and maybe we talk about something different. Maybe we don’t.’ But it’s a way of trying to say to those communities and those folks that we’re not just coming in and splash-and-dash routine, which again, national media is very good at doing.” — Editor at National Outlet

Challenge journalists at national outlets to find and publish more stories that challenge stereotypes of rural America.

“I think that Americans and journalists tend to forget that rural communities are full of people of color, that rural communities mean Native American tribes, that there is an incredibly large immigrant community, an incredibly diverse series of immigrant communities in towns across the Midwest and the plains who don’t get heard from a lot, whose politics and priorities do not get a lot of views and a lot of attention.”

— National Journalist

Partner with local and freelance journalists on stories or contract freelance journalists to produce stories for national publications.

“[Stories are being covered] but it’s missing the nuance, and I think that’s where regional journalists and independent journalists can really benefit news outlets because of that. The problem is you’ll see the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* have someone parachute, when you could easily assign this to a journalist that is already there.”

— Local/Freelance Journalist

Recommendations for National Outlets, Local Newsrooms, and Investors

Create partnerships between national outlets and local newsrooms that can produce better rural stories. For example:

Recognize the potential biases of reporters not familiar with rural and balance them by ensuring rural journalists or people with knowledge are a part of the team.

“We’re working in collaboration with these [local] teams, and they’ll put us right if they just feel that we’re making an assumption about a particular viewpoint. So the relationships with the local news are helping us avoid those mistakes. They’re the check on our national prejudices and we trust them—we obviously respect the work they do—and that’s hopefully making our product stronger.” — Editor at National Outlet

Cover local stories more quickly and accurately via partnerships and collaborative work with local journalists.

“Instead of putting national reporters on a plane and photographers on a plane and sending them to Florida, [we] have the local journalists covering it. And you’ve got much better coverage. So it actually made quite a bit of sense and we were able to make use of a lot of the reporting that otherwise would not have seen the light of day, including rural reporting [and] deep red state reporting, that other national media did not have.”
— Editor at National Outlet

Dedicate more resources to ensuring that reporters can spend sufficient time doing the legwork in rural and tribal communities when they are sent there for stories.

“If they’re able to actually come here and visit, that would make the biggest difference. We see the change in people all the time. It just makes a huge difference if you can actually go into a place and hear from the people who live there, look them in the eye and have a real conversation, a real human connection with them.”
— Communications Director at a Rural NGO

“90% of journalism is showing up and the story is always different when you actually go there. You talk to people, you reach out broadly for all kinds of perspectives. It’s always different and it’s always more interesting.” — National Journalist

Diversify national newsrooms to include more journalists who have rural-know how, such as having been raised or lived and worked in rural or tribal places.

“I think there might be some comparability to the early black reporters who went into national journalism.... They were able to get stories that they didn’t get before because they had somebody who would understand things that people who hadn’t had that background and experience in understanding wouldn’t be able to get.” — Local Journalist

Conclusion

Representation in media matters. The movie *Black Panther* was celebrated, in part, because it provided a generation of young people with the opportunity to see superheroes who look like them on the big screen. Rural and native people also need to see themselves and their communities in media and the news. Done right, reporting about rural and tribal communities would acknowledge there is distress, but it would also showcase their assets, diversity, innovation, cultural richness, opportunity and natural beauty. It would wrestle with the tough challenges communities face, while delving into the essential contributions of rural and tribal communities to our nation’s past, present—and future. Indubitably, reporting on these communities requires sustained commitment, intentionality and nuance. We hope that the findings, insights and recommendations in this report prompt reflection, discussion, creative thinking, and changes that—with time and effort—result in news stories that rural and native people embrace because they reflect their lived experience and the places they call home.



Photo Courtesy of Shawn Poynter



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