

2022

Public Benefit Report

THE COLORADO SUN





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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 economically sustainable and encompasses the variety of voices and interests across the state. As part of that commitment, the Sun was incorporated as a public benefit corporation.

Its mission, according to the staff's 2019 [annual report](#):

“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.”

In the four years since its founding, the Sun has made much headway in providing a benefit to the public, but it is still a work in progress. The Sun continues to reevaluate its business processes and content to ensure the advancement of its mission. The purpose of this report is to review the company's development in light of its stated mission and its commitment to serving the common good.

The Public Benefit

Public benefit corporations (PBCs) in the state of Colorado must operate in a sustainable and responsible manner while generating positive impacts in their communities. Colorado law requires that PBCs produce reports detailing the actions taken to pursue its 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 staff has commissioned a report annually—with the exception of 2020, when adjustments in response to the pandemic took priority over a report. The Media Enterprise Design Lab at CU Boulder also produced the reports in 2019 and 2021.

B Lab, a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting PBCs, provides tools for assessing the efficacy and impact of businesses like the Sun. Using its guidance, we narrowed our assessment of the Sun's benefit to the following areas: governance, company culture, and the Colorado public. We selected these criteria because they are especially relevant to the Sun's mission.

Over the past year, the Colorado Sun has helped stabilize legacy newspapers across the state while providing additive and necessary coverage to the state's media ecosystem, such as water reporting. The newsroom has not changed its staff size as the Sun navigates its practices for integrating new reporters into its mission. Meanwhile, news outlets across the country have already begun to replicate its innovative business practices and structure.

Governance & Business Model

The Sun is owned and controlled by nine founder-employees, three of whom comprise its executive committee: Jennifer Brown, Dana Coffield, and Larry Ryckman. An expansion of hiring and business operations in the past 12 months prompted the formation of sub-committees due to the inefficiency of making a collective decision among the nine founders. Committees have been formed to evaluate the employee handbook, diversity initiatives, and the Daily Sun-up, which is the Sun's daily podcast.

The future structure and ownership of the Sun are still uncertain. The Sun established an external advisory board to help deliberate on these questions, which the staff has consulted periodically. Ownership and governance will only become more important to address as the publication expands and hopes to retain new readers and employees, both of which have been a challenge to accommodate. But expansion is necessary for achieving the Sun's statewide goals.

"We created the Colorado Sun because we saw legacy newspapers in decline in the state," Ryckman says. "That's sad for journalists, but it's terrible for communities." Ensuring the future of the Sun will depend on finding an appropriate model for ownership and governance that scales with the organization. According to Ryckman:

One of the things we will be looking at with the advisory board is whether the Sun is properly structured. And from my perspective, everything is on the table. Should we become a nonprofit, should we remain a public benefit corporation owned by nine founding journalists, or should we become an ESOP? What would be the path to ownership for employees that would like to be owners of the Sun? It's on our to-do list to figure that out once and for all.

The Colorado Community Media (CCM) newspapers, which the Sun acquired last year through the formation of the Colorado News Conservancy (CNC), are "in better shape than ever," according to Ryckman. Tim Regan-Porter, CEO of the Colorado Press Association, agrees that many of the smaller CCM papers have "taken off" since the start of the pandemic. These papers, however, have not yet been incorporated into the Sun's ownership and governance structure.

Governance & Business Model

Membership dues are the largest source of revenue for the Sun. Membership growth leveled out over the past year, which brought to light the issues resulting at least in part from its previous customer relationship management (CRM) software. The software made it complicated for members to stop and restart their memberships, as well as log into their accounts. The Sun has recently transitioned to a more advanced CRM system to improve audience retention.

Diversifying the Sun's revenue stream was a goal identified at the time of last year's report, and much effort has been made to that end. Sylvia Harmon was hired as the director of sales and has connected the Sun with 1,500 agencies and companies interested in advertising. Likewise, Harmon created partnerships with at least 24 Colorado companies for more brand exposure, increasing both advertising revenue and readership.

The wider range of funding sources has provided a basis for future event sponsorships; the next step is to utilize these relationships to host more events that engage and attract members, along with more sponsors. The Sun did not hold any in-person events in the past year, as pandemic restrictions have continued to complicate such plans, but the staff maintains that events will be critical in the future for attracting additional revenue sources and larger audiences across the state.

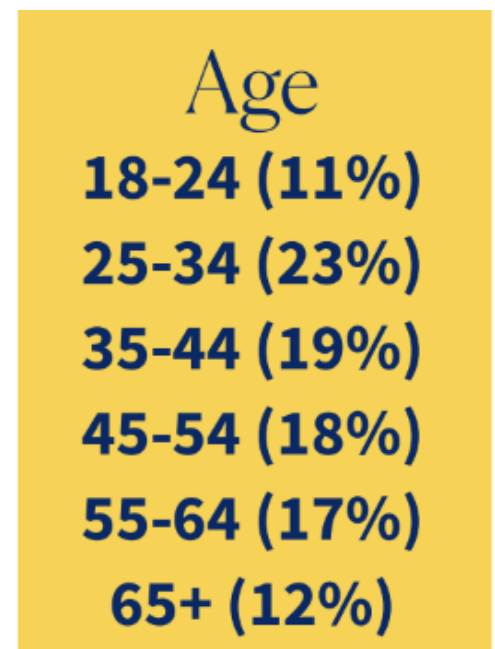
By bringing more variety to its revenue, the Sun has been resilient even as membership rates slowed. Yet, to continue enlarging its impact, the Sun will need to ensure that it has an organizational design appropriate to an increasingly complex operation, audience, and staff.

Company Culture

The size of the newsroom has remained relatively stable over the past year, and the level of its ethnic and cultural diversity likewise remains unchanged. Coffield acknowledges the need for more thoughtful recruiting practices, such as recruiting from historically Black journalism colleges and universities, as well as from a wider variety of institutions in Colorado.

Retention of younger journalists has also been a difficult task for the Sun, but crucial, as the 25-34 age range makes up the largest portion of its readers at 23 percent, according to the 2020 and 2021 readership surveys. Many of the reporters in the newsroom were colleagues in the past at the Denver Post; for new reporters at the Sun, even if they are industry veterans, the rapport among the founders can make it hard to feel like a full member of the team.

Various Sun Reporters;
source <https://coloradosun.com/about-us/>



Audience age; data from 2020 & 2021 reader surveys.

Company Culture

“It has been a challenge for us to incorporate new folks into our staff, but definitely very healthy for us and very good for readers,” says Ryckman. He adds that new staff members have helped to bring a more diverse range of perspectives to the newsroom—in turn, creating more diverse content.

Challenges include making sure all reporters are on the same page about the journalistic goals of the publication. For those who have worked together before the Sun, the answers to questions like what stories to pick and why may be obvious; newer hires, however, indicate that they are not sure where to focus their coverage and how best to understand the Sun’s mission. More needs to be done to facilitate understanding of the Sun’s long-term goals between continuing and new employees.

Some measures are already in place to support new and younger journalists at the Sun. Informal trainings on topics such as search engine optimization, lead writing, and filing public records requests are available not just for those at the Sun, but also for journalists at any of the CCM publications.

“We feel that continuing education is an important part of being at the top of your craft,” says Ryckman.

The Sun provides standard health benefits to full-time employees in addition to mental health and addiction services after coverage of traumatic events. Employees also consult Carol Wood, operations director, on an as-needed basis to discuss any additional concerns or circumstances not covered by their benefits.

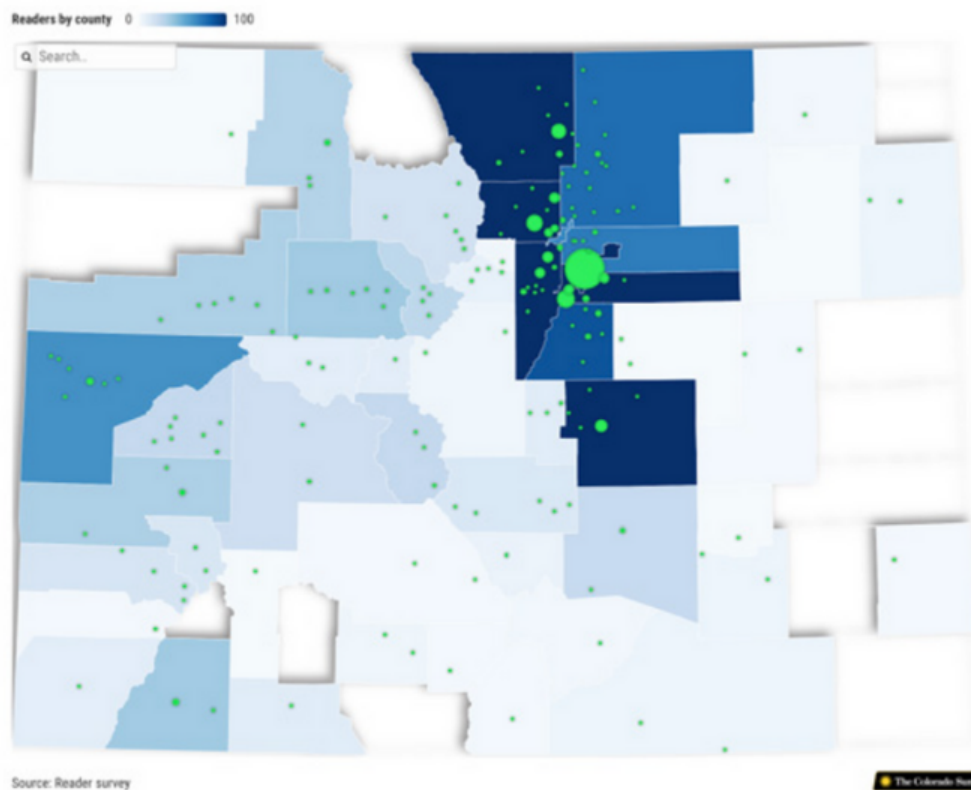
The Sun’s leaders know they could do more to make sure reporters are informed and aligned on a shared mission, and they are trying to bridge this gap, says Coffield. They hired an additional person to serve as “team editor” so that writers are more supported. This is a part of an effort to make sure there is a pipeline of journalists who are “smart, skilled, thoughtful people to take over when we retire,” says Coffield.

The Colorado Public

The Colorado Sun’s primary mission is to inform Colorado citizens from all sides of the state so that they can make educated decisions affecting their daily lives.

“The Sun is very adamant and has been very consistent in that our local area is the whole state—corner to corner and wall to wall,” says environmental reporter Michael Booth.

It is a massive duty to report news for the entire state of Colorado, and the Sun staff does not take the obligation lightly. The reporters’ work in covering rural areas and the environment in the past months reflects their dedication to ensuring no part of the state goes without news coverage.



Readership across the state; data from 2020 & 2021 reader surveys.

The Environment

“Our primary impact on the environment and climate is our coverage—highlighting issues that Coloradans care about and should care about,” says Ryckman.

Booth’s reporting on air pollution in the state aimed to help Coloradans understand what it means for them and how to minimize the personal risks. He says, “The best role of journalism is to explain factual information to people in a way that is both obviously truthful and also memorable.”

Booth wrote a Q&A-style story this August, “Should I let my Kids Outside? And Other Colorado air Pollution Questions,” to help Coloradans take the best course of action when they receive ozone alerts. Accountability coverage by Booth was also instrumental in holding those in power responsible at the Air Pollution Control Division (APCD); it exposed a potential conflict of interest with Garry Kaufman, director of the APCD, which ultimately led to Kaufman’s transition to another job.

“Those stories not only try to explain how the systems work in Colorado and where the deficits were but led directly to an attorney general investigation,” says Booth.

Deborah McNamara, who is director of communications and development at the environmental justice nonprofit 350 Colorado, says that the Sun does better environmental coverage than other statewide outlets such as the Denver Post, pointing to its coverage of air pollution regulations. Environmental reporting, by nature, is targeted toward underserved communities since it is low-income areas that are more often exposed to air pollution. This is significant because, according to the Sun’s readership survey in 2021, the poverty rate is at or above 10 percent in four out of the 15 counties of the Sun’s top readership (Denver, Montrose, La Plata, Mesa, and Montrose counties).

Staff Spotlight

Aside from general environmental coverage, the Sun also hired a dedicated water reporter, Chris Outcalt, to cover the ongoing drought. Outcalt has written stories on everything from the [Colorado Water Plan](#) and [climate bills](#) to [agricultural](#) water use, all relating to the Colorado River Basin in one way or another.

Chris Outcalt

WATER REPORTER

Outcalt started covering the water beat at the Sun about six months ago. He has been in the industry for around 15 years and most recently covered water issues in San Luis Valley before getting hired at the Sun.

Based on the Western Slope, Outcalt intends to tackle this beat in a way that addresses the concerns of all that it reaches, which is a large mission when it comes to the Colorado River, since it runs through seven different states.

He recently hosted a [panel](#) on “The future of the Colorado River and what that means for our state.” One of the panelists was Paul Bruchez, a rancher in Kremmling. The inclusion of Bruchez and others in the agricultural community in reporting is crucial in presenting a comprehensive picture of water in Colorado. “Those are people I think it’s really important I speak to and listen to so that I can convey their feelings. They are pretty reliant on this water and use a lot of it in the state,” says Outcalt.



Collaboration

The Colorado Sun continues to foster collaboration through the CNC, though the number of collaborative projects has decreased in the past year. It is normal for collaboration to “wane and wax,” according to Laura Frank, the executive director of the Colorado News Collaborative, or COLab. Frank upholds that the Sun is a leader in the state’s collaborative journalism projects, citing Jennifer Brown’s coverage on mental health. Local papers across the state use the Sun’s content to bolster their own, and outlets across the country look to the Sun as a model for the business of journalism.

The Sun joined the Statewide News Collective, which is made of news organizations with a statewide scope across the country. Part of its mission is to promote the growth of outlets like the Sun throughout the United States. Already, the Baltimore Banner has followed the Sun’s example and borrowed extensively from its code of ethics.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF EU) approached the Sun about participating in an audit with the Journalism Trust Initiative, which aims to distinguish factual reporting much like a Twitter checkmark, but for media organizations. The certification is just now expanding to North America, starting in Colorado first. The Sun has just begun the audit process, which is expected to be completed in 2023.

Collaboration continues to be a point of strength for the publication, and this is a vital part of its overall public benefit.

Reflecting Colorado's Diversity

Despite its commitment to nonpartisan journalism, the Sun's political leaning has been subject to scrutiny. Third-party evaluations of media bias have found the Sun to lean left ideologically in its coverage. We have at times observed public criticism for this, though such criticism is to be expected for any publication engaged with contentious political issues.

Tanya Ishikawa, communications chair for the Uncompahgre Valley chapter of the League of Women Voters (a nonpartisan nonprofit), says the Sun's news coverage seems ideologically centrist, but "some may consider it slightly left of center since it is a news publication and it is critical of misinformation."

Reporters at the Sun recognize the need to be intentional about the sources they include in their stories so that they are properly reflecting the relevant communities. One example of this is in Shannon Najmabadi's rural coverage.

"People would say that they were glad I was there and they don't really get that much coverage," says Najmabadi, "Or when they do get coverage people usually don't spend as much time with them. I think that's been really rewarding."

Aside from rural-communities reporting, editors at the Sun try to distill skills of mindful reporting among all of their journalists.

"What is really important to me, and one of the hardest things to achieve and improve, is making sure our sources are better reflective of the racial and gender makeup in our community," says Coffield. She wants to ensure that the Sun's coverage shows how a particular issue affects not just its most relevant community, but also other communities in the state.

While perceptions of political bias are in some sense inevitable, the Sun's journalists can earn more widespread trust by ensuring their coverage encompasses the wide range of interests and concerns of their community.

Conclusion

The content produced by journalists at the Sun in the past year has been consequential in keeping Coloradans informed of issues relevant to them, no matter where they are located in the state. As they continue to advance their mission, reporters at the Sun should strive to include an even broader range of community voices in their coverage. Looking inward, the staff faces big decisions on what business structure serves them and their mission best going forward.

Despite any uncertainties, the Sun is exemplary for news outlets in Colorado and the rest of the country. The Sun's coverage over the past year has included a wide range of concerns relevant to Coloradans. The reporters at the Sun have covered topics that other outlets in the state might not explore in as much depth. By modeling its role as a collaborative media pioneer in the state, outlets across the country are beginning to follow suit.

Over the course of the next year, the Sun should work toward developing its ownership structure. This will also help to solidify the process of onboarding new employees, training them, and ensuring alignment in the newsroom about coverage goals. There is still much that could be done for the Sun to better fulfill its mission, but that will be the case as long as it remains committed to improving access to reliable information for everyone in the state. The staff at the Sun demonstrate an awareness of the challenges before them. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is finding time apart from the day-to-day work of news reporting to establish a firmer long-term foundation for the organization.