Montana's Media Landscape Methodology

Published: Dec. 12, 2024

Background

Media ecosystem analysis can take many forms. But the first step toward any kind of analysis is an inventory of local news and information outlets that includes important data about the outlets, like location, ownership model, and whether the outlet is regularly producing news for the local area. Once this step is complete, other analyses can help further make sense of how the news media ecosystem is collectively meeting (or not) local information needs.

What this document covers is how we took that critical inventorying step—a first specifically in and for Montana—providing a snapshot of local news providers at the county level as of September 2024. Our approach borrows from ecosystem mapping efforts in other states including [Oregon](#), [Colorado](#), and [Wyoming](#). Like these studies, and many others, we have benefited from existing frameworks including those from the [Democracy Fund](#), [Impact Architects](#), [Montclair State University](#), [Medill's Local News Initiative](#), and the [News Measure Research Project](#). Their feedback, along with conversations with local media stakeholders and groups like the [Local News Impact Consortium](#), helped us construct an approach that worked for Montana's media ecosystem.

How LOR's Approach Is Different

As we've seen from the existing frameworks and research, there is value in different approaches to inventorying media. LOR's approach was developed with an eye toward understanding media ecosystems in rural places and differs from other inventories in a few ways:

(1) We cast a wide net when considering what is meant by "local news and information outlets." We included print, digital, radio, and broadcast outlets in our inventory—as well as innovative and nontraditional models like longform podcasts and curated newsletters. When those may be the only reliable sources of local news and information, it is critical that they are counted. We did not include Facebook pages, though. See "Research Limitations" for why.)

(2) We verified our information with knowledgeable on-the-ground sources. In each county, we had at least one conversation with a community stakeholder who had knowledge about local news and information sources (think: a librarian, a county clerk, a staffer at the chamber of commerce), and often more, to make sure that we were gathering a list of all possible news and information sources in a community.

(3) We differentiated between news creators (outlets whose content is largely originally reported) and news curators (outlets whose content was largely repackaged information from a variety of local sources). Both kinds of news outlets play a role in meeting critical information needs, but curators couldn't exist without creators, so we only included news creators on our media density map. Doing this required us to look carefully at the type of content each of Montana's outlets was producing to determine if it was original new content (we relied on the FCC's definition of critical information needs as our standard for "news content"), curated news content, lifestyle content, or something else.

The Approach

This methodology is a research roadmap that, through a series of repeatable steps—best described as collect, curate, and confirm—leads to an inventory of news and information outlets. Occasionally the curate and confirm steps happened in tandem or required multiple calls to complete. The initial collection, curation, and confirmation work was undertaken throughout the month of August by two

researchers; additional follow-up or clarification was completed in September. To get to a fully audited dataset, it took 140 hours of research time.

Collect

The goal of the collect phase was to build a preliminary inventory of outlets that was as complete as possible. To identify the names and locations of potential outlets, we mined a variety of online and secondary sources, including—but not limited to—those available through the Library of Congress, FCC, and several academic institutions like the Columbia Journalism Review and Medill, as well as state-level resources like those available through the Montana Historical Society, the Montana Newspaper Association, and the Montana Broadcasters Association.

Curate

The goal of this phase was to organize the outlets into a single database according to various characteristics. We used a codebook ([available below](#)) with specific instructions to ensure consistent collection and categorization.

Many of the characteristics captured in the codebook are fairly expected—for example, website, ownership model, type of outlet (print, digital, radio, etc.), etc. Two characteristics in particular were used to determine if an outlet should be included in our final dataset: outlet locality and content type.

Outlet Locality

To determine an outlet's locality, we used the physical location of the outlet and compared it with a scan of published articles to classify each outlet as either local or regional. **Local outlets** are those that regularly cover the local area in which it is based. **Regional outlets** are those that have a statewide or regional coverage niche, even if they sometimes cover a local area. We included both types in our final dataset. If an outlet was distributed via multiple channels (e.g., a radio station broadcasting on multiple translators or a print newspaper that also has a website), we identified these other channels as "access points" to the local or regional outlet

originally creating or curating the content. But the outlet itself was only counted once.

Content Type

We categorized content into four types:

Original: Content is largely original news produced by staff. We relied on the [FCC's definition of critical information needs](#) as our standard for "news content." That definition includes the following topic areas: emergencies and public safety, health, education, transportation, environment and planning, economic development, civic life, and political life. In the case of Montana, we also include agriculture as a topic area given its importance to many local economies.

Curated: Content that consists exclusively (or almost exclusively) of news from other outlets, press releases, obituaries, public announcements, sports coverage, weather, and events calendars.

Lifestyle: Content about the local community that largely does not cover critical information needs (e.g., events calendars or a local history YouTube channel.)

Other: Various other types of content that also do not meet critical information needs (e.g., tourism news, sponsored content or advertising, special interest content like school or church publications)

Only outlets that produced original content or curated content were included on our dataset. We call outlets producing original content news creators; we call outlets repackaging news news curators.

Confirm

In this stage, if clarity or additional information was needed, we contacted the outlets (e.g., a newspaper editor, station manager) directly. And finally, we contacted at least one community member who was likely to come into regular contact with news outlets, such as librarians, city clerks, county clerks, chambers of commerce,

etc., to confirm the information we had gathered and clarify any contradictions. We also inquired with these individuals about other news sources to ensure we weren't missing any. Through these conversations, we discovered many small outlets we otherwise would not have found, such as the _Hello Whitefish_ podcast and _Park County Community Journal_. This approach points to the power of using on-the-ground sources not only to verify but also to expand the inventory.

Outcomes

The results of this approach generated two things: (1) a database of news creators and news curators in Montana, and (2) a map showing the density of local news creators by county.

Research Limitations

As with any analysis of a complex system, there are limitations to this research, and the findings should be interpreted with them in mind. First, there is at least some measurement error because we are trying to code data into distinct categories and some outlets simply are not easily sorted into a single category. For example, an outlet like the _Montana Free Press_ could be classified as both a regional and a local news outlet because it provides statewide coverage but it also does some city hall coverage. We addressed this limitation by confirming our understanding of each outlet with a stakeholder (e.g., librarian, county clerk, etc), and when needed, adjudicating the decision between the two researchers. While the methodology we deployed is transparent, we did have to make judgment calls based on our best understanding of each outlet's characteristics and offerings. Further, this dataset was created in August of 2024; we recognize that at least some of these data may not reflect a current reality.

There is also a limitation of research scope. In our study, each outlet essentially counts as a "unit," meaning, a one-person outlet providing a monthly newsletter has the same value as a large TV station with numerous journalists on staff and several daily segments that offer local news. Additionally, we placed each outlet in a county,

even when it may only really cover a specific city within that county, so another limitation of this study is that we can't analyze the data at the hyper-local level.

Finally, we chose not to include what we call "civic news providers." Those providers—and there are a significant number of them—include chamber of commerce websites, county or city newsletters, and locally moderated Facebook, Nextdoor, Reddit, or Substack pages. We did not include these outlets because (1) they were not always accessible (e.g., only members can see); (2) they were not independent (often affiliated with a government or other organization); and (3) there are hundreds of these and we did not feel that we could adequately apply our codebook to these and assess them with the same kind of rigor. That said, our conversations with community members often revealed that these pages are considered to be important sources of information, and we think a future study that focuses specifically on social media and civic news providers would be a good idea.

The Codebook

To build our dataset, we needed to categorize outlets by a number of characteristics. This codebook provides specific instructions to ensure a consistent approach to collection and categorization.

Characteristic	Description and Instructions
Outlet	*Description:* This is the common name of the outlet. *Instruction:* Enter the name of the outlet, following these rules. - The name should describe what the outlet is commonly called in the community. - For sources under a DBA (doing business as), use the common name for the outlet. - Leave out generic suffixes (e.g., LLC, Company), unless that is part of the common name. - Do not include the definite article (e.g., *New York Times*). - Radio stations should include their full station identifications, and in parenthesis, their common names as provided by the outlet. For example: KMMR 100.1 FM (Mustang Radio). - TV stations should include their full station identifications along with their local channels, and in parenthesis, their national broadcasting affiliates. For example: KXLH Channel 9 (CBS). - Do not leave this field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* - What is the official name of the outlet? Or, what is this station commonly known as in the community?

Website	*Description:* This is the web address of the outlet. *Instruction:* Enter the URL, using the following rules: ● Provide the full URL that directs to the home page of the outlet, and include any prefix such as "https://…" ● If there is no web address, leave the field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Is there a website for the outlet? If so, what is it?
County	*Description:* This is the county that corresponds to the physical location of the outlet. *Instruction:* Enter the county where the outlet is based. ● For news print media, use the county that is associated with the address listed on the contact page. ● For broadcast media, use the county of the studio address (if available) rather than the signal location. ● Do not leave this field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Where is the broadcasting studio located? Where are your reporters based?
City	*Description:* This is the city that corresponds to the physical location of the outlet. *Instruction:* Enter the city where the outlet is based, using this list for incorporated cities and this list for census-designated places (CDP). ● For news print media, use the city that is associated with the address listed on the contact page. ● For broadcast media, use the city of the studio address (if available) rather than the signal location. ● If no city name can be found (for example, when it is a county-wide outlet), include the name of the largest city or the city that it covers most frequently. ● Do not leave this field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Where is the broadcasting studio located? Where are your reporters based?
Owner	*Description:* This is the name of the owner or ownership group. *Instruction:* Enter the name of the owner or ownership group. If the group has multiple media assets, ensure that the name is spelled the same each time it appears in the table. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Who owns this outlet? Do they own other media outlets in the area?
Ownership Type	*Description:* This is the ownership business type. *Instruction:* Select the business model that best describes the owner/ownership group. ☐ **National Corporate:** Outlet is owned by a national media organization that owns multiple outlets.

	☐ **Statewide Corporate:** Outlet is owned by a Montana-based organization that owns multiple outlets.
	☐ **Local Ownership:** Outlet is owned by a local organization/individual in or near the community it serves.
	☐ **Public Media:** Outlet is affiliated with NPR or PBS, or is considered to be a community broadcast channel.
	☐ **Nonprofit:** Outlet has a 501(c)(3) status, but is not affiliated with a public media entity.
Medium	*Description:* This is the primary medium type that the outlet is known as in the community.
	Instruction: Select the medium that best describes the *primary* medium type—that is, the medium that the outlet is best known as in the community.
	Printed Newspapers:
	☐ Daily Newspaper
	☐ Semi-daily Newspaper
	☐ Weekly Newspaper
	☐ Monthly Newspaper
	Other Print:
	☐ Print Newsletter
	☐ Print Magazine
	Broadcast:
	☐ Radio
	☐ Television
	Digital:
	☐ Website *(can include podcasts)*
	☐ Podcast *(select if it is the main content type)*
	☐ E-Newsletters
	Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members: • For newspapers, how often does the outlet publish information? For broadcast, how often is the news presented on this station?
Locality	*Description: This is the geographic area covered by the outlet.*
	Instruction: Review at least 10 stories on the front page of a website or local page or, listen to one radio/podcast news segment, or in the case of TV news content, watch roughly 30 minutes. Then look at the physical location of the outlet to determine if it largely publishes information about the city or county where the publisher or studio is located and select the appropriate category described below (When an outlet appears to be more than one, go to the About page to see how the outlet describes its coverage area or audience.)
	☐ **Local:** Outlets that largely (meaning much of the content) cover the city or county in which it is based, and/or the outlet describes its coverage area as related to the city or county.

☐ **Regional:** Outlets that largely cover a regional or statewide area, rather than the local one in which it is based. So, while an outlet may cover local cities or counties (even frequently), the news coverage niche is a much larger area. *A regional area is defined as: state of Montana, a large region of Montana, or a region including parts of Montana.*

☐ **[Non-local] Non-local/Non-regional Outlet:** Outlets that despite their physical locations, cannot be determined to be a local or regional provider of news or information. These include outlets that provide other kinds of programming such as educational or religious programming. They also include sources that cannot be confirmed to be operational. If selected, do not continue coding this outlet.

Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:
- Does your outlet generally cover community/ county issues? Or, do you cover issues across Montana? If you provide a mix of local and regional news, would you describe the coverage as local or regional, generally? Why is that?

Note: Some outlets are not easily sorted into a single category. For example, an outlet like the Montana Free Press *could be classified as both a regional and a local news outlet because it provides statewide coverage but also provides some city hall coverage. But the outlet describes itself as a "source for* **Montana** *news, information, and analysis," which is more in line with a regional outlet.*

Content Type	*Description*: This is the type of content that the outlet produces.

Instruction: Review at least 10 stories on the front page of a website or local page or, listen to one radio/podcast news segment, or in the case of TV news content, watch roughly 30 minutes. Determine what the news stories/segments are about and if the content is original (use bylines to assess if the content is produced by a staffer or affiliated contributor and thus original). Select the category that best applies to the content from the following four options.

News and information that meet critical information needs[†]:

☐ **Original:** Content that largely (meaning much of the content) is original news produced by staff.

☐ **Curated:** Content that consists exclusively (or almost exclusively) of news from other outlets, press releases, obituaries, public announcements, sports coverage, weather, and events calendars.

News and information that do not meet critical information needs:

☐ **Lifestyle** Content about the local community that largely (meaning much of it) does not cover critical information needs (e.g. sports channels, events calendars, or a local history YouTube channel.)

☐ **Other** Various other types of content that also does not meet critical information needs (e.g., tourism news, sponsored content or advertising, special interest content like home magazines or school publications).

Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:
- Do you have members of your staff who do original reporting? What does that look like? If you don't have reporters/journalists producing stories, where do you generally get the news you publish?

	†*We use the [FCC's definition of critical information needs](), which includes the following topic areas: emergencies and public safety, health, education, transportation, environment and planning, economic development, civic life, and political life. In the case of Montana, we also include agriculture as a topic area, given the importance of this to many local economies.* *Note: For a college newspaper's content to be considered original, it must cover critical information needs that affect the wider community the university and students are a part of. Otherwise, it should be classified as other.*
Validation Source*	*Description:* This is the source(s) of information that was used to find or validate information about the outlet. *Instruction:* Select all that apply from the following list: ☐ **[Database] Third-Party Database:** Media-related government sources (e.g., FCC, Library of Congress), private industry organizations, trade associations, and other media analyses. ☐ **[Website] Website of Media Source:** The information needed to catalog the outlet in this inventory can be found on the outlet's website. ☐ **[Direct]** Contact with Source: Information could not be found electronically (or it was unclear) so a call or email was sent to the source such as the circulation desk, the editor, or one of the listed journalists. ☐ **[Indirect]** Contact with Community: A call or email to a member of the community such as a librarian, city clerk, county clerk, chamber of commerce, provided information on the outlet.
Notes*	*Description:* These are the notes that describe how the outlet's data was validated, or information that helps validate the outlet's characteristics. *Instruction:* Provide information that was shared in the conversations/emails with sources and community members.
Access Point Information	**All information below should only be collected for access points.**
Access Point Name*	*Description:* This is the common name of the access point. *Instruction:* Enter the name of the outlet, following these rules. ● The name should describe the medium that the outlet is best known as in the community, or the one that best describes the outlet syndicate. ● For sources under a DBA, use the common name for the outlet. ● Leave out any generic suffixes (e.g., LLC, Company), unless that is part of the common name. ● Do not include the definite article (e.g., *New York Times*). ● Radio stations should include their full station identifications, and in parenthesis, their common names as provided by the outlets. For example: KMMR 100.1 FM (Mustang Radio). ● TV stations should include their full station identifications including their local channels, and in parenthesis, their national broadcasting affiliates. For example: KXLH Channel 9 (CBS).

	● Do not leave this field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● What is the official name of the access point?
Access Point Type*	*Description:* This describes the access point's medium. *Instruction:* Select the medium that the outlet *also* uses to reach local audiences. ☐ Daily Newspaper ☐ Semi-daily Newspaper ☐ Weekly Newspaper ☐ Monthly Newspaper ☐ Website ☐ Newsletter/Magazine ☐ AM/ FM Radio ☐ Television ☐ Podcast ☐ Facebook/ Online Groups *Confirmation question(s) to the outlet or community members:* ● What kind of medium is the access point?
Access Point Website*	*Description:* This is the web address of the access point. *Instruction:* Enter the URL, including "https://…" that directs to the home page of the source. If there is no web address, leave the field blank. *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Does the access point have a digital location? If so, what is it?
Access Point City*	*Description:* This is the city associated with the access point. *Instruction:* Enter the city where the access point is based, using this list for incorporated cities and this list for census designated places (CDP). ● For broadcast media, provide the FCC's community of license, and update this field if the studio address is available. ● For other media types, if no specific address can be found, provide the name of the community in which it is based (e.g., Butte, Montana) *Confirmation question(s) to ask the outlet or community members:* ● Does the access point have a physical location? If so, what is it?
Record Modification Date*	*Description*: This is the date stamp noting the most recent date and time a modification was made to the outlet's record. *Instruction:* Enter the date (MM/DD/YYYY) whenever any field related to the outlet's record is

	updated.
Record Modification Details*	*Description:* This is a list of the fields that were modified and a brief rationale for each modification. *Instruction:* Specify what fields were modified, followed by a short explanation for each change, such as the source of information, the reason for the change, and any other contextual notes. (If adding a new outlet, simply write "Outlet added.")
Record Status*	*Description:* This indicates whether the record is active and should be included in current views, or archived for historical reference. *Instructions:* The default value is set to "Active" and should only be changed to "Archived" if the outlet is no longer providing any news and information.

Not shown in the database on [LOR's Montana Media Landscape website](#).