

SPOTLIGHT PA

2023-2024

Spotlight PA Berks Project BLUEPRINT FOR BERKS



Journalism serves as the cornerstone of a vibrant and informed community, playing a crucial role in fostering transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Local journalism, in particular, is a catalyst for positive change.

"We need journalists to help uncover multiple angles of stories so we can keep working on building a more livable Berks County." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19602

"Media reporting MUST BE unbiased, accurate and untethered to any other entities with interests of their own. Honesty and integrity must be the basis of any reporting." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19508

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Executive Summary

“If we don’t have local media, we all will lose.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19610

In a study of more than 1,000 Berks County residents, we found an overwhelming need for more in-depth and trustworthy local reporting. The community members we spoke with said there is a substantial and growing gap in their access to reliable local information, and that negatively affects their ability to be engaged and informed citizens.

The key findings of this study indicate that Berks Countians are extremely frustrated with the diminished capacity of the local newspaper and that they are concerned about the decrease in access to trustworthy information in their community, which makes it difficult for them to find information about local government and important issues that affect their daily lives. 74% of participants in our public survey — regardless of their individual demographic profiles — responded that access to local news is “extremely important” to them.

Nationally, the current news landscape is characterized by rapid technology shifts, changing audience behaviors, and evolving media consumption habits. A community study on journalism plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamic relationship between information access and communities. By examining the local news ecosystem, audience demographics, and communication channels, we identified gaps in coverage, underrepresented voices, and opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

Community members were extremely forthcoming in their participation. They shared their experiences and suggested ideas openly throughout the study process. Based on the high level of volunteer public participation in this study, we recognize that people in Berks County are passionate about the importance of local journalism; in fact, they told us directly that they are aware of “what they are not getting” in the current news landscape and they expanded on their frustrations very clearly.

“Berks needs thorough local journalism...the questions that really matter are never asked or answered.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19604

This research serves as a foundational step in fostering a more informed and connected community, where journalism serves as a vital conduit for democracy, accountability, and civic engagement.

A funding feasibility exploration confirmed that the current philanthropic landscape demonstrates the capacity to meet Spotlight PA’s minimum launch goal of \$500,000 per year and stretch goal of about \$650,000 per year. Local foundations have offered potential contributions of \$350,000 per year for the first three years, and it will be necessary for a combination of other foundations, individuals, and civic-minded corporations to make up the rest. National catalytic support could sway all involved to solidify their commitments and/or make new ones.

It is recommended based on the study findings that Spotlight PA proceed with the launch of a Berks County Bureau relying on a combination of sustained local support and national catalytic support. Spotlight PA is best poised to address some of the biggest issues raised, and serve as a collaborative and stimulating force in the market to help address other areas. The bureau would be comprised of one editor and three journalists dedicated to reporting on Reading and Berks County. The bureau would serve as a centralized source of trusted journalism that unifies and empowers residents, with journalists reporting on the subject matter that community members identified as critical for local coverage:

- Local Accountability — including but not limited to city/township/borough government actions, elections and voter issues, and elected officials
- Social Issues & Quality of Life — including but not limited to housing issues, homelessness, immigration, poverty, and discrimination

The bureau would also employ a community partnerships and revenue lead to solidify Spotlight PA’s role not just as a news organization, but also as an active, positive, and indispensable member of the community.

This study offers vital insights into the specific information needs, preferences, and challenges faced by Berks County residents, allowing Spotlight PA to tailor content, delivery methods, and engagement strategies accordingly.

Spotlight PA worked with community partners from July 2023 - June 2024 to build this blueprint for revitalizing local news. Heather Adams of Berks Community Television served as Spotlight PA's Berks County Project Lead, guiding the planning process.

The objectives of the Berks Project were to assess community needs as they pertain to news consumption habits and preferences, to identify information gaps in coverage, and to test the philanthropic potential to evaluate the feasibility for a sustainable local Spotlight PA bureau. We employed the following information-gathering techniques:

1. A Community Study: We conducted listening sessions, qualitative research, and a survey. More than 1,000 Berks Countians were reached to explore and share their experiences and ideas.
2. A Funding Study: A structured interview process by an independent consulting firm tested the case for funding support with local foundations, corporations, and individual donors.

This report and the related recommendations are presented with confidence that the opportunity to expand the work of Spotlight PA in Berks County specifically fulfills a demonstrated local need and, based on Spotlight PA's statewide impact and success, can serve as a catalyst in the community for civic engagement.

"Dependable, unbiased local reporting is vital to having an informed public." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19606

Why We Did This - The Introduction

The Spotlight PA Berks Project was launched to address an emerging news crisis in Berks County.

Berks County has not been immune to the national spread of diminished news conditions. The decline of local reporting is evident with hedge fund ownership stripping the local newspaper of its resources, and the ongoing struggle for less predominant local media entities to gain enough resources and visibility to even begin to fill the gaps.

Access to trustworthy information is a growing area of deficiency in Reading and Berks, and this situation has negatively affected residents' ability to understand what is happening in their community. The lack of attentive journalistic coverage has stifled transparency and accountability at all levels.

"Independent media and press reporting is critical for our democracy." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19508

Across the United States, traditional news organizations are facing huge challenges. Declining revenues, shrinking newsrooms, diminishing public trust, and the spread of misinformation are exacerbated by the decline of legacy advertising models, consolidation of media ownership, and polarization of news content. As a result, there are concerns about the quality, diversity, and independence of many news sources.

There is a movement nationally to "reinvent local news." This means transforming traditional approaches to local journalism to address the challenges and opportunities presented by changes in technology, audience behavior, and the media landscape. It involves reimagining how local news is produced, distributed, and consumed in order to better serve the needs and interests of our communities.

The power of journalism, as protected in the Bill of Rights, is its ability and duty to fulfill the vital role of informing the public, fostering democracy, and holding institutions and leaders

to account. Addressing the news crisis requires innovation, collaboration, a renewed commitment to quality journalism, as well as new revenue models for sustainability.

The goal of this study was to embark on a thorough exploration of the news ecosystem in Berks County to identify the challenges and opportunities here so that we might “reinvent” what it looks like to access quality, reliable journalism locally. This process involved hearing directly from community members in their own words so that we could provide recommendations that would put the needs of the people at the forefront.

How It Started

In 2022, Berks County Community Foundation assembled a group of regional news and media organizations to discuss the diminished state of the local news ecosystem in Reading and Berks and to explore opportunities to redevelop that landscape.

In response to this discussion, Spotlight PA partnered with Berks County Community Foundation in 2023 to launch a planning study to develop the strategy for a potential Spotlight PA Berks regional journalism bureau. This would be Spotlight PA's second regional bureau; the newsroom launched its first in 2022, based in State College and covering north-central Pennsylvania. Already the largest statewide newsroom, Spotlight PA sought to explore further extensions of an efficient ‘hub and spoke’ model to bring more journalistic talent and high-end reporting into underserved communities across the state. The news organization accelerated its timeline for that concept in response to strong interest from people in Berks County.

Berks County Community Foundation funded a one-year planning grant for the Spotlight PA Berks Project. Heather Adams, Executive Director of Berks Community Television (BCTV), was selected to serve as the Berks County Project Lead, driving the process and the study. BCTV is a nonprofit community media center and public access channel manager with established roots in the Berks County information landscape.

A nine-person volunteer Advisory Committee of local individuals was assembled to assist in guiding the project with their skills, expertise, and experience in the Berks community,

including with the journalism industry, local trends, fundraising, and how to best serve diverse communities.

Why a Community Study?

A community study on journalism plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamic relationship between information access and the everyday lives of residents.

The goal in conducting this study was to connect with residents of all backgrounds and demographics in Reading and Berks County and explore their current experience with local news and information. The study was intentional to not assume outcomes. Spotlight PA undertook this work with no preconceived notions of form, fit, or coverage areas — or whether a bureau would be feasible at all. The result is the most complete blueprint for the future of news in Berks County ever created, based on real, identified needs as expressed by community members themselves. We have been deliberate in our approach to not tell people what they need, but to ASK them what they want.

This approach resulted in the compilation of significant qualitative and quantitative data from people across Berks County about perceived information gaps, preferences in information delivery, and the issues they believe are most critical for reporters to focus on in their communities.

What is Spotlight PA?

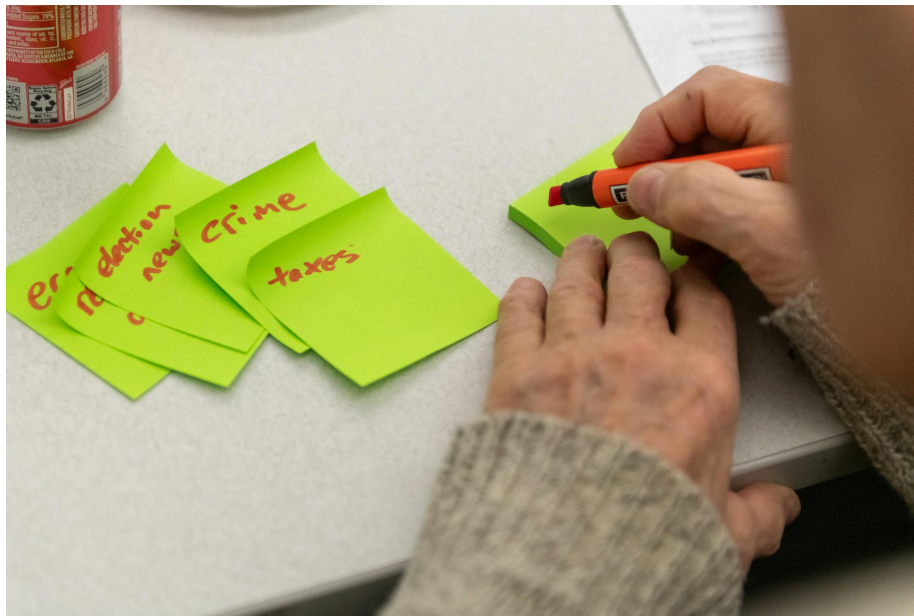
Spotlight PA is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit newsroom dedicated to high-quality investigative and public-service journalism about the Pennsylvania state government and urgent statewide issues.

Since its inception in 2019, Spotlight PA has become a leading national model for independent, collaborative journalism that empowers residents and gets results. Its work has won numerous state and national awards and driven meaningful change and policy reforms in the state Capitol and beyond.

SPOTLIGHT^{PA}

Spotlight PA Berks Project REWRITING THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM IN BERKS

Community Study Report



“Having local news is crucial to understanding and living in a community,” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19608

In Berks County, the severe decline in local reporting in recent years has stifled transparency and accountability at all levels. To address this issue head-on, Spotlight PA executed a 12-month planning study to explore the creation of a potential new journalism bureau dedicated to covering Reading and Berks County.

We used a public engagement approach to gather resident input through small group listening sessions and a survey to assess community needs as they pertain to news consumption habits and preferences, and to identify information gaps in coverage.

What we heard

The insights collected over the course of this study are not unlike those discovered in related media consumption research across the country. As legacy news outlets shrink and recede, people are finding themselves swept into the riptide, stripped of familiar resources that in many cases had been heavily relied upon for timely and accurate information about the things that matter most to them, especially close to home.

“News sources are the fabric of our community, and it is unraveling.” - Listening Session Participant, Wyomissing Library

Berks Countians are keenly aware of the diminished local news resources available to them, and they “know what they are not getting.” Individuals openly and repeatedly discussed their dismay about the void left by a less robust local newspaper, rising prices of news subscriptions and paywalls, and frustration with fragmented and polarizing news sources — many indicating that they routinely feel the need to check multiple sources in attempting to suss-out the “truth” or “figure out what’s going on.”

“Everyone is hungry for something credible. I think some of our communities are really suffering because they don’t have local information.” - Listening Session Participant, West Lawn Library

“I would prefer to hear the facts, not the spun news stories written to evoke emotions and arguments.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19512

“People want to talk about issues, but let’s work on solutions. What can we do to solve problems? People want to be engaged and we can’t be engaged if we don’t know what’s going on.” - Listening Session Participant, NAACP Reading Branch

“I want local news coverage of things that directly impact me on a local level that aren’t being covered by other news organizations. Things like important happenings at school board meetings and borough council meetings. There used to be some of that, now we barely have anything.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19611

...on local sources

In the survey, participants were asked to name the specific local news sources that they trust the most. From 827 survey participants, local cable news station (Channel 69) WFMZ received more than 300 individual responses, and the local newspaper, The Reading Eagle, received more than 225, indicating that these are viewed as the most trusted local sources by Berks County residents.

Although residents loudly admonished the Reading Eagle in discussions and comments, there appears to be a general understanding that the change in ownership of the company is responsible for the lack of resources. Many Berks residents still rely on (and many subscribe to) their local newspaper, and could name individual reporters that they see, recognize, and trust despite ongoing challenges in the company.

People voiced support for other local media entities (BCTV, Berks Weekly, WEEU, and other more regional publications, stations, and sites), but there was a disappointment in the lack of a vibrant, centralized, and trustworthy source that the community could feel united in, and easily identify as a 'go-to' source.

"There are so many orgs with small footprints sharing info that is good, but it is not far reaching." - Listening Session Participant, Exeter Library

Berks Countians felt that many sources that they currently have available to them provide information that is editorialized, politically slanted, or showing bias based on special interests rather than being independent or fact-based. People are concerned that news shared like this is telling them "what to think rather than what to think about."

"Remain a news source, not a biased organization presenting only one political perspective. There's too much of that and it's disheartening. Speak facts, share important updates not opinion." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19506

"Everyone goes to their 'camps' for info and that furthers the divide." - Listening Session Participant, West Lawn Library

“Many people get their information from poor, inaccurate sources. People believe ridiculous lies.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19522

In many conversations and survey comments, people noted that while they are wary of the quality of information on social media platforms, these are often the most accessible or visible sources for hyperlocal information. Neighborhood groups and special topics pages for fire alerts and traffic on Facebook, as well as apps like Nextdoor that platform neighborhood conversations, were identified as some of the most used sources for highly localized information.

While these sources may be filling a gap for access to information, people feel they are too often unverified and require a high level of scrutiny, with fact-checking becoming the responsibility of the user. This adds to a rampant proliferation of misinformation and disinformation.

...on diversity and representation

During group discussions, we heard concern that communities of color, younger age groups, and women appear to be under-represented in local newsrooms. These groups shared that they often feel unseen or unheard in local reporting.

According to a 2018 report from the Pew Research Center, about three-quarters of newsroom employees nationally are non-Hispanic white, and half of newsroom staff are white men. There was great concern voiced by Berks Countians about whether a new product in the market would in fact ‘look and sound’ like the people it intends to serve.

The population of Berks County is 23% Latino or Hispanic according to the 2020 Census, and it is estimated that Spanish is the language spoken in 18% of Berks households according to the 2022 American Community Survey.

“Media is not up to the job of representing the community.” - Listening Session Participant, NAACP Reading Branch

“Trying to break through the noise to address issues affecting minority communities is hard.” - Listening Session Participant, LGBT Center of Greater Reading

“Women are ignored in the news and not recognized for their contributions to the community.” - Listening Session Participant, Barrio Alegria [translated from Spanish]

Language access was identified as an important factor within Spanish-speaking communities. Participants noted that Google translations “are not enough,” and that providing information created thoughtfully and intentionally in Spanish helps them to understand information more effectively, and share it with others.

“Language access is critical, especially for the elderly.” - Listening Session Participant, Centro Hispano

Statistically, Latino and Hispanic residents were underrepresented in our survey participation, but based on listening session feedback and the majority responses from the collective Latino and Hispanic participant voices, we can infer that this is indicative of the needs of the greater community.

...on information needs and gaps

“Help us stay informed about our communities.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19608

“I do not often dial in for local news because the coverage of what is happening locally is never in-depth enough to leave me well informed.” Survey Participant, Zip Code 19610

Berks Countians are genuinely concerned about access to information and how the lack of access impacts their ability to be informed voters and engaged citizens. Lack of access to information also negatively affects their (and their neighbors’) understanding of local government, access to community information, and issues that affect their daily lives. These concerns appeared across the board, with no identifiable demographic expressing satisfaction with current conditions.

“The lack of local news is impeding my ability to act responsibly as a citizen of Berks County.” - Survey Participant, 19610

Discussions regarding school board actions, municipal meetings, and community events were punctuated with the note that local reporters are no longer physically present to report on and hold accountable those public entities making crucial decisions that have an immediate local community impact.

“Unless your municipality is a basket-case, reporters are not showing up.” - Listening Session Participant, West Lawn Library

“We do not have a top-notch source for local reporting anymore. Some meetings are attended, some events are reported on, but no one is digging deep or holding anyone accountable. I appreciate the alternative news sources trying to fill the gaps, but it's not enough.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19609

There is a heightened awareness that this absence of a media presence can directly result in lower accountability, contribute to a perception of non-transparency, and create a general feeling of uncertainty surrounding government and elected officials. Overall, people felt a sense of loss about the decline of coverage of local government meetings, school board convenings, and events.

“Reporter attention requires elected officials to explain what they are doing.” - Listening Session Participant, Wyomissing Library

Of particular interest, many session participants vocalized great concern about “not knowing” enough about candidates, offices, and elections to be well-informed voters, especially in local elections.

“It is so hard to find out who is on the ballot, what are the issues, and where do candidates stand? I feel educated and I STILL go in and see things on the ballot that I didn't expect.” - Listening Session Participant, Fleetwood Library

Media Consumption Patterns

In analyzing how often community members access and consume local news and information, a high rate of consumption was noted regardless of feelings that local news

offerings were inadequate. This demonstrates a dedication to being informed and indicates that accessing news is routine to many individuals, although their sources vary greatly.

66% of respondents access local news and information at least once per day, with 41% accessing local news and information multiple times per day.

74% of respondents indicated that access to local news is “extremely important” to them.

Information Needs Assessment

When asked “what topics are most critical for local journalism coverage,” an incredible amount of synergy was uncovered. In listening sessions, participants created and discussed this prompt with conversation boards and we collected more than 600 individual responses. Those responses were sorted and, based on frequency of each topic, used to create a survey question of the same nature. The following table reflects the survey results.

Critical Topics for Local Journalism Coverage	Response
County of Berks Government & Politics	71%
Local Township/Borough Government & Politics	59%
Social Issues (examples: housing/homelessness, quality of life, discrimination, poverty, immigration, etc.)	55%
K-12 Education, Higher Education, School Boards	43%
Local Economy, Business	43%
City of Reading Government & Politics	42%
Public Health (examples: healthcare, mental health, substance abuse)	37%
Arts & Culture	28%
Local Sports (high school, collegiate, minor league)	22%
Courts & Justice	20%
Environmental & Climate Issues	17%
Employment, Workforce Development	14%

It is the responsibility of journalists and news organizations to hold local institutions, authorities, and individuals accountable for their actions, decisions, and policies. This involves reporting on issues of public interest, investigating potential wrongdoing or abuses of power, and advocating for transparency, integrity, and ethical conduct in local governance and public affairs.

Journalism plays an important role in promoting transparency, integrity, and trust in local governance, ensuring that elected officials, public servants, and institutions are accountable to the communities they serve.

Local Accountability (identified in the survey options as the combination of City, County, and Local Borough/Township Government and Politics) is a critical priority for local journalism coverage. The same top responses were reflected in the aggregate sorted lists of topics collected during listening session activities.



"Things are not going well in our community and not reporting on the reality of it doesn't help us to be involved in our community or hold politicians accountable." - Survey Participant, 19607

"The lack of news coverage has left a huge void in Berks County. There are no watchdogs to monitor what municipalities and school boards are doing." - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19607

Social Issues ranked second in the survey as critical for journalism coverage, again tracking with the responses and discussions in our listening sessions. Social issues are those that affect and address quality of life, access to programs and services, and the well-being of area residents. In the survey they were defined as “housing/homelessness, quality of life, discrimination, poverty, immigration, etc.”

Berks Countians feel that issues like these have been notably left unexplored in recent years, creating a perceived barrier to information for residents.

“Berks County is facing a lot, and we need the help of local journalism to be honest and clear about the work ahead of us. We have big issues with the housing crisis, job market, public health issues like air and water pollution, etc. We need journalists to help uncover multiple angles of stories so we can keep working on building a more livable Berks County.” - Survey Participant, 19602

Social issues are those that reflect the values, priorities, and challenges of the community, and journalism can inform, empower, and mobilize communities to address these issues. Journalism not only highlights problems but also explores potential solutions to social issues and can promote social justice, encourage public discourse, and catalyze positive change in communities.

Other topics and issues that were identified in the study as critical for local reporting are also key to a vibrant information ecosystem. People responded that they would like to see more coverage relating to arts & culture, local sports, human interest stories, positive storytelling, events, courts and justice, employment issues, and business. Although they may not be the focus of Spotlight PA locally, these topics are vital for community identity.

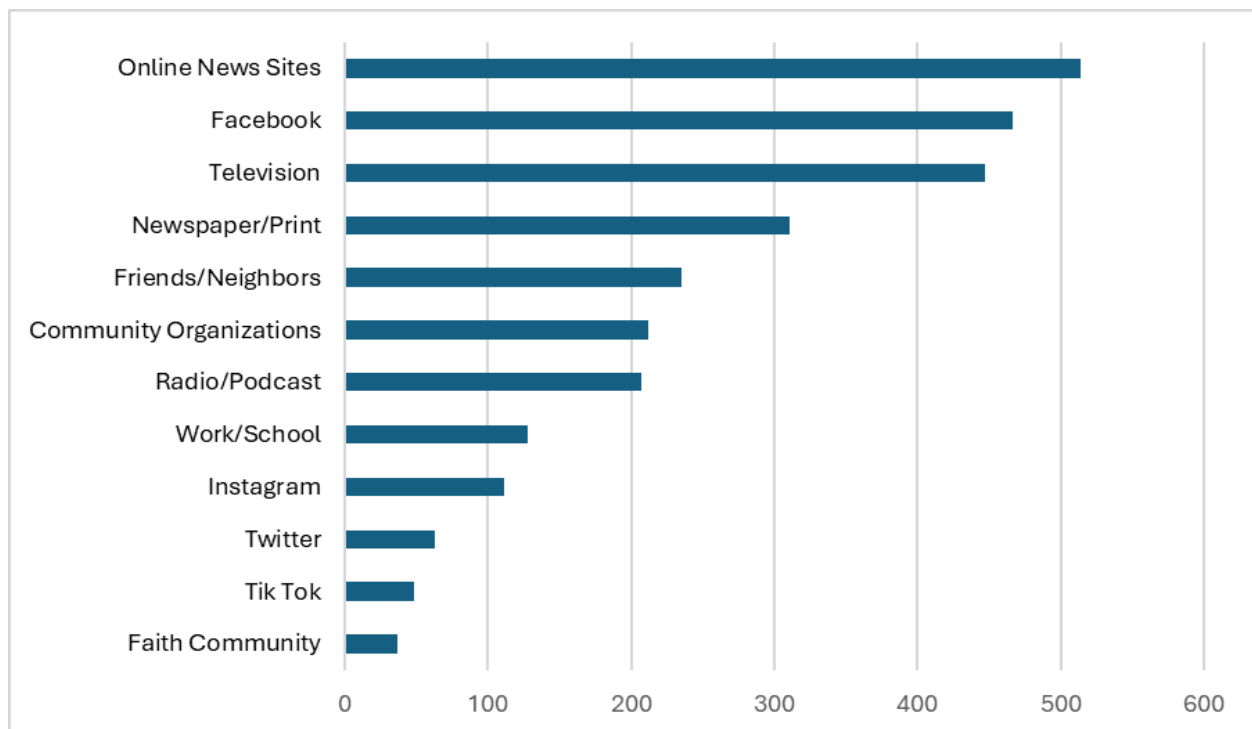
There is tremendous opportunity for collaboration among media outlets and community organizations to use the results of this research to explore areas that they can ‘lean into’ in response to these documented vital needs and information gaps.

Communication Channels and Delivery Preferences

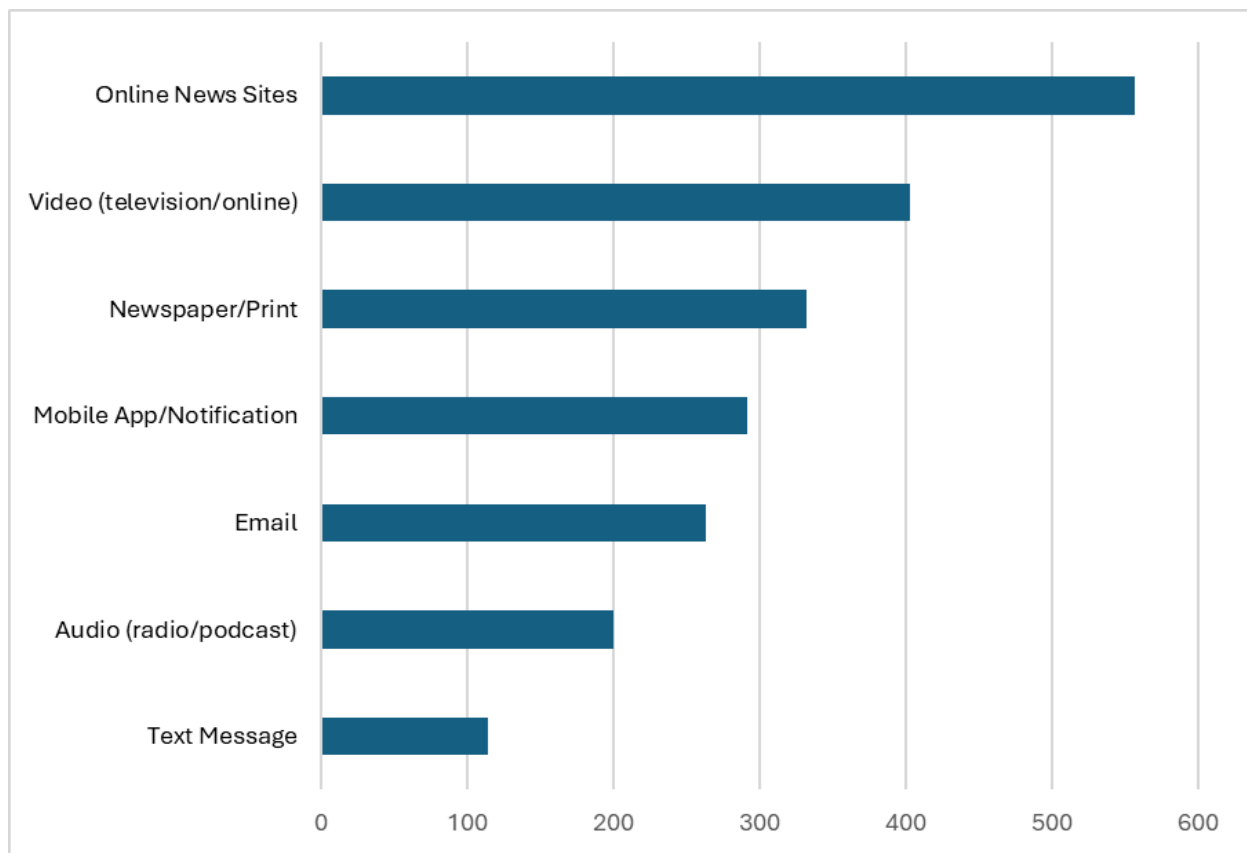
Participants were asked in the listening sessions and in the survey to identify how they currently get local news and information, and how (which modes/methods) they prefer to receive information.

While related, these two areas of interest are mutually exclusive as the first pertains only to what is currently available (sources), and the second to individual delivery preferences (modality) regardless of current offerings.

Where Berks Countians are currently accessing local news & information:



Preferred modes/methods of delivery:



Online news sites were identified as the most utilized channels (62%), as well as the most preferred channels (67%). Participants described these websites as those run by individual news outlets (ex. wfmz.com, spotlightpa.org), online versions of print publications (ex. readingeagle.com), and sites that aggregate news from multiple outlets (ex. Google News). People commented that they like the ease of access, but in most cases do not like a paywall for content.

Video (including television stations and also video content accessed via online sites and applications) scored highly, as a preferred method (48%) and as a current source (54%).

In response to both questions, newspaper/print scored notably high.

When people were asked to identify how they currently access local news and information, Facebook trended notably higher than other social media platforms. Comments showed that with less access to local content or lack of knowledge of local publications and

distributors, users relied more heavily on content shared on social sites, and more specifically on pages and groups that are hyperlocal to their neighborhoods, although these pages/groups were also regularly seen as potentially being inaccurate, or “not real news.”

“I believe people want more local news, but it needs to be delivered in an accessible manner. Most people don't get a newspaper or even read it online. Somehow people need to be educated about news quality and understand that ‘news’ they encounter on social media often is not trustworthy or accurate.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19607

People regularly identified utilization of mobile devices as a primary way they access content, and noted that while they do enjoy email delivery, they find it difficult to sift through overwhelming inboxes. In general, older participants preferred a print publication, citing the desire to “hold a paper in their hands” or low use of technology in their daily lives.

In listening sessions, we heard younger users refer to news aggregator systems on their mobile devices (Newsbreak, Apple News, etc.) as their go-to source for ease of use and accessibility; however, they commented that the content is rarely locally based.

These insights suggest that delivery methods must be multi-modal, mobile-friendly, and dynamic to reach the Berks Countians. There is no “one size fits all” to capture a majority.

The preferences for video and audio delivery call for a responsive solution, for news organizations to prioritize the creation of multimedia delivery methods in addition to written content.

We would also like to highlight that in many cases these responses indicate that people are self-directed in seeking content rather than relying on delivery in a news “feed.” For example, people may habitually visit a website they trust to read the day's news, or tune in to a regularly scheduled news program for timely matters. Individuals noted that while they check email and mobile applications, it is often more passive and as it suits their schedule.

A Challenge, But An Opportunity

During the course of public engagement, it became apparent that the news and information needs of the community quickly outpace the solutions currently available —

even with the creation of a Spotlight PA Berks Bureau. Suggestions and discussion of this challenge are addressed in the Conclusion section of this report, but it bears noting that daily news coverage emerged very clearly as an issue that demands further attention.

Community Engagement

Many suggestions arose for increasing community involvement in news production, distribution, and education, especially as it pertains to younger demographics. Citing concerns that civics education and media literacy may be shrinking and that younger generations may have a more intimidating landscape to navigate, community involvement becomes critical as a way for these younger groups to not only participate in democracy, but also advocate for their communities.

Opportunities should be explored so students and community members can be steered into participatory media efforts through education programs and collaborations. There is potential in Berks County for developing talent and expanding local reporting and storytelling via residents trained in journalistic techniques.

The high level of public participation in listening sessions and the survey are strong indicators for engagement and participation in future initiatives. It is evident that Berks Countians are willing and able to be engaged in conversations about the news. Public forums, discussions, and opportunities for feedback and participation with content and issues are great ways to foster dialogue.

***“Talking like this gives us power, and that is how Berks will remain a good place to live.” -
Listening Session Participant, Exeter Library***

How we gathered information

We used a two-pronged approach to collect qualitative feedback from across Berks County: Listening Sessions and a Survey. Fiona Morgan (Branchhead Consulting/American Journalism Project) provided ongoing training to the Project Lead in best practices for

information gathering in communities. She assisted in the creation of the structure for listening sessions and a public survey to prioritize effective communication strategies that would result in high-quality, revealing responses.

Listening Sessions

Listening sessions have been used nationally by journalism organizations including Spotlight PA to solicit feedback from community members that can help guide coverage. The format is typically a group conversation and the purpose is to gather community perspectives, build trust and engagement, and identify opportunities.



Gathering Perspectives: Listening actively to the voices of community members in order to gain a deeper understanding of their needs, priorities, and experiences.

Building Trust and Engagement: Providing a platform for community members to feel heard and valued, building trust and connection between organizers and community.

Identifying Opportunities: Welcoming concerns and ideas for potential solutions or approaches, in order to be more responsive to needs and provide a more comprehensive understanding of community perspectives and priorities.



For this project, Berks Countians were invited to join in small group conversations guided by the Berks County Project Lead. The sessions created a space for authentic, respectful, and inclusive dialogue to empower community members to contribute to the shaping of this project for their collective communities.

Listening Sessions, By the Numbers:

14 Listening Sessions

128 Participants

13 Locations

3 Sessions in Spanish

The listening session model created a structured opportunity for individuals to express their thoughts, concerns, and perspectives on the specific topics and issues related to this study.

There was no participant selection criteria and all sessions were open to the public on a volunteer basis. Attendance ranged from 6 to 15 individuals in each small group setting. We shared snacks and met in comfortable community spaces. Local organizations helped us to gather diverse groups with a wide variety of lived experiences in Reading and Berks County.

Participants registered online, via email, and by telephone, and agreed to receive additional follow-up communications regarding the study. Invitations and announcements of session dates/times/locations were distributed through Spotlight PA channels, the Berks Project Lead, various social media platforms, Berks County Libraries, and via our local partnering organizations and individuals to their clients, friends, and constituents.



The Project Lead opened each discussion by asking people if they were agreeable to observing 'Chatham House Rules' during the discussion. This style encourages participants to share "what was said, but not who said it" when discussing the sessions with others to encourage open, honest communication. Under this agreement, we committed to not identify individuals in their responses, but noted that what they shared may be used anonymously in an aggregate report.

Each discussion began with a brief introduction of the Spotlight PA Berks Project delivered by the Project Lead, and an overview of the topics and activities for the group. The Project Lead gave prompts for discussion, and utilized a basic session agenda for consistency in each meeting.



Prompts and activities included conversation starter elements designed to guide the conversation through subject matter, but were flexible in their duration. Particular groups naturally spent more or less time on an item depending on the intensity of the discussion and opinions of group members.

Listening Session Prompts are available in Appendix A.

Participants were encouraged to speak freely and the participatory responses were recorded by notetakers and through activities in which each person added sticky notes or sticky dots to conversation boards which the group then discussed. All responses were later recorded in tracking spreadsheets for analysis by the Project Lead.

Sessions were kept to a time limit of two hours to meet the expectations set in our registration information and to be respectful of attendees' time. At the close of each

session, participants completed an anonymous exit survey that gathered demographic information, feedback, and suggestions for the project.

Following each session the participants received an email providing takeaway notes and photos from the gathering and thanking them for their participation. Organizers encouraged participants to follow the progress and updates of the project over the coming months and each will receive a copy of the final report.



Community Survey

Listening sessions were a high-touch way to engage community members in deep discussions about the issues, but the survey was a way to reach more people overall and understand priority issues for a larger segment of Berks Countians.

The information gathered during the listening sessions was evaluated, and based on trending responses, served as the framework for the subsequent launch of a digital survey that was open to the public from January 15 through March 14, 2024.

Key elements of the survey:

- Available in both English and Spanish
- Designed to take less than 5 minutes to complete

- Included an open-ended comment section for respondents to add their own individual feedback.
- Multiple choice options were automatically randomized for each participant

The survey was created with the online survey software SurveyMonkey and distributed digitally, with link and QR code access. It was shared through Spotlight PA channels (email, website), Berks County organizations via their constituent databases, flyers, and social media outlets (Facebook including one paid/boosted post from Spotlight PA, LinkedIn, Nextdoor). We also received distribution help from listening session participants, the advisory committee, and supporters of the project who served as ambassadors for the study and shared the survey with their peers and groups that they interacted with both in person and online. In addition, the link was distributed via a paid text service to 2,500 individuals in Berks ZIP codes that were underrepresented in early results.

The survey questions are available in Appendix B.

While the survey was not designed or deployed with the purpose of reaching absolute statistical significance, attention was given to intentionally engage community members across a wide range of demographics including race, gender, occupation, age, and geography that would fairly represent the makeup of Reading and Berks County.

Survey Respondents, By the Numbers:

827 participants

65% Female, 33% Male, 2% Other/Prefer Not to Answer

41 Berks ZIP codes - plus 17 out-of-county ZIPs from neighboring areas

Racial Identities of Respondents:

Black or African American: 25

Asian American: 2

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 1

Native American or Alaska Native: 1

Hispanic or Latino: 51

More than one race: 15

White: 681

Other/Prefer not to answer: 51

Age Range:

Under 21: 5

21-30: 39

31-40: 131

41-50: 157

51-60: 181

61-70: 200

71-80: 100

Over 80: 14

Census Demographics and Participation Analysis

Census 2020 data tallies 428,849 individuals living in Berks County. The County is 856 square miles, incorporated in 72 municipalities (townships and boroughs) with the county seat in the City of Reading. Reading is the 4th most populous city in the commonwealth.

When we compared Census 2020 data metrics in specific demographic breakdowns, our study participants accurately represented Berks County in categories of age, geography, and employment, but fell short in terms of racial diversity (most notably in underrepresentation of the 23% Berks Hispanic or Latino community) and gender diversity.

We found it challenging to effectively reach and engage two specific populations during the community study process: Latino and Hispanic communities; and individuals ages 18-30. It is critical for newsrooms to develop close partners in the market to reach and serve these populations. A potential solution is to engage school districts in information distribution as a trusted community partner as they have a unique ability to reach students and young families directly. There is also opportunity in connecting with local organizations and

groups that already communicate with target demographics, and leveraging them as partners in encouraging information sharing through an organized strategy.

Demographic factors are shown to influence news consumption habits and preferences including use of technology, access, and language preferences. Berks County's geographic, economic, and population diversity will demand that efforts in delivery methods and products are well developed to address a wide array of needs.

Reflections

Engaging people in the Spotlight PA Berks Project study process was exhilarating and fulfilling. There were many instances in which opposing viewpoints ultimately converged in commonalities, validating the shared needs for information and communication across the community.

The Spotlight PA Berks Project Study is not only valuable to Spotlight PA in its exploration for a potential home for a journalism bureau, but it is also a benefit to the Berks County community at large as it provides a detailed, current account of the needs and issues facing residents as described by them personally. The outcomes of the study can be impactful to other projects and initiatives, and the information is intended to be shared.

The Blueprint for Berks report will be shared with all participants in the study for whom contact information was provided and will be made available to the public for review. Presentations of the materials and findings are ongoing.

Residents of Reading and Berks County uncovered many synergies during this study, regardless of their individual differences. The role of local newsrooms is to connect and empower residents with quality information that encourages civil discourse and informed decision-making. Media access and journalism can be a shared experience and, done well, can serve as a true equalizing factor in communities.

“Journalism won’t teach us all of the things, but it brings us into the room.” - Listening Session Participant, Wyomissing Library

Conclusion

As Berks Countians evaluated the news landscape around them, they shared sentiments of “desperate need,” disconnection, confusion, and frustration. But they also showed a shared desire for solutions and an open-minded approach to new products.

People in Berks County are struggling with “wanting to know more,” but cannot identify a resource to unlock that information for them. Accountability emerged as a passionate concern and Spotlight PA would serve as a supportive framework for fostering responsible transparency. The grateful and invigorated response to this community study reinforces the fact that we are on a constructive path forward together to address this problem.

“Berks County needs a local news outlet that is elevated to be the 24/7 trusted source for journalism coverage, for all areas in Berks County.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19606

A Spotlight PA Berks Bureau would directly address the issues of greatest concern to residents, and ensure the fundamental role of journalism as a force for accountability and public service is restored and reinvigorated. Spotlight PA is uniquely positioned to deliver real results while elevating the issues and concerns of Berks Countians to policymakers in Harrisburg and the rest of Pennsylvania. But it should not be ignored that other types of information needs emerged, including those relating to arts and culture, local sports, human interest stories, positive storytelling, event coverage, and more.

During the conversations for the Berks Project, it became clear that there are more challenges in creating and distributing content that serves the true needs of Berks Countians than Spotlight PA could ever address alone. There is no simple, one-stop solution to ‘fix’ the media crisis. The revitalization of the media ecosystem in Berks County will require concerted efforts and bold movements. This work will need support and resources to flourish and cannot exist in a vacuum. **The opportunity is before us to create an essential conduit of news and information to nourish our community with knowledge, understanding, and connection.**

Spotlight PA Berks Project

BERKS BUREAU FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL

“I think local news is more impactful when reported by local journalists.” - Survey Participant, 19609

During the course of the community study, one word resonated above the rest. **LOCAL.** Local focus, local coverage, local benefit. Berks Countians are keenly aware of the lack of reporting on the issues that mean the most to them — closest to home.

Based on the findings of the study, we offer the following proposal for the creation and direction of a Spotlight PA Berks County Bureau. These recommendations accurately address the needs of the community and respond to the collective desire for more accountability, transparency, and civic engagement.

“Desperately need more coverage of the area on the whole. There’s tons of state and national coverage, but people are missing what’s happening here in their own town and their own county.” - Survey Participant, Zip Code 19606

Berks Bureau Staffing Recommendation:

(1) Local Bureau Editor. This position should be the first hire, as this person will begin developing products and engagements, and will take the lead in hiring Spotlight PA’s local team of journalists.

(3) Journalists

- Reporting Desk assignments
 - (2) Local Accountability covering county and municipal government and politics including but not limited to election coverage/voter education, County, City/Boroughs/Townships, and school boards.

- (1) Social Issues covering subjects that impact the greater good and quality of life of the community including but not limited to housing issues, homelessness, discrimination, poverty, immigration, etc.

Spotlight PA is also seeking to add a fifth position to lead local community partnerships and fundraising, build awareness about the bureau, participate as an active member of the community, and sustain the reporting over time. Overall, we strongly recommend at least one staff member is bilingual (Spanish/English).

The Spotlight PA Berks Bureau staff will be employees of Spotlight PA, an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Spotlight PA will provide management, oversight, compensation and benefits. Staff are remote employees, and may be provided opportunities for in-kind collaborative workspace within a local establishment or institution.

Product & Distribution Recommendation:

Based on the findings regarding preferred methods of receiving news and information, it is recommended that Spotlight PA consider the following for impactful and far-reaching distribution:

- Launch localized products
 - Berks-branded email newsletter for content distribution
 - Virtual events focused on topics and issues identified during the study so that community members may participate in constructive conversations
 - In-person ‘meet the reporter’ type events similar to those held by the State College Bureau to encourage interaction with bureau staff and engage in conversations that identify issues and concerns
 - Creation of a ‘community’ focused product that highlights ‘good news’ and those doing impactful work in our neighborhoods
- Test new content delivery methods in Berks
 - Develop a localized social media presence, especially on Facebook
 - Convert text content to audio content for radio and podcast

- Create a video production strategy for newscast and video publishers
- Deliver information via text message/SMS
- Deploy a print/postal mail piece to satisfy high response rates preferring print/hard copy access
- Build a distribution partnership network of community-based organizations so that they can redistribute news and information through their developed constituent channels
- Include Berks Bureau content in the Spotlight PA mobile app (in development)
- Offer Spanish language translations of content and Spanish language, bilingual events, and leverage opportunities for delivering content via organizations that have outreach and distribution methods connected directly to the Spanish-speaking community

Rollout: Spotlight PA should publicly announce the bureau's launch before Q4 2024 (or as soon as funding is secured) and work toward full launch in the first 6 months of 2025. It is recommended that a catalytic national funder be identified and included in this rollout to increase the profile of the project. The rollout would include:

- Publish an announcement and host a community launch event
- Develop a marketing and branding strategy
- Post positions for hiring and begin interview process for Berks team members
- Design localized products and build distribution lists
- Conduct an initial exploration of stories and issues for coverage

Partner Publishers & Distributors:

The Spotlight PA model of content distribution incorporates a network of trusted publishing partners throughout the state of Pennsylvania that sign agreements with Spotlight PA in order to republish content at no charge through their own individual networks via print, digital, email, radio, and television. A key element of the growth of a Spotlight PA Berks bureau includes a diverse and robust network of partner publishers to redistribute content.

Spotlight PA's Berks Bureau content will be published digitally by Spotlight PA on the organization's platforms and also made available for publication by the partner publishers network of more than 100 media platforms across the state.

Current Berks County partner publishers are Berks Community Television (BCTV), WEEU, and WFMZ. Additional local publishers are welcome and Spotlight PA continues to engage potential partners in Berks and surrounding areas.

In addition to media partners, it is recommended that Spotlight PA explore methods to incorporate local organizations as partner distributors, as they may have targeted lists of their constituents who rely on the organizations as trusted sources of news and information. Listening session participants often cited community organizations as places that deliver reliable news to them.

Collaborations and Partnerships:

Exploration of potential collaborations with community organizations, businesses, or other stakeholders is a crucial element for the success of the Berks Bureau and can increase reach and connection, especially where Spotlight PA can serve as a catalyst for civic engagement and the furthering of local journalism. Two initial opportunities for collaborations have been identified that can be acted on relatively quickly.

Berks Alliance Programs: The Berks Alliance, a collaboration of local anchor institutions, has regularly hosted monthly virtual discussions and presentations focusing on timely issues and highlighting the work of organizations across Berks. The sessions are well attended and all registrants receive the recorded program following the presentation. The programs are also made available on the Alliance website and shared with BCTV for further reach.

The Director of the Berks Alliance has invited Spotlight PA to discuss the opportunity to shift these programs under the guidance of Spotlight PA, potentially in conjunction with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). With a built-in contact list, and the GRCA assisting in identifying topics, this could serve as a key product in building visibility.

Alvernia University: There is a burgeoning initiative to create a 'media center' within Alvernia's downtown Reading CollegeTowne campus that would offer workspace as well as audio and video production facilities to local media entities, including Spotlight PA team members.

The University has engaged Spotlight PA in the planning discussions for this space. This would be a prime opportunity for local bureau staff to interact with other local media outlets who will also be invited to participate in the shared space including the Reading Eagle, Berks Weekly, BCTV, and Alvernia's School of Business, Communication, and Leadership.

The university intends to offer this space in-kind with the expectation that Spotlight PA provide some level of student training or experiences, in the form of workshops or similar opportunities.

Dynamic partnerships enrich journalism efforts by fostering trust and engagement, and can ensure effective connection and service to the community.

Spotlight PA Berks Project

FUNDING STRATEGY

“We desperately need comprehensive local journalism. Hoping Spotlight will be a real positive factor in accomplishing this.” - Survey Participant, 19601

The Goal: Spotlight PA’s revenue goal for a minimum viable bureau is \$500,000 annually. We are seeking initial three-year donor commitments to build a runway for launch, to hire one reporter/editor and three journalists dedicated to reporting and engagement that is critical to Berks County. It is important to note, however, that Spotlight PA’s stretch goal for launch is \$650,000. This would enable us to include a fifth position that we think is essential to sustaining the bureau over time: a local community partnerships and fundraising lead, to engage in all aspects of community leadership and participation, and generate local revenue for the bureau. Additional funds raised beyond the stretch goal would be directed to hiring more reporters and growing Spotlight PA’s footprint in Reading and Berks County.

The Funding Study: A funding feasibility study was performed by an independent fundraising consultant. Richard R. Blain & Associates interviewed 35 individuals identified as influential to the Berks County philanthropic landscape. These interviews tested the case for funding support feasibility from foundations, corporations, and individual donors.

The funding study anecdotally found that the total likely contributions for the bureau was \$647,000 annually, which suggests that local philanthropic potential could meet Spotlight PA’s annual stretch goal.

The Call to Action: To date, local foundations have suggested commitments of up to \$350,000 annually for the first three years. Additional foundation and institutional support, combined with individual giving and corporate contributions, will be needed to reach the target goal. National catalytic financial support could solidify commitments and unlock new local support.

Acknowledgements

In appreciation and recognition of those who have aided in our work. Thank you for your support and for sharing in the vision for the future of journalism in Berks County.

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Berks County Public Libraries

NAACP Reading Branch

Centro Hispano

Alvernia University

Barrio Alegría

legriaBerks Community Television

LGBT Center of Greater Reading

VOiCEup Berks

Berks Municipal Partnership

...and more than 1,000 Berks County residents who participated in listening sessions and the community survey.

Thank you.

Appendix

A. Listening Session Prompts

1. Sticky Board Activities. Participants were asked to use colorful sticky dots to identify their personal preferences in two areas.
 - a. Sticky Board 1: How do you currently get news and information about your community? (Participants used sticky dots to identify sources.)
 - b. Sticky Board 2: How do you prefer to receive news and information? (Participants used sticky dots to identify preferred modes and methods of information delivery/distribution.)
 - c. When completed, the group discussed their responses.
 - i. What are the specific sources that you are using to get local news?
 - ii. How do you feel about these sources?
 - iii. Are there any resources that are doing something well or not well that you would like to comment on?
 - iv. Is it what you need? What could be better? What aren't you getting?
 - v. Comments about delivery, crossover, frequency, or other particular elements
 - vi. What are your favorite publications/mailling lists/deliverables, and why?
 - vii. Is there something (a product) locally that you receive that you really like?
 - viii. Are there resources you have seen in other communities that you think would be helpful here?
2. Critical Issues Identification. Depending on the number of participants, we split into groups to create sticky boards identifying "Issues that are critical to be reported on in our community."

- a. Each team used sticky notes to compile a collection of issues offered by the individual group members. When completed, each collection was presented to the larger group. We then dove a little deeper into individual responses and comments on these issues.
 - i. Which issues rose to the top or had numerous 'votes'? Why?
 - ii. What questions would you want answered about these topics?
- 3. Additional Conversation Prompts
 - a. The Project Lead used remaining time to explore areas that may not have been previously discussed in the session to garner further perspectives.
 - i. Looking in from the outside, what do you wish people knew about Berks County?
 - ii. What do you wish your neighbors had information about?
 - iii. Do you see yourself represented in the media locally? How or how not?
 - iv. Do you feel that there is a dominant narrative locally? What is it?
 - v. What other comments or concerns do you have about local news and journalism?

B. Survey Questions

The survey was available in English and Spanish, and multiple choice answer options were randomized for each user.

Q1. How often do you read/watch/listen to local news?

Multiple times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week

Less than once a week

Q2. What sources do you currently use to get local news/information? Select all that apply.

Television

Friends/Neighbors

Instagram

Faith Community

Work/School

Newspaper/Print

Radio/Podcast

Community Organizations

Online News Sites

TikTok

X (Twitter)

Facebook

Other (please specify) or additional comments

Q3. Which specific local news source(s) do you trust the most? (stations, publications, sites, etc.) [open response]

Q4. Which topics are most critical for local journalism coverage? Select up to 5.

City of Reading Government & Politics

County of Berks Government & Politics

Local Township/Borough Government & Politics

Courts & Justice

K-12 Education, Higher Education, School Boards

Public Health (examples: healthcare, mental health, substance abuse)

Arts & Culture

Environmental & Climate Issues

Local Economy, Business

Employment, Workforce Development

Social Issues (examples: housing/homelessness, quality of life, discrimination, poverty, immigration, etc.)

Local Sports (high school, collegiate, minor league)

Other or Comments

Q5. How important is it for you to have access to local news?

Extremely important

Moderately important

Not important

Q6. How (which modes/methods) do you prefer to receive local news/information?

Select all that apply.

Audio (radio/podcast)

Email

Mobile App/Notifications

Newspaper/Print

Online News Sites

Video (television/online)

Text Message

Other (please specify) or additional comments

Q7. In what language do you prefer to receive news and information?

English

Spanish

Other (please specify)

Q8. What is your home ZIP code? [open response]

Q9. What is your age? [drop down menu]

Under 20

21-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

71-80

Over 80

Q10. What is your gender? [open response]

Q11. What is your occupation? [open response]

Q12. In your own words, please describe your race or ethnicity. [open response]

Q13. Please add any additional thoughts or comments you have about local media needs and/or news coverage in Reading and Berks County. [open response]

About Spotlight PA

Spotlight PA is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit newsroom dedicated to high-quality journalism about the Pennsylvania state government and urgent statewide issues. The mission of Spotlight PA is to hold powerful public and private forces — especially governments, elected officials, businesses, and special interests — to account through urgent and compelling investigative and public-service journalism that drives change and strengthens our democracy, the state, and all who live here.

Founded in 2019, Spotlight PA is a bold, collaborative answer to the rapid and significant decline of corporate-owned, for-profit media, resulting in drastically reduced coverage of issues vital to Pennsylvanians. Spotlight PA seeks to return journalism to its fundamental role as a check and balance on the powerful, especially politicians and policy makers, and a public resource to empower residents to take action and drive change. Spotlight PA's journalism is produced to serve the public interest; all of its content is free to access, and articles are shared with more than 100 newsrooms in the state for republication at no cost. This is the largest distribution network of its kind in the United States and includes local newspapers, news sites, radio, and TV.

In the past five years, Spotlight PA has become a leading national model for nonprofit news, and its journalism has won numerous state and national awards and driven meaningful change and policy reforms in the state Capitol and beyond. A 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Spotlight PA is supported by foundations, businesses, and thousands of individuals from across Pennsylvania.

To learn more about Spotlight PA, visit spotlightpa.org

To support Spotlight PA's Berks Bureau, visit spotlightpa.org/donate/berks