

# Choices for Newsrooms

*Daily newspapers in the North American West  
have the freedom to choose how to allocate people, time, space  
and other resources to coverage of growth, development and the environment.  
At most Western dailies, reallocating these resources could result in better coverage.*

# Choices for Newsrooms

**T**his report began by making some bold assertions: The North American West is struggling with profound changes spurred by growth and development. These changes put relentless pressure on the landscape, the West's natural environment. A lot more public attention and public discussion ought to be devoted to this phenomenon, but a large majority of the West's daily newspapers are neglecting it. For the sake of the West's citizens and communities, newspapers have a duty to do better. And they make enough money that they can afford to do better.

The great need is to raise newsroom expectations and levels of effort. But that need can't be met without greater newsroom resources. Most of the West's daily newspapers will have to pursue higher standards and better practices before the overall quality of journalism can match the magnitude of what is happening to the West.

How should newsrooms go about the work of getting better? What will it take to reach these goals?

Where should newsrooms begin?

No single remedy or course of action applies universally. Even though many Western newspapers look a lot alike these days, each newspaper is different. What most of them have in common is a need to invest more heavily and more creatively in newsroom resources. Most of them also share the perennial challenge of utilizing their existing newsroom resources more effectively. Here are six specific recommendations for newsroom improvement:

**Assign and encourage more reporters** to cover growth, development and the environment. For many Western newsrooms, this recommendation means hiring at least one more journalist. For many others, a deliberate realigning of assignments and priorities may suffice.

**Become more selective about coverage** of growth, development and the environment. Sheer volume of stories doesn't necessarily equate with good coverage. Reporters in Western newsrooms

should be given more time to work on stories that are important, ambitious and complicated.

**Give more space** and more prominent placement in the newspaper to these important, ambitious and complicated stories. Western newsrooms should establish an expectation that these stories will explore causes as well as broader and longer-term implications or potential consequences.

**Provide more training opportunities** for reporters and editors. Many Western newsrooms need to make a more sustained effort to increase and share knowledge and skills.

**Cultivate and retain valuable veterans.** Many Western newsrooms should work harder at creating workplace conditions that enable these accomplished elders to nurture less-experienced journalists.

**Take more risks in storytelling.** By exploring and testing other formats and approaches, Western newsrooms can increase reader satisfaction with complicated stories about growth, development and the environment.

Making improvements happen, let alone making them endure, is no simple matter. But daily newspapers throughout the West do have the freedom to choose how they allocate people, time, space and other newsroom resources. By choosing to allocate some of these resources differently, many dailies could increase the quality of their coverage of growth, development and the environment. And if the quality of this coverage were higher, then the communities of these newspapers would be better served.

How can more Western newsrooms use their existing resources to greater advantage? This question is almost universally relevant, but it has no single, pat answer. Each newsroom must make its own choices, based on its own conditions and aspirations. Among the many potential choices available, we recommend that Western dailies make these three:

- Choose to become more selective about coverage.
- Choose to expand reporting capacity and newsgathering flexibility.
- Choose to break habitual story molds, at least now and then.

Producing greater volumes of coverage isn't necessarily the same as providing better coverage. Is it really necessary, for example, to collect quotes from several sources and then write a 500-word story on every road-resurfacing project, every drought hearing or every zoning dispute? How many of such routine stories per month are enough?

Less can be better. A newsroom can choose to

monitor all the road projects or drought meetings and still refrain from covering each one in isolation. Instead, once or twice a month, a reporter could pull together a column of briefs, perhaps called something like "On the Roads" or "About the Drought." With a little effort, such a column could be concise, interesting and useful while also expressing some personality.

Betsy Marston compiles a column called "Heard Around the West" for the biweekly newspaper *High Country News*. Her column in the paper's issue of June 23, 2003, contained six brief but effective accounts of substantive matters, such as the state subsidy of \$350 a month that each of 48 California lawmakers will receive for leasing sports utility vehicles to use in their districts. As a change of pace, Ms. Marston's column also included this amusing item:

*The City of Thornton, Colo., is probably abashed at the changes apparently wrought by spell-check on its detailed Drought Management Plan. "While thoughts do not occur at regular, predictable intervals, they are inevitable, and in Colorado, thoughts are frequent events," says the Web-published report. Then, there is this alarming observation: "A study done by the Colorado Climate Center at Colorado State University has shown that Colorado has had five severe statewide thoughts in the past century. The most recent one ended in 1978." This news goes a long way [in] explaining the actions of the state Legislature. "Fortunately," the report concludes, "most thoughts do not affect the entire state at the same time."*

On the environment beat, producing fewer stories can still result in coverage that is comprehensive and informative—especially if those stories offer lively perspectives on what has been happening and why it matters. Recent studies show that such coverage appeals to readers.

For example, Northwestern University's Readership Institute published a report in April 2001 that examined ways to reverse a national, 30-year trend of declining readership of daily newspapers. This study of 100 U.S. dailies representing all size categories was a joint venture of the Newspaper Association of America and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The Readership Institute's researchers analyzed the news content of these papers as well as the reactions of consumers to the content.

Not surprisingly, the study found that readers of daily newspapers want coverage that is intensely

## Comparing Newspaper Capacities

Newspaper	Owner	Daily Circulation	News Reporters Per 5,000 Circulation *
The Press-Enterprise	Belo Corp.	169,000	3.5
Las Vegas Review-Journal	Stephens	165,000	0.7
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	Hearst	157,000	1.6
The Salt Lake Tribune	MediaNews	135,000	1.6
The Register-Guard	Baker Family	70,000	2.0
The Columbian	S. Campbell	53,000	1.9
The Pueblo Chieftain	Rawlings Family	51,000	1.1
Tucson Citizen	Gannett	37,000	3.0
Daily Camera	Scripps	34,000	2.8
Casper Star-Tribune	Lee	31,000	1.6
Missoulain	Lee	30,000	2.2
The Santa Fe New Mexican	R.M. Martin	25,000	3.4

\*Excluding sports and entertainment reporters.

Source: IJNR survey.

focused on people—especially on people who live in their own communities. But readers also gave significantly higher priority to news about the environment and science than to news about police, crime and the judicial system or to coverage of sports. More specifically, the study found a direct correlation between “longer and more complex stories” about the environment that used a “feature approach” and higher levels of reader satisfaction.

### Growing Readership

For dailies in the West, a clear implication of this study is that growing the readership will require reallocating the resources. If dailies in the West choose to heed these findings, then they will need to shuffle some reporting assignments and even add some reporters.

To increase reader satisfaction with coverage of the environment, they will need to undertake longer and more complex stories more often and, in many instances, to become more proficient in the feature approach to telling environment stories. These adjustments, in turn, may call for making a greater investment in newsroom training and professional development.

Part of the challenge is to reduce the burden on reporters to chase the routine and the mundane. At some papers in the West, IJNR found that reporters spend precious time tracking down answers to such reader-posed questions as “Why do our highways

have numbers and not names?” and “Do I have to pull over if an emergency vehicle behind me has its sirens on?” These reporters actually called public officials to solicit direct quotes in response to these queries—and to many others like them. Time could be better spent pursuing questions with broader relevance. What would have to change, for example, in order to remove San Jose, Denver or Seattle from the list of America’s 10 most congested cities?

In Seattle, both daily papers have reported about a local person’s idea to ease commuter pressures by letting certain workers swap job locations. Consider, for example, employees with the same job description who work for retail chains and fast-food outlets that operate at several locations around the city. In Seattle, hundreds of such workers now commute in opposite directions on the same highways or endure long bus rides to and from each work shift. By trading places, many could reduce or eliminate their commutes. One local employer (Boeing) has already adopted this idea.

The *San Jose Mercury News* has explored the public’s growing interest in the concept of car-sharing. *The Seattle Times* dispatched a reporter to San Diego to see how toll roads there might be adapted for use in the state of Washington. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* told readers about a woman who moved in order to take advantage of public transit and thus eliminate her aggravating freeway commutes. *The Denver Post* wrote about a

local company that opened a branch office closer to its employees' homes. The company decided that the many hours being squandered in transits more than justified the modest investment.

IJNR commends these sorts of articles because they call attention to typical Westerners who are grappling with the frustrations of getting to and from work on crowded and often dangerous roadways. We also like the ways these stories showed people taking initiative, pursuing unconventional solutions to environment problems.

Suppose that 25% of the routine traffic-congestion stories produced during 2002 by dailies in San Jose, Denver and Seattle had been condensed and compiled into twice-a-month digests or summaries. The result would have been a significant saving of work time and news space. IJNR calculated that 50 or more days of reporting time and about 50,000 words of news text would have been freed up for the pursuit of stories that are more engaging, more instructive and more memorable.

When newsrooms are short-handed on any important beat, reporters assigned to that coverage often face extra pressures. Under these conditions, it can be difficult for reporters to break away for a few consecutive days—let alone for an entire week or longer—to gather and write a deeper and more comprehensive piece about a newsworthy issue, trend or emerging pattern. But the deeper, more explanatory stories are the ones that, according to the Northwestern University study, readers find more satisfying. Without the deeper stories, communities are deprived of the context and perspective they need to make sound decisions about the future.

### Adjusting the Load

How can a small or medium-sized newsroom rearrange the workload in order to pursue the deeper stories more often? There is no single correct answer to this question. Any of several approaches can be valid and effective, as IJNR observed during visits to many Western newsrooms—and while studying the range of bylines and the coverage produced.

Some newsrooms, such as those of *The Oregonian* and the *Los Angeles Times*, have chosen a structured but flexible team approach. Each reporter on the team has primary responsibility for some topics or issues, but all reporters stand ready to collaborate on bigger projects or to fill in for one another as circumstances warrant.

Other newsrooms, such as those of *The Press Democrat* in Santa Rosa, California, and the *Anchorage Daily News* in Alaska, consider virtually the entire newsroom to be the team. In the arrangement, many reporters—regardless of nominal beat assignment—are expected and encouraged to contribute regularly to coverage of environment and growth issues.

Still other newsrooms, such as those of the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Denver Post*, the *Arizona Daily Star* in Tucson and *The Register-Guard* in Eugene, rely heavily on an experienced, high-energy soloist to produce much or all of the environment coverage.

Two charts that accompany this chapter illustrate the variety in approaches and levels of staffing. In compiling these charts, IJNR found that newsrooms define and label their beats in different ways. Many also count the same reporter in more than one category of coverage.

IJNR also considered how the challenges of workload allocation have been addressed in several newsrooms outside the West. For example, a bureau chief at *The Wall Street Journal* contended for several years with the double-barreled challenge of distributing hard-news workloads fairly evenly while also ensuring a steady flow of deeper, more comprehensive coverage. This East Coast bureau

## Environment Reporters at the West's 20 Largest Dailies

Newspaper	Corporate Chain	Daily Circulation	Environment Reporters
Los Angeles Times	Tribune	944,000	8
San Francisco Chronicle	Hearst	512,000	3
The Arizona Republic	Gannett	451,000	2
The San Diego Union-Tribune	Copley	352,000	1
The Oregonian	Newhouse	334,000	4
The Orange County Register	Freedom	324,000	1
Rocky Mountain News	E.W. Scripps	310,000	2
The Denver Post	MediaNews	306,000	2
The Sacramento Bee	McClatchy	286,000	3
San Jose Mercury News	Knight Ridder	269,000	1
The Seattle Times	Blethen Family	220,000	1
The Vancouver Sun	CanWest Global	188,000	2
Contra Costa Times	Knight Ridder	183,000	2
Las Vegas Review-Journal	Stephens	169,000	1
The Press-Enterprise	Belo Corp.	169,000	2
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	Hearst	167,000	2
The Fresno Bee	McClatchy	158,000	1
The Honolulu Advertiser	Gannett	152,000	1
The Salt Lake Tribune	MediaNews	135,000	2
The News Tribune	McClatchy	128,000	1

Source: IJNR survey.

chief developed an unorthodox but effective solution.

He created a schedule of spot-news-duty rotation for the eight members of the bureau's reporting staff. Every week, two reporters would assume the primary responsibility for spot news, while two others would be designated as "back-up" reporters throughout that week, stepping in to assist whenever the flow of spot news became too heavy. The following week, the back-up team would relieve the primary team, while another pair of reporters would step into the back-up roles. This system guaranteed that four reporters were always on hand in the bureau, but it also freed up the other half of the staff for two weeks at a time to pursue longer and more challenging stories.

About a decade ago, Alecia Swasy used a similar strategy when she became business editor at the St. Petersburg Times in Florida. She inherited a team of reporters who had been operating in spot-news mode for so long that there was no backlog of longer and stronger pieces to use for the Sunday section cover or other high-profile positions during the week.

One of her early choices as the new boss was to run a lot of wire-service copy—relevant and timely stories—but not staff-written stories. That decision allowed her own reporters to make good use of this "liberation period." They built up an inventory of "evergreen" features—business stories (including profiles) that would remain timely and that had very little risk of perishing for six to eight weeks.

In this way, members of Ms. Swasy's staff got a well-deserved chance to catch their breath and rethink approaches to their jobs. Meanwhile, Ms. Swasy gained a critical block of time for skill assessment, personalized coaching and some assignment sharing. By accompanying some of her reporters on appointments, she was able to observe interviewing techniques and then offer suggestions for improvement. These management tactics soon yielded livelier stories—with a stronger sense of purpose, better anecdotes, sharper quotes, deeper explanations and richer supportive details.

The fifth chapter of this report described two

story formats—the Inverted Pyramid and the Battleground Framework—that receive heavy and almost constant use by most Western dailies in their coverage of environment topics. That chapter also cited a few alternate approaches, such as Marla Cone’s framing of environment disputes as scientific detective stories, leading readers on “a quest for truths.”

IJNR sees promise in the detective-story and quest concepts. We think they often work best when the story has a central character who is undertaking such detective work or some unusual initiative and who is encountering obstacles or resistance, expected or otherwise.

This central character need not be “heroic” or “successful” in order to serve effectively as the story’s organizing force. Actions, attitudes and even mishaps can keep the story moving, thus allowing for complicated explanations to unfold a few layers at a time.

We encourage more Western dailies to try out

alternative formats and story concepts on the environment beat. Stories can challenge the conventional wisdom about regulation or policy or enforcement. Which polluters don’t pay fines or do time in jail and why? Stories can make a place the central character, as “Exhibit A” in a broader pattern. Or stories can switch from the predictable point of view to one that is unexpected, as a way to help readers deepen their understanding of the issue.

The series called “Environment Inc.” that appeared in *The Sacramento Bee* in 2001 illustrates the first alternative—challenging the conventional wisdom.

In that series, reporter Tom Knudson showed that many mainstream environmental organizations had become as bloated, bureaucratic and preoccupied with revenue growth as the corporations, agencies and other institutions they were attacking. His series also questioned the hyperbolic assertions made in several of the direct-mail fundraising campaigns of these groups.

## *An Alignment of Talents*

The *Los Angeles Times* is the West’s largest and heftiest daily newspaper. It prints about 1.3 million copies of the Sunday edition, which can be far thicker than the telephone book of the megalopolis the newspaper serves.

The newsroom of the *Times* has a wall-full of Pulitzer Prizes and other major awards, and a history of rather wild management swings. In recent decades, the paper’s coverage of the environment has been somewhat erratic. Persistent, authoritative attention to air-pollution issues, for example, has been offset by booster-like coverage of water transfers.

Since its acquisition by the Chicago-based Tribune Company in 2001, the *Times* has consolidated a strong team of environment reporters under the editing leadership of Frank Clifford, an accomplished veteran *Times* reporter. Like so much of what happens in Western newsrooms, the formation and productivity of this team are not the result of a consistent corporate philosophy.

Rather they are the fruit of almost accidental mergers—the confluence of compatible temperaments and separate, personal decisions. Each of the career journalists on the environment team took a different path to reach the beat and

to become part of this current alignment of talents.

For many years, Mr. Clifford was a political reporter. He was persuaded by a friend to go on a backpacking trip to Alaska, where he decided the environment was what he wanted to write about. “I was happy to get away from politics,” Mr. Clifford explains, “from spending much of the year on airplanes full of reporters with no access to the candidate. You compare that to hiking through the Brooks Range and there was no contest.” He started covering environment in the mid-1990s, took a leave of absence to write *The Backbone of the World*, a book about the Continental Divide, and in 2001 returned to the paper to become its environment editor. Mr. Clifford has traveled widely in the West. He grasps the significance of its abiding ironies. “No region of the country is more devoted to the myth of rugged self-sufficiency,” he writes in his book, and none is “more dependent on federal largesse.”

Reporter Marla Cone is a Chicago native who says she once had a “deep aversion to science.” She started covering environment issues for *The Orange County Register* and moved to the *Times* in 1990. She now sees science as being at the

A useful example of making a place the story's central character is a feature article about the predicament of Trinidad, Colorado. Trinidad is one of hundreds of relatively small Western communities undergoing a difficult transition. Although written for *The Wall Street Journal* in 1990, this article by Dennis Farney still illustrates how an interesting story concept can be framed in just four brief, lean paragraphs at the top:

*Trinidad, Colo.—Tom Mix, the Hollywood cowboy, stayed at the grand old Columbian Hotel here. His room was 214. His horse's room was 212.*

*Miners stood up to John D. Rockefeller Jr. here—and died when he and other Eastern coal barons struck back. Men, women and children were mowed down indiscriminately when the Colorado militia crushed their bitter 1914 strike with machine guns and Springfield rifles. That was the Ludlow Massacre. People here talk about it as if it happened last week.*

*The Santa Fe Trail ran right through the center of town. Bat Masterson was a Trinidad sheriff. In its coal-mining heyday, the area boasted an astonishing 32 nationalities—Montenegrins, Italians, Lebanese, Welsh, Hispanics—babbling in 27 tongues.*

*Clearly, Trinidad has a history. The question is, does Trinidad have a future?*

To switch the point of view about the Pacific salmon crisis on the Columbia River, Lynda Mapes traveled to the inland deserts of Idaho in 2001 for *The Seattle Times*. Her story described “a treasure glittering just beyond the reach of salmon advocates and regional power managers: vast reserves of water.”

Many of the reservoirs of the Upper Snake River Basin were full or nearly so, she found, and this fact was “not lost on the Bonneville Power Administration and the federal, state and tribal guardians of threatened and endangered fish caught up in the region's second-worst drought in 70 years.”

center of her coverage, turning out 3,000-word environment stories with a strong science emphasis. Many of her pieces appear in the coveted first-column slot on Page One.

Reporter Gary Polakovic is a southern California native who once aspired to be a rock-n-roll drummer. Instead, he turned his early memories of stinging smog into a career of reporting on air pollution, first at *The Press-Enterprise* in Riverside and then at the *Times*.

Reporter Ken Weiss was covering education for the *Times* when the Tribune Company took over the paper. He saw an opportunity to propose a “coastal beat” to the new management. He now delivers lively pieces on unexpected topics, such as a story about chefs yanking endangered species of fish from their menus and another about beach congestion—too many surfers chasing too few waves.

Three more veteran reporters, Miguel Bustillo, Julie Cart and Deborah Schoch, round out Mr. Clifford's Los Angeles-based team. In addition, Elizabeth Shogren reports on environment policy from Washington, D.C., and Janet Wilson covers environment for the Orange County edition.

John Balzar is an editorial columnist at the *Times*. He writes often and broadly about issues of natural resources and the environment, such as the effects of road building in remote parts of Alaska. While not a part of Mr. Clifford's team, Mr.

Balzar has fed the perception that the *Times* has beefed up its environmental coverage. After working as a *Times* correspondent in the Pacific Northwest and earning a reputation as an engaging storyteller, he now writes an opinion column about three days a week.

Such indicators of revitalized interest in environment topics may, as some newsroom insiders suggest, reflect the absence of former publisher Otis Chandler, who had been strongly pro-development. Others argue that the increased emphasis is mostly coincidence. “What works here,” Mr. Clifford says, “is the willingness of editors to indulge the interest of reporters and let them go. It's not a permissive atmosphere. The editing is tough, and there is a greater emphasis on shorter stories. But there is also an impatience with unimaginative, formula journalism.”

While his reporting team is strong, Mr. Clifford thinks coverage of the environment has lost some prestige and priority since the 1990s. In general, the beat is not seen as a way to advancement, so most of those who elect to stick with it must find their greatest rewards in the gathering and writing of the stories.



**Frank Clifford**

Then Ms. Mapes noted that this Idaho water could turn turbines downstream and help salmon. But the politics of big-city power needs, tribal treaty rights and the federal Endangered Species Act were “up against some of the region’s most invincible political players: Idaho irrigators, Idaho water law and Idaho Power, the state’s largest utility.”

Instead of releasing any meaningful amount of this water to help downstream neighbors or fish, the water would be spread on fields of potatoes, a crop for which the world had little need then. Ms. Mapes found that Idaho farmers were dumping potatoes still heaped in warehouses from the previous season. The spud glut that had begun in 1996 meant that Idaho farmers were getting only about \$1.50 for a hundred pounds of potatoes when they needed at least \$5 per hundred pounds to break even.

Such are the choices available to newsrooms of the dailies of the West—to become more selective about coverage, to expand reporting capacity and newsgathering flexibility, to break habitual story molds—at least now and then.

In offering some suggestions on how to proceed, IJNR’s purpose has not been to disparage earnest efforts or to presume that we know what adjustments would be best for any particular newspaper—let alone what would be best for them all.

We do believe, however, that more reporters should be assigned and encouraged to cover growth, development and the environment.

We also believe that reporters need more time to work on stories that are important, ambitious and complicated. Newsrooms can choose to establish higher standards and expectations for these stories.

And newsrooms can choose to provide more opportunities for reporters and editors to learn how to meet the higher expectations.

All of these remedies will require more resources. Only the owners of the West’s daily newspapers have the power to make more resources available.

When considered in the context of typical salaries for Western reporters and front-line editors (and the pleas of so many managing editors for more reporters), the super-generous pay packages of so many Western newspaper executives deserve to be questioned. So do the bountiful profit margins that many corporate newspaper chains insist on pursuing to please shareholders. And IJNR wonders why the criteria that determine such financial rewards—especially the bonuses being paid to news executives—can’t have a much stronger connection to newsroom performance, quality of coverage and growth of circulation and readership.

As we said at the beginning of this report, the aim has not been to antagonize or alienate journalists or their supervisors. IJNR’s only hope in undertaking this ambitious project has been to stimulate and encourage more thoughtful debate and professional discussion inside Western newsrooms.

The time has come for reporters, editors and newspaper owners to engage each other in constructive and continuing conversations about these vital issues.

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I wish  
investors and owners  
of media companies  
could be made  
to understand  
the incredible  
responsibility  
they’ve assumed  
and accept  
a reasonable return  
instead of  
the excessive  
profits  
that can be  
garnered  
elsewhere.”

”  
*Walter Cronkite, speaking to  
Columbia Journalism Review  
in 1998.*