

New York Focus
Listens to
the North Country

6:00 pm
Town of Potsdam Community Room (Back Entrance)
18 Elm St, Potsdam



NEW YORK
FOCUS
COMMUNITY
LISTENING TOUR
Fall 2023 - Spring 2024



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INTRODUCTION

Every day, New Yorkers rely on systems shaped by lawmakers and moneyed interests in the statehouse and local governments. And every day, New Yorkers look for news and information to help them navigate these systems. New York Focus launched in 2020 to address these needs. Our mission is to produce in-depth journalism that reveals how power in the state really works, empowering ordinary New Yorkers to actively participate in local democracy.

With generous support from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, we began a listening tour in September of 2023 to study the information needs of New Yorkers. Our process centered on a statewide community listening tour and a survey to help us understand how New Yorkers consume, engage, and think about local news.

As part of our statewide listening tour, we visited four locations: Rochester, Albany, Potsdam, and Syracuse. We met with local residents and held discussions about local news and the issues that people care about in their communities and across the state.

We also published a statewide survey, which asked respondents questions about information access and needs, specifically drilling into how people consume local news. As an organization that covers policy, we were especially interested in how New Yorkers access information about government decision-making and what they seek from this kind of reporting.

We know that the work we put into investigating power in New York is most effective when we reach an audience that

feels connected to our reporting. As part of our mission, we frequently publish our reporting in partnership with local newspapers across the state. This helps us to reach local communities who might not otherwise be familiar with our work. Our reporters share their reports on local radio and television segments, and we offer all our reporting free on our site for republication. In order to adapt to shrinking resources, New York's newsrooms have had to adopt a collaborative and coalition-building approach to journalism. To deepen our research, we interviewed four local newsroom leaders to better understand the state of New York's news media.

We want to extend special thanks to the Lenfest Institute for supporting this project. We also want to thank the organizations we partnered with on our community events: the Rochester Area Community Foundation, the Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region, FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Central Current, and North Country Public Radio. In addition, we want to thank the Listening Post Collective (LPC), especially Program Officer Grace Northern, and Data Consultant David Pynchon.

Our aim is for this report to be useful to civic organizations — from libraries to schools to community groups — by helping them understand the information needs of communities across New York. In addition, we hope that this report will be useful to journalists and journalism organizations across New York as we consider the responsibility of local media to provide accurate and useful information to the public. **We're interested in how power operates in New York — including the power of the media.**



Attendees engage in small group discussion in Syracuse. Photo credit: Mike Greenlar

INTRODUCING NEW YORK FOCUS

Since its founding, New York Focus has investigated the impact of state power on local communities and individuals. We've investigated abuses by police and prison officials across the state; we've reported on the state's halting progress towards its climate goals; we've scrutinized the state budget and the opaque process that shapes it; and we've analyzed the effectiveness of local social service agencies. We have reporters based in New York City and Albany who cover politics, criminal justice, climate, housing, and education.

The impact of our reporting shows what can happen when someone is watching. Our work has **spurred legislation**, helped New Yorkers **receive benefits** they were owed by the state, and helped to **expose and then reverse** a policy set to block incarcerated writers and artists from publishing their work.

Our work is often published with local and national partners, and we are especially focused on partnering with local media throughout the state. Our stories are free to republish, and media partners can turn to our **republishing guidelines** to learn more and join our **distribution network**.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This report was primarily authored by Alex Arriaga and kate harloe.



Photo credit: Courtney Staton

Alex Arriaga is the Audience Engagement Editor for New York Focus, where she leads the organization's strategy to reach audiences across the state through partnerships, newsletters, social media, and community engagement. She has worked as a reporter and engagement journalist in local and national outlets, reporting on criminal justice, immigration, labor, elections, voting rights and other methods and barriers for political participation.



Photo credit: Mike Greenlar

kate (k.e.) harloe is a freelance journalist and writer based in Albany, New York. She has over ten years of experience in journalism and has worked at a range of local and national newsrooms across the country. She has a special interest in media system reform and has published extensively on this topic; she also often works with newsrooms and journalists directly to practice democratic, participatory forms of journalism. She's a proud member of the **Media Power Collaborative**, News Futures, and the **freelancers chapter of the National Writers Union**. She grew up on the northern edge of the North Country, New York.

This report was edited by Maia Hibbett, Akash Mehta, and Rebecca Klein. This report was fact-checked by Noa Ran-Ressler and Spencer O'Brien. Photographers were hired for each of the events — Marke Anderson, Courtney Staton, Charlie Teich, and Mike Greenlar.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

After many months of listening, here are the key lessons we're taking away from this project.

1 New Yorkers are eager for change.

Across the state, residents were eager to be asked for their thoughts on local news media. The number of people who attended our in-person listening sessions exceeded our expectations, as did their determination to help us document community perspectives on information access in New York. Participants highlighted the lack of standardized mechanisms that allow citizens to provide feedback to local media institutions — and thus engage in accountability — as well as a strong desire for such mechanisms.

Relatedly, residents described the experience of living within New York's shrinking local news **ecosystem**. In particular, residents explained that the decline of local news has left a major hole when it comes to finding basic civic information about municipal, town, village, county, and even state government. The New Yorkers we surveyed expressed a deep frustration at the lack of transparency they experience at all of these levels of government.

2 Newsrooms want to change.

Despite the shuttering of local newsrooms across the state, existing newsrooms are working hard to adapt and engage communities with their journalism in new ways. However, a lack of resources often leaves newsrooms feeling unable to provide the basic level of civic information that community members request and need.

3 Information gaps contribute to New Yorkers' feelings of scarcity.

New York has some of the **highest levels** of income inequality in the country. Those who can't count themselves among the state's richest spoke to us about their struggles with the state's severe housing crisis and complicated health care system, as well as their challenges with poverty, social services, and fears around climate change.

In our survey and listening sessions, people expressed a deep desire to engage with political processes to address these issues, but felt generally unable to access or understand those processes. In many cases, information gaps left them feeling unable to participate in their own communities and in the democratic systems of the state.

DESIGNING THE PROJECT'S GOALS AND METHODS

Our team began the listening tour by identifying core goals for the project. We knew that we wanted to better understand how New Yorkers experience local news, but what, exactly, were we looking to learn?

There is a growing body of literature that examines how to evaluate and analyze the information needs of a particular group of people. We began by reviewing some of this literature, focusing especially on a report published by the Democracy Fund: [A Guide to Assessing Your Local News Ecosystem](#), authored by the journalist and researcher [Fiona Morgan](#). We also drew upon the Knight Foundation's [Community Information Toolkit](#), as well as the perspectives and advice of experts in the field, including Morgan, Listening Post Collective's Grace Northern, The Jersey Bee's Simon Galperin, and others.

Informed by this body of research, we developed three overarching goals for our listening tour. We hoped the tour would help us improve our understanding of:

- **The information needs of New Yorkers.**
- **How the news media is meeting or failing to meet those needs.**
- **How we, at New York Focus, can shape our coverage to meet those needs.**

These goals informed the design of our project. We're sharing our process in case it is helpful to other newsrooms or civic organizations.

DETERMINING RESEARCH AND LISTENING METHODS

The research and listening methods we selected were informed by our goals, our most pressing questions, and our capacity. We had about six months to complete the tour and we determined that, in keeping with time and funding limitations, we would have capacity to design and distribute an online survey as well as meet with people in person.

We decided to organize four community listening sessions. This resulted in an average of one listening session per month, leaving space at the start and end of the project for planning and closure, in addition to survey design, publication, distribution, management, and other research tasks. We hoped that listening sessions would complement the survey by allowing us to collect in-depth feedback in person.



Attendees sign in at the Rochester listening session. Photo credit: Marke Anderson

LISTENING SESSION DESIGN

LOCATION SELECTION

Once we decided to hold four listening sessions, we asked a series of other questions: How would we determine the locations of the listening sessions? And how would the listening sessions work?

To select locations, we considered a variety of factors. First, we pulled demographic information on the population of New York State. With the help of [Listening Post Collective](#), we were able to request a report on the state's population from the data company [Claritas](#), which we considered in combination with data from the [United States Census](#). In addition, we also used Census data to create demographic summaries of the populations of a range of cities and towns across the state. This allowed us to consider how the demographics of a particular city might compare to the demographics of the statewide population, as well as what populations we might encounter in discrete cities or towns.

With the ability to conduct only four listening sessions, we knew it would not be possible to survey a sample of people who perfectly represented the overall demographics of the population of New York State. Instead, we prioritized other considerations. We endeavored to select places in distinct regions of the state. We aimed to select cities or towns whose residents would hold a wide variety of concerns about information access and other local and statewide issues. We also considered the interests and questions of New York Focus reporters who cover a range of beats statewide. As a new newsroom, we knew that these listening sessions might in some cases be our first visits to particular communities. We therefore viewed listening sessions not only as an opportunity to collect data, but as a chance to meet people and build relationships. Finally, while we are based in and sometimes cover New York City, we viewed these listening sessions

as an opportunity to hear the perspectives of residents in the many other cities and towns.

For these reasons, we opted to visit three cities and one rural town: Rochester in Western New York; Syracuse in Central New York; Albany, which is the state's capital, located near the state's eastern border; and Potsdam, a small town in New York's North Country.

FACILITATION & EVENT DESIGN

Next, we designed a process for the listening sessions. There are many ways a newsroom or community organization can approach a community engagement event; Morgan outlined a handful of methods in her report for the [Democracy Fund](#). One method is story circles, an approach often used by the artist and media producer [jesikah maria ross](#), which [involves participants](#) "sharing personal experiences on a theme guided by a facilitator." Another method Morgan pointed to is "world cafes," which involves three rounds of small group discussion, in between which the participants circulate. The world cafe method concludes with a report back to the wider group and typically requires two and a half to four hours. Morgan also described design thinking workshops, wherein small groups map local news and information systems, in addition to other ideas for how to practice community engagement. We also considered other methods used by organizations like [Free Press](#), [City Bureau](#), and others.

Ultimately, we adapted several of the approaches we learned about to create a framework that best fit our project's goals and limitations. While all of our community listening sessions shared a core framework, each session varied in some ways: We refined our methods as we went, and we also adjusted focus and questions as appropriate for the location we were visiting.

FRAMEWORK

We planned each listening session with an eye towards three primary outcomes.

Engaged conversation. Because our aim was not simply to extract information, but also to build relationships with people in communities we were visiting, we wanted to ensure that attendees enjoyed the experience of participating in our events and walked away with new insights.

Answers to three core questions. While we hoped to ask many questions over the course of a listening session, we decided upon three core questions all facilitators would ask participants so that we would have consistent answers to at least a few questions. (More on this below.)

Completed sign-in surveys. Upon arrival, we asked that each attendee sign in by filling out a short demographic survey.

Each listening session lasted about two hours. We found, as we ran listening sessions, that two hours was about the maximum amount of time that a small group of participants, who had been grouped together at random, seemed to stay engaged.

Typically, our listening sessions ran according to the following schedule: Attendees began to arrive 15 minutes before the official start time for the event. At start time, we allowed ten to 15 minutes for attendees to sign in, collect food and beverages, and enjoy casual conversation. The decision to provide food and beverages was intentional — and essential. We wanted to not only create a welcoming environment that was conducive to conversation, but also to express appreciation for peoples' time, efforts, and insights. Towards this end, we offered each attendee a \$20 gift card, which we sent them digitally.

We commenced the listening session with five to ten minutes of introduction from New York Focus

staff. As part of this introduction, we covered not only the listening session and how it would work, but also how this listening session fit into the broader statewide tour. We also introduced New York Focus — while a fair number of attendees were familiar with our organization, many were not. We shared articles we had published about the community we were visiting, in addition to sharing background on the mission of our newsroom.

Following the introduction, we split the participants into three discussion groups. We did this by guiding attendees to count off according to three different numbers, with the hope that this would randomize each discussion group and encourage people to converse with people other than those they knew. For each event, we set a goal of 20-30 attendees; this was the amount of participants that we knew we could, as a team of four to six people, comfortably facilitate. An event of this size would mean small discussion groups of five to ten people; for each, we typically provided one facilitator to guide the conversation and ask questions, and one person to take notes and manage the audio recording of the conversation.

After counting off, attendees split into separate discussion circles. The facilitator then commenced one hour of group discussion. We split the hour into three 20-minute segments, each focused on one of the three core questions. As part of our facilitation guide, we also provided a range of “sub-questions” or topics that related to each core question, which the facilitator could use to guide conversation. One of our three note-takers kept time for the whole room, calling out to the wider group when a given 20-minute time block was concluding.

At the conclusion of the hour of guided group discussion, we typically concluded the formal portion of the event quickly: New York Focus staff or partners shared final reflections and



Attendees of the Albany listening session in conversation. Photo credit: Courtney Staton.

house-keeping reminders. Then, we left about 30 to 45 minutes for informal conversation among participants and staff.

Leaving time for informal conversation at the end was something we learned to incorporate over time: Following our first event, we witnessed that even when formal conversation might slow in guided circles, people were excited to break out of those circles and share the thoughts they sparked with other attendees. People were also often excited to share specific ideas with New York Focus editors and reporters, an experience we found to be valuable. Informal conversation allowed for more and different forms of feedback to reach us.

The listening session framework we used was a hybrid of some of the methods Morgan shared combined with other techniques that worked well for the size of these groups and our staff. We found that one hour of small group discussion felt right-sized. We landed on an approach that tied together the world cafe approach and the focus group style.

SURVEY DESIGN

To create the online survey, we consulted with the [LPC](#), which published a “[playbook](#)” designed to support newsrooms and civic information organizations to run Information Ecosystem Assessments. We also studied the surveys and approaches of other newsrooms and organizations, including LPC’s survey of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, and El Timpano’s survey of the Latino community in Oakland, California. Through a consideration of best practices, and by studying these successful surveys, we set a goal to include no more than 12-17 questions. We also determined that our survey would be split into multiple pages, and, following the recommendations of LPC and others, we selected Google Forms as the survey tool.

Once we determined the basic parameters for the survey and the listening sessions, we began developing the specific questions we wanted to ask.

IDENTIFYING THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR THE SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS

We knew that listening sessions and surveys would each offer different types of advantages and insights. The online survey would afford us wider reach — and the opportunity to survey people beyond the locations we could visit — as well as the chance to ask a greater number of questions. On the other hand, survey questions would likely generate shorter replies with less context or depth. Listening sessions, by contrast, offered the chance to go deep: to collect nuanced answers to fewer questions. Listening sessions also offered the ability to ask questions about discrete regions or locations, and help us better understand the thoughts, needs, and issues at the center of different communities.

With this in mind, we designed the questions for our survey and our listening sessions slightly differently.



Attendees of the Rochester listening session in conversation. Photo credit: Marke Anderson

SURVEY QUESTIONS

For the survey, we decided to use three main categories of questions. (The full list of survey questions is included in our appendix.)

These included:

Questions about information access and infrastructure in New York State.

The goal of the first category of questions was to understand what sort of information infrastructure currently exists and which aspects of it people are most likely to use. Where are people most likely to look for information about their communities? Where is it easiest to reach them with information about New York State?

Questions about the respondent's information needs and their community's information needs.

The goal of the second category of questions was to understand what information people are able to access about their communities, cities, counties, and the state. In particular, we wanted to see where people find information about local or state government and how government intersects with their day-to-day lives. We also wanted to understand the local issues that people perceive as most important.

Questions about local news media in New York State.

The final category of questions focused on local news media; we wanted to hear whether people felt that local media is meeting the information needs that they identified in other parts of the survey.

Our survey questions varied in terms of geographical scope: we asked for perspectives on state, regional, and local issues. We also asked respondents to answer basic demographic questions and share contact information if they wished to receive a gift card or subscribe to New York Focus's newsletter.

LISTENING SESSION QUESTIONS

The questions we asked during listening sessions were also split into three categories in order to fit into the three, twenty-minute rounds of discussion. While the specific questions we asked did vary throughout the listening tour, they tended to follow this overall framework:

Round 1 (20 minutes): **As state residents, what information about your state is hard to find? What difference would it make to have that information?**

Round 2 (20 minutes): **What do you think about media coverage of the [City or Town], New York?**

Round 3 (20 minutes): **As residents of both [City or Town] and New York State, what issues do you feel need more attention, coverage, or reframing?**

Each of these questions was a “core question” — a question that facilitators made sure to ask during the listening session. Our discussion guides also included many “sub-questions,” which were related to the core questions. Examples of sub-questions include:

“Think of a time you needed to navigate a state system, and didn’t have the information necessary to do so. What happened? How did that feel?”

“How often do you think about state policy? How often do you feel it intersects with your day-to-day life?”

“How do you feel [City or Town], or your community within [City or Town], is portrayed in state and local media? What is the media doing well and what are we missing about this area?”

“As a [City or Town] resident, what keeps you up at night about where you live? What are your big concerns for the area?”

These are a small handful of examples. To read the full list of questions we created for listening sessions, please reference the appendix.

INTERVIEWS WITH NEWSROOM LEADERS

In addition to surveying New York State residents online and through our in-person listening sessions, we also interviewed people who work in newsrooms. We include additional information about our findings from these interviews in a later section.

DISTRIBUTION AND OUTREACH

We employed a variety of tactics to get the word out about both the survey and the listening sessions.

For the listening sessions: we found that we had the most success when we were able to do personalized outreach. For each location, we identified community organizations that were active and well-regarded by community members. To do this, we researched the area: we had conversations with local community organizations and newsrooms, as well as with reporters who had covered those areas. In some places, members of our team had existing relationships with community organizations, or knowledge of the local landscape, because they currently live or previously lived there. And for some of the events, we partnered with either a local foundation or with a local newsroom. In Rochester, we partnered with the Rochester Area Community Foundation; in Albany, we partnered with the Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region. For our event in the North Country, we partnered with **North Country Public Radio** and in Syracuse, we partnered with **Central Current**, a local nonprofit newsroom. These organizations helped us conduct outreach for the listening sessions as well.

In addition to personalized outreach to community leaders or organizations, we also promoted the listening sessions on our social media channels and through our newsletters, which we targeted to subscribers who lived in the areas where we would hold listening sessions. As able, we also distributed digital and physical fliers. For the listening session we held in Albany, the local public library shared our event fliers with its staff and on its social media channels. We found that distributing fliers, and partnering with the local libraries to do so, was an effective way to reach people beyond our existing networks. On a couple of occasions, we promoted the events via Facebook events. For the listening session in the North Country, NCPR helped with outreach by repeatedly sharing news of the event across their social media channels, and broadcasting short spots about the event in the weeks leading up to the session.

To distribute the survey, we employed similar techniques. We promoted the survey through our own social media channels and newsletter regularly. We conducted personalized outreach to community organizations and community leaders across the state. We also shared digital, physical fliers, and postcards, which contained information on the survey as well as a QR code to take the survey; our reporters distributed these when reporting in person. In addition, we compiled a list of all the public library systems in New York State, and contacted many of these systems about partnering with us to distribute the survey. We purchased one Facebook ad to promote the survey as well.



Attendees of the Rochester listening session in conversation.
Photo credit: Marke Anderson

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While we opened both the survey and the listening sessions to any New Yorker, we know that the pool of respondents we heard from only scratches the surface. Here, we will plainly describe the limitations of the research methods we relied upon to conduct this listening tour.

Though we offered gift cards and made an effort to select central and accessible locations for our in-person listening sessions, these events were most accessible to those who had the time and resources to attend a two-hour event on a week-night. And while attendees at the listening sessions did represent a diversity of economic, racial, and geographic backgrounds, there are many populations we did not survey in depth.

We learned that it is easiest to survey or gather people at places where they already gather. And while we selected locations — including community centers, a church, and a public library — where a cross-section of people gather, we also plan to be even more targeted in future listening sessions.

Both our listening sessions and our survey were limited to English speakers.

Our survey was most easily accessible to New Yorkers who have internet access. Further, the extent to which we were able to distribute the online survey was limited by our capacity; some newsrooms use **text messages** or **postcards** to survey readers or community members. These are methods that we would love to employ in the future.

Additionally, the data we collected through our online survey was affected by an incident that occurred in January: After promoting the survey

via a Facebook ad, we received hundreds of what appeared to be false responses. Guided by advice from the Listening Post Collective, as well as an independent data consultant, we cleaned the data by creating a list of specific rules that we applied to the data in order to eliminate false submissions. We will describe the rules below.

Rules

We eliminated a submission if it met one or more of the following criteria:

- The submission was submitted within 25 seconds of another submission.

- The submission was incomplete.

- The submission included “no” or a similar non-answer in response to the open-ended questions.

- The submission included long text answers that were identical to other submissions.

- The submission included a zip code that does not exist in the state of New York.

- The submission included a significant amount of demographic information that was identical to other submissions.

- The submission was insubstantial, general, and included no information specific to New York State.

With these rules in mind, we created a live duplicate of the original data, and reviewed every submission. We set up an automatic filter to flag submissions that were submitted within 25 seconds of one another. We applied the rest of the rules by flagging submissions manually. If we were uncertain about the validity of a particular submission, we eliminated it.

At the conclusion of this process, our data set consisted of **164 submissions**.

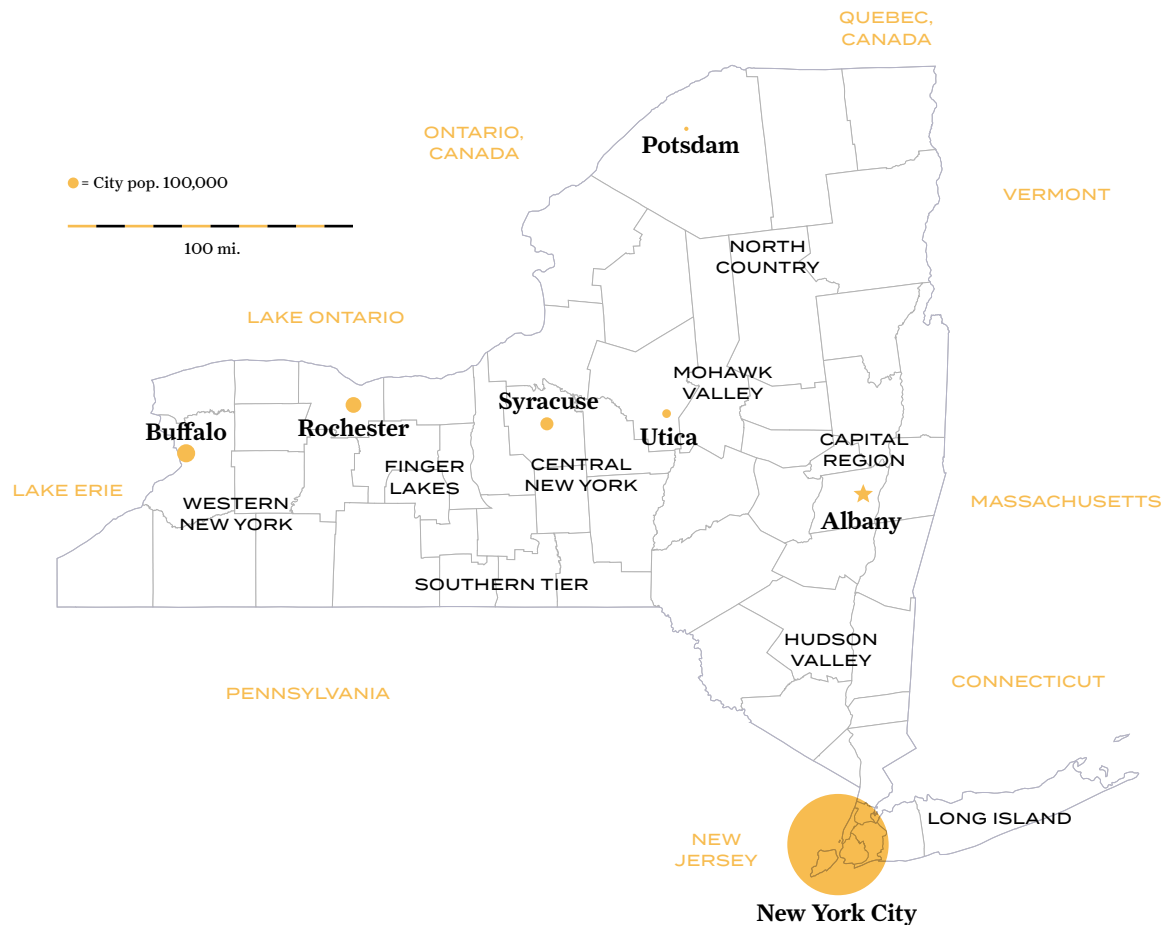
THE LANDSCAPE OF NEW YORK STATE

New York State is home to nearly 20 million people, making it the fourth most populous state in the nation.

New York State's annual budget is nearly \$240 billion, second in size only to California. New York State's budget is **larger than the budgets of most nation states.**

Like many states across the country, New York is undergoing rapid change. Since 2020, the total population of the state has **declined**, resting at a current 19,571,216 people. A 2023 report from the television outlet Spectrum News stated that **more people are leaving New York State than any other.** According to Claritas, the median age of New York residents is 40 and, in five years, projected to be 41. The current number of households is over 7.5 million, with the median household income estimated to be around \$80,000 for the current year.

New York is one of the top ten most racially diverse states in the nation, according to the **2020 United States Census.**



New York is geographically large as well. The state consists of **a total of 62 counties**, which fall into roughly **10 regions**. These regions include Western New York, home to Buffalo, the state’s second-most populous city. East of Buffalo is the Finger Lakes Region — a mix of rural, small towns and another upstate city, Rochester, which sits on the edge of Lake Ontario. Below this region is the Southern Tier and further east are the Central New York and Mohawk Valley regions, which contain a vast amount of farmland as well as two other sizable upstate cities, Syracuse and Utica. Beyond the Mohawk Valley is the Capital Region, which is home to Albany, the state’s capital, and marks the eastern border of the state. To the north of the Capital Region is the North Country, which is the largest region in the state. To the south of the Capital Region is the Hudson Valley. New York City is considered its own region. To the east of New York City sits Long Island, the tenth and final region in the state.

New York City is one of the largest cities in the world and, according to a report from the investment firm Henley & Partners, **the wealthiest**. In 2024, the firm published a report ranking New York City as the city with the highest number of millionaires in the world. By contrast, many of the state’s upstate cities and towns are struggling. Syracuse, for example, has the second highest child poverty rate of large cities in the United States, according to **2023 census data**. Several upstate regions have benefited from the arrival of new industry, such as **semiconductor manufacturing**. However, in many places across upstate New York, **population** and **industry** have been decreasing for years. The geographic and economic differences between New York City and the rest of the state have contributed to a long-standing sense of cultural division, which some attendees brought up in our listening sessions.

In 2023, a poll conducted by Siena College Research Institute found that 80 percent of voters identified cost of living as “a major problem” — with 27 percent agreeing that it is “the most important issue that the Governor and Legislature should be working on now.” After cost of living, the poll showed “crime, the recent influx of migrants, and the availability of affordable housing” as the next three most important issues, with at least 71 percent identifying housing as “a major problem.”

These findings mirror some of what we heard through our listening sessions and surveys. While our research was focused primarily on information needs and how newsrooms respond to them, we also asked questions in the online survey and in the listening sessions about issues people think aren’t being discussed or that they wished they had more information about.

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

In 2024, the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern published a report on the state of local news across the country. According to their research, New York State has 449 local news outlets, including 256 newspapers, 41 digital sites, 87 network sites, 55 ethnic outlets, and ten public broadcasting organizations.

In 2023, the same initiative found that the rate of newspaper closures across the country was up to 2.5 per week. But the loss of coverage may be more dire than that: among newspapers that still exist, many have been gutted and have few remaining journalists on staff.

In New York, we know from working with partner newsrooms that the decline in resources has resulted in newsrooms maintaining only one or two reporters to cover large regions. Even if each of these organizations was thoroughly resourced, reaching New York’s 19,571,216 residents with

accurate reporting would be a major challenge. Added together, there are 449 news outlets in New York State: That’s one outlet per roughly 43,000 residents, and many of these outlets are concentrated in New York City. As a result, we’ve witnessed local news organizations turn to coalition building, collaboration, and content sharing to sustain their work.

We’ve encountered local media coalitions such as a North Country coalition of newspapers including the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, Plattsburgh Press-Republican, Malone Telegram, Watertown Daily Times, and Glen Falls Post-Star that began sharing political stories while covering the 2018 elections and continue to share stories with one another. We also encountered a new statewide collaboration called the New York Public News Network through which 12 public radio stations — and some TV stations — are sharing stories, resources, and even a reporter.

WHAT WE FOUND

New Yorkers are eager for change.

- **Frustration navigating state systems** to access social services, benefits, and more.
- **Inability to access basic civic information.**
Government websites, in particular, are a major obstacle.
- **Distress over local crime coverage:** it is too sensational and not informative.
- **Information overload:** residents have to be hyper-engaged to find the information they need to participate in democracy.
- **Local media representation** of the regions, towns, and cities we visited **felt inaccurate or incomplete**, residents said. The reasons why differed from community to community.

Newsrooms want to change.

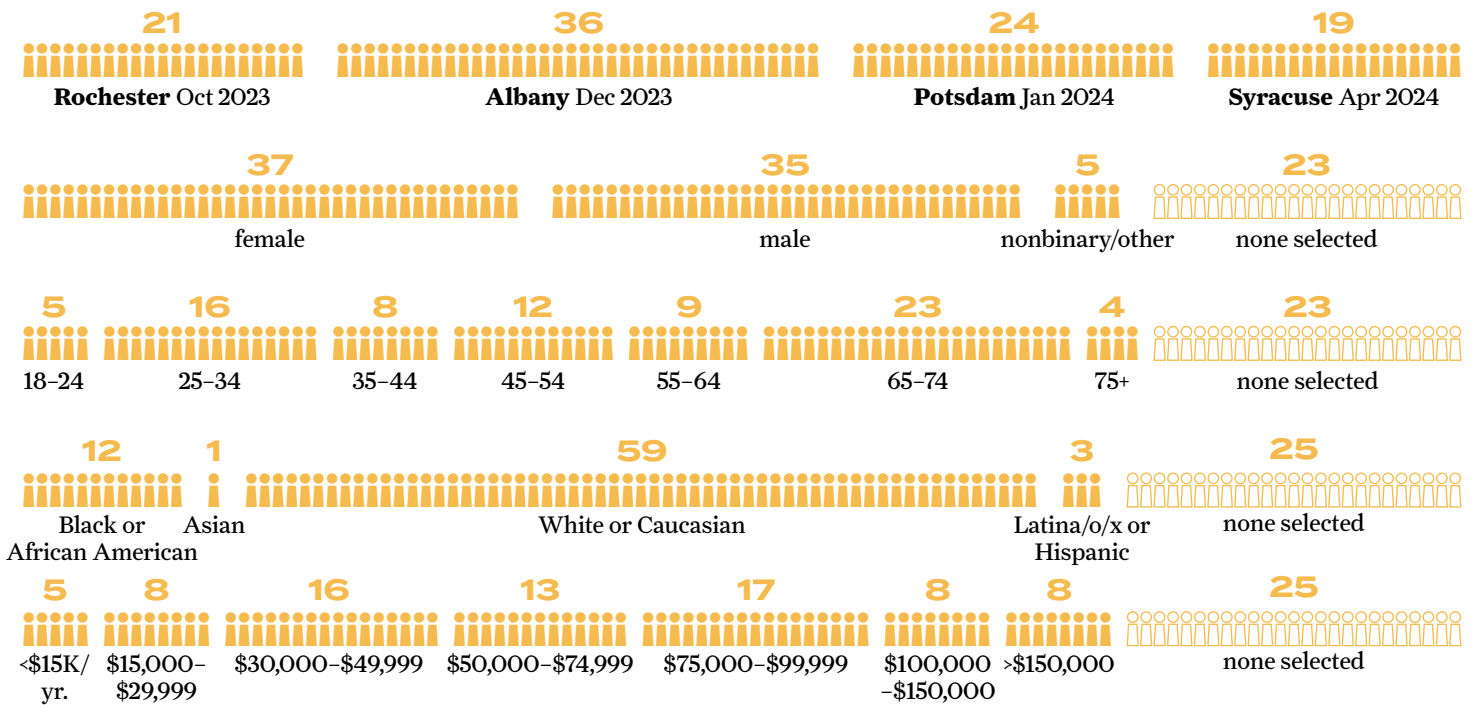
- Newsrooms are **eager to provide** the civic information that community members need, but often **lack the resources** to do so.
- Even journalists struggle to navigate the **lack of transparency** present in local, county, and state governments. Government websites, in particular, are difficult for journalists to use.
- Newsrooms have a desire to use **community-focused** forms of journalism, but need support to do so.
- Journalists share many of the **same criticisms of local media** coverage that residents do: for example, local media focuses on sports, crime, and certain types of business coverage too often.

Information gaps contribute to New Yorkers' feelings of scarcity.

- Dealing with the local and statewide housing crisis is made worse by inability to access relevant information on the issue.
- The same holds true for other local and statewide issues, such as poverty, public health, immigration, the decline of funding for higher education, addiction services, SNAP benefits, transportation, & more.
- Poor government websites and a lack of information about public meetings contribute to a sense of disempowerment.

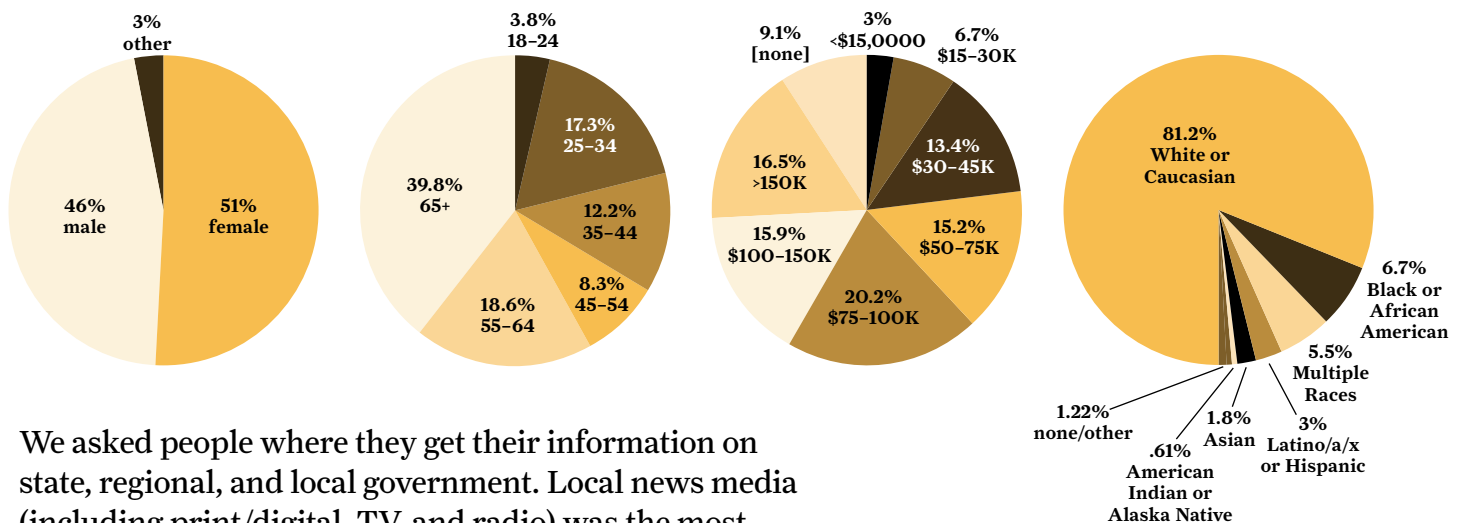
LISTENING SESSIONS: WHO ATTENDED

100 people total



SURVEY: WHO RESPONDED

164 people responded to our online survey. Our survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions.



We asked people where they get their information on state, regional, and local government. Local news media (including print/digital, TV, and radio) was the most popular response. The next most popular responses were government websites and political websites, which 55 and 54 people selected, respectively.

SURVEY QUALITATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

We asked: Do you feel you have a voice in the political processes that govern your life and communities? Why or why not?

Many respondents shared feelings of disempowerment:

“No. I feel that it is mostly influenced by the business community in any city or town in New York State.”

“Yes because I serve on the planning board and am involved at the local level. No because I am not a wealthy political donor and we all know that money drives politics.”

“A very small voice. Why? Politicians mostly listen to big donors, not the small fish.”

Some respondents acknowledged that they have a voice in politics through the work that they do, but that their level of political access is abnormal.

“Yes. But I say that as someone who comes from a point of privilege by growing up in Albany, in a family that taught me to be involved from a young age. I also say this as someone who works for the NYS Legislature, is heavily involved in my local community’s politics and has the opportunity to vote. I do, however, feel that the opportunity and ease of access to have a voice in government is limited to those who have the above privileges. Not everyone—most people in fact—have not had the opportunities to have their voice heard that I have.”

And others felt left out because of their status in a marginalized group.

“No – unable to vote”

“No. I am a member of various minority groups. My parents cannot run for President. They cannot run for other offices and were unaware of the laws or rules.”

Some respondents said a lack of government transparency was a cause of political disempowerment.

“No. True community engagement has been stripped out of the process — partly by legal and in-practice weakening of state Open Meetings Law; partly by public hearings now dysfunctional through archaic legal notice publicity; partly due to apathy; and partly because local press is routinely out-manuevered or under-staffed regarding timely notice.”

“No, because my town doesn’t send emails or even post what’s going on in town, nor does my county (Columbia County) — and we have a bad bad local paper. I’m from CA originally and I find NYS shockingly untransparent and run by an old boy network. Which harms people and NYS itself — given all the talented people in NYS, it is insane that it is so unproductive and lame.”

“Not really. The process is opaque and there’s no direct line between my comments and local elected officials hearing them and taking it into account.”

We asked: What types of information about state, regional, or local government would help you in your daily life or work, or help your community?

Many of the responses to our survey mirrored the issues that were raised in our community listening sessions. People want more information about where to access resources so that they can support themselves, their families, and their communities. They're also hungry for information that can help them navigate civic processes and political decision making. We included illustrative examples below.

“Information about unionizing and worker actions (stories of workers trying to unionize and their strategies, laws around unionizing, how and where to support workers on strike or trying to unionize); information of when and where elected officials will be meeting with the public; efforts by groups or coalitions of groups to change policy at a local or state-level; public health information; available services from government and events (like rabies vaccination clinics, for example).”

“Albany has a good though shrunk political press corps and there's decent coverage of the City government in the local papers but there's little to no coverage of County legislatures. Not sure how important it is but it feels like a void. Occasionally coverage of County Execs.”

“What bills are pending, how they might affect me and my town and how I can best find out more and give input to my electeds and by when.”

Many people answered: “Healthcare.”

We asked: What's an important issue or story in New York state, your region, or your local community that people aren't talking about?



LISTENING SESSIONS

During four listening sessions, attendees discussed issues that concerned their specific communities as well as communities across the state.

ROCHESTER

ISSUES DISCUSSED

- **Negative representation of Rochester in local media and pessimism about the future of Rochester in contrast to other upstate cities such as Syracuse.**
- **Poverty; how lack of information contributes to a feeling that there is no safety net.**
- **Economic development in Rochester, specifically the Downtown Business Improvement District.**
- **Criticism of crime coverage.**
- **Housing affordability.**

The attendees at the Rochester listening session were interested in learning about civic and community meetings and concerned about Rochester's future. Some were involved in advocacy around local issues.

While attendees pushed back on the portrait of Rochester as a "city in decline," they also raised serious concerns about the challenges faced in the city. Poverty is worse in Rochester and Monroe County than in many similarly sized metropolitan areas, and about half of children in Rochester live in poverty.

Many attendees expressed a desire to better understand how decisions are made in the city. But to find out what local government or community leaders are doing takes a significant time commitment: "you have to turn it into a hobby to show up," one resident said. Another attendee said that

they are more likely to consume news passively, by listening to radio or watching TV, but will rarely go looking for more information. "You have to remember, let me look that up. And I don't do that. Too much work."

Several attendees expressed frustration at how difficult it is for them to find public information, such as the minutes for public meetings. Attendees expressed interest in more information about school board meetings, county government, and judges. During elections, one attendee said they will rely on endorsements by their chosen political party for down ballot decisions, but they wished that they could make informed decisions independently with the support of local reporting.

The type of civic information that these attendees requested is often difficult to find, in part due to the decline of local media. But even in cases where news was available, some attendees expressed fatigue: Keeping up with available news sources takes time, money, and energy. "With the income disparity in Rochester, there are a lot of people who don't seek out news because it seems pointless, or overwhelming and depressing," said one resident. "People therefore don't have access to news that could actually empower them and give them some hope."

When asked about the way Rochester is depicted in local media, some people expressed a feeling of grief about seeing Rochester depicted so negatively. The Kodak Tower still looms over the city as a reminder that the company once employed more than 50,000 people and held up the local economy. Attendees felt that, compared to other upstate cities like Syracuse and Buffalo, people have a greater attitude of pessimism about

Rochester — and this pessimism is reflected in the way that Rochester is depicted in local media.

One question in our survey asked, “How do you feel your community is represented in state and local news media, if at all?” One respondent wrote: “It often sounds like Rochester is a dead or dying town since Kodak and Xerox have passed their prime.”

The respondent continued: “Even though I’m sure it has a lot of truth that it’s not as prosperous, it seems too broad. It also seems like Rochester is cast [in local media] as one of the most violent places on earth in terms of gun violence, but that too seems to be too broad.”

The way crime is covered was closely scrutinized by readers who attended our listening session. One attendee noticed that reporters will return repeatedly to certain sources such as a former chief of police or the chamber of commerce when reporting on public safety. Several attendees said they are interested in data journalism and in-depth reporting that incorporates accountability and potential policy solutions on crime.

Attendees shared that they are proud of cultural events in Rochester and wished local cultural journalism was more robust.

ALBANY

ISSUES DISCUSSED

- **Lack of information for non-English speakers, especially when trying to find information on issues like public health.**
- **Poor coverage of local government due to local news media’s focus on state government. Local government reporting, if produced, tends to be delayed.**
- **Desire for more coverage around local organizing efforts, especially tenant organizing.**
- **The failure of local crime coverage to give people clear answers around public safety.**
- **Handling of the migrant crisis.**

In Albany, 36 people attended. As residents of the state capital, these attendees tended to be more specific in their interests for information about state government. Some people who attended work as legislative staffers, lobbyists, or activists. Still, even those who were relatively educated on matters of state government expressed frustration with the difficulty they face in finding information about state systems or government. Albany is home to a notoriously opaque state legislature, and attendees noted that finding basic information about legislation or court decisions can be challenging.

“Even coming from inside the state government, it was really hard to access information during the LaSalle confirmation battle,” said one attendee who works as a legislative staffer. “A significant amount of criminal cases in the state do not have public records. A lot of information is siloed within state government.”

Multiple residents said they want more than just coverage of what happens at the capitol and that coverage of local issues, such as Albany’s Common Council or local organizing efforts, get lost in statewide coverage. When stories are published

about local Albany issues, it's frequently with long delays, one resident said.

The local media's emphasis on statehouse coverage contributes to marginalization of local populations in Albany such as Spanish speakers, one resident said. Spanish speakers in Albany have few sources of information to turn to for basic information about issues like public health or elections.

"Where's the programming for and by marginalized communities?" he asked. "If we can't get messages out through the media, we're gonna suffer."

Albany residents also expressed frustration with the local media's normalization of government dysfunction. They described a sense of "complacency" in how Albany is covered — "reporting on things as if they're working as intended."

THE NORTH COUNTRY

ISSUES DISCUSSED

- **Political polarization in the North Country and how this affects the way people consume news.**
- **The need for information on how to access social services such as transportation for people with disabilities, addiction services, SNAP benefits, higher education funding, and resources for business owners.**
- **Little nuance in how the North Country is portrayed in the media.**
- **Gutting of higher education.**

Twenty-four people attended our next listening session in Potsdam, New York. For this event, we partnered with North Country Public Radio (NCPR), which is a public radio station and NPR affiliate serving the Adirondack North Country, western Vermont, and southeastern Ontario.

More than in other upstate areas, attendees expressed a feeling that the North Country is a forgotten part of New York State. People don't necessarily consider this a bad thing. "I like living on the frontier," one North Country resident said. But when it comes to their local media, attendees described a void left from the loss of local news reporters, and an attachment to NCPR as a main source of reliable journalism in the area.

Attendees acknowledged that not all residents in the area feel this way about NCPR or other local news sources. They shared that the North Country has become increasingly politically polarized and acknowledged the influence of national right-wing media outlets on the information landscape of the area.

Attendees felt that the North Country, when it is represented in media, can be portrayed as a "frozen tundra wasteland" and were frustrated by what they described as ignorant depictions of rural stereotypes. They acknowledged that there is often a division politically and culturally between the community members who turn to a news outlet like NCPR for news and those who turn to right-wing or other media sources. "There are people who roll their eyes when you mention NCPR," one attendee said. Another attendee said that she tries to follow the news online but gets burnt out from trying to avoid hate.

Attendees were interested in support for navigating state and local government systems to access resources. People said that they often lack the ability to navigate complicated, bureaucratic systems to retrieve things like veterans benefits, disability benefits, or benefits for local businesses. In addition, North Country towns are often burdened with the workload of pursuing and implementing state grants. If towns don't have the ability to seek information on how to do this, they may not access available funding to begin with.

ISSUES DISCUSSED

- **Media coverage of government does not foster political empowerment.**
- **Contrasting media narratives around Syracuse and its surrounding suburbs.**
- **Lack of transparency among local government bodies.**
- **Overemphasis on executive branch in local media coverage of the government.**
- **Difficulty navigating government websites.**

Syracuse, a city with a population of nearly 150,000, is the fifth largest city in the state and a hub of Central New York. The city is undergoing major changes: a plan to tear down a major highway will soon go forward with state funding, and the incoming Micron Technology plant has received \$6 billion in federal funding in addition to \$5.5 billion in tax breaks from the state.

With so much changing in Syracuse, local residents had a lot of questions. At our listening session, which we hosted with local newsroom Central Current, 19 people attended. Residents raised concerns about the need for transparency and community input around the city's major developments. Residents also described the confusion people experience when trying to find information from government websites.

Some of the attendees said that even though they work closely with local government agencies, they still have a difficult time finding information. Multiple people mentioned challenges around obtaining public documents that they requested through the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). Even when they are able to attend public meetings, one resident said there is typically little opportunity for meaningful input — it feels as if decisions are made ahead of the meeting, they said.

Some people don't know which government entity to contact to get the information they need, attendees said.

"It is hard to understand how Albany policies will impact us in Syracuse [or our] county," another resident said.

The way local government bodies are covered in local media does not empower readers to understand their government structures, one resident said. People often assume that executive leaders such as the mayor hold the decision-making power, and this is enabled by the media's focus on covering the local executive branch. But in a city where the county's budget is 4 to 5 times bigger than the city, refocusing coverage to county leaders should be a priority, one attendee said.

Multiple attendees shared frustration with the way crime is covered, and the different approaches local media takes to covering the city of Syracuse versus its suburbs. One resident said that these coverage differences stoke fear and anger. Attendees wished there was greater care for the nuance of Syracuse, and described a desire to see positive coverage of the city.

"Syracuse city teen involved in crime on one side of the paper. Suburban sports kids do something great on the other side," one resident said. "The city vs. suburban narrative echoes."

PERSPECTIVES FROM LOCAL NEWSROOM LEADERS

In order to supplement our research on the local news ecosystem in New York State, we interviewed newsroom leaders in four locations. For the most part, the journalism professionals we interviewed worked in the same cities or towns where we hosted listening sessions. We wanted to see how journalism practitioners would answer some of the same questions we asked in listening sessions.

We interviewed four newsroom leaders: David Sommerstein, news director at North Country Public Radio (Canton/Potsdam); Erica Smith, managing editor at The Times Union (Albany); Chris Libonati, managing editor at Central Current (Syracuse); and Denise Civiletti, editor and reporter at Riverhead Local (Long Island). These interviews with newsroom leaders echoed many of the themes that emerged during listening sessions.

Examples of questions we asked newsroom leaders include:

“What information do you think is difficult for people in your community [e.g. Albany, New York] to find?”

“How would you describe your mission around coverage of government and politics? How does your audience engage with this coverage?”

“If someone not from [Albany] is reading your publication, how do you feel they would perceive [Albany] and various communities within [Albany]?”

A complete list of the questions we asked newsroom leaders can be found in the appendix.



New York Focus staff visits North Country Public Radio newsroom in January, 2024. Pictured from left to right: Akash Mehta, Alex Arriaga, Sarah Scafidi-McGuire, Kate Harloe, Maha Ahmed, and David Sommerstein.

Taken together, four core themes emerged from our interviews with newsroom leaders.

1: Government websites are difficult to navigate, even for journalists.

Multiple journalists noted that government websites — at all levels of government, but especially the state level — are exceptionally difficult to navigate. Even reporters with knowledge of local government have trouble using them, they said.

“Anything with state or local government — you have to know where to look for it or where to find it,” said Times Union Managing Editor Erica Smith. “Access to simple things like meeting times, agendas, minutes — what’s going on, where and when — [are hard to find].”

NCPR’s David Sommerstien said that, even for journalists, navigating state websites can be challenging. “The Senate and Assembly system for looking up votes is completely opaque,” he said. “It’s impossible to see who voted for what. It’s hard for journalists to find their way through it, let alone someone who wants to engage in a small way.”

The barriers created by poor websites create problems not only when it comes to locating civic information, but also when it comes to other local or regional issues, such as overcrowding in the Adirondacks.

“We could link to the Department of Environmental Conservation’s (DEC) website until the cows come home, but it sucks,” said NCPR’s Sommerstein. “Even the campground websites are terrible...and that’s the most user-friendly of all of them. It’s designed by and for bureaucrats. And we’re paying money for it.”

Denise Civiletti of Riverhead Local named a number of towns with websites that are difficult to navigate, and pointed out that it might save towns money to be more transparent.

“I don’t know what the town of Riverhead is spending fulfilling their Freedom of Information

Law (FOIL) request and then having their lawyers file appeals, but how much better off would they be financially to just pay the money to put this stuff online?” she asked. “You’re wasting a lot of money and time processing FOIL requests.”

2: Lack of newsroom resources make it hard to share civic information, let alone make it accessible.

Almost all of these newsroom leaders named a lack of resources as a challenge they face in delivering information to the public.

“It’s one thing to be able to find the stuff, it’s another to have the ability to put it out in a format that is accessible to people,” said the Times Union’s Smith.

Several journalists saw a direct link between this lack of capacity and their ability to provide basic civic information. Smith said:

I would love to have a calendar where you could say: I live in Albany or Cohoes, tell me when the city or town meetings are. It could be automated, and tell you about [all kinds of] meetings: who’s doing what and where.

I think we’ve done some smart things with the state government — with bill trackers and voter guides. But it doesn’t get as niche as it should.

Even making information available to reporters requires resources, Riverhead Local’s Civiletti pointed out. Some towns are more transparent than others, and the time it takes to uncover information takes money.

At the time of our interview, Chris Libonati at Central Current, a local nonprofit covering Syracuse, was the sole reporter on staff. “Capacity is a problem we have,” he said. Central Current started publishing in 2022.

“A clear promise we have in our mission is that we will always be free,” Libonati added. “If someone can get internet access, [they can access Central Current].”

But while Central Current’s commitment to no paywall serves their mission, it makes it harder to resource the newsroom, which can also make it harder, Libonati pointed out, to both retrieve information and make it truly accessible to the public.

3: With the capacities they have, newsrooms across the state are trying to engage with the communities they cover in different ways.

Several newsroom leaders described trying out new journalistic methods in an effort to embrace a more community-based approach to journalism.

Sommerstein described a new text message service that allows NCPR to survey readers. Reporters can use this to ask questions before they begin reporting or ask for feedback on a story.

In 2022, The Times Union partnered with Albany Public Library; together, they used community engagement methods to produce journalism together. The Times Union has since partnered with other civic organizations to produce voter guides and experimented with other ways of making reporters available to answer questions and take feedback from community members.

In general, journalists expressed a desire and willingness to try out different methods for meeting community members’ information needs, but described a lack of resources as a barrier to successfully continuing or expanding such work.

4: Local media focuses too heavily on sports, business, and crime

Newsroom leaders echoed a point that came up during most of the listening sessions we held: Local media focuses too much on coverage of sports and, especially, crime.

The Times Union’s Smith pointed out that the abundance of crime coverage among local media outlets is, in part, a resource issue. “[TV. Stations] end up doing a lot of crime coverage because it’s easier to do than an investigation,” she said.

In addition, NCPR’s Sommerstein described the tendency for local media to focus on a particular type of business coverage. There is a lot of “economic development [coverage],” he said. “The struggle to create jobs. The loss of jobs, but without an accompanying lens of: What are bread and butter economic issues actually like for families? This business opens, this business closes, but what does it all mean for average people?”

He added that local media, including NCPR, generally provides a “lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class rendition of what the North Country is.” Providing more information on what life is like in the “low-income part of the North Country is something we are always working on,” Sommerstein said. He added that this blindspot was not limited to NCPR, however: state and national media tend to focus on middle-class perspectives as well.

CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of our listening tour, we are left with a few final reflections.

1: Collaboration is key to the future of local journalism in the state – and to meeting New Yorkers’ information needs.

Throughout this tour, we’ve encountered numerous examples of local media organizations starting to work together in coalition. In the North Country, a collection of newspapers — including the Adirondack Daily Enterprise, Plattsburgh Press-Republican, Malone Telegram, Watertown Daily Times and Glen Falls Post-Star — began sharing political stories during an election and continue to share stories with one another. And this year, a new state-wide coalition emerged: the New York Public News Network, which is a collaboration between every public radio station, and some TV. stations, in the state. Together they are paying the salary of a shared reporter, coordinating coverage, and meeting regularly.

We learned more about the collaborations that are already active across the state, how New York Focus can support and participate in them, and how these collaborations might help fill some of the information gaps that residents identified. Collaboration won’t be the only answer to the disappearance of local news and information across the state: addressing these information gaps will also require policy change and new models for information sharing. But collaboration is, and will remain, key.

2: New Yorkers want to be heard and community listening is a critical way for newsrooms to listen.

In an ideal information ecosystem, community listening and audience surveys would be an ongoing part of the work of every newsroom or civic information organization. New Yorkers have strong views about the information they want and need. For those of us committed to democracy and an informed public, it is incumbent that we provide ways for communities to give continuous and direct feedback about their evolving information needs.

For our part, we know our tour only skimmed the surface, and we plan to continue visiting other cities, towns, and regions across the state.

3: At New York Focus, we're starting to apply what we've learned and we plan to keep going.

Surveying hundreds of residents across New York State has taught us a lot. Already, we've started to apply what we've learned. Here are some examples of how we are beginning to integrate these findings into our work:

Service journalism:

In direct response to questions and ideas that emerged at listening sessions, we've started to publish service journalism with answers. For example, see our guide to the state budget, which included direct answers to reader-submitted questions.

Story ideas:

Listening sessions led to story ideas and we plan to continue our reporting on information systems in the state.

Text message service and other forms of community engagement:

We're developing plans to engage community members in our journalism in new ways. For example, we're exploring the possibility of a New York Focus text messaging service.

Relationships:

Through this tour, we developed relationships, sources, and lots of ideas for projects and collaborations.

Continued listening sessions and surveys:

We plan to keep doing this work!

We would like to again extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated in this tour and for the many people who made it possible.

If you have ideas or questions, please contact us. You can reach Alex Arriaga at alex@nysfocus.com or the editors at editor@nysfocus.com.

APPENDIX

This appendix includes the questions we asked in our listening sessions, survey, and interviews with journalists around the state.

SURVEY DESIGN

#	Question	Response type/copy
Information Access and Infrastructure in New York State		
1	<p>When something happens in your community, where do you hear about it? Please check all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Radio• TV• Newspaper• Neighbor or friend• Religious/spiritual community• Library• Community center / business• Someone specific in the community• Flyers or signs• Local Nextdoor group• Facebook group• Twitter or X• Whatsapp group• Other: _____	Checkbox
2	<p>What is the most effective way to deliver news and information about New York State or your local community to you? Pick your top three.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Text/SMS• Whatsapp• Email• Instagram• Facebook• TV• Newspaper• Radio• Twitter• Religious/spiritual community• Library• Community Hub (Neighborhood Center, Public Health Clinic, etc.)• Online Community Hub (Nextdoor, etc.)• Other: _____	Checkbox

APPENDIX

#	Question	Response type/copy
3	<p>In a typical day, how do you most often get online?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Home wifi• Local business wifi• Library wifi• Work wifi• School wifi• Personal cell phone data plan• Municipal wifi• Other:	Checkbox

You and Your Community's Information Needs

4	<p>Do you feel you have a voice in the political processes that govern your life and communities? Why or why not?</p>	Open-ended
5	<p>What's an important issue or story in New York state, your region, or your local community that people aren't talking about?</p>	Open-ended
6	<p>What state, regional or local issues do you wish you had more information about? Pick your top three.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jobs• Public Health• Education• Childcare• Local Government• State Government• Community Events• Immigration/Citizenship• Housing• Homelessness• Criminal Justice• Public Safety• Race and Gender Inequality• Income Inequality• Transportation• Climate & Environment• Social Services• Local Business• Economic Development• Poverty• Other:	Checkbox

APPENDIX

#	Question	Response type/copy
7	<p>How informed do you feel about state government and decision-making that affects your community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very informed • Somewhat informed • Neutral • Somewhat uninformed • Very uninformed 	Checkbox
8	<p>Where do you get information about state, regional, or local government?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local news media (TV, Radio, Newspaper, etc.) • Government website • Politician website or newsletter • Library • School • Community organization • I don't get information about state, regional, and local government • Other: 	Checkbox
9	<p>What types of information about state, regional or local government would help you in your daily life or work, or help your community?</p>	Open-ended
<p>Local News Media in New York State</p>		
10	<p>How do you feel your community is represented in state and local news media, if at all? What does news media get right or wrong about your community?</p>	Open-ended
11	<p>What important stories or issues do you feel state and local media are not covering?</p>	Open-ended
12	<p>As we build a newsroom, we want to make sure our journalism reflects the needs of the communities we cover.</p> <p>Which of the following would you be most interested in? Please check all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm interested in talking more with a journalist in your newsroom • I want to share tips for story ideas • I'd like to share my ideas and opinions about local and state policy • I want to share my story or stories from my community • I host a regular event or neighborhood group that I'd like someone from your newsroom to visit 	Checkbox

APPENDIX

#	Question	Response type/copy
13	Who else should we be sure to talk with in your community as we get more input on our news coverage?	Open-ended
Demographic Info		
14	How would you describe your gender? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Female• Male• Transgender• Other gender (specify):	Checkbox
15	What is your age? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Under 18• 18-24• 25-34• 35-44• 45-54• 55-64• 65-74• 75+	Checkbox
16	Please select the population group or groups that you most closely identify with from the list below: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asian• Black or African American• American Indian or Alaska Native• Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander• White or Caucasian• Latino, Latina, Latinx or Hispanic• Middle Eastern or North African• Other:	Checkbox
17	The annual income for my entire household is: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Under \$15,000• Between \$15,000 and \$29,999• Between \$30,000 and \$49,999• Between \$50,000 and \$74,999• Between \$75,000 and \$99,999• Between \$100,000 and \$150,000• Over \$150,000	Checkbox
18	What is your ZIP code in New York State?	Open-ended
~	If you are already a reader of New York Focus, for what purpose do you read our journalism? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For work• To learn about what's happening in state government• To learn about what's happening in my region or local community	Checkbox

APPENDIX

#	Question	Response type/copy
Demographic Info		
19	Name	Open-ended
20	At what email address would you like to be contacted?	Open-ended
21	Cell phone	Open-ended
22	Would you like to get email updates about our newsroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes• No	Checkbox

EXAMPLE: LISTENING SESSION QUESTIONS

Round 1 | 20 minutes. As state residents, what information is hard to find? What difference would it make to have that information?

Take a few minutes for the group members to introduce themselves to one another. We're going to start by thinking about information gaps in, or information that may be hard to find, about New York State. Starting with a prompt to try and ground the conversation:

1. Prompt: Think of a time you needed to navigate a state system, and didn't have the information necessary to do so.

> By system, we're thinking of things like: the state healthcare system, unemployment benefits system, criminal justice system, education system, public housing system

What happened? How did that feel?

[Give people a couple of minutes to think, then share examples - note these examples on poster board.]

2. Prompt: Now imagine what it would be like to have that information. What difference would that information work for you? What might it help you get?

[Note descriptions, key words on posterboard.]

Possible sub-questions:

- What information is hard to find about the way the state runs?
- What information do you wish you had about how statewide decisions are made? Or about how statewide departments or decision makers function?
- How often do you think about state policy? How often do you feel it intersects with your day-to-day life?
- How much do people care about what's going in the state capitol, see it as affecting their daily lives? What would make them interested in paying attention to it?
- Interested in same questions about county and local government.

Round 2 | 20 minutes. What do you think about media coverage of the North Country, NY?

For this portion, we want to zoom in on the North Country specifically, and your thoughts about media coverage of this area.

Core Questions: How do you feel the North Country, or your community within the North Country, is portrayed in state and local media?

What is the media doing well and what are we missing about this area?

Possible sub-questions:

- Exercise // Two-part question:

1. Prompt: What are words, ideas, and concepts you often see used to describe the North Country, or your community within the North Country, in local media coverage? Specific examples of articles or instances are great!

[Allow people a few minutes to write their responses on post its or notes, then list on posterboard or post its.]

What is accurate or inaccurate about the way the North Country or these communities are described?

2. Prompt: What are words, ideas, and concepts you would like to see used to describe the North Country, or your community within the North Country, in local media coverage?

- How do you feel about media coverage of your town? Of St. Lawrence County? Of your communities in particular?
- How do you feel you and your community are represented in local and state news media, if at all? (Thinking about communities you're a part of other than Potsdam, North Country)
- Interested if there are differences in how people feel about local, state media versus national.

Round 3 | 20 minutes. Zooming out again: As residents of both the North Country and New York State, what issues do you feel need more attention, coverage, or reframing?

Now we want to zoom out again to consider both the state and the North Country frames.

We want to know: What issues - in either the North Country or the state - do you feel more attention, coverage, or reframing? By reframing, we mean: perhaps this issue is getting coverage, but you feel it needs to be covered in a different sort of way.

We want to know not just how you think particular communities should be covered differently, but also how certain issues should be covered differently. (For example: housing, criminal justice, etc.)

Possible sub-questions:

- What do you think are the most serious issues that face New York State residents? // What do you think are the most serious issues that face North Country residents?
- As a NYS resident, what keeps you up at night about where you live? What are your big concerns about the state? // As a North Country resident, what keeps you up at night about where you live? What are your big concerns for the area?
- What is one issue you're most passionate about in the North Country?
- What statewide issues do you think need more attention - or reframing (in coverage and otherwise)?
- When you think about the future of the North Country, what comes to mind? What are the most important issues facing this area?

EXAMPLE: INTERVIEWS WITH NEWSROOM LEADERS

Information access and infrastructure in New York State

1. What information do you find is difficult for people in your community (the North Country) to find?
 - a. Specifically, when people need to navigate a state system.
2. As a news organization, are there challenges with making that information accessible?

You and Your Community's Information Needs

3. How would you describe your mission around coverage of government and politics? How does your audience engage with this coverage?
4. How do you determine what types of information about state, regional, and local government would help people in their day to day lives?

Local news media in New York State

5. If someone not from the NoCo is reading your publication, how do you feel they would perceive the NoCo and various communities within the NoCo?
6. How do you feel [local media orgs] in general represent the NoCo and various communities within the NoCo?