Vermont, what’s missing from local news?
In 2021, VTDigger had a newly doubled pandemic audience with heightened information needs, new appreciation for the power of responsive journalism and an opportunity to build out regional coverage of Northwestern Vermont, including Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle counties. We also knew the region’s local newspapers had declined in recent years. In order to serve the area, we felt we needed to understand the news and information needs of the people and ask how best to meet them.

In launching the Northwestern Vermont listening project, VTDigger recommitted to the communities we serve and set out to pilot new community engagement activities that would inform strategic decision making and the future of our news coverage in Northwestern Vermont and beyond.
In total, the listening project incorporated the **voices of 540 Vermonters**. That included **154 individuals who participated in one-on-one interviews** and **386 people** from Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle counties **who completed the online survey**.

In the interviews and online survey, participants responded to a series of qualitative questions, including:

- Where do you turn to for trusted information about the place you live?
- What issues are of greatest concern to you and your neighbors?
- How easy or hard is it to find information about these issues?
- What do you wish people knew about your community?
- What stories would you like to see told?
- Finish this sentence: I wish the local news would ...

VTDigger’s Director of Community Engagement, Libbie Sparadeo, recruited and paid five part-time ‘community ambassadors’ to assist the effort. The ambassadors, all selected for their deep connections to diverse communities, interviewed individuals and helped distribute the online survey to their social networks. The online survey was also disseminated via VTDigger’s website, email subscriber list and social media channels.

Community supporters and partner organizations serving historically excluded communities assisted with survey distribution. VTDigger offered a $10 gift card to each of those survey participants as an incentive.
We learned that newspapers are still the most popular medium that people use to access trusted news. However, many residents spoke of significant declines in local newspaper coverage that have affected towns, including Milton, St. Albans, Essex, Jericho, Enosburgh and Richford. In contrast, Seven Days, The Islander and The Charlotte News emerged as robust weekly newspapers with loyal followings.

Along with a patchwork of small local papers, people in the region relied heavily on VTDigger and Front Porch Forum. Vermont Public Radio was a strong source of news cited in Chittenden County, but was less prevalent in Franklin and Grand Isle counties. Facebook was often cited as well, especially by Franklin County residents.

Television news and other radio stations were less widespread than other types of local news sources, but were still significant.

From interviewees, it was clear that other strong sources of trusted news included town and tribal governments, school districts, local Facebook groups, advocates and service providers, professional groups, local independent listservs, and mutual aid and whisper networks.
What the people want

The number one request we heard was for **more local news coverage on the city and town levels**. Under this local news umbrella, requests mostly fell into two buckets of desired news coverage:

1) Politics, policy and accountability reporting about powerful people and institutions
2) Events, culture, features and human interest coverage on the hyper-local level

Northwestern Vermonters also wanted to see increased or continued emphasis on these types of information:

- **Watchdog and investigative reporting on the state level**
- **Positive, community-building news and stories**
- **Unbiased, timely news that is accurate and factual**
- **More diversity of perspectives and representation**, with an emphasis on hearing from those being directly impacted by issues

**Solutions, resources and educational content, as well as information about how to participate in civic life and make an impact**, including:

- Relevant daily resources, bridging the gap between people and opportunities
- Outcomes, upcoming decisions and how to participate in policy on town and state levels
- Understanding potential solutions, choices and who is responsible for change that is promised

Culturally informed news that serves and accurately represents Vermont’s historically excluded communities including Black people, Indigenous people, immigrants and refugees, and people with disabilities

Community participation in the creation of the news

"No one covers selectboard meetings, school board meetings or library meetings anymore. These used to be covered by local newspapers, but no one does it anymore. No one is fact-checking the information that people share on Front Porch Forum, so any report out on what happened at these meetings is opinion-based."

- **Interviewee, Williston**
Additional themes that stood out among participants’ responses were:

Barriers to accessing the platforms and formats currently utilized by Vermont media, including VTDigger.

For example, we heard:

English-only news excludes those who don’t speak the language.

Written, long-form journalism can exclude people with limited literacy and some people with disabilities.

Website and email platforms are not accessible to those without broadband access, elders and many recent immigrants and refugees.

Alternative format requests included lists, resource guides, bullet points, text/SMS news, audio and video content in different languages, and printed materials.

General distrust of reporters, especially among people of color and people with disabilities, due to chronic misrepresentation and underrepresentation of these communities by the press.

Feedback on newsroom practices and staffing, including requests for more diverse hiring and sourcing practices, valuing experienced journalists, more community participation in newsgathering, and using trauma-informed approaches with sources when appropriate.

“You don’t see media coverage about our Black and brown townspeople unless it's something negative, unless something bad has happened. The community needs to see that presence from the media outside of terrible incidents.”

– Interviewee, Winooski
We asked respondents what issues were of greatest concern to them and their communities. The top responses were different among our survey respondents compared to interviewees, although both groups cited public health and safety as top concerns.

This helps VTDigger understand what issues we need to focus on in order to serve the news needs of our current readers (survey respondents), as well as focus areas that are important to potential new readers (ambassador interviewees).

**Online survey**

1) Politics and policy  
2) Public health and safety  
3) Climate and the environment

**Interviewees**

1) Public health and safety  
2) Equity  
3) Housing

VTDigger’s Northwest Vermont community listening team. From left to right: Brittany Malik (Colchester), Jyll Allen (Essex), Libbie Sparadeo (Dir. Community Engagement), and Wiley Reading (Burlington)
Participants from all demographics strongly voiced the importance of hearing from people who are directly impacted by any topic that is a subject of news coverage.

Historically excluded groups said they would rather see more coverage of their communities included across all areas of regular reporting, rather than establishing separate sections like a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) Vermont beat.

VTDigger needs to consider barriers to accessing the news when it comes to language, format and platforms, as well as our newsgathering practices.

We documented distinct needs and requests from these historically excluded communities in the region:

- People with disabilities
- BIPOC Vermonters
- Refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers
- Migrant workers

However, there were some overlapping themes among these communities too. For example, we heard about the lack of accurate and proportionate representation in the news and mistrust of the press as a result. Among multilingual residents and people with disabilities, there were different barriers to accessing local news due to language, format and digital platform choices.

We also identified some themes from conservatives, such as perceptions of being excluded from major Vermont media sources and a sense that conservatives are painted with a broad brush by the press.

“Disabled people are covered as subjects, but rarely get to write the stories themselves. All the disabled people in my focus group said, ‘we’re never portrayed on the news, and when we are it’s inspiration porn or it’s all about how mentally ill people are violent.’”

- Jyll Allen, Community Ambassador
Next steps and recommendations
How we’re organizing our action steps

Already, the community listening data has surfaced actionable tips, informed newsroom conversations and led to the development of new source relationships.

In addition, we collected and crystallized dozens of community recommendations that emerged from the listening project. Though some recommendations fell outside our mission as a nonprofit civic news organization, many were concrete actionable steps that VTDigger is now invested in pursuing.

We sorted these recommendations into five buckets. Within those buckets identified, VTDigger sorted community recommendations into three categories:

1) What we’re already doing
2) What we’re committed to doing next
3) What’s on our wish list if resources allow
Local news

Publish more local and regional features, human interest stories, positive news and cultural content. Cover more local and regional news related to politics, public policy and accountability.

Diversity, equity and inclusion

Create more equity, inclusion and diversity among our staff, sources, story choices, mediums and reporting practices.

Community participation in the news

Greater community participation in the selection and creation of our news.

Community action, impact and resources

Provide more information about how readers can participate in decision-making processes and have an impact in their communities. Share solutions, practical resources and educational information.

Investigative reporting

Double down on investigative journalism.
## Local news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT WE’RE DOING</th>
<th>WHAT’S NEXT</th>
<th>WISH LIST</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publishing more local news</td>
<td>Publish more features and human interest stories</td>
<td>Build a searchable event calendar; publish municipal voter guides; increase coverage of Vermont’s history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In recent years, our team of regional reporters has grown to eight, including new positions dedicated to Franklin and Grand Isle counties; Rutland and Bennington counties; and Windsor and Windham counties</td>
<td>Ensure these stories cover a broad range of regions and identities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating regional sections of the VTDigger website</td>
<td>Create a new series focused on positive stories</td>
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<tr>
<td>New geographic verticals will help readers find information of local interest</td>
<td>Similar to “The Bright Side,” a series VTDigger published during the early days of Covid-19</td>
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<td>Partnering with local newspapers</td>
<td>Incorporate weather reporting</td>
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<tr>
<td>VTDigger is now providing its stories for free to community weeklies across the state</td>
<td>For VTDigger’s newsletters and website</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Invite readers to submit photos</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To share on VTDigger’s social media channels</td>
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## Diversity, equity and inclusion

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<tr>
<td><strong>Hiring more reporters from communities underrepresented in journalism</strong></td>
<td><strong>Establish a clear set of measurable expectations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Deliver news via WhatsApp, text and other platforms; explore different journalism formats, such as comics and illustrations.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>As well as multilingual reporters who can speak with sources in their first language</td>
<td>Around diverse and equitable news coverage year-round, not just on holidays and not focused on negative events</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Donating underwriting to BIPOC-owned businesses</strong></td>
<td><strong>Deepen sourcing strategies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Through a new Underwriting for Racial Equity program that allocates free digital advertising to BIPOC-owned businesses</td>
<td>To connect with community leaders outside the traditional halls of power</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Educate potential sources around ‘what to expect’</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>When interacting with journalists so that sources are participating in our reporting with full understanding and consent</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Explore the use of printed materials</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In order to serve multilingual and elder populations as well as those without reliable internet access</td>
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Community participation in the news

WHAT’S NEXT

Create more opportunities for reader participation

By revamping VTDigger’s opinion section and exploring new platforms for reader engagement

Build out a VTDigger community ambassador program

To strengthen connections between underrepresented communities and the newsroom

Community action, impact and resources

WHAT’S NEXT

Create standing “how-to-participate” explainers

And include “what you can do” information in stories to help readers understand the decision-making process and enable them to take part in it

Track progress of major policy initiatives

So that readers can understand what’s happened in the past and what’s to come

Launch a VTDigger jobs board

To connect people with work opportunities

WHAT’S NEXT

WISH LIST

Publicize and preview key meetings and events in advance; create a section dedicated to sharing volunteer opportunities; share information about essential resources, such as food, clinics and housing opportunities
## Investigative journalism

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<tr>
<td>Planning major “centerpiece” stories</td>
<td>Highlight VTDigger’s investigative journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To run every weekend and providing reporters time and resources to deliver more ambitious journalism</td>
<td>Make it easier for readers to find investigations and their impact</td>
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“I wish the local news would... do this more!”

– Ambassador interviewee, Burlington