

# STATEHOUSE JOURNALISM IN TRANSITION

## INSIGHTS FROM OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON



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# Executive Summary

As state governments increasingly serve as both staging grounds for national policies and potential havens from federal influence, the importance of statehouse journalism has grown. This case study of Olympia, Washington, examines whether journalists are prepared to meet this need. Like press corps in other states, Olympia's statehouse reporters face mounting financial pressures, rapid technological changes, and shifting audience expectations—all reshaping how they cover state government. Through interviews with current and former statehouse reporters and a comprehensive content analysis of news pertaining to the 2023 legislative session, this study reveals the strengths and limitations of Washington's state-government reporting, offering insight into the challenges and opportunities facing statehouse journalism today. Key findings include:

## **1) A shrinking statehouse press corps:**

Since 2000, the number of full-time statehouse reporters in Olympia has more than halved, leaving fewer journalists dedicated to covering state government. This reduction leads to significant challenges, including a lack of institutional knowledge, weakened connections to key political figures, and reduced capacity for investigative and in-depth reporting, especially into the influence of increasingly powerful interest groups and lobbyists. Growingly, coverage is concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural areas underserved and raising concerns about the press' ability to reflect diverse regional perspectives.

## **2) Challenges with audience engagement:**

Many reporters note that public interest in state-government news is limited to a dedicated minority, leading to challenges in making policy coverage compelling for a broader audience. This raises questions about how to engage readers who might not find traditional government reporting relevant to their lives. This challenge is amplified by economic pressures on newsrooms, which must balance public service with financial viability.

## **3) A new generation of state-government reporters:**

A younger, predominantly female group of journalists now constitutes Olympia's full-time press corps, bringing fresh interest in how policies impact citizens' lives rather than focusing solely on political strategy. This shift is balanced against constraints in time and resources, especially during the fast-paced legislative session, where investigative and long-form reporting becomes more challenging. Cross-organizational collaborations help manage some of these limitations.

## **4) An increased role for specialized and general reporters:**

Reporters specializing in fields like education, environmental policy, and health are contributing increasingly to statehouse coverage, bringing expertise that broadens the scope and depth of reporting. However, general-assignment reporters frequently are tasked with covering "hot-button" issues like crime and identity politics, a focus that sometimes fuels divisive culture wars. These reporters, due to time constraints, also tend to rely on fewer sources.

## **5) An expansion of news offerings:**

Local and national initiatives have diversified Olympia's news landscape, introducing newsletters, podcasts, and university programs producing their own coverage. National, primarily nonprofit, initiatives dedicated to state-government reporting also are adding breadth to coverage in Olympia. Yet, the financial sustainability of these efforts remains uncertain, raising questions about the longevity of such expanded reporting.

The findings from this case study are relevant for other states, as the challenges faced by statehouse journalists in Washington are not unique to Olympia. Across the country, state governments are increasingly important centers of policymaking, yet many news organizations face struggles with shrinking press corps, audience engagement issues, and financial pressures. Understanding how these dynamics play out in Washington can offer lessons for other states grappling with the same trends. As states continue to shape policy with significant consequences, the findings of this study highlight the need for more research and innovative solutions to support and sustain statehouse journalism nationwide.

# 1. Introduction

Reporting on state governments has never been more critical, yet it is also more vulnerable than ever. While national politics often dominate headlines, the decisions made in state capitals—where policy experimentation can thrive and where states sometimes provide refuge from federal mandates—have an immediate and lasting impact on the daily lives of citizens.<sup>1</sup> State governments control key issues like health-care access, education standards, taxes, criminal justice policies, and infrastructure—matters that shape communities in profound and direct ways. Unlike national coverage, which tends to focus on broader, often abstract topics, statehouse journalism digs into the specifics of how laws are crafted, debated, and enacted within a particular region. The consequences of these decisions can be felt immediately—whether through changes to local school systems, new tax policies affecting family budgets, or transportation bills altering daily commutes.

Despite its vital importance, state-government reporting remains largely unexplored as an area of research. Few studies have examined how statehouse news is produced, how it is consumed, and how it shapes public discourse and democratic accountability.<sup>2</sup> This gap is troubling: without a deeper understanding of statehouse journalism, it becomes harder to grasp how it can serve as an effective safeguard of democracy. Statehouse journalism is especially crucial as a mechanism for investigating the growing influence of powerful interest groups and lobbyists in state governments.<sup>3</sup> The absence of this research leaves us with an incomplete picture of how state-level reporting fosters transparency, holds

government officials accountable, and checks the outsized influence of special interests—especially at a time when shrinking newsroom resources and increasing pressures on journalists threaten the very existence of this crucial coverage.

This report seeks to address these gaps by examining state-government reporting in Olympia, Washington. Through interviews with both current and former statehouse reporters, alongside a comprehensive content analysis of news coverage related to the 2024 legislative session, this study explores how staffing levels have evolved, the opportunities and challenges journalists face, and how these changes affect the stories that get told—and, just as importantly, those that do not. By investigating the dynamics of statehouse reporting in Washington, the study highlights the ways in which resource constraints and evolving newsroom structures influence the depth and breadth of coverage, ultimately shaping the public's access to information and, by extension, their democratic engagement.

While this case study focuses on Washington, its findings have broad implications for other states facing similar challenges. As resources for statehouse coverage continue to decline, this research offers a baseline for future studies and provides methods that can be applied to examine statehouse journalism in other regions. Ultimately, the goal is not just to fill a gap in the literature but also to spark a larger conversation about the future of state-level reporting—and its indispensable role in sustaining a healthy democracy.

## 2. Data and Methods

This report looks at how state-government reporting has changed over time using Washington as a case study. Washington's statehouse press corps is moderately sized compared to other states: It's not as big as those in places like California, Texas, or New York, but it's larger than those in smaller states such as Alaska, North Dakota, and Delaware.<sup>4</sup> This makes Washington a good choice for study, as it helps avoid extreme cases on either end of the spectrum. Politically, Washington's legislature is fairly balanced, with 59% Democrats and 41% Republicans, unlike states dominated by a single party. This balance means the findings are more likely to apply to other states, not just those with Democratic majorities. Adding further balance is Washington's news landscape, which includes reporters from both liberal and conservative areas, such as Seattle and Spokane, respectively. The state also is experiencing changes seen across the country, like the use of student interns, journalists funded by programs like Report for America, and new (digital) media ventures. While no state perfectly represents all others, Washington is a helpful starting point to explore how state-government reporting is evolving.

To understand the evolution of state-government reporting, we conducted in-depth interviews with both current and former statehouse reporters. These interviews provided insights into the changes that have occurred in the composition and practices of the press corps. The discussions explored topics such as the challenges reporters face in covering the statehouse, the impact of new media ventures, and how economic pressures have reshaped the way journalists approach their work. Additionally, the interviews highlighted the strategies journalists use to navigate these challenges and the opportunities they see for improving state-government coverage. (For a list of the interviewees, see Appendix A.)

For the content analysis, we included all stories produced by news organizations that had a full-time statehouse reporter during the 2023 legislative session. This comprehensive approach captures the entirety of state-government coverage from these core outlets, which represent the primary news sources for Olympia. Additionally, we gathered articles produced by

other reporters at the same news organizations, such as specialists covering topics like education or the environment, and general-assignment reporters who occasionally cover the statehouse. This broader inclusion helps ensure a complete view of state-government reporting, reflecting how various types of journalists contribute to the overall coverage. The content analysis is particularly useful for identifying patterns in coverage, such as the most frequently reported topics, the diversity of sources cited, and how the stories balance the daily legislative process with issues of broader public interest. It also helps to identify gaps in coverage, particularly those areas that may be underserved or underreported. (For a list of the news organizations in the content analysis, and more details regarding coding and analysis, see Appendix B.)

To count the number of statehouse reporters, we focused on those who were based in the Olympia statehouse on a full-time basis during the 2024 legislative session. This approach excludes reporters who work remotely, who cover the statehouse only occasionally, or who are student interns or freelancers. Using this criterion allows us to specifically capture the core group of reporters who are deeply embedded in the day-to-day legislative process—those whose presence is most crucial to ongoing statehouse coverage and whose roles have been increasingly questioned as newsrooms undergo transformations. This method also allows us to make comparisons over time. We used 2000 as a baseline year for these comparisons, asking longtime former reporters to estimate the number of full-time statehouse reporters at that time. The year 2000 was chosen because it represents a period before the technological and financial shifts that significantly impacted the media landscape, providing a useful point of reference for the evolution of the statehouse press corps. We cross-referenced our numbers with available reports to ensure accuracy.<sup>5</sup> While we applied this strict definition of “statehouse reporter” for counting purposes, for our interviews, we expanded the pool to include as many reporters as possible, including freelancers and those who did not meet the full-time, Olympia-based reporter criteria.

The statehouse press corps is in constant flux, and this report captures a snapshot of the state of play based on interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024, along with a content analysis of the 2023 legislative session. Given the fluid nature of the media landscape, some reporters have moved to different roles or employers since the time of the interviews. Where relevant, we note both the

reporter's position at the time of the interview and their current employer to provide the most accurate and up-to-date picture of the statehouse reporting landscape. This dynamic nature underscores the challenges and transitions within the field, highlighting the ongoing shifts in how state government is covered and by whom.

## 3. Key Findings

### 3.1 A Shrinking Statehouse Press Corps

Since 2000, the number of full-time reporters covering state government has dropped dramatically. In Olympia, the statehouse press corps has shrunk from 19 full-time journalists to just eight during the most recent legislative session.



Much of this drop has come from newspapers and wire services. For example, *The Seattle Times* once had three full-time statehouse reporters but now has only one.<sup>6</sup> The Associated Press, which also had three reporters in its Olympia bureau, hasn't had a dedicated statehouse reporter in recent legislative sessions.<sup>7</sup> McClatchy, which owns *The Olympian*, *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, *The Bellingham Herald*, and *The Tri-City Herald*, used to have one reporter from each paper covering the legislature; *The Olympian*, prior to being acquired by McClatchy in 2007, had two full-time reporters.<sup>8</sup> Now, only one reporter is responsible for covering state-government news for all four papers.<sup>9</sup> Other newspapers, like *The Columbian* in Vancouver, *The Longview Daily News*, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, used to have their own reporters in Olympia but no longer do.<sup>10</sup> A few publications have kept their staffing levels steady: For instance, both *The Spokesman-Review* and *The Everett Daily Herald* have maintained a single full-time reporter covering the legislature for years, though it appears the *Herald* will not have one in the upcoming session.<sup>11</sup>

Staffing from broadcast media has always been more limited. Among television stations, only KING 5 News has a full-time statehouse reporter, who has held this role since 2007.<sup>12</sup> In radio, the Northwest News Network, which serves public

radio stations in Washington and Oregon, has reduced its statehouse team from two reporters to just one.<sup>13</sup>

This isn't just about fewer reporters—it's also about losing years of experience and the knowledge that comes with it. Today, full-time statehouse reporters in Olympia have a median of only two years of experience, compared to 17 years for those who have left. Skilled new journalists must quickly get up to speed on the complex world of state policy and legislative procedures. As one reporter described it, starting out is like a "baptism by fire"<sup>14</sup>; another admitted that everyone was "all kind of learning" and trying to regain "the institutional knowledge" that has disappeared.<sup>15</sup> While colleagues and peers can offer some support, the job is still daunting: The 2023 legislative session alone involved 1,768 bills, 147 lawmakers, hundreds of hearings, 1,059 lobbyists, and numerous PR professionals, all fighting to influence outcomes.<sup>16</sup>



Another loss is the presence of columnists who once added depth and perspective to legislative coverage. Newspapers like *The Seattle Times*, *The Tacoma News Tribune*, and *The Spokesman-Review* previously featured columnists who offered analysis, context, and informed opinions that helped readers make sense of the complexities of state government.<sup>17</sup> Their voices served as a bridge between the intricacies of policymaking and the concerns of the public, providing a unique blend of storytelling and commentary. These columnists also had the ability to write pieces that captured attention and provoked reactions from politicians, often sparking public debate or influencing the broader political narrative. Today,

this form of coverage is largely absent, leaving a gap in both accountability journalism and the nuanced interpretation of legislative actions.

The shrinking press corps is impacting how the state government gets covered. The capacity to conduct in-depth investigative reporting has been weakened, limiting the public's ability to hold government officials accountable and to understand the full impact of legislative actions. Full-time statehouse reporters published 10 investigative stories during the 2023 session.<sup>18</sup> Many noted that their inability to do more stemmed largely from time and resource constraints. Because most journalists are their employer's sole statehouse reporter, they "have to drop everything whenever some breaking news [happens] or when the governor calls a press conference."<sup>19</sup> Another explained:

The way that my job is structured, at least at this point in it, I don't think that I would really take on an investigation on my own unless I had like a team...or somebody to work on it with. Because doing an investigation story by myself in this bureau, I just think [that] I would lose it. I think I might lose my mind a little bit, sitting with something and trying to carry that and keep the momentum up on something as lofty as an investigation that a lot of times is rooted in something that happened a long time ago or something that's not as like there's an event happening or, you know, some sort of news peg.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, having fewer staff makes it harder to maintain the relationships that reporters need to have with key stakeholders, such as legislators, agency heads, and advocacy groups. These stakeholders vary in the extent to which they communicate with the press, with some readily sharing updates and providing interviews, while others are more guarded or selective in their interactions.<sup>21</sup> This inconsistency can make it challenging for reporters to generate balanced and comprehensive coverage. Just as importantly, it limits their ability to access internal information or land exclusive interviews. As a result, journalists often need to work harder to build trust and establish communication channels to ensure they can deliver accurate and timely information to the public. This is especially true for newer reporters, who note that "it takes a longer time to build rapport and trust" and for

people to realize "this isn't just an intern" but that "this person is our local reporter."<sup>22</sup>

Another consequence of a shrinking press corps is the concentration of coverage in urban centers. As news organizations cut back, they increasingly focus resources on areas like Seattle and its surrounding areas, leaving rural and underserved communities without consistent statehouse coverage. In the most recent session, issues like housing development—a key concern in cities and suburbs—received almost eight times as much news coverage as stories dealing with agricultural policy. The result is a growing information divide, where rural communities may be left in the dark about critical state-government decisions that affect their daily lives. Or, as one reporter suggested, it may be that legislators from those regions can send press releases to small newspapers in these areas, which they will run. That, he says, "is probably a longer-term danger for their community."<sup>23</sup>

### **3.2 Challenges with Audience Engagement**

Many reporters have noticed a limited public interest in state-government news, often feeling that coverage primarily appeals to a small, dedicated audience. While a few citizens are deeply engaged with legislative matters, many appear to pay little attention to state government. This can be challenging for journalists who are committed to informing the public and wish their work could reach and resonate with a broader audience.

One longtime reporter described how state capitals often get overlooked, likening them to "flyover territory" in the news landscape.<sup>24</sup> People who follow political news tend to focus on Washington, D.C., which feels almost like a reality TV show. "It's sort of like watching *Desperate Housewives* or something," the reporter noted. "It's a shitshow and it's kind of interesting to see what's happening." On the local level, civically minded individuals care about town or city politics because it directly affects their community. But state governments often fall into a middle ground that's harder to engage with. As the reporter put it:

Covering a legislative session is a little bit like covering a sporting event where nobody knows the rules of the game and...



the players on the field. Everytime you go to report on the game, you're having to remind people: Here are the rules and here are the players, and here's why you should care. It's a really heavy [lift]. And that's before you've talked about what's actually happening.

This problem is not new. A reporter who first came to Olympia in 1991 explained that since day one there has been "a lot of striving to figure out how do I make this [coverage] not boring?"<sup>25</sup> Legislative activity, by its nature, tends to be technical and procedural. The journey of a bill from introduction to becoming law involves multiple stages, including committee hearings, debates, amendments, and votes in both legislative chambers. Each of these stages has specific rules and protocols that can be difficult to follow without a deep understanding of the system. Legislation also often addresses highly technical subjects, such as tax codes, environmental regulations, healthcare policies, or infrastructure planning. These topics require specialized knowledge to fully grasp the implications of proposed changes or how new laws will be implemented.

While keeping people interested in state government has always been tough, many journalists believe it's gotten even harder in recent years. They point to growing political disillusionment and the explosion of media options that make tuning out state news all too easy. One reporter described how trust in politics is at an all-time low, a reality that can feel distant when you're "in this building [the statehouse] surrounded by lobbyists and politicians and staffers who... live and breathe this 24/7."<sup>26</sup> Add to that the endless choices of what to read or watch, and it's no wonder people skip over stories about state policy. "There are so many things out there that are more interesting," one journalist said, "than a bill slowly moving through the state senate."<sup>27</sup>

To tackle these challenges, nearly all state-government reporters have moved away from what they call "turn-of-the-screw" stories. One journalist explained that she and her colleagues used to write detailed accounts about a bill's

every move—passing out of committee, heading to the rules committee, then waiting to come to the floor.<sup>28</sup> "That approach assumed people were following along with every single update and knew all the ins and outs of the process," she said. "I don't think any of us actually write that way anymore. And that's good because it left readers out if they missed a prior story." This older style of reporting worked better when newsrooms were fully staffed, but now, with fewer reporters and dwindling public interest, it's both impractical and fails to capture the audience's attention. As another reporter put it, "People just want to know what a bill does."<sup>29</sup>

Now, reporters are aiming for fewer stories with greater relevance. Instead of covering every step of the legislative process, they focus on key moments—like when a bill is introduced and again when it passes, highlighting the changes it brings.<sup>30</sup> This shift also involves asking, "Does anyone outside this building care about this?"<sup>31</sup> and exploring how it impacts everyday lives.



While the general public may be disengaged, there are dedicated audiences who closely follow state-house coverage. This includes politicians, lobbyists, and those whose work is directly impacted by policy changes—like school administrators and advocacy groups. And although their numbers are relatively small, there are also everyday citizens who care. "It's really gratifying to hear from those people," one reporter remarked. "Those are the people you want."



Yet a tension remains between what journalists feel is important and what they think will catch the audience's attention. One reporter referred to this as a "riddle" he can never quite solve.<sup>32</sup> He sometimes feels that the most impactful stories go unnoticed by the public. For instance, an investigation he conducted into lobbyists' influence led to changes in ethics rules, but he wagered that if people outside the capitol were surveyed, only one or two out of ten would even know about the story. Still, he found solace in knowing that "the people who write the rules paid attention, and that's a kind of success."

The challenge is particularly evident in coverage of the state budget. One experienced reporter estimated that budget stories receive “about 50 percent of the coverage they used to.” He described the budget as a “dull but important” topic that requires extensive knowledge to uncover interesting stories, yet even seasoned editors often shy away from budget pieces.

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### 3.3 A New Generation of State-Government Reporters

A new wave of state-government reporters is reshaping Olympia’s press corps. Predominantly young and female, these journalists are breaking away from traditional coverage that prioritizes political strategy and power plays. Instead, they are driven by a desire to make policy reporting more relevant to everyday people, digging into how laws passed in the statehouse impact citizens’ lives. This shift marks an evolution in statehouse journalism, yet it comes with its own set of challenges, as these reporters must navigate demanding workloads, limited resources, and the fast-paced nature of legislative sessions.

Of the eight full-time statehouse reporters in the most recent legislative session, seven were women. This marks a significant reversal from the past, when state-government reporting was largely a male-dominated arena. As one interviewee wryly observed, these roles were typically filled by “55-year-old men who’d been doing this forever.”<sup>36</sup> Back in the 2000s, spotting a female reporter in the press corps was a rarity—there was often only one.<sup>37</sup> Today, the press corps is not only predominantly female, but also much younger. Many are recent college graduates, bringing a new generation’s curiosity and drive to the challenging world of statehouse journalism.

Youth doesn’t mean a lack of skills or knowledge. Many of these reporters honed their skills through internships, often working as state-government reporters while still in college. The majority also hold degrees in journalism, giving them a strong foundation in reporting, ethics, and storytelling. The relative youth of this group, of course, reflects the exodus of more seasoned journalists over the years, but the new cohort is not unprepared. In fact, many arrive in Olympia having gained practical experience early on and understanding the demands of statehouse reporting from the outset.

This new generation of statehouse reporters is eager to break away from the traditional “insider-baseball” style of political coverage, which often

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emphasizes legislative maneuvering and insider drama that primarily interests those within the political bubble. Instead, they aim to produce journalism that highlights how policies directly impact the daily lives of ordinary people. One reporter emphasized, “Readers don’t necessarily care about the process as much as how the policy will affect their lives.”<sup>38</sup> Another noted:

“I think it’s really easy when you’re in this building and you’re kind of surrounded by lobbyists and politicians and staffers who kind of live and breathe this 24/7 to be like, “Oh my God, committee vote on this, so important.” But if you’re walking down the street, even a couple blocks north in downtown Olympia, most people are going to be like, “What? Tell me why this actually matters to me.”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, a journalist pointed out that many people “don’t really care about...in-the-weeds arguments” unless they involve serious ethical misconduct.<sup>40</sup> This shift in focus reflects a commitment to better serve readers by covering stories that connect to their lives, rather than amplifying political squabbles or policy minutiae that have little relevance outside of the Capitol. Despite their commitment to producing people-centered journalism, these statehouse reporters

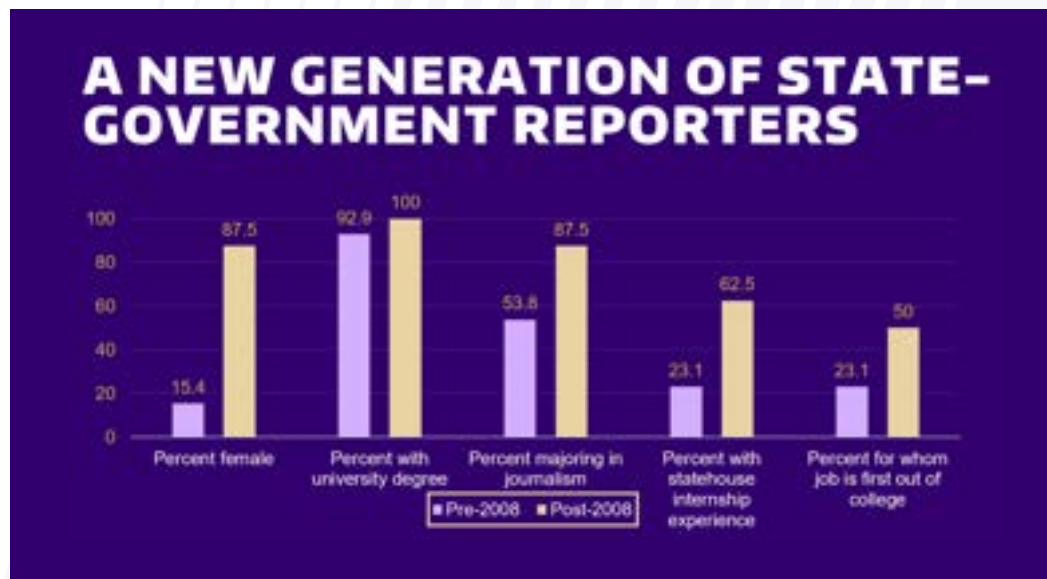
often face significant constraints that make it difficult to realize this vision. A key challenge is the relentless pace of the legislative session, which leaves little room for in-depth, human-focused stories. “During [the] session, it’s really hard to do anything that’s like long form,” one reporter said. “It’s almost impossible to sit with something for too long.”<sup>41</sup> Tight deadlines and the constant churn of new bills often force reporters to produce quick-turn stories rather than deep dives. Even when a topic develops over time and allows for more thorough reporting, there’s always the risk of sudden legislative action that can derail coverage plans. The pressure to meet daily deadlines often means focusing on brief, rapidly assembled pieces rather than the more extensive, in-depth projects many would like to pursue.

Another challenge reporters face in implementing a more people-centered approach is the institutional nature of statehouse reporting, which often relies heavily on sources like politicians, lobbyists, and advocacy organizations. One journalist reflected on the difficulty of breaking out of this traditional mold: “Statehouse reporting historically has not been [focused on people]; it’s been very institutional. Here, I feel more confined to...institutional reporting.”<sup>42</sup> While other jobs might allow more flexibility to pursue stories rooted in community perspectives, the demands and structure of statehouse journalism in Olympia make this difficult. The reporter described how, instead of having time to connect deeply with communities and conduct on-the-ground reporting, the reality often stops short: “I talk to advocates, and then I don’t get to the second degree... it becomes I talk to the advocate. And that’s it.” This approach can feel restrictive, as it prevents stories from fully capturing the impact of policies on the lives of ordinary people.

Despite these challenges, reporters are not without resources or agency. They are finding ways to share knowledge and manage workloads through occasional cross-organizational collaborations. Such partnerships enable journalists to pool their expertise and time,

fostering a more comprehensive approach to statehouse reporting. For instance, one collaboration uncovered how lawmakers utilize “legislative privilege” to exempt embarrassing content from public records, highlighting a significant issue of transparency in government.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, a previous joint effort documented the “revolving door” between state public service and lobbying, shedding light on potential conflicts of interest and fostering a greater understanding of the relationships between lawmakers and lobbyists.<sup>44</sup> These collaborations illustrate how reporters are leveraging collective efforts to enhance their coverage and bring vital issues to the forefront, even within the constraints of their daily responsibilities.

In addition to formal collaborations, informal mentoring and support networks among reporters play a crucial role in navigating the



challenges of statehouse journalism. Every current reporter emphasized the supportive atmosphere within the press corps, where colleagues share knowledge to help each other succeed. This environment stands in contrast to the more competitive atmosphere that characterized the press corps of the past, as described by nearly all former reporters. As one reporter noted, “We don’t all need to write about a bill clearing a committee in the same way, on the same day, at the same time.”<sup>45</sup> This kind of pressure, they argued, sometimes compelled journalists to match competitors rather than branch out into unique, important stories. Today, the emphasis is much more on trying not to duplicate each other.

### 3.4 An Increased Role for Specialist and General Reporters

About one-third of state-government news coverage during the 2023 legislative session came from people other than statehouse reporters. Specialist reporters, who often cover specific beats like education, housing, or the environment, bring valuable expertise that broadens the scope and depth of reporting. Their knowledge introduces new perspectives and sources into statehouse coverage. On the other hand, general-assignment reporters—often called upon for “spot” reporting—add variety but face the challenge of covering complex state issues without the same depth of statehouse experience. Increasingly, these general-assignment reporters are being asked to tackle high-profile, “hot-button” topics like crime and identity politics, issues that often inflame culture wars. This shift shapes what issues get reported and how they’re presented.

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Reporters from specialized beats produced nearly a third of all housing coverage and more than half of the stories on education and environmental topics. These areas often demand in-depth knowledge, making it advantageous for journalists familiar with the subject matter to cover relevant legislative developments. One statehouse reporter explained, “If there is a proposal or an issue that a beat reporter would have a lot more firsthand knowledge of, then it makes sense to have a conversation about who’s going to cover this or how we are going to cover it.”<sup>46</sup> She highlighted an example from her newspaper, where the investigative team, after completing a series on special-education schools and inadequate state oversight, continued to follow and report on related legislative proposals.

Reporters from other beats not only cover a broader range of topics but also bring distinct sourcing practices to their state-government reporting. They are twice as likely to include voices from civil society—such as non-profits,

activists, and community organizations—in their stories. This sourcing diversity is crucial because government news, whether at the state or national level, often relies heavily on the perspectives of elected officials. By incorporating a wider array of voices, these journalists help provide a more comprehensive view of how policies impact various communities and give space to viewpoints that might otherwise be overlooked.

Specialist reporters also contribute a unique style of reporting that enriches statehouse coverage. Approximately 40 percent of the stories they produce during the legislative session fall into the category of what scholars term “contextual journalism.”<sup>47</sup> These pieces go beyond simply recounting recent events, such as press conferences or the passage of bills. Instead, they aim to illuminate broader trends and help audiences understand the nuances

of complicated policy issues. Notably, specialist reporters are almost twice as likely to produce these contextual stories compared to statehouse reporters. This difference may stem from the fact that specialist reporters often don’t face the same deadline pressures to

cover the policy process and can dedicate more time to exploring the deeper implications of legislative developments. By providing this kind of in-depth analysis, specialist reporters enable readers to grasp not only what is happening but also why it matters and how it fits into larger societal shifts.

This practice of involving specialist reporters in statehouse coverage isn’t new. Several longtime statehouse reporters noted that beat reporters

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have contributed to legislative reporting for decades.<sup>48</sup> However, as different beats that are being emphasized today, the areas of focus change. Beats like the environment and housing have grown significantly in recent years as public

concern about climate change and affordable housing has surged.<sup>49</sup> These issues have become central topics in state-government reporting, reflecting shifting societal priorities and the increasing complexity of the policy landscape.

General-assignment reporters also play a significant, if sometimes less encouraging, role in statehouse coverage. They are responsible for producing just under a fifth of all news stories from the 2023 legislative session. However, their reporting often centers on “hot-button” issues, which can skew the focus of coverage. Topics like crime or dramatic human interest stories tend to dominate their assignments, sometimes at the expense of broader legislative issues. For

“Hot-button” issues can grab audiences’ attention, but they can skew coverage and inflame culture wars.

instance, changes to Washington state’s DUI blood alcohol limit became a headline-grabbing topic, generating considerable media attention despite the bill having little chance of advancing. Protests about the passage of a bill providing protections for trans people generated similar coverage. These assignments reflect a tendency to gravitate toward attention-grabbing stories, and sometimes in ways that inflame culture wars.

General-assignment reporters also tend to rely on fewer sources than their statehouse or specialist counterparts. This limitation is likely tied to the rapid pace at which they are expected to produce stories, often turning around a piece in a single day with little time to dig deep or consult multiple sources. Additionally, it reflects the reality that general-assignment reporters may not have an extensive, well-developed network of insider contacts that statehouse veterans or beat specialists can tap into. Yet, despite these constraints, they still find ways to diversify statehouse coverage. In fact, general-assignment reporters are

twice as likely to feature civil-society voices, such as activists and nonprofit leaders, compared to their statehouse colleagues. This sourcing choice introduces perspectives that are often missing from the government-dominated reporting landscape, showcasing a unique way that general-assignment reporters enrich public discourse.

Another indication of the tight time constraints general-assignment reporters face is evident in the nature of the stories they produce. Nearly three-quarters of their work falls into the category of “conventional” reporting, which focuses on immediate events and adheres to the classic who-what-where-when-why structure. These stories are typically centered on recent developments, such as legislative debates or policy announcements, rather than offering the in-depth analysis or trend-focused narratives characteristic of the “contextual” journalism produced by specialist reporters. The emphasis on quick-turnaround, event-driven coverage reflects the challenges general-assignment reporters encounter when balancing the demands of speed with the aspiration to provide comprehensive, meaningful reporting.

## WHO COVERS THE STATEHOUSE?

■ Core statehouse reporters ■ Other-beat reporters ■ Generalist reporters ■ Other



### 3.5 An Expansion of News Offerings

In recent years, Olympia's news ecosystem has become more diverse, thanks to a wave of local and national initiatives that have expanded the scope of state-government coverage. New offerings, including newsletters, podcasts, and university-led reporting projects, have created fresh opportunities for the public to stay informed. At the national level, organizations focused on state-government journalism have also contributed to this broadened landscape, bringing additional resources and attention to the statehouse beat. However, despite this promising expansion, the financial viability of many of these initiatives remains uncertain, casting doubt on whether these gains in coverage will endure in the long term.

One new addition to Olympia's evolving news landscape is *The Washington Observer*, a political newsletter founded and published by a seasoned journalist with decades of experience covering the state capital. *The Washington Observer* focuses on the politics, policies, and key figures of Washington State, emphasizing the influence of money and power on government and legislative processes.<sup>50</sup> It offers a mix of in-depth analyses and timely news updates, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of state governance. The newsletter has performed well enough that the founder was able to hire an additional reporter in 2023, allowing for more coverage. While some content is available for free, full access often requires a subscription, reflecting the newsletter's aim to deliver high-value, insider perspectives to statehouse insiders.

*Cascade PBS*, formerly known as *Crosscut*, is a Seattle-based online news site that emphasizes analytical reporting on state politics.<sup>51</sup> Since its inception in 2007, it has undergone several transformations, evolving from a commercial startup to a nonprofit and eventually merging with the local PBS station. This trajectory reflects both its resilience in the media landscape and the ongoing challenges of establishing a sustainable business model. With a dedicated full-time statehouse reporter, Cascade PBS aims to illuminate how policy decisions affect everyday citizens, prioritizing substance over event coverage. Most reporting usually takes the form of written text but the organization has experimented with podcasts in recent years.

University students interning at the statehouse make vital contributions to Olympia's media landscape. The University of Washington sends about four students each year, while Washington State University typically sends two.<sup>52</sup> These interns report for various state news outlets, including The Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, which distributes their stories to member newspapers, many of which are rural weeklies lacking dedicated political reporters. Although student internships in Olympia have existed for decades—and the overall number of interns has declined—these students still deliver essential coverage and acquire valuable skills that enhance their appeal to future employers in journalism.<sup>53</sup> In the 2023 session, student reporters accounted for just under 8 percent of all statehouse coverage.

*[un]Divided*, a self-described “center-right” podcast and YouTube program, offers what it calls “political coverage for the anti-fringe,” often focusing on “hot-button” issues like homelessness, crime and education.<sup>54</sup> Hosted by a former Seattle television news reporter, the show primarily emphasizes commentary and incorporates stories from individuals impacted by government decisions. In the most recent election, the host advocated for several conservative causes.<sup>55</sup> The podcast has grown since its founding in 2021 and now features daily live shows. Supported through Patreon, the podcast relies on listener contributions and advertisements to sustain its operations.

An additional local trend is the expansion of Washington state's public affairs network, *TVW*, providing unfiltered, gavel-to-gavel coverage of state-government proceedings, much like C-SPAN does at the national level. Founded in 1993, *TVW* broadcasts live and recorded sessions of the Washington State Legislature, public-policy discussions, Supreme Court hearings, and various state-agency meetings. Nearly all current and former statehouse reporters noted that the existence of this coverage makes it easier for them to track the legislative process and political developments in Olympia, especially via a daily email that highlights upcoming hearings.

One recent proposal was shelved before getting off the ground, highlighting the difficulty with the economics of new models. In September 2024, the Washington State Association of Broadcasters

and the Allied Daily Newspapers of Washington announced they would be opening a news bureau tasked with providing comprehensive coverage for both broadcast and print outlets across the state.<sup>56</sup> The bureau was expected to have four full-time reporters, producing stories in broadcast, print, and digital formats for members of the two groups. What made this bureau particularly promising is that member organizations will be able to request coverage of specific stories, potentially bringing more attention to overlooked issues—especially those important to rural communities. However, the funding for the initiative failed to materialize when the main funding source (the Washington State Association of Broadcasters) declined to underwrite the bureau and its news director.<sup>57</sup>

While some initiatives do not focus exclusively on statehouse reporting, they nonetheless play an essential role in covering state-government issues. InvestigateWest, founded in 2009 by veteran Seattle journalists, is one such example. Its recent stories include an investigation into delays in Washington’s inmate release process, which cost taxpayers millions, and an analysis of how “constitutional sheriffs” in rural Washington challenge state authority.<sup>58</sup> InvestigateWest also examined issues around independent election mapmaking. By partnering with local outlets and offering free republication, it helps ensure essential accountability coverage statewide.

Some developments in Washington’s statehouse media landscape are part of broader national trends in state-level journalism. One example is the *Washington State Standard*, a nonprofit news outlet launched in 2023 as part of *States Newsroom*, a national network of organizations committed to providing state-level coverage. With three full-time reporters covering Washington state government, the *Standard* conceives of itself as providing a daily flow of political and policy information, which it makes freely available to all news organizations. It embraces the “turn-of-the-screw” or “process” reporting that many other outlets are jettisoning, focusing on the intricacies of legislative processes and the implications of policy decisions for everyday citizens. This stems from its founder’s belief that citizens benefit not only from long-form, investigative journalism but also shorter articles that explain “what the debate is in the legislature, what the governor is doing... and how it all ties together on a daily basis.”<sup>59</sup>

Another key trend in addressing the challenges of statehouse reporting is the *Report for America* (RFA) initiative. RFA places emerging journalists in local newsrooms to bolster coverage of critical issues, with a particular emphasis on state and local government reporting. It provides funding for part of a reporter’s salary for three years, with the goal that news organizations will be able to sustain the position financially by the end of that period.<sup>60</sup> In Washington, *Report for America* has funded a state-government reporter at the *Spokesman-Review*.

*Axios Local Seattle*, part of the national Axios network, adapts the site’s signature format of concise, bite-sized stories for a Seattle audience. One of its reporters is a former statehouse reporter who, while no longer based full-time in Olympia, continues to cover state government in her new role.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the site’s editorial leadership includes the former Associated Press (AP) bureau chief from Olympia, bringing deep institutional knowledge of state politics to the team.<sup>62</sup> *Axios’* approach is designed to appeal to younger, urban readers, offering quick, digestible summaries of news with an emphasis on clarity and relevance. The focus on brevity aligns with *Axios’* goal of providing news for busy readers who want to stay informed but may not have time for long-form pieces. Through this format, *Axios Local Seattle* seeks to carve out a niche in the state-government reporting landscape, blending the rapid-fire nature of digital news with the insights that come from veteran reporters familiar with Olympia.

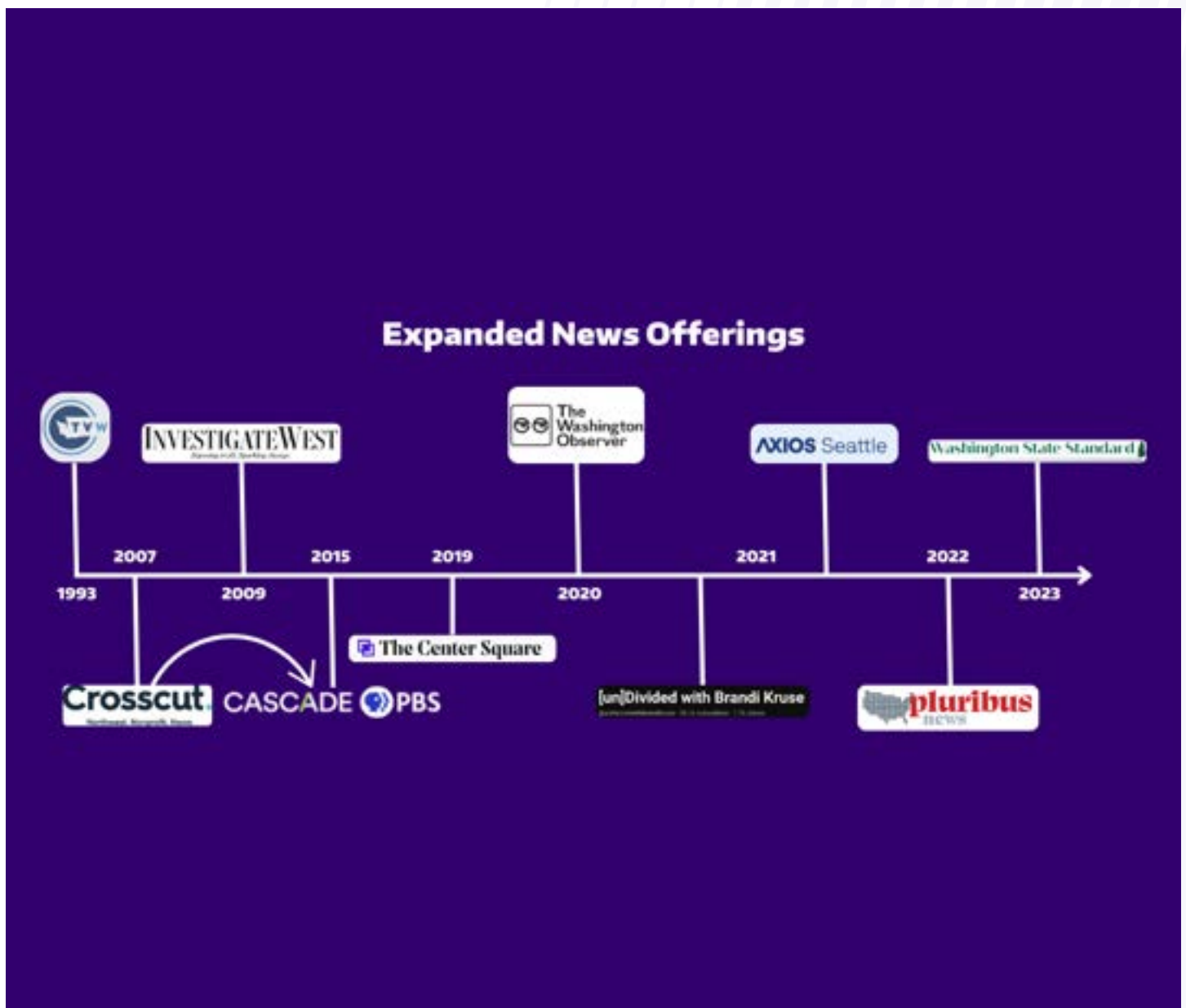
*Pluribus News* is a digital media outlet that focuses on state-level public policy, aiming to illuminate how legislative trends in individual states influence national conversations. Founded with the idea that state legislatures play a crucial role in shaping future federal policies, *Pluribus News* covers legislative and policy developments across all 50 states. This nonpartisan publication seeks to “connect the dots between what happens in different state capitals and how these events affect broader national trends.”<sup>63</sup> One of its reporters is a longtime Olympia journalist, who maintains strong ties to the community through his ongoing weekly television show for public television, *Inside Olympia*.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, *The Center Square* is a news organization that focuses on reporting about state and

local government affairs, often emphasizing a conservative and libertarian perspective. It is part of the Franklin News Foundation, which is known for its emphasis on free-market principles. Currently, The Center Square has two reporters dedicated to covering Olympia and state-government matters, as part of its goal to provide comprehensive and economically focused news about state governance.<sup>65</sup> Its coverage is particularly aimed at making information about state decisions and their financial implications accessible to taxpayers.

All of these new developments suggest that statehouse reporting may have hit its lowest point and is now gradually on the rise. Yet, questions remain about the long-term sustainability of these outlets. Monetizing local news is still a

significant challenge because advertising revenue, which traditionally supported newspapers, has increasingly shifted to large tech platforms like Google and Facebook. Subscription models can be difficult to scale, particularly when competing with free content. Additionally, many of these initiatives are funded philanthropically which, while helpful, often runs the risk of donor fatigue—meaning the consistent financial support needed to keep these newsrooms afloat could wane over time. This creates a delicate balance between producing essential public-service journalism and ensuring financial stability. This challenge is further underscored by *the Everett Herald's* decision to lay off its sole statehouse reporter in the summer of 2024, a move that illustrates the continuing financial constraints faced by commercial news outlets.





## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This report highlights how state-government reporting in Washington is adapting amid financial pressures, technological shifts, and evolving audience needs. Although Washington's press corps has shrunk dramatically since 2000, it remains a vital arena for statehouse reporting and, by extension, for public accountability and informed citizenship. The findings suggest that while reporting resources are increasingly centralized in urban centers and constrained by staffing reductions, a new generation of journalists is seeking to make policy reporting more relevant to everyday citizens by focusing on the real-world impacts of government decisions rather than purely political strategy.

One prominent finding is that the shrinking press corps has forced both statehouse and general-assignment reporters to cover a broader range of topics with limited resources. This dynamic is especially challenging for reporters who are often required to produce rapid-turnaround stories at the expense of investigative depth. In this environment, general-assignment reporters frequently handle "hot-button" topics like crime, which may skew coverage toward attention-grabbing stories and away from comprehensive policy reporting. Meanwhile, the presence of specialist reporters, while limited, offers valuable depth by bringing expertise in fields like education and environmental policy to the legislative beat. These reporters are instrumental in providing "contextual journalism," or coverage that connects legislation to broader societal trends, helping audiences make sense of complex issues.

Additionally, the expansion of news offerings, including independent newsletters, podcasts, and initiatives like Report for America and the *Washington State Standard*, demonstrates a growing commitment to filling coverage gaps left by traditional outlets. However, this expansion faces significant sustainability challenges. The financial landscape for local journalism remains precarious, as advertising revenue continues to shift to major tech platforms, making it difficult for news organizations to monetize their work. Philanthropic funding, while essential, is vulnerable to donor fatigue, casting uncertainty on the long-term viability of these new initiatives. *The Everett Herald's* layoff of its last statehouse reporter in 2024 serves as a reminder that

commercial constraints continue to impact the industry, even as new ventures strive to provide crucial statehouse coverage.

Statehouse reporters in Washington, however, benefit from relatively favorable public disclosure laws compared to many other states, which provides a crucial advantage in their ability to access government documents and hold public officials accountable. Though some legislators are invoking "legislative privilege" to shield documents, these laws enable reporters to more effectively investigate and report on legislative activities, providing transparency that is essential for democratic functioning. Additionally, Washington has an important asset in its state-funded public affairs television station, TVW, which is operated with funding primarily provided by the state legislature. This resource has become increasingly important, as it allows reporters to directly access live legislative sessions, committee hearings, and other key events. By supplementing traditional reporting, TVW helps fill coverage gaps, offering both real-time access and historical archives that are invaluable for investigative work. Together, these tools enable Washington's reporters to maintain a level of access and depth in their coverage that may be more challenging in states with fewer resources or less transparent systems.

While these findings are specific to Washington, it is likely that at least some of the observed trends are relevant to statehouse reporting across the country. Similar financial pressures affect newsrooms nationwide, and many state legislatures now wield significant policy-making power as federal gridlock continues. This means the need for in-depth statehouse reporting is widespread, even as newsrooms struggle to fund such coverage. Like Washington, many states are seeing new models for journalism emerge, such as nonprofit outlets and reporter positions funded by organizations like Report for America. These solutions, while promising, face similar questions of financial sustainability and long-term viability in other states.

Moreover, the centralization of resources in urban areas and the shift toward digital platforms are trends that extend beyond Washington. In states with large, diverse geographies, the concentration

of reporters in urban centers may similarly result in underserved rural communities. Additionally, the focus on “contextual journalism” by specialist reporters—who explore broader implications of policy rather than just legislative mechanics—reflects a trend that is becoming essential in complex policy landscapes across the U.S.

Future research might foreground the perspectives and needs of audiences in understanding how statehouse reporting can better serve citizens. This is crucial for identifying the types of information that resonate with different demographic groups, and for recognizing how citizens engage with and think about policy issues. Variations in public opinion based on factors such as race, class, and geographic location can shape how people interpret government actions and decisions. With widespread disillusionment in politics as a source of positive change, particularly among historically marginalized groups, it is essential to examine how news reporting can both reflect and address this skepticism. Research that incorporates audience analysis can help ensure that journalism is not only informative but also relevant and empowering to diverse communities, offering a path forward in strengthening public trust in governance.

Future research can also examine the evolving relationship between statehouse reporters and political actors, as this dynamic has shifted significantly in recent years. Politicians no longer rely on reporters as their primary means of reaching the public, thanks to the rise of social

media and other direct communication channels. This change raises critical questions about the role of traditional journalism in holding political figures accountable and informing the public. In many states, a troubling trend is emerging where politicians increasingly view journalists as adversaries rather than partners in democracy. This animosity can manifest in efforts to suppress unfavorable coverage, including legal actions against reporters and crackdowns on whistleblowers and ‘leaks’—both of which are vital sources for investigative journalism. As political actors gain more control over their messaging, the challenge for journalists is to maintain their independence and ability to report critically, without fear of retribution or censorship. Research into these shifts is essential to understanding the future of statehouse reporting and ensuring that journalists can continue to serve the public interest.

Finally, more research is needed to explore how these dynamics play out across different states. While Washington offers a valuable snapshot, states differ significantly in their political landscapes, the laws governing public-records access, and the unique challenges that shape how journalists report on state government. Understanding these variations is key to adapting statehouse reporting strategies to local contexts. This report highlights the urgent need for a flexible and forward-thinking approach to statehouse journalism, one that can evolve alongside the shifting demands of public service reporting and meet the diverse needs of audiences in states across the country.

## 5. Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Jacob M. Grumbach, *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2022; and Devin Caughey and Christopher Warshaw, *Dynamic Democracy: Public Opinion, Elections, and Policymaking in the American States*. University of Chicago Press, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The limited research that does exist focuses on counting the number of statehouse reporters. See Elisa Shearer, Katerina Eva Matsa, Amy Mitchell, Mark Jurkowitz, Kirsten Worden and Naomi Forman-Katz. "Total number of U.S. statehouse reporters rises, but fewer are on the beat full time." *Pew Research Center*, 2002. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/04/05/about-half-of-statehouse-reporters-cover-statehouse-legislative-sessions-full-time/>; and Katerina Eva Matsa and Jan Lauren Boyles, "America's shifting statehouse press: Can new players compensate for lost legacy reporters?" *Pew Research Center*, 2014. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/07/10/americas-shifting-statehouse-press/>. Other studies focus on the role of student reporters. See, for example, Sarah Gamard, Richard Watts, Emily Sheftman and Hannah Kirkpatrick, "University-led statehouse student reporting programs." University of Vermont, Center for Community News, 2023. Available at [https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Center-for-Community-News/pdfs/Final\\_Statehouse\\_Report\\_HK\\_3.31.2023.pdf](https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Center-for-Community-News/pdfs/Final_Statehouse_Report_HK_3.31.2023.pdf). An exception is a comparative study of American and German reporters, which used the Albany, New York statehouse as a site. See Matthias Revers, *Contemporary Journalism in the US and Germany: Agents of Accountability*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Finally, a classic study on public opinion was set in the Illinois statehouse and interviewed journalists, among others. See Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Hertel-Fernandez, *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States -- and the Nation*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See Shearer et al., "Total number of U.S. statehouse reporters rises, but fewer are on the beat full time."

<sup>5</sup> League of Women Voters of Washington. "The decline of local news and its impact on democracy." 2022. Available at <https://lwvwa.org/journalism-study>. See also Kathleen Searles and Austin Jenkins, "Media and politics in Washington state." In *Washington State Government and Politics*, edited by Cornell W. Clayton and Nicholas P. Lovrich. Washington State University Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with David Postman, May 1, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with Rachel La Corte, March 3, 2023, and David Ammons, May 2, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with Brad Shannon, November 19, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Shauna Sowersby, Jan 20, 2023, Adam Wilson, May 1, 2024, and Chris Mulick, May 3, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> League of Women Voters of Washington, "The decline of local news and its impact on democracy." 2022, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Jerry Cornfield, February 22, 2023, and Jim Camden, February 14, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.king5.com/article/about-us/team-bios/drew-mikkelsen/281-287779784>.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Tom Banse, February 13, 2023, and Jeanie Lindsay, May 20, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Claire Withycombe, February 20, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Laurel Demkovich, February 9, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Austin Jenkins, February 14, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Jim Simon, November 21, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Because sessions run only for a few months, there may be greater opportunity for enterprise reporting when the legislature is not in session. Indeed, several reporters said that their capacity for such work increases during those periods.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Joseph O'Sullivan, February 3, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Jeanie Lindsay, May 20, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Jenelle Baumbach, May 20, 2024, and Jerry Cornfield, February 22, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ellen Dennis, May 24, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Jerry Cornfield, February 22, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Austin Jenkins, February 14, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Tom Banse, February 13, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Claire Withycombe, February 20, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Joseph O'Sullivan, February 3, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Melissa Santos, April 25, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Rachel La Corte March 1, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Laurel Demkovich, February 9, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Peter Callaghan, May 30, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Austin Jenkins, February 14, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with John Stang, February 12, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Paul Queary, February 7, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Austin Jenkins, February 14, 2023.

- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Melissa Santos, April 25, 2023.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Rachel La Corte March 1, 2023.
- <sup>38</sup> Interviews with Laurel Demkovich, February 9, 2023.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with Claire Withycombe, February 20, 2023. Withycombe notes that this insight comes from a conversation with her statehouse colleague Jeanie Lindsay.
- <sup>40</sup> Interview with Ellen Dennis, May 24, 2024.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Jeanie Lindsay, May 20, 2024.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with Grace Deng, May 16, 2024.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview with Shauna Sowersby, January 20, 2023.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with Joseph O'Sullivan, February 3, 2023.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with Melissa Santos, April 25, 2023.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with Claire Withycombe, February 20, 2023.
- <sup>47</sup> Katherine Fink and Michael Schudson, "The rise of contextual journalism, 1950s-2000s." *Journalism*, 15(1): 3-20, 2014.
- <sup>48</sup> Interviews with David Postman, May 1, 2024, and Peter Callaghan, May 30, 2024.
- <sup>49</sup> Susan Stellan, "Investigating the housing crisis." *Nieman Reports*, November 19, 2018. Available at <https://niemanreports.org/articles/investigating-the-housing-crisis/>. See also David Robbins and Dawn Wheatley, "Complexity, objectivity, and shifting roles: Environmental correspondents march to a changing beat." *Journalism Practice* 15 (9): 1289–1306, 2021.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with Paul Queary, February 7, 2023.
- <sup>51</sup> Interview with Joseph O'Sullivan, February 3, 2023 as well as public remarks by Donna Gordon Blankinship at the University of Washington, November 17, 2022.
- <sup>52</sup> Personal communications with John Tomasic, November 5, 2024, and Benjamin Shors, November 4, 2024.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with Peter Callaghan, May 30, 2024.
- <sup>54</sup> Brandi Kruse, "I just quit my job in corporate media. Here's why." November 8, 2021. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1qnFbkPVBk&t=122s>.
- <sup>55</sup> Brandi Kruse, "Big money and big media team up to defeat initiatives." October 1, 2024. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lythOt7gBYw>.
- <sup>56</sup> Brier Dudley, "Washington news organizations creating Olympia bureau." *Seattle Times*, September 6, 2024. Available at <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/washington-news-organizations-creating-olympia-bureau/>.
- <sup>57</sup> Brier Dudley, "Olympia news bureau plan fizzles, for now." *Seattle Times*, November 6, 2024. Available at <https://view.email.seattletimes.com/?qs=014516a2c8cb0fbf6b205cbcfaa4baac5e4085e5e812771493e-ab692a4dd037c531f503effb70952e60fb514cd812ad95fa3738d4b2d3b2aa2a0643a8efa4dac1588bb744-0be3478ec252b588402f260>.
- <sup>58</sup> See Paul Kiefer, "Washington prisons delayed nearly a third of all inmate release dates last year, costing taxpayers millions." InvestigateWest. Available at <https://www.investigatwest.org/investigatwest-reports/washington-prisons-delayed-nearly-a-third-of-all-inmate-release-dates-last-year-costing-taxpayers-millions-17706636>. See also Paul Kiefer, "In a rural stretch of Washington, a 'constitutional sheriff' and his growing volunteer posse provoke controversy." InvestigateWest. Available at <https://www.investigatwest.org/investigatwest-reports/in-a-rural-stretch-of-washington-a-constitutional-sheriff-and-his-growing-volunteer-posse-provoke-controversy-17706597>.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with Chris Fitzsimon, April 25, 2023.
- <sup>60</sup> Interview with Laurel Demkovich, February 9, 2023.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with Melissa Santos, April 25, 2023.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview with Rachel La Corte March 1, 2023.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with Reid Wilson, March 3, 2023.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with Austin Jenkins, February 14, 2023.
- <sup>65</sup> "About The Center Square." Available at <https://www.thecentersquare.com/site/about/about.html>.
- <sup>67</sup> See Joe O'Sullivan, "Some WA lawmakers are sidestepping the state's Public Records Act." InvestigateWest. January 12, 2023. Available at <https://www.investigatwest.org/news/some-wa-lawmakers-are-sidestepping-the-states-public-records-act-17692134>.

## Appendix A. List of Interviewees

**David Ammons**, former statehouse reporter, Associated Press

**Tom Banse**, semi-retired statehouse reporter, Northwest News Network

**Jenelle Baumbach**, former statehouse reporter, *Everett Herald*

**Jadene Cabahug**, statehouse student intern for *The Seattle Times*, now Cascade PBS emerging journalist news fellow

**Peter Callaghan**, former statehouse reporter, *The Tacoma News-Tribune*

**Jim Camden**, former Olympia bureau chief, *The Spokesman Review*

**Jerry Cornfield**, former statehouse reporter at *The Everett Herald*, now statehouse reporter at Washington State Standard

**Laurel Demkovich**, former statehouse reporter at *The Spokesman-Review*, now statehouse reporter at Washington State Standard

**Grace Deng**, former statehouse reporter, Washington State Standard

**Ellen Dennis**, former statehouse reporter, *The Spokesman-Review*

**Chris Fitzsimon**, publisher and chief executive officer, States Newsroom

**Austin Jenkins**, staff writer, Pluribus News and host of Inside Olympia

**Rachel La Corte**, former statehouse reporter and editor, Associated Press, now editor at Axios

**Jeanie Lindsay**, statehouse reporter, KUOW

**Chris Mulick**, former statehouse reporter, *The Tri-City Herald*

**Joseph O'Sullivan**, former statehouse reporter, Crosscut (now Cascade PBS) and *The Seattle Times*

**David Postman**, former statehouse reporter, *The Seattle Times*

**Paul Queary**, editor and publisher, *Washington Observer*

**Melissa Santos**, former statehouse reporter, now at Axios Local Seattle

**Brad Shannon**, former political editor and statehouse reporter for *The Olympian*

**Shauna Sowersby**, former statehouse reporter for McClatchy, now statehouse reporter at Cascade PBS

**John Stang**, freelance reporter

**Adam Wilson**, former statehouse reporter, *The Olympian*

**Reid Wilson**, founder and editor, Pluribus News

**Claire Withycombe**, former statehouse reporter, *The Seattle Times*, now Education Lab reporter at *The Seattle Times*

## Appendix B. Details Regarding the Content Analysis

The content analysis examines statehouse coverage from eight key news organizations: the Associated Press, Axios Local Seattle, Crosscut, KING 5 News, KUOW, McClatchy, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Spokesman-Review*. These outlets represent the full landscape of Washington's news organizations with dedicated statehouse reporters at the time of our data collection. By focusing on these eight organizations, we can capture the full scope of coverage produced by full-time capitol reporters across diverse media formats, including online, television, print, radio, and wire services. This approach also lets us assess how much statehouse reporting is handled by other journalists within these organizations—such as general-assignment reporters or those covering other beats—providing a comprehensive view of the state's legislative reporting ecosystem.

Each of these eight news organizations brings a unique perspective and approach to covering Washington's statehouse. The Associated Press, a nonprofit wire service, has historically maintained the second-largest bureau in Olympia, providing extensive, statewide coverage. Axios Local Seattle, part of the for-profit digital news organization Axios, originally focused on national politics but has, since 2020, expanded through Axios Local to cover urban populations across the country. Crosscut is an online public affairs outlet that started as a commercial venture in 2007 and later merged with Seattle's public broadcaster, KCTS, forming Cascade Public Media in 2015. KING 5 News, a commercial television station based in Seattle, competes for the largest local TV news audience. KUOW, Washington's most widely listened-to public radio station, employs a statehouse reporter, with partial funding coming from KNKX, another public radio station. Its news is shared through the Northwest News Network, a coalition of public radio stations across Oregon and Washington. McClatchy, a California-based company, owns about 30 newspapers nationwide, including *The Olympian*, *Tacoma News Tribune*, and *Bellingham Herald* in Washington, which share a single full-time statehouse reporter. *The Seattle Times*, a primarily family-owned daily newspaper, has long supported one of Olympia's largest reporting bureaus. Finally, *The Spokesman-Review*, a family-owned daily newspaper, serves readers mainly in eastern Washington, offering insights from a regional perspective.

To be included in our sample, a news item had to be published or broadcast during Washington's 2023 legislative session, which ran from January 8 to April 24, and directly reference the "Washington legislature." Initially, we monitored TV and radio coverage in real-time to confirm that broadcast stories were consistently posted on the organizations' websites. After a week of comparison, we found that broadcasts were indeed mirrored online, allowing us to focus on identifying relevant stories manually from each website. In cases where multiple versions of the same story existed—such as text summaries of radio or TV reports—we analyzed the original broadcast formats to capture what audiences primarily consume. For instance, with radio stories, we analyzed the audio rather than the text summary. Occasionally, we found duplicate publications of the same story, but we included only one for data analysis. We also excluded opinion pieces, including editorials, op-eds, and talk-show discussions, as our focus was strictly on news reporting. Ultimately, we amassed a comprehensive dataset of 572 news items, capturing what we believe to be the entirety of statehouse reporting by these eight organizations during the 2023 session.

To better understand the range of contributors to statehouse coverage, each news item was coded according to the type of reporter involved in its production. Those identified as working full-time in the 2023 legislative session by the Washington Capitol Press Corps were coded as "capitol press corps," while individuals recognized as "student interns" or "Report for America" reporters were labeled accordingly, based on both news articles and supplementary interview data that ensured accurate identification. Reporters on the general politics beat—but not exclusively assigned to the statehouse—were coded as "politics." Together, these journalists represent what we refer to as the "core statehouse reporters"—those primarily responsible for statehouse news. Reporters were coded as "other beat" if they specialized in fields outside of politics (e.g., education, health, or environment), while those listed in bylines as "staff reporters" or freelancers were categorized as "general assignment" or "freelance," respectively. This coding scheme enables us to explore differences in reporting focus and depth across various journalist types, including potential

contrasts between seasoned capitol reporters and student journalists. Once all news items were coded, we consolidated reporter types from 11 initial categories into four meaningful groups: core statehouse; other beat; generalist (which includes general-assignment reporters, freelance reporters, hosts, anchors, and producers); and other.

To understand how different types of reporters draw from various sources, we analyzed the first five quoted sources in each news item. By focusing on direct quotes, we capture the clearest evidence of a journalist's active sourcing choices. While this method excludes indirect attributions—such as press conference summaries or references to other media reports—it provides a more accurate view of the source networks reporters actively engage with. This approach also gives insight into the time journalists may have had to develop each story. All quoted sources were coded based on patterns identified in initial readings and informed by existing research on political reporting. To enhance interpretability, we organized sources into five broad categories: (1) government, encompassing elected officials and agency representatives; (2) civil-society representatives, such as members of advocacy groups and labor unions; (3) business interests and lobbyists; (4) topical experts, including academics, think tanks, and professionals in fields like law and medicine; and (5) an “other” category for infrequent sources that didn't fit elsewhere, like the premier of British Columbia. This categorization provides a clearer view of whose perspectives different reporters prioritize in their statehouse coverage. Additionally, we created a summative index of the total number of sources in each article, offering further insights into how sourcing breadth varies by reporter type.

Building on our analysis of sourcing patterns, we also examined whether the topics reporters cover vary by reporter type, assigning each news item a primary topical focus. Our initial list of topics was adapted from the US Policy Agendas Project, which categorizes themes to help researchers analyze policy debates in the media. This approach allowed us to explore any shift from traditional “hard” news—focused on government operations and economic policy—toward “soft” topics such as crime and education, and to

identify which types of reporters contribute to these shifts. For example, a classic “hard” news story might cover the state's annual budget, while a recent “soft” news item from our sample reports on statehouse debates over lowering the legal blood alcohol limit for drivers. This categorization offers insight into how different types of reporters shape public understanding of state-level policy issues through their choice of topics.

To round out our analysis, we coded each news item according to its story type. We differentiated between “conventional” and “contextual” reporting approaches. Conventional stories, marked by a straightforward “who-what-where-when-why” structure, focused on immediate events like press conferences or bill signings, delivering information with clarity and speed. In contrast, contextual stories delve into broader trends or complex issues, aiming to provide audiences with a richer understanding of the story's implications. Given rising concerns that the erosion of statehouse reporting will diminish investigative journalism, we also coded specifically for “watchdog” stories—those in which journalists explicitly take on a role of holding power accountable, investigating potential misconduct, or amplifying the voices of those who may have been wronged. This layer of coding allows us to assess the diversity of storytelling approaches in statehouse reporting and the ongoing presence of investigative journalism in an era of shrinking newsrooms.

Our content analysis demonstrated high levels of intercoder reliability across all categories, which is necessary for ensuring the consistency and accuracy of our findings. Krippendorff's alpha, a measure of agreement between coders, ranged from 0.87 to 1.00 across different categories, with higher values indicating stronger consistency. An alpha of 0.92 for author type, 0.88 for source type, and a perfect score of 1.00 for story type all indicate that the coders were in strong agreement about how to categorize each news item. These high levels of agreement show that our coding process was reliable and that our conclusions are grounded in consistent interpretations of the data. In simple terms, this means that multiple people looking at the same material would arrive at the same conclusions.

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