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INFORMATION NEEDS ASSESSMENTS IN THREE NEW JERSEY COMMUNITIES

What residents in Blairstown, Paterson and Trenton need from their local news outlets

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CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA

The Center for Cooperative Media is a primarily grant-funded organization based at Montclair State University's School of Communication and Media in New Jersey. The Center's mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond, which it does through creating community, collaboration and research. Now in its 10 year, the Center receives operational funding from Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Montclair State University, and has received project-based funding from Rita Allen Foundation, the NJ Civic Information Consortium and others.

The Center coordinates statewide and regional reporting, connecting dozens of local news and information providers through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons. The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices, focusing on collaboration, business models and ecosystem mapping. It convenes the annual, national Collaborative Journalism Summit and is the only organization worldwide that studies collaboration in journalism. The Center's annual reports offer a detailed history of programs and impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research project was designed to help three hyperlocal news outlet startups better understand the information needs of their communities. While the three communities we worked with – Paterson, Trenton, and Blairstown, NJ – differ in important ways, there are also commonalities in terms of people's desires for local news and information.

First, all three communities expressed a desire for some form of "service journalism," whether it was in the form of more information about the location and content of municipal government meetings, how to find service providers, or contact information for local leaders. Content like this may seem like low-hanging fruit, but publishers who can keep up-to-date and reliable lists like this would provide tangible benefit to their communities.

Second, we learned that people in all three communities rely heavily on Facebook for news and information about their towns and the people in them. While not everyone enjoys the often partisan or misleading information that circulates so easily on Facebook, it is still one of the first to be updated when news breaks and one of the best places for publishers to be highly visible. Finally, in two of the three communities – Paterson and Trenton – people want more local news about crime and safety, and in two others – Paterson and Blairstown – the publishers may grow their audience if they offer their content in languages other than English. In all three, at least some people mentioned wanting more feel-good, solutions-oriented local news.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION
WHY INFO NEEDS ASSESSMENTS?

The idea of a journalist looking to an audience for guidance on the most newsworthy topics of the day – rather than to an editor or by relying on amorphous news values – is relatively new. This practice gained prominence in the mid-2010s with the formation of several organizations to help newsrooms more easily understand the information needs and wants of their audiences. For example The Listening Post Collective (est. 2013), Groundsource (est. 2015), Hearken (est. 2015), and Outlier Media (est. 2016) all help news and community organizations contact people directly to gather information about what they want and need to know. Internews has been conducting information needs assessments in conflict zones and with other communities facing adversity for more than 10 years (Internews, 2023).

Crittenden and Haywood (2020) date this movement to the Knight Commission's 2009 report, "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age" which was closely followed in by Waldman's (2011) FCC report, "The Information Needs of Communities: The changing media landscape in a broadband age," the title of which heralded the turn toward the audience. In some ways, an information needs assessment is as simple and straightforward as the term implies: one seeks to understand what information a community needs.

But of course, it is more involved than this. Sarah Alvarez of Outlier Media offers one definition: "Information [needs] are not just what people don't know; it is information people need but there is a barrier to accessing, understanding, or trusting the information." (Alvarez, 2021). Information needs assessments in the context of journalism imply "a more interactive – and potentially reciprocal" relationship with the audience, reflecting the practice's close affinity to engaged journalism, which in turn grew out of the public journalism movement of the 1990s (Schmidt and Lawrence, 2020, p. 518-519). Information needs assessments stop short of making the audience co-creators of content, however; assessments such as those conducted here are in this way perhaps closer to audience research than engaged journalism (for a study that bridges the two, see McCullough and DeVigal, 2022).

Building on Alvarez, an information needs assessment might ask, what are the barriers to accessing information in a given community? Do people have access to broadband internet; do online newspapers have paywalls; are people aware of all of the sources for online news and information? What are the barriers to understanding local news or information? Are there language barriers; educational attainment barriers? What are the barriers to trusting local news or information? Is misinformation rampant; are there political divides? These are among the challenges that news and information providers face as they seek to serve their communities. In addition, it has been increasingly recognized that formal audience information needs assessments, when conducted in the early stages of a news organization's formation, can fundamentally shape its goals and mission, while also building in a habit of interacting with community members from the beginning (e.g. Konieczna, 2020).

HELPING NEW HYPERLOCALS IN PATERSON, TRENTON, AND BLAIRSTOWN

This research assessed the information needs for three towns in New Jersey – Paterson, Trenton, and Blairstown – that are being served by new hyperlocal news and information organizations. These startups were among the recipients of the first round of public funding from the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, a first-of-its-kind state-level public funding mechanism for news and information initiatives throughout the state.

The needs of the audiences for the three outlets were both universal and specific to their communities. People need reliable, timely, fact-based information about their communities in order to live their lives and participate in society. At the same time, certain communities have needs specific to their location, context, and history.

PATERSON (PATERSON INFO HUB)

Paterson, N.J., is a majority-Hispanic city (61 percent of the population, in the latest census). Within that Hispanic community, most people are from the Dominican Republic, although nearly every Central and South American country is represented, meaning Spanish is widely spoken. Paterson also has a sizable Arabic community. With nearly 160,000 residents, Paterson is one of New Jersey's largest cities; however its median household income is below average for the state, at $45,141. Detailed demographic info for Paterson may be found in Appendix A.

Paterson is served by a robust array of nonprofit and local government organizations, including the organization involved in this project, The Paterson Alliance. The Paterson Alliance is a 501(c)3 founded in 1998 to bring these various agents together to "improve collaboration between members, to be inclusive and build a culture where everyone feels respected, included, and valued." The Paterson Alliance represents more than 80 nonprofits in the city, and through its various activities around education, housing, food security, and other areas, it touches many families throughout the community.

Although Paterson currently has a handful of local news outlets, (e.g. Perselay Associates and Janus Solutions, 2020; Stonbely, 2021) the bulk of the content consists of crime coverage and re-purposed press releases from local businesses. In particular, there is very little to no coverage of the activities of the nonprofits in the Alliance or the communities they serve, the issues they deal with, or the services available to them.

The Paterson Information Hub ("Info Hub") is a new initiative by the Alliance to provide that missing critical information to the Paterson community, beginning with a shared calendar and later also providing original journalism. The Info Hub is a partnership between Paterson Alliance and Paterson Free Public Library, which has provided resources and community connections to the effort.

To gather the data that informed the Paterson information needs assessment, the Center for Cooperative Media conducted an online survey as well as in-person focus groups. The number of respondents for the online survey was 67; three focus groups – one in Spanish and two in English -- were hosted at the Paterson Free Public Library. The first English focus group had 3 participants, the second had 10, and the Spanish focus group had 9 participants.

TRENTON (TRENTON JOURNAL)

Trenton is New Jersey's state capital and one of its largest and best-known cities. Nearly half of its population identified in the most recent census as Black/African American, and it has a sizable Hispanic and Latinx population as well. One of the defining geographic features of Trenton is its "wards," which are named according to their cardinal location (north, south, etc.).

The North ward is known to be the wealthiest and has many historical buildings. The South ward, by contrast, is the least affluent. The West ward is the most suburban of the four, and the East ward is home to the high school and many of the clusters of immigrants that make up Trenton's population. Detailed demographic info for Trenton may be found in Appendix A.

Trenton's media market is similar to those of many cities in the sense that what used to be a relatively thriving ecosystem is now home to papers that have had their staffs and budgets cut repeatedly over the years and a handful of digital-native startups who have much smaller staffs and budgets than their legacy ancestors (e.g. Peterson's Breaking News of Trenton). For example, in September 2022 Isaac Avilucea left The Trentonian after covering Trenton for 8 years, leaving the outlet without any full-time reporters, and leaving the state capital with very little if any watchdog coverage. Kenneth Miles started The Trenton Journal in 2021 to address some of these gaps; his goal is to produce positive stories for the Black and Brown communities in the area, focusing specifically on culture and local politics.

Trenton Journal is different from the two other outlets in this study because it had been active for more than a year at the time of the research. Miles is the main producer of content for the site and runs it in addition to working a separate full-time job. He was very enthusiastic about conducting an information needs assessment to have a better idea of who would be interested in the local news he produces and what they need that he doesn't currently offer.

To gather the data that informs the Trenton information needs assessment, we conducted an online survey as well as in-person focus groups. The number of respondents for the online survey was 119; the two English-language focus groups were held at the Trenton Free Public Library and Ujima Village, which is a community organization. One focus group had 10 participants and one had seven.

GREATER BLAIRSTOWN (RIDGE VIEW ECHO)

Blairstown is a small, rural town in northwestern New Jersey near the Pennsylvania border. Three adjacent municipalities – Frelinghuysen, Hardwick, and Knowlton – join Blairstown as "feeder communities" for the local high school, and together constitute greater Blairstown. The population is more than 90% white, and the average household income for the four towns is $100,651. Detailed demographic info for greater Blairstown may be found in Appendix A.

Like the other communities in our study, Blairstown has over the years lost much of its local news coverage, including the main newspaper that served the area, which stopped publishing more than 20 years ago. Also like many other communities, Facebook Groups have formed to fill information gaps; the main Facebook page for the area – Goings on in Blairstown – had 10,300 members at last check (of a population of 12,281).

Ridge View Echo began as an effort by the Blairstown Enhancement Committee, which is made up of volunteers. Because of extremely limited resources, they were — at the time of our study — able to cover only a fraction of the news they wanted to provide, and were publishing bi-weekly. Their goal is to provide the kind of local coverage that they lost almost 25 years ago when The Blairstown Press folded. Since then they've received only sporadic or very high-level coverage from regional or statewide outlets like The New Jersey Herald (a Gannett paper), or The Express Times, which is based in Pennsylvania.

To gather the data that informs the analysis below, we conducted an online survey as well as both in-person and virtual focus groups. The number of respondents for the online survey was 170. We had a difficult time getting people to show up to focus groups, both in-person and virtual. For the two scheduled in-person focus groups, 20 and 10 people, respectively, confirmed the day before that they would attend. Of those who confirmed, two people showed up for the morning focus group and zero showed up for the second, afternoon group. As a result, two additional virtual focus groups were planned. For the first, four of the 7 who indicated interest showed up. For the second, zero of the 7 showed up.

FINDINGS

From the focus groups and surveys, we learned from each community what they wanted from local news, where they currently get local news, and how each outlet in question could serve them best. The surveys for Blairstown and Trenton were essentially identical in terms of their questions, and both were distributed via Survey Monkey. All of the focus groups hosted in Blairstown and Trenton were conducted in English.

The Paterson survey was designed to reach the various non-English-language communities that are prominent there, so it was translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Bengali. One of the three focus groups in Paterson was conducted in Spanish; the other two were conducted in English.

The findings for each town are presented below; different findings are highlighted for each community, based on the strength of the responses to different questions and what appeared to resonate in each. Therefore findings presented for one town (e.g. satisfaction with quality of life) may not be discussed for the others.

One condition of the Google News Initiative grant was that after the initial information needs assessments were complete, each outlet was to make improvements to their product based on the findings. Then, community members who had participated in the first round of information gathering were to be asked for their feedback on these improvements. The results of these final follow-up surveys are presented below as well.

PATERSON (PATERSON INFO HUB)

As a nascent start-up, Paterson Info Hub's goals were to assess its community's information needs and desires regarding events around town – specifically, those put on by, or in service of, the people served by the nonprofits represented by Paterson Alliance. However the information we gathered also addressed views about Paterson as a place to live, topics and other local organizations of interest, and how people in Paterson learn about local news.

The survey was distributed by multiple means: Paterson Alliance shared it with its listserv and encouraged its member organizations to do the same. In addition, Paterson Alliance and the Paterson Public Library shared a call for participation on their various social media channels. The focus group moderator for Paterson, who had worked with the Alliance before and has deep roots in Paterson, shared it among his networks. Finally, we created a printed flyer that included the information about the survey, as well as the link and a QR code, in all four languages in which the survey was available: English, Spanish, Arabic, and Bengali.

For each of the towns, we offered a financial incentive of $25 electronic gift cards to 40 randomly selected people who filled out the survey. Because of this, we received a large number of submissions that were clearly bot-generated or completed with nonsense answers that were replicated in submissions over and over again verbatim. After cleaning, the final number of legitimate surveys for Paterson was 67 (note that all survey questions were optional, so the numbers reported below often do not add up to 67). We ran three focus groups in Paterson, two in English and one in Spanish.

Views about the community and life

Paterson survey respondents mostly lived (55%) and/or worked (67%) in the city of Paterson. A few more either lived (11%) or worked (5%) in Passaic County outside of Paterson. The greatest share of survey respondents (43%) have lived in the area for 1-5 years, but a remarkably large number of respondents have lived in the area for six years or more, with more than 15% living there for more than 25 years.

All focus group participants lived and/or worked in Paterson.

How long have you lived in the Paterson area? 53

Less than 1 year
1-5 years
6-10 years
11-24 years
More than 25 years

0%   10.0%   20.0%   30.0%   40.0%
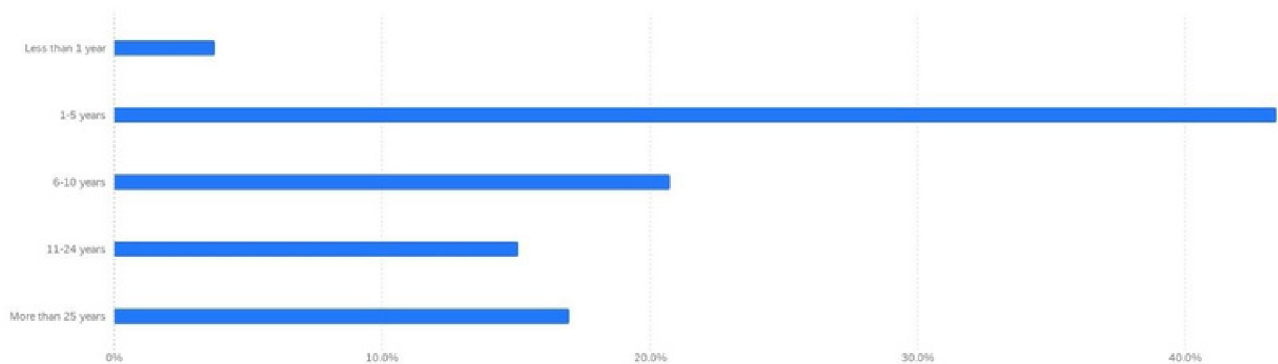
Some questions in the survey explored how respondents feel about the community they live in, and what they enjoy or worry about in their own lives. This information can be used to better understand the human experience of potential readers, and to create content that feels more personally relevant to what is on their minds.

Our respondents mostly had positive feelings about living in Paterson. When we asked, "Overall, how would you rate Paterson as a place to live and/or work?", a total of 12% of people said it's an "excellent" place to live, while 56% said it is at least a "good" place to live, and 11% said it is "poor" or worse. We asked respondents to describe the community in one sentence; some of their answers (reported verbatim) are below.

Mixed but optimistic

- Paterson is a city filled with diversity and multiculturalism but has challenges in affordable housing, cost of living, and transportation. Paterson has multiple programs addressing these challenges but the town continues to carry a shadowy past of crime and desolation.
- A city with mostly good hard working people that are overshadowed by the violent lawless ones.
- It's nice and kind of bad at the same time.
- Poor, rebounding through community initiatives.
- Paterson is a vibrant city with many different cultures, foods, and people that is often challenged due to a lack of funding and resources.
- A city that is desperate for a rejuvenation plan.
- Rebounding.
- It's not the worst, but it could be better.
- A city with unlimited potential.
- A town in need of help!
- It has its good and bad parts.

Praise

- This is a good city to live in.
- It's a beautiful city.
- The city is very nice.
- A vibrant city.
- Beautiful and comfortable place.
- It's a beautiful city, it has great sports, it's easy to get around, it's clean.
- It's a nice place to live.
- Paterson is a wonderful place to live.
- A city everyone wants to live in.
- A very beautiful city with a human heart.
- It's very beautiful.
- The environment is good.
- It's a livable city.
- Nice place to live and work
- The neighborhood is comfortable.
- A place where you can settle down.

History and tradition

- Rich in history.
- The famous silk industry center in the United States, known as the "silk city."
- The "silk City" standing by the Passaic River.
- An important industrial city.
- The mighty City of industry.
- The home of the olive.
- Waterfall Line Cities.
- A very rich library.

Expensive

- The rent is not worth the asking price.
- High cost of living.

Diversity

- Hay diversidad de personas.
- Diverse city with a great variety of food.
- Paterson is big and diverse but very dirty and dangerous.
- Paterson is a diverse town, with an incredible history, and fabulous foods!
- A variety of community areas, business centers, low income areas, middle class sections; multinational.

Natural beauty

- The beautiful scenery of Paterson always makes me feel relaxed and happy.
- The environment here makes me very comfortable and I like it very much.
- The living environment in Paterson is very comfortable.

People in the focus groups were also mixed in their assessment of Paterson, focusing on both the good and the bad (as they perceived it). They used words and phrases like, "rich with historical value," "full of potential," and "resilient" to describe its positive aspects, while they used words and phrases like "separated melting pot," "dangerous," and "devolving" to describe its negative aspects.

How do people in Paterson feel about events and related information needs?

Most survey respondents (55%) said it is "very important" or "extremely important" to know about events happening in Paterson. Only 2% said "not at all important."

Most people (62%) also said that, compared to three years ago, it is easier today to keep up with information and news about the community. Only 23% said it has gotten harder to keep up with local news. This finding stands out, because when we asked this question in other communities, we found more people saying it is "harder today" than saying it is "easier today."

Focus group participants similarly felt like there are multiple ways of finding out about events and other information in Paterson, but expressed frustration about finding specific types of information and finding information exactly when they needed it. Specifically, focus group participants wished for a place to go for curated and vetted information about what is going on in the city – both good and bad. This suggests that something like Paterson Info Hub would provide great value.

Event topics of interest

The survey respondents listed a couple topics about which they were most interested in events addressing: safety/crime reduction and food insecurity/hunger. These seem to be issues that affect many people in the community, or that people want to help with. After those, nearly half of people showed interest in events about exercise/recreation, housing affordability and homelessness, early childhood education, mental health, and music. The list of topics we asked about, and the percentage of people who said they are interested in each topic, are below.

% of survey respondents who expressed interest in events addressing:

Safety and crime reduction	72%
Food insecurity and hunger	61%
Exercise, recreation and fitness	53%
Housing affordability or homelessness	47%
Early childhood education and before/after school activities	47%
Health care and health services (physical or mental health)	44%
Concerts and musical performances	44%
Personal finances	39%
Jobs and job training	35%
Youth and teen programs	33%
Theater and arts	33%
Professional development	32%
Drug addiction and recovery	32%
Volunteer and donation opportunities	28%
Academic support and tutoring	25%
Summer camps	23%
Small business support and networking	19%
Immigration services	19%
Religion and faith	18%
Senior services	14%
Literacy	9%
English as a Second Language (ESL)	9%

Focus group participants had slightly different priorities, though many of the same topics came up; they listed: arts and recreation, religion/bible studies, "getting into 'good' trouble," spending time with family, and going out/night life as the topics about which they'd be most interested in attending events.

Organizations of interest

Because of Paterson Info Hub's focus on events, we asked survey respondents and focus group participants to identify any local organization or group that they would be especially interested in seeing event information from, or whose events they have attended in the past. Paterson Info Hub can use this extensive list for targeted outreach to obtain information that they know their audience is interested in. Some of the answers, divided by topic, are below (answers were copied verbatim):

Employment

- Programs that support adults to study in a short program (answer was in Spanish)
- Work and training
- Small business support and networking
- Job training

Health

- Event information from Health Care and Health Services.
- Homecare Options (2)
- Association of Health Services (2)
- Saint Joseph Health (2)
- Paterson HMHB Coalition

Community services and volunteering

- YMCA
- Passaic County YAP
- Community public welfare activities.
- Volunteer organizations (5)
- Paterson Charitable Foundation (2)
- Catholic Charities
- Father English Communication Center
- Paterson Healing Collective
- Paterson family success center
- Community service
- NJCEDV
- Coalition Against Violence
- New Destiny Family Success Center (NDFSC) (2)
- Father English Food Pantry

- 4CS [Childcare Financial Assistance Agency]
- Paterson Habitat [for Humanity]
- Point in Time Count
- Oasis (2)
- Paterson Education Fund
- Paterson Healing Collective
- Boys & Girls Club
- City Green
- Eva's Village
- Many 100 African American Women
- PHC
- Bugg Foundation
- Monique Latise
- FTI Group

Sports and fitness

- Sports and recreational activities (7)
- Exercise
- Outdoor activities
- Planet Fitness
- Fitness community
- Paterson Sports
- National Parks Service (21)

Government and civil society

- Local government
- Library, Paterson City government
- Paterson Council Meetings
- Passaic County meetings
- Library events

Arts and culture

- Paterson Creations
- Paterson Apricot Fiesta
- Ohana Comic Con
- Portuguese festas rock
- Paterson Music Project
- Drama and the Arts
- Any arts or education organizations, especially ones that work with the public schools
- Music performances (5)
- Museum
- Current affairs information, hot news, reading and learning

Other

- Digital Press Videogames (2)
- flea markets
- northjersey.com

Reasons people go to events

In addition to organizations of interest, we asked what factors motivate people to attend an event. The greatest share of survey respondents (more than half) said that they attend events that "help me solve everyday problems in my life" and that "connect me to friends and neighbors."

Paterson Info Hub can emphasize these types of events in their calendar — focusing on utility and connection. More than 4 in 10 people also said they choose events that provide civic information, are entertaining, or help with jobs (see percentages below).

This led us to suggest that they consider making their events calendar filterable by some of these reasons that readers might be seeking (see full list of recommendations at the end of this section).

Reasons survey respondents reported attending local events (multiple reasons could be chosen, so the total percentage equals > 100%)

They help me solve everyday problems in my life	53%
They connect me to friends and neighbors	52%
They help me stay informed and be a better citizen	44%
They are entertaining or relaxing	44%
They help me with my job	41%
They help me save money or buy things I need	36%
They help me spend time with or take care of my family	24%

In-person vs. online events

Given the rise in virtual or hybrid events since the Covid-19 pandemic began, we asked people about their preferences in this regard. Eighty percent (80%) of survey respondents said they are interested in in-person, outdoor events. Fewer people (49%) said they would attend indoor events. About a third (31%) said they would go to online events.

Because of the difference of opinion about this among people, we suggested tagging events according to outdoor/indoor/virtual/hybrid, and/or allowing filtering by this variable in the event calendar.

## Methods and sources for events and information

The Paterson Alliance and the Paterson Free Public Library were already go-to sources of information for those who responded to the survey, probably because the sample was largely drawn from those who are already in their information orbits. The Alliance has a regular newsletter in which it details the activities of its nonprofit members and sometimes highlights other information it deems noteworthy for its target community. Respondents said they use the Alliance to find information every day (20%), at least weekly (49%), or a few times a month or more (79%). This finding suggests that the Info Hub has a solid base from which to build out its audience to the wider community.

The three most-cited sources by which our survey respondents got their news and information about events was by talking with family, friends, or co-workers; using an internet search engine such as Google; and through one's Facebook news feed, in that order. Thirty-nine percent (39%) said they use a search engine such as Google daily, and 76% said they do so at least weekly. In total, ninety percent (90%) use Google to find out about local events at least a few times a month. We therefore suggested that Paterson Info Hub prioritize search-engine optimization (SEO).

Another important channel among respondents (both survey and focus group) was Facebook. More people said they use their Facebook News Feed every day (42%) to find information about news and local events than any other method we asked about.

Nearly 80% use it for this purpose at least monthly. Facebook Groups were also popular — with less everyday usage for events information (29%) but still 79% using Groups at least monthly. This suggests that Paterson Info Hub should be active on Facebook.

There are many other methods people use less often, but still commonly, to find information about local news and events: TikTok, Twitter and Instagram; local television news broadcasts and websites; local email newsletters; and local news media including Paterson Press, Paterson Times, TAPinto Paterson, and radio news. The graphic below shows patterns of usage for all of the information sources we asked about.
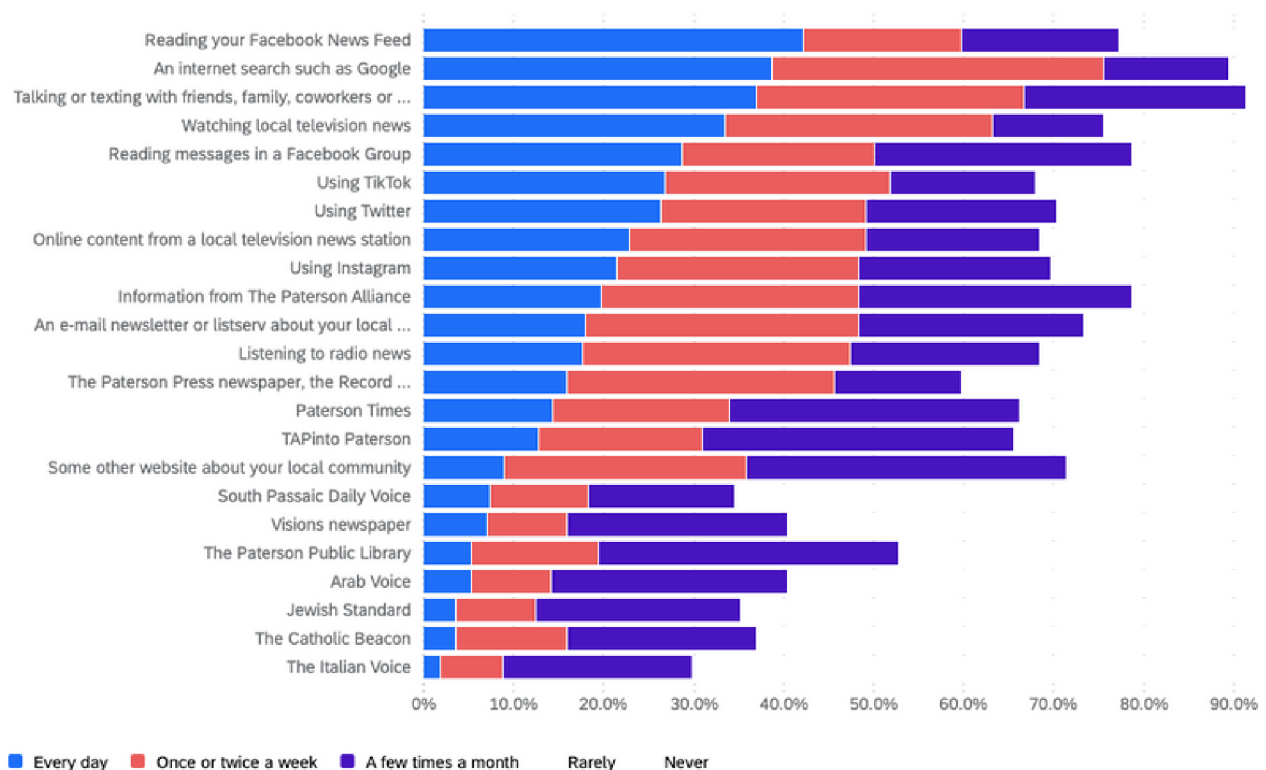
We also asked people to name any person or organization they "trust the most" to give them information about local news and events. Many people (12) cited the Paterson Alliance as a trusted source. Below are some of the other responses. As with the organizations respondents turn to for information, the sources listed by survey respondents as most trusted can be a good starting place for Paterson Info Hub to tap for participation in their content creation (answers are copied verbatim).

Government offices

- Mayor's Office (Farhanna Sayegh)
- Public Schools
- National Park Service
- Health Coalition of Passaic County
- Paterson family success center
- Local government
- People in government
- Local police department/law enforcement
- Family members who work for the government

Community groups

- Emails from Paterson organizations that I recognize
- Patterson Charitable Foundation
- Tiffany Jacobs

Other sources

- My family
- TikTok
- My friends and neighbors
- Twitter
- Family and friends

News media

- Local TV news
- Radio news
- Paterson Times

Focus group participants had similar responses; they reported getting trusted information from friends and family, from social media, and from email lists, although they also expressed hesitation with getting info from social media in terms of whether it is trustworthy.

Recommendations given to Paterson Info Hub

Below are the recommendations we gave, based on both our discussions with the publishers and the analysis above.

- The top two topics of interest for the community members we heard from were safety/crime and food (in)security, which do not readily lend themselves to events, which suggests that a different platform – perhaps an email newsletter or dedicated website – may be of more interest to those community members who want to hear about these topics.

- However, nearly half of people showed interest in events about exercise/recreation, housing affordability/homelessness, early childhood education, mental health, and music. This list of topics lends itself well to a shared calendar. In addition, the greatest share of survey respondents (more than half) said that they attend events that "help me solve everyday problems in my life" and that "connect me to friends and neighbors." You can emphasize these types of events in your calendar — focusing on utility and connection.
- There is a long list of trusted organizations in Paterson; consider collaborating with these organizations on a calendar or news outlet (beyond just asking them to contribute content), so that trust is built in from the beginning. You may also tap people/offices on the list of most trusted sources.
- Engage to a greater extent on Facebook, and be present on Facebook groups that are relevant in Paterson; this is where most of the traffic is and where you'll have the greatest visibility.
- Paterson is extremely diverse; take advantage of this diversity by offering your content in as many relevant languages as possible, but especially Spanish and Arabic.

Based on our recommendations, and given the available resources, Paterson Info Hub decided to make the following changes:

- Hire a translator and make the event calendar available in both English and Spanish (other languages as resources become available).
- Hire part-time help to engage in promotion and outreach to raise awareness about the calendar.
- Make printed flyers and posters to raise awareness about the calendar.
- Hire a developer to improve the online user experience of the calendar

After the proposed changes had begun to be implemented, we sent a follow-up survey to the people who had filled out the survey or participated in one of the focus groups, asking them whether they had seen any of the promotion material, or noticed the improvement to the calendar. We also asked them to identify which among the events they saw listed they'd be most likely to attend, and the topics of events they'd like to see more of. They were also asked for general feedback in an open-ended question.

Though the sample was small, even after several reminders (N=9), those who did respond were largely enthusiastic and gave constructive feedback. Those who had heard about the calendar already reported seeing it promoted on Facebook, or through the Alliance's newsletter, as well as by word of mouth. Six of nine said they would definitely attend an event they'd seen advertised there (the other three said "maybe").

The topics that interested the respondents the most ranged from food insecurity to health and well-being, and several expressed interest in events that were free and cater to children. Almost all respondents reported finding out about events from Facebook News Feed and friends and family, reinforcing the need for Paterson Info Hub to be active on Facebook to generate buzz in the community.

TRENTON (TRENTON JOURNAL)

The second community for which we assessed information needs was Trenton. The survey was distributed by Miles, owner of The Trenton Journal, to people in his network, including the nonprofit community foundation for which he also works, as well as prominent churches. Miles also posted a link to the survey in his newsletter and on his website.

As in Paterson, we also created a printed flyer with the survey link and a QR code. Because of the financial incentive, we had a number of false responses by bots or people trying to game the drawing, which we also saw in Paterson.

The final *N*, after cleaning, was 119 (recall that all questions were optional, so the numbers reported below often do not add up to 119).

The survey respondents were distributed evenly among the four wards of Trenton; this suggests that Trenton Journal's coverage of the four wards should be roughly equal.
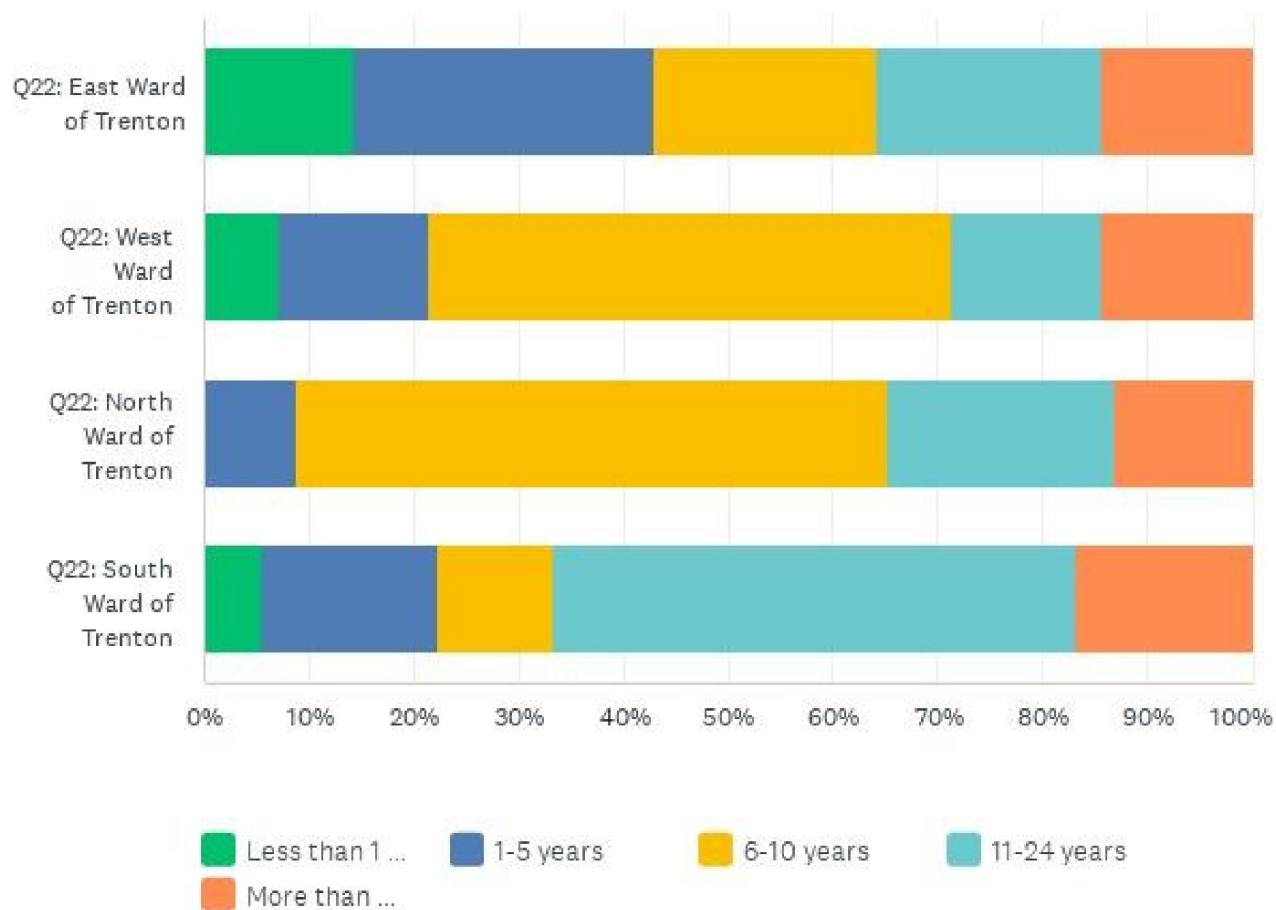
Table 1: Where survey respondents live

East Ward	North Ward	South Ward	West Ward
21	25	23	22

The graphic below shows how long the respondents have lived in Trenton. There is marked variation here depending on the ward; in the West, South and North wards, more than 65% of residents have lived there for at least six years, while in the south ward more than 55% of residents have been there for at least 11 years, showing depth of connection to the community.

The East ward is the most evenly distributed and has the greatest percentage of residents who have been there for less than a year; notably, all of the respondents from the North ward have lived there for at least a year.

The focus group respondents also tended to be people who have lived in the city for a decade or longer (we did not differentiate their answers by ward).

Chart showing responses to Q22 ("How long have you lived in Trenton?") broken out by ward. Categories: Less than 1…, 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-24 years, More than…

Views about the community and life

In general, the respondents who live in Trenton's South Ward stood out as having different experiences and opinions in many cases, compared to residents of other wards. Perhaps surprisingly, given how long people have lived in the area, they were much more likely to say their community is a "poor" or "terrible" place to live (43%).

For comparison, only 23% of the East Ward, 19% of the West Ward, and 20% of the North Ward residents said the same (see graphic below). Because of this and other marked differences, the responses of South Ward residents were considered separately for the analysis.

Overall, how would you rate your community as a place to live? Would you say it is...

Answered: 90   Skipped: 1

How people feel about Trenton
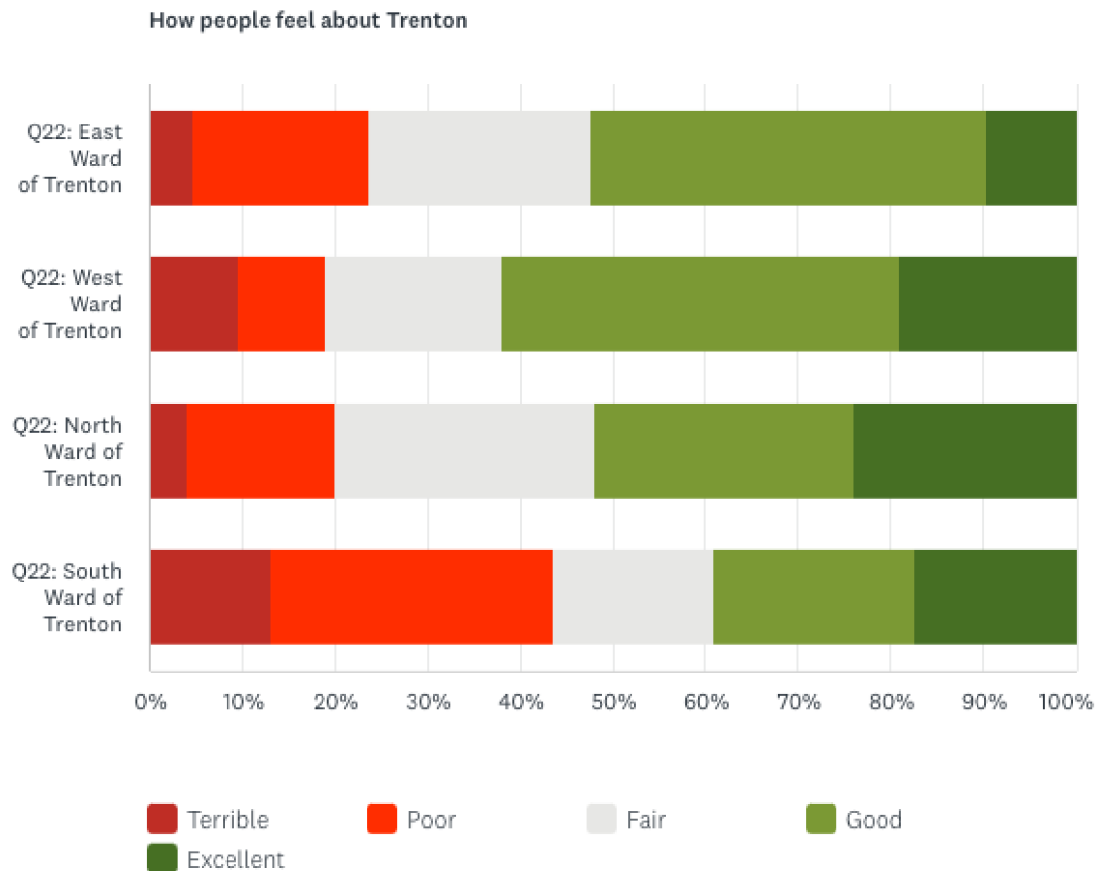
Respondents from the West ward were generally happiest with their community's quality of life, with more than half stating that Trenton is a good or excellent place to live, followed by respondents from the East and North wards, where roughly half think the same.

By contrast, nearly half of respondents from the South ward said Trenton is a poor or terrible place to live, and the fewest calling it a fair place to live, showing the strongest division of opinion on the question.

We asked people to describe the community in one sentence. Some of the responses were negative:

- There are a lot of empty houses in my neighborhood.
- Lack of police presence.
- Lots of crime and gangs.

But others struck a balanced and nuanced view of the strengths and challenges:

- Eclectic mix of good and bad.
- Trenton should be so much nicer than it is, but it is well located and there is lots in the surrounding area that is wonderful.
- A good community where good people and good news is lost in the bad press and violence by a few in the community.
- You can see the beauty within the struggle.
- It depends where you live in the community.

People in both focus groups acknowledged problems with the area – lack of repairs to facilities and problems accessing public information came up several times – but also emphasized the many positive sides of Trenton and of the people who live there. They wanted to hear more about these positive stories and have easier access to public information to fix the things that are wrong; these comments informed the recommendations that we made to the publisher (listed below).

What are Trenton's information needs?

About 6 in 10 survey respondents said it is "very important" or "extremely important" to keep up with local news. Meanwhile, 40% said it is harder today to keep up with local news compared to three years ago. Only 23% said it was easier. The focus group participants reported following news at the national, state and local levels, usually through mass media such as cable news networks or the evening news. Both survey and focus group participants said they would be excited about a local news source that filled the existing information gaps in Trenton.
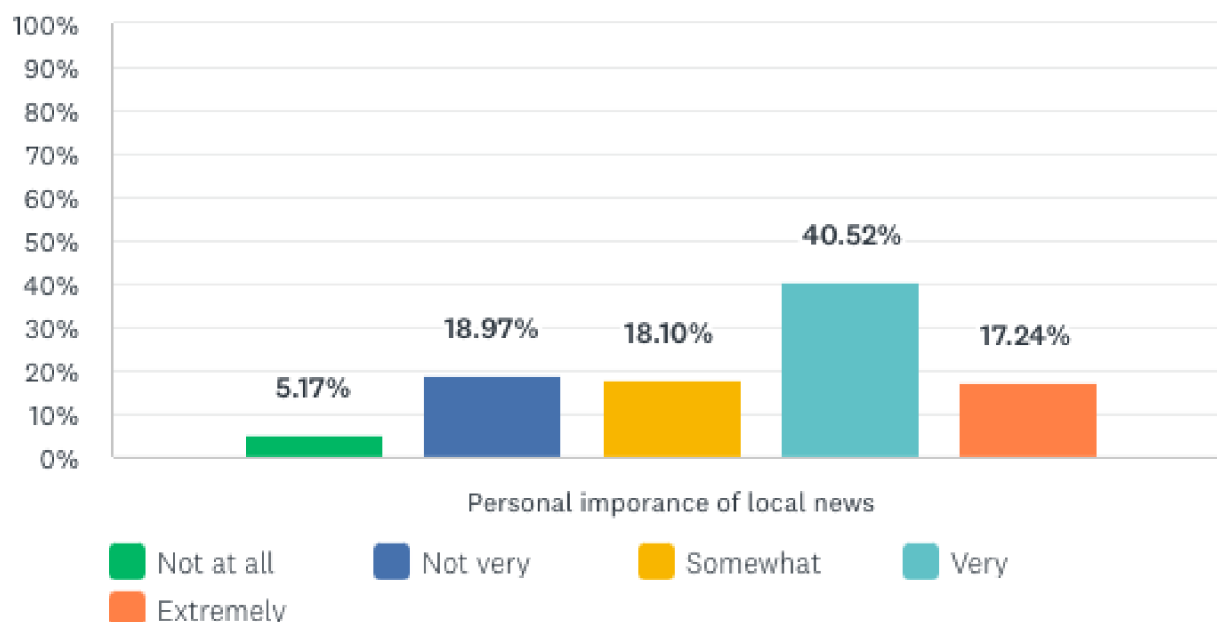
Satisfaction/concern

One survey question asked whether each topic is a significant source of either satisfaction or concern in the community. On many topics, the respondents from Trenton disagreed. The most polarizing issue was crime and safety: 33% feel crime is high and they are unsafe there, while 46% of people think the opposite.

There were four topics where at least 15% of the people strongly agreed but another at least 15% strongly disagreed:

- Crime is low/high.
- Entertainment options are good/bad.
- Jobs are satisfactory/unsatisfactory.
- The environment is clean/unclean.

Additionally, local government and politics was the issue most people had an opinion about. Only 10% said this was not important to them. Fifty percent agreed that local officials are effective and trustworthy, while 33% disagreed. The responses to these topic-based questions suggested to us that the Journal will want to be even-handed in its coverage, especially of these divisive local topics.

Some topics, however, evoked agreement:

- The community's history. A total of 32% strongly agreed and 60% at least somewhat agreed that Trenton has history and traditions to be proud of.
- Sports. A total of 58% agreed that local sports are fun and exciting to follow, while only 21% disagreed.
- Social issues. A total of 56% agreed that the community shares their values on issues like race, immigration, and abortion.
- Another survey question asked, "How important is it for you personally to read the following types of information in the Trenton Journal?"

Respondents said the most important topics of coverage were crime, sports, health care, and local government. There were large groups who were "somewhat" interested in other topics: entertainment options, local history and traditions, and local arts and culture. Twenty-six percent said that family life is "extremely important" to them.

How people use and access local news

To better understand The Trenton Journal community's information needs and the motivations that drive them to seek out local news, we asked them to name the most important reasons they follow local news. The top response was "to stay informed and be a better citizen" (37%).

After that nearly a third of respondents said they use local news for entertainment, hobbies, and sports (33%), or to "find places to go and things to do" (30%). Twenty-eight percent said local news helped them in their job and 26% said it helped them stay safe and avoid crime. These answers point to the importance of "service journalism," a simple but extremely practical and helpful practice.

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
It helps me stay informed and be a better citizen.		37.14%	39
It helps me entertain myself by following hobbies, sports or interests of mine.		33.33%	35
It helps me find places to go and things to do.		29.52%	31
I like to talk to friends, family and colleagues about what's going on in the community.		28.57%	30
It helps me in my job.		27.62%	29
It helps me know how to stay safe and avoid crime.		25.71%	27
I use it to know the local weather.		25.71%	27
It helps me solve everyday problems.		23.81%	25
It helps me save money or choose where to shop.		23.81%	25
It helps me spend time with or take care of my family.		19.05%	20

There were a few most-common ways that survey respondents discover local news in Trenton. Each of these is used every day by 3 in 10 survey respondents, and at least weekly by 50 to 60% of them:

- From friends / family.
- Google searches.
- Reading Facebook News Feed.
- Reading Facebook Groups.

Facebook is a major factor in the local news ecosystem of the survey respondents. Nearly 8 in 10 are getting local news and information there regularly. Half use Facebook for news at least once a week. Notably, the everyday news engagement is slightly stronger for Facebook Groups than for Facebook News Feed.

Frequency of use for news	Facebook News Feed	Facebook Group
Every day	23%	28%
Weekly or more	55%	51%
A few times a month or more	78%	67%

Separately, we asked people how satisfied they are with various local news sources, including some Facebook Groups. The Facebook Groups ranked higher in satisfaction than any other news source. For example, the Group named "Trenton Orbit" rated highly, with 25% saying they "love it and use it all the time" and a total of 60% saying they at least "find it useful and use it sometimes."

Another 18% "don't love it, but "use it when I have to." Only 10% avoid it and 12% never heard of or used it. The Group named "Peterson's Breaking News of Trenton" was more polarizing: 28% "love it" and 16% "dislike" it. Nonetheless, 50% of respondents find it useful sometimes and 65% at least use it when they have to. Focus group participants also reported accessing local news via Facebook, as well as from family/friends and from local television news, in particular on News 12 New Jersey.

Other social networks are used by a smaller number of respondents, suggesting either that the Journal should be cautious about devoting too many scarce resources to other platforms or that the survey and focus groups did not reach community members who use these for local news and information.

Social network	Percent using daily	Percent using 1-2 times a week or more
Instagram	19%	43%
Twitter	12%	37%
TikTok	14%	31%

Meanwhile, about 45% of survey respondents use Trenton Journal social media accounts at least weekly, and 68% visit at least a few times a month. The other newspapers we asked about — The Trentonian, Trenton Daily, and The Times of Trenton — ranked lower in satisfaction; these may be secondary sources for some of the Journal's readers.

We also asked survey respondents to name any sources that they "trust the most for useful, reliable local news and information." There were a few individual responses to that question that might suggest nontraditional sources with whom the Journal may want to build relationships:

- Luz Esperanza y Vida organization.
- East Trenton committee.
- Trenton Waves podcast.
- Street ministries.
- The Old Mill Hill Society.

What people think of Trenton Journal

Respondents generally enjoy Trenton Journal's content on social media: 21% "love" Trenton Journal social media and use it all the time. Another 41% (the most common answer) say Trenton Journal's social media is "useful and use it sometimes."

Only 12% dislike its social accounts, and 12% haven't heard of them yet. Opinions were stronger among residents of the South Ward. They have a more favorable opinion of Trent Journal's social media accounts (32% "love it", another 45% say "useful sometimes"), and they rated Trenton Journal's social media accounts as more satisfying than any other local news source.

Trenton Journal's website and emails were a bit less popular than their social media; still, a majority do find them useful. The website or emails are used by 47% at least weekly and at least 61% visit at least a few times a month. These somewhat contradictory findings should be explored in follow-up conversations with community members or further research.

Reader opinion	Trenton Journal's social media accounts	Trenton Journal's website and emails
"Love it, use it all the time"	21%	19%
"I find it useful and use it sometimes"	41%	39%
"I dislike it and avoid using it"	12%	18%
Never heard or it or used it	12%	9%

We asked the people familiar with Trenton Journal how well it does certain things. At least 60% of people think it does these things at least "fairly well":

- Is fair to all sides.
- Is neutral and doesn't take positions on issues.
- Acts as a watchdog of powerful institutions and people.
- Makes the news entertaining.
- Provides diverse points of view.
- Makes it easier to find important civic information.
- Helps people understand communities unlike their own.
- Verifies and gets the facts right.

Slightly fewer people, about 55%, think it does these things at least fairly well:

- Provides forums for community discussions,
- Reports on possible solutions to problems in society,

At the same time, a sizeable minority (about 40% of people) thought the Trenton Journal did those things poorly, so there is room to improve. As part of the research design, we devised several recommendations for each publisher based on analysis of the data from the survey and focus groups. The recommendations we presented to the Trenton Journal are below, based on both our discussions with the publishers and the analysis above.

Recommendations given to the Trenton Journal

- Create a dedicated section for posting the dates and times of upcoming municipal meetings, similar to your events page; publicize it via your newsletter and social media.
- Go one step further and cover municipal meetings regularly, even if it's simply by providing a transcript.
- Consider adding a section on your website that lists all city and state departments, the services they provide, and their contact information.
- Consider offering different sub-pages for each ward, that can be tailored to the differing concerns and interest in each.
- Engage to a greater extent on Facebook, and be present on Facebook groups that are relevant in Trenton, especially "Trenton Orbit" and "Peterson's Breaking News of Trenton."

Based on our recommendations, and given the available resources, Trenton Journal decided to make the following changes:

- Increase coverage of municipal meetings, the education system, and crime and safety.
- Create a tab on the website's resource page to house publicly available data about the city.
- Create an online directory of public officials and other power-holders in the city; increase coverage of them through profiles and interviews.

After the proposed changes had begun to be implemented, we sent a follow-up survey to the people who had filled out the survey or participated in one of the focus groups, asking them how often they visited Trenton Journal's website, how they felt about each of these changes, and for any other open-ended feedback they might provide. For each of the changes, we asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this change, and if they disagreed, what they'd like to see done instead. Again, the sample was disappointingly small (N=9), but generally positive.

Four of the nine reported visiting the website daily, while three said they visit a few times a week and one said rarely. Perhaps not surprisingly (since the changes were based on community feedback), there was overwhelming agreement with the changes that Trenton Journal is making. However, when there was disagreement there was valuable feedback, such as the suggestion to focus on neighborhoods rather than the education system, or to provide data about the percentage of rentals to ownership and information about rental building ownership as part of the publicly available data. One open-ended response stated, "I love the idea of covering municipal government and the people that are associated with it."

GREATER BLAIRSTOWN (RIDGE VIEW ECHO)

The third and final community where we conducted an information needs assessment was greater Blairstown, which includes four adjacent municipalities. As before, we asked community members how they feel about where they live, which topics they want to see covered by their local news sources, how they primarily get local news, and how those who have engaged with Ridge View Echo feel about the outlet so far.

The survey was circulated in a number of ways, including by the Ridge View Echo among its social networks; by members of the Blairstown Enhancement Committee, the organization that founded the Ridge View Echo; in popular Facebook Groups; and by printed flyers that were posted around town (primarily in Blairstown). Because of the demographics of greater Blairstown, the survey was offered only in English and the two focus groups were also conducted in English. We did not have the problem of bot-generated or false responses in greater Blairstown to the same extent that we did in the other two communities. The final number of survey responses was 170. (As before, please keep in mind that all of the survey questions were optional, so the numbers reported often do not add up to 170.)

Where survey respondents live

Blairstown	Hardwick	Knowlton	Newton	Frelinghuysen
61	27	17	5	30

Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the survey respondents live in Blairstown, followed by Frelinghuysen, Hardwick, Knowlton, and Newton. This may suggest the order in which the Ridge View Echo should prioritize resources by town – at least in the beginning — as one could argue that more coverage of a town like Knowlton could attract more readers from there.

The graph below shows how long survey respondents have lived in their town. Half of the survey respondents (49%) have lived in the area for 25+ years, showing a robust depth of connection to the community. Only 4% had moved to their town less than 1 year ago.

The focus group respondents also tended to be people who have lived in the area for a decade or longer.

How long have you lived in the area?

Answered: 156   Skipped: 14
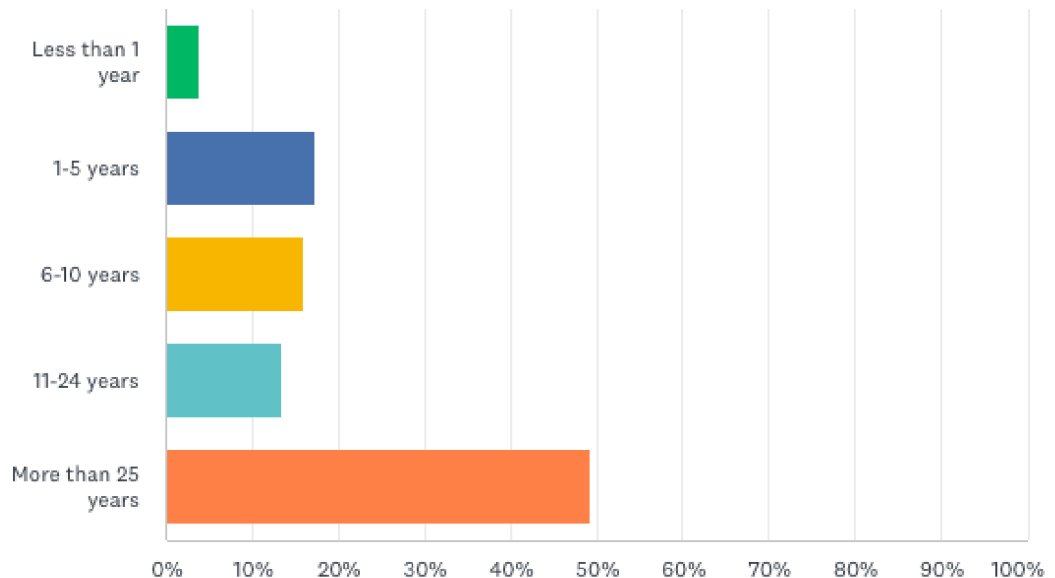
The publisher of Ridge View Echo requested that we do some further analysis on the survey responses, based on four independent variables of interest: age of respondent, how long they've lived in the area, the town in which they live, and how they voted in the most recent presidential or local election (i.e. political affiliation). That more granular analysis is interspersed throughout.

Views about the community and life

Overall, survey respondents like living in greater Blairstown: 27% of people said that their town is an "excellent" place to live, while 84% said at least "good." Words most-commonly used to describe the area include:

- Community.
- Rural.
- Quiet.
- Good.
- Beautiful.
- Peaceful.
- Nice.
- Caring.
- Friendly.

The things respondents most strongly liked about the area included a low crime rate, it being a good place to raise a family, and the area's proud history and traditions. Almost half of respondents "strongly agree" with those characteristics, and nearly 8 in 10 at least "somewhat agree." The top concerns expressed related to the number of entertainment options, lack of jobs, frustration with local politicians, and the arts and culture scene. But even on each of those topics, more people were satisfied than dissatisfied.

The graph below shows the length of time living in the community mapped against how people rated their community. In general there is a high level of satisfaction, with very few respondents rating the place they live as less than good or excellent. Satisfaction was highest among people who have lived there between 11 and 24 years.

My community is...			HowLongInArea			Total
			Less than 10 years	11-24 years	More than 25 years	
	Excellent	Count	14	7	21	42
		%	24.6%	33.3%	27.6%	27.3%
	Good	Count	29	11	46	86
		%	50.9%	52.4%	60.5%	55.8%
	Fair	Count	11	1	6	18
		%	19.3%	4.8%	7.9%	11.7%
	Poor	Count	2	2	2	6
		%	3.5%	9.5%	2.6%	3.9%
	Terrible	Count	1	0	1	2
		%	1.8%	0.0%	1.3%	1.3%
Total		Count	57	21	76	154
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

When satisfaction is analyzed in terms of the age of the respondent, we see that, as above, people in general are happy with their community, with very few rating it "poor" or "terrible." In addition, happiness with one's community increases as respondents' ages increased.

My community is…		What is your age?				
		18-29	30-39	40-59	60+	Total
Excellent	Count	4	10	11	17	42
	%	11.4%	20.4%	35.5%	43.5%	27.3%
Good	Count	20	31	15	20	86
	%	57.1%	63.3%	48.4%	51.3%	55.8%
Fair	Count	7	5	5	1	18
	%	20.0%	10.2%	16.1%	2.6%	11.7%
Poor	Count	3	2	0	1	6
	%	8.6%	4.1%	0.0%	2.6%	3.9%
Terrible	Count	1	1	0	0	2
	%	2.9%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%
Total	Count	35	49	31	39	154
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

We also looked at greater Blairstown respondents' level of community satisfaction crossed with their political affiliation. Democrats felt markedly less optimistic than Republicans or those who abstain or vote split tickets. This may have to do with the fact that, according to one of the publishers of Ridge View Echo, the conservative element in the community is prominent in the public sphere, especially loud and partisan online.

My community is...		Which of the following best describes how you voted in elections from 2016 to present?					Total
		No answer	I did not vote in any elections	I voted for candidates belonging to both or other parties	I voted only or mostly for Democratic candidates	I voted only or mostly for Republican candidates	
Excellent	Count	5	1	9	8	19	42
	%	50.0%	6.3%	34.6%	20.0%	30.6%	27.3%
Good	Count	4	10	13	24	35	86
	%	40.0%	62.5%	50.0%	60.0%	56.5%	55.8%
Fair	Count	1	3	2	7	5	18
	%	10.0%	18.8%	7.7%	17.5%	8.1%	11.7%
Poor	Count	0	2	2	0	2	6
	%	0.0%	12.5%	7.7%	0.0%	3.2%	3.9%
Terrible	Count	0	0	0	1	1	2
	%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%	1.6%	1.3%
Total	Count	10	16	26	40	62	154
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Passions and worries

Some questions in the survey explored what respondents enjoy or worry about in their own lives. This information can be used by publishers to better understand the human experience of their audience, and to create content that feels more personally relevant to what is on their minds.

When asked to name their personal passions, the most common survey responses in greater Blairstown were:

- Reading
- Hiking
- Music
- Gardening
- Traveling
- Environment

Focus group participants named friends and family, cooking, nature, religion, yoga, and personal finance as topics that they felt passionate about.

When asked to name their biggest worries, the most common survey responses were:

- Health.
- Children.
- Safety.
- Money.
- Family.
- Taxes.

Focus group participants worried about crime, political division, and their children's schools.

Keeping up with the news and topics of concern

Nearly 70 percent of survey respondents said it is "very important" or "extremely important" to keep up with local news. Meanwhile, nearly half (45%) said it is harder today to keep up with local news compared to three years ago; 31% said it was easier. The focus group participants also felt strongly about following local news and events, and expressed frustration that certain local information was either difficult to find or had negative political overtones.

When we look at the desire to keep up with local news by age, the survey respondents confirm what other surveys found: as people age they consider keeping up with the news more important. A large majority of the survey respondents in greater Blairstown who are over the age of 30 consider keeping up with local news to be extremely or very important – with zero over the age of 40 saying it was "not very" or "not at all" important. This is good news for a hyperlocal venture like Ridge View Echo, which are looking to fill the information gaps that exist there.

How important is it to you personally to keep up with news and information about your local community?		Ages 18-29	Ages30-39	Ages40-59	Ages60+
Extremely important	Count	1	12	7	9
	%	3.0%	24.5%	22.6%	23.1%
Very Important	Count	16	23	18	22
	%	48.5%	47.0%	58.1%	56.4%
Somewhat important	Count	7	9	6	8
	%	21.2%	18.4%	19.4%	20.5%
Not very important	Count	8	4	0	0
	%	24.2%	8.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Not at all important	Count	1	1	0	0
	%	3.0%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	Count	33	49	31	39
		100%	100%	100%	100%

There are a few most-common ways that people in greater Blairstown discover local news. Each item below is reported to be used every day by 4 in 10 people, and at least weekly by 60 to 70% of people, to find local news and information:

- From friends/family.
- Google searches.
- Reading Facebook News Feed.
- Reading Facebook Groups.

Social media did not figure as prominently among the focus group participants, but they did mention using Google searches for local news and information. The focus group participants also discussed difficulty in finding information about basic goings-on around town, like community events and municipal meetings. Meanwhile, about 50% of survey respondents visit the Ridge View Echo site at least weekly, and 71% visit a few times a month.

Focus group participants lamented the lack of a paper newspaper and wondered whether Ridge View Echo would ever consider publishing in print. This conversation led to a discussion about the visibility of the Ridge View Echo as a news source without a print edition. While participants recognized that printing is expensive, they suggested at least a semi-regular print publication would go a long way toward raising awareness about the Ridge View Echo.

Topics for news coverage

There was strong interest among survey participants in the "hard news" topics of crime, local politics, and health care. Respondents are also looking for ways to connect with the small-town feel of their area through celebrations of history/traditions, local community groups, and hearing stories about people who live in their community. Finally, there was a bundle of topics related to things to do and enjoy — raising a family, environmental beauty, outdoor recreation, restaurants/bars, entertainment, and arts & culture, in which respondents expressed interest.

The focus group participants talked more about coverage of the school system, and voiced frustration about the current lack of coverage of municipal meetings, specifically those that discuss how taxpayer money is spent. They also voiced interest in a local "Angie's List," that could connect them with contractors and other service providers.

Desire for Ridge View Echo coverage

Because Ridge View Echo had published several editions at the time of our research, we wanted to ask about familiarity with the outlet, and thoughts about its performance thus far. Of 154 respondents, 56% were "somewhat familiar," 32% were "very familiar," and 12% were "not at all familiar." The relatively high level of familiarity likely has to do with the fact that the survey was circulated by people close to the outlet, but also shows that they are capable of reaching people outside their immediate orbit and that there is room for growth.

The survey also asked about specific topics of interest, ranging from sports to health care to education. For each, respondents could respond on a scale ranging from extremely to not at all important (or "don't know"). We were then able to look at each of these topics by age, town of residence, political affiliation, etc. For example, we learned (perhaps not surprisingly) that respondents aged 18 to 29 are least interested in news about local government or politics (they were least likely of all age groups to rate it "extremely important" and most likely to say "not at all important"), while 80% of respondents over 70 rated such news "extremely important." Another example – this one more surprising – was that respondents between the ages of 60-69 were the most likely to say that news about the environment and pollution were "extremely important" (57%), while only 37% of respondents ages 18-29 said the same.

The amount of space required to report the full breadth of findings exceeds what is available here, but all of this information has been given to the publishers and they are now able to hone their coverage based on this analysis. In an ideal world, they would be able to conduct a similar survey on a yearly basis to understand how these preferences change as their audience grows.

Role of social media

Facebook is a major factor among the respondents in greater Blairstown. Nearly 8 in 10 people are getting local news and information there regularly. Notably, news engagement is about the same for Facebook News Feed or Facebook Groups, suggesting that Ridge View Echo should promote its stories and reach readers through both News Feed posts and Facebook Groups.

Frequency of use for news	Facebook News Feed	Facebook Group
Every day	41%	36%
Weekly or more	63%	63%
A few times a month or more	78%	79%

In particular, the Facebook Group "Goings On in the Blairstown Area" is ranked as the most satisfactory source of local news. A total of 30% of respondents said they "love it and use it all the time," while 72% "find it useful and use it sometimes." Another 20% say they "don't love it, but use it when they have to." Only 18% of people dislike or haven't heard of this Facebook Group. Other Facebook Groups, including but not limited to "What's Happening in Blairstown" and "Blairstown News", are used at least sometimes by about 70% of respondents.

Advertising effectiveness

Ridge View Echo is supported in part by advertising, and wanted to know what its existing audience thought of the ads it had placed so far. Fifty-nine percent of respondents said they "find the advertising on the site interesting and relevant," and 60% said they "would like to see ads from more local businesses on the site." Further, 58% said they "are more likely to shop at a business that advertises on the site," and more than a third of the respondents (36%) said that an ad on the site had led them to make a purchase or take an action over the past year. This is useful data for a startup like Ridge View Echo to take to both current and potential advertisers.

How people use local news

We asked people what are the most important reasons they follow local news. The top response was "to stay informed and be a better citizen" (57%). This suggests that Ridge View Echo's coverage of core civic activities of local government and public affairs should be prominent. The second answer was "find places to go and things to do" (46%) — which points to the importance of "service journalism" that is simple but extremely practical and personally helpful to the individual.

A significant number of respondents also said they follow local news in order to "talk to friends and family about what's going on in the community," and that they like to entertain themselves by following hobbies and interests in the news. This suggests that paying attention to the enjoyable news and events is something greater Blairstown readers want — not just hard news reporting but a celebration of the fun and interesting things happening in town.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
It helps me stay informed and be a better citizen	56.71%	93
It helps me find places to go and things to do	46.34%	76
I like to talk to friends, family and colleagues about what's going on in the community	35.37%	58
It helps me entertain myself by following hobbies, sports or interests of mine	29.27%	48
It helps me spend time with or take care of my family	23.78%	39
It helps me know how to stay safe and avoid crime	23.17%	38
It helps me save money or choose where to shop	21.95%	36
It helps me solve everyday problems	17.07%	28
I use it to know the local weather	17.07%	28
It helps me in my job	15.24%	25

Comparing satisfaction with news sources

Finally, we asked survey respondents to compare their satisfaction with several different local news sources. Respondents reported being most satisfied with the local news they get from several different Facebook Groups, followed by Ridge View Echo. Instagram is also fairly popular as a local news and information source, with 50% finding it useful and using it at least sometimes. The other news outlets we asked about — Express Times, New Jersey Herald, The Press, and Pocono Record — ranked lower in satisfaction, suggesting that these may be secondary sources for some portion of the audience, but not strong competitors.

Recommendations given to Ridge View Echo

Below are the recommendations we gave, based on both our discussions with the publishers and the analysis above.

- Create a dedicated section for posting the dates and times of upcoming municipal meetings, similar to your Events page; publicize it via your newsletter and social media.
- Go one step further and cover municipal meetings regularly, even if it's simply by providing a transcript.
- Get more involved on Facebook, both on the feed and in groups.
- Continue to cover feel-good lifestyle issues in addition to hard news.
- Consider adding a section that allows people to recommend service providers; maybe service providers could recommend themselves for a fee (similar to advertising but in a dedicated section)? Could list it as a Directory similar to the others that you have under Resources.

Based on our recommendations, and given the available resources, the Ridge View Echo decided to make the following changes:

- Hire an associate director to provide more service journalism and promote Ridge View Echo in the community.
- Increase coverage of local school board communities (1 high school and 3 elementary schools).
- Increase coverage of local events in Frelinghuysen, Hardwick and Knowlton townships.

After the proposed changes had begun to be implemented, we sent a follow-up survey to the people who had filled out the survey or participated in one of the focus groups, asking them how often they visit Ridge View Echo's website and for their opinion about each of the proposed changes. As with the others, we included an open-ended question for any other suggestions. The response in greater Blairstown was better than in Paterson or Trenton but still low (N=14). We attribute the lackluster response rates to a lack of financial incentive and to the timing of the surveys, which were sent out during the busy holiday season.

Greater Blairstown respondents reported visiting Ridge View Echo's website regularly; roughly half said they visit a few times a week and half said a few times a month (recall that they publish new content every two weeks). An overwhelming majority agreed with the changes they are making – again not surprising given that the suggestions for these changes came from the community. Additional suggestions for other topics that they'd also like to see more coverage of included state and county politics, the local arts scene, local crime, and success stories of local businesses.

The respondents also gave constructive suggestions for further expansion, including a "letters to the editor" section, expanding to more adjacent towns, and more publicity to reach a wider audience.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Lessons and future work

One lesson learned was that it is difficult to "parachute" in to a community and expect to get a robust response to surveys or focus groups. Even though our publishers – who themselves are deeply rooted in their communities – assisted in recruiting people, we likely could have benefitted from more face time in the locations and more creative outreach to bring people to the table.

Despite the challenges, all three publishers were deeply appreciative of the opportunity to better understand their audiences at the formative early stage of their development. Our hope is that the connection they have forged with their audience will continue to become an iterative feedback loop. To make an even greater and lasting connection, similar research (surveys, focus groups) would be conducted in six months or a year, and yet another round of improvements would be undertaken.

APPENDIX A

Demographic info for greater Blairstown

	Pop.	Median household income ($)	Race: % white	Home ownership (% who own their home)	# of homes	Age 65 or older, %	Age 18-64, %	Homes with a computer, %	B.A. degree or higher
Blairstown	5,736	107,439	94.8	92.5	2,092	21.2	61.7	96.1	43.1
Frelinghuysen	2,085	106,447	93.0	88.0	708	20.0	61.0	n.a.	45.5
Hardwick	1,519	95,625	91.0	89.0	527	18.0	60.0	n.a.	36.4
Knowlton	2,941	93,092	89.0	87.0	1,217	18.0	64.0	n.a.	27.5
Total or average	12,281	100,651	92.0	89.1	4,544	19.3	61.7	n.a.	38.1

Demographic info for Paterson, NJ

Population	157,794
Median household income ($)	45,141
Race: % white	27.2
Race: % Black/African American	25.7
Race: % Hispanic/Latinx	61.4
Home ownership (% who own their home)	26.0
# of households	45,627
Age: % 18-64 years	61.3
Age: % 65 or older	11.7
Homes with a computer, %	87.0
Homes with broadband internet, %	76.2
B.A. degree or higher, %	11.5

Demographic info for greater Trenton

Population	90,457
Median household income ($)	37,002
Race: % white	35.3
Race: % Black/African American	48.7
Race: % Hispanic/Latinx	37.2
Home ownership (% who own their home)	38.4
# of households	28,581
Age: % 18-64 years	62.3
Age: % 65 or older	11.3
Homes with a computer, %	84.2
Homes with broadband internet, %	68.1
B.A. degree or higher, %	14.2

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