



California Local News Fellowship:

Case Study 5: Rural Newsrooms

September 2025

Background

The [California Local News Fellowship](#) is a state-funded program designed to increase the capacity of local newsrooms and support early career journalists. The ultimate goal is to ensure that California communities, particularly underserved communities, have reliable access to high quality news and information so that they can make informed decisions about matters that affect their lives and the health of their communities. Impact Architects is conducting a series of case studies to highlight examples of value that California Local News Fellows add to California communities. This is the fourth case study, focusing on coverage of rural communities in the state.

The California Local News Fellowship seeks to strengthen access to news and information for all Californians. A crucial part of that mandate is to serve California's rural populations. About 2.3 million California residents, roughly 6% of the population, live in rural areas, according to the [Public Policy Institute of California](#). California Local News fellows are distributed all across the state, with several placed in the most rural counties of California, particularly north of the state capital, Sacramento.

California Local News Fellows provide coverage in **17 counties whose populations are at least 10% rural.**



The counting of fellows includes coverage area, regardless of where the newsroom is physically located.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

This case study focuses on the common challenges faced by three fellows and newsrooms in rural counties, as well as the particular value they have provided to the communities they serve.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines a rural area as a census tract that [contains fewer than 2,000 housing units or 5,000 residents](#). The percent of the population living in rural areas varies in the counties in which the fellows work. The fellows and counties highlighted in this case study are:

- **Yucheng Tang, Chico Sol, Butte County.** Chico is the county seat of Butte County, which is about 1,600 square miles and has a population [just over 200,000](#). A total of 21% of residents live in parts of the county designated as rural by the Census Bureau.
- **Lingzi Chen, Lake County News, Lake County.** Lake County, with a population of about [67,000 and covering 1,300 square miles](#), is less densely populated than Butte County. About 41% of the population lives in a rural area.
- **Francisco Manuel Martínezcuello, The Trinity Journal, Trinity County.** Trinity County is the most sparsely populated and most rural of the three counties. It has the largest land area of the counties analyzed here, [about 3,200 square miles, and also has the smallest population, which is about 15,400](#). It is entirely rural.

Challenges for Rural Newsrooms

Rural newsrooms face challenges typical of most news organizations: they struggle with capacity and resources to continue providing local news and information. But these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that population centers are geographically dispersed. In the case of

Butte County, the population center of Chico is geographically disconnected from the rest of the county, even though they share the same county government and have many of the same resource needs. In the case of Trinity County, there is no real population center. The geography makes reporting more time and resource intensive, as reaching communities necessitates more travel.

Lingzi Chen, the Fellow at Lake County News, notes that she and her editor are the only full-time employees at the outlet, and they are tasked with covering two city governments, in addition to the county government, all of which are spread out over a large geographic area. **"I think the lack of human resources and the journalists to population ratio is the basic challenge in covering a place like Lake County,"** she said.

Rural newsrooms are also under greater pressure with the decline of local news sources. When asked how their newsrooms fit into the local news and information ecosystem, two organizational leaders responded with reference to what has been lost and what that means for their organization. Leslie Layton — managing editor of Chico Sol, a digital news site — said that while Butte County is not considered a "news desert," it feels like one. She notes that the public radio option and the alt weekly, local institutions, have cut back their content, as has the daily paper, the Chico Enterprise-Record. Similarly, Elizabeth Larson founded the Lake County News, a digital news site, in 2006 in response to the earlier acquisition of the Lake County Record-Bee by MediaNews Group (Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund). The third, Editor and Publisher of the Trinity Journal Wayne Agner, responded: **"We are the news and information environment."** The Trinity Journal is the sole local media outlet for the county.

Building Relationships

Fellows serving rural communities also said they face a shared challenge with respect to community members' perception of media. Butte County is mostly conservative, as both of its state representatives are Republican, as is its U.S. House representative. Yucheng Tang, the Fellow for Chico Sol, said that because the outlet is labeled as "progressive," it is sometimes hard for him to get conservatives in the community to speak with him. **"I want to approach both sides of stories, but sometimes it's hard for me to get access to the non-progressive side, or non-liberal side voices,"** he said. Tang described how he's sought to represent a variety of perspectives in his reporting, something local community members have expressed appreciation for.

Francisco Manuel Martínezcuello, Fellow at the Trinity Journal, said that while the Journal isn't considered "progressive," he has faced challenges building relationships with the Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes (Native Americans compose about 2% of the population in Trinity County) because of general distrust of the media.

General distrust in media could be compounded by the fact that the fellows are new arrivals in places with small populations where people are more familiar with one another. However, fellows report using their newcomer status to their advantage to help build trust. As new arrivals, fellows say that simply showing up to public meetings and public events helps them become part of the communities. The basic principles of good reporting, including being an active presence in the community and reporting accurately and fairly (which are also a common theme across the California Local News Fellows case studies), are helping the fellows develop relationships in their new communities. Martínezcuello said that one of the ways he has earned the trust of community members is by simply participating in community events. **“I’m always out there in the community on Saturdays and Sundays, even on my days off,”** he said. **“If there’s an event on Saturday, I’ll show up and take pictures and just talk to people.”** Martínezcuello, a retired marine, is also part of Trinity County’s search and rescue team.

Lingzi Chen said that early in her tenure, a government official didn’t respond to her emails. She asked the official why, in person, and he responded that he didn’t trust the media. Chen responded by saying that she wants to be responsible and accurate and invited corrections if anything is inaccurate or unfair. This helped pave the way for a relationship. **“I think there’s an advantage to being one of the few reporters here in that all the government officials know you,”** she said. **“They know that you’re present. And it’s hard to not respond to you.”**

California Local News Fellows want to hear the perspectives of all residents because doing so allows them to provide the most well-rounded and useful information to their communities. Having two years to integrate into the community is proving to be valuable for building long-term trust.

Community Value and Impact

Building relationships with local communities is allowing fellows to write and share nuanced, in-depth stories, reinforcing the value of reliable local news and helping to create more informed and engaged communities. Reporting by fellows based in rural newsrooms covers a variety of topics, and as the primary reporters at their organizations, each fellow does a little bit of everything.

At Chico Sol, Yucheng Tang is a general assignment reporter who covers everything from city council meetings to housing to the environment. He writes daily stories as well as features. When asked what stories he’s telling that otherwise wouldn’t be told, he mentioned a series of stories about an arson incident. The series captures what both Tang and his editor characterize as his greatest strength: deep engagement with multiple perspectives. The series of stories about the arson ultimately turned into a question about the community’s past. The structure that burned down was the Bidwell Mansion, named after John Bidwell, who is credited as the founder of Chico. Regarding Bidwell and what would happen with the structure after the fire, Tang wrote:

"Some see [Bidwell] as a progressive settler and pioneer, while others regard him as an exploitative colonizer. The essence of the argument is about whether a controversial figure like Bidwell deserves to have his former residence memorialized in this way — and whether his story should be told with more nuance."

Tang solicited and presented multiple perspectives as part of his series, and at least one commenter offered recognition of the work, suggesting that decisionmaking about what to do with the site should follow community conversation: **"I really appreciate Yucheng Tang's balanced reporting on this controversial story. A series of discussions should precede any action on the site. Our understanding has evolved a lot from the time of John Bidwell, our actions should as well."** The comment suggests that Tang's approach is encouraging civic participation. The series has led to deep engagement with a complex topic that Chico Sol wouldn't have been able to cover as extensively without the news fellow.

[In the fire aftermath, Bidwell Mansion's future still unclear. April 13, 2025](#)

[Carlson serving time for Bidwell mansion arson. April 18, 2025.](#)

[Chico State historian dug deep to tell the Bidwell story. April 24, 2025.](#)

Lingzi Chen and Elizabeth Larson, her editor, are the only two staff members at Lake County News. Out of necessity, they have to prioritize their time and energy toward what they view as the most meaningful and important stories for Lake County residents. That has meant a lot of close coverage of government activity, such as spending and resource allocation. As a result of Chen's presence, this coverage has increased and spurred participation in local civic issues.

In March 2025, Chen wrote a story about a new fire hazard zone map from the state, which expanded high risk zones throughout Lake County. The new map would affect the city's resources by shifting more responsibility to the local government for addressing wildfires, and it would affect residents by potentially leading to higher insurance rates. Her initial coverage provided a thorough overview of the implications of the map. **"The map itself is a complicated thing, so my job was to explain those things, make sense of it, tell a better story, a more comprehensive or thorough story, so that the public understands,"** she said.

Chen also referenced the 90-day public comment period that started a few weeks before the article was published. As the end of the public comment period was approaching, Chen reached out to local officials to get an update, and she was informed that there was little public participation. She responded by making the lack of comment part of the story. She wrote: "Nearly three months after the map's release, both the cities of Lakeport and Clearlake report receiving no public input." After the article was published and the deadline was approaching, public comment began to come in. And according to Chen, **"almost all of those letters refer to my**

articles." Engagement followed laying out the details of a complex topic and reminding communities about opportunities to engage with local decisionmakers.

[Cal Fire's new fire hazard map expands 'very high' zones across Lake County; local officials express concern. March 20, 2025.](#)

[Public comment period for proposed fire hazard map expanding 'very high' zones in Lake County closes next week. May 7, 2025.](#)

[Lake County governments adopt state's new fire hazard map: 'very high' severity zones expanded by 14,000 acres. July 17, 2025.](#)

Martínezcuello is the only one of the three fellows hired to cover a specific beat. He focuses on the environment, science, climate, and Indigenous communities in Trinity County. And specifically, Martíñezcuello's primary focus is to produce a multi-media and multi-part series about restoration efforts for the Trinity River, which brings all of those topic areas together.

The topic of river restoration is complex. [Almost three-fourths of Trinity County, and thus much of the river, is under federal management](#), which means that Martíñezcuello must build relationships with local and federal officials for information. Indigenous communities are deeply involved with the [Trinity River Restoration Program](#), and the Hoopa Valley Tribe and Yurok Tribe have long relied on the river and its wildlife. Martíñezcuello has worked to build relationships in these communities as well. Editor and Publisher Wayne Agner said that this reporting project has "been in the back of my mind forever," and the newsroom is now able to do it with Martíñezcuello on staff. **"This is a divisive issue," Agner said. "It needed a deeper dive than what we've been able to do. . . I have no pre-conceived notion on what it will show or reveal, but Martíñezcuello has been building relationships and will start pulling stories together."**

Martíñezcuello is similarly eager to see the results of his work in Trinity County. He also views this series as just one part of how he approaches his current and future career as a journalist: **"I feel that urgency, and it keeps me going and pushing myself to write these deep stories, to go deeper, and to ask more questions and get more voices and listen to the people in the community, because they matter."**