

Our Town: Community Journalism for Rural Sustainability

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Summary:

Most rural Oklahomans live in news deserts with limited or no access to local reporting about issues that affect their communities. As newspapers struggle to fund their operations, communities may lack relevant local information to inform decisions, support local engagement, and connect with the broader community. Meanwhile, the decline in reliable news and reliance on social media fuel the spread of misinformation and underscore the need for improved media literacy education. Our project builds on community-identified priorities to increase rural Oklahomans' access to news, strengthen local ties, support existing news organizations, and bolster rural teens' media literacy. We will design, implement, evaluate, and scale a citizen journalism curriculum for rural Oklahoma high schoolers. This proposal describes a pilot program in Greer and McCurtain Counties, implemented through partnerships with OSU's School of Media & Strategic Communications and the O'Colly student newspaper; the Rural Scholar program; KOSU Public Radio; and Crosswinds News. We will create a unique, eight-week citizen journalism training program for 11th- and 12th-grade students at Mangum High School in Greer County and Idabel High School in McCurtain County. Students will receive concurrent-enrollment credits and college-readiness mentorship and will produce open-access stories to support community and state news ecosystems. The pilot will allow us to test outcomes, refine implementation and establish feasibility to scale the program.