

IMPACT ARCHITECTS

California Local News Fellowship:

Case Study 2: San Diego

December 2024

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. Since 2023, the California Local News Fellowship has awarded 76 fellowships over two cohorts, covering over half of California's counties that represent the vast majority of the state's population. The following case study will be the first of several that highlight the ways in which fellows are making a difference in their communities through their journalism.

Residents in the city of San Diego have plenty of news options. The city is home to a legacy newspaper, public media, community media, Spanish language media, multiple digital nonprofits, and several television stations. And yet, through conversations with the three California Local News Fellows based in San Diego, it's evident that there's a need for additional reporting capacity in San Diego. Jamie Self, Managing Editor at the investigative news outlet inewssource, said "you'd think the media ecosystem is fairly robust, but there are many communities throughout San Diego that don't feel their issues are represented in the media," and "a lot of areas around the county don't get much coverage at all." Geographically, the South Bay area of San Diego County and Imperial County, which neighbors San Diego County to the east, are undercovered. And community and ethnic media is present but underresourced, leaving large portions of the population undercovered.

The three California Local News Fellows in San Diego address these needs. Philip Salata is a fellow at inewssource. His investigative journalism focuses on bringing accountability journalism to Imperial County, where it is lacking. Kori Suzuki works at KPBS, San Diego's public media outlet and affiliate for NPR and PBS. Suzuki's multimedia journalism is similarly meant to expand the reach of KPBS to serve residents in the South Bay and Imperial County. Residents of Imperial County have always received radio and television signals from KPBS, but without a great deal of local reporting. And Macy Meinhardt is based at San Diego Voice and Viewpoint, a community media outlet focused on San Diego's Black populations. She is currently the only full-time staff writer for the outlet, and the organization's local news output has increased greatly since her appointment.

The California Local News Fellowship is designed to add capacity to local news organizations, provide experience and professional development for the fellow, and generate more accessible and relevant journalism for California communities. Because there are three fellows in San Diego, we have the opportunity to situate them and their organizations within the broader local news and information ecosystem. And because the fellows each meet a specific need within the ecosystem, we can then understand how and why their roles and their journalism can have a lasting impact on California communities.

The News and Information Ecosystem in San Diego and Imperial Counties

Communities

San Diego and Imperial Counties differ significantly in their demographic make up, public resources and institutions, and information providers. San Diego County has a population of about 3.2 million.¹ By contrast, the much more rural Imperial County is home to 179,702 people.²

In addition to being more rural, Imperial County's population is also predominantly Hispanic or Latino, with just over 86% of people identifying as such. And nearly 75% of Imperial County residents age five or older speak Spanish at home.³ In San Diego County, 43.1% of residents identify as White non-Hispanic. The next largest racial group is the county's Hispanic or Latino population (34.9%). The county is also home to a larger proportion of residents identifying as Asian (13.4%) than the U.S. average (6.4%).

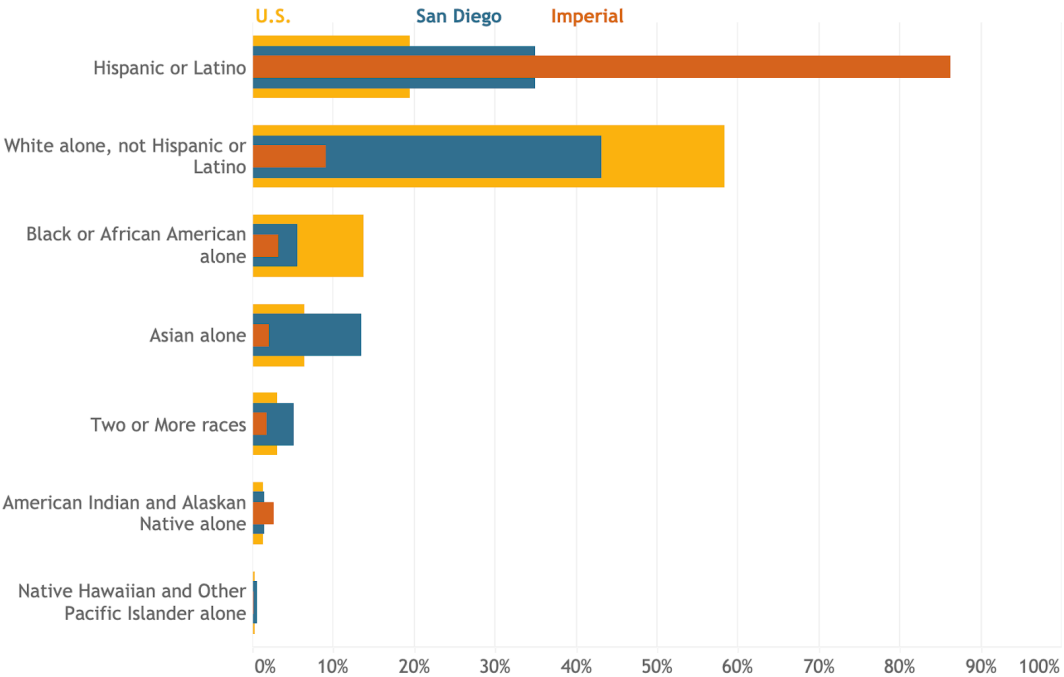
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<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html>

² United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Imperial County, California; San Diego County, California; United States."

³ United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Imperial County, California; San Diego County, California; United States."

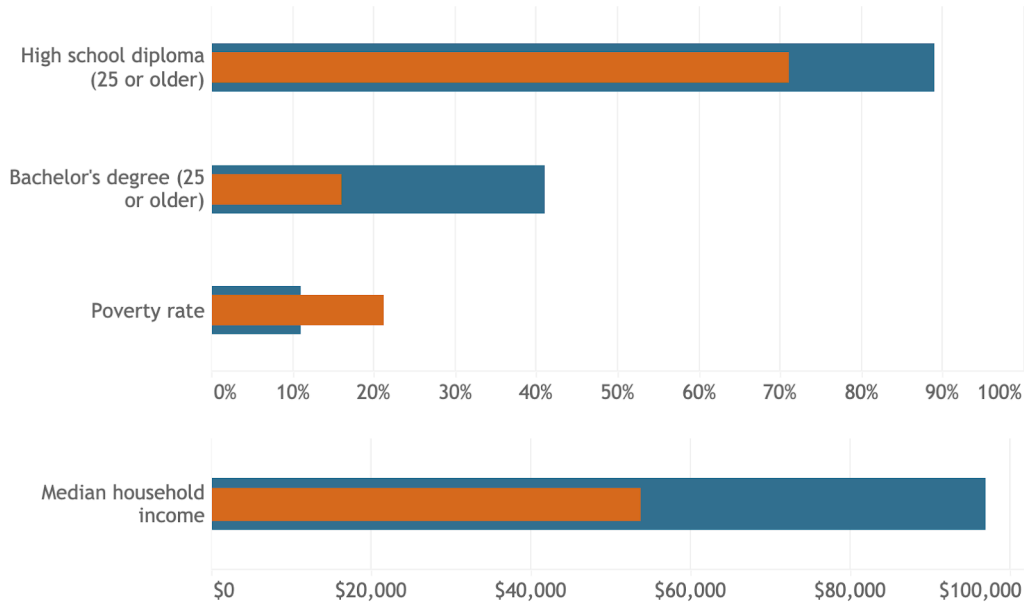
The Hispanic or Latino populations in San Diego and Imperial counties are proportionally much larger than the U.S.



However, when it comes to education and income measures, the neighboring counties look starkly different. Nearly 89% of San Diego County residents age 25 or older have a high school degree or higher, similar to the national average. But only 71.3% of Imperial County residents age 25 or older are high school graduates. And while 41.0% of San Diego County residents age 25 or older have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, more than six percentage points above the national number, only 15.9% of Imperial County residents have a Bachelor’s degree or higher. San Diego County is also significantly more wealthy than Imperial County overall. Median household income in 2022 dollars is \$96,974, more than \$20,000 higher than the national average (\$74,149) and more than \$40,000 higher than that of Imperial County (\$53,847). More than a fifth of Imperial County residents are living in poverty, according to Census data, roughly double that of San Diego County (10.7%) and all U.S. residents across the country (11.5%).⁴

⁴ United States Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Imperial County, California; San Diego County, California; United States.”

Community measures regarding education and income between **San Diego County** and **Imperial County** are starkly different.



News and information providers

Understanding the makeup of the two counties is critical context for understanding the news and information landscape. By identifying county demographics, communities, and resources, we can begin to understand who is or is not being served by the existing information landscape, what barriers to access might exist, and where there are notable gaps.

We found 46 news organizations located in San Diego County and seven in Imperial. In both counties, most news providers are both print and digital publications, making up 65.2% of San Diego County’s 46 information providers and five of Imperial’s seven. A large proportion of San Diego County’s information providers are independent for-profit organizations (43.5%) though there’s also a significant presence of media affiliated with national broadcast chains or owned by large or regional newspaper chains with holdings in multiple states (41.3%).

	Imperial County	San Diego County
Organization type		
Nonprofit	0	4
Independent for profit	5	20
National broadcast chain	2	6
National newspaper chain	0	13
Public media	0	3
Medium		
Digital only	0	4
Print and digital	5	30
Print only	0	1
Radio	0	3
Television	2	8

The county also has strong public media and three nonprofit newspapers — inewssource, Times of San Diego, and Voice of San Diego. The county is home to a number of outlets serving specific communities, including news outlets geared towards Black residents like The San Diego Voice and Viewpoint, a mix of national broadcast affiliates and local print and digital newspapers providing Spanish-language coverage, an Indigenous owned and operated radio station (KPRI), and several magazines and newspapers serving Asian American communities with English and in-language content. Three of the seven outlets we found in Imperial County are community media, providing Spanish-language local news: a local Univision affiliate, a local UniMás affiliate, and the Adelante Valle newspaper. The four other news providers based in Imperial County communities are independent for-profit print and digital newspapers.

While it's clear Imperial County has far fewer news organizations than San Diego, we also know that many San Diego-based newsrooms offer at least some coverage of Imperial County communities. However, given the differences between the two counties, it's difficult to know how much news organizations in neighboring counties are serving the specific needs of Imperial County residents. And while the county has a much smaller population than its neighbor to the west, longer distances between communities in the more rural county could make it challenging for a small number of local outlets to provide in-depth coverage of every community. And even in San Diego County, which appears to have a robust news ecosystem at the county level, there is variation in coverage within smaller communities or neighborhoods. Conversations with fellows and their newsrooms indicated that some communities, particularly those that have historically been underserved by media, tell them that they feel local outlets often do not cover topics and issues important to them.

Fellows in the News Ecosystem

Like all California Local News Fellows, the three in San Diego are early career journalists. They bring diverse experiences, backgrounds, and interests that inform their work in their newsrooms and communities. Despite being early in their careers, our conversations with the fellows and organizations indicate that the fellowship is playing a significant role in the San Diego region's local news and information ecosystem. While the organizations are all different, a common theme emerged over the course of the conversations: Each fellow has a strength in relationship and trust building, which has resulted in journalism focused on accountability, impact, and positive change.

San Diego Voice & Viewpoint: "More substantive and directly local"

Latanya West, Managing Editor of the San Diego Voice and Viewpoint (SDV&V), a legacy publication serving Black and African American communities in San Diego County, stated that the publication already has a great deal of trust with the community. This trust has been cultivated over the publication's 40-plus years of existence. It's also actively being earned, as West cited the organization's town halls, local donations, relationship with Black-owned business, and general

open door policy as reasons why the publication continues to have a reputation for high quality news. At the same time, the San Diego Voice and Viewpoint has not always had the resources to maintain consistent local news from an on the ground reporter, as it also publishes national and international wire stories, commentary, and community announcements. The publication's Local News Fellow, Macy Meinhardt, has allowed SDV&V to publish local news more regularly, and it has resulted in the publication's output being "more substantive and directly local."

Meinhardt attended Chapman University in Orange, California, majoring in English with an emphasis on journalism. While she said she enjoyed her classes, her motivation to pursue journalism as a profession came while working as an intern for Event-News Enterprise, a weekly newspaper and website serving various small cities in Orange County. While there, she reported on the local trash company [dumping at an unauthorized site](#) in the city of Cypress, which [affected a range of communities](#), but particularly the older and lower income residents near the site. Being in communities and interacting with people — Meinhardt said she went door to door around the dump site asking people about their experience — made journalism less abstract for her. It also showed how elevating community voices can lead to accountability.

Carrying this experience to SDV&V, Meinhardt takes a community-oriented approach to reporting, focusing on complex issues and pursuing storylines that can make positive change. She views the purpose of her journalism as holding powerful institutions accountable for their actions, particularly when the institution is meant to serve the public. She does this by being present, displaying sensitivity to community members, and letting the journalism unfold on the community's terms. For example, in December 2023, San Diego Police pursued a vehicle through traffic, with the cars reaching speeds of around 100 mph. The driver hit a car, which killed two young boys, Malikai and Mason Orozco-Romero, aged four and eight.

Meinhardt attended the police practices commission to review the police department's pursuit policies at the behest of concerned community members, and [wrote a story about it](#). This type of coverage is typical to what Meinhardt does at SDV&V in that it was about accountability and the potential for change. But it ended up also being the start of deeper community connection.

In addition to several broadcast media outlets, the boys' mother, Victoria, and other family members were at the public meeting. Meinhardt noticed that it didn't seem like the mother wanted to talk to the media and did her best to avoid the cameras. Instead of approaching her at the commission, Meinhardt found the boys' mother on Instagram and sent a message. In it, Meinhardt introduced herself, acknowledged that she understands if she doesn't want to talk to the media, but left her contact information if and when she decided she wanted to. Meinhardt speculated that not being forceful and clearly making the choice the mother's might have led to her opening up. They began exchanging messages, where Victoria talked about her sons, sharing stories and sending pictures.

Victoria eventually had an on-the-record interview with Meinhardt and invited her to a service held at the boys' elementary school. Meinhardt was the only member of the media there and wasn't there to cover the event and write about it, [though she later did](#). That story also exemplifies Meinhardt's community-centered approach. She said, "I made it a point to not just talk about how those boys died but also how they lived — what their interests were, what they wanted to be when they grew up. And I think the family appreciated that."

West cited other areas in which Meinhardt has contributed to the depth and substance of SDV&V's local journalism. She noted that the feedback from the community has been positive. In this case, the trust was already there, but Meinhardt has helped make SDV&V a more essential resource for meeting information needs in San Diego.

KPBS: "Doing stories that weren't being done"

Addressing the topic of homelessness in San Diego, Investigative/Enterprise editor David Washburn said, "It's not that it *wasn't* covered, but that it was so focused on San Diego and specifically downtown San Diego." With the appointment of Kori Suzuki, whose title is South Bay and Imperial Valley Reporter, KPBS has expanded its coverage of important topics like homelessness into places like the South Bay, which has been undercovered by KPBS and local media in general. Washburn specifically complimented Suzuki's coverage of the restriction of homeless encampments in Chula Vista, a South Bay city, and cites his active presence covering [city council meetings](#) about the issue as an example of Suzuki's commitment to showing up and being present. This trait is especially in Imperial County, where Washburn said Suzuki has "built trust by being there."

Suzuki grew up in the Bay Area but went to Macalester College in Northfield, Minnesota for his undergraduate degree in Media Studies. He went on to earn a Master's Degree in Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and over the course of his undergraduate and graduate education, Suzuki worked at multiple news outlets and in multiple capacities, from photography to audio production to editing. Suzuki stated that journalism didn't play much of a role in his youth growing up, and his interest in it while an undergraduate was mostly academic. Journalism turned from an interest to a professional path in 2020. Suzuki stated that experiencing and witnessing the pandemic unfold alongside the Black Lives Matter movement led him to want to "understand at a deeper level systems of power at work" and to be able to examine and explain social hierarchies around race, class and gender so as to "help everyone understand systems that shape our lives."

Exploring systems of power might seem abstract and not immediately relevant to the daily lives of residents, and indeed it can be. But Suzuki approaches it from the ground up. This is evident in his reporting in Imperial County. Because a part of his beat is based there, he endeavored to meet people, make connections, and be open about his role in the region. This is particularly

important for undercovered regions with populations that don't frequently interact with the press. Suzuki stated that trust building practices have been the major area of growth for him since starting the fellowship, and he identifies four key elements for doing so:

- Be as transparent as possible
- Form initial connections on the community's terms without an agenda
- Establish relationships with trusted community groups that can make connections with residents
- Maintain relationships and presence so that when an urgent issue does arise, the foundation for sharing is there

For an early career journalist expanding the reach of a public media organization to rural, underresourced populations, and underserved populations, these lessons are essential.

A series of stories about a community losing an essential service illustrate what this approach can do. Niland is a town with about [600 residents](#), about half of whom live in poverty. In 2022, a fire at the town's post office caused it to be shut down. Residents were told that the facility would be closed temporarily, but more than two and a half years later, the post office is still closed. In Suzuki's [first piece about the post office](#), in April 2024, he wrote: "Community leaders said the closure has forced some residents to drive 50 miles to pick up their mail and delayed deliveries of medication and groceries to a majority low-income community." And, quoting a resident, Suzuki wrote: "'We want to bring a spotlight to us,' Garcia said, who also worked for many years at the post offices in Niland and Imperial. 'We want people to know that we are important. We do matter. All mail is important.'"

Not long after Suzuki's first story, California's U.S. senators wrote a letter to the Postmaster General elevating the issue and noting the crucial importance of a functional post office for a small, relatively isolated town such as Niland. Community action, additional reporting from the [Calexico Chronicle](#) (one of the news outlets in Imperial County), and KPBS's consistent coverage has brought sustained attention to the issue, although it has not led to a resolution. It's one example of the hardships rural communities face when essential services are disrupted.

Washburn reiterates that Suzuki is producing journalism for KPBS and communities in the South Bay and Imperial County that wouldn't have been done otherwise. "[Suzuki's] there physically, spending a lot of time at events, meetings, and engaging," Washburn said. KPBS produced journalism in these places before, but it's now consistent.

inewssource: "He makes people feel seen and heard"

inewssource sought a California Local News Fellow to fill a specific need. They wanted someone to cover the environment and energy in San Diego and Imperial counties. Managing Editor Jamie Self stated that "many reporters could do this in San Diego, but Imperial is trickier. It requires

being there. People are reluctant to talk on the phone, so you need to show up at schools, public meetings, etc. If you do that, you can do some good reporting." inewsources did find somebody who could do that in Philip Salata. As an investigative news outlet, the output of the journalism differs compared to organizations like SDV&V and KPBS, as it is less frequent and more oriented toward institutional and structural change, but the approach to relationship building and trust is similar.

Salata did not have a direct route to becoming a journalist. He studied modern literature as an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz and then worked for an international theater company in Italy after graduation. After working various other jobs, Salata returned to school and enrolled in a master's degree program at USC Annenberg before being named a California Local News Fellow in 2023. He said that his experience working for a theater company, combined with seeing inequities in quality of life and people struggling to make their way in the world, contributed to his decision to pursue journalism.

Salata described his time in theater as "an aesthetic response to all the things going on in the world." Salata ultimately decided that journalism was a way for him to "consolidate my energy in terms of doing something about the kinds of problems that I was seeing around me rather than being an observer of those things. I think journalism was a very special answer to that because, on the one hand, it was really about maximizing what an observer can be and then translating that into active civic participation." This feeling was made more acute in 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded and the murder of George Floyd led to mass demonstrations throughout the country. Both events furthered Salata's resolve to pursue journalism in the name of public service.

An important environmental topic Salata has followed is the development of [lithium mining in Imperial County](#). It's an extremely relevant topic for an investigative reporter in the region, as lithium mining in Imperial County has not begun in earnest yet, so explaining the environmental, economic, health, and quality of life implications mining would have is crucial for surrounding communities. Salata said "the question that was really central to my mind was, well, this is an extractive industry and there are histories of extractive industries that have been deeply problematic and affected communities." Salata acknowledged that perspectives are diverse, particularly due to the promise that lithium mining will bring much needed resources to the region.

To truly understand the issue, Salata spent a lot of time with people near the Salton Sea, where the lithium stores are, to get to know nearby residents. "The reporting I'm drawn to," Salata said, "comes from the perspective of really understanding the daily lives and experiences of people in that area and thinking from their point of view rather than just from the industry point of view." He described his approach as "[reporting by hanging out](#)," in that the goal is not to get quotes or publish a story right away, but to get to know people and understand them on their own terms. Meinhardt and Suzuki didn't describe their practices in quite that way, but Salata could let them borrow the term and it would fit.

Self attested to the effectiveness of Salata's relationship building. She described a grant-supported project about healthcare access in Imperial County that included an outreach component. They decided to host focus groups, not to get a source for a story but to listen to perspectives from Imperial County residents. Self attended one focus group. She observed Salata as "extremely present. He makes people feel seen and heard, and we were able to have a very real conversation that surfaced a lot of issues." She also said that as an editor in San Diego, she might have been able to pick out story leads, but "I would not have been able to get those insights and that depth without being there."

Better News Through Stronger Relationships

From a broad perspective, the news and information ecosystem in the San Diego region is not lacking. It has dozens of news organizations from all forms of media and organization type. But on a closer look, there are significant gaps, as media is concentrated and the communities and regions that have historically been underserved remain underserved. An analysis of the news and information ecosystem alongside community indicators attests to this lack, particularly between San Diego County and Imperial County. Our conversations with California Local News Fellows and their host organizations affirm this observation.

Each of the fellows and organizations are working to change that status quo. That the efforts come from places with distinct audiences and missions is notable. A local mix of investigative journalism, public media, and community media is one sign of a strong local news and information ecosystem. Importantly, the organizations are not trying to enact change through abundance — simply producing more stories about places and people historically underserved. That will happen, but it won't be sustainable or have an impact without a thoughtful and empathetic approach to reporting. Instead, the fellows and their host organizations are carefully building relationships so that the reporting they produce now is meaningful for communities and is built on a foundation of trust. The individual and collective effort won't immediately change the status quo, but their contributions toward eventually doing so are evident.