

# Who Will Tell the Story?

## Building Journalism Pathways for Rural Communities

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FORJ 2026 Rural & Small-Town Journalism Conference

Capstone Panel | Summary and Key Findings

### Panelists

- Erin Foote Morgan (Moderator) — CEO, FM Civic
- Jan Pytakski — Senior News Editor, Daily Yonder
- John Schrag — Co-Founder and Executive Director, Uplift Local
- Torsten Kjellstrand — FORJ board member; retiring University of Oregon faculty member
- Lily Raff — Central Oregon Community College journalism instructor; Future Journalists of America leader

### Summary

The capstone panel focused on a central workforce challenge for rural journalism: many communities need more reporting capacity, but the traditional pipeline—recruiting early-career journalists with four-year degrees and asking them to relocate for relatively low salaries—is increasingly unrealistic. The panel highlighted a more place-based approach: identify talent already rooted in communities, provide practical training and mentorship, and build partnerships that make it possible for emerging journalists to contribute without overloading small newsroom staff.

Across the discussion, panelists described several complementary pathways: paid fellowships, community-based Documenters, high school and community college programs, FORJ's Future Journalists of America and Earn Your Press Pass, internships with outside mentoring, and exposure programs such as Washington State University's Rural Plunge. A consistent theme was that the strongest models combine local knowledge and trust with professional journalism skills rather than treating those as competing assets.

### Key Findings and Takeaways

- **The traditional rural hiring model is breaking down.** John Schrag described how difficult it became to recruit and retain young journalists in communities such as Prineville and Madras. Lily Raff connected that problem to low newsroom salaries, high housing costs and student debt, arguing that newsrooms must reconsider who can realistically enter the field.
- **There is talent already inside rural communities.** Uplift Local's Documenters program has surfaced community members who never imagined themselves as journalists, including

bilingual and bicultural residents who later joined the staff. The lesson was to look beyond conventional résumés for people who are curious, trusted, knowledgeable and able to tell stories.

- **Training works best when paired with mentorship.** Torsten Kjellstrand cautioned against simply placing inexperienced people into small newsrooms that lack the capacity to train them. John Schrag described the “secret sauce” as pairing local trusted community journalists with experienced professionals who can provide reporting and editing expertise.
- **Fellowships can become a hiring pipeline.** Jan Pytakski said the Daily Yonder initially built its fellowship program to improve representation, educate new rural reporters and add capacity. Over time, it also became a reliable way to identify future employees; many core staff members are former fellows.
- **Community colleges are an underused statewide workforce partner.** Lily Raff described COCC’s ability to train, vet, mentor and sometimes pay interns while they work in local newsrooms. The panel saw potential for a basic reporting credential or remote coursework that could extend this model to rural communities across Oregon.
- **The pipeline is not limited to young people.** Audience discussion and panel responses emphasized adults changing careers, retirees and residents with deep subject expertise. Raff noted that community college journalism students span a wide age range, while Pytakski pointed to a valued contributor in her 60s with no formal journalism training.
- **FORJ can help connect short-term and long-term pathways.** The discussion positioned Future Journalists of America, Earn Your Press Pass and a potential community college credential as pieces of a continuum: early exposure, practical entry-level training, place-based education and eventually paid newsroom work.
- **Shared infrastructure can solve more than workforce problems.** When an audience member described important stories he lacked capacity to cover, the conversation broadened to statewide resource sharing. Panelists cited opportunities to connect local publishers with specialty newsrooms and to share reporting on topics such as wildfire, Indigenous communities, health care and education.
- **Young journalists should help redesign journalism, not simply fill vacancies.** Kjellstrand argued that emerging journalists bring different assumptions about formats, technology and audience needs. Their value is not only additional labor; they can help newsrooms evolve toward audio, video, podcasts and other forms that reach new audiences.
- **Good onboarding requires structure and realistic time commitments.** In response to a startup publisher’s question about burnout, panelists recommended regular check-ins, understanding each person’s working style, giving emerging journalists projects they care about, and recognizing that mentorship requires time—possibly shared with outside educators or experienced journalists.

## Program and Model Highlights

**Daily Yonder fellowship program** — Uses partnerships with journalism schools, foundations and other organizations for recruitment and/or funding. The program supports newsroom capacity and representation while functioning as a trial period that can lead to long-term hires.

**Uplift Local Documenters** — Trains and pays community members to attend public meetings and produce fact-checked notes. Uplift Local then uses those notes for reporting and has discovered promising staff talent through the program. Schrag noted that the current model is expensive for very small rural publishers and suggested a lower-cost rural version.

**WSU Rural Plunge** — An immersion model that takes students into rural communities to meet residents and understand rural life. Kjellstrand emphasized that the value is exposure and relationship-building, not simply producing stories.

**Future Journalists of America / COCC** — Provides paid high school journalism experience while COCC offers local, affordable journalism education, internships and mentorship. Raff stressed that young people remain interested in journalism when they can see a viable pathway into the work.

**Earn Your Press Pass** — FORJ's entry-level training resource for community members who may be able to cover meetings, sports and community events. The panel framed it as a practical way to test and develop local talent while longer-term education pathways are built.