WHEN 16-YEAR-OLD Chris Apassingok caught his first whale on St. Lawrence Island in April 2017, environmental activists from outside of Alaska launched a social-media attack that included death threats to him and his family. While the story provoked national outrage, the response in Alaska was generally positive: here was a young Alaska Native man living his culture and demonstrating leadership by providing for his community.

It’s no surprise that Alaskans are suspicious of outsider journalists “parachuting in” to report on the concerns of our small communities with complex cultural identities and nuanced networks of influence. Here, journalists are often tasked with explaining these nuanced identities and networks to the outside world, such as when Anchorage-based reporter Julia O’Malley traveled to St. Lawrence Island to spend time with the community, dine with the Apassingok family, and write a story of “culture, values, and community” for High Country News.

“The purpose of journalism,” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write in their classic textbook, The Elements of Journalism, “is not defined by technology, nor by journalists or the techniques they employ,” but rather “by something more basic: the function news plays in the lives of people.” For Apassingok, journalism helped shed light on the broader cultural context of his world, fostering empathy across deep difference.

WHAT ROLE does the news play in your life? It’s likely the answer has changed over time, as technological innovation has shifted the political, social, and economic landscape of mass media. Journalism’s business model has changed, and so too our habits, our expectations, and our relationship to the news.

That relationship is increasingly strained: according to an annual Gallup poll, Americans’ trust in journalism has fallen slowly and steadily since 2000. Since 2007, fewer than half the country have indicated confidence in the mass media when it comes to reporting the news “fully, accurately, and fairly.” That waning trust could be connected to any number of trends: our unabated news cycle; the ease of publishing unvetted information on the internet; the political influence of funders and distant media conglomerates; the declining attention span of news consumers; social media “filter bubbles;” the blurring lines between journalism and entertainment; the rise of the freelance economy. Regardless of the causes, this crisis of trust has profound implications for our communities and for democracy.

Journalism, at its best, provides us with the information we need to make decisions about our lives, our communities, our society, and our government. Journalism allows us to monitor and influence the sources of power that shape our lives. Journalism shares the stories that over time become our history and define our culture. What happens when we lose faith in journalism? How else do we inform ourselves to make good decisions, prevent corruption, and influence those in power? Can trust be rebuilt? If so, how?

In our experience at the Forum, trust must be built gradually, one conversation at a time. That's why we’re offering Kindling Conversation toolkits and microgrants to host community conversations between journalists and community members across the state. The first toolkit uses the perspectives shared on the following pages as a springboard for conversation around the question, “What is journalism for?” Then it’s your turn to share your point of view.

We thank The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their generous support of this initiative and the Pulitzer Prizes for their partnership.
OUR WORST ENEMY
By Lina Mariscal

It was November 2015, and we had done everything we could to stop the government of Mexico from closing its consulate in Anchorage. Several community members and I had worked hard for nine years to demonstrate the need for a full-service consulate in Alaska. In 2009, when one finally opened, we felt our work was done and we all moved to other things.

Six years later, we started receiving telephone calls telling us that the consulate was closing. Our community was concerned—even afraid—but what was more worrisome was that nobody knew the reason for the closure. The community was never given formal notice. People wondered what was going to happen. Mexico was the only Latin American country with official representation in Alaska, and other nationalities looked to the consulate as a possible ally when they needed help.

While trying to organize the community, it was painfully clear that lack of knowledge and information was our worst enemy. Had we been aware of the consulate’s problems, perhaps we could have done something to change its decision. A means of communicating with our community became a priority.

We decided a bilingual newspaper could be the solution. Sol de Medianoche was born in April 2016 with the mission to inform, educate, and unite the community. Although we had a good number of people willing to help, none of us was a journalist or had any experience publishing a newspaper. We asked around; met with the editor of a local newspaper; interviewed a professor in the Journalism Department at UAA; and figured out some of the things we would need to get started. We secured donations from local Latino businesses to cover initial costs. And we were fortunate: someone with experience editing and publishing a highly recognized magazine in Mexico moved to Alaska around the time we started our quest.

Sol de Medianoche informs readers on current, important issues. We publish cultural and educational pieces. Our newspaper is a channel for other organizations to tell our community about services or programs. And the paper helps to build equity in this place we consider our home.

Lina Mariscal was born in Durango, Mexico and immigrated to Alaska in 1983 at age 16. She served as the Honorary Consul of Mexico from 2001 to 2009 and is a community advocate for immigrants, social justice, and human rights. She is a founder of Sol de Medianoche, a bilingual (Spanish and English) newspaper based in Anchorage. Articles are submitted by volunteers; ad sales cover the cost of graphic design and printing.

BLOCK BY BLOCK
By Kirsten Swann

Walking through Mountain View on a sunny summer afternoon several years ago, the precocious eight-year-old girl cut a wide berth around the orange and green condominiums next to the community center.

“They have guns,” she told me, glancing up at the faded facades before quickly looking away.

She wasn’t the only neighborhood resident who kept a wary eye on the sagging two-story buildings. The Marina and Karina Park condominiums, aging and neglected, had struggled to survive. Graffiti faded across mold-stained walls. Broken windows stayed broken. Police came by often, for all kinds of reasons. An old RV doing business in the parking lot drew frequent visits. When fireworks in the same parking lot turned to gunshots one summer evening near the Fourth of July, neighbors gathered in front yards to watch as officers swarmed the street in front of the buildings, corralling shouting teenagers into waiting squad cars. That same year, another teenager was shot and killed in the street next to the condo complex.

So when the first boards began to appear over the windows and doors of some of the units in early 2018, rumors began to fly. The building had a well-known past but a mysterious future. Some neighbors speculated it had been seized by the federal government.

The truth was this: Months earlier, at a community council meeting attended by no more than a dozen residents, a nonprofit housing developer had announced plans to purchase and redevelop the condominiums, operating the revamped buildings as apartment rentals, like the hundreds of similar units the nonprofit already operates all over town. Project renderings showed modern buildings, lush landscaping, and spacious courtyards. The story was covered only by the Mountain View Post blog, both when the plans were first announced and then again in the summer when the work began.

Each time, the news provoked a flood of reactions from curious neighbors. Some launched into thoughtful discussions about design elements, parking, and residential development. Others were just surprised to learn what was really going on.

“I just passed by this place and thought it was abandoned,” a neighborhood teen remarked.

Now she knows what really happened.

In such moments, I see clearly what journalism is for: to record the forces shaping the places we live, year by year and block by block. I focus on the little things, like the fate of the corner condo complexes. The kind of hyperlocal journalism I publish via Mountain View Post features the neighborhood characters and concerns larger publications don’t often cover (for lack of knowledge, resources, or interest).

But even the smallest stories can have a large impact on people’s lives, I’ve learned. Sharing those stories is what journalism is all about.

Kirsten Swann is an Anchorage writer living in Mountain View, where she’s published mtviewpost.com since 2014. An award-winning blog repurposed into a quarterly print magazine, Mountain View Post features hyperlocal news coverage and stories about neighborhood places and the people who live there.
A college student in rural Alaska writes about making jam from wild-picked blueberries. Another chronicles how he gathers wood pallets from around his village and prepares them to heat his home. Still another describes roasting fresh-caught muskrat over an open fire.

These stories by University of Alaska students, along with many others, offer insight into Alaska’s rural experience, by way of their “ordinary” and unassuming voices. These and similar stories have appeared in Alaska newspapers, on websites, and elsewhere through a UA publication project called Chukchi News and Information Service (CNIS).

Such writing is not news, or even editorial, and not information typically found in the Alaska press. It’s commonly called cultural journalism, like the well-known Foxfire project in rural Georgia, where students write about traditional mountain life.

After working in full-time journalism in the 1980s in urban Alaska, in the late 1980s we moved to Kotzebue, located in Northwest Arctic Alaska, to teach both face-to-face and distance classes at Chukchi College, a satellite campus of the University of Alaska.

Like everywhere, so much of college success depends on solid communication skills. Accordingly, we helped students learn to write for college classes, mostly through developmental writing, basic composition, and other classes. At the same time, we recognized that these students, as rural Alaskans, reflected unusual and remarkable life experiences.

We wanted to share this unique world view outside the classroom, so in 1988 we launched Chukchi News and Information Service. The primary goal? To motivate students to higher standards of excellence through the painstaking process of polishing writing for publication. CNIS grew into an award-winning project (whose honors include a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award) that published hundreds of student writings along the way in newspapers, in magazines, and online. (The project also published two cultural journalism anthologies.)

In addition to writing about traditional rural activities, our students also tackled contemporary problems. For example, a high school honors student's harrowing tale about meeting a student from another part of Alaska at a school sporting event, then connecting online only to be cyberstalked and threatened demonstrates social media’s inherent risks, even in rural Alaska.

As these students have worked toward certificates, degrees, and other educational goals, their voices have simultaneously expanded the rural Alaska perspective in statewide media. Ultimately, cultural journalism can enlarge what constitutes the concept of journalism in Alaska.

**VALUING ‘ORDINARY’ VOICES**

By Susan B. Andrews and John Creed

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"Storytellers," the actor Robert Redford tells us, “broaden our minds, engage, provoke, inspire, and ultimately, connect us.” And that is what journalism is all about, in a sense: to fairly and accurately relate through print and broadcast news events that may impact readers; to inform them; to help them to respond.

To me, journalism has always been about the people involved, from brewery strikes to civil rights demonstrations in the Lower 48, to the Alaska Native land claims movement and environmental politics in Alaska today.

Journalism is about figuring out what people need to know and putting that information into the stories they will read, so they can participate as voters, volunteers, economic actors, or simply as observers.

As journalists we try to get the answers to what is happening and why, from the most heart-warming to the most heart-wrenching.

In Denver, during a horrific snowstorm, I interviewed a hotel manager who opened hotel rooms for free to dozens of folks stranded by the weather. Her reason, she said, was simply paying forward the kindness of strangers when she was a victim of Hurricane Carla in Texas.

In Anchorage, I interviewed the family of a young teacher who went out jogging on the Alaska Peninsula and was attacked and killed by wolves.

We are storytellers, telling readers and listeners news they need to know to keep them engaged in the world around them.

Democracy depends on citizens being informed on issues and what political candidates really stand for. This involves balanced coverage of issues and individual political campaigns, in a way that provokes discussion and action on issues that are the fabric of our society, from honest and efficient government to a healthy economy and environment.

Journalism tells us stories about how our world is functioning or not functioning, about problem solvers and problems unsolved, from successful international efforts to rescue 12 boys and their soccer coach trapped inside caves in Thailand to the struggle to reunite immigrant children with their parents at the southern border of the United States.

Journalism also informs us about the socio-economic impact of severe weather conditions, armed conflict, and myriad entertainment and sports events, including the summer and winter Olympics, and the people involved.

The challenge, as distinguished journalist Bob Schieffer has said, is to find the truth in today’s deluge of news, and tell the story.

Margaret Bauman’s background in journalism, since graduating from Michigan State University, included stints on the wire services in several states and at CBS News in New York, where she worked with some of the world’s best journalists. As a journalist in Alaska, she currently covers fisheries and environmental-related news for Fishermen’s News in Seattle and The Cordova Times.

**DEMOCRACY’S STORYTELLERS**

By Margaret Bauman
FRONT LINES OF SOCIAL CHANGE
By Daysha Eaton

In November 2016, I had just arrived at Standing Rock where activists and journalists were tear gassed, shot with rubber bullets, and jailed by law enforcement in their homeland. It was the largest mass demonstration in recent American history and the only one in my lifetime led by Native Americans.

On first approach, rattling down a two lane highway, the gathering came into view as we rounded a corner with a large rock outcropping. In the distance, the flickering light of hundreds of campfires interrupted the black night of the prairie under which thousands of people assembled in glowing teepees, tents, and a giant geodesic dome.

It was one of those rare moments in life when you know that you are exactly where you should be. At Standing Rock, as a human being, as a journalist, I experienced resolve and clarity of purpose. I followed my instinct. No newsroom paid for me to get there. I used my own money, donations, and vacation time to make the journey to report back about Alaskans who had joined the movement. A new chapter of American history was beginning and I wanted to be there to help write it.

The conflict revolved around protecting water and a broken treaty with the U.S. government. But it was also about something larger. The demonstrators were fed up with feeling depersonalized and devalued. In their experience, the U.S. government prized corporations over people, and was quick to destroy natural resources in exchange for financial gain.

The shared mission to assert self and defend place transcended geography, race, gender, and class. Social media helped demonstrators chronicle events unfiltered and with immediacy, and triggered an avalanche of support. Where activists galvanized around a common cause, it would take journalists—through storytelling from on the wintry frontlines to the gallery of a courtroom—to give context and policy significance to a global audience.

Without journalists on the ground at Standing Rock, the world would not have known the scale of the gathering, or the less than peaceful tactics used to silence and disperse the discontented—water sprays in freezing temperatures, tear gas, rubber bullets. Journalists upended the dominant narrative of people thwarting progress to expose a more complicated human truth.

Standing Rock reminded us of the intersectionality of civil disobedience, journalism, and public policy. Even though the NoDAPL movement failed to stop the pipeline from being built, in the end it made a mark on the culture, shifted consciousness, and left a model for resistance.

As it has before, and will again, America was testing its moral and political principles. The eye of the press is needed now, more than ever, to serve as a witness to these unfolding battles for the soul of American democracy, especially in rural and underserved communities.

Daysha Eaton is a contributor with Alaska Public Radio Network. She has worked at KDLG in Dillingham, KSKA in Anchorage, KYUK in Bethel, KBBI in Homer, KHNS in Haines, and KMXT in Kodiak. Her stories have aired on NPR’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered,” PRI’s “The World,” and “National Native News.” She reported independently from Standing Rock in 2016, and in 2017 produced a series of stories about Pebble Mine with Koahnic Broadcast Corporation and with grant funding from the Alaska Humanities Forum.