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SPEAKERS

Jen Fifield, NPR promo, Nicole Cox, Steve Jess, Kyle Cook, Christopher Conover



Christopher Conover 00:03

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week, ensuring accuracy in ballots and election news. We're less than six weeks from the 2024 general election, so this week, as we continue our Your Vote 2024 coverage, we're thinking about accuracy in an election, both in terms of what's on the ballot and what message candidates are sending. We start with Votebeat's Jen Fifield, who recently profiled efforts to translate Arizona's ballot into Dine, the largely aural language of the Navajo people. I started by asking her about the laws that govern translating ballots.



Jen Fifield 00:49

So basically, the federal government realized that, even if you don't speak English, in this country you have a right to fully understand your ballot. So they put in requirements that say, not only do counties have to translate for certain groups, if there's so many of them that don't speak English well or read English well, they not only have to translate the ballot, but any material that goes with it so people can have a full understanding of what's on that ballot. And in Arizona, that means that Spanish is covered in a few counties. That's typical across the country, but here, especially, we have this, these high concentrations of native voters, indigenous voters, who still only speak their native language and need help.



Christopher Conover 01:32

You went up to to sit in on the meeting, which I understand was no easy trick in itself, getting into the meeting where they were translating for residents of the Navajo Nation, and in reading your article, which everybody in our newsroom agreed was a really great article, there were all kinds of things that the translators were having trouble with because simply the concept or the word didn't exist.



Jen Fifield 00:00

J Jen Fifield 02:02

Right, so this is for Navajo, which is a traditionally oral language, and it's really difficult for counties to figure this out across the country. How do you translate a very complicated written ballot into something that's just spoken? This is provided through poll worker training. They're trained on how to speak this translation at the polls and also in a recording that people get. And so for Navajo, specifically, it's very hard translation from English. If you say the table instead in Navajo, you're going to describe what a table is, a flat surface where you can put things or so you know. So you can see how there's many different ways you could define table, just for as an example, and so that's what they really struggled with, especially with these complicated, controversial election words

C Christopher Conover 02:46

Right, You pointed out a couple of them. We'll start with the one that was at the top of the article dealing with fentanyl. It's a word we use in English all the time, but there's no word for it at Navajo. And how do you explain it?

J Jen Fifield 03:02

Correct and the and the cultural implications of that right? Because drugs and medicine in Navajo culture is thought of much differently in our western culture. So with fentanyl, they had to tell you that this wasn't the fentanyl used in a in a medical hospital setting for procedures, that's still very commonly used. This is actually the illegal drug being sold. This is a part of a proposition saying, if you sell fentanyl illegally and it harms someone, then you could be criminally liable. So just explaining that in a very short manner was very difficult for them, along with many other the propositions on our ballot.

C Christopher Conover 03:44

The other one that, of course, stuck out to me, and I think a lot of people, when they read your article, will be abortion, big issue on the ballot, not only in Arizona, but all over the country. And again, no word for it.

J Jen Fifield 03:58

Correct, no word for it in Navajo, but also in English. We fought over how to word this proposition, right? How to word the language around it, how to explain what we were voting on. And so all those conversations happen in public, and here you have a very private meeting where people are defining what abortion is. In Navajo culture, abortions traditionally have been shunned, and so there's sensitivity around this topic right now, in that translation, they use the word Awéé, which is baby in Navajo, which baby? As you know, some abortion advocates would want it to be called a fetus. And so, you know, there's so many things that go into this translation and how it's interpreted could really define how someone votes on it.

C Christopher Conover 04:41

Christopher Conover 05:12

I am guessing, as we've sort of talked about, this is not a new problem, this language of translation. How have, since we're focusing on the Navajo, but we have almost two dozen federally recognized tribes in Arizona, how have the tribes been dealing with this over the years?

J Jen Fifield 05:00

So basically, because all of this is done in private, unless you're really paying attention, you don't know how it's being done, we have native voting advocates across the state and the country who have been filing lawsuits over time, not just here in Arizona, but across the country, saying this isn't being done well, we need to have a seat at the table, and we need to make sure that our people are fully understanding their ballots. In Arizona, that's led to a settlement where they have requirements for how the counties in the state do this. But I don't, I still don't think this is why I wrote this story. I still don't think people realize this is a requirement. I still don't think people realize the importance of the requirement and just take a better look at how we're doing this.

C Christopher Conover 05:40

If someone who is a native speaker of one of these languages, they get their ballot and they realize that something isn't translated well, or they believe something is not translated well, is there anything that can be done, or is it a case of, hey, the ballots printed, and we know that that's a big legal step. Oh, well.

J Jen Fifield 06:03

first of all, I want to better describe this traditionally aural ballot is coming to them in a aural form, right? It's coming to them in a recording. So they're not actually seeing a physical ballot when they get it, but when, if they're listening, for example, they're provided this recording at polling places they can listen to and they don't understand anything. Hopefully the translator on the spot can help them. You know, the poll workers can help them. Hopefully they can call family friend. Hopefully it's not Election Day. They have time to do this. They're voting early. So I would suggest everyone who has a language barrier, who needs language assistance take your ballot at home, get a mail ballot. You know, there's, there's ways, because we have such a great early voting system in Arizona, that we can get around this, and we can really understand our ballots well.

C Christopher Conover 06:49

is this and you may not know this just based on your reporting, as we said, there are close to two dozen federally recognized tribes in Arizona. Is this problem more particular to the Dine language, or, for example, down here, if someone needed a Tohono Ootham or a Pasqua Yaqui or Apache or I mean, pick your your language. Are there similar problems with other indigenous languages?

J Jen Fifield 07:17

There definitely are. And the thing is, for the languages you named, except for Apache, there will be no translation provided because they don't fall under this federal requirement. Now I know in Pima County, the recorder has worked to try to make sure that the people at the polling places that are on the nation, or, you know, who need them, have people stationed there at the poll, the polls that can help. And so while it's not required, I think some counties do do a good job, or at least try to have people at the polling location that can help and provide that language assistance.

C Christopher Conover 07:53

So it's really up to the counties, with the exception of a handful of the languages, because so many our tribes are so small,

J Jen Fifield 08:00

Correct. Yeah. And again, emphasizing the importance of, you know, finding someone who can help you understand the ballot if you don't speak English and beforehand, before you get there, so you're not faced with this. I mean, this is a very long, complicated ballot in English. I should be recommending this for us, too, people who do speak and read English, because it's so long. So everybody should be voting early this year.

C Christopher Conover 08:21

Yeah, somebody said this year's ballot looks like a Costco receipt. It's that long.

J Jen Fifield 08:27

It is so long and it's so complicated. So good luck everyone

C Christopher Conover 08:31

As you have done some reporting on voting issues in tribal areas in Arizona before, and in addition to language, there are some tribal areas, I think some of them are, you reported, are officially ranked as the most remote voting places in the entire country. So there are a lot of things going on on tribal lands here. Language is a major one, but just one issue.

J Jen Fifield 09:00

Yeah, and a lot of it is the remoteness, like you said, and a lot of them don't have physical addresses. They, you know, they mark their address based on where they are located on based on other physical things, like a gas station or, you know, a tree even getting through those

barriers trying to get them a mail ballot in their mailbox on alone, you know, trying to make sure that they have internet where they're located when they go to vote, so we can have those updated poll records of who's who's registered. Those kind of things are very underreported in the state, but very important, especially because these native communities can have such an impact on our election results.

C Christopher Conover 09:42

And as you said, big impact. People maybe not think about it. Think more about Pima County, Maricopa County, maybe Coconino County, you know, is having the big impacts. But no, the native vote is significant here in Arizona.

J Jen Fifield 09:57

especially when we see a high turnout, a. If native voters are especially encouraged this year, it might shift the election results.

C Christopher Conover 10:06

All right, Jen, well, thanks for sitting down with us for a couple of minutes.

J Jen Fifield 10:09

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

C Christopher Conover 10:11

That was Votebeat reporter Jen Fifield, you're listening to The Buzz. After the break, we preview the new season of the Fact Check Arizona podcast, stay with us.

N NPR promo 10:24

The candidates for November are set. I know Donald Trump's tight between now and Election Day. We are not going back. A campaign season unfolding faster. Kamala Harris is not getting a promotion than any in recent history. Make America Great Again. Follow it all with new episodes every weekday on the NPR politics podcast.

C Christopher Conover 10:49

Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover, as part of our your vote 2024 coverage. We're talking about accuracy in elections this week with election season now in full swing, azpm, which originates the buzz, is dropping a new season of its podcast. Fact Check Arizona.

In this episode, host Steve Jess talks with Kyle Cook, the Digital Media Manager for Rocky Mountain PBS in Denver. They talk about billboards that have been popping up promoting a questionable media outlet.

S Steve Jess 11:24

We start this week with a name you may have seen on billboards along Interstate 10 or maybe even in a newspaper, depending on where you live, the Epoch Times the billboards seen in battleground states including Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota and Michigan proclaim Number One Trusted News alongside a picture of a man who is the face of some of its online videos. Physical copies of the Epoch Times also pop up occasionally in public spaces. We've even seen them in our break room at AZPM, which is on the University of Arizona campus. The publication's issues go deeper, though, with opaque ownership reporting that pushes debunked conspiracy theories and questionable advertising practices. Kyle Cook wrote about these issues earlier this year for Denver's Rocky Mountain PBS, where he's the digital media manager. Our conversation started with how he came up with the idea for the story.

K Kyle Cook 12:22

I was actually driving on I-70 headed west to go skiing one weekend, and I noticed one of these billboards for the first time. The first thing that stood out to me is how kind of simple it was, right? It had this kind of like grammatically correct, but still kind of awkward headline of Number One Most Trusted News, which has a journalist, just caught my eye, because I'm always interested in what other outlets are saying about themselves, but Number One Most Trusted News in these huge letters and then a photo of an unidentified man and that, that was it. So I looked it up when I got home, and not only were there several of them in Denver, but there were several of them across the country, from Washington State to Tennessee, where I used to work, to places on the east coast. So that was my initial entry point into it. And then I was just curious about, you know, advertising isn't cheap, and the fact that this is nationwide physical media, it just had, there was a lot of questions there for me.

S Steve Jess 13:26

So what did you find out about these billboards and the people behind them?

K Kyle Cook 13:31

Yeah, so, so again, like the first thing that I found out was just how pervasive they were. But then I started looking into kind of the history of this kind of shadowy marketing of the Epoch Times, specifically in Denver. Several years ago, copies of their physical newspaper were left in the Colorado State Capital like on the newsstands, which that created a bit of a controversy, because there is a process by which papers are allowed to be in the capital, and so people were concerned that this kind of fringe, conspiratorial outlet was given a platform in the capital, but the Capitol press corps came out and said that they did not approve those to be placed there. So I think some individual just came and dropped them there. In 2019, unsolicited copies of those newspapers were delivered to folks around Colorado from not only in the

Denver Metro area, but also in ski towns like Steamboat Springs and and again, people were like, we we did not ask for this, and often they didn't agree with the kind of slant that that comes with the with the paper. Another thing I realized is the coverage itself. You know, they purport to be most trusted, but if you read their stories, it's very conspiratorial, almost like Farrakhanian in its like mistrust of traditional medicine, of government, but it is also very clearly anti Chinese Communist Party, and so I did some research, and I found that the founders of this paper were part of the Falun Gong movement in China, which was kind of this new wave religious movement that the Chinese Communist Party called them a cult and banned them from China.

S Steve Jess 15:15

Some elements of this story like leaving random copies of the newspaper in the state capitol, or in our case, in university buildings, where students can see them, almost sound like, just to name one example, something that the Jehovah's Witnesses might do. Do you see a parallel there?

K Kyle Cook 15:34

I do. And yes, it's this very kind of like loosely organized group of followers, and the ownership structure is very difficult to discern. It's a common it's technically a nonprofit, which I think a lot of us think of nonprofit media, as you know, unbiased or publicly supported, like NPR or PBS, but this is a loose network of many different nonprofits with a very confusing ownership structure. And I think that's by design. I think the folks behind this paper don't exactly want people to know where they stand on on, you know, financially and where their money is coming from. The Department of Justice recently launched an investigation into this. They also, I think part of the reason that they are they're using these kind of like guerrilla marketing tactics is S K S K S K because the more traditional kind of online marketing that you see, they've gotten in trouble with. Facebook banned them from advertising a few years ago because of the claims that they were making, they were not true, and they were also juking the stats a little bit and not being totally honest about their claims and their funding. So they were banned from Facebook, but then they created new Facebook accounts with with names like, you know, Number One American News and like, kind of again, these very like, ambiguous titles that some people might seem trustworthy, but when you look into it again, it's again, this very conspiratorial news that they're sharing.

S Steve Jess 17:05

I hate to put it this way, but it's a little suspicious too, just to see any print newspaper engaging in a major high budget advertising campaign, given the state of the print media these days, when newspapers are withering. It sounds like they have, clearly an agenda other than just selling lots of newspapers and selling lots of ads and making lots of money, there's, there's something else behind it, don't you think?

K Kyle Cook 17:30

yeah, absolutely. And to your point, I think that was one of the things that initially niqued my

year, absolutely. And to your point, I think that was one of the things that initially piqued my interest. Was, you know, what is this company that seems to have a bottomless budget to advertise, but that's a newspaper, right? Like those, those two things don't, don't mesh,

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Steve Jess 17:46

Yeah,

K

Kyle Cook 17:46

and so you're exactly right, and that is what piqued my interest. But, you know, I think one of the interesting things is that the photograph that they use on these billboards is of one of their hosts, whose name is Joshua Phillip. He hosts a show that primarily airs on YouTube that is not even a new show. It even comes with a disclaimer that it's not a new show and it's an opinion show. Again, it's very conspiratorial. Unfortunately, because they are spreading what I think is fair to call misinformation. They have, you know, hundreds of 1000s, if not billions of views on on many of his videos. The pandemic especially, was a time when a lot of these videos kind of exploded in popularity because they were kind of capitalizing on mistrust of the vaccines and of the government at the time, and they really seem to have doubled down in that and a lot of their their news articles, I say news with air quotes. I know this is an audio format but, include this kind of skepticism around medicine that verges on misinformation. I remember one of the one of the stories that I referred to in the article that I wrote was about how positive thinking influences cancer prognosis and how, you know, kind of these, these more anti medicine and more, just like you know, you just have to think positive and your cancer will go away. That's kind of the message that they're trying to send through their coverage. It's very again, I keep repeating conspiratorial, but it's also rife with misinformation, and it's also has this hard line, kind of born again undercurrent to all of their work.

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Steve Jess 19:27

So what would you tell someone who is interested in checking out the epic times you know, they see these billboards, they're they're intrigued by them. This looks interesting. What's your answer to somebody who wants to check out their website or their newspaper?

K

Kyle Cook 19:43

Yeah, I think the simplest, the simplest answer is to follow the money. To see I think no matter what outlet you're looking at, whether it's you know, a local NPR station or a local PBS station, or you're you know, or even the New York Times, looking at the ownership structure is is very, is very telling about kind of the motivations for their coverage. I think the fact that it is difficult to find out who owns the Epoch Times is by design. Look at what they're writing about and and try to look at it objectively. I would also caution, caution people to not sign up for their emails, because they are relentless, and it's very hard to unsubscribe. I did as a part of this story, and it took me a long time to kind of get out of the net that they cast. I think something that people it's a little easier to come across. They are very much close to, related to Shenyang, which is a very big global dance phenomenon. Shenyang also has an anti communist message. That's that's very clear. But these Shenyang and the Epoch Times are are owned by the same

organizations, and the Epoch Times has a whole vertical on their website dedicated to Shenyang and how great Shenyang is. And NBC News has done a lot of great coverage on the Epoch Times as well, and they've even spoken with former journalists who have worked for Epoch Times. And I would encourage people to go read those stories, because it is really fascinating to hear from people who used to work for this paper about the kind of directives that they received from their boss and what they were and were not allowed to write about. One of those directives was to write glowing profiles of Shenyang performers because it helped them with their visa applications. So there's this web of biases and motivations that aren't exactly clear to someone who might just be flipping through their website. Yeah, I would encourage people to dig deeper and to read about the Epoch Times from outlets that are not the Epoch Times because they're not reliable narrators about their own story.

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Steve Jess 21:50

Clearly, it's an organization and a newspaper that has an agenda of some kind, and the agenda is anti Chinese Communist, but also a little bit of anti science, anti medicine mixed in there too, from what you're telling me. Can you tell me what was the most egregious of the things that you saw from the Epoch Times that that people should be skeptical about?

K

Kyle Cook 22:18

Yeah, as I mentioned earlier, you know, there was a lot of, you know, a kind of anti medicine slant, anti Western medicine, I would say. Also very much, and this is where we get into more of the kind of, like, hardline Christian conservative views of the outlet. But they are very much opposed to the LGBTQ community. There's one of the web, one of the headlines that I came across said The Sinister Theory Behind the Q in LGBTQ. A former reporter for The Epoch Times spoke with the New York Times, and they said that when they worked at the paper during the S K S K Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, where I believe over 50 people were killed at a at a gay nightclub in Orlando, they were instructed to not use the word gay in their articles about it, but they were also told to emphasize the fact that the gunman in that case was Muslim. So these very like conflicting you know, it made it impossible to write about if you you're you're not supposed to write about the queer community, but you are supposed to elevate anytime a person of color commits mass violence. Some of the directives that the reporters were receiving were very disturbing to me.

S

Steve Jess 23:36

Clearly, they had a particular lens that they wanted their reporters to look through when they wrote stories about events that happened. So as a journalist, what's the lesson for news consumers? Just ordinary, you know, civilians who are looking for a reliable source of information, besides maybe saying, well, the Epoch Times, isn't it?

K

Kyle Cook 23:57

Yeah, I would encourage people to do what's called lateral reading. So if you're interested on a topic, maybe it is, maybe it is the vaccine, maybe it is, unfortunately, a recent shooting, maybe it's the upcoming election. If there's a topic that you're interested in, you know, read about it in

it's the upcoming election. If there's a topic that you're interested in, you know, read about it in a in an outlet of your choosing, but also make sure to read about it in other outlets as well, so that if you do come across the Epoch Times, that's not the only place that you're getting your information. I think there are a lot of outlets, particularly, you know, local NPR affiliates, local PBS affiliates, even local community papers that do a great job in disclosing who their funders are and where their money comes from. I think outlets that are very open about their funding models are more often than not, trustworthy and more reliable. Something else about the Epoch Times that I think is important to note is that when you look at their website, it's a pretty elegant operation. It looks good, it looks clean, it's it's easy to read. I think historically, you know, a lot of the kind of misinformation websites just look a little shoddy, right? Like, you can look at the website and be like, I don't know if I totally trust this. There's a lot of pop up ads. There's videos that are auto playing. It's kind of an ugly format The Epoch Times is not that it's a very like classy looking website, but that only further kind of masks the more sinister motivations that they have. And so I guess my advice there would be to not just always trust your eyes, make sure you're also reading a little deeper into it.

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Steve Jess 25:38

Thank you very much. I appreciate you spending some time to talk with us today about that.

K

Kyle Cook 25:43

Yeah, thank you, Steve. I hope I was helpful.

S

Steve Jess 25:45

Kyle Cook is the Digital Media Manager of Rocky Mountain PBS in Denver, as you heard, some traditional news outlets have carried stories from the Epoch Times. Among them, for a time, was the Sierra Vista Herald and some of its sister papers in Cochise County. They carried those stories for a few months earlier this year, we asked Harold Managing Editor Matt Hickman about that. He said the newspaper was offered a free trial of stories from the Epoch Times, and decided to try it out as a counterpoint to some of the other free use content providers who he said, tend to be left leaning. But Hickman said he soon noticed the content the Herald was offered by the outlet was a more sanitized version of what was being posted on the Epoch Times website, which had suspect journalistic quality. So the Sierra Vista Herald stopped carrying those stories.

C

Christopher Conover 26:39

That was the first episode of the new season of the Fact Check Arizona podcast. The second episode came out earlier this week and goes over claims made in a debate over the Secure the Border Act. You can find fact check Arizona wherever you get your podcasts, and that's The Buzz for this week. You music. Tune in next week as we take a look at two opposing ballot initiatives having to do with primary elections. You can find all our episodes online at azpm.org and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast, just search for the buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer, and our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover, thanks for listening.



Nicole Cox 27:34

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