

azmirror.com

A nonprofit news site publishing left-leaning news and commentary about Arizona politics and public policy that does not disclose its liberal donors.

Ownership and Financing

The Arizona Mirror, based in Phoenix, Arizona, was created in 2018 as part of States Newsroom, a network of nonprofit news sites based in 12 state capitals. The Arizona Mirror describes States Newsroom as “a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit supported by a coalition of donors.”

Until November 2019, when States Newsroom gained its own independent 501(c)(3) status, the network was supported by the Hopewell Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. According to States Newsroom director and publisher Chris Fitzsimon, Hopewell, which was launched in 2015, provided administrative support to States Newsroom and its affiliate sites, but did not fund them. Hopewell is managed by Arabella Advisors, a consulting firm that specializes in left-leaning philanthropy.

Andrea Verykoulis, deputy director of States Newsroom, told NewsGuard that the idea for States Newsroom came from people who had donated to Chris Fitzsimon’s earlier project, a North Carolina-based website called NC Policy Watch. “Longtime donors of NC Policy Watch approached him about replicating it or investing in other properties like it in other states,” Verykoulis told NewsGuard in a phone interview. “Why they chose Hopewell, I can’t say.”

Fitzsimon told NewsGuard in a phone interview prior to the approval of the independent tax status that Hopewell acted as States Newsroom’s “fiscal sponsor,” and would do so until States Newsroom’s separate 501(c)(3) status was approved. “Hopewell is not a funder. The money is given to Hopewell by a coalition of donor-advised funds, local foundations, reader support,” Fitzsimon said, explaining that donations in effect passed through Hopewell to the Newsroom, which could not accept donations independently until it became a separate entity.

Fitzsimon told NewsGuard that he and the other editorial employees at the Newsroom do not know what prompted the program’s founding donors to affiliate with Hopewell. “We don’t know why they chose Hopewell...I would’ve been happy to be started by anybody. That’s just how it worked out,” Fitzsimon said. “The people who gave money to Hopewell, one of the few things they insist on is that their donors remain anonymous.” He described this as a negative aspect of working with Hopewell. “That’s the only downside — or a downside — of being incubated. We can’t really talk about that as long as we’re a project of Hopewell,” he told NewsGuard prior to separating from Hopewell.

Verykoulis said that Hopewell’s policy is to not “disclose or confirm who gives to any of its various projects, which included Newsroom.” Yet the information was passed to the States Newsroom team, Verykoulis confirmed, and they could see a list of donors by site. After States Newsroom split off from Hopewell in early November 2019, Verykoulis told NewsGuard that they had not decided whether to publish any information about major donors. “As to what will appear on each site, we have not determined that,” she wrote in an email. She did not respond by email to a specific question from NewsGuard requesting information about the identities of States Newsroom’s donors.

Neither the Arizona Mirror nor the Newsroom list their donors. A Donate page on AZMirror.com states that the site is “supported by the generosity of those who believe an informed Arizona is a better Arizona.” AZMirror.com does not run advertising.

In a 2017 tax filing, the Hopewell Fund describes its mission as “helping social/corporate entrepreneurs and other changemakers launch new, innovative social change projects.” The filing shows that in 2017, Hopewell donated \$4.9 million to Priorities USA, a left-leaning Super PAC aligned with the Democratic Party. It also donated \$2.6 million to the New Venture Fund, a left-leaning nonprofit that, along with Hopewell, is managed by Arabella Advisors, which does not disclose its investors.

Fitzsimon told NewsGuard that the sites in the States Newsroom network “have nothing to do with Hopewell’s larger policy,” adding that “Hopewell has no say in our editorial policy.”

The Arizona Mirror’s About page asserts that “We retain full editorial independence.” However, according to the States Newsroom website, the network’s national staff supervise the different state sites. States Newsroom’s About page also says that Fitzsimon “oversees the content and themes of the organization,” and a national editor “works with the state editors to plan coverage, maintain editorial standards, expand the reach of each state’s reporting and commentary, and advise on cross-outlet projects.” Verykoulis said each site’s editor makes the final decision on what they publish. “We offer a lot of editorial guidance and support...but the editors decide what to cover,” Verykoulis told NewsGuard.

Content

The Arizona Mirror primarily covers state politics and public policy in Arizona. The site describes its mission as “amplifying the voices of Arizonans whose stories are unheard; shining a light on the relationships between people, power and policy; and holding public officials to account.” The site lists four staffers based in Phoenix, the state capital, and also relies on regular freelance contributors.

Content on the site is organized into sections including Education, Immigration, Criminal Justice and Policing, Politics, Law and Government, and Investigations. In addition to Arizona politics and policy, the site reports on national issues as they relate to Arizona. For example, in September 2019, the site posted a story about how Arizona’s congressional delegation voted on a gun regulation bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

AZMirror.com occasionally posts content from Cronkite News Service, the news division of Arizona PBS, which is affiliated with Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Credibility

Articles on AZMirror.com are typically fact-based and well sourced, drawn from the



This website generally maintains basic standards of credibility and transparency —with significant exceptions.



Does not repeatedly publish false content



Gathers and presents information responsibly



Regularly corrects or clarifies errors



Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly



Avoids deceptive headlines



Website discloses ownership and financing



Clearly labels advertising



Reveals who’s in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest



The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Criteria are listed in order of importance.
More information.

site's original reporting and interviews with politicians, activists, subject-matter experts, and people with firsthand knowledge of events. The site's reporting is often cited by leading Arizona newspapers, including the Arizona Republic and the Arizona Daily Star. Headlines accurately reflect the content.

The site regularly issues corrections, clarifications, and updates, which appear at the bottom of articles.

AZMirror.com includes a dedicated Commentary section and labels opinion articles as "Commentary." The website's About page notes that the site aims to "provide a platform for progressive opinions." However, NewsGuard's review found that news coverage — not just opinions — has a liberal slant as well. In assessing the site's political coverage in 2019, NewsGuard found that the Arizona Mirror mostly focuses on issues that matter to the left, often framing stories from that point of view.

For example, the issue of immigration is nearly always presented from the perspective of critics of U.S. President Donald Trump's immigration policies. A May 2019 article, headlined "AZ Democrats want DHS to do more to aid in humanitarian response to migrant families," included no comments from Republican lawmakers or Homeland Security officials, nor was there any indication the site sought to reach them for comment. Jim Small, the site's editor, said this story was posted on the site's blog, which serves as a "a repository for quick-hit news briefs" and so the article was not meant to be "a fully fleshed out news story."

An August 2019 story focuses on a transgender woman who faced deportation after committing what the site described as a "minor infraction" — standing on light rail platform without a ticket — in Phoenix. Small told NewsGuard in an email that this story represents the goal of the site's reporting. "We strive to tell the stories of people from marginalized communities within Arizona, with a particular focus on how existing government policies ... affect people within those communities," Small said.

The headline of an October 2019 story about a delay in the implementation of a policy aimed at curtailing welfare benefits for undocumented residents stated that immigrants were "spared" from the policy — language that suggests disapproval of the rule. Small disagreed, and said that the language was factually precise: "The word 'spares' does not convey editorial judgment, it is a succinct description of what the court ruling did," he said.

Moreover, articles frequently include just one point of view. A June news article about a U.S. Supreme Court decision focused only on the reaction of Democrats, under the headline "Democrats cheer Supreme Court's 2020 Census ruling." The headline on an October news article about a conservative activist referred to her as an "extremist," but the article did not offer any context to explain her ideology or what makes it extreme. Small told NewsGuard that the story included links to articles that describe the activist's political positions, "so our readers can quickly learn more about this person."

Because AZMirror.com favors left-leaning causes in its news coverage without clearly disclosing this orientation on the site, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not meet its standard for handling the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

The Arizona Mirror describes itself as "independent," despite supporting causes supported by left-leaning politicians and activists. Further, the site claims to have "editorial independence" from Hopewell, the left-leaning nonprofit that helped launch the site, but no information is provided about the organization, its donors' identities, or the group's political agenda. The misleading lack of disclosure, in combination with the site's refusal to identify its donors and its consistent practice of publishing news and opinion that favor the political goals of its founding backers, has led NewsGuard to conclude that the Arizona Mirror does not gather and present news responsibly.

"I understand your concern regarding the funding sources for AZMirror and any other Newsroom sister sites," Small told NewsGuard. "However, I take some exception to the allegation that we don't gather and report information about Arizona government and public policy responsibly."

NewsGuard disagrees because the politically one-sided and undisclosed funding of the work of even well-credentialed journalists severely undermines the credibility of how they choose and report stories.

Transparency

AZMirror.com's About page describes the site as an "independent, nonprofit news organization that is focused on connecting public policy with the people it affects and bringing a fresh perspective to coverage of the state's biggest issues." The site notes that it is part of States Newsroom and is "supported by a coalition of donors," although, as noted, it does not provide any information about these donors. Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not adequately disclose its ownership and financing.

In response to a question from NewsGuard about Arizona Mirror's donors, Small, the site's editor-in-chief said, "I am not in a position to know those details," and added that States Newsroom is better informed about questions of funding. States Newsroom does not publish information about its donors on its website, and Verykousis, the network's deputy director, did not respond to two emails from NewsGuard asking for information about their donors.

Hopewell's managing director, who is also Arabella Advisors' managing director of advocacy, did not respond to two emails from NewsGuard asking about Hopewell's connection to StatesNewsroom.

Stories typically identify the writer and link to the author's biography and an archive of past work. The Mirror's four full-time staffers — including the editor-in-chief — are listed on the About page, along with their Twitter accounts and email addresses.

The site does not run advertising.

History

The Arizona Mirror launched in September 2018. In a press release at the time, editor-in-chief Small said the Newsroom network "is filling the void caused by corporate news operations cutting back on statehouse coverage by funding nonprofit news organizations across the country."

Corrections: This Nutrition Label was updated on Nov. 7, 2019, to reflect that upon further review, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly, and that it does not gather and present information responsibly. The criteria checklist has been adjusted accordingly. NewsGuard apologizes for the errors.

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Sources

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