THE BUCKEYE FLAME

OHIO'S LGBTQ+ NEWSROOM

RURAL NW OHIO INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT



WHO WE ARE

The Buckeye Flame amplifies the voices of LGBTQ+ Ohioans to support community and civic empowerment through the creation of engaging content that chronicles our triumphs, struggles and lived experiences.

This assessment will help us understand how to better serve our audience and community in rural NW Ohio, a news desert compared to the rest of the state.

WHO I AM

I cover Ohio's rural LGBTQ+ communities for The Buckeye Flame via Report for America. I'm the only Rural LGBTQ+ beat reporter in the world, which is particularly important given that rural land covers most of Ohio. This opportunity to partner with Listening Post Collective and launch this assessment helped me develop more connections with our rural queer audience, source more unique story ideas and help the newsroom better serve and understand rural areas littered with anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Anna Malefatto, our first development director who left during this project. I truly could not have completed this project without you!

Thank you to Listening Post Collective and Report for America for supporting The Buckeye Flame.

And thank you to the community ambassadors I interviewed for this project, and to the residents who responded to our surveys and came to the listening sessions. You were all invaluable!

ABOUT RURAL NW OHIO

Rural NW Ohio spans from small farming communities to a mid-size college town to Ohio's fifth largest city. In some places, anti-LGBTQ+ lawmakers have thrived alongside nonprofits trying to build their local LGBTQ+ community.

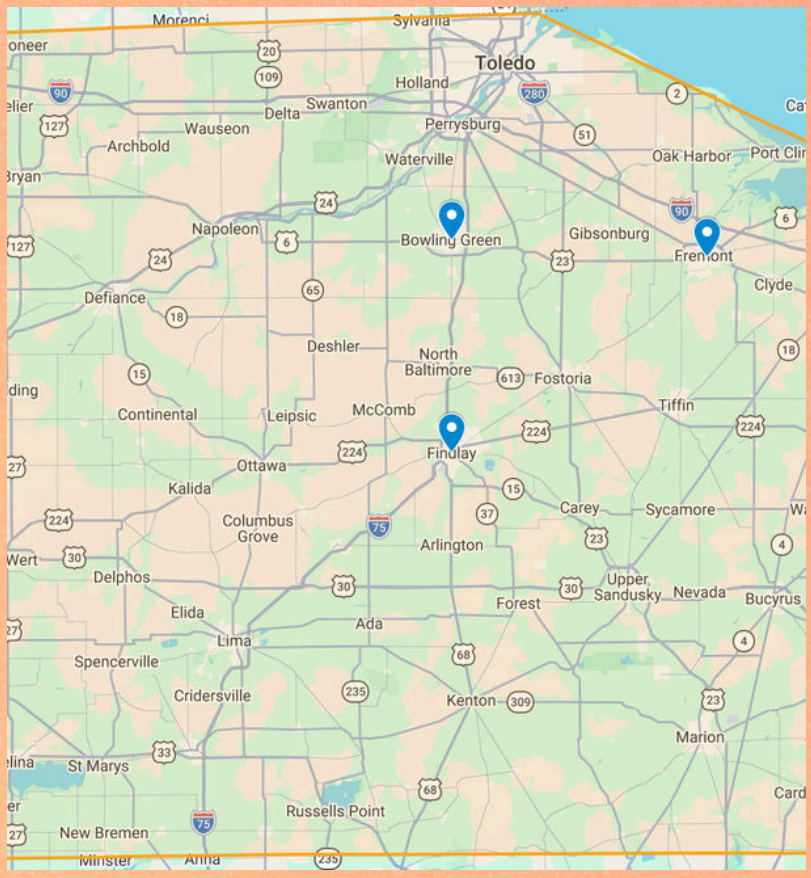


LGBTQ+ life in this region varies greatly. Bowling Green, a college town, had an LGBTQ+ nightlife that receded over the past decade, interviewees said. Seneca Proud hosts a successful Pride celebration every year in the same district as a Republican representative who champions his bill which prevents trans minors from receiving life-saving gender-affirming care.

Nonprofit leaders have expressed a desire to work together, but they feel alone – a sentiment shared by individual queer Ohioans who responded to our survey and might not be able to travel to Toledo or Cleveland and connect with their queer communities.

All the while, newspapers shut down. Attendees at our listening sessions told us how those publications that remain regularly feature caustic online comment sections that discourage local LGBTQ+ community members from reading the news – assuming the algorithm even delivers it to their timelines in the first place.

COMMUNITY MAP



We visited key LGBTQ+ community spaces. With the almost-complete absence of brick-and-mortar LGBTQ+ community centers in this region, coffee shops and libraries have become de facto LGBTQ+ gatherings spots, including the ones we visited in:

- Bowling Green, Ohio
- Fremont, Ohio
- Findlay, Ohio

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

According to our survey, most people within rural NW Ohio feel there are **“some”** to **“a lot”** of LGBTQ+ people in their county. **16%** of respondents, however, felt otherwise, reporting that they felt alone in their identity and community.

The vast majority of respondents (**84%**) said LGBTQ+ community members do not feel safe enough to come out to their family or at work.

TOP COMMUNITY ISSUES



Stories of Queer Joy connect us

LGBTQ+ community members said that positive stories of queer life make them feel empowered and more connected to each other.

Where to find community

Responses and listening sessions showed rural NW Ohioans have trouble finding queer-friendly events, resources, and places to socialize.

> [I wish I better understood] how to find support in the area for older LGBTQ+ individuals. I feel very isolated and rejected by the community and wish I didn't feel so alone.

How to submit news tips

Respondents, interviewees, and listening session attendees didn't always know how to submit a story tip, or what constituted a good news story.

LGBTQ+ Ohioans are afraid to come out

Though most survey respondents said there was a significant amount of LGBTQ+ community members, most overwhelmingly said it's not easy to come out to family or at work.

> [I wish I better understood] resources for youth and/or older adults. I think we have a good understanding of events, especially during Pride, but don't always know how to connect to advocates or other gays.

HOW YOU ACCESS INFORMATION



SOCIAL MEDIA

Most people get their news from social media. However, when local news outlets report on LGBTQ+ stories, they rarely moderate their toxic comment section. This vitriol has caused community members to not click on the story at all.

LOCAL NEWS UNDERREPORTS LGBTQ+ ISSUES

Community members say their local news doesn't cover LGBTQ+ news often. When they do, outlets can be biased and microaggressive.

NEWS COMES TOO LATE

Survey responses and interviewees noted how social media algorithms can bury LGBTQ+ news and events, making it hard for the community to stay up to date.

WORD OF MOUTH IS STILL IMPORTANT

With social media algorithms shifting every day, some organizations achieved more visibility through flyers and spreading news via word-of-mouth rather than social media.

> Feels very lonely in Auglaize county as an LGBTQ+ person, so honestly hearing anything about local issues affecting us would be good? Most of what I hear about or read are things happening at the state level or in the 3C cities.

> I wish I better understood the general state of the community here

Russell Exlos-Raber

"I love being involved, but I feel like we need to be doing more."

When we asked people attending Fremont Pride to fill out survey cards, multiple people said they got their LGBTQ+ news from one local leader: Russell Exlos-Raber, who runs the Pride organization.

After Fremont Pride held its first celebration in 2020, Exlos-Raber said he couldn't stand seeing it languish – so he "took the reins."

He said he shares news on social media that he believes is accurate and relevant to his local LGBTQ+ community. But he also said it is tough to do so when the local newspaper's Facebook comments are so toxic and unmoderated.

"[The toxicity] is not coming from the news sources. It's coming from people commenting on the news sources."



Our NW Ohio Survey

We asked 27 questions in a Google Form survey, and four questions on a survey card. The two-pronged approach allowed us to capture answers from people who might have missed our survey callout online or didn't have time to fill it out.

We wanted to know how LGBTQ+ people in Northwest Ohio found out about LGBTQ+ news, what kind of outlets they frequented, and what they thought of the coverage. Not only did this help us understand our NW Ohio audience's news diet, the responses helped better understand where our blind spots were – and, hopefully, how to fix them.

In total, we collected **87 responses** between June 23 and August 7. Most of our responses were from the survey cards, which were all from attendees at Findlay Pride who approached our table. Though we distributed the cards elsewhere afterwards, we didn't collect any responses.

Fremont Pride: A Case Study

On July 25, The Buckeye Flame took another opportunity to meet LGBTQ+ Ohioans where they are, this time at a Northwest Ohio rural Pride celebration.



We set a modest goal for the day: to collect 20 survey cards. By the end of the day, we had collected **52 responses**.

Highlights included:

- **100%** of respondents said that LGBTQ+ stories are underreported by their local media.
- **62%** said that they learn about LGBTQ+ events in their community too late.
- **54%** encouraged reporters to connect with their local LGBTQ+ community in person.

Cheyane Thacker

> **"It's crazy that we have all of this technology, and we're resorting to [getting] boots on the ground."**

Cheyane Thacker has been involved in Seneca Proud nearly since its formation, joining as a 23-year-old working at a coffee shop. Now 30, she serves as Seneca Proud's president even as their local Republican state representative regularly spearheads anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

As social media giants have pulled away from promoting LGBTQ+ news and information more and more, Thacker feels like her organization is struggling to find a solution.

"We're at a tipping point where everyone knows what the issues are, but no one knows the solution just yet."

But Thacker hopes more organizations like her will figure it out **together**..



Final Analysis

What you Want

- You want to find community
- You want to know what's going on
- You want to tell us stuff, but don't know how

Social Rankings

1. Facebook
2. Instagram
3. Newsletter
4. Newspaper
5. Word of mouth

News deserts and social media giants are making it harder and harder for rural Northwest Ohio's LGBTQ+ community to read accurate news and information.

Community ambassadors – like Russell and Cheyane – are key to telling your stories timely and authentically.

The Buckeye Flame gets most of our readership from social media, so we need to identify more ways to **connect with our audience** and **break the algorithm**.

We also don't want to shy away from going to rural Ohio in person, or cutting down on our stories of queer joy.

We are working on a series of articles related to socializing and event planning in Ohio's LGBTQ+ community, **thanks to your feedback**. We're also looking to reach beyond our typical audience through short-form videos and more in-person visits to your community.

What we need from you

It's clear that not only does rural NW Ohio's LGBTQ+ community thrive when there is an actively involved ambassador of their community, but The Buckeye Flame's coverage is more topical and relevant with these connections.

We need your help identifying more ambassadors. Is it your local pastor? Business owner? GSA supervisor?

Additionally, consider a "succession plan" so your community does not have to restart from scratch if the ambassador leaves.

That way your community won't come undone, and we can keep reporting your stories.

VIEW THE FULL SURVEY

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About the Listening Post Collective

The Listening Post Collective brings global expertise and strategies to meet community information needs in the U.S. Our Collective comprises former journalists, business leaders, humanitarian activists, grassroots organizers, and public policy analysts, all dedicated to empowering communities through reliable and impactful information.

LPC develops civic media and power-building resources for places in the U.S. that have been historically excluded from news and information systems. We partner with people and organizations to develop local news and information solutions that help communities thrive. To expand our reach, we've compiled our decade of experience in to our Civic Media Playbook, for people to access anywhere at anytime.

The contents of this report were built by using tools, resources, and templates in the Civic Media Playbook. To create your own, log on to the Playbook by visiting the links below.



Listening Post Collective

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