

Northwestern
MEDILL
Local News Initiative

TWO DECADES
OF DATA,
DESERTS &
DYNAMIC
CHANGE

State of Local News Report

2025



2025

STATE OF LOCAL NEWS REPORT



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The Medill Local News Initiative, founded in April 2018, is a research and development program intended to provide greater understanding of local news in America and help bolster the sustainability of local news that is critical to a self-governing democracy.

This State of Local News Project is one of six distinct projects that are part of the Local News Initiative.

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INTRODUCTION

Two Decades of Data, Deserts and Dynamic Change

by **TIM FRANKLIN**

Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News

Twenty years of data, one overarching headline: transformation.

With this State of Local News Report, Medill has two decades of data on local news outlets across America. And over the span of that time, the historic reshaping of local news has come into clearer focus.

News deserts are widening. Newspaper closures continue unabated. Independent publishers are calling it quits at an alarming rate. Yet local digital-only news sites are multiplying. Many are even thriving.

Our Medill Local News Initiative researchers updated and expanded a database of local

newspapers, digital-only news sites, networks, ethnic media outlets and public radio broadcasters. The team also utilized a predictive model to identify counties at high risk of losing local news. And a team of editors and reporters were deployed to highlight innovators in local news and to canvass the country to report on vital issues in the industry.



“

THIS SCRUPULOUSLY RESEARCHED REPORT TELLS A STORY OF WRENCHING RETRACTION, INSPIRATIONAL CREATION AND UNCEASING TRANSFORMATION.

”

The result of all that months-long work is simultaneously sobering and inspiring.

The steady, unrelenting decline of local newspapers — still the primary news source in most areas — is leading to an ever-rising number of news deserts, now 212 counties. This has huge implications for communities and our society. At the same time, digital-only local news sources are growing, providing pathways for new journalism entrepreneurs and giving consumers even more information choices.

The festering, 20-year-old problem? Those digital news sites don't come close to replacing the number of newspapers and journalism jobs being lost.

And the digital news providers are almost entirely concentrated in metro areas, leaving vast swaths of the country with little to no access to local news.

To summarize: This scrupulously researched report tells a story of wrenching retraction, inspirational creation and unceasing transformation.

Medill can conduct this research only with the help of our philanthropic supporters. We're grateful to the Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Southern Newspaper Publishers Foundation, Microsoft, Myrta J. Pulliam Charitable Trust and Medill alumni Mark Ferguson and John Mutz for their continued support.



PART 1

LOCAL NEWS LANDSCAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our first State of Local News report, published in 2016, examined the local news landscape across America over the previous 10 years, taking data from 2005 as its starting point. Now, in the project's 10th year, we are able to look back through the past two decades and see dramatic transformations in the ecosystem of local news.

Almost 40% of all local U.S. newspapers have vanished, leaving 50 million Americans with limited or no access to a reliable source of local news. This trend continues to impact the media industry and audiences nationwide. Newspapers are disappearing at the same rate as in 2024; more than 130 papers shut down in the past year alone. Newspaper employment is sliding steadily downward. And although there has been some growth in stand-alone and network digital sites, these startups remain heavily centralized in urban areas, and they have not been appearing fast enough to offset the losses elsewhere. As a result, news deserts — areas with extremely limited access to local news — continue to grow. In 2005, just over 150 counties lacked a source of local news; today, there are more



**Almost 40% of
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have vanished in the
past two decades**

50 MILLION

Americans live with limited or no access to local news

212

counties without
any local news source

1,525

counties with only
one local news source

3,500

newspapers have
vanished

than 210. Meanwhile, the journalism industry faces new and intensified challenges including: plummeting readership and steep losses of revenue from changes to search and the adoption of AI technologies, while Congressional funding cuts to public broadcasters threaten to leave large swaths of rural America without local news.

This report tracks 8,000 outlets within the American local news ecosystem. Beyond the more than 5,400 remaining newspapers, our database of local news includes close to 700 stand-alone digital sites, more than 850 network-operated digital sites, more than 650 ethnic and foreign language organizations, and more than 340 public broadcasters.

In preparing this report, we assembled and assessed data from a wide variety of sources, including industry groups, state press associations, and government statistics. As part of this process, we also manually reviewed the news outlets in our database to ensure that they consistently publish original locally-focused content that meets their community's critical information needs. For this year's report in particular, we significantly expanded our database of public broadcasters. For more information about our research, please review our methodology.

News Deserts

Over the past two decades, the number of news desert counties — areas that lack consistent local reporting — has grown steadily. This past year was no exception: in this report, we are tracking 212 U.S. counties without any local news source, up from 206 last year. In another 1,525 counties, there is only one news source remaining, typically a weekly newspaper. Taken together, in these counties some 50 million Americans live with limited or no access to local news.

Twenty Years of Newspaper Data

In the first quarter of the 21st century, a period marked by rapid digital innovation and evolution, local newspapers and the U.S. news media industry have undergone profound shifts. Close to 3,500 newspapers have vanished, leaving one in every four Americans with limited access to a local print newspaper. These disappearances have occurred across the country but are especially pronounced in the suburbs of large cities, where hundreds of papers have merged together. The papers that remain look profoundly different than just a few decades ago, with significantly consolidated ownership and reduced print frequencies.

Public Broadcasting

In July, Republicans in the U.S. Congress voted to rescind more than \$1 billion that a previous Congress had allocated to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. As a direct result, all federal funding to local NPR and PBS member stations vanished.

This leaves hundreds of public media stations at risk of having to reduce or suspend operations — at a time when their services are increasingly vital to Americans with limited alternatives for local news, especially in rural areas. In this report, we track 342 public media stations across the country. Collectively, the signals from these stations reach into more than 90% of all U.S. counties, including 82% of news deserts, making them a crucial piece of regional information infrastructure within the local news ecosystem.

Circulation Changes

Over the past two decades, print newspaper circulation across the United States has dropped by an estimated 80 million, a loss of 70% from 2005 levels. While print readership continues to decline, online visits to news organizations have also been in retreat; in the past four years, monthly unique page views of the websites of 100 of the largest papers have decreased, on average, by more than 40%. The model of the traditional daily newspaper is transforming with all these declines: in 2025, less than a fifth of U.S. dailies are still printed and delivered seven days a week.

Employment

Employment in local news has dropped at a staggering rate since 2005, with the newspaper industry losing more than three-quarters of its



jobs, and this trend has continued unabated. In the past year, total jobs in the newspaper industry declined by 7%, and the number of journalists employed within all media categories shrunk at a similar rate. In 39 states there are fewer than 1,000 journalists remaining.

Chains and Ownership

An ownership trend that started in 2024, when a wide range of smaller papers rapidly changed hands, continued in 2025. Within the past year, almost 250 newspapers changed hands across more than 100 transactions.



Startups and Sustainability

Over the past five years, we have tracked more than 300 startups that have emerged across the country. Support for both these new startups, which have opened in almost every state, as well as existing legacy outlets has come from a surge in philanthropic investment as well as public

policy initiatives. Over the past year, such efforts have boosted a wide variety of news outlets.

Overall, however, philanthropic grants remain highly centralized in urban areas, and state legislation has not been widely adopted throughout the nation, leaving many outlets in more rural or less affluent areas still vulnerable.



THE 2025 LANDSCAPE OF LOCAL NEWS

Local news in the United States is distributed widely but unevenly, closely following population centers. Of the 8,000 news outlets tracked in our database, 65% are located in urban or suburban areas.

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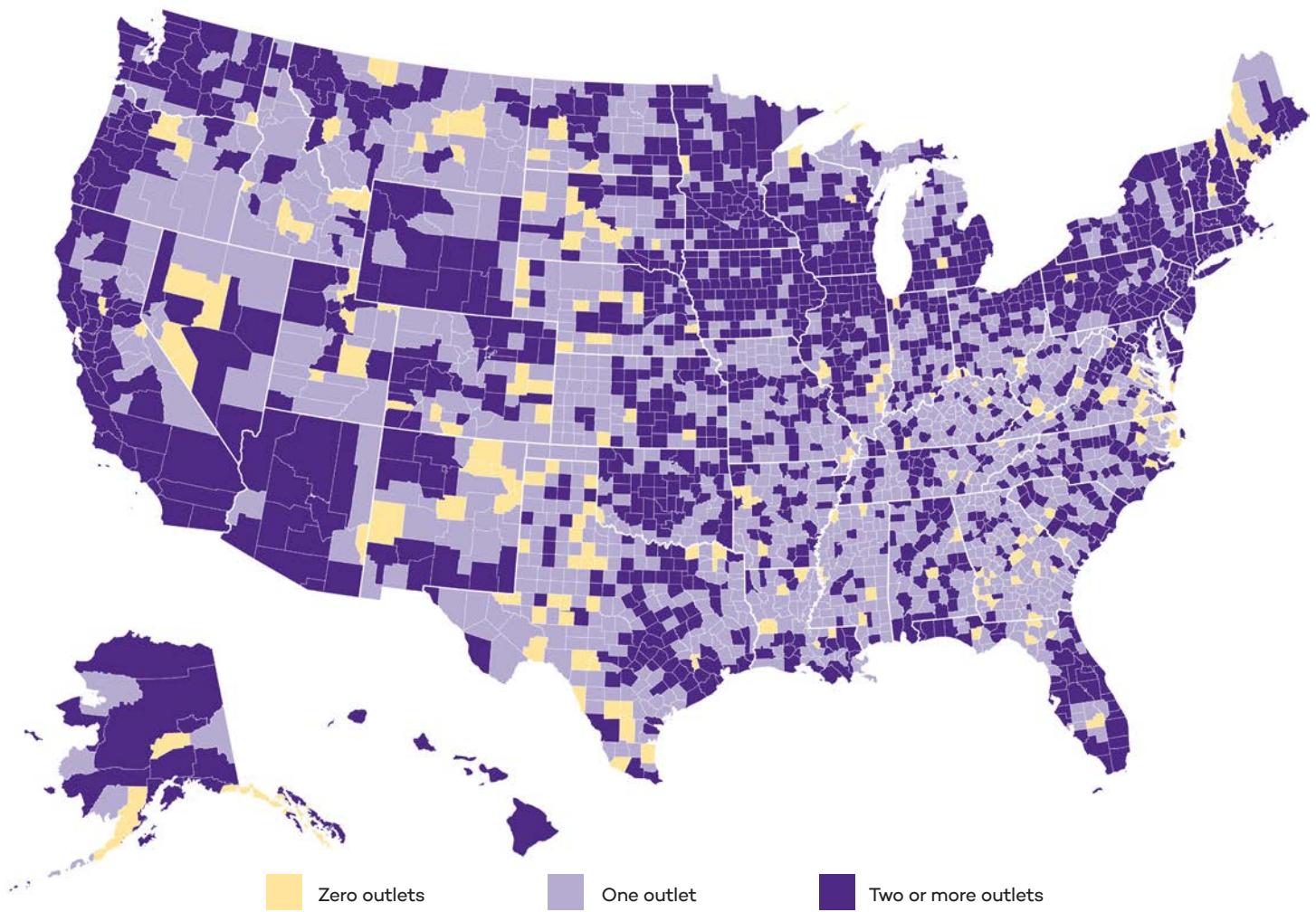
More than two-thirds of the local news outlets in the U.S. are newspapers. The vast majority of those newspapers are weeklies, defined as being in print fewer than three days a week.

Newspapers continue to disappear at an alarming rate: in the past year alone, 148 vanished due to closures or mergers, a little more than two each week. The majority of those disappearances were weeklies, but dailies were not spared — as of this year, there are fewer than 1,000 daily print newspapers remaining in the United States.

In general, these losses look different than in some previous years, when the primary drivers

How many news outlets are near you?

There are 212 counties in the United States with no news outlets. There are 1,525 counties with only one.



Source: Local News Initiative Database

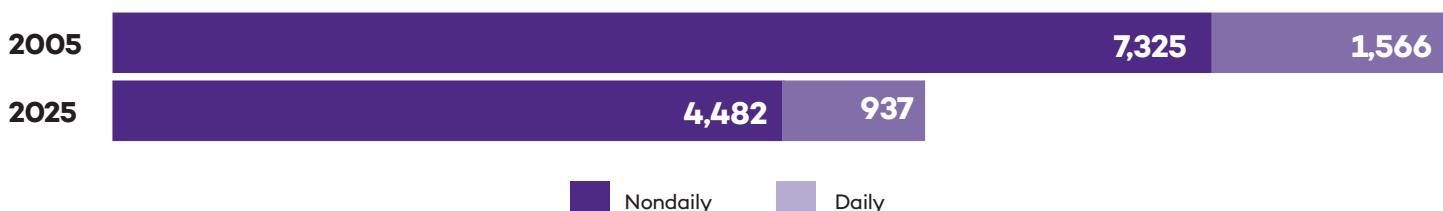
behind newspaper disappearances were mass closures or mergers carried out by a few large chains. In the past year, only a tenth of the newspapers that vanished had been controlled by one of the 10 largest companies. Instead, many of the papers lost in the past year were smaller, independent chains and outlets. In May, for example, [four Minnesota papers closed](#) after citing financial reasons, saying “the combined revenue for all four of our newspapers totaled less than our expenses.” In July, the Wasatch Wave, which had operated in

Utah for 136 years, [closed after the long-time owners retired](#). And in February, the Aurelia Star in Iowa [shut down](#) after the county board of supervisors voted not to carry public notices in the paper.

Even with these declines, local newspapers remain the backbone of the American media ecosystem, and are more numerous than all other media types combined. Yet for many readers, digital-only news sites are an increasingly integral part of their news

Total number of local U.S. newspapers in 2005 and 2025

There has been a net loss of 3,400 papers since 2005.

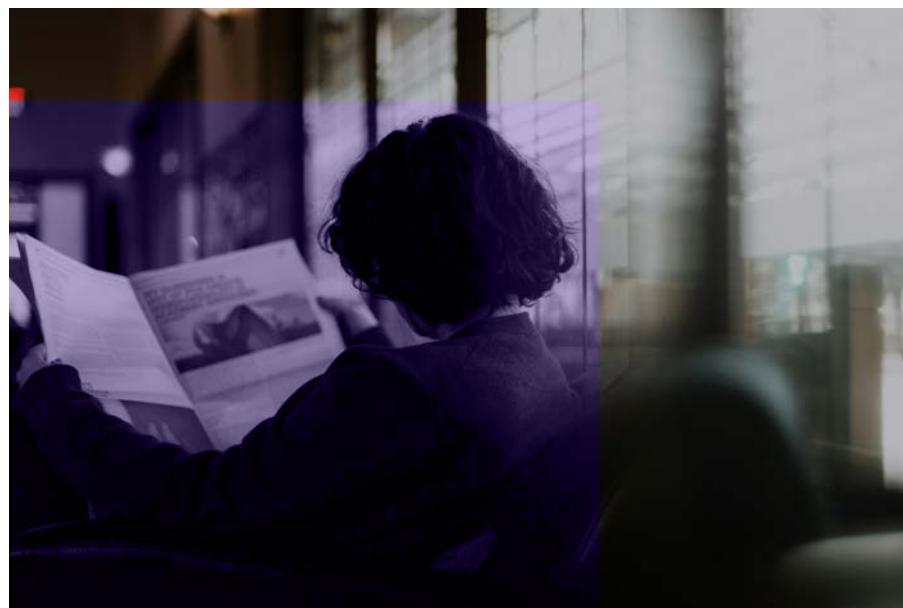


Source: Local News Initiative Database

consumption habits. In this update, we are tracking 695 stand-alone digital news outlets, up from 662 last year. This modest growth includes a handful of startups as well as some newspapers that have ended their print product and are pursuing a solely digital news presence.

As part of our 2024 report, we added the category of network digital sites to our database, tracking 742 individual sites across 23 network groups. This year, that number has grown to 853 sites across 52 different networks. Some of this growth has been natural: Axios, for example, expanded operations over the past year, opening new sites in cities including Pittsburgh; Huntsville, Alabama; and Boulder, Colorado. Many other new additions to this list, however, are reclassifications from existing media categories, such as the addition of NJ.com following the New Jersey Star-Ledger's transition to digital only publication.

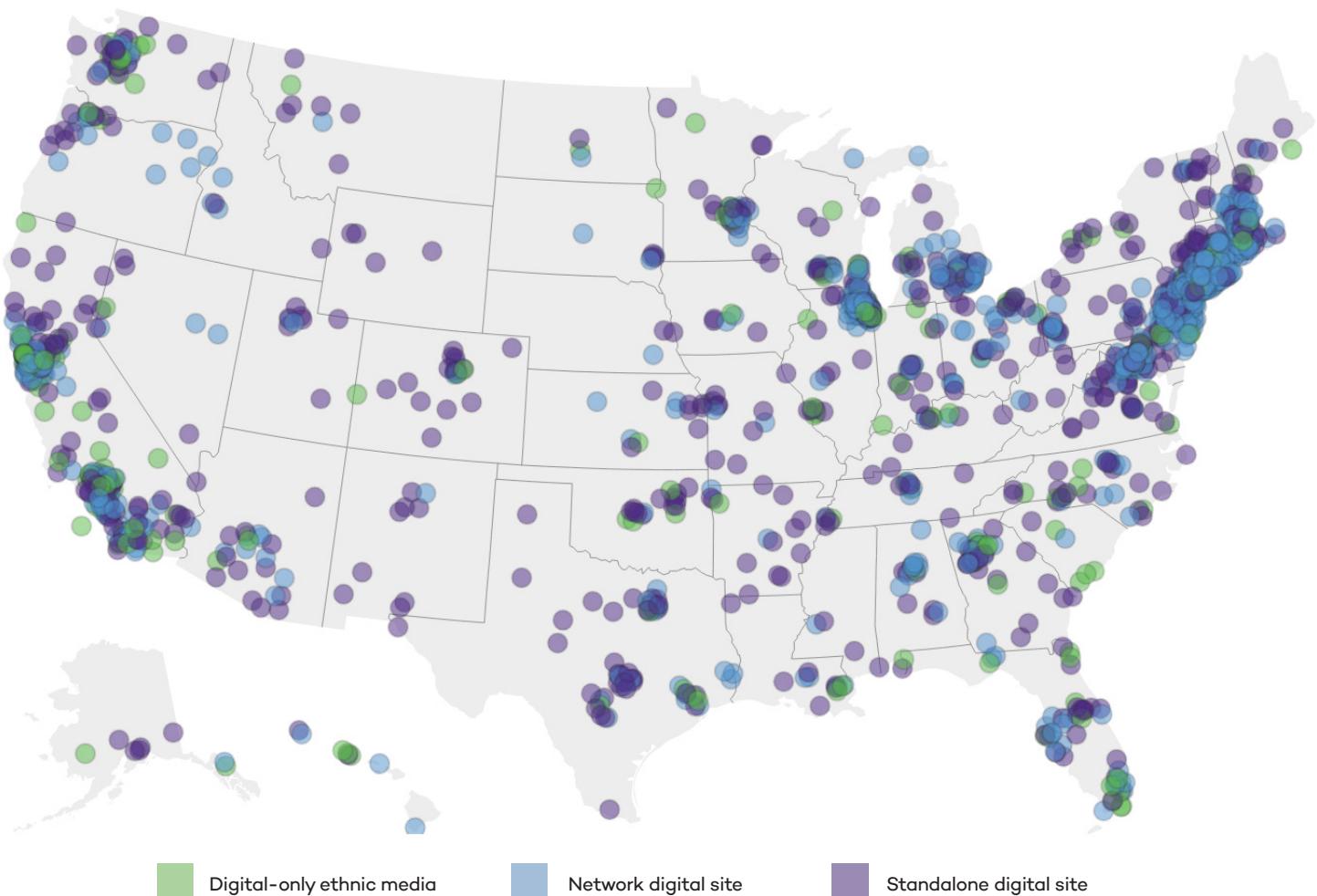
As was the case last year, the number of network sites doing original reporting specific to their local community is a small fraction of the larger landscape of networks. For example, our 2025 database tracks 535 Patch sites that offer original local reporting. As a larger organization, however, Patch boasts more than 11,000 sites, a massive jump from just under 2,000 in 2024. In our review of these sites, we found that almost all of them fall into the category of Patch AM, the network's "news brief" collection of aggregated newsletters.



**THERE ARE
FEWER THAN
1,000 DAILY PRINT
NEWSPAPERS
REMAINING
IN THE U.S.
AS OF THIS YEAR**

Digital-only local news is growing but remains concentrated

More than 90% of digital-only local news sites fall in counties designated “metro” by the USDA.



Note: Points jittered for illustrative purposes. Exact locations approximate.

Source: Local News Initiative Database

While standalone and digital network sites are strong alternatives to print newspapers for many readers, they remain heavily concentrated. Of the close to 500 U.S. counties home to a digital news outlet, only a quarter are in rural areas.

And the demographic characteristics of counties supporting digital sites are nearly the polar opposite to news deserts: These counties tend to be more affluent, with lower rates of poverty and higher rates of educational attainment.



NEWS DESERTS

Every year since we began tracking local news outlets, the number of news deserts — areas with extremely limited access to local news — has grown. The past year was no exception: out of the 3,144 counties in the U.S., there are now 212 counties with zero local news sources, compared to 206 in 2024. Additionally, there are 1,525 counties with only one local news source remaining, usually a weekly newspaper. Taken together, that means that one in seven Americans, almost 50 million people, live with limited or no access to local news.

Counties with lower levels of news access are spread across the United States, but some states are more affected than others. In Mississippi, for example, 72% of people live in a county with limited access to local news. The three states where the most people live in zero- or one-source counties are Georgia (5 million people), Texas (4 million people) and North Carolina (2.9 million people).

A decade ago, the expansion of news deserts was tied to mass closures and consolidations

driven by “media barons.” By contrast, much of the growth in news deserts over the past year can be attributed to the closures of several smaller papers that were independently owned or were controlled by small chains. Last summer, for example, two news deserts were created in Mississippi [after Buckley Newspapers closed](#) the Jasper County News and the Smith County Reformer. At the start of this year, the 141-year-old Chesterton Tribune in Porter County, Indiana [ceased publication again](#) after having been revived following a brief shuttering in 2021. And



Top states with counties with limited access to local news



Georgia

5 million people live in zero- or one-source local news counties



Texas

4 million people live in zero- or one-source local news counties



North Carolina

2.9 million people live in zero- or one-source local news counties



Kentucky

2.38 million people live in zero- or one-source local news counties

in late June, the closure of the daily Eagle Times in Sullivan County, New Hampshire, [created a rare news desert](#) in New England.

News deserts have many common characteristics. On average, they tend to be poorer counties and have smaller economic outputs than the rest of the country, with populations that are less well educated. They also tend to be more rural areas: In 2025, almost 80% of news deserts were in counties the USDA classifies as predominantly rural. These factors make it challenging to establish a viable news startup; For the people living in these counties, lack of access to local news is one of many interconnected inequalities.

As previously mentioned, digital news outlets have typically emerged in counties with very different conditions than news deserts. Underdeveloped technological infrastructure is among the latter's challenges. In the 212 news desert counties, less than half of residents have access to the fastest speeds of terrestrial internet connectivity on average, as the latest data from the Federal Communications Commission shows. In 20% of these counties, fewer than 10% of residents can access the internet at these high speeds. The dual disparities of lack of a local

Demographic profiles of news deserts and watch list counties

News deserts have no local news source. Watch list counties are at risk of losing their only local news source.

Demographic measure	News deserts	Watch list counties	U.S.
Median household income	\$61,595	\$54,135	\$77,719
Percent with Bachelor's degree or higher	20.5%	19.4%	36.2%
Median age	43.5	45.2	39.2
Percent below poverty line	16.4%	18.3%	12.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

news source and limited internet connectivity place residents of news deserts on the edge of a widening information divide.

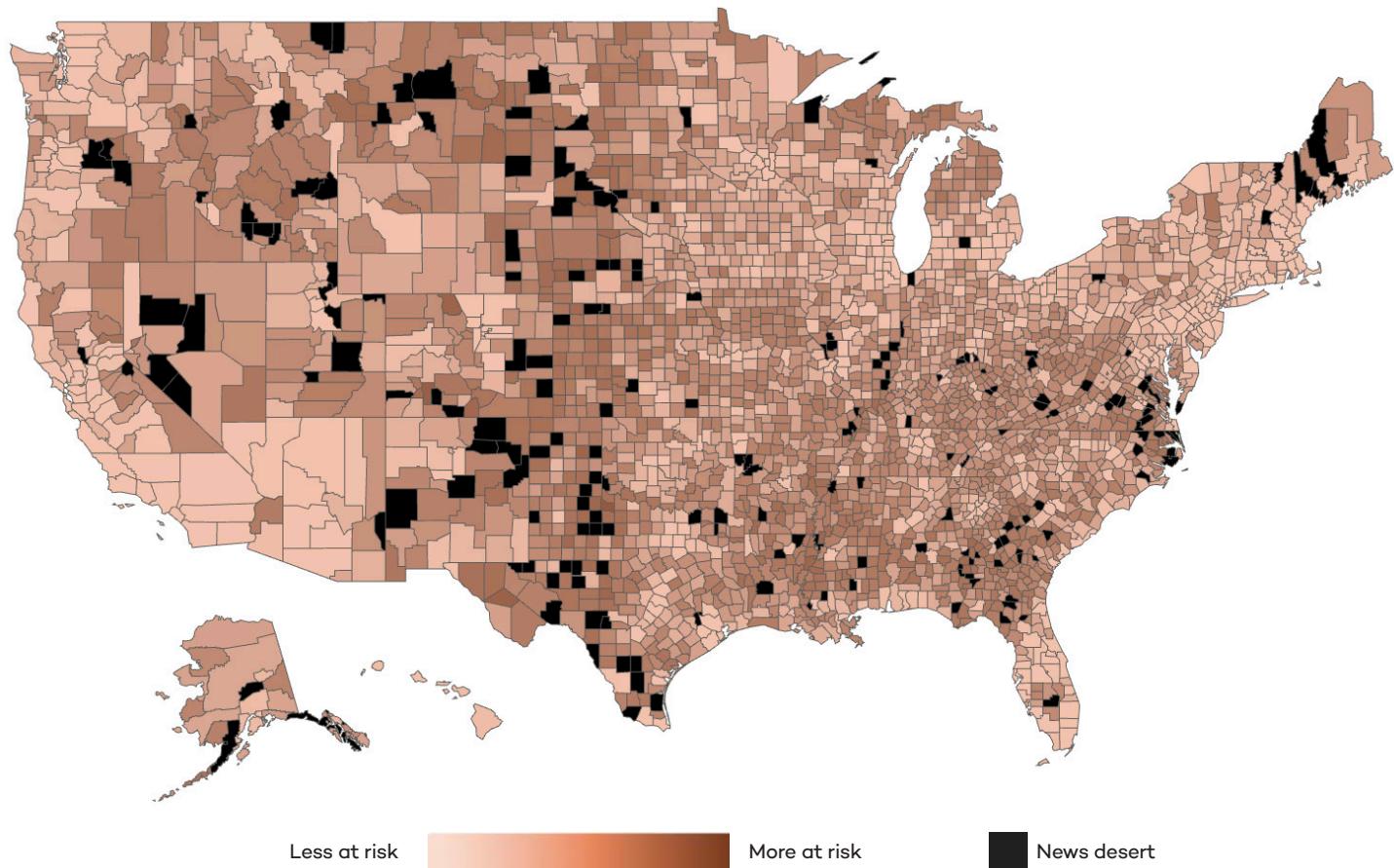
The shared similarities among news deserts allowed researchers from the Medill Local News Initiative to develop a predictive model that examines a county's risk levels for losing its local news sources. This model is used to generate the Medill Local News Watch List, a set of counties that have only one source of local news and are at high risk of losing it. When we first published this model in 2023, the associated watch list focused on counties with particularly high poverty rates. As part of this year's update,

1 IN 7 AMERICANS

HAVE LIMITED OR NO ACCESS TO LOCAL NEWS

[we refined our watch list methodology](#) to more closely adhere to the underlying model and account for the range of factors influencing the emergence of news deserts. Incorporating the latest data, 249 counties have been identified by our watch list as having a greater than 40% likelihood of becoming a news desert within the next decade.

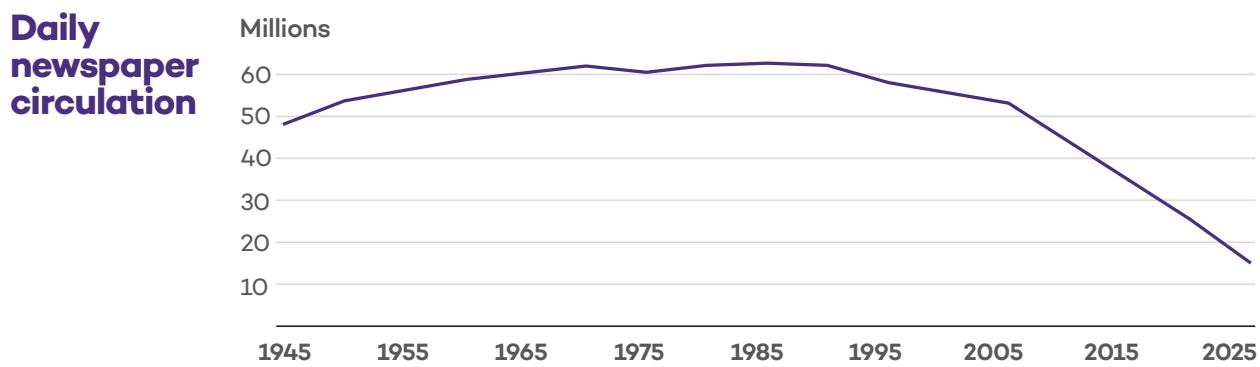
Local news ecosystem barometer 2025



Source: Local News Initiative Database

TWENTY YEARS OF NEWSPAPER DATA

The U.S. newspaper ecosystem has changed significantly since 2005. Although circulation of the largest dailies had declined since the industry's peak in the 1980s, the overall number of papers and the revenue they generated had remained relatively static coming into the new millennium. Within a few years, however, the industry's fortunes plummeted. The print-advertisement-based business model that had sustained American newspapers for the previous century began to collapse. As more and more papers closed, the ones that remained became prime targets for consolidation by new and aggressive media chains.



Source: Editor & Publisher

Twenty years later, the U.S. newspaper landscape has been transformed. In 2005, there were 3 newspapers for every 100,000 Americans; today, there are 1.6. The shrinking number of newspapers has heightened disparities in access to local news: In 2005, a little more than 37 million people lived in the 1,400 counties that had zero or only one newspaper. In 2025, that number has ballooned to more than 88 million — one in every four Americans — with limited access to a local newspaper. Although many of these people are able to get local news from another source, such as a digital-only site or a public broadcaster, more than three-quarters remain reliant on a newspaper as their only news source.

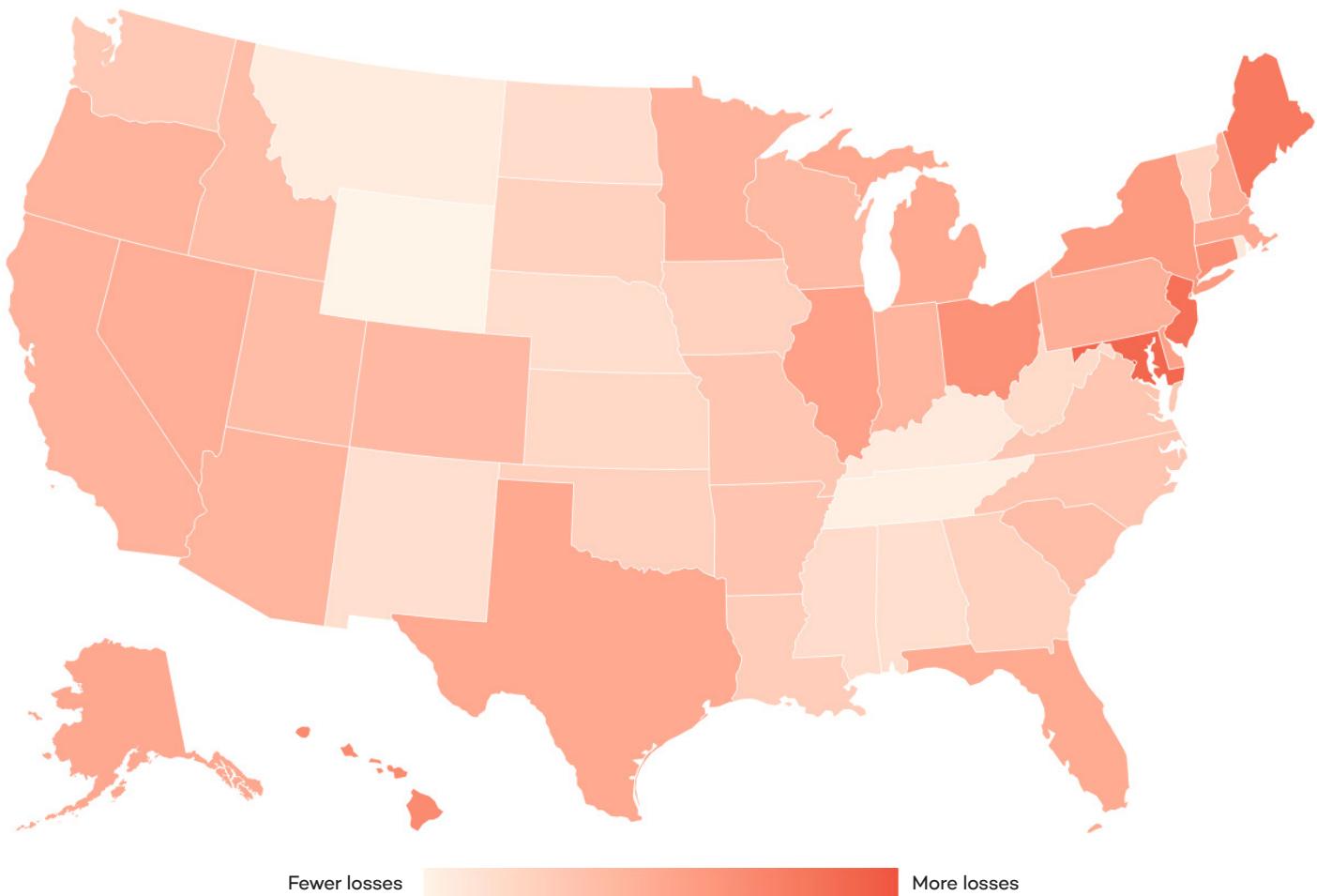
(One challenge in performing a county-level analysis is that the boundaries of counties in the U.S. have shifted in some cases over the past

twenty years. Notably, in Alaska, where census areas and boroughs form county equivalents, there have been several splits among such entities, such as the city of Skagway separating from the larger Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area in 2007. For the purposes of this analysis, we are using 2010 county definitions when referring to 2005 data. The recent overhaul of Connecticut's county boundaries does not impact these findings.)

Since 2005, close to 3,500 newspapers have ceased printing, but these disappearances have not been equally distributed. Some states have lost significantly more newspapers than others: Percentage-wise, Maryland, New Jersey, Maine, Hawaii and Ohio have lost the most. Twelve states have lost more than 100 newspapers in the past 20 years.



Newspapers lost by state, 2005-2025



Source: Local News Initiative Database

An examination of the counties where newspapers have vanished reveals trends in where the greatest losses have occurred. The crisis of local news is often characterized as a rural problem, but in terms of magnitude, the disappearance of local newspapers has most starkly impacted urban and suburban areas. Of the 3,500 newspapers that have vanished since 2005, almost 70% disappeared from counties categorized as predominantly urban. A quarter of newspaper losses have occurred in just 10 metropolitan areas, with New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and Minneapolis the five cities most affected. Almost a third of U.S. cities

have lost more than half of their newspapers. Some have lost significantly more: Milwaukee, for example, has lost 80% of its newspapers over the past two decades, as has Rochester, New York. Columbus, Ohio, has lost 74%, with more than 45 papers vanishing.

In part, these urban losses have been greater because these areas had the most to lose. But they also speak to how newspapers have disappeared. Suburban newspapers proved particularly vulnerable to the mass consolidations carried out by large chains. Near Boston, for example, the suburban

papers owned by Gannett largely have been folded into a single website named Wicked Local. In California, many of the community weeklies surrounding Los Angeles were shut down throughout the 2010s by Freedom Communications before its sale in 2016.

Consolidation in newspaper ownership has been particularly striking. In 2005, there were 3,995 unique owners. Today, ownership has halved, with just under 1,900 owners remaining. While many of the vanished companies were smaller owners that disappeared along with their independent newspapers, the largest owners were not spared from consolidations. Indeed, several of the top owners in 2025 were formed out of mergers among the biggest chains that controlled the landscape in 2005. The two largest chains 20 years ago, Gannett and GateHouse Media, each with more than 150 papers, combined when the parent company of GateHouse — New Media Investment Group — bought Gannett in 2019, before adopting the Gannett name. Two other large owners, the Journal Register Company and Boston Herald parent Herald Media, were both acquired by MediaNews Group, also known as Digital First Media, a publisher owned by Alden Global Capital. Knight Ridder, a technology pioneer of early internet publishing, was acquired by McClatchy in 2006.

Independent ownership has also transformed. The proportion of newspapers that are independently owned has dropped especially among smaller, rural papers, declining from 54% in 2005 to 47% today. Among dailies, the differences are even more stark. In 2005, the



more than 1,500 daily newspapers were owned by 459 unique owners. Today, the remaining dailies are owned by just 162. The vast majority of these dailies are controlled by larger and medium-size chains; less than 15% remain independently owned.



THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING LANDSCAPE

The era of public broadcasting in the United States formally started almost 60 years ago. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and laid the foundation for dispersing taxpayer funds to support public broadcasters nationwide. The conceptual origins of public media began much earlier, however, according to Anna Brugmann, senior manager for states policy at National Public Radio (NPR).

“This is an essential promise that our government made to Americans really early on,” said Brugmann in an interview with Medill. “That they have the ability to access information that reflects their communities and share it with each other and enter into a national conversation no matter how difficult that may be. And public media is among the best suited to fulfill that role.”

The two major components of public media — NPR and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) — were incorporated in 1970 and 1969, respectively. These organizations, along with

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PUBLIC RADIO AS AN ANCHOR AND AS A CENTER OF GRAVITY IS SO ESSENTIAL FOR MEETING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.

— **Anna Brugmann**, senior manager for states policy at NPR

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dozens of smaller public media stations and networks, have grown to play significant roles in the broader local news ecosystem.

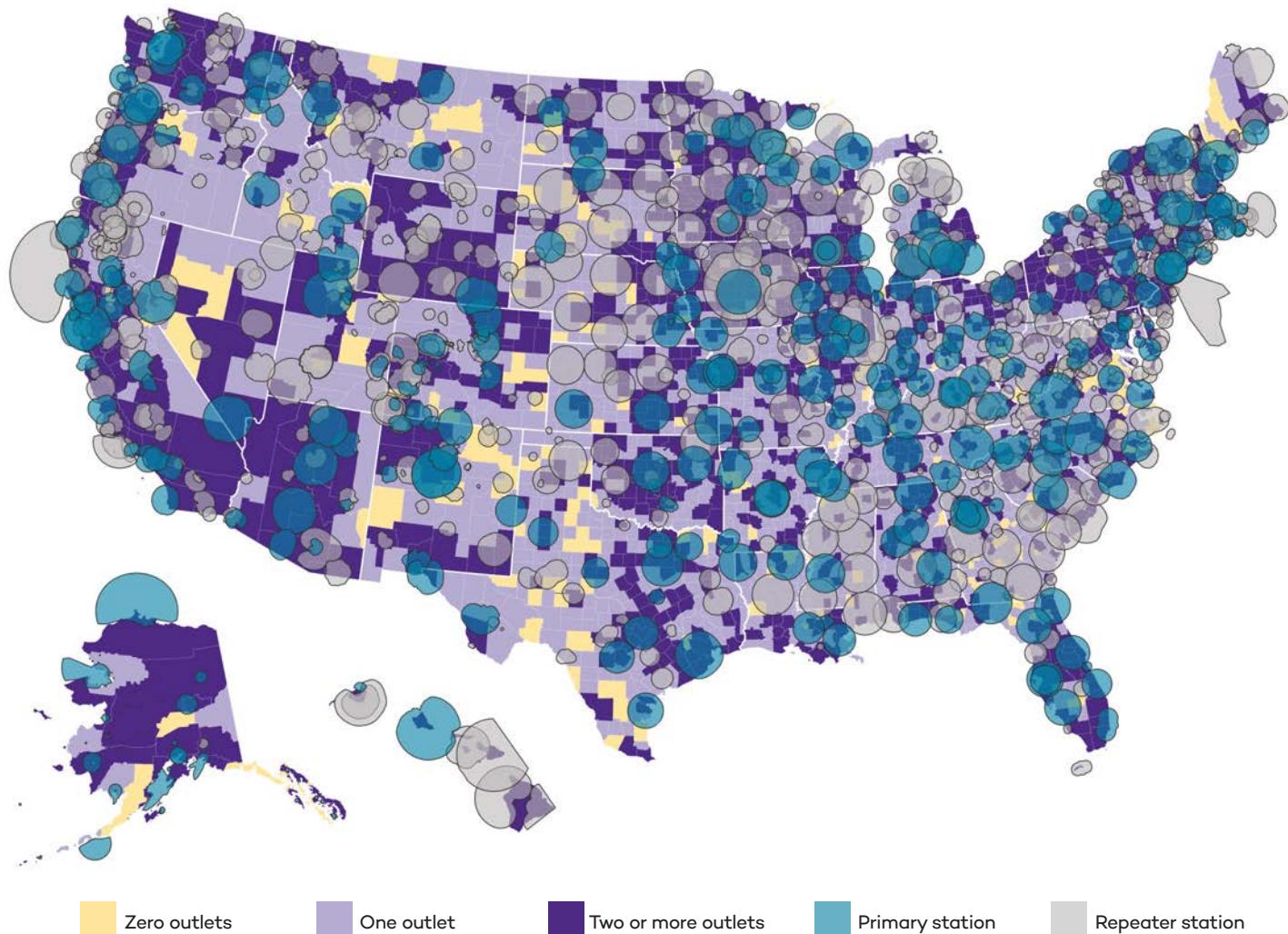
As part of our 2025 update, we have expanded the scope of our public broadcasting data to better reflect its place in the local news landscape. Our database tracks nearly 300 public radio stations and more than 100 public television stations that originate local reporting

content within their programming. Beyond these, we are also tracking hundreds of repeater and affiliate signals that broaden the geographic reach of these stations. For more information on how this update was conducted, please review our methodology.

The public broadcasting stations tracked in this update are located in 278 counties. In nine counties — six in Alaska, one in Idaho, one in

Public radio blankets in the United States

Public radio stations reach more than 80% of news deserts when including repeaters.



Source: Local News Initiative Database, National Public Radio & Federal Communications Commission



New Mexico and one in South Dakota — a public broadcasting station is the sole source of local news coverage. In 42 other counties, public media is one of only two sources, with the other typically being a weekly newspaper.

Outside of newspapers, many media alternatives such as digital outlets are heavily concentrated in urban and often more affluent areas. But public broadcasting, and public radio in particular, is different. Although two-thirds of radio stations emanate from urban locations, the remainder are spread throughout the country, bringing local news to many rural regions that are otherwise underserved by local sources.

Every state has at least one public broadcaster, but the dynamics of how these are distributed differ from the distribution of other outlets in the news ecosystem. Alaska, for instance, with its low population density and vast expanses of rugged terrain, has the most public broadcasting stations of any state. It is closely followed by California, with Colorado, New York and Texas rounding out the top five.

One of the key advantages of public broadcasting that makes it a potential remedy to news deserts is that the signals from many stations reach into areas with limited access to other forms of news. In an analysis of the signal contours for each of the public radio stations in our database, Medill researchers found that the primary stations reach into 46% of news desert counties and 53% of counties with only one news source. When repeaters are included, this reach jumps dramatically, with signals extending into 82% of news deserts and 90% of single-source counties.

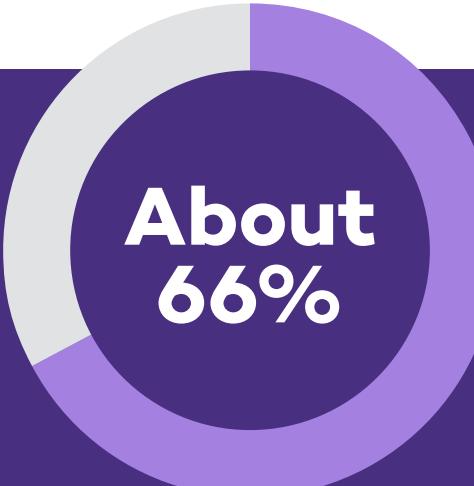
NPR has expanded on this infrastructure by explicitly organizing stations into regional networks that are able to share information, reporting and resources. This model allows stations to work together in times of emergencies, such as the aftermath of Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina, and to elevate more routine stories and reporting. As Brugmann puts it: “The ability to collaborate with each other as public radio stations has been a significant value proposition that we offer to the American people to facilitate local, regional and national conversations.”

Recent congressional actions have complicated this mission. The proportion of money that NPR and PBS receive from the federal government has decreased significantly since their early years, when the majority of their funding was federal. Yet cutting off federal support for public broadcasting has been an objective of conservatives for decades. This came to fruition in July, when Republicans voted to rescind more than a billion dollars that had been allocated for CBP disbursement through fiscal 2026 and 2027.

This clawback posed a sudden and significant threat to stations across the country. Although NPR and PBS receive only a small portion of their operating budgets from the federal government, individual member stations are in very different financial situations. The budgets of these stations can vary wildly, with some dependent on federal grants for a small fraction of their revenue, while others rely on federal support almost exclusively.

In a review of station finances from 2023 and 2024, we found that roughly two-thirds of stations receive more than 10% of their funding from government sources through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In about 10% of stations, that support counts for more than 40% of funding, putting these stations at elevated risk of having to drastically scale back operations or shut down entirely. The stations with the highest dependencies tend to be those located in poorer, more rural areas. Of the 24 counties with stations that receive more than 40% of their funding from federal sources, half are classified as very rural. These stations face a dual challenge: A large percentage of their funding has vanished, and they cannot make up the deficit through audience or local business donations, as stations in more urban areas might be able to do.

Already, federal funding cuts have taken their toll, with layoffs announced by several outlets, including [PBS North Carolina](#) and [KUNC in](#)



About
66%

of stations receive more than 10% of funding from government sources through Corporation for Public Broadcasting,

and that government support accounts for more than 40+% of funding for about 1 in 10 stations



Colorado. And while no station has closed this year as a result of the recessions, several stations face that possibility; NPR CEO Katherine Maher [estimates that as many as 70 to 80 could disappear](#). New Jersey PBS [announced](#) that it will shut down next summer.

Despite all this, public broadcasting enjoys strong public support and trust, with an estimated [two-thirds of Americans](#) saying they value the local programming put out by public media stations. As Brugmann says, “In answering this question of not only how do we talk to each other, but how do we talk to ourselves and our community, public radio as an anchor and as a center of gravity is so essential for meeting the American people where they are.”



CIRCULATION AND FREQUENCY CHANGES

Of all the metrics used to measure the newspaper industry, readership is perhaps the one that has plummeted most. In 2005, combined newspaper circulation of dailies and weeklies hovered around 120 million. For the population at the time, that means there was one newspaper produced for every two and a half Americans. In 2025, circulation estimates are close to 38 million, or a newspaper for every nine people — a reduction of nearly 70%.

Of course, the share of people consuming news from a print product in 2025 is decreasing. Most news consumers looking at a newspaper will visit that paper's website for headlines and stories of the day.

In a recent Medill poll of Chicago news consumers' preferences, just 5% said they got their news from a printed newspaper "all the time," compared to 40% who did so using a smartphone. Yet digital traffic to local news sites is experiencing a cratering similar to that of print.

In preparing this report, Medill researchers examined the web traffic to the 100 largest newspapers whose website activity was tracked by the media analytics company Comscore. We found that, on average, these papers' monthly pageviews declined by more than 45% over the past four years. Of those 100, only 11 experienced any growth in readership over the same period.

This drop has coincided with technological changes that threaten to upend how readers interact with news sites. The widespread

Publication frequencies of the 100 largest dailies

44% of the largest daily newspapers publish less than seven days a week.



Source: Local News Initiative Database

integration of generative AI into search engines, for example, has led to users seeing search results with headlines and content in summary form, without actually going to the underlying sources (which are pushed down further in search results). Already, [this has particularly affected](#) some of the largest revenue generators in an outlet's portfolio, such as product reviews and "evergreen" journalism. Additionally, traditional news outlets are facing competition from new, emerging sources. In Medill's poll of [Chicago news consumers](#), nearly a third of respondents said that they received news from social media content creators.

As circulation, readership and clicks all decline, news organizations have been searching for ways to cut costs. Reducing publication frequency has been one of the more common methods; as a result, the archetypal newspaper delivered seven days a week is increasingly rare. Of the 100 largest dailies in the country, 44 print fewer than seven days a week. Across all dailies, that proportion is more than 80%. Roughly a quarter of dailies print less than four days a week.

Reduced printing schedules have naturally led to reductions in print operations. Gannett, for example, has significantly consolidated production infrastructure over the past year, closing or announcing closures in several printing plants across the country. The plants, which printed the [Columbia Daily Tribune](#) in mid-



Missouri, the Rhode Island [Providence Journal](#), the Detroit [Free Press](#), the Arizona [Republic](#) and the Minnesota [Star Tribune](#), as well as numerous smaller papers, collectively employed close to 600 people, roughly 9% of all production workers in the newspaper industry. As a result of these closures, many of these papers are no longer printed in the states they cover: The Providence Journal will be printed in New Jersey, for instance, and the Star Tribune will be printed in Iowa.

Beyond reductions, many newspapers have elected to end print distribution altogether. Among the most high-profile to do so this past year was the New Jersey Star-Ledger, the largest newspaper in the state when it ceased its print product in February. Along with some of its more localized associated publications, the Star-Ledger shifted to operating as a statewide digital news outlet. Another Advance Local property, the Birmingham News in Alabama, shifted to online only in 2023. Smaller papers have done the same: The 52-year-old San Diego Reader [announced in February that it, too, would be online only](#).

This trend looks likely to continue; in August, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution announced plans to end its print publication at year's end.

NEARLY 1 IN 3
HAVE RECEIVED
NEWS FROM
SOCIAL MEDIA
CONTENT
CREATORS,
ACCORDING TO
A MEDILL POLL

OWNERSHIP

In 2024, we identified a record number of newspaper transactions taking place. Within the past year, that number has dipped slightly but remains high: Over the past year, we tracked 243 papers that changed hands across 112 transactions. Like the 268 papers that changed owners last year, the majority of these transactions involved smaller and mid-size chains.

The main reason for the decreased activity compared to 2024 was the reduced presence from Carpenter Media Group, whose aggressive acquisitions last year accounted for more than 100 of the ownership changes.

Earlier this year, Carpenter made a couple of purchases, such as buying the Midwestern Enterprise Media Group in January and Missouri-based Salem Publishing in February. In general, however, most transactions that took place over the past year were between smaller buyers and sellers. These changes include [The Tecumseh Herald](#) in Michigan, which was sold to a local business owner in



10 largest newspaper owners in 2025

Despite contraction, Gannett remains the largest local newspaper chain.

Owner		2025 total papers	2025 total dailies	2024 total papers	Net change	Rank change
1	Gannett/Gatehouse	297	211	310	-13	-
2	Alden/MediaNews Group	165	72	170	-5	-
3	Adams Publishing Group	154	34	148	6	-
4	Paxton Media Group	151	44	130	21	↑ 1
5	Carpenter Media Group	126	21	138	-12	↓ 1
5	Lee Enterprises	112	74	128	-16	-
7	CherryRoad Media	92	8	81	11	↑ 1
8	Ogden Newspapers	88	56	92	-4	↓ 1
9	CHNI/Retirement Systems of Alabama	76	51	77	-1	-
10	Horizon Publications	71	39	73	-2	-

Source: Local News Initiative Database

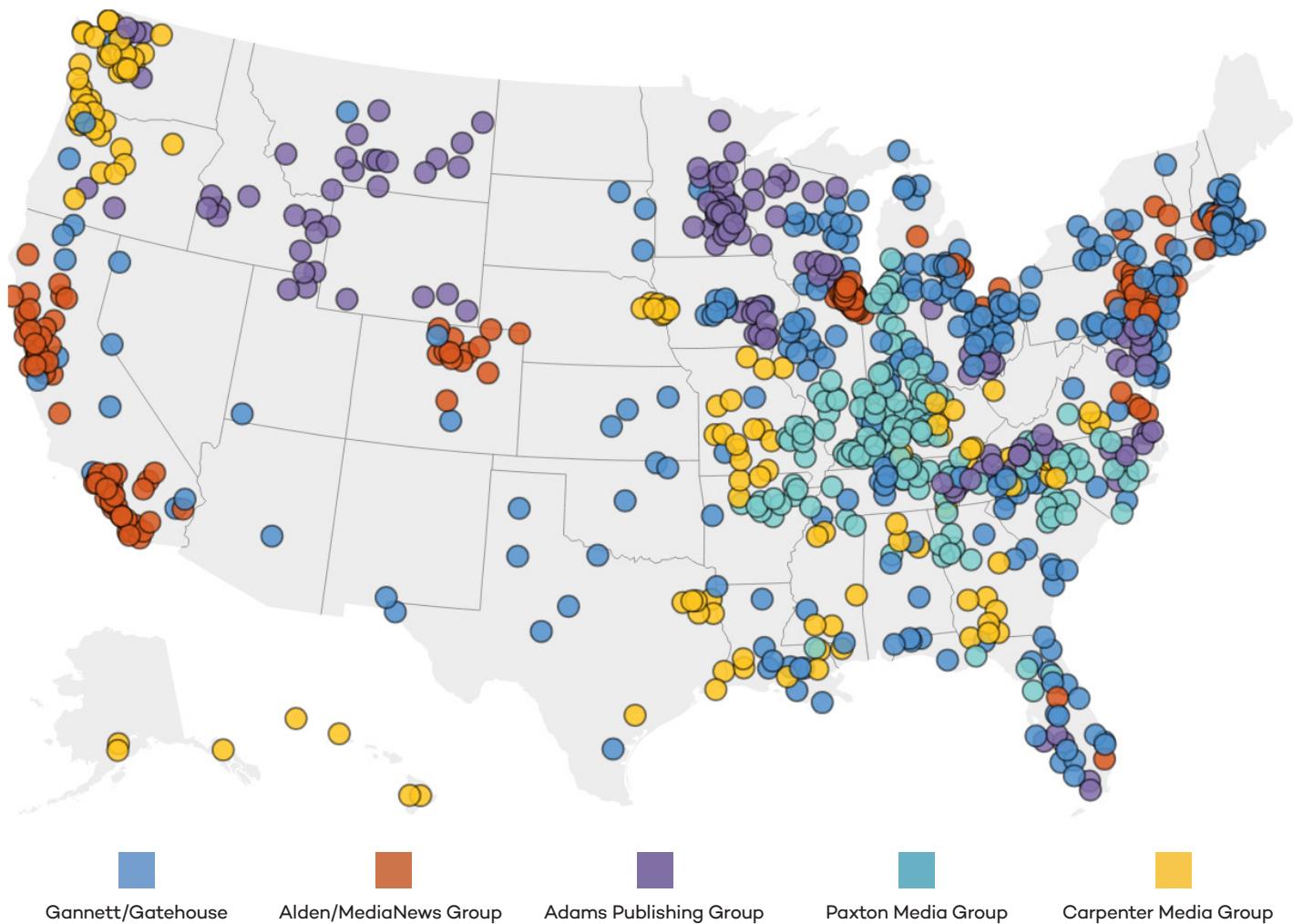
the Spring, or the [Chicago Reader](#), which went to Noisy Creek, a publisher known for alt-weeklies. Not all of these transactions were strictly purchases: In April, the Spokane Spokesman-Review [was donated](#) to a newly formed nonprofit organization.

Additionally, some larger chains continued the trend of offloading properties: Gannett, for example, [sold the Austin American-Statesman](#) and several associated papers to Hearst in February.

Despite this activity, the overall ownership structure of newspapers remains relatively consistent with last year. In 2025, nearly a quarter of all newspapers are controlled by the 10 largest companies, as are 60% of all dailies. The vast majority of newspapers, more than 95%, are for-profit entities. Among digital sites the proportion is higher: In this update, we found that 44% of standalone sites are nonprofit outlets.

Largest newspaper owners in 2025

The five largest local newspaper chains own over 15% of the country's dailies and weeklies.



Note: Points jittered for illustrative purposes. Exact locations approximate.

Source: Local News Initiative Database

EMPLOYMENT

In our previous report, we found that the number of people employed in the newspaper industry in 2023 had dipped below 100,000 for the first time. In 2024, the most recent data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that number continued to shrink. Some 91,550 people were employed across all occupations within the newspaper industry, a decline of 7% from 2023. Since 2005, more than 270,000 newspaper jobs have vanished, a loss of more than 75%.

Newspaper publishers continue to suffer significantly higher losses compared to other industries. From 2023 to 2024, the newspaper industry recorded the 11th-highest loss of jobs among any industry tracked by the BLS, in terms of percentage. Over that period, almost every U.S. state lost newspaper jobs; in half of all states, there are fewer than 1,000 newspaper workers left.

Of course, local news extends beyond newspapers. Less than a third of the nearly 42,000 journalists in the United States — just



FROM 2023-2024, THE JOURNALIST OCCUPATION FARED WORSE THAN 85% OF ALL JOBS TRACKED BY THE BLS

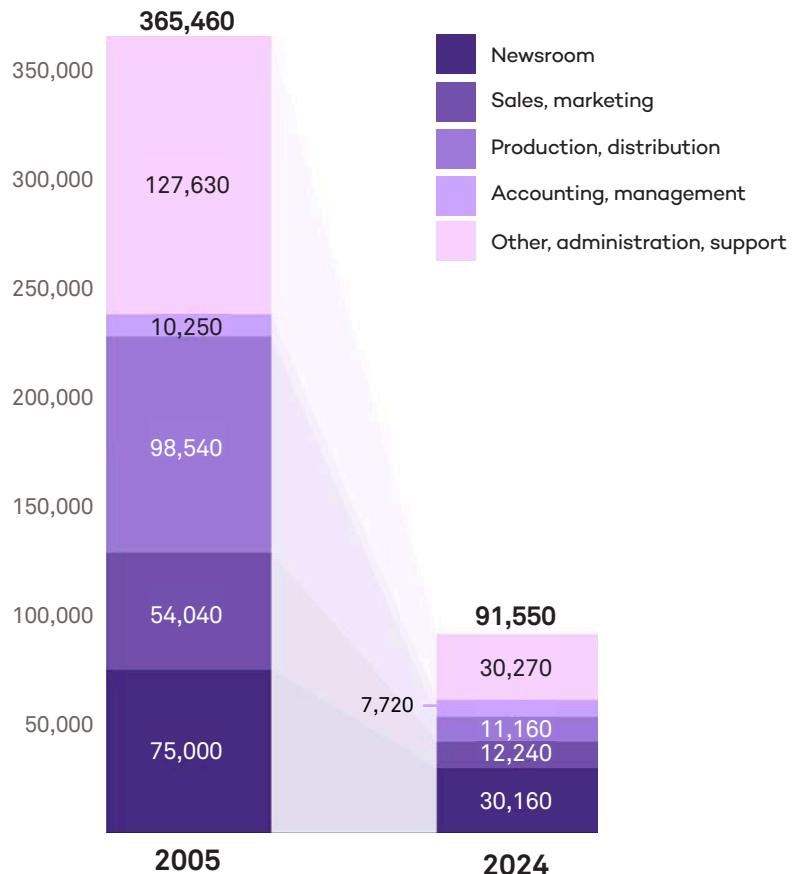
29% — are employed in the newspaper field as of 2024, though it is the largest single category. In 2005, by contrast, the newspaper industry employed 71% of all reporters.

The other major sectors for journalism jobs are digital media and broadcast reporting, each of which account for roughly a quarter of such employment. The latter category even reported some minor growth in the past year, with television broadcasters adding close to 200 journalist jobs and radio adding close to 300.

These modest gains, however, were unable to match the overall losses: In the same period, newspapers lost more than 1,200 journalist jobs and digital publishers more than 1,800.

Newspaper employment in 2005 and 2024

Total newspaper employment has decreased by more than 70% over the past two decades.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

All told, the journalist occupation declined by a little more than 7% from 2023 to 2024, almost identical to the decrease among newspaper publishers. Over that same time frame, journalist jobs fared worse than 85% of all occupations tracked by the BLS.

STARTUPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Last year, encouraging signs emerged as philanthropic organizations and policymakers made efforts to support local news across the country.

In April 2024, New York lawmakers added support for local news into the state budget. In May of the same year, Illinois passed legislation aimed at preserving local news organizations in the state.

Some of these efforts have begun to bear fruit. Encouragingly, in Illinois, the money provided under the new law — in the form of tax credits for retaining journalists — has been going to places where it was most urgently needed. Of the 120 outlets receiving funds from the plan, [more than half were located outside the Chicago area](#). No money was directed to news outlets owned

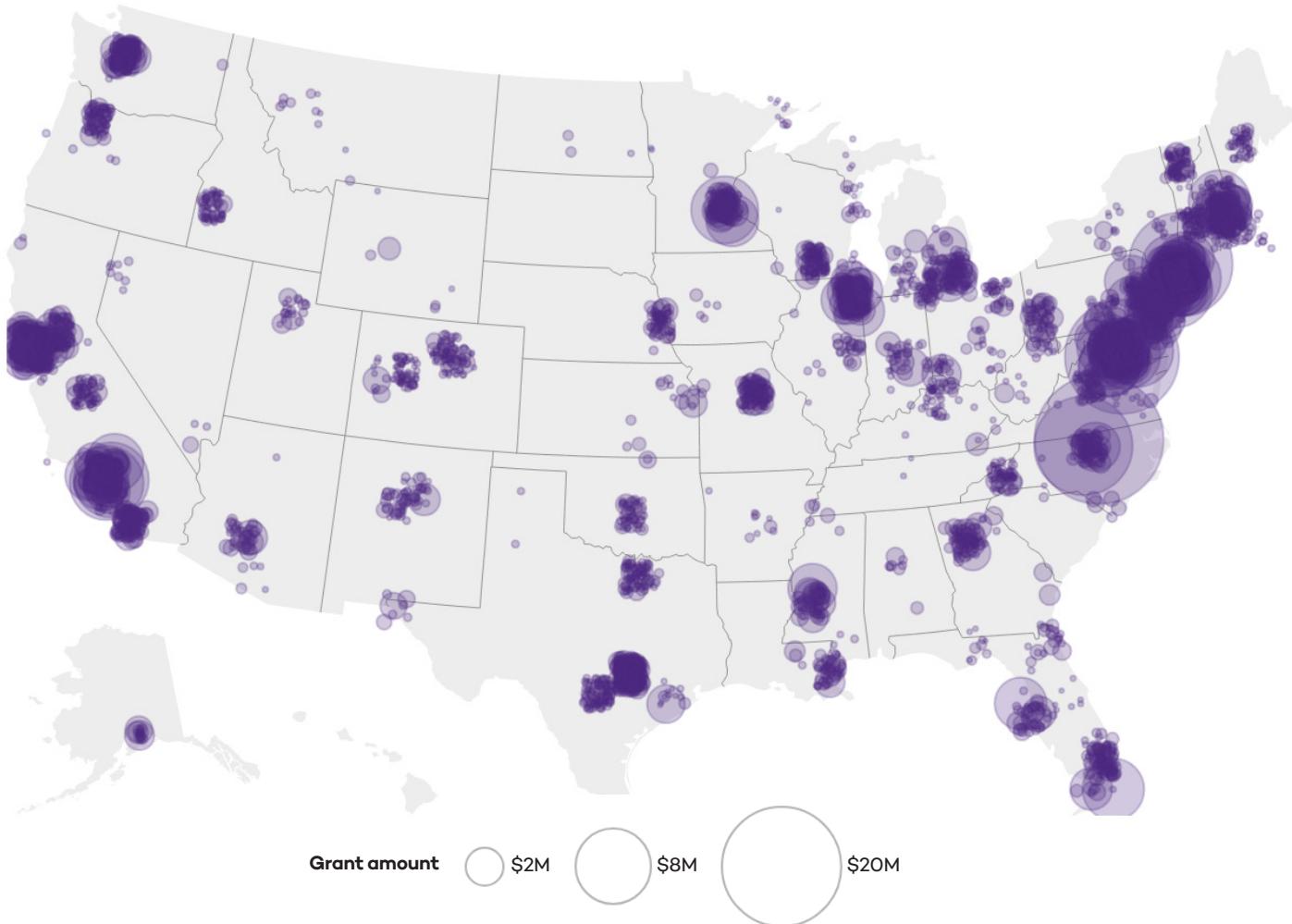


by the largest U.S. newspaper owner, Gannett, or to Chicago Tribune owner Alden.

In New York, however, the legislation has stalled, and no money has been distributed to news outlets in the state this year. Additionally, while legislation similar to that in Illinois and New York is under consideration in about ten

Philanthropic giving for journalism, 2021-2025

Metropolitan areas receive 95% of grants and 98% of grant monty awarded to support journalism.



Note: Points jittered for illustrative purposes. Exact locations approximate. Data includes non-local news organizations.

Source: Candid Foundation Directory

other states, there have been some setbacks. A Local News Fellowship Program in New Mexico [failed to get the required votes](#), and tax credit measures in [Maryland](#) and [Massachusetts](#) also failed to advance.

On the philanthropy side, Press Forward, founded to support local newsrooms, has begun distributing grants from its pooled fund. So far, more than 200 news organizations, all with budgets under \$1 million, have received grants

under this system. As with the credits in Illinois, the outlets receiving these grants have been in a variety of geographic locations, with a little more than half of the grants going to urban areas, and more than a quarter being directed to rural communities.

Additionally, facing the sudden loss of federal support for public broadcasting, [several foundations have announced an initiative](#) to provide emergency stopgap funding to the most



vulnerable outlets. The plan aims to make \$36.5 million available in stabilization grants and direct support for individual local stations.

At the state level, public media organizations are also mobilizing to help disperse resources, such as New York Public Radio, which [recently announced a program](#) to make syndicated content freely available to the stations most at-risk from the loss of funds.

Despite this, the overall philanthropic landscape of journalism remains heavily centralized. In a review of the 10,000 largest journalism grants distributed over the past five years, Medill researchers found that these grants — totaling more than \$1.1 billion — were allocated to just under 1,000 recipients, according to data from the Candid Foundation Directory. Furthermore, 95% of these grants, and 98% of grant dollars, went to organizations in urban areas.

Over the past five years, more than 300 new local news startups have emerged across the

country. Just under 80% of these startups have been digital, either standalone or part of a larger network site, but there have also been some print newspapers established as well, such as the [Grainger County Journal](#) in Tennessee, which started in March, or the [La Conner Community News](#) in Washington state, which opened at the beginning of the year.

Smaller, independent local outlets are a key backbone of the American local news ecosystem, as they are often the most active and trustworthy sources for community audiences. These are also the outlets that have proved especially vulnerable to closures and mergers over the past year, in a departure from the corporate consolidation of years past.

Supporting community local news, especially in rural areas that are often overlooked by funders, is essential to ensuring that people can continue to access reliable information and maintain a strong sense of local identity.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Three years ago, the Medill Local News Initiative created a project within the annual [**State of Local News**](#) report to highlight outlets that are innovating and growing amid their quest for sustainability. The goal in spotlighting these publications ([seen in this interactive map](#)) and posting [conversations](#) with journalists or executives at each was to share business and audience strategies and insights that might inspire news leaders in other areas.

There are, of course, positive developments in the 2025 report. Medill researchers' analysis of publication openings and closures, ownership changes, and other data found several areas of growth: Standalone digital outlets increased from 661 in 2024 to 695 nationwide. Digital network groups producing original reporting more than doubled, to 55 from 23 in 2024. And there are about a hundred more individual digital news sites, up from 742 in 2024, thanks to a mix of openings and reclassifications as outlets such as [New Jersey's Star-Ledger](#) shifted from print and digital to online only.



Staff of the Houston Chronicle

Lookout

EUGENE-SPRINGFIELD

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON • EMERALD BROADBAND
5TH STREET PUBLIC MARKET • EUGENE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

THE BAKER FAMILY FOUNDATION • THE CHAMBERS FAMILY FOUNDATION
OREGON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION DONOR ADVISED FUNDS
THE FORD FAMILY FOUNDATION • THE TYKESON FAMILY FOUNDATION
THE VAN METER/BARNHART FAMILY FUND • THE YARG FOUNDATION



Some of that growth can be missed, however, amid findings on newspaper closures — 148 gone in the past year, about two per week — and a significant widening of news deserts and newspaper industry job losses (down 7% from 2023 to 2024).

Yet some journalism successes are reflected in other sorts of metrics, including audience engagement, memberships and donations.

So with this year's edition of Bright Spots, the Medill Local News Initiative is highlighting another dozen outlets to share successful practices and strategies from across the local news landscape.

In Eugene-Springfield, Ore., a second Lookout [Local outpost](#) is expanding on the achievements

of the ([Pulitzer Prize-winning](#)) [Santa Cruz, Calif.](#), location launched in 2020. That [digital network](#), founded by longtime media business analyst Ken Doctor, aims to open three more outlets by the end of 2026. [Deep South Today](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan digital network focusing on Louisiana and Mississippi, [added a third publication](#) to its roster in September. Deep South Today, which has no physical offices for its parent operations, seeks to achieve scale by pooling resources and channeling efficiencies back into coverage of rural areas across [Mississippi Today](#), [Verite News](#) and [The Current](#). The [Southeast Missourian](#), the flagship newspaper of the Rust Communications media holdings, began a search for a new content management system in 2021 that led to Rust's development of a new, AI-tool-infused CMS that has since been sold or contracted to more than 100 other publications.



Individual outlets, too, are making strides. The [Henrico Citizen](#), in Henrico County, Va., and the [Montana Free Press](#), based in Helena, were launched several years ago by print reporters. Both outlets upended their publication schedules and coverage plans when COVID-19 hit. One 20-year-old publication, [BikePortland](#), was founded by a blogger for The Oregonian who decided independent publishing had more potential for success than writing for a legacy newspaper. Innovating long before the term “creator economy” was coined, BikePortland’s Jonathan Maus says that his site has drawn more than 600,000 comments over the past two decades. Meanwhile, [RedBankGreen](#), an early attempt at a digital town square in Red Bank, N.J., was also founded by a former newspaper reporter. As it transitioned to a new publisher over the past two years, the site launched a hundred-year campaign to secure its future and celebrate independent local news.

The Bright Spots mix includes some larger operations, such as the [Houston Chronicle](#), the legacy news outlet in the fourth-largest U.S. city. [The Daily Herald](#), in Arlington, Ill., is an employee-owned newspaper that began publishing more than a century ago, while the [Daily Memphian](#) is a seven-year-old nonprofit digital site. We revisited [The Post and Courier](#) to learn about its post-pandemic efforts to shore up local coverage across South Carolina. [The Honolulu Civil Beat](#), a Pulitzer finalist in 2024 for its coverage of the Maui wildfires, was named the best overall news site in the state 14 years in a row by the Society of Professional Journalists’ Hawaii chapter. One of its recurring features is “[Fix It!](#)” — service journalism that points out local problems (including damaged sidewalks) and then revisits to see if they’ve been addressed.

Bright Spots feature map marks 12 local outlets in the U.S. that are growing amid industry-wide economic challenges and changing media-consumption habits.



To determine this year's Bright Spots, we started by seeking input from outside Medill. In the spring, we crowdsourced requests for nominations on social media and the Local News Initiative website and solicited suggestions from journalists across the country, as well as from organizations including INN, LION and the Local Media Association. We received more than seven dozen nominations, many of them digital outlets that have launched in recent years, including [The 51st](#), [Arizona Luminaria](#) and [Shasta Scout](#). (A couple of suggestions, such as [Bridge Detroit](#) and [Richmondside](#), were covered among last

year's Bright Spots.) We narrowed the list by considering factors such as number of years operating; geographic and platform diversity; and innovations in business operations, content distribution or audience engagement. While we focused on publications in their fifth year of operation or older, we look forward to including newer startups in future reports.

The map above shows this year's Bright Spots (with information about their operations), as well as more than 300 new local news startups that are less than five years old.

As happened last year, we noticed some shared characteristics and themes among the Bright Spots:

1

Eleven of the 12, whether for-profit or nonprofit, are locally controlled.

(The Houston Chronicle is owned by New York-based Hearst, a private media conglomerate that owns several other publications in Texas.) None of the for-profits is publicly traded or owned by large investment funds or hedge funds, so they are not subject to sizable shareholder pressures or profit expectations.

2

Nonprofit and for-profits alike are pursuing philanthropic support for newsroom operations or positions. Report for America positions have been valued contributions at the Daily Memphian, Henrico Citizen and Montana Free Press.

3

Whether seeking outside support or shifting internal resources, leaders at all outlets stressed the importance of studying audience consumption habits and potential information gaps to align projects and beats with audience needs.

4

Partnerships and collaborations — whether with other news outlets, local businesses or education institutions — expand audience reach and strengthen engagement. They can also be important sources of revenue: In Virginia, a partnership with the Henrico Economic Development Authority underwrites advertising for small businesses in the county, with the authority paying for half of a \$4,000 ad package and the Henrico Citizen providing half through in-kind services; this year, 40 small businesses participated.

5

A recurring theme across conversations was the importance of testing initiatives, iterating, incorporating feedback and being willing to fail fast.

Many, particularly journalists at outlets that started small, also emphasized the value of connecting with other local journalists through accelerators, grant-supported training initiatives, or similar groups facilitated by LION and INN.



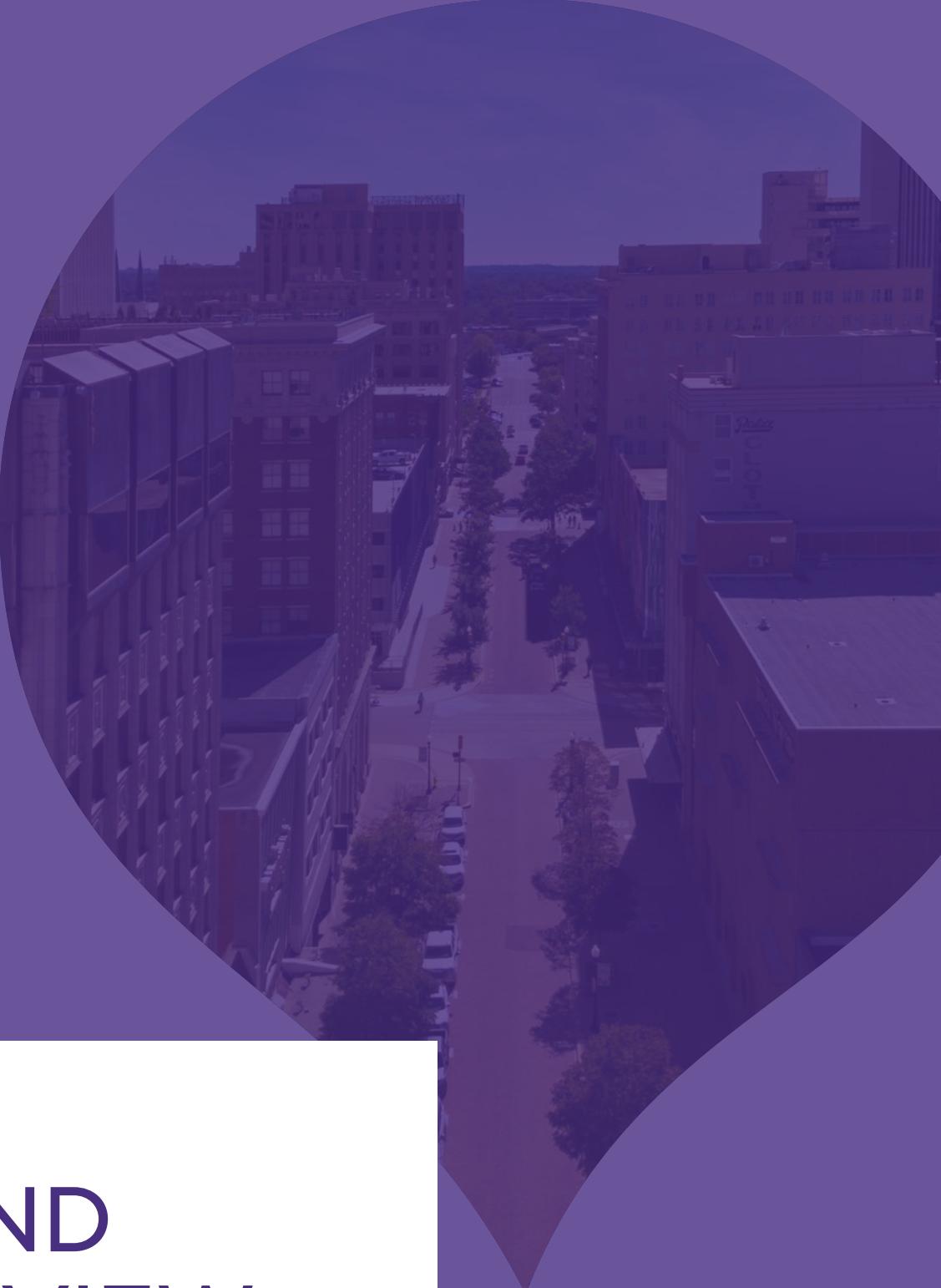


With the demise of the print-advertising-based business model, reader revenue is increasingly valued, though there is no consensus view on paywalls vs. memberships and donations. Some for-profits, such as the Henrico Citizen, are free for users. Some nonprofits, such as the Daily Memphian, consider paywalls necessary sources of revenue. Even at outlets where access is free, there is a growing use of membership programs, which typically facilitate donations and engagement with supporters.

"As much as the business side of me says, 'Why would you not pay for something that you need?' You pay for everything else in your life that you need. You don't go to the grocery store and fill up your cart and walk out," says Henrico Citizen founder Tom Lappas. "But if we can fund it another way, we want to. We don't charge because the people who really need this coverage might not be able to afford it."

Ken Doctor, the media analyst behind Lookout Local, echoes some themes even as his network

takes a different approach: "The overall model is maximize access as much as possible, but make sure you have a number of inputs paying for those memberships, either by individuals or by some kind of philanthropy or sponsorship that gets it out to a lot of people."



PART 2

GROUND LEVEL VIEW



Keeping Voices from Vanishing

Public radio, long a lifeline, is at risk in Alaska and rural areas across the nation

by LIAM SCOTT

In the remote Arctic town of Kotzebue, Alaska, some residents still talk about the Dairy Queen that closed several years ago. They also talk about what's at risk of closing next: the region's lone radio station.

Since 1973, [KOTZ](#) has delivered the news to Kotzebue, population 3,102, and several other small, sparse villages that collectively are home to about the same number of people. Some 30 miles north of the Arctic Circle, KOTZ is the only source of local news for a region larger than Indiana, but with just 0.1% of its residents. For five decades, the station has been a lifeline,

connecting remote communities throughout Northwest Alaska and to the rest of the state and country.

But those bonds are at risk since Congress voted in July to claw back more than \$1 billion in federal funding to public media stations like KOTZ, an NPR affiliate. The rescission is

expected to disproportionately impact news stations in rural areas, which have fewer local funding options than more affluent and populous areas so tend to depend more heavily on federal support. Since the unprecedented funding reversal, KOTZ and other stations have been scrambling to make up shortfalls and stave off the prospects of program cutbacks, staff layoffs or permanent closure. Of NPR's more than 240 member stations, 70 to 80 could shutter as a result of the cuts, the network [estimates](#).

For a station like KOTZ, where federal funds supplied about 40% of the budget, the abrupt cut poses an existential threat. The station has ramped up fundraising efforts and has enough money to continue operating until the spring. A longer-term solution remains elusive. Whether KOTZ will close has become a perennial question for the station and the thousands of people who rely on it for local news, weather forecasts and emergency alerts. "This is silencing the voices of rural Alaska," says KOTZ's news director, Desiree Hagen. "That's a real injustice."

“

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LIKE ALASKA ON
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TO LIVE HERE.”**

— Desiree Hagen, news director of KOTZ

”

The stillness that envelops Kotzebue is punctuated by the squawking of seagulls, the rumbling of residents' four-wheelers and the rhythmic lapping of waves against the

shore. The town lies on a sand spit at the end of a narrow peninsula near where the Kobuk, Noatak and Selawik Rivers end. It's so far west that KOTZ's signal reaches part of Russia's eastern coast.

In Kotzebue, which is the seat of the Northwest Arctic Borough, about 70% of the town's population is Iñupiaq, an Alaska Native group that traditionally inhabits a huge swath of the state's northwest.





KOTZ news director Desiree Hagen at her desk at the station.

The Iñupiatun name for Kotzebue is Qikiqtaġruk, which means “almost an island,” because the hamlet is nearly surrounded by water. In the summer, Kotzebue is bathed in sunlight; during the frigid winters, the town is cloaked in darkness. Like many places in rural Alaska, Kotzebue isn’t on the state road system, making it accessible to outsiders only by plane or boat. When I visited in September, the talk of the town was a brown bear that had been spotted near the Chinese restaurant Empress. “Kotzebue is like Alaska on steroids,” Hagen says. “You have to have a lot of strength to live here.”

When federal lawmakers began calling for cuts to public media funding in the spring, KOTZ’s general manager, Lenora Ward, who was born and raised in Kotzebue, had a feeling this would be different from the times Congress had threatened to defund public media. Given the Trump administration’s various funding cuts and attacks on the press, Ward had little hope that things would turn out in public media’s favor. “I didn’t think we had a prayer,” Ward said. “What was going through my mind was: ‘What is the easiest, fastest way to make money?’”

In July, Ward’s fears became reality. Despite [broad support](#) for public media programming, the Senate voted 51 to 48, and the House of Representatives voted 216 to 213, to claw back \$1.1 billion in funds previously allocated to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The CPB, in turn, cut all federal support for NPR, PBS and their hundreds of member stations across the country. Hagen, the news director, was at the KOTZ office when she learned the news. “I just cried,” she said. “It was heartbreaking.”

Originally from Virginia, Hagen moved to Alaska in 2012. It’s where she says she’ll die one day. The 41-year-old started working at radio stations in Homer in the south and Bethel in the southwest before moving to Kotzebue in 2023.

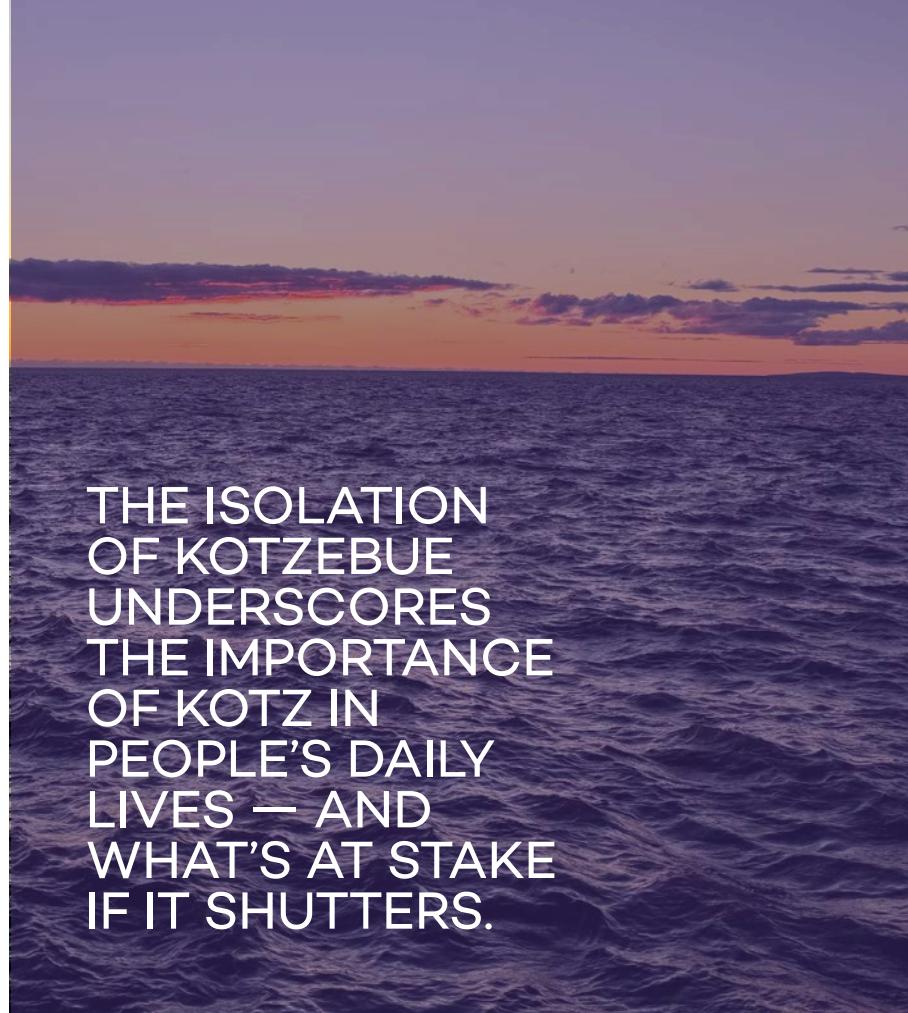
The population may be small, but there’s no shortage of stories to tell in this corner of the Arctic, says Hagen, the station’s lone reporter and, by her assessment, the northernmost journalist in the United States. “I feel like I produce so many stories, and also not enough stories,” Hagen told me one morning in her office in the squat, grey building that KOTZ calls home.

Sitting at her desk, which is cluttered with reporting notes and recording equipment, Hagen was working on a story about record rainfall and erosion in the region and another about a recent marathon in Kotzebue, which was considered the first held in Alaska above the Arctic Circle. The list of other topics Hagen is tracking runs long: climate change; the powerful NANA Regional Corporation, a for-profit entity representing native Alaskans; the controversial Ambler Road project, which risks threatening the region's already beleaguered caribou population; the nearby Red Dog zinc and lead mine, which employs some of Kotzebue's population and is set to close in a few years; the potability of tap water. There are many competing interests in rural Alaska yet hardly enough journalists to examine them. But without KOTZ, "there wouldn't be a lot of accountability in general," Hagen said.

In Alaska, 86% of communities cannot be reached by road. In remote parts of the state, many people don't have internet access or cellphone service. (Nationally, about one in six households, mainly in rural areas, don't have internet access, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration estimated in 2024.) The isolation of Kotzebue and villages like it around Alaska underscore the importance of KOTZ in people's daily lives — and what's at stake if it shutters.

Every half hour, KOTZ broadcasts weather forecasts for Kotzebue and other towns in the region, including Deering and Kobuk. The frequency of the forecasts reflects how quickly — and dangerously — local weather can change. "Weather is really important here. Life-and-death kind of situation," said Ernie Norton, an 82-year-old Kotzebue resident and KOTZ volunteer.

Last October, Kotzebue was hit by a storm that devastated the area with severe flooding. Through the storm, KOTZ kept broadcasting. "All



THE ISOLATION OF KOTZEBUE UNDERSCORES THE IMPORTANCE OF KOTZ IN PEOPLE'S DAILY LIVES — AND WHAT'S AT STAKE IF IT SHUTTERS.

of a sudden, it was time to switch to emergency reporting mode," Hagen said. Some homes were destroyed, much of the town lost electricity, and dozens of people had to evacuate from their homes, she said. The small airport was flooded, so the National Guard couldn't send help for a few days.

Beyond extreme weather events, forecasts are an important part of daily living, particularly among indigenous communities. Traditions of fishing, hunting and gathering are deeply ingrained among the people who have called this rugged terrain home for generations. Many residents have hunting cabins in rural areas. Knowing the weather is critical to hunting safely, especially when people are "at camp," or out in more remote parts of the region.

When Kotzebue resident Siikauraq Whitting is at camp, where she and her husband sometimes

spend months, she says they drop everything when the weather report comes on. "That's something that we listen to religiously," Whitting said. "We know it's going to be on every day, on the half hour. It's been like that for decades. Hopefully it'll be there for decades to come."

Depending on the weather, it might not be safe to hunt or fish. If a storm is coming in, people might have to hurry home or find somewhere safe to hunker down. "The most important thing when we're out there is the weather forecast," says Cyrus Harris, who runs a hunting program in Kotzebue that provides tribal elders with food. If the radio stopped operating, "it would be more dangerous," Harris added.

And when people go missing, which is relatively common in winter, when people sometimes drive snow mobiles across frozen stretches of ocean or river, KOTZ broadcasts information — where they were last spotted, what they were wearing — to help find them.

Rural radio stations in Alaska also help foster community. For about 40 years, Norton has hosted a popular Sunday music show, featuring a range of genres, including Iñupiaq gospel music. For many Kotzebue residents, listening to the radio all day is just part of life. "We have the hots for KOTZ," Whitting quipped. Youth basketball games are also a magnet for audiences. For the region's basketball finals, teams from 10 villages travel by plane to compete in Kotzebue. "Not everybody can come," says Ann Howarte, a KOTZ volunteer who broadcasts the games. "So they listen to the radio."

Birthday wishes and death notices are also regular fare, informing relatives and friends in distant villages. An elderly woman in Kotzebue named Daisy Norton calls the station almost every afternoon with birthday messages for far-flung residents. "Communities are separated by hundreds of miles and are all connected by a single radio station," Hagen said. There are

other quotidian messages, too — a tribal elder who needs help unclogging a sink, someone lost a wallet. "This banter, this chatter, it brings people together. And I don't want us to lose that," U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R), a third-generation Alaskan, told me in September. "To feel like you've got a sense of community helps you get through some colder, darker winters."

In Kotzebue, fears about what KOTZ's closure would mean for the community are matched only by frustration toward the federal lawmakers who voted for the funding clawback. It's unclear, some residents told me, whether the lawmakers don't understand the rescission's threat to rural communities or whether they don't care. "It seems like we're forgotten," said Kotzebue Mayor Derek Haviland-Lie, who previously was the news director and an announcer at KOTZ. The disproportionate impact the cuts will have on rural areas fuels a broader sense that rural Alaska often gets the short end of the stick, some residents said. "Everybody's concerned. It's a lifeline," Northwest Arctic Borough Mayor Dickie Moto told me.

It's not unusual for rural Alaskans to harbor distrust toward people from the Lower 48. But what's particularly troubling, some Kotzebue residents said, is that two of the three members of Alaska's congressional delegation voted for the funding cuts. "It's pretty dire right now. I can't sugarcoat it," said Murkowski, who voted against the clawback.

"There was extraordinary political pressure that was put on Republican members of Congress to go along with the rescissions request. And I felt that was unfortunate," Murkowski said. But to some Kotzebue residents, the votes by U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan and Rep. Nick Begich in favor of the cuts feel like a betrayal. "People will often pay lip service and say they're working for rural Alaska because they want their vote," said Hagen. Neither Sullivan, who was recognized with an award in 2020 for his support of public



broadcasting, nor Begich responded to requests for comment.

News stations around Alaska and the country are feeling the fallout with varied levels of urgency. Recent fundraising efforts have helped, KOTZ's Ward said, but in a poorer area like Kotzebue, fundraising alone won't generate enough to save the station. "Everyone is at a loss for money right now, so I'm not really sure how we're going to do this," Ward told me. Report for America is financing Hagen's salary, but that's a temporary grant, and the station's general operating budget is still short by tens of thousands of dollars. The station reduced its signal output from 10,000 watts to 5,000 to save money. "We're going broke, so we've got to cut somewhere," said Pierre Lonewolf, the station's longtime sound engineer.

KOTZ doesn't have plans to lay off staff, but a few hundred miles southwest, in Bethel, Alaska, the news station KYUK, where federal support

counted for about 70% of funding, is preparing for layoffs and to significantly reduce staff hours in the new year. Sage Smiley, KYUK's news director, says her position is being reduced from full time to just five hours per week. KYUK, which faces a \$1.2 million budget gap, is the only source of local news for a region roughly the size of Oregon. On a national scale, of the 31 counties with stations that received more than 40% of their funding from federal sources, half are considered very rural, which means audience and local business donations aren't able to make up the deficit, according to an analysis by Medill's Local News Initiative. The Bureau of Indian Affairs in early October [announced](#) \$4.5 million in one-time funding for 14 public stations across Alaska, including KYUK and KOTZ, but stations say the infusion won't help much in the long term.

Even as philanthropic groups like the Knight Foundation and MacArthur Foundation [pledge](#)

[**tens of millions**](#) in emergency funding for public media, newsrooms around the country are in similar predicaments. Multiple station managers said they're trying to be creative, knowing that no silver bullet exists. KSJD in Cortez, Colo., hopes to narrow its deficit by increasing performances at its affiliate, the Sunflower Theatre. "It's just one way that we'll offset some of those cuts," said the station's executive director, Tom Yoder.

Besides their shared challenges, public broadcasters are united by a shared devotion to the work — and a grim awareness that if they shutter, commercial news stations are unlikely to replace them in markets that aren't particularly lucrative. "No one who works here does it because we're getting rich," said Scott Smith, general manager of West Virginia's Allegheny Mountain Radio, which received 60% of its funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. "We put our hearts and souls into what we do, and it could end, and that's an extremely difficult pill to swallow."

Concern over KOTZ's future is taking an emotional toll on staff. Ward had been trying to quit smoking, but she gave up after Congress passed the rescission. "The radio station needs

money; give me a cigarette," Ward said one September afternoon, before stepping outside for a smoke break.

For Hagen, the funding crisis has been a source of both anxiety and motivation. "Anger has been fueling a lot of my reporting," she said. "My work is valuable, but having Congress treat it like it's not makes me want to prove that even more." But there's a limit to how much inspiration can be borne from hardship. "I don't think I've been taking care of myself," Hagen relented.

Later that day, Hagen's shift on air comes to a close around 9 p.m. She switches the radio to an automatic setting, so it can continue playing music throughout the evening until live programming begins again in the morning. "I feel exhausted," Hagen says as she turns off the lights and locks up.

Before hopping on her bike to ride home, Hagen points to the sun, which is beginning to sink toward the horizon, its orange glow reflecting on the black ocean. On the other side of town, the full moon already hangs high in the night sky. This evening, the only noise is the howling of the wind.



Northwest Publishers: Defying Odds

As newspapers shutter nationwide, a handful of leaders continue to maintain independence

by BRIER DUDLEY

Publisher Les Zaitz spent three years trying to save his life's work. His Malheur Enterprise weekly newspaper on Oregon's eastern border had an acclaimed reputation for hard-hitting investigative reporting. To keep it open, Zaitz was willing to make a deal.

He even offered to train his successor to smooth the transition.

Eventually, his patience and resources ran out. Unable to lure a new owner to rural Malheur County, Zaitz took the excruciating step of [closing The Enterprise](#) in May.

Zaitz embodies an alarming trend in local news: the shrinking ranks of independent publishers.

Like Zaitz, many independent publishers are reluctantly throwing in the towel because they can't find a successor or investor willing to take on the risk as revenues and audiences decline.

Medill's 2025 State of Local News Report confirmed this troubling pattern. Fewer than half of all U.S. newspapers, 46%, are independently owned. That's down from 54% two decades ago.



Nathan Alford, publisher of The Lewiston Tribune, with equipment producing “e-commerce paper” in its production facility. (Brier Dudley / The Seattle Times)

This decline is more severe among dailies: Fewer than 15% remain independently owned.

Of the 148 newspaper closures and mergers since July 2024, a majority of those outlets had been independently owned, a Medill analysis found.

What's a small, independent owner to do?

Consolidation may make sense for publications with smaller audiences, less advertising and overlapping roles at adjacent operations. But local journalism suffers if those savings aren't reinvested in newsrooms. Already-thin staffs get smaller as roles and content are combined across chains.

That leads to less diversity of voices covering local communities, eventually making the ecosystem more susceptible to national political and economic pressures.

Yet selling to a chain is sometimes the best option for local publishers grappling with declines in advertising amid rising costs, technology upgrades and intense competition for readers' attention.

Those challenges also make it harder for independent owners to navigate generational changes. Sales or closures happen when aging owners are unable to find family members or others willing to run what are essentially high-risk, low-margin small businesses, despite their outsize importance to local communities and democracy.

Successfully managing these transitions is one key to slowing and potentially stopping the decline of America's local newspaper industry.

Here are examples of what local newspapers in the Northwest are doing to survive and remain independent. They include selling to employees, diversifying print operations and cultivating the next generation of operators.

Sunnyside up

Darkness was falling on The Daily Sun News in 2018.

The paper was a fixture in Sunnyside, a farm town in Washington's Yakima Valley, where 87% of the population is Hispanic. But a regional

chain that had owned The Sun since the 1980s decided to close it.

Representatives of Eagle Newspapers were driving from Oregon to pull the plug when interim publisher Andy McNab threw a hail Mary.

McNab was hired by Eagle in mid-2018 and directed to wind things down. But after looking over the business he thought it was viable as a weekly, “if you get rid of corporate ownership demands.”

“I called them up and I said, ‘hey, tell you what, for this pittance amount, don’t close it, just give it to me,’” McNab said in an interview.

Eagle agreed even before the suits had arrived. So McNab gathered Sun employees and made a life-changing offer.

“You’ve got two choices,” he recalled saying. “You can commit to owning this newspaper in five years, or you don’t have a job today, by the end of the day, because Eagle’s coming to close you down.”

Employees Ileana Martinez and Job Wise were gobsmacked but agreed to the deal. In early 2024 they officially became co-owners and publishers of what’s now [The Sunnyside Sun](#) weekly.

“There are obviously struggles that we have but we’re still going,” Wise said. “We’re still printing, still have our subscribers.”

“Still independent,” Martinez added.

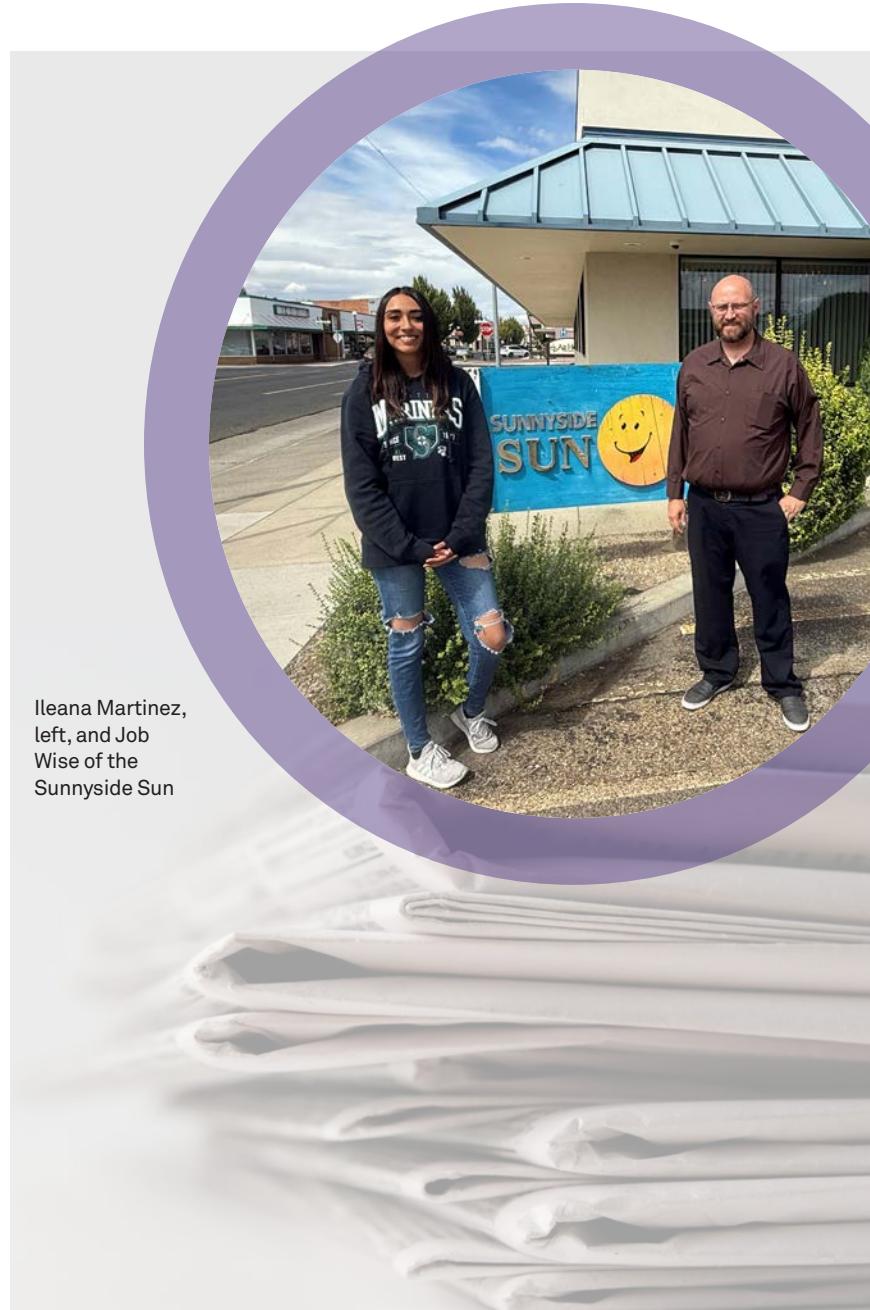
Both were hired as graphic designers, Martinez in 2013 and Wise in 2008. Now she is managing editor and he is general manager, roles that overlap at a business with just two other employees: a reporter and part-time bookkeeper.

Martinez, 33, had previously never worked in news. Her closest experience was helping with

her high school yearbook and taking a summer graphic-design course.

“I was working a graveyard shift at Walmart and I saw a job listing and decided to apply for it,” she said. “Within a week I was working here.”

The Sunnyside native grew up with the paper, though, because her family subscribed.



Ileana Martinez,
left, and Job
Wise of the
Sunnyside Sun

A LARGER QUESTION IS WHETHER THERE ARE ENOUGH EMPLOYEES ACROSS NEWS INDUSTRY TO ASSUME OWNERSHIP OF THE 1,900 REMAINING INDEPENDENT PAPERS.



“They had to — I was on the varsity bowling team so they had to look for the picture every week,” she said. “Funny story, there never was a photo of me in it.”

Wise, 43, moved from California, looking for work. He depended on the job to support a family with six children, the youngest of whom was 1 when McNab made the offer.

“A bit of a risk factor there but it’s worked out so far,” Wise said.

The acquisition was facilitated by a \$50,000, low-interest loan the city’s economic development commission provided, using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act.

McNab’s offer included a commitment to teach Wise and Martinez how to run the business.

“At the end of five years I would turn it back over to them at a price that they could afford, whether it’s

through the bank or making money and whatever else,” he said. “I picked it up for cents on the dollar and I expected to sell it in five years for cents on the dollar, and that’s basically what we did.”

This wasn’t the first time McNab returned an Eagle castoff to local ownership found within the building.

McNab became publisher of Eagle’s [Idaho County Free Press](#) in 1993. When he retired in 2015, General Manager Sarah Klement succeeded him and then acquired the paper from Eagle in 2019.

Grooming employees for ownership is one way to preserve newspapers that might otherwise close or be consolidated. It’s an option for corporate owners when paring their newspaper holdings.

Ownership opportunities also incentivize newspaper employees to stick with low-paying jobs.

“It’s tougher, and you’re not going to make money that we did in, say, the ’70s,” McNab said. “But you can still make a pretty decent living.”

A larger question is whether there are enough employees across the news industry to assume ownership of the 1,900 remaining independent papers. With newspaper industry employment down two-thirds over the past 25 years, there are fewer people gaining industry experience and fewer yet who might consider a second act publishing a community newspaper.

McNab lucked out in Sunnyside: It took him less than half an hour.

“It was a very spontaneous decision because he gave us about 20 minutes to decide,” Martinez said.

“The sale price was \$45,000 — \$40,000 plus an agreement to pay off the company truck,” Wise said.

“Yeah, we didn’t want the truck but we agreed to pay for it and he gets to keep it,” Martinez said, laughing.

The Sun is profitable and paid off its debt this summer after receiving a \$50,000 grant from the Inatai Foundation, a Seattle philanthropic organization.

Hacking the press

A growing number of newspaper publishers see printing as an antiquated drag on their business.

Not Nathan Alford, the fourth-generation publisher of [The Lewiston \(Idaho\) Tribune](#).

To keep churning out quality journalism, Alford turned the Tribune and its production facility into a skunkworks.





He's developing a series of startups, drawing on the company's 133 years of experience producing, bundling and distributing printed materials and advertising. Six ventures have launched since 2011, with a seventh coming in 2026, all to support the Tribune's core mission.

The developments are physically represented by a modern production facility standing tall next to the newspaper's single-story, midcentury offices in downtown Lewiston, at the intersection of the Snake and Clearwater rivers.

"We're growing so much over here to underwrite the stuff over there — it's like a big team effort," Alford, 54, said in the production facility, waving toward the newsroom.

The facility has a growing collection of purchased, scavenged and customized machines producing new products.

"So every dollar we make over here goes back into covering the losses of the newspaper," Alford said over the whir of forklifts and hum of presses. "We're still not making enough, we need to get better, but we're fighting."

The Tribune remains a for-profit but is also pursuing partnerships with local foundations to support several coverage areas.

Alford said the strategy is to push innovation across the company, channeling the entrepreneurial drive that brought his great-grandfather and great-great uncle north from Texas, via Portland, with a printing press in 1892.

"We need to have the pioneering spirit of our founders to evolve into a sustainable, adaptable, ever-increasing business," he said.

To reach younger audiences, the Tribune started a weekly, events-oriented publication called [Inland 360](#) in 2011. A direct-mail business and an outdoor advertising venture operating electronic billboards followed.

Coming soon is a video lab, in a converted press workers' break room, that will broadcast short news segments to social networks and produce sponsored content.

Alford began hacking the Tribune's production facility in 2019, after the family acquired a commercial printing company in Spokane.

The Tribune worked with the manufacturer to do more with its main press while also buying and reassembling other equipment to create new lines of business.

One machine was used to make the plastic films covering the face of new iPhones. After the manufacturer in Ohio went bust, Alford got the machine free and converted it to handle paper products.

In one corner of the facility are pallets of wrapping paper, printed by the main press on recycled paper, bound for national retailers this holiday season.

In another corner is a product Alford dubbed “e-commerce paper.” Its modified press produces the recycled “void fill” material that online retailers use to wrap products. One customer, an outdoor equipment company, gets the paper printed with maps of wild rivers.

Alford’s company also works on papers certified for use with food products and provides an ammunition manufacturer with paper used to make bullets.

Yet another machine prints special materials for packaging medical devices.

Instead of seeing the press, production crew and mailroom as places to trim costs, Alford saw them as places to innovate.

“Our mind-set is so important,” he said. “I think many newspapers across the country adopt kind of a custodial mind-set, where you’re more managing the current climate and you’re trying your best to cut expense, to match the declining revenue, or you’re the custodian of that legacy business. Versus waking up and hitting the front door in the morning with more of a founder’s mind-set.”

Chains tried repeatedly to acquire the Tribune over the years.

It happened once, after other descendants of the founders sold 67% of their shares in 1981. That led to the Tribune being owned by the parent company of the [Salt Lake Tribune](#) in Utah, which in turn was acquired by Denver-based cable TV giant TCI.

Alford’s father, A.L. “Butch” Alford, bought the Tribune and several smaller papers in the region back from TCI in 1998.

INSTEAD OF SEEING THE PRESS, PRODUCTION CREW AND MAILROOM AS PLACES TO TRIM COSTS, ALFORD SAW THEM AS PLACES TO INNOVATE.

“Nothing against the chains,” said Butch Alford, 86, “but they’re a bunch of financial bastards.”

Buying back the Tribune re-committed the family to the paper’s survival.

“That was really the turning point,” Nathan Alford said. “Most folks at Butch’s age at that point, I think, would have said okay, well, I’ve had my career and we’ve had our three generations. But counter to the corporate trend at the time — most of these papers in the late ’90s were being swallowed up by larger companies — Dad put all his pennies and dollars back into our community newspaper.”

In those years, Nathan Alford was studying law in Spokane and working summers in the newsroom. After graduating in 2001 he decided to try keeping the paper “going another generation.”

He became publisher in 2008, just as recession and technology disrupted the news business,

major advertisers evaporated and many in the industry made painful cuts to stay afloat.

Today the newsroom has around 25 employees and the overall company employs 105, including 44 in the production facility.

Margins are 2% to 3%, Alford said, but they need to have at least 10% operating profit for stability and sustainability.

All in the family

Will Campbell trained to be a paramedic before studying journalism, so when the newspaper editor came upon a burning RV in the road in Vancouver, Wash., he was ready for whatever happened next.

Fortunately the RV's owner, Jill, was safely out of the vehicle.

Jill told Campbell she'd lost her job, couldn't pay rent and had moved into the RV two weeks earlier. Her life's possession were aflame, and she was now among Vancouver's growing homeless population.

"I thanked her and wished her the best of luck and went back to the newsroom and wrote up the little, tiny story with a photograph," Campbell recalled in an interview.

Still, Campbell was shaken by the 2020 incident — and the feeling that The Columbian, the daily paper his family owned since 1921, wasn't able to tell the full story.

"Homelessness is such a big issue in our county, and we didn't have the means to go and find out how many more people are dealing with this, or what resources did Jill have, or what are the barriers for her getting back on her feet. And so that felt like we were missing so much," he said.



So Campbell and his brother, Publisher Ben Campbell, began seeking donations from nonprofits and individuals so The Columbian could better cover housing and homelessness in the region.

It's part of a broader effort by the Campbells to cautiously but steadily diversify revenue, maintain a decent newsroom and positive workplace, and preserve the paper for generations to come.

"We grew up here," Will Campbell said. "We have such a strong emotional connection, that overrides the need for a max profit. We sacrifice a lot of profit and a lot of opportunity in other industries to just put our heart and soul into The Columbian. This is our community, and this is the heartbeat of the community."

Asking [the community to help](#) raised \$1.6 million since 2022 — equivalent to \$3 from every resident of Clark County. That enabled The Columbian to hire five additional journalists, two of whom would report hundreds of stories on homelessness. After turnover, the program now supports three full-timers and one intern.



“ WE SACRIFICE A LOT OF PROFIT AND A LOT OF OPPORTUNITY IN OTHER INDUSTRIES TO JUST PUT OUR HEART AND SOUL INTO THE COLUMBIAN. THIS IS OUR COMMUNITY, AND THIS IS THE HEARTBEAT OF THE COMMUNITY. ”

– **Will Campbell**, co-owner and editor of The Columbian

“It’s been great to tell those stories. It’s critical for changing the whole narrative of homelessness,” Will Campbell said.

The results were clear to reader Dee Anne Finken, a former journalism instructor at nearby Clark College.

The paper has reduced staffing since she moved to the area 28 years ago, Finken said, and provides fewer national stories.

“They can’t cover as much,” she said, but “they do a darn good job covering the homelessness problem.”

The Campbell family nurtured successive generations to maintain its independent ownership.

Ben Campbell, 37, became publisher when his father, Scott, retired in 2020. He briefly worked in television but returned to fill a digital strategist job in The Columbian’s advertising department.

Will, 35, initially chose to be a paramedic. He came to realize that a big part of emergency medicine work was interviewing patients and that he really enjoyed writing. He went to journalism school and spent two years as a public-safety reporter in Spokane before taking an editing job at The Columbian.

In 2024 the brothers became co-owners, buying out their parents and brother. Will Campbell became the top editor last January.

Young brothers taking the helm of a family business in a riverside city could be a Hallmark plotline. But the story isn’t entirely upbeat. As at every independent newspaper, business is tight and the future is uncertain.

Fifteen years ago, the family nearly lost the paper. It built a fancy new headquarters just before the 2008 recession hit, crashing both its newspaper business and foray into commercial real estate.

The Columbian filed for bankruptcy protection, put the tower up for sale, moved back into its circa-1950 building and began cutting more than 100 jobs.

That could break a family business and repel the next generation. But Will and Ben Campbell said things never turned bitter.

If anything, that experience strengthened their resolve to carefully steward The Columbian.

They receive emails now and then about being acquired, but “we would not really entertain those offers if they were knocking at the door,” Ben Campbell said.

“Will and I are both in our 30s and we have a long career ahead of us. We both really love this place and we have fun,” he said.

The Columbian is surrounded by papers that are no longer independent. Across the river in Oregon, every daily newspaper is owned by national chains.

The latest entrant is Carpenter Media Group, a Southern chain that bought nearly half of Oregon’s remaining papers from local families, closed several mastheads, cut newsroom jobs and shuttered one of the newest print facilities in the West.

In June, Carpenter stopped printing the [Portland Tribune](#) and laid off at least five staffers, The Oregonian reported. It also closed two suburban weeklies, consolidating them into a third and laying off their last reporter.

In Washington, the Campbells are one of three remaining local families publishing dailies.

Soon there will be two.



The next generation of the Cowles family in Spokane declined to become publishers of [The Spokesman-Review](#), so it's being donated to a nonprofit. Worsening business conditions were a deciding factor, Publisher William "Stacey" Cowles said when the announcement was made in April.

"Had there been somebody who was desperate to be publisher of a newspaper we may have hung on a little longer," [he said](#). "It's going to be tough, even having philanthropic dollars."

That leaves the Campbells, and the Blethen family, publishers of [The Seattle Times](#) and papers in Yakima and Walla Walla that print three days a week.

[The Oregonian](#), a daily owned by the media conglomerate Advance Communications, used to be a competitive threat to The Columbian. Then it closed its Vancouver bureau in 2008 and reduced

print frequency to four days. The Columbian is holding steady with six print editions per week.

"We don't lose sleep, really, over any other news outlet," Will Campbell said. "I lose sleep over having 500,000 unique visitors to the website and only really 14,000 accounts subscribing."

The paper has around 10,000 print subscribers. It employs about 100 people, including 29 in the newsroom.

Two more potential employees are in the wings: Ben Campbell's sons, who are 4 and 2 years old.

"It's an important piece of our community and so our goal is to keep that as strong as possible," Will Campbell said.

"Another goal of ours is to have it be appealing enough to the next generation, Ben's kids and my future kids ... if they want to work here."



Baltimore Bucks the Trend

Local outlets are withering across the country — but not in Charm City

by PAUL FARHI

The appointment of a new inspector general isn't typically the sexiest local-news topic, but it may have been the hottest story going this summer in Baltimore County. Amid suggestions of **political favoritism** and **backroom deals**, the county executive **pushed out** the incumbent inspector. Intense media coverage ensued.

The **Baltimore Sun** and its upstart competitor, **The Baltimore Banner**, published dozens of news stories and editorials. **The Baltimore Brew**, a scrappy digital news site launched in 2010, scored a few scoops. Local TV stations paid attention. Even the **Daily Record**, a business and legal publication, weighed in.

Coverage of the IG story — vast, varied, detailed — says a lot about the state of Baltimore's media landscape: namely, that it's vibrant, despite

years of cutbacks at legacy news sources. The Sun, long the state's largest daily publication, for decades boasted a mighty newsroom, replete with foreign bureaus and a 400-person staff. Today its newsroom is less than a quarter of that size. But Baltimore retains far more journalistic muscle and vigor than many comparably sized or even larger markets. A 2024 University of Maryland study of the state's **local news ecosystem** found that Baltimore and its immediate environs had 33 news outlets of various sizes and types, offering more



local coverage than the District of Columbia. That's remarkable given that D.C. has a larger population (roughly 700,000 to Baltimore's 570,000) and is home to thousands of journalists (though most cover the federal government, not the city).

Start-up digital operations have become significant media players in Maryland's largest city. On many days, The Banner, plus smaller outfits such as the Brew and the [Baltimore Beat](#), a Black-led and -focused nonprofit, compete with The Sun and broadcasters for scoops and eyeballs. Part of what's striking about this fresh generation of local outlets, and the overall variety of media options in Baltimore, is that it has developed at a time when many news organizations are shrinking and closing nationwide.

As the Medill School's annual [State of Local News report](#) has documented, professional news

sources have disappeared from hundreds of counties across America over the past two decades — trends that show no signs of slowing. Almost 40 percent of U.S. newspapers have vanished since 2005. In the past year alone 136 newspapers closed, or more than two per week. Amid the patchwork of (mostly rural) news deserts are more than a thousand other counties that retain just a single full-time news source, sometimes staffed by a lone local journalist or even wholly produced by journalists outside the publication's nominal coverage area.

Like many urban areas Baltimore has retained its legacy daily newspaper (The Sun), though in greatly diminished form from its near-monopolist past. What's more unusual, however, is a second, citywide, digital-only general interest news site (The Banner), plus the mixture of niche and ethnic news outlets. This raises the question: Is a model

for the future of U.S. news and news consumption taking shape in Baltimore?

Baltimore's news ecosystem is "both healthy and fragile," says Jerry Zremski, co-author of the University of Maryland media report. Healthy in its competitive froth, but the future remains uncertain. "We all know," says Zremski, "that no one has found the secret formula to guarantee long-term success in local journalism."

'Always a great news town'

Baltimore has a grand heritage of local journalism. Some of America's most esteemed literary journalists got their start in Charm City or made it their professional home, including H.L. Mencken, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Russell Baker and, more recently, journalist-turned-screenwriter and producer David Simon. Several of the media outfits taking root today were started by local news veterans, such as former Sun reporters Fern Shen and Mark Reutter at the Brew and Lisa Snowden at the Beat. The [Baltimore Afro American](#), founded in 1892, is one of the oldest continuously published Black newspapers in the U.S. These days, the Afro has two direct competitors, the Beat and [Baltimore Times](#), a nonprofit that initially launched in 1986 as a monthly publication.

"Baltimore has always been a great news town," says Simon, a former Sun reporter who set three of his acclaimed TV dramas ("The Wire," "Homicide: Life on the Streets" and "The Corner") in the city. "It really is a distillation of all the problems of America," he said, ticking off ingrained racial tension, crime and political corruption. "It's a microcosm."

However rich the source material, Baltimore's legacy and niche publications have faced the same declines in advertising and online traffic that have decimated local news operations nationwide. The once-dominant Sun has shrunk to around 85 journalists, according to its publisher, and

"WE ALL KNOW THAT NO ONE HAS FOUND THE SECRET FORMULA TO GUARANTEE LONG-TERM SUCCESS IN LOCAL JOURNALISM."

— **Jerry Zremski**, co-author of the University of Maryland media report



has been beset by labor turbulence and staff defections amid ownership turnover in recent years. Baltimore's two other daily papers, the News American and the Evening Sun, closed in 1986 and 1995, respectively. Its alternative weekly, the City Paper, closed in 2017.

The most invigorating recent development — and the one inspiring the most hope — has been the emergence of the nonprofit Banner in 2022. Funded primarily by hotel and nursing-home magnate Stewart Bainum Jr., The Banner has effectively transformed Baltimore into that national rarity: a two-newspaper town. From its newsroom and business offices on historic Pratt Street amid the tourist bustle of the Inner Harbor, The Banner's daily output includes coverage of politics, education, sports and arts, plus occasional investigations. Among The Banner's enterprise pieces last year was a series on the city's opioid-overdose crisis, conducted in conjunction with the New York Times. In May it [won the Pulitzer Prize](#) for local reporting.

At The Banner, scale is the point

Bainum started The Banner after his attempt to buy The Sun from longtime owner Tribune Co. failed in 2020. He pledged \$50 million in startup capital — possibly the largest amount ever staked on a local news digital startup in this country. The Banner has yet to break even, but so far it appears to be closing the gap with the Sun and by some metrics has surpassed it. It has amassed about 72,000 subscribers, not only in the city of Baltimore but across all of Maryland's 23 counties, a 25 percent increase since the end of last year, according to chief executive Bob Cohn. A vet of The Economist, The Atlantic and Conde Nast who joined The Banner at the end of 2023, Cohn projects that revenue will grow 36 percent this year, from \$13.4 million in 2024. Subscriptions start at \$60 a year and renew at \$235, though about one-quarter of

Banner subscribers were enticed by \$1-for-six-months teaser offers. Maintaining a 95-person newsroom is costly, Cohn says, but scale is the point: "If you're determined to provide useful and compelling journalism, the kind that people are willing to pay for, you've got to build a big newsroom," he says.

The Banner's growth trajectory gave its board the confidence to launch an affiliate publication in Montgomery County, a prosperous Washington suburb some 35 miles southwest of Baltimore. (Bainum lives and works in Montgomery County.) Despite its downtown Baltimore location and editorial focus on the city, the outlet engaged in some subtle rebranding in August, dropping Baltimore from its web domain to reflect its expanding coverage. When it announced the Montgomery launch in September, The Banner also revealed partnerships with two Washington TV stations, NBC4 (WRC) and Telemundo 44 (WZDC). Under the agreements, Banner reporters participate in on-air segments; the outlet also has partnerships with Baltimore's CBS affiliate (WJZ) and public radio station (WYPR).

One cloud on The Banner's seemingly sunny horizon was the departure in May of founding editor Kimi Yoshino, who left to become a managing editor at The Washington Post. Yoshino built The Banner's newsroom and oversaw its Pulitzer-winning opioid series and extensive coverage of the 2024 [Key Bridge collapse](#). Other Banner reporting under Yoshino included an [investigation of a Baltimore megachurch](#) accused of hiding years of sexual impropriety as well as coverage of [allegations of sexual misconduct](#) against former Baltimore Ravens kicker Justin Tucker.

"To a certain extent, I felt comfortable leaving The Banner because I knew it was on a solid path to sustainability," Yoshino said, repeatedly referring to the publication as "we." She added, "I was no longer worried about its survival." In September, The Banner named Audrey Cooper,

a former editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle, as its [next editor in chief](#). She took the helm in October.

Over on Exeter Street, where The Sun's newsroom has relocated following [another move in 2023](#), things have been less rosy. Alden Global Capital, the investment firm notorious for snapping up ailing newspapers, acquired the 188-year-old Sun in 2021 with its purchase of Tribune Co.'s newspaper division. Alden then flipped the paper early last year to Maryland businessman David D. Smith for a price Smith said exceeded \$100 million. Smith, like Bainum, is a wealthy proprietor: His fortune comes from his family's control of Sinclair Inc., the TV-station giant based in nearby Hunt Valley, Md. His acquisition of the paper restored it to local ownership for the first time in nearly 40 years. But Smith's activism in city politics and efforts to cross-publish content among his media holdings have caused turbulence.

Over the past 18 months, Smith and his longtime business partner, Sun co-owner Armstrong Williams, have transformed The Sun's news and opinion pages. Williams, who once managed Ben Carson's presidential campaign, has become a featured columnist, one of several conservative voices added to the traditionally liberal opinion section. Williams also sits on The Sun's editorial board and oversees its newsroom. "I'm running the paper every day," [he told an interviewer last year](#). According to Williams, Smith plays an active role in shaping The Sun's news agenda. "He'll say to me, 'You might want to do more of this...and I'll say to [editor and publisher Trif Alatzas]...Can we look at doing more of this?'"

Among the most controversial changes at The Sun has been a content-sharing partnership with Sinclair and its Baltimore TV station, WBFF, known as Fox45. The Sun routinely publishes stories carrying a byline of "[Fox45News](#)" or "[Sinclair National Desk](#)." The latter is the TV company's bureau located outside Washington.



The addition of the Sinclair-produced copy has unsettled some longtime Baltimoreans, including several current and former Sun journalists. The Sinclair stories tend to emphasize crime and civic dysfunction and conservative viewpoints, they say, at the expense of more balanced or nuanced reporting. "I see the influence of Smith in the crisis reporting about the city, as if the city is in some chaotic meltdown state where crime is out of control," said Dan Rodricks, a beloved Sun columnist who retired in January after nearly 50 years (and now contributes to the Baltimore Brew and [Baltimore Fishbowl](#)). "The Sun still does a pretty good job of covering the community. But there's a slant that suggests a Democratically run city is in the midst of a breakdown."

Baltimore magazine senior editor Ron Cassie says Smith and Williams have undertaken "the

Audrey Cooper,
editor in chief
of The Banner



“ PEOPLE DON’T CARE WHO OWNS THE PAPER AS LONG AS THE REPORTING IS GREAT. IT’S NOT POLITICAL. IT’S THE FURTHER DISMANTLING OF THE PAPER AND THE CHEAPENING OF IT. ”

— **Ron Cassie**, Baltimore magazine senior editor

Fox-ification” of The Sun, merging its sensibility with Smith’s TV station. “People don’t care who owns the paper as long as the reporting is great,” said Cassie. “It’s not political. It’s the further dismantling of the paper and the cheapening of it. He’s lowered the writing and editing standards.”

Smith’s involvement in Baltimore politics, including financing ballot initiatives to reduce the size of the city council and impose term limits on its members, has also sparked criticism.

(In an interview last year with The Banner, Mayor Brandon Scott asserted that Smith was the face of a group of wealthy White men seeking to roll back Black political power in the city: “This is about, ‘Can they go back to the old days,’” [Scott told the publication](#).) With control of The Sun

and Fox45, Smith has amassed enormous media power to advance his political agenda, some say.

Meanwhile, tensions in the newsroom — fueled by stalled contract talks and the alleged degradation of editorial standards — led to a weeklong byline strike last fall. (At a rally, Sun employees held signs reading “Integrity matters!” and “Don’t Sinclair our Sun.”)

Smith and Armstrong’s tenure has been marked by a precipitous decline in subscribers. The Sun [reportedly had 230,000](#) paid subscribers when Smith took control in early 2024. It had 120,000 in August, according to Alatzas, the publisher and editor in chief.

Despite the readership losses, Alatzas — a veteran of two decades at The Sun — said the news organization intends to expand. It plans to

add 50 newsroom staffers, with a bureau chief for every county in the state, Alatzas said, though without specifying a timeframe. In an interview, he described Smith as someone who “cares deeply about Baltimore” and The Sun.

“He wants to invest in local journalism,” Alatzas said. “He’s focused on how to make this a sustainable, thriving business for generations.” In meetings with community groups, Smith has said he “bought The Sun to save it.”

Screenwriter Simon, who still lives in Baltimore, laments that his beloved former paper has become “a stalking horse for the Republican Party and the politics of Mr. Smith.” A supporter of The Banner, he offered earlier this year to write an apology for the death of any character from “The Wire” in exchange for a \$500 contribution to the publication. Simon calls The Banner “the last, best hope for a quality newspaper” in Baltimore and says it can be a model for local-news operations elsewhere. “I want to see the medicine work because I want it to be prescribed elsewhere,” he said.

Is Baltimore a road map for local news success?

The shifting fortunes of the Sun and Banner raise another existential question about Baltimore and about urban news competition generally: How long can a city sustain two competitive full-service news operations, even with well-heeled proprietors behind them?

While The Banner’s growth is encouraging, all of the runway provided by its backer, Bainum,

doesn’t guarantee liftoff. The Messenger, a nationally focused news startup, burned through \$50 million in seed money in less than a year before closing in 2024. Another well-funded nonprofit urban startup, the Houston Landing, plowed through \$20 million before shutting down in May. “The Banner is really good, has excellent leadership and has hired really well,” Peter Bhatia, the Landing’s former CEO, said by e-mail this summer. “All that contributes to a special situation in Baltimore.”

Trends in local news suggest the battle of Baltimore between The Banner and The Sun may be a fight to the death. “If The Sun starts bleeding cash or The Banner starts bleeding cash, the health of Baltimore’s news ecosystem may well rest on how much patience their wealthy owners have,” said Zremski, the University of Maryland scholar.

In this regard, Baltimore looks like other cities where legacy and start-up news operations uneasily co-exist. In Chicago, the legacy newspaper, The Chicago Tribune, is slipping while digital upstarts such as Block Club Chicago are gaining (it’s notable that The Tribune and The Sun once had the same owners, first Tribune Co. and more recently, Alden, the hedge fund known for its cuts). The emergence of local outlets in Detroit, Denver, Cleveland and Memphis also suggests that growth in local news is surely possible, but often at the expense of the incumbents.

In the near term at least, Baltimore is beating the odds amid the long decline of local news. At the moment, it’s a competitive fight. And that might be as good as it gets.



Email Over Algorithms

How newsrooms are reclaiming their audiences

by JACKIE SPINNER

It was big NBA news when the San Antonio Spurs signed a \$229 million contract extension with star point guard De'Aaron Fox this summer. But for the [San Antonio Express-News](#), the timing of the four-year deal was lousy: The paper's Spurs newsletter had gone out the day before.

Not long ago, the newspaper would have counted on push alerts or social media posts to draw readers to its website. But as habits shifted, newsrooms across the country began leaning on newsletters — free or paid — to deliver stories straight to inboxes, building loyalty and creating new revenue streams. When the news broke in August, the Express-News reached its most dedicated fans with a special e-mail blast to its Spurs Nation subscribers.

The payoff was immediate, said JJ Velasquez, the paper's managing editor of audience, citing a spike in opens and clicks.

“It’s the guaranteed way to engage with our audience when other channels like social media or search falter or change, as they are apt to do,” he said. “We know that our newsletter audiences are stabilizing for us.”

Newsletters have become vital to more organizations and individuals across the journalism industry as a direct-to-consumer vehicle that’s not tethered to potentially unreliable social or search platforms. They give outlets a consistent way to reach readers directly, strengthening ties at a time when referral traffic from social media is falling. A 2024 report from



Chartbeat and Similarweb, a digital intelligence platform, showed that Facebook referral traffic to publisher websites **declined 50%** over the past year. Meanwhile, news websites are facing growing competition from AI-fueled search engines and chatbots, which can summarize news articles and answer questions without sending users to the original source. That shift threatens to further erode website pageviews and undercut the advertising and subscription models many newsrooms rely on.

All of that has pushed many outlets to double down on products they can fully control — such as newsletters.

E-mail newsletters earned their first dedicated chapter in the [**2022 edition of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report**](#), which tracks trends in consumption patterns across dozens of countries. Researchers found that 22 percent of U.S. media consumers read a news email newsletter weekly. In 2025, the share of readers was 21 percent, but newsletter audiences continue to skew older than the general population of news consumers and are more educated and politically active than the average news audience.

Newsletters are critical to reader revenue, especially in subscription-focused models, the [**2025 Reuters report**](#) found. Conversion rates of e-mail newsletter readers to paid subscriptions are higher than conversions from most social channels, particularly when integrated with membership or tiered access models, Reuters reported.

For many newsrooms, this means newsletters are no longer just a low-cost tool for engagement; they've become a core part of the business model.

“Our newsletter is very stable and successful,” said Joe Coughlin, editor of The Record North Shore, a five-year-old nonprofit serving Chicago’s suburbs. “It’s just been such a reliable part of our landscape as a newsroom and who we are. In fact, some readers think that’s all we are, and we’ve learned to think that’s okay.”

While it’s not a game-changer for web traffic, the outlet’s main weekly newsletter has proven its worth in brand awareness and sponsorship revenue. Coughlin writes the top, giving readers a behind-the-scenes look at how the main story was reported, before highlighting headlines and linking to other original coverage. “It’s kind of its own product,” Coughlin said.

Embracing that product has paid off. Coughlin’s team sells three ad placements within the Thursday newsletter — one banner and two

square slots — and those are now included in larger sponsorship packages. The Record North Shore also has a newer newsletter, sent on Mondays, that is for paid members.

Chris Krewson, executive director of [LION Publishers](#), said 85 percent of LION's 500 local independent member publications in the U.S. and Canada now produce newsletters, second only to original reporting. What many newsrooms once left at aggregated headline dumps has matured into smartly curated and voice-driven products.

"A newsletter is a tactic," Krewson said. "They are really key to monetizing a membership program."

Effective independent publishers use newsletters to widen the reach of enterprise stories or investigations, he said, and to draw readers toward sustained support. "You actually see a funnel from total newsletter subscribers to a conversation rate to people who eventually get on the path to membership," Krewson said.

Major news events can of course drive interest and readership. The Express-News picked up paid subscribers after the devastating flooding over the Fourth of July weekend in Central Texas and other flooding in June that killed 13 people in San Antonio.

"All of our enterprise coverage and on-the-scenes reporting has had a profound impact on conversion," Velasquez said, using the term for moving readers of free content to ones who pay for news.

The numbers can be small, he added, but understanding the details of the metrics — and the revenue they stand to represent — is important. "People are attuned to clicks and page views and visits a lot more than conversions. I think psychologically it makes sense: You'll see thousands or tens of thousands of views and conversions only in the dozens. But that's 24 people who decided from reading your story that they wanted to pay us for our news."

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I THINK A LOT OF THE INDUSTRY APPROACH TO NEWSLETTERS IS TO HAVE A REPORTER DO THIS IN BETWEEN WRITING. IF YOU INVEST A LITTLE MORE TIME IN THAT, IT COMES ACROSS TO THEIR READERS.

— Colin Deppen, newsletter editor/reporter for Spotlight PA

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The evolving role of social media also has made newsletters an attractive method for building audiences and trying to expand reach. The unpredictability of social platforms' operations in recent years — Facebook's algorithm tweak one week, X's tech meltdown the next — has spooked newsrooms. Newsletters, by contrast, have direct reach and are stable.

Spotlight PA's newsletter strategy is a prime example. Colin Deppen was hired in 2023 and put in charge of the investigative nonprofit's two newsletters, one that is free for anyone who signs up and one for readers who donate. "We want everybody to support our news because our news is responsible and reliable and thoughtful and all that," he said. "But supporters sometimes want a little something extra, too."

The content strategy is pretty simple. "We stress brevity, familiar-sounding language, all those hallmarks of digital journalism," Deppen said. "We try to use best practices there."

The daily newsletter, PA Post, has the larger audience of email subscribers — 35,000 — but it also has generated conversions among those free readers to donors, Deppen said.

Crafting a strategy and then building the readership for it requires time, editorial voice

and an understanding of audience needs. In addition to Deppen, the outlet's lead editor of news products, Spotlight PA also has a dedicated newsletter reporter.

"I think a lot of the industry approach to newsletters is to have a reporter do this in between writing," Deppen said. "If you invest a little more time in that, it comes across to their readers."

That understanding is also driving changes at **Verite News**, a Black-led nonprofit newsroom in New Orleans.

Editor-in-chief Terry Baquet, who oversaw The Times-Picayune's [Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage](#) of Hurricane Katrina 20 years ago, said Verite is rethinking its newsletter strategy to better reflect the depth and direction of its journalism.

"What our newsletters do right now, and we plan to expand on, is to let people know the kind of coverage we're doing," Baquet said.

In a natural disaster of similar proportions today, newsletters would be essential, he said.

"I think newsletters would become even more stand-alone in the case of Katrina," Baquet said. "They are not going to want to read long stories."



Arvin Tchivzhel of Mather Economics, a Georgia-based consulting firm for publishers, said that deciding whether a newsletter is worth developing requires a hard look at the numbers and potential for payoff, however an outlet defines that.

“Do the math,” he said. “How many opt-ins can you get? Two hours a week or two hours a day and you’re only getting a couple hundred and only converting one person a week. If you’re really small, the math might not work out.”

At The Record North Shore, the effort is worth the time. Coughlin estimates it takes him about 15 minutes to write the introduction at the top of the Thursday newsletter and 60 to 90 additional minutes to compile headlines, add links to original coverage and format the rest of the edition.

That personalized opener is key, according to this year’s Reuters Digital News Report, which is produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. Researchers found that successful newsletters are increasingly personality- or voice-driven, often authored by reporters or commentators familiar to audiences. Formats such as explainer threads, curated commentary and behind-the-scenes journalism also are gaining traction.

Tchivzhel said it comes down to choosing the right strategy depending on a newsroom’s size and resources. Many larger outlets have subscriber-only newsletters that are clearly

RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT SUCCESSFUL NEWSLETTERS ARE INCREASINGLY PERSONALITY- OR VOICE-DRIVEN, OFTEN AUTHORED BY REPORTERS OR COMMENTATORS FAMILIAR TO AUDIENCES.

generating revenue, he said. Smaller publishers, such as the [Bangor Daily News](#), have taken a more targeted approach, producing a premium, subscriber-only politics newsletter aimed at institutions, nonprofits and government entities.

“It’s an email marketing campaign,” LION’s Krewson said. “But it’s also your best chance at a forecastable revenue stream.”



PART 3

ABOUT THE PROJECT



Methodology

The findings in this report are based on information in a comprehensive proprietary database that is created and maintained by the Local News Initiative at Northwestern University. Over the past year, researchers at the Medill School of Journalism, Media & Integrated Marketing Communications have collected data on close to 6,000 local newspapers, 1,100 public broadcasting outlets, 1,000 ethnic media outlets and more than 12,000 standalone and network digital sites. The information is derived from a variety of industry and government sources and supplemented with extensive research and reporting, fact-checking and multiple layers of verification.

- **Newspapers:** Information on individual newspapers in the database was derived from a number of industry sources. Membership lists provided by state press associations (and procured through additional data validation efforts from our team) were cross-referenced with news industry stories, as well as data available from Editor & Publisher and the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM). Researchers then conducted extensive independent online research, ascertaining the status and content of newspapers by checking websites and print versions as well as consulting press association directors, editors, publishers and local libraries when appropriate.
- **Independent Digital-Only News Sites:** The list of local digital news sites was compiled by merging lists published online by the

Local Independent Online News Organization (LION) and the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), as well as the Alliance for Nonprofit News Outlets (ANNO). As with newspapers, researchers visited all of the websites to verify that the content was updated regularly and the domain was still active.

- **Public Broadcasting:** The list of public radio and television stations came from data supplied by National Public Radio and gathered from Public Broadcasting Service sources. To determine whether a station produced original content, we reviewed individual stations' schedules and staffing, as well as content posted on the station's website.
- **Ethnic Media:** The original list of ethnic media outlets was compiled in 2020, drawing from several key sources: ethnic newspapers listed in the Editor & Publisher DataBook (2004, 2018), the Craig Newmark School of Journalism's (CUNY), State of Latino News Media, the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA, representing African American newspapers) and the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NABOB). In our 2025 review, we updated the database to remove outlets if no news content had been published for the preceding six months, and we added new ethnic media outlets in 2025, verified through lists provided by the Indigenous Journalists Association and American Community Media and additional data validation efforts from our team.
- **Network Digital-Only News Sites:** We defined a digital network as a chain of two or more digital-only local news websites providing local or statewide reporting. This list is built primarily from the largest networks in the country such as Patch, TAPinto and States Newsroom, as well as smaller networks found in industry lists like INN and LION. As with the rest of our database, Medill researchers

reviewed each local network site to verify that it produced consistent and original local news content.

In addition, we used media information contained in numerous surveys and reports by, among others, the Pew Research Center, the Poynter Institute and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, as well as scholars and researchers at the nation's universities, including the foundational data compiled between 2012 and 2020 by the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Demographic and economic data from both state and national government sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, also were incorporated and analyzed.

Building and Refining the Newspaper Database

Our 2025 report identifies 5,419 local newspapers in the country that were still being published at the end of September 2025. With each newspaper in the database we include the following variables: name, city, state, parent media company, frequency (daily/weekly), number of days published per week and (when available) total circulation and website URL. Our research is concerned with identifying local newspapers that provide public-service journalism. Therefore, in addition to using industry and press association lists, we add an additional layer of verification. When possible, we consult both online and print editions of newspapers, analyzing the content of several editions, to ascertain whether the paper covers local government meetings, such as school board and county commissioner meetings. The outlets included in our database cover, at minimum, the critical information needs outlined by the Federal Communications Commission. Intentionally excluded from our proprietary database are shoppers, community newsletters (which focus on people and events, instead of

news), specialty publications (such as business journals and lifestyle magazines), monthly and biweekly publications, advertising inserts, TMCs (Total Market Coverage publications) and some zoned editions that feature minimal local journalism relevant to the county where the zoned edition circulates.

Many states and municipalities have different thresholds for determining whether a newspaper is a “paper of record” and therefore eligible to carry legal notices. Often that threshold is based on circulation and distribution. We recognize that the income from legal advertising is critical to small dailies and weeklies. Therefore, we can work with the executive directors and general counsels at individual press associations if there are questions or concerns about the difference in our methodology (which is focused on news coverage) from the threshold used by government officials to determine whether a publication is eligible to receive legal advertising.

Building and Refining the Digital Sites Database

Our 2025 report identifies 695 standalone digital-only news operations that focus on producing either local, regional or statewide coverage of events and issues. Excluded are those sites associated with existing or legacy media — such as sites for public and commercial broadcasting stations, newspapers and magazines — as well as national digital operations, such as ProPublica and Inside Climate News. We also exclude sites that are focused primarily on entertainment or event coverage, government and commercial sites (such as those operated by real-estate companies) and those that have been inactive for the past six months. Each site in the digital database has the following variables: name, city, state, nonprofit or for-profit designation, news focus (local, regional or state focus), specialties (i.e., specific focus on topics such as politics,

business or education), year established and founder or publisher/owner. As with newspapers, we add an additional layer of verification, analyzing the content of the sites, seeking to ascertain whether each site provides coverage on the eight topics identified by the Federal Communications Commission as being “critical information needs.”

Building and Refining the Digital Networks Database

Our report tracks 853 digital-only network sites. We defined a digital network as a chain of two or more digital-only websites providing local or statewide reporting. Intentionally excluded are news aggregators, community message boards and AI-generated content farms. When possible, we manually reviewed each site to verify whether it regularly published original, reported news stories. In cases where networks were too large for that manual process to be feasible, we built web scrapers to perform that review based on the same criteria. For each of Patch’s 11,000 local domains, for example, we programmed a scraper to pull the headline, byline, publication date and URL for the 10 most recent stories. Based on that information, we then determined a site to be active if at least two of its stories were originally reported and published within the last month.

Building and Refining the Public Broadcasting Database

There are more than 1,000 public radio stations in the United States yet many of these are repeater or affiliate stations that carry content originating from a primary station nearby. In this update, we reviewed programming schedules and homepage content for primary NPR and PBS broadcast stations in the U.S. to identify 342 that produce original local news. This forms the core of our public broadcasting database.

Building and Refining the Ethnic Media Database

The original list of ethnic media outlets was compiled in 2020, drawing from several key sources: ethnic newspapers listed in the *Editor & Publisher DataBook* (2004, 2018), the Craig Newmark School of Journalism's (CUNY), State of Latino News Media, the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA, representing African American newspapers) and the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NABOB).

This original list of outlets — including traditional newspapers, websites and TV and radio stations — will serve as a foundation as we continue to expand this dataset over the coming years. In 2023, we classified the presence of these ethnic media outlets within news deserts, high-poverty areas and metropolitan regions using our broader research database.

Our analysis covers a range of outlet types, including podcasts, radio, newsletters, blogs and Facebook groups, in addition to more traditional formats like print and website content. This diversity reflects the various ways in which underserved audience segments access local news.

Dealing with Circulation Limitations

The circulation figures in our 2025 report come with a number of limitations. Some circulation figures are audited and verified; others are self-reported. Therefore, we have incorporated additional verification steps and information in an attempt to be as transparent as possible about where we are getting the numbers. When possible, we use circulation numbers for paid weekday circulation from the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM). AAM is the industry leader in media verification and specializes in verifying circulation metrics for publishers. However, less than 10%

of papers in the database — mostly dailies — currently subscribe to AAM audits, which count both paid print and digital subscriptions in the total number. Additionally, the reported AAM numbers for the large dailies often lag behind the audit by a year or more. Because news organizations must pay AAM to verify their circulation statistics, many small papers do not use the service and instead self-report. In addition to AAM, we have consulted SRDS and E&P datasets. When available, we used circulation figures provided by state press associations. There is currently no widely accepted and easily accessible tracking system for online readership data, especially for the thousands of local papers in small and mid-sized markets.

Tracking Sales, Changes in Ownership, Mergers and Closures

Throughout the year, the Local News Initiative tracks changes in ownership of newspapers, digital-only news outlets and ethnic media organizations, as well as closures and mergers, through news accounts and press releases, as well as extensive online research. We consulted a number of industry sources as well as local libraries and, when possible, the outlets themselves.. We define a closure as a newspaper or news outlet that ceased publishing and a merger as a newspaper that has been combined with another publication. We classify digital sites as closed (with a date listed for closure) if the site has not published any content for more than six months. We consult:

- Publicly available corporate documents, including quarterly and annual reports released by the individual media companies, and press releases by Dirks, Van Essen, Murray & April; Cribb, Cope & Potts; and Grimes, McGovern and Associates — three of the most active firms in the U.S. handling sales of newspapers and digital sites.

- News articles about individual purchases and business decisions.
- Statements made by executives in press releases, news articles or industry presentations.
- Reports and interviews with industry representatives and analysts.

There are limitations to all of the above sources. Press releases, news articles, statements made by news executives and reports from industry analysts often list by title only the sales of the largest and most prominent newspapers in a chain, usually dailies. The weeklies involved in the sale, as well as specialty publications (including

shoppers and business journals) and digital sites, are often grouped together and reported as a single number. That is why we try to check all announcements of sales against publicly available documents and corporate websites.

The local news ecosystem is rapidly changing, and we make every effort to adjust our database accordingly. We take all suggestions and corrections seriously; if you would like to reach us, please use [contact form here](#).

This research was overseen by Tim Franklin, John M. Mutz Chair in Local News; and Zach Metzger, Project Director and primary report author. Inquiries about the findings or insights in this report can be addressed to: stateoflocalnews@northwestern.edu.



Research Faculty and Staff



Tim Franklin, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, was the founding director of the Medill Local News initiative, a research and development project designed to bolster the sustainability of local news. Before joining Medill, Franklin was President of The Poynter Institute. He's been the top editor of The Indianapolis Star, Orlando Sentinel and Baltimore Sun. He was a Washington Managing Editor of Bloomberg News. He was appointed to the bipartisan Illinois Local Journalism Task Force.



Zach Metzger, Director of State of Local News Project, leads the State of Local News Project at Medill, overseeing the data collection, analysis and reporting on the landscape of local news. He previously researched local news at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, where he completed his PhD in 2024. Before joining the State of Local News Project, Metzger worked as a data analyst in the environmental industry.



Srishti Bose, Research Associate, is responsible for the data analysis and design portion of the State of Local News Report, coordinating the management, updating, and analysis of the newspaper, bright spots, watchlist and ethnic media databases. She is a Medill School of Journalism graduate with a degree in Media Innovation and Content Strategy. Before her current role, Bose worked as a mergers and acquisitions (M&A) lawyer in India, specializing in the Fin-Tech and Retail sectors.



John Volk, Research Associate, is the State of Local News Project's database administrator and developer. His in-depth research and automated systems strengthen Medill's data on local news organizations across all media types. A two-time Northwestern graduate, he has previously worked at the Star Tribune, the Local News Accelerator and Northwestern Athletics.



Autumn Brewington, Project Editor, is a contributing editor overseeing Bright Spots. Starting in 2001, she worked in The Washington Post's national and business news sections and was op-ed page editor from 2007-2014. She edited for The Wall Street Journal and the national security affairs website Lawfare before rejoining The Post in 2020. Brewington launched and wrote The Post's royal newsletter (2022-2023). She was a spring 2024 media fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.



Liam Scott, Project Contributor, is a journalist who covers media and democracy. He is a contributing writer at the Columbia Journalism Review and a contributor at The Washington Post's Press Freedom Initiatives. Scott previously reported on press freedom at Voice of America, during which time he was named a Livingston Award finalist and won a National Press Club award.



Paul Farhi, Project Contributor, is the Washington Post's former media reporter. He left the paper at the end of 2023 after nearly 36 years as a staff writer, during which he also covered business, politics and general assignment features. He has also been a senior contributing editor to the American Journalism Review and now contributes to the Atlantic, the Athletic, the Daily Beast, and Columbia Journalism Review. He has been a frequent commentator on TV and radio about the media industry.



Jackie Spinner, Project contributor, is professor of journalism at Columbia College Chicago, where she is faculty advisor to the Columbia Chronicle. She was a staff writer for The Washington Post for 14 years and covered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She is the editor of Gateway Journalism Review and the director and producer of two documentary films, Don't Forget Me and Morocco, Morocco, the latter of which aired on PBS in Chicago in 2022.



Brier Dudley, Project contributor, is editor of The Seattle Times Save the Free Press public service initiative, which reports on the local journalism crisis and advocates for solutions. Dudley has been with the Times since 1998 and was a member of its editorial board for five years. He spent 14 years covering Microsoft and the technology industry, including nine years writing a tech column, and has won numerous regional and national journalism awards.



Ed Malthouse, Research Director, is the Erastus Otis Haven Professor of Integrated Marketing Communications at Medill. He also has an appointment in the McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Sciences' Department of Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences. Malthouse is an expert in applied statistics, market research and media marketing.



Joe Germuska, Chief Nerd, runs Knight Lab's technology, professional staff and extracurricular activity. He was a founding member of the Chicago Tribune's News Apps team. He is the founder and project lead of the Census Reporter project, a website designed to make Census data easy for journalists. He also serves on the board of City Bureau, a Chicago-based civic journalism lab. Germuska has a BA in African History and MS in Product Design and Development Management, both from Northwestern.



Leah Schroeder, Research Assistant, is a Northwestern senior with journalism and policy research experience. For the State of Local News Project, she tracked newspaper closures and transactions and completed FOIA research. She also works for the Institute for Policy Research and has written for The Daily Northwestern, The Dispatch, Midstory, and several Chicago-based publications.



Mary Randolph, Research Assistant, is a senior at Northwestern studying journalism, data science and history. With the Local News Initiative, she's written breaking news, tracked outlet closures, and collected data on FOIA requests in news deserts. She also worked with Illinois' Local News Task Force, where she co-wrote a policy recommendation report that informed current legislation. Her work was featured in Pew Research Center, Smithsonian Magazine, the Chicago Reader, HorizonMass and The Daily Northwestern.



Anavi Prakash, Research Assistant, is a sophomore at Northwestern studying journalism and social policy. She conducts education research for the Institute for Youth in Policy and is an editor at The Daily Northwestern. For the State of Local News Project, she focuses on the newspaper and digital sites database.



Diya Raj, Research Assistant, is a sophomore at Northwestern University studying Journalism and Computer Science. Outside of the Medill Local News Initiative, she is also an assistant editor at The Daily Northwestern. investigative journalism and major financial institutions.



Chloe Nicola-Mintz, Research Assistant, is a sophomore journalism student at Medill. She brings extensive research experience and a strong passion for local news to the team, and has worked diligently on a content analysis survey, digital sites analysis, and news deserts due diligence.



Mitra Nourbakhsh, Research Assistant, is a junior at Northwestern, pursuing a double major in journalism and international studies, with a minor in data science. Her strengths in data analysis and technical knowledge of research methods have been integral. She also conducted a content analysis survey as well as our updates of digital news sites.



Sophie Rivka Baker, Research Assistant, is sophomore at Northwestern studying journalism and political science. Along with the State of Local News Project, she is a reporter for The Daily Northwestern.

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