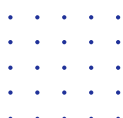


A Hard Reality: Independent Local Journalism in the United States

Merrill Brown and Jacob Spudich

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Institute for Democracy,
Journalism & Citizenship



Introduction

There is no longer much debate about the dimensions of the local news crisis in the United States. Thousands of newspapers have disappeared, newsroom employment has collapsed and hundreds of communities have little or no consistent professional news coverage. What remains much less clear is what will replace what has been lost.

Over the past several years, one answer has begun to emerge. Across the country, journalists, entrepreneurs and community leaders are creating independent local news organizations—often small operations built around websites, newsletters and social platforms, and frequently started by one or a small number of people who believe their communities need something that existing news organizations - to the extent they remain in operation in those communities - no longer provide.

There are now hundreds of these enterprises. Some have become significant institutions in their communities. Some have built substantial audiences and diversified sources of revenue. Some are growing. And many of their founders have demonstrated remarkable determination to keep them alive.

But it is too early to conclude that the country has found a sustainable answer to the local news problem.

That is one of the most important conclusions of a survey we conducted in the spring of 2026 for Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship, where Merrill Brown served as a visiting professional fellow. Jacob Spudich joined Brown as a researcher while completing his master's degree at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

The entrepreneurs who participated in the survey demonstrate that small independent organizations can provide journalism their communities value and, in many cases, build businesses around it. But they have also demonstrated how extraordinarily difficult it is to create a sustainable local news enterprise.

And the difficulties aren't principally journalistic. Many of the people in our study already know how to report, edit, write and produce news. What many have had to learn—often while simultaneously publishing every day—is how to run a business, find customers, sell advertising and sponsorships, seek foundation or other institutional support, understand their audiences, develop multiple revenue streams, manage technology, hire people and build an organization.

That distinction may be central to understanding the next phase of local news.

HIGHLIGHTS

We surveyed 277 independent local news operators and received completed responses from 112 publishers in 37 states and Washington, D.C. What we found is both encouraging and sobering.

The people who responded are not, for the most part, newcomers experimenting with journalism. More than 61% have been publishing independently for five years or longer. Among those who came from traditional media, 76% have at least a decade of institutional experience and nearly half have 20 years or more. And 92% describe independent publishing as their primary career.

- Fewer than 5% of respondents said they became independent publishers out of pure necessity.
- Fewer than 2% said they were actively open to returning to a traditional newsroom.
- More than half said balancing journalism with business operations is a top challenge. More than one in five said growing beyond a single member organization was one of the top financial challenges.
- About 4 in 10 respondents draw all of their personal income from their publications. But 1 in 5 still earn less than a quarter of their income from that news organization.
- 4 in 5 use advertising or sponsorship revenue models, dwarfing subscription-only efforts and also outnumbering grants and fellowships. Hybrid models combining some or all in various proportions were common.
- Local models aren't interchangeable. Population and business density, income, access to philanthropy and civic culture impact viability and models of independent local publishing.
- The best local news entrepreneurs are also striving to build community institutions.
- Platform dependence may pose a real threat for as many as 3 in 4 respondents.
- Burnout and sustainability are major challenges for more than half of respondents with peak risk among those identifying as having 100-500 paying subscribers.
- Survival doesn't always mean sustainability. Founders working unsustainable hours, or relying on a spouse's salary, may not have a model that can be replicated or scaled.

We dig into the numbers of each of these findings in the pages below.

An entrepreneurial response to the local news crisis

The numbers documenting the decline of American local journalism remain extraordinary. According to the 2025 Medill State of Local News report, nearly 3,500 newspapers have disappeared since 2005, and more than 270,000 newspaper jobs have been eliminated. There are 213 counties without any local news source and another 1,524 with only one remaining source.

At the same time, more than 300 local news startups have launched in the past five years according to the same Medill report. Our research focused on people participating in that rebuilding. One of our most interesting findings was how deliberately many of them chose to do it.

Only 4.5% of respondents selected the option that said they became independent publishers out of pure necessity—a layoff or an inability to find stable work. Several more described layoffs or job loss in their own words. Nearly a quarter cited editorial freedom as a primary motivation, while many others described recognizing a vacuum in their communities and deciding that somebody needed to fill it.

There is a tendency to think about independent local publishers primarily as refugees from traditional journalism. But that's not an accurate description of the people who responded to our survey.

For many, independent publishing represents a second act in journalism rather than a fallback from it. They have taken skills developed over long careers and applied them to communities in which they believe they can make a difference.

And they appear remarkably committed to what they have built.

Only 1.9% said they were actively open to returning to a traditional newsroom, even though salary, editorial freedom and job security are the conditions they themselves name as most likely to bring them back. Among respondents with 20 or more years of traditional media experience, nearly four out of five said they would not return or were unlikely to do so.

That is a striking vote of confidence in independent journalism.

It should not, however, be confused with a vote of confidence in its economics and its long-term viability.

Journalism is only half the job

Perhaps the most important lesson from our research is also one of the simplest: knowing how to produce good journalism and knowing how to build sustainable journalism businesses are very different skills.

Traditional news organizations obscured that distinction for generations of journalists.

A reporter at a newspaper or television station generally did not have to sell an advertisement before writing a story. Editors generally weren't responsible for customer acquisition, payment systems, pricing, marketing or sponsorship packages. Advertising departments, circulation departments, technology staffs, finance departments and executives performed those functions.

Independent publishing collapses many of those jobs onto the founder.

As Bill Smith of Evanston Now described his role in our interview with him: "I'm the editor, I'm the publisher, I'm the ad salesperson, I'm the reader revenue person, I'm the donation revenue person, I'm all of those things, and the janitor at this point."

More than half of those who answered—51.9%—identified balancing journalism with business operations as one of their biggest challenges, while 21.8% identified scaling beyond a one-person operation as their biggest financial challenge.

This is more than a workload problem. It is also a skills problem.

Editorial skills are central to creating credible local news organizations. But editorial ability by itself cannot create a sustainable enterprise. A successful local publisher also needs business judgment—and, increasingly, expertise in marketing, audience development, technology, product development, grant writing, advertising, sponsorship, events, membership and other forms of revenue.

That is an enormous portfolio of responsibilities to place on one or two people. It also helps explain a paradox in our findings. These publishers are experienced journalists, and many have managed to keep their organizations operating for years. Yet longevity doesn't automatically produce financial security.

Among respondents, 38.7% said their independent publishing operation provided all of their personal income. But another 20.7% earned less than a quarter of their income from their publications. Full dependence is more common among longer-running publications, but even among those publishing five years or more, fewer than half (42.6%) draw all of their income from them.

In other words, longevity does not guarantee that a publisher eventually reaches financial stability.

For many, the economics appear to establish themselves surprisingly early and mature as an organization grows. Revenue diversification is highest among operators in years three through five, 76.2% of whom run three or more revenue streams beyond subscriptions.

There is no single revenue model

Another lesson from the study is that the search for *the* business model for local news may itself be misguided.

That's because at least as of 2026, there isn't one.

About 82% of respondents use advertising or sponsorships, making them by far the most common revenue source. More than half have used grants or fellowships. Only 6.3% rely exclusively on subscriptions. And revenue diversification is common, particularly among organizations that have been operating for three to five years.

That finding is worth emphasizing because subscriptions and membership have received enormous attention in many of the recent conversations about digital journalism. While reader revenue clearly matters, subscription-only local news businesses are unusual among the publishers we studied.

The more common model is a hybrid: advertising, sponsorship, subscriptions or membership, donations, grants, events and other revenue sources combined in different proportions depending on the community.

That makes sense.

Local markets are not interchangeable. A business model that works in an affluent suburb may not work in a rural county. A publication covering a state capital has different opportunities from one serving a town of 15,000 people. Communities differ in population, income, business density, philanthropic resources, civic culture and willingness to pay for news.

Successful local news businesses are therefore likely to be intensely local businesses—not merely local editorial products.

Building an audience isn't the same as building a community

The distinction between an audience and a community is another area where we think the local news conversation needs to evolve.

Three-quarters of our respondents said their initial audiences grew organically, and 67.6% cited word of mouth or personal networks. About 40% leveraged an existing social following, while roughly one in five brought an audience from a previous media job.

Those are useful audience-development mechanisms. But they are not necessarily scalable ones.

More importantly, attracting readers is only one part of what a local news entrepreneur has to accomplish.

Local journalism has an unusual relationship with its customers because its value is partly transactional and partly civic. People may read a community news story because they want to know why a road is closed or what happened at a school-board meeting. But a successful local organization ultimately must become something more than a collection of useful stories.

It has to become part of the community. It must provide some of the glue that brings communities together. And it has to provide real utility for its audience as local newspapers historically provided content and services that could in many cases be found only in the pages of that publication.

That means listening as well as publishing. It means developing relationships with residents, civic organizations and local businesses. It can mean holding events, convening conversations, responding to

questions and making the news organization visible and accessible. It means understanding what people really need and believe is missing from their community—not simply measuring which stories generated the most page views.

And community building has an economic dimension as well.

One publisher in our study described local businesses approaching the publication because they recognized what it was doing and wanted to support it. That relationship between usefulness, trust, community identification and financial support may prove as important to the future of local news as any particular subscription technology, publishing platform or even editorial approach.

The best local news entrepreneurs, in our view, aren't simply editors with their own websites.

They're working at building community institutions.

The danger of building on someone else's platform

There is another business challenge that deserves more attention.

Nearly three-quarters—74.8%—of respondents said they were completely or very dependent on a single primary platform. Dependence does not ease with experience. Publishers operating five years or more report nearly the same level as the sample overall. Yet only 9.4% identified platform dependence as a major challenge.

That is a remarkable disconnect. The survey did not ask respondents to name their primary platform, and for some it may be a website or email list they control. But for many, the primary channel is almost certainly a platform owned by someone else.

Independent publishers rightly value the editorial autonomy they have gained by leaving traditional institutions. But many have exchanged one form of dependence for another: they rely heavily on technology and distribution systems controlled by companies whose business decisions they cannot influence. These include social networks, newsletter platforms and content management systems.

Anyone who has worked in digital publishing for very long has seen this movie before algorithms change. Social networks alter their priorities. Referral traffic disappears. Platforms rise and fall. Companies change ownership. Products are discontinued.

For an independent publisher, the safest audience is ultimately an audience with which the publisher has a direct relationship. Email lists, registered users, subscribers, members and people who regularly visit a publication directly are therefore more than audience-development metrics. They are business assets.

Platform diversification isn't merely a technical strategy. It is part of what independence should mean.

The point where success becomes dangerous

The most troubling finding in our research concerns burnout.

More than 55% of respondents identified burnout and sustainability as a major challenge—the most frequently selected challenge in the survey.

But burnout wasn't evenly distributed.

It peaked at 77.3% among operators with 100 to 500 paying subscribers. These are publishers who have built enough of an audience to create substantial expectations. Most already have some outside help, but it often isn't enough to meet them.

That is a particularly revealing stage in the development of a local news company.

At launch, a founder may be able to do nearly everything. There are relatively few customers, relatively little infrastructure and relatively limited expectations.

Success changes the equation.

More readers mean more stories to cover, more newsletters to send, more advertising relationships to manage, more customer questions to answer, more community relationships to nurture, more technology to maintain and more expectations about reliability. And perhaps most consequentially more people to manage and whose cumulative payroll must be met.

But the revenue required to hire the next employee may lag well behind those expectations.

This is the dangerous middle of local news entrepreneurship: too successful to remain a hobby-sized operation, but not yet successful enough to become an adequately staffed business.

The staffing data reinforces that conclusion. Nearly 90% report some form of paid or volunteer support, most commonly freelancers. Solo operation is far less common among longer-tenured respondents. Yet a couple of publishers in precisely the 100-to-500-subscriber group where burnout is highest are still doing everything themselves.

That isn't simply a personal wellness issue.

It is also a business sustainability issue.

Survival is not sustainability

Taken together, the findings force us to make a distinction that sometimes gets lost amid the understandable enthusiasm about the growth of independent local journalism.

Survival and sustainability are not the same thing.

The publishers we surveyed have accomplished something important. Nearly 62% have been operating for five years or more. They have built audiences, attracted advertisers, won grants, hired freelancers and created journalism their communities value. Many have no interest whatsoever in returning to the institutions they left.

Those are meaningful accomplishments.

But a business that survives because its founder works unsustainable hours is not yet a sustainable business. A publication that depends upon a spouse's salary or retirement income may produce excellent journalism but doesn't necessarily provide a replicable economic model. A publisher whose audiences are largely controlled by a social platform remains vulnerable even after years of successful publishing.

And our sample almost certainly presents a more encouraging picture than the universe of local news entrepreneurship as a whole.

By definition, we surveyed organizations that still exist. We did not systematically capture the entrepreneurs who launched publications and shut them down. Our respondents also underrepresent portions of the Deep South, Great Plains and Mountain West—areas where the local-news problem is particularly acute.

But the appropriate conclusion isn't that independent local news doesn't work.

Quite the contrary.

Our research demonstrates that it can work.

The more important question is how we make it work for many more people, in many more communities, with much better odds of creating durable institutions.

We are still early

There has been a natural tendency in media to look for the new model that will replace the old one.

We don't think independent local news is at that stage yet.

The field is still developing. Business practices remain uneven. Revenue models are still being tested. New nonprofit and philanthropic structures are emerging. Technology is changing rapidly. And the entrepreneurs themselves are learning from one another in real time.

The encouraging news is that there are now enough organizations operating long enough that we can begin studying the field systematically rather than relying primarily on anecdotes, press releases and individual success stories.

That work needs to accelerate.

We need to know more about why some local news organizations grow and others simply plateau. We need better data about organizations that fail, not only those that survive. We need to understand which revenue combinations work in which kinds of communities. We need better measures of community engagement and loyalty. We need to know when founders should hire, what they should hire first and what kinds of shared services could reduce the burden on small organizations.

And we need to translate that data gathering and research into practice.

Building local news means building local news entrepreneurs

There has been significant and important investment in local journalism in recent years. Philanthropic organizations, universities, nonprofit news organizations and industry groups have begun creating new sources of capital and support.

Capital matters enormously.

But money by itself will not solve the local news problem.

The country also needs a much larger pool of people capable of building and managing sustainable local news organizations.

That requires education and training that treats journalism and entrepreneurship as complementary disciplines rather than separate ones. Local news entrepreneurs need to understand reporting and editing, but also revenue strategy, sales, marketing, audience development, community engagement, product development, technology, financial management and organizational leadership.

Our own findings point directly at that need. More than half of respondents named balancing journalism with business operations as a top challenge, and the publishers we interviewed described learning revenue strategy largely on the job.

That is not a criticism of the people doing this work.

For most of journalism's history, we didn't train journalists to do these things.

Now we have to.

Journalism schools have a role to play. So do business schools, foundations, local-news organizations, professional associations and successful entrepreneurs who can teach the people coming behind them. Training shouldn't be limited to people already running publications. We should be creating pathways for journalists, business people, technologists and community leaders who might become the next generation of local news founders.

The rebuilding of American local journalism will require more than preserving existing institutions. It will require creating new ones.

And institutions don't build themselves. People build them.

The entrepreneurs in this study give us considerable reason for optimism. They have identified needs in their communities and acted to address those needs and fill community voids. They have demonstrated that people still value local journalism and that businesses and other institutions will support it. They have shown that experienced journalists are willing to reinvent themselves as independent publishers and that many find the work sufficiently rewarding that they have little interest in returning to traditional newsrooms.

But they have also shown us how difficult the work is.

The next stage of local news development should therefore be less about searching for a single solution to the local news crisis and more about creating the conditions under which thousands of different local solutions can succeed.

That means capital. It means technology. It means better, more refined and customizable business models. It means the expertise required to build direct relationships with communities. And, especially, it means developing people who understand that producing indispensable journalism and building a sustainable organization around that journalism are equally important parts of the job.

The independent local news movement has demonstrated that something significant is happening.

It has not yet demonstrated that the country's local news problem is on its way to being solved especially in remote or underserved communities.

We are still early. And understanding what these entrepreneurs have learned—both what is working and what isn't—is one of the places the next phase needs to begin.

We look forward to hearing from readers and would welcome having the audience share the work widely. We believe the study is instructive and thought-provoking for local journalism entrepreneurs, academics, researchers, funders and commentators.

Acknowledgements

This research would not exist without the 112 independent publishers who took the time to answer our survey about what they may consider to be the least comfortable parts of their work. They were asked about money, burnout, the current journalism landscape and whether what they had built was going to last, and they answered candidly. We are grateful for that.

We owe a particular debt to the publishers who sat for follow-up interviews: Dave Askins of the B Square Bulletin, Bill Smith of Evanston Now, Peter Rice of Downtown Albuquerque News, Joe Sneve of The Dakota Scout, David Jacobs of Shelby News Reporter, Susan DeVilder of The Kewanee Voice, Jason Cole and Courtney Cole of Excelsior Citizen and Chris Lopez of the Alamosa Citizen.

Michael Clarke of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications helped shape the direction and foundation of our survey design.

At the Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship, we thank Margaret Talev, Ellie Wilson and Susan Nash for their support of our work. At the Newhouse School we thank Dean Mark Lodato for his support of the Institute and our research.

About this Research

This report is based on a survey of independent local news operators and follow-up interviews conducted by Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship during spring 2026 into the summer 2026.

We defined independent local news operators as independently owned news organizations producing original local reporting that are not owned by a chain or legacy media company. These included solo operations, newsrooms of just a few individuals and more complex, bigger operations.

To find them, we started with directories and member lists maintained by LION Publishers, Project Oasis, the Independent Journalism Atlas and Substack, then used AI-assisted research (more details in our disclosure) to solidify the list.

Once these newsrooms were identified, we utilized Python and LLMs to scrape member lists and other organizational materials for basic contact information as well as location, website URL and primary website hosting. Python scripts, written with AI assistance, pulled publicly available contact and organizational information from directory listings, including location, website and publishing platform. We then checked every organization against our criteria and verified contact information by hand.

In April 2026 we invited 277 operators to take an online survey through Qualtrics. The survey covered six areas: background and motivation, financial picture, scale and audience, staffing and operations, platforms and distribution and challenges and relationship of their work to traditional journalism.

We received 112 submissions from operators in 37 states and Washington, D.C., a response rate of 40.4%. Not every respondent answered every question, so each result is reported as a share of those who answered that question.

Eight respondents, nine people spoke with us in follow-up interviews. We checked every quotation against our recording, notes and transcripts.

Respondents chose whether to take part, and they came to us through directories and networks, so the sample is not statistically representative of every independent local news organization.

It skews toward established publishers with long careers in traditional media. Because we only surveyed publications that are still operating, the results do not capture the ones that have closed. Financial and audience figures are self-reported. Thirteen states have no respondents: Alabama, Delaware, Hawaii, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Carolina, Vermont, West Virginia and Wyoming.

The data reflects a single point in time, so differences between groups show correlation and our research doesn't necessarily measure causation.

The research was reviewed, edited by us, the authors, as well as other members of the IDJC.

A Hard Reality: Independent Local Journalism in the United States

Findings from a survey of independent local news operators across 37 states and Washington, D.C.

Merrill Brown and Jacob Spudich
Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship

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Research Overview

Who conducted the research, how it was done and who participated

About the Authors and Institution

- Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship is based in Washington, D.C. and studies the relationship between democratic health and the information environment
- The IDJC is part of both the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
- Merrill Brown is a Visiting Professional Fellow at the IDJC. He comes to Syracuse University as a veteran news executive with decades of experience in media
- Jacob Spudich is a master's student in Advanced Media Management at the Newhouse School

About This Research

- Starting in April 2026, the IDJC invited 277 independent local news operators to take the survey. The analysis includes 112 responses across 37 states and Washington, D.C.
- Participants were identified through directories and interviews including LION Publishers, Project Oasis, the Independent Journalism Atlas and Substack
- The survey covered six areas: background and motivation, financial picture, scale and audience, staffing and operations, platforms and distribution, challenges and relationship to traditional journalism
- A select group of respondents participated in follow-up interviews which provided qualitative testimonial woven throughout this presentation

Who Responded

- 61.6% have been publishing independently for five or more years which makes this a sample of established publishers
- 76% of those with traditional media backgrounds brought 10 or more years of institutional experience with them
- 92% of the sample describe independent publishing as their primary career
- Respondents span 37 states and Washington, D.C., with the West (30.4%) and South (25.9%) having the highest representation
- The sample skews toward experienced journalism veterans who made a deliberate choice to go independent which shapes nearly every number in this dataset

The Local News Crisis

As traditional local newsrooms have deteriorated and collapsed throughout the past 20 years, millions of Americans now live in communities without reliable local news coverage

The Local News Crisis

There are 213 counties in the United States that are news deserts with no professional news outlet with another 1,524 counties with only one remaining news source.

- 136 newspapers closed in the 12-month 2024-25 period tracked by Medill's 2025 State of Local News Report
- Since 2005, nearly 3,500 newspapers have closed and more than 270,000 newspaper jobs have been eliminated
- Roughly 80% of news deserts are in counties the USDA classifies as predominantly rural
- According to the Medill report, more than 300 local news startups have launched over the past five years which is a major part of the ecosystem this research examines

Source: Medill State of Local News Report, 2025, Northwestern University

Identifying the Opportunity

The collapse of institutional local journalism created a vacuum and an opportunity for people to step into these roles and take responsibility for covering their communities

Identifying the Opportunity

This sample is of a deliberate workforce in which journalism veterans identified a community need and chose to act on it, rather than operators pushed out of institutional media with nowhere else to go.

4.5%

of respondents went independent out of pure necessity (layoffs or inability to find stable work)

12/29

open-text motivation responses described filling a local news vacuum as the driver

34.8%

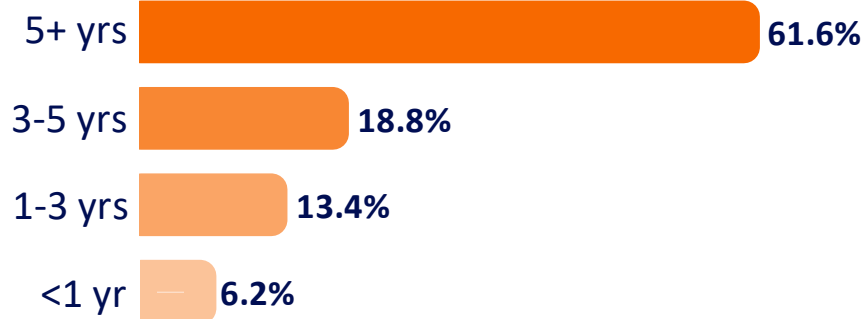
describe their path as "both choice and circumstance"

24.1%

cite editorial freedom as the primary driver

Veterans with 20+ years of traditional media experience are nearly twice as likely as less experienced operators to describe their move as "both choice and circumstance" (47.8% vs. 32%)

Years independent (n=112)



When we got here, the condition of local news was so poor, not even covering who's running for city council, county commission, school board. We just felt uninformed as residents. And as former journalists, we made the decision, let's do something about it

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen (paraphrase)

"People are glad to have me covering them. People really want coverage of our community"

David Jacobs, Shelby News Reporter

Who Is Doing This?

The operators in this sample are not career changers or accidental publishers. They are journalism veterans, most with a decade or more of institutional experience, who made a deliberate decision to build something independently

Who Is Doing This

Independent local publishing in this sample is not a young person's pivot or a pandemic-era experiment. It is the second act of a career journalism workforce that chose to build something on its own terms

76%

of respondents with traditional media backgrounds brought 10 or more years of institutional experience into independent publishing

41.1%

have 20+ years of traditional media experience, the largest single cohort in the dataset

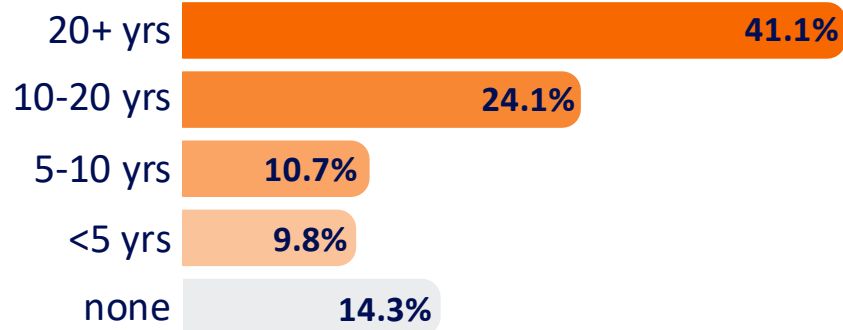
92%

describe independent publishing as their primary career

38.7%

report independent publishing as 100% of their personal income

Traditional media experience (n=112)



"We come from a daily newspaper world, so we're used to producing daily. That's always helped Mary Ann [co-founder] and I."

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

"It is literally the way I think I can earn a livelihood and given that this is the way I want to earn my livelihood, I think there's a right way to do it and a wrong way to do it."

Dave Askins, B Square Bulletin

Making a Living

Most independent news operations are won or lost in their first year. The data reveals how operators financed their launch, what financial backstops made survival possible and how quickly – or slowly – they are totally dependent on income from their site

Making a Living

The data does not support a gradual ramp narrative. Operators either reach full income dependence in the first few years or stabilize around a durable hybrid, and that pattern holds regardless of how long they have been publishing.

38.7%

report independent publishing as their sole source of income which is the single largest income category in the dataset

20.7%

remain below 25% income dependence regardless of how long they have been publishing

39.3%

most commonly cited spouse or partner's income as financial backstop

9/28

open-text supplemental income respondents specifically named Social Security, a pension or retirement pay as part of what makes their lifestyle viable

Full income dependence does not grow gradually with tenure. The 3–5 year cohort (38.1% fully dependent) and the 5+ year cohort (42.6%) both cluster in a similar range, suggesting the transition happens early or not at all

Income distribution by years publishing (n=107)

■ <25% ■ 25-49% ■ 50-74% ■ 75-99% ■ 100%



"When I started, I was at a point where I probably hypothetically could have retired. And so while money was not ample, I was not in a position of feeling like my doing this is absolutely crazy because I can't afford to not have a full-time paid job."

Bill Smith, Evanston Now

"We made the decision that our best path to try this would be to borrow \$100,000. We borrowed, as a couple, \$100,000 from the SBA, a small business loan at 4.99%"

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

The First Subscribers

Building an initial audience is the first operational test for any independent publisher. The data shows how operators did it and what the limits of those methods look like over time

The First Subscribers

Most of this sample built its audience passively through organic growth and personal networks rather than deliberate acquisition strategies. And for a significant share, that audience never converted into a paying one.

75.7%

of operators built their initial audience through organic platform growth, 67.6% through word of mouth which are the two least controllable and least scalable methods available

39.6%

leveraged an existing personal social media following

19.8%

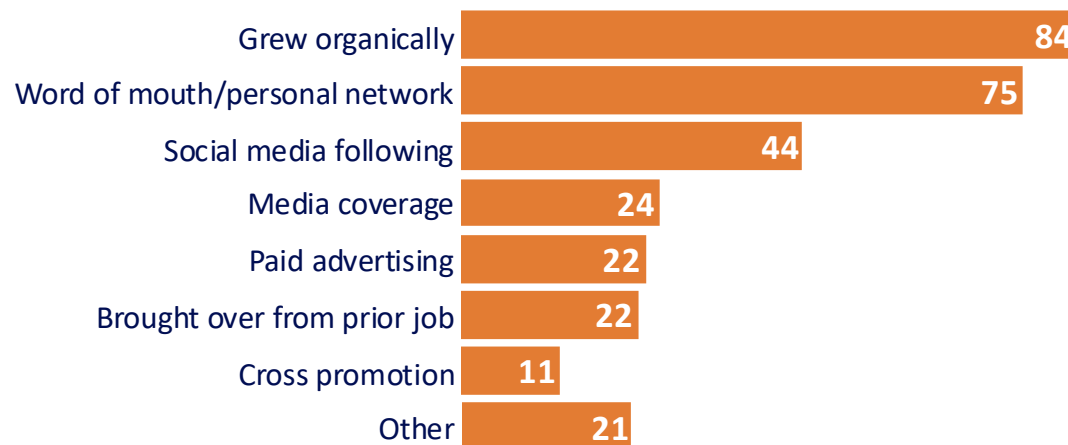
brought an audience directly from a prior media job

33.9%

of all respondents have no paid tier, including a substantial share of operators with five or more years of experience, audience size and paid conversion do not automatically connect over time

Only 19.8% used paid advertising at all, and among 5+ year operators its use drops to 13.2%, suggesting it is a startup tool that most abandon once organic growth takes hold

Building initial subscriber base (n=111, multi-select)



"It's basically just been word of mouth. I think there are two things that help on a low, grind-it-out level. One is to have, in addition to the five-day-a-week newsletter, a weekly free headline preview, which I write to be as tantalizing to people as possible."

Peter Rice, Downtown Albuquerque News

"The first account we created was on Instagram, and we started to seed it daily. It's a very photogenic area, beautiful area, good people. So we started to feed Instagram with that type of content and started to see people come around to our feed."

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

How Are People Making Money?

Advertising and sponsorships dominate across every stage of development. But the revenue picture grows more complex with tenure, and the data reveals where diversification concentrates, where it plateaus and what the rarest model in the dataset is.

How Are People Making Money?

The hybrid revenue model is the structural norm. Advertising is nearly universal, grants concentrate in the middle years and the subscription-only model – despite its prominence in industry conversation -- is almost nonexistent in practice.

82%

utilize sponsorships and advertising, the most widespread revenue source, rising to **89.7%** among operators with 5+ years of publishing experience

53.2%

access grants and fellowships, peaking at **71.4%** among 3–5 year operators, suggesting institutional funding matters most during an establishing phase

6.3%

rely on subscriptions alone, the pure subscription model is the rarest revenue structure in the dataset

Revenue diversification is highest among 3–5 year operators, 76.2% of whom run three or more revenue streams, compared to 54.4% of operators at 5+ years

Revenue streams by years publishing (n=111)



“From the beginning the community supported us and business came out and recognized what we were doing. Community businesses came to us and asked about how they could support us. Over the first couple of years we had mentorship opportunities from larger publications”

Jason Cole, Excelsior Citizen

Thinking About the Business Side

The business challenge most operators face is not simply making enough money. It is producing the journalism and running the business at the same time, with no institutional structure to separate the two.

Thinking About the Business Side

The burden operators describe is structural. Independent publishing concentrates every institutional role into a single person, without separation and a backstop.

51.9%

name "balancing journalism work with business operations" as a top challenge, the second most-cited challenge in the survey

21.8%

name scaling beyond a one-person operation as their single biggest financial challenge

4/23

open-text financial challenge responses frame the burden as a time and focus problem rather than a revenue problem, with several describing having to choose between reporting and revenue work on any given day

The business complexity extends beyond finances. Respondents describe as a fundamental identity change the expansion of their role from that of a journalist to a position that also includes the role of a publisher.

"Don't underestimate the psychology of the consumer. Don't complain. Run the business. If you have the skills and commitment just do it while understanding the consumer."

Joe Sneve, The Dakota Scout

"I'm the editor, I'm the publisher, I'm the ad salesperson, I'm the reader revenue person, I'm the donation revenue person, I'm all of those things, and the janitor at this point."

Bill Smith, Evanston Now

Platform Dependence

Three quarters of respondents are highly dependent on a single platform. The data shows that dependence does not ease with experience and the threat of missing distribution opportunities or platforms going out of business are not treated as true risks

Platform Dependence

The defining value of independent publishing is autonomy. The defining reality of how this sample distributes its work is concentration in platforms it does not control and largely does not worry about

74.8%

of respondents are completely or very dependent on a single primary platform

9.4%

selected platform dependency as a top challenge, suggesting most operators are not actively tracking it as a risk

2.8%

of respondents describe having several equal distribution channels with no primary dependence

29.9%

Have adopted Bluesky, outpacing Substack at **21.5%** and approaching Twitter/X at **35.5%**

Dependence does not ease with experience. Operators publishing five or more years report 75.8% 75.8% completely or very dependent, identical to the 74.8% for the entire sample.

"We believe each platform has to be treated separately; they can't be hinged together. We're producing specifically for each platform because they all value different things, their algorithms, how they like to see stuff. And we've adjusted as those platform algorithms have adjusted."

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

"I do a weekly social media post tied to that free weekly preview. It's like 'here are the headlines you missed' by foolishly attempting to get your news just on social media."

Peter Rice, Downtown Albuquerque News

Hitting a Wall

Burnout is the most commonly reported challenge in the study. The data shows it is not randomly distributed across operators but concentrates at a specific audience threshold where accountability is high and resources are still insufficient.

Hitting a Wall

The operators most at risk of burnout are not the newest or the most exhausted. They are the ones who have built enough of an audience to feel accountable to it but not enough revenue to share the load

55.7%

of respondents cite burnout and sustainability as a top challenge, the single most selected item in the entire survey

77.3%

is where burnout peaks among those with 100-500 paying subscribers, where audience accountability is highest and revenue is not enough to hire help

61%

of operators who publish multiple times per day report burnout, the highest rate of any frequency group

47.8%

of 5+ year operators publish multiple times a day, compared to 30% at 1-2 years. Publishing frequency increases with tenure rather than leveling off.

Burnout, balancing journalism with business operations and converting subscribers are the top three challenges. They are three descriptions of the same compounding condition

"Yeah, you get frustrated everywhere. I mean, we thought about quitting every day. Every day we say, really, you want to do this again? I talk to Mary Ann all the time. You sure you want to do another year? You sure we want to do that? You sure? Should we quit? Let's go away."

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

"At the end of 2024... I did just shut down and I said, I'm done, I'm tired, and I'm going to find a different job. And that lasted for about six weeks, and some folks talked me into bringing it back."

Dave Askins, B Square Bulletin

Growing Without Burning Out

Growth does not eliminate operational strain. The data shows how staffing evolves with tenure and where the transition from solo operation to supported operation tends to happen.

Growing Without Burning Out

Independent does not mean solo for long. The transition from working alone to working with freelance support happens for most operators within the first three years and is nearly universal by year five.

89.2%

maintain some form of compensated or volunteer support

10.8%

of respondents handle everything themselves

57.1%

of operators in their first-year work alone. By years 1 to 3 that figure drops to **20%**, and by year 3 and beyond it falls below **6%**

8.3%

of operators with 100-500 paying subscribers are still working entirely alone, same group where burnout peaks at **77.3%**

The most common form of support is freelance. 45.9% pay freelance contributors occasionally and 43.9% have regular paid content contributors

"The main driver was that I bringing in enough revenue to be able to afford to pay people? And for a long time, I wasn't."

Bill Smith, Evanston Now

"I want to say it was like year three or something like that, started using freelancers from time to time."

Peter Rice, Downtown Albuquerque News

"My board chair has worried about my burning out but it's very hard to take a vacation."

Susan DeVilder, The Kewanee Voice

Does This Work? Is This Achievable?

Operators in this survey have built something meaningful in their local communities. The data on whether it is financially sustainable, personally sustainable and something they would choose again suggests a complicated but telling story.

Does This Work? Is This Achievable?

The near-total absence of return interest is not just a sentiment finding. It reflects a workforce that has built something it values more than the stability it left behind, even when that stability is explicitly offered back

1.9%

of respondents are actively open to returning to a traditional newsroom, even though competitive salary, editorial freedom and job security are named as conditions that could bring them back

61.7%

say they would not return under any circumstances or consider it unlikely. Among operators with 20+ years of traditional media experience that figure rises to **79.1%**

43.2%

describe themselves as a “small but growing operation.”

52.6%

of operators with 1,000-5,000 paying subscribers describe themselves as an established small business

This workforce has not looked back. Fewer than 2% are actively open to returning to institutional journalism.

“I knew all along we could do it. People are so happy we brought them local news. I never doubted we could pull it off.”

Susan DeVilder, The Kewanee Voice

“The brand is bigger than we anticipated. I mean, you hope the brand goes but the brand was there, and we're like that's pretty cool.”

Chris Lopez, Alamosa Citizen

Key Takeaways

Independence is a choice

Only **4.5%** went independent out of pure necessity. The people doing this are journalism veterans who made a deliberate decision and **61.6%** have sustained it for five or more years.

The financial trajectory is set early

Operators either reach full income dependence in the first few years or stabilize around a durable hybrid. The 3–5 year and 5+ year cohorts report nearly identical rates

Burnout is structural

It peaks at **77.3%** among operators with 100–500 paying subscribers, where audience accountability is highest and revenue is still insufficient to hire help.

Key Takeaways

Platform dependence is the most underacknowledged risk in the dataset

74.8% are completely or very dependent on a single platform and that number does not decrease with tenure.

Local news is appreciated

The entrepreneurs say that both readers and advertisers yearn for local news coverage and worry when they live without any news products in their communities

Learning the business side is vital

Taking the revenue side of the business isn't a given at launch and too often the editorial leadership requires mentorship, tutelage and advice on developing and executing revenue strategies

A Hard Reality

This research was conducted in Spring 2026 by the Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Survey data was collected from 112 independent local news operators across 37 states and Washington, D.C.

Merrill Brown and Jacob Spudich
Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship

AI Methodology and Disclosure

Part of the purpose of this project was to test how AI tools could extend the capacity of a small research team. Given questions and concerns around AI, and our commitment to transparency, this section lays out when and where AI tools were used, where human judgment applied and how we checked the results.

Claude (Anthropic), and to a lesser extent ChatGPT (OpenAI), were used for organization and some production aspects of this project. AI tools were used at several stages of the research workflow, including identifying potential organizations, improving survey questions, analyzing completed survey data, identifying gaps or leads for interviews, and assisting with drafting.

We began by developing a set of principles and characteristics for what would count as an independent local newsroom. We used a large language model to help identify organizations that fit those criteria. We also consulted organizations and projects including LION Publishers, Project Oasis, the Independent Journalism Atlas and Substack to identify appropriate local news organizations.

Once these newsrooms were identified, we used Python and LLM-assisted tools to collect publicly available contact and organizational information, including location, website URL and primary website hosting. We reviewed the organizations against our criteria and fact-checked the information ourselves.

We wrote the survey questions ourselves, then worked with a large language model to improve, condense and simplify them. The AI tool suggested revisions to wording, length and answer options.

Once the survey closed, we used AI tools for a first pass at the results. Claude ran analysis of the survey data and drafted summaries of what it found. From there, we went through the data ourselves, outlined conclusions and worked to visualize the data and make it understandable, putting that information into both a master spreadsheet and a findings and analysis document. We reviewed those outputs against the raw data and decided which findings to report and how to interpret them.

Once we had the findings and analysis document together, we used an LLM to spot absences or leads in the survey data. Those shaped the questions we brought into interviews to make sense of the data and fill in gaps missed during survey collection. The authors conducted the interviews and evaluated the interview material themselves. Some of the interviews were transcribed using a built-in transcription tool in Microsoft Word. Others were based on notes.

AI tools helped draft and edit portions of the written report based on our notes, summaries, observations and conclusions. We built the research deck ourselves, selecting the findings, writing the slide narrative and designing the presentation. Some summary language in the deck draws on the AI-assisted findings and analysis documents described above, and every figure and quotation in it was verified against the source data.

We fact checked our statistical data as well as our qualitative data from interviews ourselves. We also used Claude to check the figures and quotations in the deck and report against the survey dataset and

interview transcripts for anything we missed after our initial fact check. We resolved every discrepancy by going back to the source data.

AI tools did not generate survey responses, interview material or quotations. The authors conceived and executed the survey research work, defined the population and criteria, evaluated the underlying data, conducted the interviews and made the substantive judgments about the findings, arguments and recommendations presented in this report.

The authors reviewed, evaluated and adopted every finding and conclusion in this report, and we take full responsibility for them and for any errors.