

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.