

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.

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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%

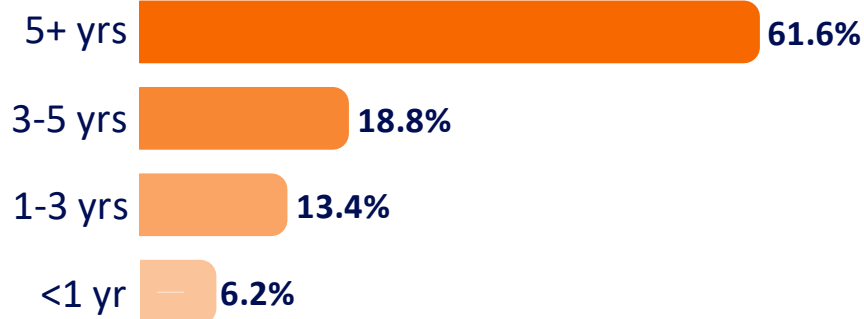
describe their path as "both choice and circumstance"

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

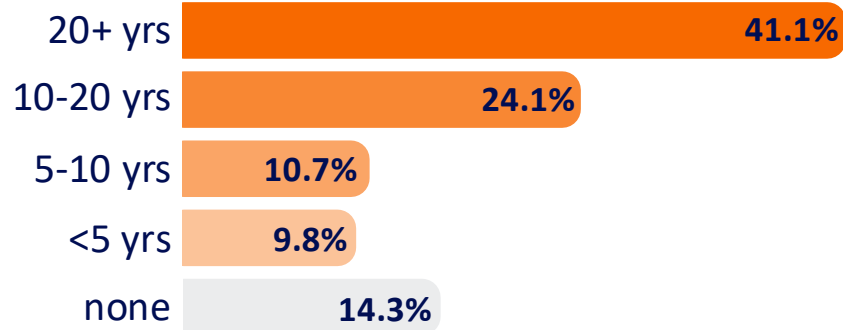
92%

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%

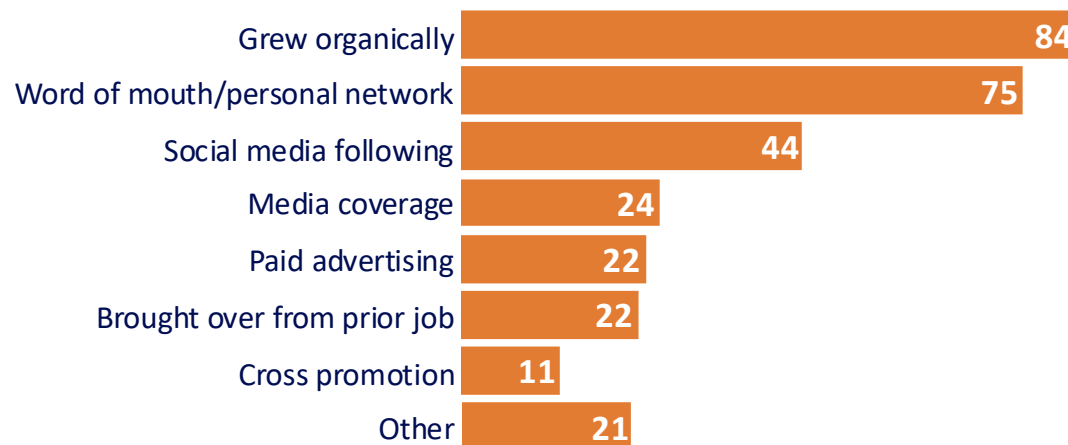
brought an audience directly from a prior media job

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.

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