THE STATE OF NONPROFIT NEWS

INN Index 2024
Audience & Distribution



Institute for Nonprofit News

About INN

The Institute for Nonprofit News strengthens and supports 500 independent news organizations in a new kind of news network: nonprofit, nonpartisan and dedicated to public service. From local news to in-depth reporting on pressing global issues, members of the INN Network tell stories that otherwise would go untold – connecting communities, holding the powerful accountable and strengthening civic life. INN programs help these news organizations develop revenue and business models to support strong reporting, collaborate on editorial and business innovation, share services and advance the diverse leaders who are forging a new future for news.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Index 2

Method and Definitions 3

Chapter 1: Audience Goals 3

Chapter 2: Third-Party Audiences and Republication Strategy 10

Third-Party Republication 11

Republication Terms and Practices 15

Challenges In Tracking Third-Party Audience Reach, and What's Next 18

Chapter 3: Direct Audience Trends and Tactics 19

Web Audience Gainers vs. Decliners 20

Direct Audience Tactics 22

Reaching New Audiences 26

Chapter 4: Marketing for Audience Growth 27

Chapter 5: Understanding Audience Scale and Habits 30

Conclusion 35

About the Index

In its most recent annual survey of its network of nonprofit news organizations, INN focused deeply on examining audience and distribution. Drawing on survey responses from 346 INN members and supplemented by interviews with a subset of members, this report explores the most pressing questions related to nonprofit news outlet audience strategy and trends.

The report aims to serve as a useful resource to the nonprofit news sector, helping to answer key questions that INN's members, partners, funders and colleagues are asking as these news outlets define, grow and serve direct and third-party audiences.

INN's Audience & Distribution Index Report was published on October 21, 2024. Previous Index reports are archived.

REPORT CREDITS

INN's Index research team: Emily Roseman, Ha Ta, Michele McLellan and Jesse Holcomb

Data visualization: Ha Ta

Research interviews: Vignesh Ramachandran and Ha Ta

Editor: Marquita Brown

Research advisory board: Rick Edmonds, Nicolás Ríos, Eba Hamid-Rivera and Nicole Rocchio

Data collection and analysis assistance: Jasmyne Ricard, Sherise Immanuela and Ethan Meyers

With special thanks to INN's audience team for guiding this report: Sam Cholke and Jasmyne Ricard

The Nonprofit News Difference:

INN's work in the field points to key differentiators that characterize nonprofit journalism.

1. **EDITORIAL FOCUS:** Nonprofit newsrooms prioritize reporting that meets public needs but is challenging to produce, including specialized in-depth reporting, investigative and civic work to hold governments accountable, and robust, inclusive local coverage.

2. **TRUST & TRANSPARENCY:** Community-centric rather than shareholder-focused, nonprofit news is nonpartisan and focuses on facts, and news nonprofits are more transparent about their funding than most commercial media.

3. **SUSTAINABILITY:** News nonprofits are highly entrepreneurial and supported in good measure by the people they serve, making them more resilient than many for-profit media.

4. **COLLABORATION:** A culture of collaboration enables nonprofit news to share local reporting on a national scale. Most nonprofits share their coverage with commercial media, distribute through digital platforms and publish without a paywall – sharing information far beyond their own direct audiences.

Methods and Definitions

METHODS

About the survey: INN distributed the survey online in January 2024 to 409 INN Network newsrooms, excluding service organizations that are also INN members. Ninety percent, or 370 organizations, completed the survey. Survey language is provided here. The data do not scientifically represent all North American nonprofit news outlets because not all of them belong to INN, including an array of public media stations. Cautiously interpret specific year-over-year comparisons; this report draws directional trends across the field.

A note on the cohort used for this report: This report includes the data of 346 of the 370 news organizations that completed the survey. The report does not include data provided by 20 members from the public media sector due to systematic differences in how they report revenue and expenses. Four more outlets were excluded because they are not primarily publishers.

Chapter 1: Audience Goals

THE NONPROFIT NEWS DIFFERENCE

In a media ecosystem built on and measured by consumer attention, pageviews and clicks, it's not looking good for news outlets: From 2020 to 2023, the percentage of traffic to news websites driven by social media has been cut in half. Fewer people are closely following the news, news avoidance is up, and consumers are shifting their news habits. Small local shops, public broadcasters, local TV and even The Washington Post are in a state of changing and often declining audiences. Web traffic is in flux for nonprofit outlets, too.

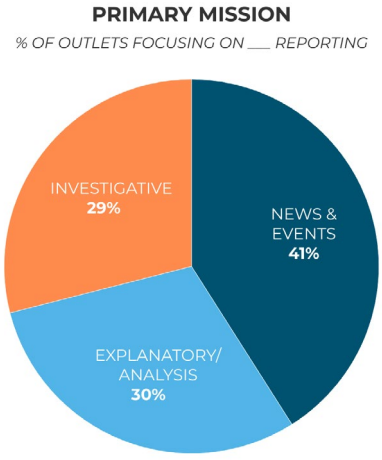
Within this tumult, nonprofit, independent news outlets emerge as a key point of difference.

While many commercial media models hinge on identifying, serving and maximizing audiences with a high ability to pay for the product —or maximizing audiences and selling their attention to advertisers — a key part of the nonprofit mission often includes serving audiences and covering topics not traditionally seen as revenue generators. The nonprofit model allows these news outlets to recenter their primary mission around their defined goals and impact

The nonprofit tax status doesn't indicate high-quality journalism or editorial independence, but the INN standards filter does.

To become an INN member, an outlet must demonstrate editorial excellence, editorial independence, and transparency in funding. Throughout the 2023 calendar year (CY2023), only 48% of nonprofit newsrooms that applied for INN membership in 2023 were accepted.

Jump here to read the shared standards of INN members.



In 2023, 6 in 10 organizations focused primarily on in-depth, time-intensive news, including investigations and explanatory reporting.

first, profitability second — letting these organizations spend time and resources on the costly, time-intensive work of uncovering corruption, producing deep explanatory reporting, and connecting a community.

Let's get down to brass tacks, though: News outlets need audiences. Nonprofit news outlets are not immune from the business of capturing and growing audiences. So how are these organizations growing and measuring their communities served? INN will release additional findings in the coming weeks: Chapter 2 will cover third-party audiences reached by republishing partners, Chapter 3 will dig into direct audience growth tactics, Chapter 4 will discuss how outlets are tracking and measuring their audiences and impact, and Chapter 5 will review marketing tactics.

This chapter begins where all audience strategy should start: the organization's goals.

This chapter focuses on audience goals as standalone factors to be examined but also uses INN members' self-reported goals as filters for understanding other audience trends, including direct audience growth. For example, it explains how a news outlet's goal of serving a specific audience (rather than a general one) might impact web or email audience size. This chapter mostly focuses on nonprofit news' audience goals and how they vary across the sector.

BALANCING AUDIENCES

All news outlets in the INN network are united by high quality journalism, financial transparency, and editorial independence. But nonprofit news outlets often tackle different parts of an interconnected problem. Previous Index reports cover how the geographic scope of an outlet's coverage (local, state, or national) impacts its revenue portfolio and standard capacity — and the same can be said for the outlet's audience strategy and size. Trickling down from the organization's reason for operating come audience goals, or who the outlet aims to reach or serve, how many people, and by what means.

Many nonprofit news organizations try to balance their public service mission of creating open and accessible journalism while also defining target audiences for their work. In INN's survey, 44% of outlets rated serving both general and specific audiences as important or very important objectives. Smaller cohorts in INN's sample focus on targeting specific audiences (6% of outlets) or getting their coverage into broader, general audience streams (25% of outlets).

Target audiences typically start with groups connected to the outlet's mission or impact, including groups defined by geographic areas, race or ethnicity, specific interests like climate or education, or power and influence. Target audiences often also include groups likely to become paying members or subscribers. The central audience challenge of the nonprofit news outlet is to determine the right portfolio of audiences that centers the outlet's intended impact and mission while being in sync with the outlet's means of sustainability, including small-dollar donations and grants.

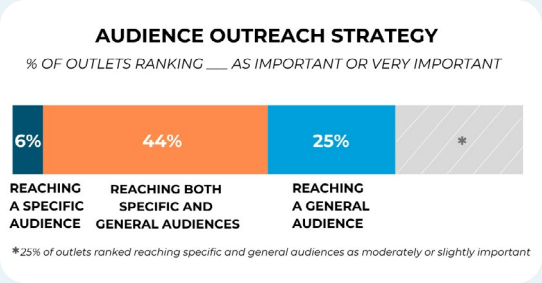
Although Index data doesn't explain how organizations are striking this balance, INN's reporting and work in the field show that many nonprofit outlets will adopt a tiered approach to their audience strategy: defining their primary objective as creating coverage "for" a specific group and their secondary objective as "about" a group to provide information to policymakers or interested community members.

For example, Borderzine, a national outlet focused on providing relevant coverage for the areas surrounding the U.S.–Mexico border, describes their audience portfolio like this: "Audiences we target include regional audiences to help inform on issues affecting our communities, and broader national audience interested in learning about the U.S., Mexico border region and Latino communities. This audience values genuine cultural understanding and needs verified, informative reporting on topics of public interest."

Similarly, Barn Raiser says their primary target audience is composed of two groups of people: "One is civically engaged people who live in rural and small-town America and who read news online. The other is civically engaged people who don't live in rural America but have an interest in understanding the challenges facing rural and small town communities."

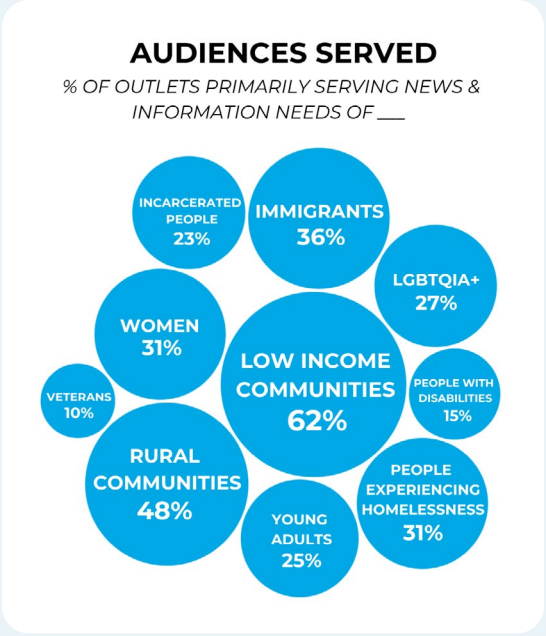
What we see in the Index data is that typically, the larger the outlet's geographic scope (national or global versus local), the more targeted the audience plan. While local outlets are highly focused on audiences defined by the geographic bounds of their communities, state or regional and national or global outlets are more apt to target audiences defined by demographics or a specific topic.

The organization's coverage priorities also drive the scale of audience targeting. Outlets that focus on producing explanatory journalism are more likely to value specific



A note from INN's audience team:

Nonprofit organizations of varying missions exist, in part, to cover critical needs of a community that the market has failed to produce. Nonprofit news organizations are no different. It is clearly reflected in how they articulate their target audience and then attempt to strike an appropriate balance. Sam Cholke, INN's manager of distribution and audience growth, discusses how some nonprofit news outlets are striking this balance.



audiences that are interested in a particular topic, while their counterparts that emphasize investigative reporting or current news tend to put a higher priority on attracting broad, general audiences.

WHO NONPROFIT NEWS OUTLETS SERVE

About half of all surveyed outlets (51%) said they focus primarily on serving the news and information needs of an underserved community. These organizations most frequently cite low-income, rural and immigrant communities as their audience focus, reflecting trends from last year, too.

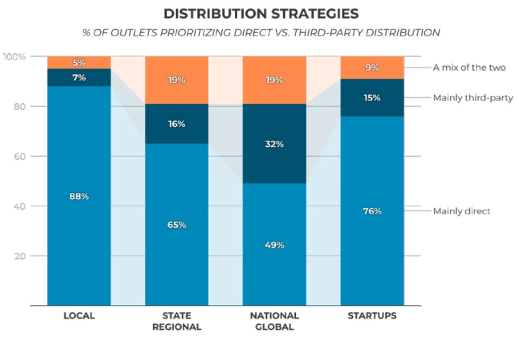
INN asked a separate question specifically about serving communities of color and found that about a fifth of INN outlets, or 73 outlets surveyed, focus primarily on meeting the information needs of communities of color. People of color comprise a majority of the respondents' audience, and their organization spends most of its funding, resources, and staff time on stories for people of color.

Such audience priorities have significant implications for the audience engagement and growth options members of the INN Network see as mission-aligned, how they appear to be responding to external pressures like the decline of social media referrals, and the incentives organizations are responding to when setting strategy.

For example, INN members serving communities of color or other groups historically excluded or harmed by media organizations often use audience engagement strategies that might seem untraditional to some, including text messaging, community events, partnerships, WhatsApp groups and print newsletters. INN reported on a few examples of this in its 2022 Q&A series, How nonprofit newsrooms serve communities of color, including how the Dallas Free Press uses text messages and community events to engage with bilingual communities in the West Dallas neighborhood, and how Charlottesville Tomorrow partnered with a local magazine to reach new audiences.

INN's work in the field shows that these types of audience engagement and growth strategies are often more costly, carry higher risk, and involve more complex distribution strategies that require more staff time and expertise. Indeed, staff time and financial resources emerged as the top two most common barriers organizations in the survey face in their

efforts to grow and engage with audiences. Nearly half of the survey's respondents cited staff time as the primary barrier, and a little over a quarter reported financial resources. Less common primary challenges included organizational strategy and planning, staff knowledge and skills, and attracting and retaining staff.



Third-party distribution includes distribution through another outlet's digital, broadcast, or print channels, either for free or for a fee, and can also include using news aggregator platforms (like Apple News or Smart News) or syndication platforms.

OVERALL DISTRIBUTION STRATEGY

How are outlets defining their focus on either building direct audiences via their own platforms, like web or email newsletter, or reaching third-party audiences? Similar to how nonprofit outlets determine their balance of general vs. specific audiences and how they define who they serve, nonprofit outlets must craft the right distribution approach to match their mission.

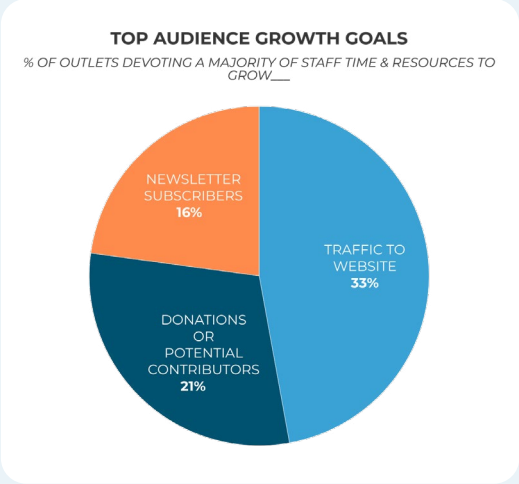
Survey data show the geographic scope of an outlet's coverage and its age often dictate the organization's audience and distribution strategy.

- **Local outlets** produce coverage for a single city, county or metro area, or even a cluster of neighborhoods or towns. They usually focus on serving a population of 100,000 or less. Nearly all local outlets (9 in 10 outlets in 2023) focus on reaching audiences through their own direct platforms, mostly over the web. For local outlets, focusing on direct distribution makes sense: Many operate in areas without other sources of high-quality news that might be potential content sharing partners. At the same time, local outlets are finding success with building revenue from direct audiences (including small-dollar donor giving and earned revenue), so it's a distribution strategy that works with both mission and sustainability.

- **Startups:** 76% say they primarily reach audiences over direct channels. This could reflect a shift of strategy for nonprofits, but likely also reflects that most startups are local and tend to have this direct audience priority.

- **National and global outlets** typically focus on investigative or explanatory reporting and target audiences of multiple millions of people with their coverage. They rely on third-party distribution — partnerships with other news sites, print publications and public radio — to reach audiences beyond their own platforms.

- News organizations that **focus on a single topic** (13% of all nonprofit outlets) are twice as likely as the rest of the field to rely on partner publications to distribute their journalism. In all, 55% of single-topic outlets say they either rely primarily on this third-party distribution or employ a roughly equal mix of direct and third-party distribution to reach their audiences.



AUDIENCE GROWTH GOALS

Despite varied missions and distribution strategies, nonprofit news organizations seem to be heading in a similar direction: investing in growing audiences via their own platforms (including their website and newsletters). When asked to rank their top audience goals, the two most popular responses were increasing overall website traffic and email newsletter subscriptions, winning out over social media engagement or reach, paid reach, third-party distribution, and other engagement metrics.

Almost half of respondents ranked increasing traffic as their top (33%) or secondary (15%) audience goal. Another 16% listed increasing email newsletter subscriptions as a top goal, with 30% ranking growing newsletter subscribers as their second goal. The third most popular audience goal selected was to increase donations or engage audiences that can be converted into paying contributors: 21% listed it as their top goal; 19% ranked it as their second.

At the outlet level, INN's data show that organizations tend to select primary audience goals based on where there was room for improvement. A third of outlets indicated their top audience goal was "increasing overall traffic to websites or other products," and this cohort reported less web traffic (as measured by average monthly uniques or AMUs), reporting nearly half the mean AMUs compared to the full survey sample. Outlets with web traffic growth as their primary goal tend to be state or regional in focus.

Following a similar pattern, about a fifth of outlets (21%) indicated engaging audiences that can be converted into paying contributors as their top audience goal, and this cohort reported lower individual giving revenue than their peers. Outlets with monetizing audiences top of mind tended to be local, more likely to prioritize daily news, and more likely to be a smaller-budget organization.

MEMBER INSIGHTS

INN reached out to several outlets to better understand why they're focusing on particular audience growth goals and what these goals look like in practice.

Sierra Nevada Ally, an outlet based in Reno, Nevada, that covers the environment, civics and culture, is focused on growing web traffic in 2024. Pandemic spikes in their audiences have eased, but the Ally's Google Analytics dashboard doesn't tell the whole story. Like many outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ally reported a spike in web audiences. Yet this traffic, largely from opinion pieces, wasn't the type of audience co-founder and Publisher Joe McCarthy felt was consistent with the publication's mission. The Ally's board of directors and staff felt the same. So in 2022, they decided to move away from opinion pieces and return to their core values: civics, climate, community and collaboration. While they still publish some essays, the shift back to the Ally's core journalism mission has adjusted their audience size back to pre-pandemic levels. McCarthy said even though provocative opinions had increased readership, they're very comfortable being more focused on their mission and excited to use a new Press Forward grant to reach even more readers that are often overlooked.

In 2025, the Ally will focus on audience growth while sticking to its mission and increasing outreach to communities that lack news access, including the area's Latino and Indigenous populations.

Other outlets, like NextCity, have turned their focus to converting their existing loyal audiences into small-dollar donors. Executive Editor Lucas Grindley points to lessons from their participation in Meta Journalism Project's U.S. Reader Revenue Accelerators as a catalyst for this primary audience focus. At one point in the program, Grindley calculated the lifetime value of a sustaining donor (a person who signs up to auto-renew their contribution monthly or yearly) versus a one-time donor — the result pointed him and the team toward prioritizing sustaining donors above all. The strategy shift has paid off: As of September 2024, Next City has 1,000 sustaining donors, which is twice as many as it had almost two years ago. (Next City's main tactic to incentivize sustainers has been a "pay what you wish wall" — a prompt for audiences to consider donating after reading three articles, when registering for a webinar or downloading one of the organization's e-books.)

What does Sierra Nevada Ally's focus on growing web audiences around the four C's — civics, climate, community and collaboration — look like in practice?

For civics, they're moving away from breaking news and politics. "We are not going to cover breaking news unless it truly has a story behind it. That's part of the shift," McCarthy said "We're doing less chasing down specific day-to-day stuff and working more on long-form journalism." Along those lines, the Ally recently published a voter guide they update daily. "We're helping our voters be able to make their own decisions," McCarthy said. "So we drive traffic to each one of the races, folks can visit each one of the candidates, websites and or Facebook pages and Twitter pages and wherever else they're trying to attract potential voters."

Chapter 2 will cover more examples of audience growth and engagement tactics.

CHALLENGES AND WHAT'S NEXT

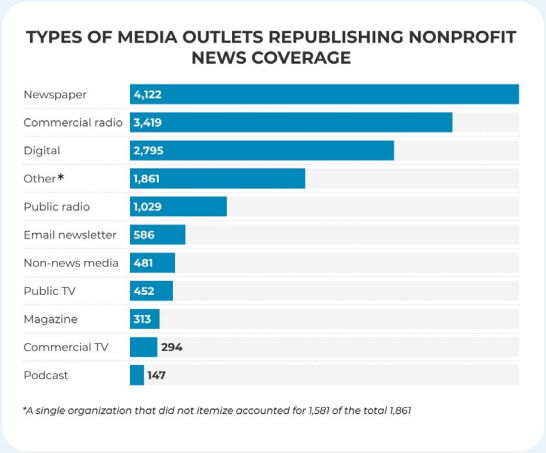
Nearly half of the survey respondents listed staff time and financial resources as the two key challenges they face while trying to grow and engage their audiences. Less common primary challenges included organizational strategy and planning, staff knowledge and skills, and attracting and retaining staff.

Defining comprehensive ways to measure the size and scope of audiences beyond pageviews is a key ongoing challenge most cited by outlets in INN's reporting. Metrics captured in Google Analytics and similar tools are usually limited to on-platform reader behavior, so newsrooms like Next City are looking to industry leaders like The 19th, which is measuring reach across all platforms, and hoping to adopt a similar strategy. An additional challenge is quantifying audience reach for republishing partnerships. Some tools for calculating the reach of a story require a piece of code for the publishing partner to include on their webpage that will help measure its audience, but inconsistent compliance makes it almost impossible to paint a true picture of audience size. Chapter 3 will cover efforts to track and measure direct and third-party audiences.

Chapter 2: Third-Party Audiences and Republication Strategy

In our first chapter of this report, we examined how nonprofit news outlets are setting audience goals and distribution strategies based on their missions. We noted that, for 2024 and beyond, most nonprofit news outlets aim to grow their audiences through their own, direct platforms.

Data from the annual Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) Index and INN's work in the field points to a second, major way nonprofit news outlets reach audiences: by allowing and encouraging other outlets to republish their stories. We refer to this kind of distribution as "third-party distribution." The majority of nonprofit news outlets – 84% of outlets surveyed – allow other news outlets to republish their content for free – and the number of third-party distribution partners is growing.



In 2022, 7,100 partner outlets republished INN members' stories. In 2023, that number doubled to 15,500. This increase, though primarily driven by a handful of larger nonprofit outlets growing their republishing partners in 2023, represents a long-term sector-wide trend: The network effect of nonprofit news is growing over time. That trend will be discussed later in this chapter.

This chapter will cover the major drivers behind the substantial growth in third-party distribution partners, how outlets handle republishing their work and tracking third-party reach, and the most common platforms to do so.

Third-Party Republication

GROWTH IN THIRD-PARTY REPUBLICATION PARTNERS OF NONPROFIT NEWS OUTLETS

Some types of nonprofit outlets prioritize third-party distribution more than others. For example, investigative and single-topic outlets, whose longer-form storytelling styles aren't conducive to the high publishing frequency required to draw consistent direct traffic, take advantage of third-party distribution to reach a wider audience.

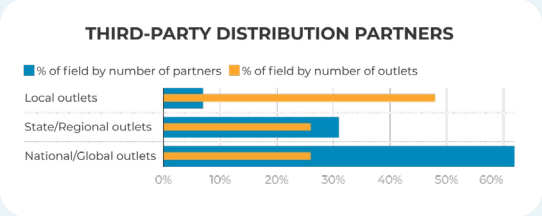
The geographic scope of coverage also plays a role in an outlet's distribution strategy. Redistributing coverage via third-party partners is a key way larger state, national and global nonprofit outlets expand the reach of their journalism while local outlets tend to focus on reaching audiences through their direct platforms. National and global outlets, which are often investigative and explanatory news powerhouses, tend to have a mission and more resources to reach audiences beyond their platforms.

An outlet's editorial focus also affects its third-party redistribution numbers. Outlets that concentrate on a single topic reported a higher median number of partners per outlet, at 13, while those focusing on multiple related topics have a median of eight partners. Outlets covering general news reported a median of four partners. The fieldwide median is six partners.

About 13% of INN members surveyed identify themselves as single topic outlets. These outlets include Chalkbeat, which focuses on covering education, and The Marshall Project, which provides in-depth reporting on the U.S. criminal justice system. The outlets' specialized content fills a gap in the media

MEDIAN THIRD-PARTY DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS PER OUTLET

Outlet type	Republishing partners
Geographic scope of coverage	
Local	3
State/Regional	17
National/Global	13
Coverage priority	
Current news	3
Explanatory news	6
Investigative news	14
Editorial focus	
General news	4
Multiple related topics	8
Single topic	13



landscape by appealing to a broad range of partners, including general topic outlets and smaller news outlets that do not have reporters or resources dedicated to specific beats and want to supplement their reporting with trusted content.

Across the nonprofit sector, up to 15,500 media outlets republished or aired coverage from the INN network in 2023, more than double the 7,100 counted in the 2022 survey. The large increase came mostly from a few large state, regional and national outlets that reported a significantly higher number of third-party publishers in 2023 compared with 2022, accounting for a net of about 7,500 additional third-party publishers.

National and global outlets garnered the highest total number of third-party distribution partners, about 9,600, accounting for 62% of all partners, despite representing just 26% of the field. Local outlets, which make up nearly half of INN's membership, reported a total of 1,100 distribution partners. State and regional outlets reported approximately 4,800 partners.

Outlets that republish nonprofit news content include other nonprofit news organizations as well as for-profit media partners that distribute content across various platforms, including websites, newspapers, commercial or public radio and TV, newsletter, and podcasts.

With newspaper partners in particular, state/regional and national/global outlets also reported the highest redistribution numbers, citing about 2,300 and 1,600 newspaper partners in 2023, respectively. In contrast, local outlets reported 250 newspaper partners.

INN's work in the field suggests that nonprofit outlets are likely a key source of news for these newspapers, especially at the state level, where traditional newspaper coverage of statehouses has significantly declined. Filling this gap was a primary mission for many state nonprofit outlets when the field began to grow in 2009.

DRIVERS OF THIRD-PARTY REPUBLICATION GROWTH

What's driving significant growth in third-party distribution partners? INN Index data and reporting with 16 outlets reveal these primary drivers: a broader distribution capability provided by syndication platforms like the Associated Press, Public News Service, Stacker Media; more one-to-one outreach; and expanded tracking efforts.

Utilizing syndication platforms for a one-to-many content distribution approach

Nonprofit outlets that have seen steep year-over-year growth in the number of outlets that republished their content said syndication platforms like Public News Service and Stacker played a major role in driving that acceleration. These organizations tend to cover state, regional, national or global issues. These platforms may charge fees for content distribution, but some nonprofit outlets that have used the services say their work is getting introduced to a wider audience.

The Hechinger Report, a national nonprofit news outlet that covers inequality and innovation in education, reported about 500 third-party outlets republishing their content in 2023, a substantial jump from a few dozen outlets reported in the previous year's survey. Nichole Dobo, Hechinger's director of audience engagement, said the increase is a direct result of a partnership with Stacker Media. The partnership, which began in 2023, has provided Hechinger a new avenue to reach local audiences. "Stacker allows us to gain additional partners after the first-round partners that we typically have for the majority of our stories," Dobo said in an email. "This new distribution channel increases the opportunity for us to reach key priority audiences including local TV stations, rural communities and middle America."

Besides a wider reach, nonprofit news outlets want to distribute information and engage audiences beyond traditional news consumers or the typical nonprofit news audience. "The goal has always been that we just want to reach people where they are. We have a TikTok account, and we're on all the third-party news apps. We just want people to see our stories no matter where they get their news," said Rachel Glickhouse, partnership director at Grist. "The goal of this approach is, we want our work to be as accessible as possible. And so partnerships are just one piece of that as part of our overall audience strategy."

The Daily Yonder, a nonprofit news outlet that provides news, commentary, and analysis about and for rural America, has found such success with their radio distribution strategy. With the syndication platform Public News Service, the outlet has been able to distribute newscasts and stories to radio stations nationwide. Their work could be picked up by hundreds of stations, or in rare instances, thousands, said Adam Giorgi, The Daily Yonder's director of planning and program development. The radio stations, which are often small, locally operated stations with fewer resources, do not have to pay to air content redistributed to them, Giorgi said.

"Definitely part of what animates our thinking is we don't want to reach just the same old affluent news consumers, people who are already pretty prone to high news consumption," Giorgi said. "We're wanting to get stuff out to folks who maybe aren't in the nonprofit news bubble. We feel like our radio strategy definitely helps with that."

Giorgi said he has also been encouraged that several stations have consistently carried The Daily Yonder's weekly radio newscast, which has been in production for many years — a signal that the outlet's product is valued and serving a real need.

The Daily Yonder also recently partnered with Stacker Media to distribute their stories and get republished by a mix of mainstay newspapers and smaller metro publications, such as those in college towns, and midsize metro areas, further expanding their reach.

In 2023, The Daily Yonder reported more than 3,700 redistribution partners, of which 3,200 were radio partners.

"If we had to try to manually reach out to all the organizations that show up in our databases via Public News Service and Stacker, it just wouldn't be possible. So those partners are pretty vital," Giorgi said. "If we had infinite resources, we would be reaching out to people all the time and saying, 'Use our stuff.' But it'll eat away at your capacity really quickly. So it's a matter of finding ways to get our work out there without totally exhausting ourselves. We're trying to cover rural America at large, so it's a matter of how do we get our arms around that?"

Leaning into one-to-one outreach to distribute content

Many nonprofit outlets are building relationships with other newsrooms to broaden their story distribution, often reaching out directly to potential republication partners to pitch stories.

For example, Andrea Lopez-Villafana, managing editor of Daily News for Voice of San Diego, a local nonprofit investigative outlet, said she sometimes personally reaches out to outlets in the area that might be interested in republishing certain stories.

"I have done that in the past, just sort of reaching out to outlets saying, 'Here's our content sharing policy. We dropped this investigation. If you'd like to republish, here it is. You can use it. You don't have to pay for it.' And then, out of that, getting some sort of analytics on how many people read the story," Lopez-Villafana said.

Rest of World, a nonprofit publication that "challenges expectations about whose experiences with technology matters," serves a global audience. Head of Audience Gabriel Boylan said the outlet seeks to reach the audience it aims to serve via partnerships with publications outside of the U.S. that publish in native languages, especially in countries or regions Rest of World regularly covers.

"It's essentially the same as why a lot of us nonprofits are partnering with local news outlets, right? Because it's a way of distributing the information," Boylan said. "And it's also a way of saying, even if a law isn't changed, even if nothing concrete happens in the world, the impact is that the local community was able to see itself reflected in our reporting and learn something about what's going on in their community."

Embracing and expanding third-party distribution tracking efforts

Several nonprofit outlets we interviewed attributed some of the growth in their republication numbers to a more concerted and systematic tracking effort. Outlets who have found value in monitoring their third-party republication metrics are investing more time and using emerging tools for this purpose. Some of the methods these outlets use include the WordPress Republication Tracking Pixel, Google Alert, Parse.ly, Truescope, a media monitoring platform, republication buttons, and manual tracking through staff awareness, among others.

Outlets said they use third-party republication metrics and direct reach in internal audience reports, presentations to their board, impact reports, and pitches to funders.

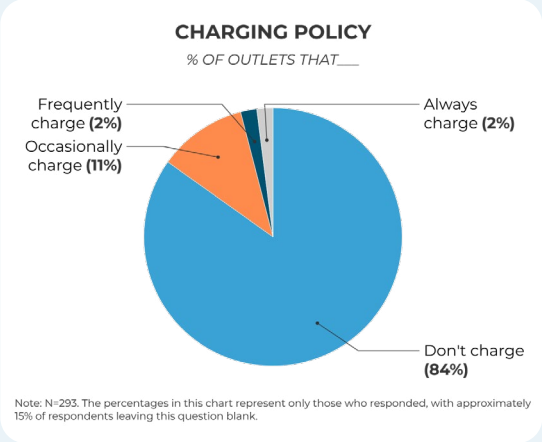
One reason tracking efforts are so important: Many nonprofit outlets we talked to agree that a broader audience reach can be an effective pitch to funders and donors. Outlets said they can strengthen their case for support and funding by showing that their content is being disseminated widely across various channels or reaching extensive geographical areas and audiences.

"If someone's looking to fund our work, we can tell them not only are we reaching all these people through our platforms, but we're also getting reach across the country through radio and through newspapers and through other organizations," Giorgi of The Daily Yonder said. "It makes us feel like we have a much stronger base to stand on when we're talking to funders and when we're really making the case for our work."

The Daily Yonder uses a republication tracking pixel developed by INN and managed by NewsPack to track who's republishing their stories. The outlet also uses a combination of Google News Alerts and staff awareness.

Giorgi also devised a tracking system to remove duplicates from republication data provided by third-party platforms to get the number of unique media outlets that republish The Daily Yonder's stories.

"The other thing that we ended up being able to do is just look at engagement rates," Giorgi said. "Once I have that table that shows me all the unique outlets, I can then also look at their pickup rate. So I can say this radio station picked up our stuff 80% of the time. This station picked it up 20% of the time. That's going to inform our ability to deepen a relationship with people who are using your stuff a lot … or look at someone who's taking it 20% of the time and say, 'How can we potentially re-engage this person and get them to be used at 40% of the time or 60% of the time?'"



Republication Terms and Practices

Nonprofit news outlets use two primary approaches for republication: terms and/or permission required and designated partnerships. In practice, these approaches are often flexible, open to exceptions, and tailored to align with each organization's business model and mission. Under these approaches, while some outlets charge for republication, the majority — 84% of INN members — do not. Our data and reporting show that within each primary approach, outlets make individual decisions about when to charge and how much.

Outlets primarily rely on third-party distribution, which tend to be national or global in scope and often focus on explanatory and investigative journalism, are less likely to charge for the republication of their work. About $3 million in revenue came from syndication across the field in 2023, accounting for 0.6% of the field's total revenue.

Most outlets try to make republication accessible and easy by referring partners to general terms on their website or asking for explicit permission to republish. Almost a third, or 31% of outlets, require explicit permission before stories and coverage can be republished, and nearly 40% of outlets allow their stories and coverage to be republished fairly easily and for free under "general terms defined on their website." Those general terms tend to specify requests such as crediting the original author and publication for content and images used, including links to the original website or newsletter signup forms, not making significant changes to the original content, and not reselling stories.

Other outlets try to establish more guidelines, largely to keep track of who is republishing their work and to build more reliable republishing partnerships. About a fifth, or 21%, of nonprofit outlets allow only designated partner organizations to share their coverage.

These findings track with what we've heard from members during interviews. Besides the benefit of stories being seen by more readers when redistributed, many nonprofit news outlets view their work as a public service and seek to generate greater exposure for their reporting. As a result, they prioritize making their reporting more accessible for republication, especially by less-resourced outlets or fellow nonprofits that serve the information needs of local communities.

REPUBLICATION PRACTICES

Setting general terms or requiring explicit permission

Lopez-Villafana said Voice of San Diego's content sharing policy is made simple and easy so that papers with fewer resources don't have to go through a bunch of hoops to republish their stories. Unless specifically restricted, Voice of San Diego allows other outlets to republish articles for free as long as they adhere to specific conditions listed in the outlet's sharing policy.

Media outlets often don't have to ask for permission to republish. They can pull content from Voice of San Diego's website if they're following republishing policy, Lopez-Villafana said. "I don't vet who is publishing. They just have to follow these guidelines. The only reason I will know if someone's republishing our work, aside from seeing it somewhere else, is that some may reach out" and ask for permission to use photos.

Voice of San Diego is approaching its 20th anniversary, but it is still relatively young compared to other news outlets in the area. This makes partnerships with other local outlets highly valuable for gaining exposure to new audiences, Lopez-Villafana explained.

One example of such partnership is with El Latino, a Spanish only news outlet in San Diego that republishes stories by Voice of San Diego and translates them into Spanish, broadening the outlet's reach within Latino communities. Much of Voice of San Diego's work is investigative journalism focusing on holding the government accountable and encouraging civic engagement, so working with smaller outlets that already have established trust with specific communities, like El Latino, has been particularly beneficial to their mission.

Republication buttons automate this process for many nonprofit outlets. The Daily Yonder places prominent republish buttons in their stories. Their stories are licensed under Creative Commons and may be republished for free, online or in print. Grist, which highlights climate solutions and uncovering environmental injustices, uses a similar approach.



Screenshot from Grist's website

Establishing republishing or collaboration partnerships

Republication partners tend to be outlets that share a similar mission or geographic scope of coverage and could be a part of a formal collaboration, like INN's Rural News Network, or individual partners the outlet has built a relationship with over time.

INN Index indicates that local outlets found republishing through established partnerships more effective than distributing their work through syndication platforms — a strategy that works well for larger state, national and global outlets.

Local news outlets, which tend to focus on specific geographic areas that might not always be relevant to a broader audience, typically have fewer third-party republishing partners. Despite representing nearly half of the field, they account for only 7% of partnerships. On the other hand, local outlets usually target a more

specific, concentrated audience, so syndicating their content to national platforms might not help them reach their target audience.

Instead, local nonprofit outlets prioritize engaging in smaller, localized collaboration efforts with outlets covering neighboring areas or similar topics. They see these partnerships as better suited to their goals of expanding their reach to audiences they're not engaging through direct channels and connecting with communities.

Mariann Martin, co-founder and operations, development, and community engagement director of Canopy Atlanta, said they hope to grow their audience through republication. One reason why the outlet has not maintained regular partnerships with syndication platforms, however, is because it is not aware of any that would be a good fit.

In place of using syndication platforms to distribute their work, Canopy Atlanta, a nonprofit with a mission to bring journalism to more neighborhoods across metro Atlanta, partners with a few outlets sharing similar coverage areas including 285 South, Atlanta Civic Circle, and Capital B to co-publish content fairly regularly. "From a distribution standpoint, that feels like a really good fit, a manageable fit, and definitely getting the work out to more folks," Martin said.

Martin also pointed to a specific audience group that Canopy Atlanta is hoping to grow, readers who are the community the outlet is working in.

"Our audience definitely tends to be the Greater Atlanta area's more white, higher income bracket versus the communities that we work in, where we struggle to really build an audience," Martin said, "and that's probably just because they don't see newsletters as a sort of part of their daily news habits."

Martin said this challenge of building an audience in the outlet's coverage area while serving their existing audience is not unique to her organization. Instead, it is a challenge faced by other small, local news outlets working in lower income communities or communities of color.

Voice of San Diego started building two collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing local journalism and pooling resources, Lopez-Villafana said.The first initiative involves a partnership between Voice of San Diego, KPBS and inewsource called Public Matters, focusing on resource and content sharing for election coverage. These outlets bring different news coverage expertise, with Voice of San Diego and inewsource focused on investigative reporting and accountability, while KPBS focuses more on general news. For this election cycle, they're delivering comprehensive general ballot guides alongside more in-depth analyses of key races.

This collaboration enables participating newsrooms to optimize resources and ensure that their reporters can focus on their areas of expertise without duplicating efforts. Voice of San Diego is also part of a California news partnership where participating outlets display a banner on their homepage, highlighting stories from other California-based outlets. This initiative not only broadens participating outlets' audiences by leveraging each other's reach but also fosters collaboration within California-based news organizations, Lopez-Villafana said.

Charging for republication

Often, outlets do not have a one-size-fits-all approach to charging for republication. Instead, they individualize republishing or licensing agreements based on the request they receive from potential partners. These paid partnerships tend to apply to commercial operations.

Almost all outlets we talked to, whether they charge for republication or not, indicated that their content is mostly free for fellow nonprofit news outlets to republish and mentioned the desire to be a good community member and support their peers.

"We weren't thinking of [charging for republication] as a revenue generator necessarily, but more as a fair way to gatekeep a little bit of who was republishing our stuff," Boylan said. "If we get a request from a for-profit publication, we'll probably take it case by case."

Some of the determining factors, Boylan said, are whether the original publication was fairly recent and how much time and resources went into it compared to the offered fee.

"We're a lot more open just to be a good community member and support our peers in the nonprofit world," Boylan said. "But also, having access to an audience that we can be fairly certain will value our work, and potentially take the steps that we would want somebody to take, which is maybe go to our website or follow us on social media or sign up for our newsletter. There's not as much of a doubt, I think, as there might be with some for-profit institutions or places that are just trying to license millions of things to get lots of clicks and impressions, which are going to be a lot less useful for creating relationships with an audience."

The Food & Environment Reporting Network, which focuses on long-form investigative and explanatory reporting, exclusively produced stories through paid partnerships. "We only produce in partnership, and those partnerships are always paid, even if it's a nominal fee," Founder and Executive Director Tom Laskawy, said, "and the reason is that this industry is fundamentally still a for-profit industry, and people use content to raise revenue in all sorts of ways. The partners that we work with all have budgets for these freelance projects, and our belief is that in the kind of context of a co-pay, that partners should pay what they can."

The outlet almost always charges for third-party republication of their work, even if for a nominal fee, with some exceptions for government or educational use, Laskawy said.

"Our experience, by and large, is that content that is given away for free tends not to go as far, it tends not to generate as much interest, and it tends to be a little bit more scattershot," Laskawy said. "And so we don't release our work under Creative Commons, very consciously, for example, and to some extent, it's because our partners have varying exclusivity windows where no one can republish."

The Food & Environment Reporting Network website states that the outlet's content cannot be reproduced without permission.



Screenshot from The Food & Environment Reporting Network's website

"Our baseline belief is content has value, and that you pay for things that have value. I think it also is a little bit of a gating factor so you don't get inundated potentially with requests," Laskawy said. "There are a lot of unethical people out there in this world, and if you don't provide some sort of required interaction before someone can scrape and use your content, you have very little control over how it's being used."

Challenges In Tracking Third-Party Audience Reach, and What's Next

What's next for third-party audiences? Overall, we anticipate seeing higher rates of republication again in 2024 as the focus on building third-party partnerships gained momentum amid a presidential election year.

INN has been investing in republication opportunities for its members, too. Earlier this month, INN launched a collaboration with The Associated Press to help member newsrooms expand their reach, bringing crucial, local election stories to wider audiences across the U.S. INN members' politics and elections coverage is available via AP's third-party distribution service called APT, allowing thousands of AP member news organizations in the U.S. to freely republish nonprofit stories. This collaboration extends the reach and impact of On the Ground, INN's politics and elections republication service.

During this growth spurt, a key challenge for nonprofit news outlets will be quantifying and tracking third-party audiences' reach. Newsrooms across the board recognize the benefits of tracking third-party reach but lack human resources and appropriate tools to do so.

Tracking third-party republication is complex. More tracking tools are becoming available, but there is no single solution that effectively monitors all avenues for republication. As a result, the ability to thoroughly and accurately track third-party republication tends to favor larger nonprofit outlets with more resources. Many organizations still depend entirely or in part on manual recordkeeping. Several outlets cited time, human resources, and infrastructure as the top hurdles for tracking third-party reach.

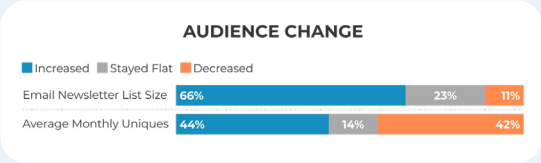
Overcounting duplicates is another common issue outlets face when tracking the number of unique republishers. Tracking metrics also vary across republication mediums like web, radio, or print, presenting another serious challenge.

A major dilemma many INN member outlets have is how to accurately track third-party audience reach and donor conversion, and the impact of investing in third-party distribution.

"That's like the million dollar question, right? Is there any way to connect the dots between these third-party distribution arrangements that we're doing and the traffic and the audience on our first party platforms?" Giorgi of The Daily Yonder asked. "There are some hypothetical or anecdotal reasons to believe that those two are correlated in some fashion, that getting out there into the world more is going to improve your traffic. But at this stage, unfortunately, it's really hard to be able to actually say with any certainty whether that's happening."

It can't hurt to have more name recognition and reach, Giorgi said.

In the next chapter, we will explore major trends and tactics nonprofit news outlets are using to grow direct audiences.



Chapter 3: Direct Audience Trends and Tactics

News outlets in the INN Network engage and grow audiences on their own platforms — primarily on their own websites, email lists and social media channels. We call them "direct audiences" because they engage directly with the outlet's own channels instead of other news outlets or third-party platforms. "Direct audiences" here could also be understood as "owned audiences" and is different from "direct traffic," which refers only to website visitors.

What this all means from INN's point of view:

With the collapse of referrals from social media, there is now greater reliance on Google and search as the primary source of referral traffic for nonprofit news outlets. It will be important for nonprofit outlets, and the organizations that support them, to invest in diversifying referral traffic and news discovery opportunities for potential audiences. Initiatives like INN's partnership with the Associated Press and our Collaborations work aim to increase opportunities for coverage across the INN network to meet more audiences. Experiments with artificial intelligence as a tool for news discovery could also help.

Our first chapter on the goals of nonprofit news outlets covered the bifurcation in the sector between local nonprofit outlets, which naturally pay more attention to direct audiences, and larger, national, global and regional outlets, which invest more in third-party audiences. The reasons are baked into their design: many local outlets can only reach audiences over their own platforms (their localized coverage is seldom relevant enough to get picked up by a larger distributor). And many local outlets operate in areas without any potential partner organizations, such as a local newspaper, to help amplify coverage.

On the other hand, larger national, global and regional organizations — many of which focus on investigative reporting or cover a single issue deeply — prioritize third-party audiences as a means of revealing corruption and bringing more knowledge around broad topics.

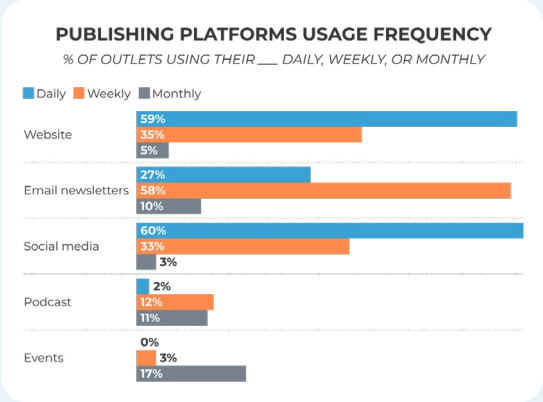
Over the last several years, social media's changing policies and practices dramatically altered the distribution game for all news outlets. As Nieman Lab put it: "If you are a U.S. news publisher, you likely know that your traffic from social media has fallen — the question is just how much." Mounting frustrations in changing platform policies seemed to push outlets toward investing in direct-audiences.

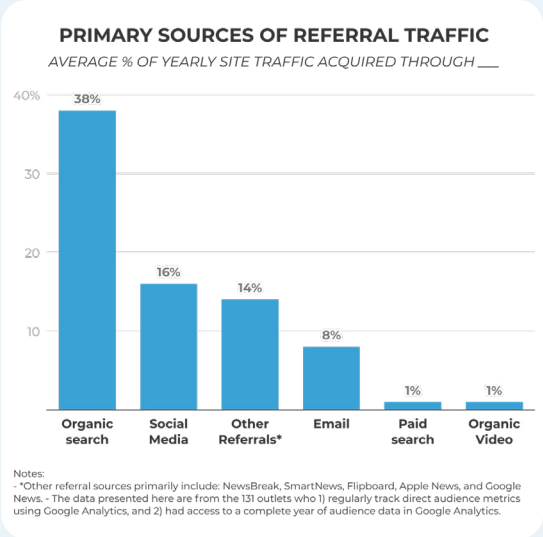
The nonprofit news field largely shifted its focus from third-party to direct audiences over six years, with one-third of outlets primarily reaching audiences directly in 2017 to double that share in 2023. In the past two years alone, a third of the sector expanded its reach to direct audiences. Many outlets that had built distribution models around third-party partners and platforms pivoted, leaning into direct audience growth through SEO optimization, email newsletters and events.

In this chapter, we explore web traffic and email newsletter patterns across the nonprofit news sector. We then review the primary drivers for direct audience engagement and growth: search engine optimization (SEO), email newsletters, events, and other tactics.

Web Audience Gainers vs. Decliners

In the first chapter of this report, we discussed how growing web and email audiences is a primary goal for nonprofit news outlets — and the top approaches for direct engagement. This





chapter focuses on web and email as two lenses for examining audience trends and tactics.

In our Index Report published in June, we reported that web traffic was in flux. Across all surveyed outlets in 2023, the average number of unique monthly visitors declined by about one-third from 2022. This downward trend is in sync with web traffic trends across the publishing industry.

Here's what we're seeing in the data: Web traffic losses are not evenly distributed. Over two years (2021 and 2023), 4 in 10 outlets grew web traffic ("**web gainers**"), 4 in 10 lost traffic ("**web decliners**"), and the remainder stayed flat. We focus on this two-year timeframe for our analysis, but this trend broadly started before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Web gainers are more likely to be local, smaller, younger, and leaner revenue-wise. For example, the median age of the gainer group is 6, whereas the median age of web decliners is 12. The logic then follows, and this is clear in the data, that web decliners are often larger, older national and global organizations. National and global outlets are twice as likely to have lost traffic in the past two years than gained it.

A few factors contribute to this bifurcated web trend. Let's start with national and global outlets: We know that many of these larger, older organizations prioritize third-party distribution over direct audience growth because of how their organization's mission and incentives are structured. We also suspect, and hear in our reporting, that larger national and global outlets are taking the biggest hit from the overall drop in referrals from social media.

We see a dynamic group of young, local startups launching and investing in direct audience development from their inception. Compared to the web decliners, these younger outlets with growing web audiences are more likely to have increased staffing dedicated to audience development. From 2021 to 2023, 4 in 10 of web gainers increased their full-time equivalents (FTE) for audience development, while only about 2 in 10 of the web decliners did. The median FTE devoted to audience development in 2023 for web gainers and web decliners remained the same, suggesting that the web gainer outlets are investing a larger share of total resources in audience development than their more well-resourced peers.

Spotlight on Asheville Watchdog

Asheville Watchdog is one of those younger, local outlets that

has been steadily growing their web and email audiences since the outlet's launch in 2020, from 166k pageviews in 2020 to more than 2.75M for 2024 to date. They plan on continuing to focus on growing audiences in 2024 and beyond. For The Watchdog, they have their mission to produce investigative and accountability journalism established, and now they're focused on growing the tent of readers and increasing engagement among their existing audiences.

Keith Campbell, the outlet's managing editor, points to increasing the volume of stories and covering local issues of the highest concern to Asheville's communities as the driving forces behind web audience growth. One series of stories that brought in a lot of new audiences was around the main hospital. After Asheville's beloved hospital was sold and converted to a for-profit operation five years ago, trouble started to arise, including a spike in staff cuts and staff departures. The Watchdog's investigative reporting covered these changes closely, leading to the state attorney general filing a lawsuit against the hospital and its corporate owner and the federal government placing the hospital in immediate jeopardy, the toughest sanction a healthcare facility can face.

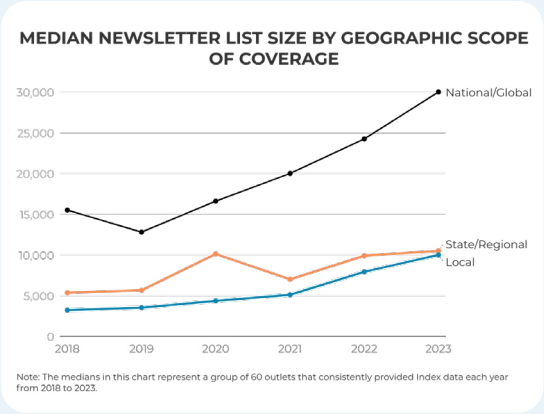
Since September, The Watchdog's focus has been covering the devastation wrought by Tropical Storm Helene, the worst disaster in western North Carolina's history. Asheville lacked potable drinking water for more than seven weeks, and The Watchdog relentlessly covered the damage to the water system and the city's restoration efforts.

Heading into 2025, Campbell is laser focused on continuing to provide new, relevant coverage to their readers every weekday. The Watchdog will exceed that goal this year, with the outlet increasing its coverage during Helene. And the Watchdog is expanding, recruiting for an additional investigative reporter.

"People are constantly telling us how much they appreciate what we're doing and hope we can continue to grow. But we think we can do much better. There are a lot of people who aren't reading us, and we continue to try to build that awareness, and hopefully, as we develop a marketing plan and get smarter about the audience, we'll get there."

Direct Audience Tactics

In addition to producing relevant, fact-based reporting, how are nonprofit outlets engaging and growing direct audiences?



ORGANIC SEARCH

Index data show that organic search drives the most referral traffic to nonprofit news outlets. Organic search is website traffic that comes from unpaid results on search engines such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo. For the typical nonprofit news outlet, organic search drove 38% of traffic in one year, followed by social media (16%). The "other referrals" category drove 14% of traffic, and respondents most frequently cited NewsBreak, SmartNews, Flipboard, Apple News and Google News as sources of traffic.

Our data show that larger, national and global organizations gain most from organic search referrals. A small cohort of 29 nonprofit outlets said organic search accounted for 50% or more of their total traffic and, as a group, these outlets reported more average monthly visitors than the field as a whole. They were most likely to be national/global or state/regional outlets that prioritize explanatory or investigative reporting. Conversely, local outlets covering daily news and events were underrepresented in this group of organic search powerhouses.

INN Index data doesn't explain this, but INN's work in the field suggests that explanatory and investigative outlets often produce more "evergreen" content — articles that might remain more relevant over time because they provide deep analysis or context on broader issues. Larger, national and global outlets often have more resources to invest in search engine optimization (SEO) and improved website speed. And older websites likely have more search authority, visibility, and established trust via external linking and other factors.

For example, organic search accounts for more than 50% of website traffic for Bay Nature, a San Francisco Bay Area environmental media nonprofit. Each new story the organization publishes builds on 24 years of deeply researched, expertly sourced evergreen journalism that attracts curious local residents seeking to learn about nature and the environment where they live. Website visitors who become paying members receive a year of access to live nature talks and guided hikes.

EMAIL NEWSLETTERS

Email newsletters remain one of the most reliable tools for audience growth, and they are incredibly widespread across the sector: only a handful of outlets in our survey — about 10

of 346 — don't have a newsletter. Local Independent Online News Publishers reported similar findings in their 2024 report on local news outlets: 95% of their reporting outlets have a newsletter, up from 81% in 2022.

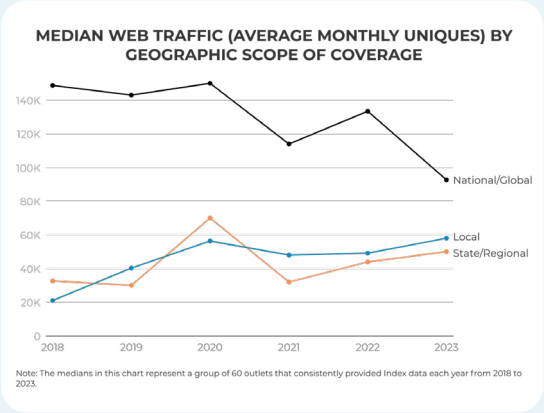
Newsletters are even the primary distribution platform for a smaller cohort of nonprofit outlets. In 2023, 13% of outlets primarily distributed coverage over newsletters, up slightly from 10% of outlets in 2021. And about one-quarter of the sector (27%) sends out a daily newsletter, reflecting a commitment of time and labor to the platform. Many small, local outlets are launching newsletters as a quick and nimble way to show proof of product and start building a core following (see the work of the Tiny News Collective).

Two-thirds of outlets reported gains in email subscribers from 2021 to 2023 (we'll call them "email gainers"), with only 1 in 10 reporting declines ("email decliners"). The remaining outlets stayed flat. Of course, many email subscribers could be inactive or the list owner might have recently cleaned their list to improve deliverability, so we shouldn't take this as a platform-growth victory. But writ large, we see email success span across the industry more so than other platforms.

In our email data we see trends similar to what we reported earlier for web audience trends: Email gainers tend to be younger, with a median age of 6 years since launch, and they tend to be local or state/regional in focus. Email decliners tend to be older and have a national/global focus. The distinction between gainers and decliners blurs a bit more for email, though, with many larger and older, national and global outlets also well-represented among gainers.

But unlike with our web data, with our email data we see a stronger connection between platform effort and platform success. A good majority of the email gainers (7 in 10) reported email as a top two audience distribution platform, compared to only about half of the decliners. More than half (54%) of the email gainers reported having some FTE devoted to audience development, whereas 43% of the email decliners had audience development staff.

Index data doesn't explain why we see more of a connection between effort and success for email vs. web, but INN's work in the field shows email audiences are more controllable compared to web or social media, with email service providers yielding a dataset that can be used for direct messages and



product testing. And, it has long been established that email newsletters can establish regularity and loyalty with audiences.

Email newsletters are touted as a silver bullet platform for nonprofit media, and many wonder when email will fall from grace. We can and should be critical of the email hype — it doesn't work for every outlet and audience, of course — but it's worth noting where we see continued success. We asked survey respondents an open-ended question: *What strategies has your organization found to be most effective in building its audience?* Newsletters prevailed as the top cited strategy in about 1 in 4 responses. (There were 180 total responses to this question.)

Success with web audience growth and email audience growth go hand in hand. The web gainers were more likely to have increased their newsletter subscribers from 2021 to 2023, with 77% of them reporting email subscriber growth compared to 52% of the decliners. Virtually none of the web gainers, 3%, lost newsletter subscriptions.

THE WEB-TO-EMAIL PARTNERSHIP

Based on reporting with several nonprofit outlets, we're hearing about a powerful web-to-email audience exchange: Outlets are investing in converting web audiences into newsletter subscribers through experimentation with on-page acquisition, and link-heavy newsletters are driving web traffic back to the outlet's story pages. KPCW, a public radio station serving the greater Park City region in Utah, saw a 175% increase in website traffic following the introduction of its free weekday newsletter, "The Local," and 18 months later more than 10% of daily visitors to KPCW.org come from the newsletter.

Based on insights from a reader survey this year, Wisconsin Watch began experimenting with developing an audience for a new newsletter focused on state politics. The team uses audience segmentation tools to show non-subscribers an embedded newsletter signup form when they visit a politics article. SEO-optimization helps expand the reach of those articles and widens the pool of potential subscribers for the politics newsletter.

Respondents frequently cited paid lead generation ads on Facebookas a cornerstone newsletter growth tactic. We'll cover marketing and paid growth in our next report chapter, which is coming soon.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EVENTS

Web and email audiences are the most common platforms today, but we're also tracking the growth in the use of social media and the consistent use of events as audience engagement and growth strategies.

A majority of outlets (60%) use **social media** daily to distribute their content, while a third (33%) do so weekly. Facebook is used most often (more than 80% of outlets post there at least once a week) followed by X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. Many outlets leverage social media platforms to funnel audiences to the web or email. MinnPost, for example, uses paid ads on Facebook and LinkedIn to drive newsletter sign-ups and has a dedicated onboarding email series for readers who sign up via social media ads.

In our reporting, we also noticed a shift in how outlets describe using social media. Many outlets describe social platforms as a way to engage with users and audiences where they are, and less as a step in a funnel toward other platforms or small-dollar donors. In particular, outlets are leveraging Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to engage younger, more diverse audiences. The Lens, for example, hired a social media and marketing manager and a photojournalist to create visually engaging content for younger audiences. They have seen an increase in their social audience and continue to explore strategies to convert social followers into loyal readers.

Many outlets mentioned **events and community gatherings** as their primary way of reaching new or harder-to-engage audiences. Events are used broadly across the sector but not quite as deeply as other platforms, figuring in the activities of more than 70% of publications but rarely ranking as a top three platform for reaching audiences.

Event frequency has held steady over time. In 2018, 78% of publishers reported staging at least one event, with a median of four events annually per outlet. In the latest survey, 8 in 10 said they conducted one or more events in 2023, with a similar median.

Massachusetts-based Lexington Observer hosts events and sets up booths at local gatherings to build awareness and attract newsletter subscribers in a small, tightly-knit community. For Dallas Free Press, in-person interactions often lead directly to text message subscriptions, particularly in neighborhoods historically neglected by news media. Dallas Free Press' pop-up newsroom, akin to an old-fashioned lemonade stand, makes the rounds at community events in Black and Latino neighborhoods, where team members' one-on-one conversations break down the trust barriers that stymie digital subscriptions. 100 Days in Appalachia holds forums and roundtable discussions to connect with audiences around specific regional issues, as well as sponsoring documentary screenings and festival events, concerts featuring regional musicians and artist pop-ups.

Spotlight on MLK50

MLK50: Justice Through Journalism cites public outreach as a major tool for attracting and engaging new audiences, including people who had never heard of the Memphis, Tennessee-based publication before. MLK50 focuses on hosting spaces that center practical problems like housing, often distributing guides tailored to specific community concerns. At two 2024 Juneteenth events that drew more than 135,000 people — the South Memphis Black Farmers Market and Cooper-Young Festival in four unique Memphis neighborhoods — journalists from the outlet discussed their journalism and answered questions about community issues. MLK50 handed out branded Juneteenth t-shirts, story cards with enhanced visual design and QR codes, and one-page guides to navigate landlord issues and to locate lead remediation resources. "When we get out from behind these screens and in front of the people that we're writing about, they become less of a subject and become more of a speaker," Audience Engagement Manager Melonee Gaines said. "I want to make experiences fun and informative — and they walk away with something that has our brand awareness on it."

Reaching New Audiences

INN's reporting and work in the field points to a common audience challenge that ranges across national and local outlets alike: At a certain point, audience sizes start to level off and plateau once the outlet has maximized their "easy," core audiences.

For a local outlet, this could mean tapping into the folks who are already avid news consumers in a given community or, for a single-topic national outlet, quickly gaining the professionals working directly in the covered industry. Nonprofit outlets tend to have missions (see Chapter 1 on Goals) that compel them to reach the disengaged, serve communities otherwise not served, or bring new audiences into the fold. This means once an outlet grows a core audience, but not all of the audiences attached to its mission, its audience work is far from over.

Our reporting shows that many nonprofit outlets are in this stage of audience growth – reaching the early milestone of building a core audience, starting to convert this early and loyal audience into small-dollar donors, and then starting to focus on untapped or disengaged audiences. Usually, this looks like reassessing audience strategy and adapting new or more sophisticated, multi-platform audience strategies.

Spotlight on Block Club Chicago

Six years into its journey, Block Club Chicago is undergoing an overhaul to better define the stages of its audience funnel. Lizzie Schiffman Tufano, who joined the organization in late 2022, notes that the outlet is starting to focus on lead generation and building its pipeline better. "Up until this year, I'd say we've done very little lead-gen and external pipeline building. My theory is we are nearing the ceiling of how much new traffic will flow in without us making any effort on that front," she said.

Block Club is now focused on understanding its audience beyond its core base. By the end of 2024, it aims to map out geographic and demographic gaps across Chicago and develop strategies to reach those underserved areas.

"We feel pretty confident that if you live in Chicago, we have something of value to offer you," Schiffman Tufano said. The goal is to identify blind spots in coverage and engagement, such as areas where people haven't encountered Block Club's content or felt its relevance.

This shift has prompted Block Club to test new methods of engagement. The organization has dipped its toes into editorial partnerships with other local outlets, offered giveaways with Chicago-based event organizations, and hosted in-person events.

Spotlight on Shelterforce

Shelterforce, a nearly 50-year-old nonprofit covering affordable housing and community development, recently launched a strategic plan for audience growth and diversity. "We want to ensure that we are reaching a diverse pool of audiences," said Schlonn Hawkins, who joined in 2020 and is CEO and publisher.

Shelterforce focuses on a multiplatform approach, leveraging webinars, social media, newsletters, and even pop culture discussions to engage new readers. A recent webinar Shelterforce hosted tied to the movie "In the Heights" used its themes of gentrification to spark broader conversations, attract new audiences, and drive newsletter sign-ups. Shelterforce is also considering partnering with influencers to make content more accessible and engaging for marginalized communities.

Shelterforce is rethinking its reliance on platforms like Facebook and experimenting with Instagram and video content to stay relevant in an evolving digital landscape. "We have to stay in this digital landscape game of information consumption," Hawkins noted, warning against becoming obsolete like Blockbuster video stores.

Shelterforce plans to grow its webinar series and host its first in-person event, which Hawkins believes will attract a fresh wave of readers.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Nonprofit news outlets are demonstrating progress in engaging and growing their direct audiences across websites, newsletters, social media, and events. However, audience growth is only part of the story. The next chapter will explore strategies around paid efforts to expand reach, including the use of lead generation ads. The last chapter of this report will dig into how these organizations are measuring and tracking audience activity, with a particular focus on assessing the impact and effectiveness of their marketing and engagement efforts — underscoring that growth alone does not equate to success.

Chapter 4: Marketing for Audience Growth

Some nonprofit newsrooms have embraced marketing as a way to deepen and widen their reach despite (or amid) ever-tightening competition for audience attention.

Roughly three quarters of nonprofit news organizations dedicate at least a portion of their annual budgets toward marketing their journalism to wider audiences. But, for the vast majority of outlets, marketing remains a tiny portion of their overall budget. Across all INN members, outlets devoted just 3.5% of their yearly budgets on average to marketing, a share broadly consistent across different types of outlets.

Outlets that report spending any portion of their budget on marketing tend to generate more revenue than organizations that spend nothing on marketing. For those with a marketing budget, however small it may be, the median annual revenue is $542,000 compared to just $306,000 for organizations with no marketing budget.

The same pattern holds, albeit more narrowly, when looking at the relationship between marketing investment and specific forms of revenue that could stand to grow if marketing efforts yield strong results. Outlets with marketing budgets generated a median of $81,000 in individual giving revenue in 2023, compared

Average/Median percentage of organizations' yearly budget devoted to marketing to help grow their audiences

Geographic scope of coverage	Average percentage of yearly budget devoted to marketing	Median percentage of yearly budget devoted to marketing
Local outlets	3.3%	1.0%
State/Regional outlets	4.6%	2.0%
National/Global outlets	2.8%	1.0%
All outlets	3.5%	1.0%

to $73,000 among outlets without a marketing budget. And outlets with marketing budgets also outpaced the rest in advertising and sponsorship revenue, generating a median of $2,000 in 2023 compared to a median of $0 among outlets without a marketing budget.

Outlets' investment in marketing is also associated with audience growth and ambition. About 51% of outlets with a marketing budget saw audience growth between 2021 and 2023. Just 39% of outlets without a marketing budget experienced audience growth during the same period.

Forty-four percent of outlets with a marketing budget report aiming to reach a large target audience of at least 1 million readers. Slightly fewer outlets, without a marketing budget, (39%, aimed to reach an audience of that size.

GOALS IN MARKETING

To better understand why these news outlets are investing at least some of their resources in marketing, INN asked members to identify their main priorities. What are they trying to get out of marketing?

The survey found that outlets are most interested in seeing their paid marketing efforts bear fruit in traffic growth. Nearly half (47%) of outlets indicated traffic growth is a high priority. And 30% of outlets say collecting email addresses through newsletter sign-ups is a high priority.

While some outlets invest in marketing to prioritize audience growth, a smaller portion (15%) say that their top marketing priority is donor development.

% of outlets that ranked ___ as a high priority.

Goals	Percentage of outlets
Increase overall traffic to website or other products (increase overall, general audience reach)	47%
Collect email addresses or other first-party data through newsletter sign-ups or other products	30%
Increase targeted traffic to website or other products (increase overall impact, or increase targeted audience reach)	27%
Directly solicit donations or other financial contributions	15%
Other	4%

GOALS FOR PAID MARKETING EFFORTS

The survey findings suggest that outlets are prioritizing growth in web traffic, not because they are building on an area of strength, but because they are operating at a deficit. Outlets making overall traffic growth a top priority tended to lag behind the field overall in web traffic in 2023, with a median of 22,000 average monthly website visitors, compared to 27,000 for the field overall. See our report chapter on audience goals for more on this trend.

PLATFORMS FOR MARKETING

By far, Facebook is the most common venue for digital content marketing among INN members. Nearly half (45%) of outlets say they use Facebook content boosts, which are a way to

extend the life of a post on the social media feed of a user, and advertisements to market their brands to audiences.

And 18% of outlets say they invest in Facebook paid lead generation, a way to identify new potential audiences for a newsletter or web product, and drive those potential audiences from Facebook and to their own website. About one-fifth of outlets (21%) say they pay to boost their content on Instagram.

% of outlets that used ___ for digital content marketing

Type of digital content marketing used	Percentage of outlets
Facebook content boosts/advertisements	45%
Instagram boosts	21%
Facebook paid lead generation	18%
LinkedIn boosts	9%
Twitter promotions	6%
YouTube promotions	2%
Google Ads (pay-per-click)	2%
Bing Ads (pay-per-click)	1%
TikTok promotions	0%
Other	10%

N=346

TYPE OF DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING USED

Nonprofit outlets that report using Facebook paid lead generation amassed a strikingly larger subscriber list for their email newsletters, with a median of 14,000 readers. Nonprofit news outlets overall attracted a median of about 6,000 subscribers.

Among the outlets that experienced web traffic growth in 2023, 79% reported using Facebook content boosts, 33% reported using Facebook paid lead generation, and 36% reported using Instagram boosts. In each case, these proportions significantly outpaced nonprofit news outlets overall. With other social marketing tools, the outlets that enjoyed traffic growth did not substantially differ from the outlets that did not use those tools.

One such organization, Ovideo Community News, has seen its audience triple recently alongside its use of paid Facebook ads. This local outlet serving communities in Florida grew their newsletter list of 2,700 in June 2023 to more than 12,000 today, with most of the growth coming from several rounds of lead generation through Meta ads. A two-year grant from Indiegraf supported this audience development work.

For MinnPost, paid lead generation was the single most effective marketing strategy it implemented over the last year. Paid lead gen efforts helped the MinnPost team grow their newsletter list by 34% in 2024. Before investing in these marketing efforts beginning in mid-2023, their subscriber count was fairly stagnant.

The editors at Charlottesville Tomorrow are also pleased with the return on investment in Facebook lead generation and report a conversion rate of about $1.25 per sign-up. Still, this organization is a testament to the importance of knowing the market and diversifying marketing strategies. Charlottesville Tomorrow serves rural communities and uses a flyer distribution service that has yielded a conversion rate similar to Facebook lead generation.

The bottom line, though? For the team at Charlottesville Tomorrow, what matters is making sure the sign-up process is easy and clear on every story on their website.

Chapter 5: Understanding Audience Scale and Habits

Nonprofit news outlets have significantly grown their reach in the past decade. But they struggle to measure the full size of a growing audience for their high-quality journalism. A more comprehensive picture of the wide reach of nonprofit journalism is vital for the field's economic sustainability. Better methods to capture the scale of nonprofit newsrooms' reach and impact could catalyze fundraising and membership growth.

Data from the INN Index suggests that nonprofit journalism's reach is significant. Together, the websites of 346 outlets in our survey drew at least 61 million visitors monthly in 2023, a number that corresponds to roughly one-fourth of the adult population of the US. We also count 8 million email subscribers, 5 million podcast downloads on average per month and the readership of 7 million print editions plus readership in up to 15,500 outlets that re-publish the work of nonprofit organizations.

In this chapter, we focus on how publishers track and measure the scale of their audiences as well as key challenges they face in documenting their reach in an increasingly complex distribution ecosystem. Previous chapters covered outlets' audience goals, reach on their own channels and reach via republication by others.

We know that significant work is underway to develop new ways to measure audience reach and impact. However, the data and our observations in the field indicate that the ability to understand audience behavior is significantly underdeveloped compared to the challenging task at hand.

For example, according to our survey:

- **Measuring the true scale of the audience for nonprofit news is a growing challenge for INN and members as the number of people accessing reporting through outside partners has rapidly expanded.** Many are experimenting but few have come up with a consistent way to measure readership of their work published in third-party platforms.
- **The field as a whole is not taking full advantage of widely available analytics tools to track and better understand audiences of their websites.** Only two-thirds of publications (67%) regularly track usership with Google Analytics or other tools that measure their direct audience to their websites.
- **Few publishers have robust confidence in their ability to develop audience strategy as the news distribution landscape becomes more complex.** The confidence gap is most pronounced among smaller news organizations that often don't consider basic audience metrics in decision making.

THIRD-PARTY AUDIENCE TRACKING EFFORTS

While the field in recent years has been heavily focused on increasing direct traffic, publication by third-party channels is a major driver of the reach of nonprofit news and it continues to grow.

Because nonprofit publishers and their funders place a high value on giving the public broad access to high-quality news, the majority of INN members – 84% of outlets surveyed – make their reporting available to republish at no cost and with very few restrictions. This means a significant audience for INN member content is not on INN member websites, newsletters or other products.

Conversations with INN members indicate that audience metrics from republication partners are notoriously difficult and time consuming to collect and track. In addition, as reach grows through an expansion of republication partners, measuring audience overlap becomes a more urgent and technically challenging problem. As a result, the scale and size of third-party audiences is growing rapidly but remains broadly outside of members' or INN's ability to measure, presenting unique challenges for members trying to understand their actual audiences.

As we detail in Chapter 2: Third-party audiences and republication strategy, publishers are experimenting with a variety of tools and combinations of tactics

for tracking this readership, including using tools like Google Alerts, Parse.ly, media monitoring platform Truescope, adding WordPress' Republication Tracking Pixel to their website, as well as manually tracking through staff awareness.

For example, The Conversation U.S. has found success with capturing the scope of its audience by combining direct audience numbers with third-party republication data to get a more accurate understanding of story reach. Joel Abrams, director of digital strategy and outreach for The Conversation U.S., said they are able to obtain those off-platform metrics in three primary ways:

- **Asking publishers to use a tracking pixel.** While Abrams said it involves effort on both ends — publishers must add the pixel code to their content management systems — he said most regular republishers get it working and it helps capture those numbers.
- **Matching news aggregator data with in-house numbers.** The Conversation U.S. republishes on Yahoo and Apple News and uses their respective reporting portals to pull article traffic on those platforms. The newsroom then combines audience metrics from that article with direct traffic to get more comprehensive audience data.
- **Trying to get a handle on republications where there is no data:** The Conversation manually searches newspaper databases for articles that appeared in print, and uses web search engines to find republications where the counter pixel was not used.

"It does pay off," Abrams said. Being able to demonstrate reach to funders "is really important and a key element in our success in getting and retaining them."

But while Abrams said the numbers are helpful, his colleagues have found some funders are more interested in the quality of audience reached, like if a big-brand news website or newspaper republished a piece. To build on that qualitative data, The Conversation U.S. also tries to keep track of the buzz around a story: if an author was interviewed by a media outlet and quoted, if a podcast mentioned a story, what engagement the organization's Instagram and TikTok videos have had. "The more stuff we do, the more data we have to deal with," Abrams added.

DIRECT AUDIENCE TRACKING EFFORTS

Most nonprofit newsrooms are regularly using some form of analytics to measure direct audiences. We define regularly as track at least monthly. However, a significant number of outlets (33%) do not regularly track basic measures of their web audience via Google Analytics even though publishers identified growing this audience as a top goal.

Regular use of analytics drops off steadily with the size of the organization as measured by revenue. Outlets that raise $2 million or more in annual revenue are nearly twice as likely to use analytics regularly. Through the lens of geographic scope, national outlets are the most likely to track regularly and global outlets are the least likely.

Indeed, 95% of outlets with revenues of $2 million or more rely on analytics, nearly twice the rate of those operating on less than $250,000. This disparity largely reflects differences in resources. While free analytics tools exist, they can be challenging to navigate. For instance, some smaller newsrooms have expressed frustration with Google's transition to Google Analytics 4, the latest version of its popular free analytics tool, noting that setting up basic reports and dashboards is less intuitive than in the previous version.

Direct traffic metrics can provide valuable insights for news outlets to make editorial decisions. Evanston Roundtable, a nonprofit news outlet covering local issues in Evanston, IL, outside Chicago, often uses audience analytics on Parse.ly for editorial insights.

"The editors like to see what stories are the top performers, and not just stories, but categories," said Mark Miller, vice president and treasurer of the board. "For example, a couple years ago, we launched food coverage on the site. We didn't really do much with

Tracking frequency	Percentage of outlets
Regularly (monthly) track	67%
Don't regularly track	33%

Percentage of outlets using Google Analytics or similar providers to track direct audience metrics

that, we found a writer to do both coverage of restaurants and other food related topics, and we can see in the traffic that that has really taken off as a category. So [audience analytics], at a high level, are of interest to either confirm or or knock down theories we have about what we want to be doing."

Rhode Island-based ecoRI News routinely uses audience metrics as a point of information for the volunteer board of directors as well as to track the newsroom's impact and monitor general audience growth trends.

"We track how many web visitors, how many email subscribers we have so we can [measure] broad trends in growth. And for editorial, we track whether people are clicking on opinion versus the straight up news stories," said Joanna Detz, publisher and co-founder.

Digital audience analytics alone don't drive ecoRI News's editorial decisions, Detz added, instead, the newsroom takes a hybrid approach, combining audience metrics with insights from the comment section on their website and from real world conversations with their readers.

As a statewide newsroom covering a geographically large and dispersed state, Montana Free Press relies heavily on audience data to understand its reach, particularly in smaller communities. The organization tracks how its reporting is consumed, how readers discover their content, and how they engage with it across various platforms. This includes analyzing behavior flow — how people navigate to and interact with their stories — as well as monitoring content pickup and republication.

"Using as much analytical data as possible to understand who we're reaching, especially in small communities, is important because Montana is a very large state and so geographically dispersed," said Nate Schoenfelder, the outlet's audience engagement director.

Direct traffic can also become a valuable source of revenue, although not typically in the way of traditional commercial mass media, which sells eyeballs and clicks to advertisers. Instead, direct reach is a primary gateway for readers to become small, recurring donors or members. However, only 25% of outlets track conversion rates (the number of readers becoming donors). Among those who do track conversion rates, publishers most often monitor newsletter metrics (75%).

There is an impact on the organization's confidence in strategic decisions. Among outlets who do track conversion rates, 38% of newsletter readers became donors and 28% of web users became donors.

THE CITY, which covers New York, recently started tracking conversion rates to its newsletter and donations in late 2024. Diana Riojas, the newsroom's audience manager for distribution and engagement, said the metrics have been a "game changer." The numbers revealed THE CITY's service journalism — like its explainers about recycling or archive of Mayor Eric Adams coverage — have converted many readers.

"Before we didn't really know how valuable the service journalism was," Rojas said. "We would hear from people, sure, but knowing that people are donating to THE CITY or even subscribing to our newsletter and want to hear more from us, that was like: OK, we're doing something right. We should just keep doing the right thing, and keep answering people's questions."

EMERGING PRACTICES – CAPTURING THE WHOLE AUDIENCE PICTURE

We often get this question: How many people are consuming coverage from INN member outlets?

As we noted earlier, nonprofit news content is reaching tens of millions of readers on a range of platforms. But current metrics often don't capture a comprehensive picture of nonprofit journalism's audience. In an effort to go beyond traditional measures, some are focusing on developing their own metrics that measure their reach.

The 19th created a metric they call "total journalism reach" to more comprehensively capture how its journalism is consumed. Depending on the newsroom's focus during a given month, it could combine a mix of website views, views from republications, views on aggregation apps like Apple News, views of newsletters based on open rates, event attendees, video views, podcast listens and Instagram post views.

"In our current reality, journalism exists in various formats splintered across platforms and products," Alexandra Smith, The 19th's chief strategy officer, wrote in Columbia Journalism Review last year. "People are just as likely to get their news on Instagram as from a news website. It no longer makes sense to rely primarily on measuring readership by traditional website metrics."

Since The 19th launched its new approach, Smith told INN the biggest impact has gone beyond numbers. "It's a culture shift more than it's a metrics tool in a lot of ways, because the culture shift is that our goal is to reach people wherever they are with our journalism and [total journalism reach] measures that."

Now that there is measurable value placed across platforms, Smith said the newsroom feels more engaged and rewarded experimenting with different formats beyond traditional articles.

For news organizations reconsidering metrics, Smith advises a customized approach: "No one should copy and paste the metrics that we're tracking. The real power is in having those conversations in your own organization, to talk about: What is your mission for your journalism and products? What are you trying to do with and for your audiences? And then from there: Which places and spaces does it make sense to measure?"

Next City has developed its own version of a "total journalism" number, incorporating reach across all platforms, including newsletter opens, Apple News and podcast plays. "We want to think about what real reach looks like," said Lucas Grindley, Next City executive director. Grindley said the goal has been to align who the organization is with how they measure. For example, Next City had many stories republished on partner newsroom sites and the metrics had to catch up to capture those.

The experimentation is also going beyond digital measures. Some organizations are holding focus groups or gathering survey data. The Maine Monitor pays close attention to how government officials and institutions are taking action in response to their reporting. The Pulitzer Center tailors how it defines impact depending on the project, measuring indicators like the quality of engagement, factors about story placements and the representation

journalists bring to the work. While Resolve Philly has an impact tracker for projects, the organization has said the best way to understand impact is to ask the people impacted. They have done this by reaching back out to readers who have consumed their service journalism via text. City Bureau measures its success with how civically engaged its communities become, using a collaborative tracker database. "Several Chicago Documenters* have run for their local police district councils, demonstrating expanded civic capacities and leadership and exerting civic power — and we tag these activities accordingly in our impact database," said Kristen Fallica, City Bureau's director of communications. "For us, success means creating conditions where information, generative relationships and practical skills combine to restore civic health and drive the structural solutions democracy requires."

CONFIDENCE IN USING AUDIENCE DATA TO MAKE STRATEGIC DECISIONS

Only about one in ten publishers say they are fully confident of their ability to use audience data to make strategic decisions about editorial, distribution, marketing, staffing and budgets. Larger organizations also express more confidence in their use of analytics to inform editorial and distribution strategy (and they are more likely than their counterparts to regularly use analytic tools).

Some publishers say they prefer direct, in-person audience engagement over digital analytics. They believe qualitative, analog measurements — such as conversations with readers, community feedback and real-world interactions — provide valuable insights for their newsrooms.

"Web analytics come with so many caveats of whether something went viral in search or the stories that get the most traffic are not always the accountability stories that you spend the most time on, or the stories that are the most civically important. It may have had a great headline." said Joanna Detz of ecoRI News. "I don't make editorial decisions based solely on what technology is telling me, I often find I need more context. And now, when less traffic is coming from search, it almost seems like the analytics that matter are the ones coming from our direct-to-consumer channels, like the newsletters, which aren't being filtered by an algorithm or by AI yet."

ecoRI News covers environmental and social justice issues across the smallest state in the U.S. that only takes about 45 minutes to drive across. "We're so local and Rhode Island is so small," Detz said. "We also meet a lot of people in real life and sometimes that's just more valuable to have conversations and understand how people are consuming our news."

Detz said ecoRI News' newsletter subscribers are likely more loyal readers because of the intentionality of signing up and consuming their stories, versus readers who stumble upon stories via search.

The Evanston RoundTable has been working with BlueLena, a digital marketing and revenue management platform, to analyze audience data and set up more targeted calls-to-action on its website, but Miller said the outlet's core editorial priorities are pretty intuitive and clear. "We're a hyperlocal news outlet, so a lot of this is kind of obvious to cover what's going on in the schools, city government, the local economy, the arts and culture scene and food. Editorial instinct works pretty well."

Smaller newsrooms have also expressed that viral stories can sometimes skew their data. "We will occasionally get some story, like an outrage story, that catches the attention of the national press," Miller explained. "People get angry and start clicking through to read the story. It's like a one and done thing for a couple days, there's a ton of traffic … I don't want to take the lesson from that, that we should be doing more of that. We don't want to chase traffic. We're not in the clicks business."

*Documenters are citizens recruited, trained, and compensated to attend and document public governance meetings and civic events, as part of the Documenters Network. The Network, powered by City Bureau, is a collective of newsrooms and community organizations committed to participatory civic media, aiming to build a new public record by covering under-reported public meetings.

Montana Free Press is a unique exception among small, statewide newsrooms with its strong emphasis on data-driven audience measurement. Schoenfelder said he holds a monthly all-staff meeting to help stakeholders all around the newsroom understand the latest audience metrics. He shares core KPIs during that meeting, including unique visitors, loyalty metrics and story-specific performance. "I always tell our staff if you want to get in the weeds, just ask, and we can set aside some time to do it. But otherwise, these are the things that we're focused on."

Schoenfelder said the Montana Free Press has found having a data-driven mindset has helped them detect topics that their readers are interested in that they would not have expected. After seeing chatter on social media about Montanans receiving high property tax assessments, the newsroom's data reporter put together an explainer about tax policy and the changes. "The audience for that explainer was huge," Schoenfelder said. "We did not expect something on tax policy to get such across the board traffic. It was one of the most read stories that we had published."

Schoenfelder is the only full-time staffer focused on audience tracking, and a marketing contractor helps with social analytics. "Everyone is just motivated and making sure that their quality reporting is reaching as many people as possible or reaching the right people — and being able to have the impact that they desire," Schoenfelder said.

Conclusion

Capturing nonprofit journalism's full reach and impact is crucial to driving fundraising and membership growth. While funders often rely on traditional audience metrics, data on non-traditional reach can also make a strong case. Additional data about non-traditional reach will be persuasive to many donors, grantors and government agencies who currently rely on traditional metrics to measure a news organization's reach and success.

INN's work in the field suggests that in many cases, publication on a third-party platform does not result in more direct traffic to the nonprofit outlet's website. Given current challenges to capture a holistic picture, it is worth assessing a combination of direct audience and third-party audience metrics across platforms to understand readership.

This presents nonprofit publishers with the dual task of ensuring they are making full use of available tools to track and grow their direct audience while also finding ways to measure the wide reach and influence of their work in other publications.

INN Index participants

100 Days in Appalachia

100Reporters

Access Press

ACEsTooHigh

Adirondack Explorer, Inc.

Advocate Media - Dallas Inc.

AfroLA

Alabama Initiative for Independent Journalism (Birmingham Watch)

Alameda Post

Amjambo Africa (Ladder to the Moon Network)

Amplify Utah

An Arm and a Leg/Public Road Productions, LLC

Anthropocene Magazine

Applegate Valley Community Newspaper

Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting

Arizona Luminaria

Ark Valley Voice

Armchair Lehigh Valley

Arnolt Center for Investigative Journalism

Asheville Watchdog

Ashland.news

Aspen Journalism

Athens County Independent (Southeast Ohio Independent News)

Atlanta Civic Circle

Austin Monitor

Austin Vida

Barn Raising Media Inc.

Bay City News Foundation

Bay Nature Institute

Belt Media Collaborative

BenitoLink Inc.

Better Government Association (Illinois Answers Project)

Big Pivots

Block Club Chicago

Bolts

Border Belt Independent

Borderless

Borderzine

Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism (Massachusetts Media Fund, Inc.)

Boulder Reporting Lab

Boyle Heights Beat

Breckenridge Texan

BridgeDetroit; Bridge Michigan

Brookline.News

Bucks County Herald Foundation

California Health Report

CalMatters

Canopy Atlanta

Capital B

Capitol News Illinois

Cardinal News

Carolina Public Press

Cecil Public Media

Center For Broadcast Journalism

Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism

Center for Public Integrity

Center for Responsive Politics (now OpenSecrets)

Central Current

Centro de Periodismo Investigativo

Chalkbeat, Votebeat (Civic News Company - parent company) of Chalkbeat, Votebeat, and future beats to come

Charlottesville Tomorrow

Chesapeake Bay Journal

Chicago Reader (Reader Institute for Community Journalism, Inc/Publisher of the Chicago Reader

Cicero Independiente

Circle of Blue Inc.

City Bureau

City Limits

Cityside

CivicLex

CivicStory

Civil Eats

CoastAlaska, Inc.

Coda Media, Inc. (Coda Story)

Columbia Insight

Columbia Missourian

Community Info Coop (Bloomfied Information Project, now The Jersey Bee)

Conecta Arizona

Connecticut Mirror

Corner Post

Current

Daily Yonder (Center for Rural Strategies)

Dallas Free Press

DC Witness

Deep South Today (includes Mississippi Today and Verite News)

Delaware Currents

Delaware Public Media

Documented

East Greenwich News

East Lansing Info

ecoRI News

Eden Prairie Local News

EdSource

EdSurge

El Paso Matters

El Tecolote

El Timpano

Enlace Latino NC

Evanston RoundTable Media

Feet in 2 Worlds

Flatwater Free Press

Flint Beat (Brown Impact Media Group)

Floodlight

Florida Bulldog

Florida Center for Government Accountability

Food & Environment Reporting Network

Food Bank News

Foothills Forum

Fort Worth Report

Fostering Media Connections

Four Points Media

Fresnoland

Friends of San Quentin News

Futuro Media

Gig Harbor Now

Global Press

Global Reporting Centre

Granite State News Collaborative

Grist Magazine, Inc

Growing Community Media

H2O Radio

INN Index participants

Harpswell Anchor

Hidden City Philadelphia of CultureTrust

High Country News

Highlands Current Inc

Highway 58 Herald

HNE Media Dba The Northeast News

Honolulu Civil Beat

Hoptown Chronicle

Hothouse

Hudson Valley Pilot

In These Times

India Currents Foundation

IndiJ Public Media (parent company of ICT, formerly Indian Country Today)

inewsource

Injustice Watch

Inkstick Media

Inside Climate News

Institute for Public Service Reporting

InvestigateWest

Investigative Journalism Foundation

Investigative Post

Investigative Reporting Workshop

Invisible Institute

Ipswich Local News

Isthmus Community Media, Inc.

Jewish Currents

Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting

Kentucky Center for Public Service Journalism/ Northern Kentucky Tribune

Kentucky Health News

Key Biscayne Independent

Key Peninsula News

Knock Publishing Company

KOSU Radio

KPCW

KQED

Lexington Observer

Limestone Media

LkldNow

LOOKOUT Publications

Los Angeles Public Press

Lower Cape TV

Madison365

Making Contact

Marblehead Current (Marblehead News Group, Inc.)

MarylandReporter.com Inc.

Matter News (Grey Matter Media)

Mendocino Voice (The Mendocino Voice)

Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting (now Investigate Midwest)

Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service

MindSite News

Mineral Wells Area News

MinnPost

Mission Local SF

Mississippi Free Press (Mississippi Journalism and Education Group)

MIWISCONSIN

MLK50: Justice Through Journalism

Mongabay Org Corporation

Montana Free Press

Montclair Local Nonprofit News

Montpelier Bridge (now Capital Region Community Media, Bridge Community Media)

Mother Jones (Foundation for National Progress)

Mountain Journal

Mountain State Spotlight

MuckRock

My Neighborhood News Network

NancyOnNorwalk

Nashville Banner

National Catholic Reporter

National Parks Traveler

Nevada Public Radio

New Hampshire Center for Public Interest Journalism

New Haven Independent

New Mexico In Depth

New York Focus

Newton Beacon

Next City

NJ Spotlight News

NonDoc Media

North Carolina Health News

North Dakota News Cooperative

OCCRP (Organized Crime & Corruption Reporting Project)

Oklahoma Watch

Open Campus

Open Vallejo (Informed California Foundation)

Outlier Media

Oviedo Community News

palabra.

Pasquines

PassBlue

Patagonia Regional Times

PBS NewsHour

PBS39

Peekskill Herald

Piedmont Journalism Foundation

Pikes Peak Bulletin

Pine Plains Local Journalism Project Inc.

Planet Detroit

Plateau Daily News

Plymouth Independent

PolitiFact

Prism

Prison Journalism Project

ProPublica

PRX

Public Health Watch

Public Square Amplified

PublicSource

PVD Eye (The Providence Eye)

Radio Ambulante Studios, Inc.

Reasons to be Cheerful

Religion News Service

ReligionUnplugged (The Media Project)

Resolve Philly

Rest Of World Media, Inc.

Retro Report, Inc.

Rochester Beacon

Sahan Journal

Salish Current

San Antonio Report

San Francisco Public Press

San José Spotlight

Santa Cruz Local

Sapan News Network

Scalawag

INN Index participants

Science Friday

Searchlight New Mexico

Shasta Scout

Shelterforce (National Housing Institute)

Sierra Nevada Ally (The Sierra Nevada Ally)

Signal Ohio (includes Signal Cleveland)

SJVWater

Sludge (Participatory Politics Foundation)

Solitary Watch

Sopris Sun (The Sopris Sun)

South Dakota News Watch

South Side Weekly NFP

Spotlight PA

SpotlightDC: Capital City Fund for Investigative Journalism

Springfield Daily Citizen, Inc.

Stocktonia News Service

Street Roots

Street Sense Inc

Streetcar Suburbs Publishing Inc. (formerly Hyattsville Community Newspaper Inc.)

The 19th*

The 74 (74 Media)

The 9th Street Journal

The Appeal

The Atlanta Voice

The Austin Bulldog

The Badger Project

The Beacon

The Bedford Citizen

The Belmont Voice

The Buckeye Flame

The Center for Investigative Reporting, Inc.

The Charlotte News

The Chronicle Of Philanthropy Inc.

THE CITY

The Commons (Vermont Independent Media)

The Contributor

The Conversation U.S.

The Current (The Current GA)

The Current Media

The Daily Tar Heel

The DC Line

The Dial

The Examination

The Forward

The Frisc

The Frontier

The Garrison Project

The Hechinger Report

The Hinesburg Record

The Hummel Report

The Indiana Citizen (Indiana Citizen Education Foundation, Inc.)

The Intercept

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

The Ithaca Voice Inc.

The Jersey Vindicator (New Jersey Center For Nonprofit Journalism)

The JOLT News Organization

The Journal (Kansas Leadership Center)

The Kansas City Defender

The Kent Good Times Dispatch (Kent News, Inc.)

The Lakeville Journal Company; The Lakeville Journal Foundation

The Land

The Lens

The Lund Report, Inc.

The Macon Newsroom (Mercer University)

The Maine Monitor (The Maine Center For Public Interest Reporting)

The Marjorie

The Marshall Project

The Narwhal

The Needham Observer

The Nevada Independent

The New Bedford Light

The Objective

The Oglethorpe Echo (The Oglethorpe Echo Legacy Inc.)

The Record North Shore (The Record Community News)

The Red & Black Publishing Company

The Red Hook Daily Catch (now The Daily Catch)

The Reporters Inc.

The Riverside Record

The Salt Lake Tribune

The Shoestring

The Texas Tribune

The Trace

The Tributary

The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

The Venetoulis Institute For Local Journalism

The War Horse

The Water Desk

The West View (West View Media)

The XylomThe Xylom

Threshold (Auricle Productions/Threshold)

Threshold (Auricle Productions/Threshold)

Tone Madison

Tradeoffs

Tucson Sentinel

Turnagain News LLC

Type Investigations

Underscore (Underscore News)

Unsettled

Voice of OC (Voice of Orange County)

Voice of San Diego

Voices of Monterey Bay

VoxPopuli Corp.

VTDigger (Vermont Journalism Trust)

Washington Monthly

Watershed Voice

Wausau Pilot and Review

WCBU

Western North Carolina Public Radio

WFAE

WGLT

WHYY, Inc.

Winchester News Group, Inc.

Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (Wisconsin Watch)

WITF

WitnessLA

WJCT

WVIA

WyoFile

Yale Environment 360

YES! Media

YourArlington

YR Media



Institute for
Nonprofit News

inn.org

Please contact INN's communications team at
news@inn.org with any questions or press inquiries.