Nonprofit News Fact Sheets

Nonprofit news grows and advances on different paths, largely driven by geographic scope
Dear friends of nonprofit news:

The future of journalism looks intriguing right now. News startups are launching all over the country; well-established newsrooms keep growing. We’re driven by all kinds of questions: How do small local news startups survive at the high rates they do? How are communities backing them? What’s working for the specialists who cover a single subject, with intensity and expertise? What DNA does investigative powerhouse ProPublica in New York share with the Patagonia Regional Times community newspaper in rural Arizona?

INN launched the Index in 2018, a rare opportunity to study a new philanthropic field in real time, as it develops. At that time, we lumped the field of 100 or so U.S. nonprofit newsrooms together in one study. Now there are more than 360 nonprofit newsrooms, together one of the biggest reporting networks in the country.

What we’ve learned as the nonprofit journalism field grows is that nonprofit news is not a business model; it draws on many business models. The umbrella term “nonprofit news” covers several types of news media models aligned by their public service mission that shapes their journalism and their commitments to the communities they serve.

In this supplement to INN’s 2021 Index Report, we break out five distinct segments of the nonprofit news field: Local news, state and regional news, national and global news, publications primarily serving communities of color, and single-subject news specialists. These segments are certainly not homogenous, yet each group shares characteristics in how they develop distinct revenue, product and audience models to support strong journalism and public service.

1 NATIONAL AND GLOBAL NEWS OUTLETS tend to be larger than their state and local counterparts. These strongholds of the field attract most of the field’s foundation and major donor revenue. They achieve wide reach through a combination of direct and third-party distribution.

2 STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS OUTLETS operate on smaller budgets than their national counterparts. As a group, they have the most balanced funding mix of revenue from foundations, donors and earned sources. These outlets have relied on traditional media to distribute their work, but increasingly look to engage audiences directly.

3 LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS tend to be the smallest of the nonprofits. They lag the field on major donor support but derive above average shares of revenue from earned sources, small donors and members. With smaller audiences, local outlets achieve nearly all of their reach by direct distribution.

4 OUTLETS THAT PRIMARILY SERVE COMMUNITIES OF COLOR are most often local. They attract a hefty share of their revenue from foundations, but draw a smaller share of their revenue from donor support, compared to the field overall. Like other local outlets, they reach the bulk of their audiences directly.

5 SINGLE-SUBJECT NEWS OUTLETS tend to be national or global in scope. They rely more on foundation support than the rest of the field. These outlets reach the vast majority of their audiences through their own direct channels.
The enclosed fact sheets break out the business models, audience approaches and editorial focus of each of these segments. For nonprofit news leaders who seek clearer benchmarking data, this provides comparisons closer to your own model. For philanthropists supporting one type of news outlet, this can provide a miniature "state of the field" narrowed to your area of focus or impact. For researchers intrigued by the future of news, we hope this provides more insights.

This resource is made possible thanks to our members, who commit to financial and editorial transparency and share their data and distinct business approaches with each other in the name of collective knowledge-building. And from their distinct approaches, INN and its members are finding new levers and new ways to build news reporting that works.

Sue Cross, INN’s CEO and executive director

INN Index
Recurring survey of members’ revenue, audiences, staffing, DEI and other indicators

Case Studies
Lessons learned and progress made by individual news organizations

Guides
How-to playbooks for practitioners, including guides for launching a new outlet, converting to a nonprofit, and growing earned revenue

Research from our peers
Useful data and examples from the field of nonprofit news

Compensation Study
Average salaries, benefits and more from across the field

INN’s research reveals strengths, challenges and opportunities for the nonprofit news field.

The Institute for Nonprofit News provides actionable research on nonprofit journalism for our members, partners and the wider field. Our research captures the progress and setbacks across the nonprofit news field and highlights the best practices and success stories that emerge from our members.
Local news organizations: A startup boom

The local sector of nonprofit news is growing rapidly, with an average of nearly one launch per month for each of the past three years. The number of local organizations has nearly doubled since 2016, and the newcomers often operate on much smaller budgets than their predecessors.

**Definition:** Local news organizations are those that cover part or all of a community, municipality or county or a cluster of them, ranging from large metro areas to rural communities. This study includes 92 local outlets, which accounted for more than a third of the nonprofit news field in the United States and Canada in 2020.

The landscape

**Growth:** Local news was once a small segment of nonprofit news. One in six outlets was local prior to 2008. Growth accelerated in 2018 as gaps in local news coverage widened. A total of 33 local outlets launched in 2018-2020, including 11 during the COVID crisis in 2020. Local nonprofit outlets now operate in 28 states and the District of Columbia.

- **Examples:** The City launched in 2019 in New York and the San Antonio Heron launched in 2018.

**Mission:** Local outlets are often generalists in a field that tends to specialize. Local organizations are much more likely to cover a broad range of topics and to focus on current news and events.

- **Examples:** New Haven Independent in Connecticut and The DCLine in Washington cover a broad range of news topics.

**Focus on communities of color:** Local nonprofit news outlets are more likely to say coverage of a community or communities of color is a primary mission. One in four local organizations have that focus, compared to one in six survey respondents overall.

- **Examples:** Block Club Chicago and Cicero Independiente focus on covering Illinois communities of color.
Revenue

Total revenue: Most local nonprofit news outlets sit on the lower end of the revenue scale compared with the rest of the nonprofit news field. Two-thirds generate revenue of less than $500,000 a year. Median revenue was $257,500 in 2020. Local organizations account for 36% of nonprofit outlets, but collectively take in only 13% of nonprofit news revenue.

Revenue gains: More mature local organizations showed significant gains since INN launched the Index. Among 19 local organizations that provided revenue data for 2017 in the first survey and for 2020 in the latest survey, 11 reported increases and five more than doubled their revenue.

- Examples: City Bureau and Wausau Pilot & Review each reported revenue increases of threefold or more from 2017 to 2020.

Revenue mix: Local nonprofit news organizations match the rest of the field in share of total revenue from foundations. They enjoy above average support from small donors and members but lag in major gifts. Individual giving as a share of total revenue declined from 40% of total revenue in 2019 to 29% last year. One major factor in this decrease is the influx of small startups that have not yet developed significant donor revenue. Meanwhile, the share of earned revenue has risen steadily among local outlets, from 10% of total revenue in 2017 to 23% in 2020. The newcomer organizations raised the same share of revenue from earned sources as the established outlets, with about one third of the startups reporting revenue from advertising sales.

Revenue outlook: More local organizations are launching in small communities that may not have large foundations or wealthy donors to tap for revenue. At the same time, local organizations may be able to generate earned revenue from sources such as community-based advertising and sponsorships as well as developing small donations or memberships.

Staffing

- Employees of color make up 37% of local news organizations’ management, staff and significant contractors, somewhat higher than the 32% in the rest of the field.
- Most local nonprofit outlets operate with a small staff. The median staff size (full-time equivalents for staff and significant contractors) is 4.5, with the number of paid personnel ranging from 0 to 31.

Audience

Local news outlets are well-positioned to build and engage local audiences directly through a variety of platforms. Since they are reaching nearly 90% of their audience directly, as opposed to syndication or partnerships with larger news outlets, efforts to grow web and newsletter audiences could be leveraged to grow earned revenue.
State and regional organizations: A balanced revenue mix

State and regional organizations have grown significantly in number in the past decade and now operate in 40 U.S. states, as well as Puerto Rico and at least one Canadian province. As a group, they lead the field in developing a revenue mix that balances multiple funding sources.

**Definition:** These news outlets primarily focus on government policy or politics or topics of public interest such as health or the environment in a single state or in a region. There are 60 state and 21 regional outlets in this study. Together, they make less than one-third of the nonprofit field.

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**The landscape**

**Growth:** State-focused nonprofit news outlets often fill significant news and information gaps, and the trajectory of the state/regional organizations reflects that. Before 2008, there were only nine of them, about one-tenth of the field. When the last recession hit, cash-strapped legacy news organizations sharply reduced or eliminated state and regional coverage. Enter nonprofit news: 27 state and regional organizations launched between 2008 and 2011. Since then, the sector has enjoyed steady growth.

- **Examples:** Among the newcomers, Searchlight New Mexico and 100 Days in Appalachia both launched in 2017.

**Mission:** State and regional outlets are most likely to produce investigative or explanatory journalism. Nearly half have in-depth investigative reporting as their primary focus. They tend to cover a limited number of topics, such as environment, education and health, often under the umbrella of government coverage.

- **Examples:** South Dakota News Watch launched in 2018, and NJ Spotlight News launched in 2010.

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**Coverage Scope**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage Scope</th>
<th>% of Outlets That Cover</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Single Topic</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several Related Topics</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Range of Topics</td>
<td>35%</td>
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**Primary Mission**

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<tr>
<th>Primary Mission</th>
<th>% of Outlets Focusing On</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis or Explanatory</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>News &amp; Events</td>
<td>14%</td>
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Numbers may not add up to 100% because of rounding.
Revenue

- **Total revenue:** State and regional organizations tend to run lean operations. More than half operate on less than $500,000 in annual revenue, including four in 10 that take in less than $250,000. Median revenue in 2020 was $360,000. These outlets take in 26% of total nonprofit news revenue while representing 30% of the field.

- **Revenue gains:** Established organizations posted revenue gains between 2017, the year for which INN first collected data, and the latest survey covering 2020 operations. Among 33 state and regional outlets that provided revenue data for 2017 and for 2020, 22 reported revenue gains.

  - **Examples:** Carolina Public Press and the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism both more than doubled their revenue from 2017 to 2020.

- **Revenue mix:** State and regional outlets derive a significant share of their revenue from contributions. Individual giving nearly equals that of foundation grants as a share of total revenue. As such, they are less reliant on foundation funding than the rest of the field. The share of revenue they generate from earned income sources such as advertising and sponsorships has been on the rise, accounting for 20% of total revenue in 2020, compared with 14% field-wide.

- **Revenue outlook:** These organizations may be well positioned to lead the field in developing a balanced range of revenue sources, including from earned sources.

Staffing

- As a group, state and regional organizations have a lower percentage of employees of color than the rest of the field, a difference that is most pronounced at the top level, where only one in five executives is a person of color.

- Many state and regional nonprofits operate with small staffs. The median staff size (full-time equivalents for staff and significant contractors) is 5.5, less than half the median of national organizations. The staff sizes range from 1 to 70. Only one-third have 10 or more.

Audience

Nearly two-thirds reach their audience primarily by direct means, a significant increase from four in 10 in 2017. These organizations traditionally relied heavily on reaching their audience through established third-party publications, such as local newspapers. But the field as a whole has been seeking to expand its direct audience and convert audience members into donors.
National and global organizations: A powerhouse in nonprofit news

National and global organizations make up the most established and prominent group in nonprofit news. Their revenue, reach and impact dwarf the rest of the field.

Definition: National organizations focus on public affairs issues that affect the entire country, whereas global organizations generally take aim at broad world topics or they produce news of distant places. There are 70 of these organizations in the study, including 47 national and 23 global in scope. Together they made up just under a third of the field in 2020.

The landscape

Growth of outlets: National and global organizations dominated the early development of the nonprofit news field. More than half of national and global outlets publishing today already existed ten years ago. In the past decade, a slower pace of new launches has not blunted the significant impact of these organizations, which routinely appear among finalists or winners of major U.S. journalism awards.

• Examples: The 19th and The Markup launched in 2020.

Mission: Many nationally or globally focused outlets produce in depth explanatory reporting. Many cover a single topic such as the environment, education, criminal justice or religion. They account for more than half of all single-topic outlets. Others cover several related topics, such as news about or for indigenous peoples, youth, veterans or military families.

• Examples: Solitary Watch covers solitary confinement. The Counter focuses on inequality in the U.S. food system.
Revenue

**Total revenue:** As might be expected, national outlets operate on larger budgets than the rest of the field. Well over half generate annual revenue of $1 million or more. Median revenue in 2020 was $1.8 million for national organizations and $446,000 for global organizations. While these organizations represent less than one-third of the field, they generate 60% of the field’s total revenue.

**Revenue gains:** Twenty-three national and global outlets participated in both the first INN Index survey, covering 2017 operations, and the latest survey, covering 2020. More than half reported revenue gains during that time.

- **Examples:** Grist more than doubled revenue from 2017 to 2020.

**Charitable revenue:** With high visibility and prominent impact on a national or global scale, these organizations benefit from stronger foundation and major donor support than the rest of the field. Seventy percent of the individual giving dollars they receive comes from major donors.

**Earned revenue:** Earned revenue, such as sponsorships and events, does not figure prominently in the national/global nonprofit portfolio. It accounts for less than 10% of revenue for these outlets. Fewer than half reported earned revenue from any source.

**Revenue outlook:** Together, national and global organizations command the lion’s share of revenue in the nonprofit field. Given their high profile and demonstrated impact, charitable support for these organizations is likely to remain strong.

Staffing

- One-third of their total personnel and one-fourth of their executives are people of color, about average for the field.
- The median personnel (including staff and significant contractors) of these organizations is 12 full-time equivalents (FTEs), more than double the rest of the field. The range is 1 to 148 FTEs.
- National organizations have a median of 13 FTEs and global organizations have 10.

Audience

While national and global organizations reach a lower share of their audience by direct distribution, rather than through third-party distribution partnerships or syndication, they excel at direct e-newsletter and web reach.

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<th>AUDIENCE REACH</th>
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<tr>
<td>MEDIAN NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS</td>
<td>16,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEDIAN MONTHLY UNIQUE VISITORS</td>
<td>81,000</td>
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Organizations that focus on communities of color: Mostly local, urban

Nonprofit news organizations whose primary mission is serving communities of color have nearly doubled in number since 2017.

Definition: Our survey asked whether a publication “has a primary mission of creating content for, about and/or with communities of color.” There are 50 such organizations in this study, making up one-fifth of the nonprofit news field.

The landscape

Growth: Only 10 of these organizations existed prior to 2008, when nonprofit news entered a sustained period of growth. An additional 16 launched prior to 2017. Since then, 24 have launched, including four during the COVID crisis in 2020.


Mission: Outlets that cover communities of color tend to be local and to focus on a small number of topics. For now, they are largely an urban phenomenon: Most of the local outlets are based in metro areas or cities including New York City, Boston and Seattle. In terms of mission, they are more likely to cover news and events than to focus primarily on in depth investigations or explanatory journalism.

Examples: Two nonprofits cover news for and about communities of color in Wisconsin – Madison 365 and the Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service.
Revenue

Total revenue: Organizations in this group have a wide range of revenue. However, a significant percentage generate $250,000 or less a year. As a result, they generate 15% of total revenue in the field while representing one-fifth of all outlets. Median revenue in 2020 was $520,000, which is significantly higher than the rest of the field.

Revenue mix: These organizations collectively receive from foundations a share of revenue that is significantly higher than the rest of the field. At the same time, their share from individual giving is about half that of the rest. The earned revenue share is about the same.

Revenue outlook: Some of these organizations operate in communities that do not have a lot of wealth, posing challenges for developing a significant donor base from direct audiences. Continuing foundation funding may be critical as these community-focused outlets explore funding methods.

Staffing

- The percentage of personnel overall that are people of color is much higher than in the rest of the field: 55% of all personnel are people of color, including 52% of top executives.

- In the individual organizations, people of color usually make up a significant share (40% or more) of total personnel. The median number of full-time equivalents for this group is 6.8, slightly higher than in the rest of the field.

Audience

While most of these organizations say digital is their primary distribution platform, some use other methods of engaging their communities, such as SMS. Nearly half publish in at least one language in addition to English or exclusively in a different language.

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Single-topic news organizations: A growing niche

Single-topic organizations represent one-fifth of the nonprofit news field. This niche group has quadrupled in number since 2008, fueled in part by success in attracting foundation support.

**Definition:** Single-topic outlets maintain a tight focus on and produce specialized reporting about one topic of public interest such as criminal justice, education, energy, environment, housing or religion. The 51 single-topic outlets in this study vary in their geographic scope, although most are national in scope. We highlighted these outlets because they are distinct in their fundraising and audience reach.

The landscape

**Growth:** From fewer than a dozen outlets when the nonprofit news boom began in 2008, the single-subject sector has expanded at an average rate of nearly three launches per year, accelerating with the launch of 11 organizations in 2018-19.

- **Examples:** Food Bank News and The Water Desk launched in 2019.

**Mission:** Most single-topic organizations produce analysis and explanatory reporting, to a greater extent than the field as a whole.

- **Examples:** The War Horse reports on the human impact of military service. EdSource reports on education policy in California.
Revenue

**Total revenue:** Nearly half of single-topic organizations generate revenue of more than $500,000, similar to the rest of the field, and the median revenue per outlet in 2020 was $480,400. Single-topic organizations take in 23% of nonprofit revenue while making up 22% of the field.

**Revenue gains:** More established organizations proved their staying power. Of 16 outlets that provided revenue data for 2017 in the first survey and for 2020 in the latest survey, 12 reported revenue increases and none reported a decline in revenue during that time.

- **Examples:** Chalkbeat, which covers education in the U.S., more than doubled revenue.

**Revenue mix:** Single-topic organizations draw more than half of their revenue from foundations, a much higher share than the rest of the field. Since 2017, single-topic outlets have doubled the share of revenue from individual giving.

**Revenue outlook:** Grant support has been a bright spot for single-topic news organizations, which can tap foundations that are highly engaged in specific issues. Earned revenue, underdeveloped across the nonprofit news field, is especially so among single-topic sites.

Staffing

- About one-third of all personnel are people of color. However only one in five executives is a person of color, which is low compared with the rest of the field.

- Most single-topic outlets operate with a small staff. The median staff size (full-time equivalents for staff and significant contractors) is five, with the number of paid personnel ranging from 0 to 71.

Audience

These outlets say they reach 82% of their audience on their own platforms, higher direct reach than the field at large, in part because they can effectively define and target key audiences for their work. They are much less likely than the rest of the field to reach their audience through publication partnerships.
About the survey

The Index is the most comprehensive study of nonprofit news. INN’s latest Index Report found that the nonprofit news sector grew by almost every measure. During a year of crises, audiences swelled, coverage expanded, staffing measures increased, and individual giving revenue surged for many. Previous Index reports are archived.

METHODS: INN distributed the Index survey online in January 2021 to 284 INN network newsrooms, excluding service organizations that are also INN members, and 268, or 94%, completed the survey. Survey responses reflect performance in 2020. Survey language is provided here. The data do not scientifically represent all U.S. nonprofit news outlets, since not all belong to INN. Specific year-over-year comparisons should be interpreted cautiously; this report draws directional trends across the field.

To better understand how the field is developing, the Index team analyzed revenue and other performance data for 2020 based on:

• Geographic scope: Whether the organization serves a defined local community, focuses on news of a state or a region, or is national or global in the scope of its coverage.

• Coverage scope: Whether the organization focuses on a single-subject, a limited number of related subjects or covers general news like more traditional organizations.

• Journalistic mission: Whether the organization focuses primarily on in depth investigative reporting, analysis and explanatory journalism or current events.

• Communities of color: Whether or not an organization has a primary mission of providing coverage for and about one or more communities of color.

ABOUT INN

The Institute for Nonprofit News supports and strengthens a network of more than 350 newsrooms. In partnership with our members, INN is creating a new future for news: independent, inclusive, non-partisan, and dedicated to public interest rather than private profit. Our success supports informed communities and democratic life across North America. In a little over a decade, the INN network has grown tenfold. INN is now advancing another cycle of tenfold growth to build an American field force of more than 20,000 public service journalists.

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