

Survey: Assessing the barriers to visual reporting in rural news markets

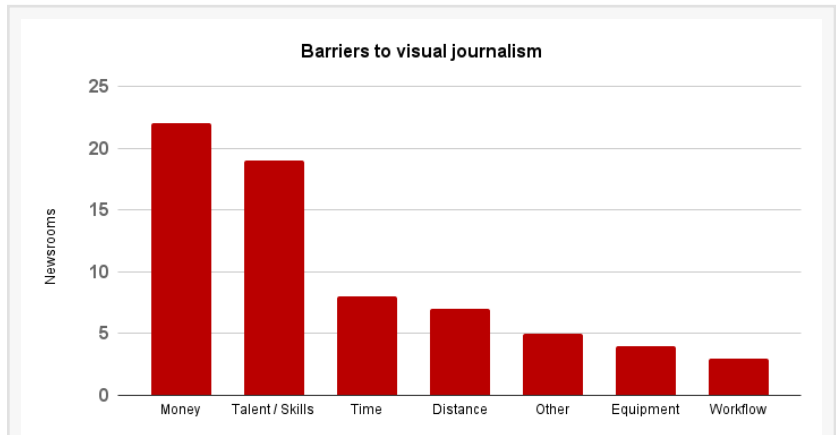
US-based local news outlets are invited to participate in an open survey to provide a comprehensive view of the state of visual journalism in local media.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, UNITED STATES, December 17, 2024 /

EINPresswire.com/ -- News deserts, areas with limited or no access to local news sources, have given way to image deserts. According to a [report from CatchLight](#), a San Francisco-based visual media organization, and the Rural News Network, a project of the Institute for Nonprofit News, this is especially true in rural regions of the United States. For many of the news outlets represented in the Rural News Network, difficulty accessing remote areas is just one of the persistent challenges they face when it comes to visual reporting.

“Visual journalism is vital for the future of local news,” says Jenny Stratton, executive editor for CatchLight Local. “In rural areas, where people can feel excluded or disconnected from larger media outlets, visual storytelling can bring local issues to life in a way that preserves and reflects the nuances, daily realities, local knowledge and stories each community holds.”

Local news organizations serving rural



Among the newsrooms surveyed for this report, resources and talent are the top challenges for producing visual journalism.



Fox collects sweet grass on the Badger-Two Medicine, a rocky 130,000-acre region of sacred terrain for the Blackfeet Nation in Montana. The area has been embroiled in a land fight with oil and gas interests for decades. Photo: Andrea Bruce / CatchLight Global

audiences also face digital divides that may limit their readers' access to news media and contribute to less reliable internet access, making it difficult to load images or stream videos and other multimedia content. Although rural communities in the U.S. share some of the same challenges, they are by no means a monolith, and more visual journalism is needed to build more inclusive representation, close widening information gaps and prevent misinformation.

“When I think about innovation in rural journalism, I think about how journalists from Nebraska and Mississippi to West Virginia and New Hampshire are finding ways to cover the far corners of their communities,” said Emily Lytle, Innovation in Focus editor at the Reynolds Journalism Institute. “I often hear from journalists who are looking to stretch their resources and expand their ability to share visual stories because they recognize that visual journalism is one of the most powerful tools we have to amplify often-overlooked rural stories.”

Affirming Lytle’s statement, two-thirds of newsrooms surveyed reported that visuals are a high or very high priority. However, few have dedicated visual staff, and even fewer have visual teams. The majority of newsrooms surveyed rely on a patchwork approach, with just 17.5% employing a full-time staff photographer or dedicated visual journalist.

To help address this prevailing issue, CatchLight Local launched a collaborative visual desk in California aimed at increasing access to high-quality visual journalism for community-based newsrooms. This year, the initiative expanded to serve local news outlets across the United States and is [accepting new members](#) on a rolling basis.

This survey is part of a broader effort to understand the needs of local newsrooms. The project emerged from the authors’ participation in the Institute for Nonprofit News Emerging Leaders Council, where they identified a lack of current data on the resource challenges experienced in local news outlets. The findings, while preliminary, represent the industry’s first network-wide survey focused on visual journalism in rural newsrooms.

Invitation to participate:

In order to gain a comprehensive picture of the state of visual journalism in local media,



A trucking company warehouse on flooded farmland near Hansen Ranches, south of Corcoran, Calif., on March 23, 2023. Photo: Larry Valenzuela / CalMatters / CatchLight Local

CatchLight and Prism Photo Workshop are expanding the survey to local newsrooms across the United States. The organizers are offering a raffle incentive to invite the time and knowledge of local news leaders. The deadline to [participate in the survey](#) is January 24, 2025. Results will be published in an updated report in 2025.

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CatchLight | www.catchlight.io

CatchLight is a visual-first media organization that leverages the power of visual storytelling to inform, connect, and transform communities. The organization invests in the future of visual storytelling through the CatchLight Local Visual Journalism Initiative, which seeks to establish the sustainability of visual journalism by providing community-based newsrooms with editorial resources, training, and strategic partnerships; the CatchLight Global Fellowship, which provides grants to visual storytelling leaders worldwide; and CatchLight's public programs, including the Visual Storytelling Summit, Night of Photojournalism, and Focal Point conversation series, which showcase impact in visual storytelling and expand public awareness, access, and support for the field.

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