



Syracuse University Survey Finds Burnout Is Top Challenge for Independent Local News Publishers

Report from the Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship draws on responses from 112 publishers in 37 states and Washington, D.C.

SYRACUSE, NY, UNITED STATES, October 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- More than 55% of publishers of independent local news organizations cite burnout as a concern, and about 52% view balancing journalism with business operations as one of their most pressing challenges, a new survey finds.

Researchers behind the survey from Syracuse University's [Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship](#) (IDJC) sought to examine the issues facing independent publishers as they seek to fill gaps created by the collapse of traditional local newsrooms.

Burnout is the most common challenge, cited by more than half of publishers, in the survey, "[A Hard Reality: Independent Local Journalism in the United States](#)." Among those with 100-500 paying subscribers, 77% of publishers cited burnout as a challenge.

At that stage, the operation is "too successful to remain a hobby-sized operation, but not yet successful enough to become an adequately staffed business," the report says.

The study was conducted by veteran news executive and educator Merrill Brown, an IDJC visiting fellow, and researcher Jacob Spudich G'26, who graduated with a master's in advanced media management from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. The institute is led jointly by Newhouse and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

Brown hopes the research helps inform the journalism industry and the public about the importance of understanding the current local news environment and the challenges facing entrepreneurs serving their communities.

"More financing, more training and more local support is required if the current independent local news revolution is going to be sustained," Brown says.

The survey found a range of financial situations for publishers: roughly 1 in 4 drew their entire personal income from the outlet, while 1 in 5 earned less than 25% of their income from the

venture—reflecting a need for publishers to draw from other income sources. Nearly 22% of publishers identified scaling their business beyond a one-person operation as their top financial hurdle.

Brown and Spudich argue the next phase of local news development should focus less on finding a single fix for the local news crisis and more on building the conditions, including raising capital, skills training and shared expertise, that let many different local solutions succeed.

Especially critical is entrepreneurial training, the report says, that places topics like revenue strategy, audience development and organizational leadership as core to the profession, alongside reporting, editing and storytelling.

“A business that survives because its founder works unsustainable hours is not yet a sustainable business,” the authors say. “A publication that depends upon a spouse's salary or retirement income may produce excellent journalism but doesn't necessarily provide a replicable economic model.”

Other key findings:

- Fewer than 5% became independent publishers out of necessity, and fewer than 2% said they would consider returning to a traditional newsroom.
- 3 in 4 respondents are highly dependent on a single distribution platform they don't control.
- 82% of respondents use advertising or sponsorships; more than half have used grants or fellowships, and only 6.3% rely on subscriptions alone.

“We hope these findings can serve as a roadmap and support system for local journalism entrepreneurs, as well as a base on which additional research about efforts to rebuild local news can be built,” says Margaret Talev, Kramer Director of the IDJC.

The study drew on a spring 2026 survey of 277 independent local news operators that yielded 112 completed responses from publishers in 37 states and Washington, D.C., and follow-up interviews with nine publishers.

[View the full report](#) for detailed survey findings and interview excerpts.

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