



WINTER 2024 | VOLUME 3 NUMBER 1



## Journalism and AI

Navigate your YouTube video backlog with ease

Digital screens offer Black news and ads a seat



# Note from the Director

**Randy Picht**  
RJI Executive Director



**WELCOME TO THE WINTER 2024** edition of RJI Insight.

If you've been following our work, you know we are about practical innovation in community news — the kind that doesn't stop with a theory but is tested in the field and backed by research. Like the drone in the cover image, this is innovation you can see and sometimes even touch. This season's issue showcases some great examples of our approach.

Consider, for instance, the continually expanding, multi-state network of digital screens that help Black media reach their communities in a challenging advertising environment (p. 16). Then there is the work of our RJI Fellows, with the newest cohort busy testing and refining their open-source resources for newsrooms facing a variety of challenges (p. 8).

And from a massive, game-changing survey on burnout in the news industry (p. 4) to a 10-state study on the environmental and media sentiments of people in the Mississippi River Basin (p. 9), RJI's research is aimed at gathering the most in-depth understanding of industry issues so that we can create the most useful solutions.

Part of that understanding also comes from keeping our ears to the ground and determining what the newest trends and advances mean for the future of news. It's clear by now that machine learning is more than just the latest craze — read what experts have to say about how we move forward from here (p. 12).

In fact, you'll find a thread of AI in many of this issue's stories, such as Paul Cheung's reviews of AI-assisted tools that can sort through, timestamp and summarize YouTube videos to help you save time (p. 20).

We also have a few features in this issue that address RJI's impact in new ways. Take a look at p. 23 for our yearly impact report, which illustrates the scale of our efforts to strengthen community news. It sits alongside our strategic plan (p. 22), and for good reason. As our work continues to expand, we have never been more focused on the core of RJI's existence: real innovation that you can use.

But as always, that innovation isn't a one-way street — reach out if you'd like to collaborate.

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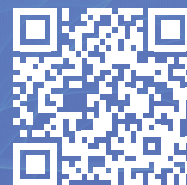
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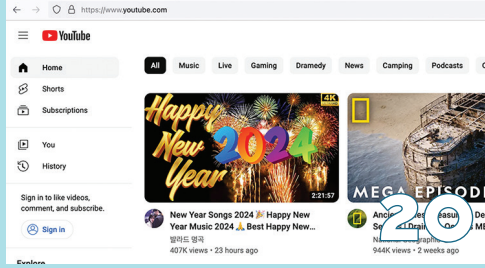
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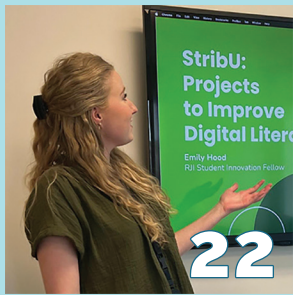
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## ON THE COVER

RJI's facilities were host to nearly 80 high school students from across the U.S. who participated in the Missouri School of Journalism's annual High School Summer Workshop in June 2023. These future journalists received hands-on training about how to utilize a drone to help tell a story from Assistant Professor Dominick Lee. Photo: Nate Brown | © 2023 Curators of the University of Missouri



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The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) works with the news industry, professors, students and others to make sure journalism has a long and bright future. As a “think-and-do” tank that opened its doors in 2008, RJI uses its guaranteed funding to work exclusively to strengthen journalism in the service of democracy. It’s part of the Missouri School of Journalism.



## WINTER 2024 VOLUME 3 NUMBER 1

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# Innovation in Focus

## How to use a chatbot to have a conversation with your community

*Innovation in Focus explores new tech, tools and methods of storytelling for newsrooms worldwide. We interview experts, test ideas and provide our findings on a different topic each month. In this edition, Emily Lytle, RJI's Innovation in Focus editor, examines five AI options journalists can use for transcribing audio.*

**AFTER TALKING TO** others experimenting with chatbots in news organizations like NPR and Graham Media Group, RJI was curious how bots could help communities navigate continuous coverage of a topic, answer common questions for readers, or even identify questions that newsrooms aren't already answering in their work.

But how do these chatbots hold up in a real newsroom setting? To find out, RJI partnered with Missouri Independent, a nonprofit news organization covering Missouri state government, politics and policy, and Queen City Nerve, an alternative news outlet that provides a voice for news, culture, arts and music in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area. While several tools for creating chatbots were examined, the platforms Fini, Chat Thing and Manychat were ultimately the ones tested.

### Comparing pricing, storage, user experience

Each platform had varying levels of price plans, which allowed users to upload progressively more documents, build more bots or customize and integrate the bots in different ways.

Queen City Nerve tested Chat Thing (with the \$49/month Standard Plan) by creating a simple bot and launching it in their Slack

space with members. Publisher Justin LaFrancois liked that it integrated easily with Slack and he could build the entire bot on his own, as well as monitor interactions with the bot via a dashboard. The biggest challenge with Chat Thing was the bot often struggled to read .csv files with data.

Missouri Independent tested Fini. Unlike Chat Thing, which is more do-it-yourself, Fini builds the bot for you when you move past the free level. With controls to ensure the bot sticks to the knowledge base and the ability to customize for different platforms besides a website, Fini has a lot going for it.

In Chat Thing and Fini, the bots can cite the links or sources where they found the answer to a question. That said, both occasionally incorrectly attributed a source when the links were checked. Double check this before you let your readers interact with your bot!

Depending on the customizations you request, Fini may require more time or a higher pricing plan. The goal was to put Missouri Independent's chatbot on their Instagram, but the newsroom's IT and social team didn't have the time or resources to integrate the APIs.

Unfortunately, trying to create a bot that would exist on a website would require paying at least two months of the \$500/month

Advanced Plan for the creation and implementation of the chatbot. Still, when LaFrancois looked at Fini's offers, he appreciated that the Advanced Plan allowed him to build unlimited bots and upload as many documents as he wanted for a set price. He considered finding funding specifically for this.

Then, there was Manychat – an entirely different product. Unlike the more generative AI-based platforms, Manychat allows you to create a controlled conversation flow that exists on social media like Instagram and Facebook. One perk is that the free plan is accessible and doesn't require a credit card.

We tried using Manychat on our Innovation Team Instagram, and it was easy to use and a convenient way to answer common questions. If you're fielding many FAQs on Facebook or Instagram, this may be a helpful automation tool.

### Testing the bot in a small group before going live

Before building their first full-fledged bot with Chat Thing, Queen City Nerve tested a simple one in their Slack space. They chose to focus on the development of an old mall and pulled links of 50-60 stories about this from their website. LaFrancois then launched the bot in their Slack space and was



PLATFORM	PRICE	STORAGE	MESSAGES	LIMITS / FEATURES
Fini	Starter – <b>Free</b>	Unlimited documents	25 questions per month	Deploy up to 3 bots Supports 1 language
	Growth Plan – <b>\$0.096 per question asked</b>	1,000 documents	10,000 questions	Unlimited bots
	Advanced Plan – minimum <b>\$500/month</b> (for news orgs)	Unlimited	Unlimited	Custom integrations: Slack, Zendesk, etc. Uses GPT-4
Chat Thing	<b>Free</b>	1 data source; about 450,000 words	Aprox 40 messages	1 chatbot
	Basic – <b>\$14/month</b>	1 data source per bot; about 2.25 million words	Aprox 1,000 messages	3 bots
	Standard – <b>\$49/month</b>	3 data sources per bot; About 7.5 million words	Aprox 5,000 messages	6 bots, No Chat Thing logo, GPT-4, Integrations: Slack, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram
Chatling	<b>Free</b>	5 files; 500,000 characters	35 message responses	1 bot
	Basic – <b>\$15/month</b>	15 files; 2.25 million characters	2,250 message responses	5 bots, API access, file size can be 2MB
	Pro – <b>\$35/month</b>	Unlimited files; 4.5 million characters	5,500 message responses	10 bots; 25 MB file size

clear with members that he wanted them to ask it questions as a test.

This gave us a better understanding of how people might interact with the bot and led to some key takeaways. For example, the bot doesn't always add context to its answers. In one instance, the chatbot answered a question about a specific policy that this community was considering but never acknowledged that the community had rejected this policy until directly asked.

An additional challenge came when readers — who may not be as knowledgeable about specific topics as reporters but are active in their communities — asked questions that are not answered in the original content. Encouragingly, the bot

appropriately said “I don't know” at these times.

Seeing how readers interacted with the bot in this test Slack space also helped inform how Queen City Nerve plans to communicate the bot to their community. LaFrancois plans to create a prompt guide that will help readers make the most of the chatbot. Chatling, which Queen City Nerve considered, was another that seemed to have a lot of potential. LaFrancois decided against it, however, because it did not offer Slack integration or as much storage as Chat Thing.

Overall, many of the platforms worked well in initial test stages, but they sometimes exceeded news organizations' budgets, the customization of the chatbot became

too complicated or the bot would deliver unreliable information. Still, since many of the tools for creating custom chatbots were updating as the experiment progressed, initial tests showed that it was possible to create a bot that would connect communities with their local news in a meaningful way.

It's clear that it is important for newsrooms to trust the tools they use before they can clearly and confidently introduce this innovation to their audience.

**Emily Lytle** is the Innovation in Focus Editor on RJJ's Innovation Team. She produces the monthly web series Innovation in Focus.





# RJI News in Brief

## Survey will provide research-driven solutions to burnout

**RJI'S SURVEY ON BURNOUT** in the news industry, conducted in partnership with research firm SmithGeiger, concluded in late November with more than 1,135 responses, easily surpassing the target for participation in less than two months and making it one of the largest surveys related to burnout ever conducted.

Launched in October, the anonymous, 15-minute survey sought firsthand feedback from journalists about workplace and societal factors that contribute to making burnout the troubling issue it is. Factors included the availability of on-the-job resources, social media harassment and the impacts of public hostility, among others.

The high turnout means more rigorous findings and optimal data to analyze for the final report, which will be available in the first quarter of 2024 and will be sent to journalists and news organizations to help them develop data-backed solutions. RJI also plans to work



directly with industry leadership to develop such solutions, from collaborative research projects to webinars and other events that will make the results accessible to a wide industry audience.

While women and those who have been on the job for a short time appear to be at greater risk of burnout, the issue reaches across generations and specializations. From local news to journalists in all 50 states, from television and radio to student journalists preparing to

enter the workforce, burnout is a topic of concern, and the survey has sought to collect responses from a diverse array of people with various levels of experience.

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## Searching for truth

### When media and military come together

This symposium, a RJI collaboration with the Missouri Law School, will feature panels about whistleblowers, war crimes evidence, mental health and a keynote presentation from a noted war photojournalist.

For more information, contact Robin Nichols ([nicholsrkn@missouri.edu](mailto:nicholsrkn@missouri.edu)).

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## RJI fellowship applications close Feb. 4



**RJI IS ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS** for the next round of RJI Fellows until Feb. 4. Fellows receive a stipend (up to \$100,000 for residential fellows, who spend a year on-site in Columbia, Missouri, and \$25,000 for remote fellows, who can be individuals or institutions and work over a period of eight months) to develop and test a free and accessible resource of practical use to community-centered newsrooms.

Past fellows have built a Slack-based SEO tool, a toolkit to work with incarcerated communities, a development tracker tool, a safety platform and other useful and innovative resources for journalism.

As fellows work on their projects, they also post regular updates on [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org) for journalists and the public to follow along and gain insights from the process. Before being finalized, the resources are tested in real newsrooms, helping to ensure that the end products are feasible and beneficial.

“I think the outstanding element about the RJI Fellowship is that it’s not just that you hand people the money and run. There was so much ongoing support,” said former fellow Linda Austin in an interview with RJI Director of Innovation Kat Duncan. Austin, a journalism educator, created “microlearning” courses designed to quickly teach journalists important skills, such as how to write for mobile audiences. “It was nice dealing with people who were competent, helpful, encouraging, supportive — the kind of environment you’d like to have in every newsroom.”

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# 81st POY contest kicks off in February

**JUDGING FOR** Pictures of the Year, RJI's international and highly prestigious annual photojournalism competition, will run Feb. 5–27.

A \$1,000 cash prize and Tiffany crystal trophy will be awarded to the first place entries in five premier categories, including Photographer of the Year and International Photographer of the Year, and winners will be crowned across a total of 35 categories.

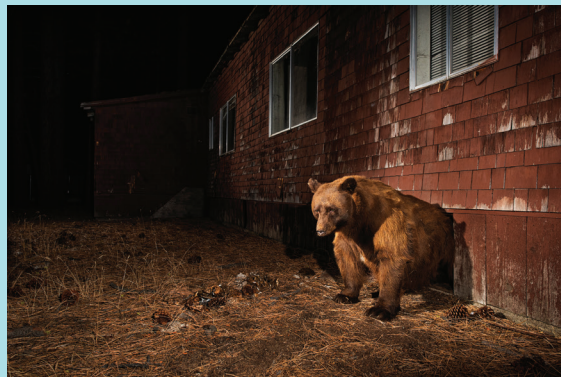
Each year, some of these categories focus on impactful and timely news, and this year's 81st competition will include both single image and picture story categories centered on the Israel-Hamas War.

The call for entries for the competition, which is open to anyone and is the oldest of its kind in the world, concluded Jan. 14. Judging will take place virtually and will be livestreamed via POY.org.

Last year, judges reviewed more than 30,000 images from photojournalists in more than 100 countries.

Right: Corey Arnold | National Geographic Magazine

Below: POY80 Photographer of the Year Gabrielle Lurie | San Francisco Chronicle



Above: Jasper Doest | National Geographic Magazine



Left: Sarahbeth Maney | The New York Times



Left: Kili Yuyan | National Geographic Magazine

## Trusting News launches trust kits



**TRUSTING NEWS**, an organization backed by RJI that uses research-driven strategies to help journalists build stronger relationships with their communities, has launched a series of “trust kits” designed to break down those strategies into step-by-step guides.

The kits center around topics such as transparency, equitable and ethical sourcing and maintaining a proactive newsroom culture.

“We’re foundationally trying to change some of the priorities in newsrooms, change the way journalists

conceive of and talk about their jobs,” said Trusting News Director Joy Mayer, a former RJI fellow who incubated the concept with startup funding from RJI.

Mayer also emphasized that while a big part of Trusting News is about helping journalists explain their work to the public, they are also working to shore up the other side of that relationship — helping journalists understand the public.

“We see ourselves as standing in a gap of trust in the middle of this broken relationship,” Mayer said. “There’s a lot of humility that newsrooms need to exercise to understand who they’re serving and who they’re leaving out. We ask the question: Who would feel seen and understood by your journalism, and who might feel neglected or misrepresented?”

Mayer sat down with RJI Executive Director Randy Picht in December to discuss the kits and more. Scan the QR code right to see the full conversation on RJI’s YouTube channel.



[bit.ly/3Rt8xuX](https://bit.ly/3Rt8xuX)



## Now accepting applications for 2024-2025 RJI Fellowships

**Apply now** to join the next class of **RJI Fellows** and **develop a practical, open-source resource** for community newsrooms. **Read more** about the fellowship on p. 5 and **apply by Feb. 4** to be part of a program that **makes a real difference.**



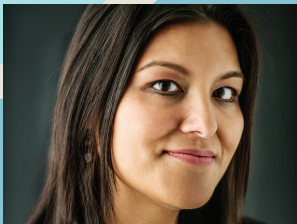
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## Check out the latest from the RJI Insight YouTube series!

You can read about Joy Mayer's interview on p. 7. Here are two more can't miss videos:



**S. Mitra Kalita** is the co-founder and CEO of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown media organizations. She sat down to talk about collaborating with RJI on strategies to forge sustainability and revenue for her network.



[www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-GMaARAbOA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-GMaARAbOA)



**Nora Hertel** is the founder of news startup Project Optimist. Hear about how Nora is working with RJI to cover rural and small-city life in Minnesota in innovative ways.



[www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYgybCAenWQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYgybCAenWQ)

## RJI Fellow Jennifer Mizgata: A culture of care



**THE 2023-2024 CLASS** of RJI Fellows is creating innovative and practical projects aimed at helping newsrooms engage with and accurately represent their communities.



Jennifer Mizgata

In this issue, we're highlighting Jennifer Mizgata, a coach and consultant specializing in digital innovation,

leadership development and improving work culture. She is creating an online training program that helps news leaders build more sustainable and caring work environments.

With some feedback from Joy Jenkins, a professor and researcher who is part of RJI's core research team, Mizgata has built a survey to create a baseline understanding of what work culture looks like across the news industry.

"I hope the survey responses provide a broader picture of the challenges that people face, take stock of how culture manifests in

different organizations and capture what is making a substantive, positive impact in organizations," Mizgata wrote on [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org). "My hope is that it will provide me with more information and be useful for those who take it, prompting more critical thinking about one's own workplace."

The survey and Mizgata's other research will feed into a training program aimed at helping balance the priorities of newsrooms to ensure internal policies and wellness programs are not forgotten in the race for a scoop.

Mizgata's work complements other RJI resources related to burnout and trauma-informed reporting available at [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org), where you can also learn more about all of this year's fellows. In addition to Mizgata, they are: Maria Arce, Tamoia Calzadilla, Stacy Feldman, Kate Maxwell, Arjuna Soriano, Celia Wu and Ariel Zych.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE BELOW FOR AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR PROJECTS**



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# RJI Research Focus

## Learning about your audience through a single-topic lens

What people think about the land they live on can tell newsrooms a lot about how to cover their communities

**RJI AND THE** Missouri School of Journalism have released first-of-its-kind research on the attitudes and environmental awareness of people living in the Mississippi River Basin — the largest drainage basin in the United States and a vital environmental and agricultural region.

With more than 2,300 people surveyed across 10 states along the Mississippi River, the project produced a number of insights that can help newsrooms report and write about climate change, such as:

- A majority of people have noticed significant changes to their state and local environments.
- Residents show strong support for sustainable agriculture methods.
- University scientists and extension agents are among the most trusted sources of science and environmental information.
- Local television remains a go-to media source.

The study was supported by RJI and led by assistant professor Kate Rose in collaboration with the Mississippi River Basin Ag & Water Desk, a collaborative network of journalists covering agriculture, water and other environmental issues. States surveyed — Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee and Wisconsin — all intersect with the main stem of the Mississippi River.



An aerial view of Muscatine, Iowa, on the Mississippi River on Monday, Sept. 18, 2023. Aerial support provided by LightHawk. Photo: Nick Rohlman | The Gazette

Notably, when asked about the Mississippi River Basin, many respondents were not aware that they personally lived within the river's watershed or didn't recognize its significance. Given that the basin covers more than 40% of the continental U.S. and supplies more than 90% of agricultural exports in the country, Rose said the results demonstrate a need for more outreach and education about the region's important roles and the basin's connection to local environments.

"There are a lot of areas where people haven't been taught some of the basic concepts that are really impacting the areas where they live," Rose said, noting that flooding, pollution and land use in the basin have consequences for the entire country.

Rose noted that the results are a call to action for the universities, journalists, government agencies and other organizations that play a role in keeping people informed

about their local environments in the basin.

"People want to know what is going on in their backyard, and community news organizations can fill that demand, not only as traditional newsrooms but through organizations like the Ag & Water Desk, pop-up newsrooms or university extension services," said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. "This report shows that if we reach out, people are willing to listen."

To that end, the report also offers a detailed breakdown of respondents' use of various news sources for information about the environment, with local television news being the most popular choice.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE BELOW  
TO SEE THE COMPLETE REPORT**



[rjionline.org/research-of-note](https://rjionline.org/research-of-note)





RJI hosted more than 30 journalism faculty from universities across the country to share their expertise around statehouse coverage. The group gathered for a group photo in the RJI amphitheater on Sept. 29, 2023.

# A collaborative approach to statehouse reporting

**LAST SEPTEMBER**, about 30 journalism faculty from universities around the country gathered at RJI to share their knowledge and experiences with statehouse reporting. At a time when coverage of state capitols increasingly falls on the shoulders of nonprofit outlets, part-time reporters and students at university-run news services, the faculty came together to share advice on how to build successful statehouse programs.

The conference featured panels moderated by Missouri School of Journalism professors and guests from other universities. Participants also toured the collaborative

newsroom where students, staff and faculty from the School's professional news outlets share resources and information to deliver community news to Columbia, Missouri.

"The conference allowed for discussion about many of the pressing issues for faculty operating a bureau, including funding, distribution and management of students," said Elizabeth Stephens, an associate professor and executive editor of the Columbia Missourian. "I think everyone walked away with a concrete idea for improving their program or where to start for a new program."

For Mark Horvit, a professor at the School, the conference was the latest

step toward a goal he has pursued for several years: a network of university statehouse reporting programs that work together to uncover themes and patterns that are bigger than any one state, giving their audiences access to crucial context.

"I've wanted for a while to create something that ties together statehouse bureaus so we can share information and look for things like model legislation," said Horvit, referring to a draft of legislation that is used as the basis for bills in multiple independent legislatures, often as part of a coordinated effort to introduce similar legislation in statehouses across the country.



***“The conference allowed for discussion about many of the pressing issues for faculty operating a bureau, including funding, distribution and management of students. I think everyone walked away with a concrete idea for improving their program or where to start for a new program.”***  
**— Elizabeth Stephens**

“The people creating this model legislation know what is going on in the big picture, but we don’t. We don’t network the way the people we cover network, and that’s a problem.”

Horvit first tried to get such a network off the ground working informally with members of the Institute for Nonprofit News, itself a network of more than 425 nonprofit news organizations. With the help of a team of students, he built a database of recently-passed legislation that would allow users to identify trends and potential story ideas.

The database saw limited use, and ultimately, Horvit realized he was putting the cart before the horse. In the statehouse reporting group — created by Richard Watts, executive director of the Center for Community News (CCN) at the University of Vermont, which provided some funding for faculty

to attend — Horvit found other faculty members who wanted to build a nationwide network to share information and ideas.

“The main thing we need is for people to be engaged,” Horvit said. The establishment of a reporting network is only one goal of the conference, however; overall, the organizers hope that the mixture of participants from experienced statehouse operations and fledgling — or even not-yet-established — programs will help encourage the creation of more new statehouse bureaus at universities around the country.

And it’s not just the conference itself that is building a community of collaboration and support among the participating universities; CCN also hosts monthly meetings for the group and offers one-on-one mentorship.

So far, the approach seems to be going over well.

“The conference left me with a plan to move forward and replaced a lot of the stress of trying to create something basically on my own,” said Laura Glasscock, an assistant professor from Kentucky State University. “It really was great for me.”

Horvit and Stephens moderated sessions alongside those from other participating institutions, including the Student Press Law Center. Participants represented 21 different states.

**ABOUT THE MISSOURI STATEHOUSE REPORTING PROGRAM**



[bit.ly/3GB7Drf](https://bit.ly/3GB7Drf)

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[www.uvm.edu/ccn](http://www.uvm.edu/ccn)





# Journalism and AI

Where we go from here, according to experts

**WHEN THE ONLINE** News Association held its annual conference last August in Philadelphia, the dominant focus on artificial intelligence and machine learning underscored how quickly these tools have burst forth from the realm of quiet experimentation — even as news organizations largely remain cautious about integrating Large Language Models like ChatGPT into their workflows.

At the 2022 conference, two months before the momentous launch of ChatGPT, only two sessions focused specifically on AI. Fast forward to ONA23, and it was much easier to count the sessions that didn't involve AI. Microsoft and Google, each vying for a dominant share of the AI-driven search engine space — a space that, more and more, determines which news stories people see and when they see them — were both represented in discussions that emphasized an optimistic outlook on these technologies as time-saving tools with remarkably low barriers to entry.

One conviction was ubiquitous: journalism cannot afford to miss the boat on another technological leap forward.

“We like to say that we tend to embrace the fear and manage the opportunity,” said Jim Brady, the vice president of journalism at the

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**“AI is coming; there is no law, there is no mandate that will ever stop it at this point. So it's very important that journalism is part of the discussion.”**

— **Jared Schroeder, Associate Professor, Missouri School of Journalism**

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Knight Foundation, reminding other panelists that the industry is still paying the price for failing to fully embrace and monetize the internet at its outset. “We have to do the opposite now. AI can do amazing things with collecting public information, suggesting stories to write based on the stories you've done... we have to get out of this cycle of

fearing the new thing. Other industries don't fear the new thing and make much better use of it.”

But Jared Schroeder, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism who is working with RJI to address first amendment issues in the AI era, believes the slow and scattered uptake of AI in newsrooms isn't just about fear. In an interview in December, Schroeder pointed out that unlike most resources available to media organizations, AI tools don't come with a set of best practices.

“It seems like most news organizations do not have a policy yet,” Schroeder said. “There is definitely a little bit of waiting to see what happens, but at the same time, no decision is a decision. When these organizations do not create a policy and do not communicate with reporters and editors about what the requirements or expectations are, that can lead to problems.”

Sports Illustrated recently became a poster child for precisely this issue when anonymous staffers admitted



the magazine had published AI-generated stories without labeling them as such. In fact, as first reported by *Futurism*, the stories came complete with AI-generated bios for nonexistent writers such as “Drew Ortiz,” who — according to his bio — “likes to say that he grew up in the wild.”

Of course, this was far from the first AI-related faux pas in the industry. Back in January 2023, not long after ChatGPT had exploded onto the scene, CNET — a website known for its reviews of consumer electronics — was found to be using AI to generate stories that were sometimes riddled with errors. While not accompanied by outright deceptive bylines, the stories were criticized for a lack of transparency by both readers and CNET staff.

For Schroeder, the issue is not the use of AI technology in these and other cases, but the lack of clear communication even within the news organizations as to when and how it is being used. And while the industry must deal with the added difficulty of appraising a moving target at

a time when machine learning is still advancing exponentially, he maintains that laying down some ground rules is not rocket science.

“News organizations don’t have to reinvent journalism here,” he emphasized. “They should use their organizational norms. Who they are, their

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**“We’ve discovered fire. We can either figure out how to use it properly, or it can burn us.”**

— **Mahesh Ramachandran,**  
**Reuters head of news technology**

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identity, their culture. They should be asking the question, ‘who do we want to be as a news organization?’”

### **Embracing the new thing**

At ONA, panelists like Aimee Rinehart, program manager for the Associated Press Local News AI initiative, seemed to have a firm handle on the answer to the question. Rinehart downplayed concerns about generative AI

potentially replacing journalists and focused on the technology’s capabilities as a workhorse for mundane, time-intensive tasks.

“We’re not talking about creating an article,” Rinehart said. “Right now, we’re going to solve some workflow problems. ...You want to identify annoyances and free up reporters to focus more on the reporting.”

That is the aim of YESEO, a Slack bot created by 2022 RJI Fellow Ryan Restivo to generate suggestions for headlines, subheads and story descriptions geared toward search engine optimization. Like many in the industry, Restivo pivoted the app’s development to integrate the new wave of generative AI but avoided unleashing a more flexible — but less curated — version of the technology in the app.

“YESEO offers five headline suggestions right now,” Restivo said during a panel focused on startups using AI. “I had thoughts about including the crazier suggestions, but at the end of the day I wanted it to be useful and not off-putting to people





using the app for the first time.”

“You have to look at what AI can do better and what it can’t,” echoed Ernest Kung, AP’s AI product manager, in a panel entitled ‘The Perils of Ignoring AI in your Newsroom.’ “What AI is good at is finding patterns, but it’s not necessarily good at reaching a point where it can write a very clean article.”

Kung pointed to several practical AI applications the AP has already built for local newsrooms around the country, such as a system for the Brainerd Dispatch in Minnesota that automatically collects information from police blotters and a tool for Michigan Radio that pulls key information from records of city council meetings (much like Agenda Watch, an RJI collaboration with Stanford University).

### **An expanding frontier**

This view of AI as a sidekick rather than a replacement-in-training aligns with what some are calling an “ethical assistive” approach to using AI tools in the newsroom.

Start-up platforms like Legitimate seek to help journalists lean on AI

for just about everything in the reporting process except the bulk of the writing, providing suggestions for articles to write based on the content of previous stories, a light outline for the story’s structure, background information and statistics, Grammarly-like editing suggestions and auto-generated social media posts. A tool called Runway can even create videos based on text prompts.

In an ONA presentation about his platform, Gerard Donnelly, the CEO of Legitimate, highlighted that “the process of creating content needs to live with the journalist.”

Donnelly believes widespread adoption of these assistive tools will happen once one or two major news organizations model a path forward for others to follow. But regardless of how newsrooms choose to employ an increasingly staggering range of options, one thing is clear: fear of the unknown is unlikely to stop the industry from embracing an era of experimentation.

“We’ve discovered fire,” said Mahesh Ramachandran, head of news technology at Reuters, at the

conference. “We can either figure out how to use it properly, or it can burn us.”

### **Minding the gap**

While news organizations are making an effort to proceed ethically with AI integration, specific AI policies are still hard to come by, though they do exist. The AP, which has been using AI to varying degrees since 2015, announced last summer that it would no longer publish AI-generated stories or images, though it encouraged staff to familiarize themselves with available tools.

And in November, 17 organizations from around the globe — including the Ethical Journalism Network, which worked with RJI in 2015 to refurbish a database of journalistic codes of conduct, the foundation for the network’s Accountable Journalism website — came together to release the Paris Charter on AI in Journalism. The charter lists 10 principles for newsrooms to follow, prioritizing transparency and accountability.

The New York Times, on the

other hand, has thus far aimed its policies at defending the publication's intellectual property, forbidding AI models and other automated tools from collecting its content for the purposes of training said models.

But Schroeder and other experts agree that waiting for major media organizations to either model responsible usage or put forth guidelines would leave some organizations in the dust, especially when it comes to rural newsrooms that are already dealing with a persistent digital divide.

Jasmine McNealy, an associate professor at the University of Florida and a senior fellow in tech policy at the Mozilla Foundation, has written that "having a seat at the table requires more than mere mentions in frameworks. It requires the implementation of good policy made through participatory consultation."

Alluding to the White House Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights put forward by the Biden Administration, which calls for inclusion of diverse communities and experts in

the "design, use and deployment of automated systems," she maintains that rural communities themselves — not just the larger networks that represent them — must take part in the conversations that will, over time, coalesce into industry standards.

"The well-funded national news organizations are going to be fine," Schroeder agrees. "They're going

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***"We like to say that we tend to embrace the fear and manage the opportunity. We have to do the opposite now."***

***— Jim Brady, the vice president of journalism at the Knight Foundation***

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to use their resources, their mass audiences and their large staffs to leverage these tools. But what about, you know, the newspaper in a little town in southern Missouri or western Kansas?"

It's not a new concern, and it's not limited to the news industry — in a 2022 article in *Nature*, behavioral data scientist Ganna Pogrebna sounded the alarm on inequities inherent in

how AI models collect data.

"A lot of the data used to make facial recognition possible are generated from rural environments, but the technology is primarily used in metropolitan areas...so rural data are being used in urban settings and that's not necessarily reciprocated," Pogrebna said.

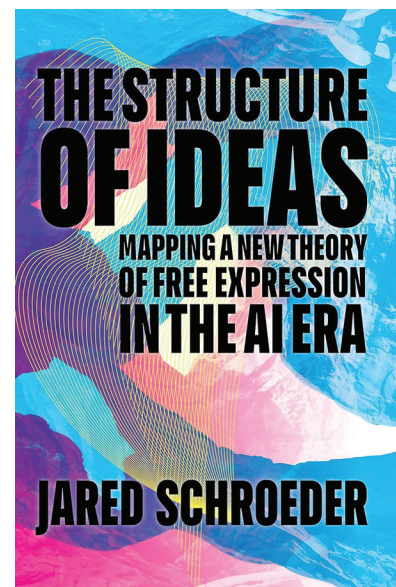
In other ways, the issue can be somewhat reversed. Schroeder pointed out that if fewer stories are published about rural communities, then an AI trained on news content will be biased toward urban settings.

For now, Schroeder is using these and other inequities as a teaching tool. He shows his students how, for example, AI image generators tend to create images of white people. But the time is coming, he said, when the industry will need to take firm step forward toward an inclusive and innovative future or risk being left behind.

"AI is coming; there is no law, there is no mandate that will ever stop it at this point," Schroeder said. "So it's very important that journalism is part of the discussion."



Jared Schroeder is the author of the upcoming book, "The structure of ideas: Mapping a new theory of free expression in the AI era," due for release in June 2024.







**Digital screens offer Black news and ads a seat at the table — or a barber's chair**



***“My clients get a kick out of it, for sure. They want to know where the next new business is. I’ve had people come in who look at the screen and say, ‘that’s my doctor’ or something like that. It’s aesthetically pleasing.”***

***— William Humphrey, owner of Tapers Barber and Beauty Salon***

**A PILOT PROJECT** — sponsored by the Reynolds Journalism Institute — to help news organizations serving under-represented communities has enjoyed some early success, so much so that it is already expanding both in its Midwest roots and beyond.

The project, placing digital screens that display local news and advertising in key areas of a city, was launched in St. Louis in June as an experiment to see if a similar effort in Minneapolis could be duplicated in another city. It’s called the Dynasty Interactive Screen Community (DISC).

Thanks to the fast, positive results from the pilot, DISC has already expanded to Atlanta with more than 100 screens, and it will be operating in Chicago, Detroit and Washington, D.C., in 2024.

One of the foundational elements of the initiative is taking advantage

of trusted relationships. DISC places digital community news and advertising on screens in community staples like restaurants, salons and malls with the hope of growing its audience by attracting viewers who aren’t already subscribers to the newspapers that supply the content and sell the ads. In return, the businesses displaying the screens can receive advertising across the entire local network.

“Our goal is to build audience — to make these publications relevant and help them be the true voice of their communities,” said David Beckford, founder of the Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm Dynasty Media.

And while Atlanta’s network is enjoying a burst of growth — the city is now the largest market for this fast-growing network — the St. Louis screens are no slouches.

### **Voices of Market Street**

Along the historic and bustling Market Street thoroughfare in St. Louis, Tapers Barber and Beauty Salon is seeing the benefits of this unique collaborative relationship between journalism, businesses and their communities. Owner William Humphrey started Tapers in 2009, and he has had two screens in the shop since early 2023.

“My clients get a kick out of it, for sure,” said Humphrey. “They want to know where the next new business is. I’ve had people come in who look at the screen and say, ‘that’s my doctor’ or something like that. It’s aesthetically pleasing.”

One such client, Darryl Jones, appreciates the unique delivery of news and advertising on the screens.

“I can get a lot of info off the screen without all the jibber jabber on the TV,” Jones said. “And since it



***“I can get a lot of info off the screen without all the jibber jabber on the TV. And since it repeats, you can see it again if you miss something.”***  
***— Darryl Jones, Tapers client***

repeats, you can see it again if you miss something.”

Like much of Humphrey’s clientele, Jones — an executive in the food and beverage industry — has been getting his haircuts at Tapers for the better part of a decade. He knows the community and knows many of the business owners whose events and advertisements are featured on the screens, but he appreciates how the screens still manage to surprise him.

“There have been times where I’ve seen something and said I’ll probably stop through there,” he said. “Events I wouldn’t have even known about. And I called the folks and said, ‘it’s cool that you have this up there on the screens. When did you do that?’”

Some, like Jones, see the screens as an effective way to make the goings-on

in a large and diverse community digestible to a passive audience.

But for others, the screens’ connections to the community run deeper, tapping into a deep well of strong relationships that businesses forge with locals. Ronald Reynolds, another longtime regular (and unrelated to RJI’s namesake, Donald W. Reynolds), sees the news and ads as endorsements from Humphrey, whom he trusts to make good choices regarding the content that is displayed in Tapers.

“Most of us have been coming here for years, and we know if Will is supporting something, then it must be pretty good,” Reynolds said.

It’s an outlook Reynolds applies to the screens’ news, events and ads alike, suggesting that the network helps position community coverage as one piece of a wider

— and trusted — constellation of community information that roots itself in participation from local business owners.

Humphrey, who grew up in St. Louis, hopes the network will spread further along Market Street to capture even more of the diverse population that he sees reflected daily in his clientele.

“I like the fact that there are always a lot of different people coming in, migrating from out of town,” Humphrey said. “All kinds of races, ages, genders. There are so many opportunities for these screens to bring them exposure.”

### **Working together**

While digital screens showcasing content and advertising have been around for years, Beckford’s new twist of offering targeted — and





most importantly, local — content and advertising is adding an attractive element to the strategy.

Beckford believes the model is particularly useful as a means to give Black and minority media organizations access to the level of audience exposure that more traditional distribution and funding models increasingly fail to support.

The ongoing expansion in Atlanta is quickly demonstrating the scalability of that approach. The 28 screens now featured at Plaza Fiesta — an expansive mall and farmer’s market serving Atlanta’s vibrant Latino community — add to a network that now reaches 1.4 million people per month in the city. This is in addition to 80 screens in Minneapolis-St. Paul reaching Black, Hispanic, Somali and Native American communities.

According to Beckford, part of the success of the digital screen concept comes down to the positive and diverse community engagement it fosters among both consumers and business owners.

“A city is big enough for many voices; those voices make us who we are and help move us forward,” Beckford said. “But we’re not berating anybody — that’s not what we’re for. I don’t want to go eat and see who got killed today. It’s our best foot forward, the best of St. Louis or Atlanta or Minneapolis-St. Paul.”

The hope, he said, is that the screen networks not only boost exposure for local news organizations in these cities but also create a stronger local, multicultural ecosystem of reporting and advertising in a globalized digital world.

Indeed, whereas news organizations and other businesses usually

have to pay for advertising and distribution that is meant to drive people to them, DISC focuses on meeting people where they are by utilizing existing community resources, such as restaurants and other public gathering places that already have a steady supply of audiences.

The result, Beckford said, is a more level — and more collaborative — playing field that better represents the value these organizations bring to their communities.

“You know, a little pizzeria is not going to be in Sauce Magazine or the St. Louis Post-Dispatch very often unless they have a significant advertising budget,” Beckford said. “But on our 50 social media pages and on our screens reaching 300,000 people, that pizzeria will be there every day. The same is true for a newspaper that has a small circulation. They work together.”



# Navigate your YouTube video backlog with ease

**HAVE YOU MISSED** numerous virtual panels in the past two years and now feel overwhelmed by the backlog of YouTube videos you need to catch up on? Worry no more!

There are several AI tools available that can save you time by swiftly generating detailed AI-generated video summaries, complete with timestamps. YouTube Digest and NoteGPT are here to rescue your day.

Before diving into my reviews of these tools, it's important to note that my evaluation is based on personal experiences, and I have not received any compensation or collaboration with the mentioned programs or companies.

## YouTubeDigest

YouTubeDigest is a Chrome extension that utilizes the capabilities of ChatGPT AI to create summaries of YouTube videos. It helps users save time by allowing them to preview video content before deciding to watch the video in full.

Users can personalize their experience by selecting from various summary modes, such as a simple transcript, a TL:DR single paragraph summary, an article, a set of bullet points or a chat.

Furthermore, the tool offers a versatile extension that enables users to specify time ranges for customized summaries, summarize and translate content between different languages, and export summaries in formats such as PDF, DOCX, or plain text for convenient sharing and referencing.

I conducted a trial run using a New York Community Trust information session on YouTube, which focused on their national and international environment program. This was to evaluate if the Center for Public Integrity should pursue the grant opportunity. The video was approximately 54 minutes long.

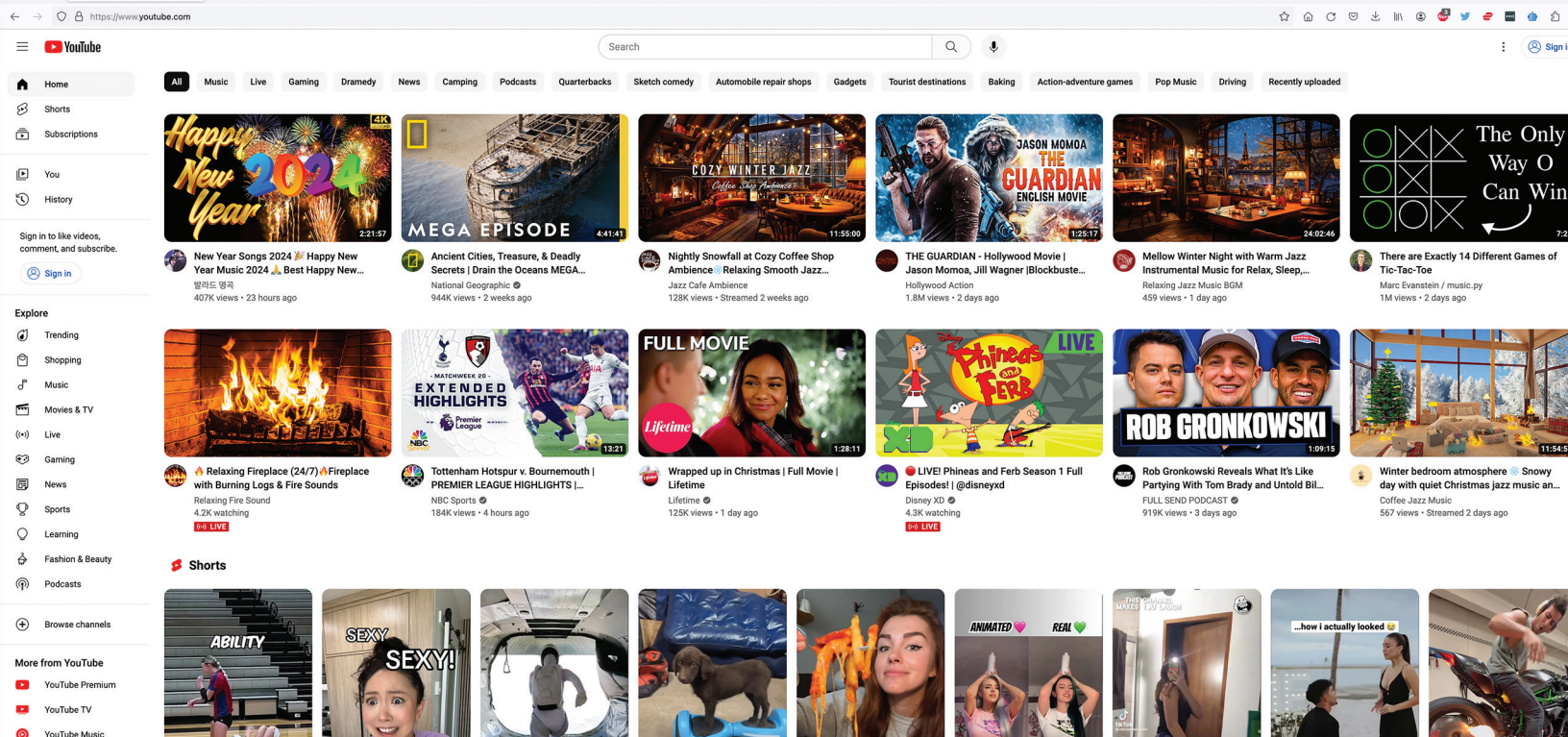
For this trial, I used a custom video setting where I set the summary mode to create titled sections. The result was a series of headlines with timestamps and summaries.

This approach proved particularly useful, as it allowed me to quickly scan the content through the section titles and summaries. I could then use the timestamp function to directly access and watch the parts of the video that were most relevant to our needs.

I also experimented with their chat function, but the results didn't meet my expectations. When I inquired about the average funding amount for the program, eligibility and the application deadline, the chatbot simply replied, "The transcript does not contain specific eligibility criteria for applying."

Another limitation I've encountered is the size of the summary window. I would prefer if the summary window were resizable or if it could be detached and opened as a separate window for more convenient viewing.

For the time being, I plan to utilize this tool primarily for its summarization capabilities, allowing me to quickly scan through



video content, rather than engaging with its chat function.

## NoteGPT

Like YouTubeDigest, NoteGPT is another tool that leverages ChatGPT to summarize YouTube videos, but it offers additional features. NoteGPT enables users to annotate and take notes about the videos, and these notes can be shared on social media or with other users. NoteGPT also offers more language and customization options, allowing users to create personalized prompts for summaries, and it boasts better integration with the OpenAI API.

I experimented with the tool on the same New York Community Trust information session available on YouTube. Right away, the tool generated a concise summary highlighting the key points, which was in line with my expectations. However, what surprised me was the detailed transcript accompanied by the AI summary feature,

complete with highlights and key points. This allows you to read just the AI-generated summaries, bypassing the full transcript that often includes numerous filler words like 'um' and 'uh.'

Another notable feature is the 'save to notes' option. This allows you to select specific parts of the transcript and save them as notes. When you visit the notes tab, you have the choice to either take a screenshot or use the automatic function to capture various screenshots from the entire video, aligned with your transcript timeline.

You can easily jump to specific parts of the video by clicking on the timestamp. Additionally, you can tag sections of the transcript and add personal annotations to both the screenshot and the transcript, enabling you to revisit the video later and consult your notes to determine which sections you might want to rewatch.

The tool seems to provide the functionality to share specific

sections of the transcript or screenshots on social platforms, as well as in PDF format or via a link.

However, when I attempted to share, the screenshots and notes did not align with what I intended to share. I tried sharing the content multiple times using different options, but unfortunately, I had no success. At this point, I'm uncertain whether this discrepancy is due to a bug in the tool or a mistake on my part.

For the time being, I plan to utilize it primarily as a tool for personal transcript summarization and annotation and will refrain from sharing the notes with others.

**Paul Cheung** is a RJI

columnist exploring how newsrooms and journalists with limited resources can use AI tools to improve efficiency and increase capacity in their daily development and audience operations.





# RJI Strategic Plan 2023–2026

**2023 MARKED THE CULMINATION** of more than a year of work developing a strategic plan — a living, dynamic document that will help RJI continue to move the industry forward.

“This plan will help RJI stay nimble and address some of the most impactful issues in the industry while remaining true to who we are,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “The practical innovation we champion is driven by a razor-sharp focus on positive impacts for community news organizations.”

The plan codifies a vision that not only proudly reflects what RJI has been doing since its doors opened in 2008, but paves a path into a future in which community news throughout the country has the resources to flourish.



## Our mission

*Why do we exist?*

The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) at the Missouri School of Journalism empowers journalists with knowledge, tools and funding to strengthen journalism through practical innovation.



## Our vision

*What are we creating?*

We experiment with new ways to inform audiences, build trust and inspire people to make their lives and communities better.

[SEE MORE ABOUT RJI STRATEGIC PLAN HERE](#)



[rjionline.org/strategic-plan](https://rjionline.org/strategic-plan)

# RJI Impact Report

**2023 WAS ANOTHER YEAR** full of new solutions and ideas for RJI, with a continued focus on strengthening community news via in-house experimentation and support for innovative content and funding models. You already know we conducted one of the largest-ever surveys on burnout — here are some other ways RJI made an impact.

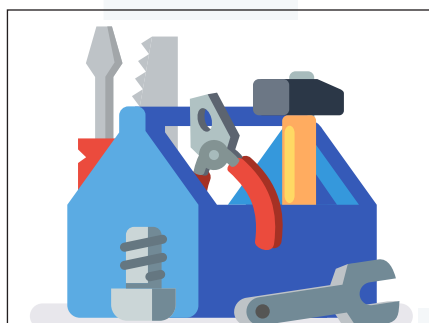


## Source Diversity Tool

This tool which we built in partnership with Chalkbeat is now being utilized in over 100 newsrooms worldwide.



RJI Fellow Ryan Restivo's YESEO bot is now available in 11 languages to be utilized in newsrooms around the world.



## Collaboration Pilot & Toolkit

A partnership project with the Institute of Nonprofit News to explore how community-centered newsrooms can build sustainable and impactful collaborations.

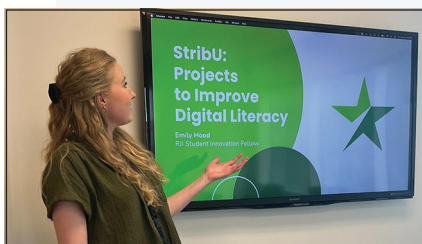


This year, we partnered with and interviewed newsrooms such as the Kansas City Beacon, Missouri Independent, the 19th, NPR Planet Money, PBS, Sarasota Herald-Tribune and others to test innovative and experimental ideas from republication strategies to AI audio editing tools.



## RJI Community-Centered Symposium

We launched our first RJI symposium, supported by RJI and a \$10,000 grant from Democracy Fund, to create an accessible experience for any resource strapped newsroom or journalist to learn about practical, innovative resources and projects.



## RJI Student Innovation Fellows

Our RJI Student Innovation Fellows were matched with newsrooms across the country to build and expand upon innovative initiatives. They worked with the American Press Institute, Sacramento Bee, Texas Tribune, Lake County News, Star Tribune and the Springfield News Leader.



## AGENDA WATCH

Launched in June 2023 with Big Local News, this free-to-use platform scrapes agendas and minutes from local agencies for journalists across the country to help them find and cover important issues in their communities.

THE FULL RJI IMPACT REPORT FOR 2023 WILL BE AVAILABLE HERE



[rjionline.org/impact-report](https://rjionline.org/impact-report)



# RJI Project Spotlight

## Build news quizzes for habitual engagement

Missouri Business Alert expands their quiz from Instagram to newsletters

**RJI'S INNOVATION IN FOCUS** team collaborated with Missouri Business Alert, an online newsroom that publishes the top business news from across Missouri, in fall 2023 to address the topic of newsletter quizzes to grow their audience.

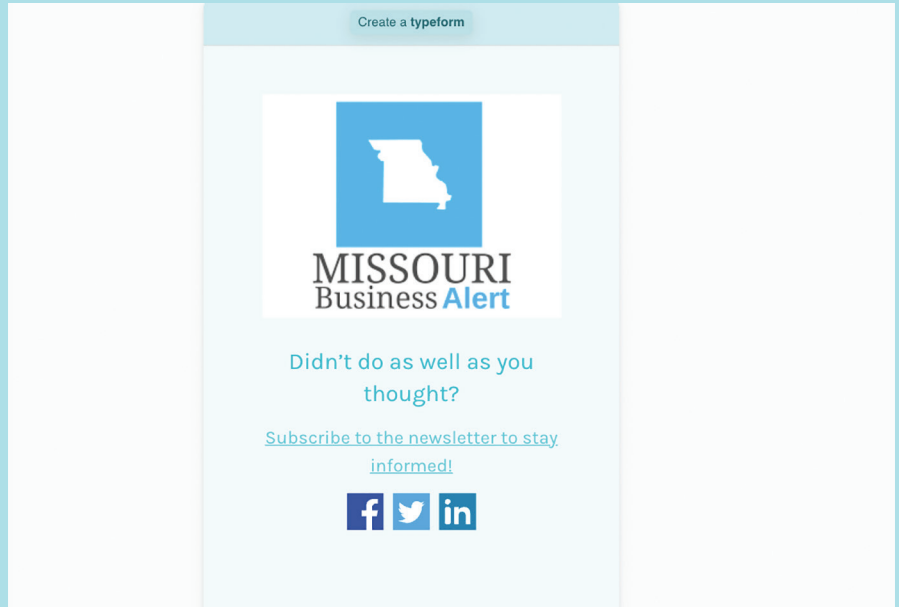
MBA has been using the quiz feature on Instagram to share weekly news quizzes, and the editors recognized that they could reach different audiences — not just social media — if they embedded the quiz in their newsletter and on their website as well.

Together, RJI and MBA worked to determine which tool would best accomplish this goal and identify strategies that could grow their loyal newsletter audience, create innovative advertising opportunities and connect readers with other ways to support MBA.

### To pay or not to pay for a quiz platform

MBA already had assigned staff members writing and editing quizzes, so the decision was made to go with an affordable, DIY tool, Typeform, rather than a service that could help with the quiz writing and embedding on-site.

Typeform has a free version that only allows users to collect 10 responses, but it offers enough features to get started and test a few quizzes. The paid version starts at \$25/month and allows for the collection of 100 responses, with



more design and data collection capacities as you upgrade.

Typeform was also one of the only tools explored that made adding hyperlinks easy. When we spoke with the News Games founders, they shared that — compared to cross-words and word puzzles — news quizzes are where readers most often click to read related articles.

Another reason to like Typeform: A Typeform-generated quiz link or embed code can be copied straight into your website, blog, or newsletter to collect responses in real-time.

### Built-in analytics

You don't need an outside tool to measure basic analytics and actionable insights from a Typeform quiz. Typeform tracks question response rates, drop off points, answer variations, completion times

and more. Quiz creators can access user-friendly reports to decode trends across all of these data points. This enables data-driven decisions to optimize future quizzes for more engagement going forward and personalize experiences for your readers.

**Emily Lytle** is the Innovation in Focus Editor on RJI's Innovation Team. She produces the monthly web series *Innovation in Focus*.



**FOLLOW THE QR CODE BELOW TO READ MORE ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP AND OUR FINDINGS**



[bit.ly/3S6DUgq](https://bit.ly/3S6DUgq)

# Where are they now

## What's old is new: Rebekah Monson brings newsletters to the cutting edge

**REBEKAH MONSON** is the co-founder of Miami-based local media startups WhereBy.U and Letterhead and former board chair of LION Publishers. She used her tenure as a 2017-2018 RJI Fellow to develop open-source tools and strategies that help newsrooms and publishers do more with the data they receive about their audiences, uniting these resources in an easy-to-use Wordpress plugin.

Letterhead, Monson's latest project, automates the process of creating and monetizing newsletters.



### How did your fellowship experience feed into your subsequent work in the industry?

We built a prototype plugin that would link our tools together and make acquisition — bringing in newsletter subscribers — simpler. That led into other work that we were doing with newsletters, which ended up becoming a whole different software company. So some of the work we had done at RJI to solve this one little slice of the problem really fed into what has now become Letterhead.

### In 2017, you were zeroed in on newsletters before a lot of organizations had caught on to their resurgence. What drove that decision?

Our thinking at the beginning was, what's a lightweight, inexpensive-to-produce but impactful medium

that we can really build in collaboration with users, with their full buy-in? People were sort of discovering at the time that newsletters are a great tool for understanding reader engagement and trying to upsell folks into membership and subscription models.

Another thing was we were already starting to hear about changes in privacy law, and I was thinking a lot about email as a really nice tool that already had this longstanding set of policy and law around it. You had to go the extra mile for email already; you had to ask people to opt in, so you were already getting consumer buy-in on the front end. The challenge with that is email is a closed system. How do you grow that audience faster when folks can't try the program without signing up? We were really wrestling with that question, which led into our work with RJI.

### What's next for you?

We just raised more than \$5 million in seed funding for Letterhead, so I am all-in on making this the best possible email-publishing platform that I can. I also plan to stay involved as much as possible with LION to have that direct link with publishers who are fighting the good fight.

People are more collaborative now than they ever have been in journalism, but we still have this longstanding ethos of not collaborating, of trying to beat each other to the punch. The RJI Fellowship for me was a really great opportunity to lean in on the collaborative side and sort of think about the industry as a whole, not just our specific business needs, and that is something I'm continuing to think about.





**ATTENDEES AT THE FIRST** RJI Community Journalism symposium, supported by a \$10,000 grant from Democracy Fund, compare notes in RJI's Palmer Room. Professionals from across the country spent two days learning from each other and working together. The result: 26 innovative projects on the drawing board or underway in newsrooms across the country. We plan to share experiences and case studies from these efforts in 2024.