



**A ground-level look into the burnout crisis**

**2023-2024 RJi Fellows share free resources**

**Follow-up on RJi's Community-Centered Symposium**

# Note from the Director



**Randy Picht**  
RJI Executive Director



**IT'S TIME FOR THE SUMMER 2024 EDITION OF RJI INSIGHT**, and there is no denying that we are in a new era.

Like the throngs of cicadas that have blanketed the Midwest and Southeast this summer, AI has lived mostly out of sight, underground, for a long time. Now, in the midst of an explosion, the parallels write themselves: some are creeped out. Some avert their eyes and wish it would all just go away. But if you're like the birds, you sense an opportunity.

You'll notice issues and innovations surrounding AI are infused into many of the stories in this issue, such as our check-in with an SEO-streamlining app a year after its launch (p. 16) or David Caswell's global investigation of the future of journalism (inside back cover).

And even where the connection is not explicit, AI's presence can be felt in the background, as when we look at how newsrooms are responding to the burnout crisis (p. 8) in the wake of RJI's large-scale survey of current and former journalists and newsroom managers (p. 10).

At a time like this, it is easy to slip into speculation. But as always, our emphasis is on usability — this issue is full of accessible resources that address a wide range of challenges, from growing subscriber counts in the crowded newsletter space (p. 2) to building pop-up newsrooms, reporting on natural disasters, working with the community to supplement local reporting and other open-source projects created by the 2023-2024 class of RJI Fellows (p. 18).

You can also see examples of smaller-scale projects that community newsrooms built themselves as a result of RJI's Community-Centered Symposium (p. 20). And if the dizzying array of business models, organizational strategies and methods of engagement that have arisen in response to the crises of news deserts and public trust have you questioning what, exactly, community-centered news means in 2024, you're in luck. Joy Jenkins, a member of our research team at RJI and an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, dives deep into how legislators and academics are addressing that very question (p. 14) in attempts to support the local news ecosystem.

One thing we know for a fact: community reporting benefits from collaboration — with the local public, with fellow news gatherers and with the wider industry. Let us know if you have an idea for how we can collaborate.

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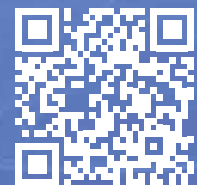
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The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) works with the news industry, professors, students and others to make sure journalism has a long and bright future. As a "think-and-do" tank that opened its doors in 2008, RJI uses its guaranteed funding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



### ON THE COVER

Panelists and attendees gather for a photo during the welcome dinner at RJI's "Searching for Truth: When Media and Military Come Together" symposium. This impactful April event, hosted at RJI, was a collaborative effort with the Veterans Law Clinic at the University of Missouri School of Law. (See page 6 for details)



### SUMMER 2024 VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2

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# Innovation in Focus

## To deepen newsletter impact, vary your call to action

*RJI's Innovation in Focus explores new tech, tools and methods of storytelling for newsrooms worldwide. Each month, the team interviews experts, test ideas and provides our findings to help media organizations each month.*

**NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBER** growth can be a never-ending and intimidating goal. This month, Innovation in Focus explored one practical strategy that helped a small newsroom learn more about their audience and contribute to the growth of their subscriber list.

Working with PublicSource, a nonprofit newsroom in Pittsburgh, the idea was to build on a lesson they learned during a recent fundraising campaign: Frequently changing the messaging, style and colors on their call to action boxes increased the amount of donations they received.

Would this also work for newsletter calls to action (CTAs)? Changing these notices weekly would add one more task to an already small audience team, so tools and a workflow were identified to help with this consistent experimentation. Here are a few lessons learned:

### Defining success

After talking to newsletter consultants and editors, it became evident that it was important to write a hypothesis outlining what was being tested and how success would be measured.

Hypothesis: Once a week for four weeks, if different newsletter calls to action are posted that are specific to PublicSource's categories — such as education or local government — there will be an

increase in newsletter subscriptions when the language, style and colors change. Analytics in WordPress and Mailchimp will indicate the number of new subscribers.

### Choosing the focus

Because PublicSource's most popular articles fall into the local government and education section of their website, that became the focus of efforts. By changing the language on calls to action in these sections, the hope was to create a more personalized experience for the reader and better show the value of the newsletter with more specific wording.

A bonus: PublicSource has been thinking about creating a specific newsletter product for one or both of these beats. This experiment promised to give some early insights into how audiences engaged with these stories.

### Establishing a smooth workflow

Tools that helped with organization included a Notion document and a Google Sheet. Similar to Google Docs, Notion documents allows multiple editors on a doc but offers some more sophisticated features like generative AI tools, sortable tables and embeds.

This document included:

- A timeline which included a calendar to help keep the weekly updates on track.

- An embedded Google spreadsheet that tracked the language used in each pop up, dates run, delay time of the pop up, color and style choices and the number of signups.
- A section for brainstorming language and styles.

PublicSource staff found the heaviest workload fell in the first week of the experiment when gathering research and brainstorming language. The following weeks were much simpler, consisting of choosing a previously edited CTAs and pasting it into the formatted boxes. They estimated this took 30 minutes per week.

Here are the steps they followed and who was responsible:

1. The audience producer brainstormed ideas for CTAs in the Notion doc.
  2. Members of the editorial team reviewed the CTAs, made minor edits and placed +1s next to their favorites.
  3. Those favorite CTAs went into a shared Google spreadsheet.
  4. The audience producer and creative director set up two forms in WordPress.
- They named one PublicSource Local Government 1 and the other PublicSource Education 1, setting up a naming system to use later.

5. In the forms, they toggled on “honeypot” to avoid bots. This worked better than the double verification option since people were not following through and verifying their email.
6. Then they set up Newstack campaigns in WordPress for Local Government and Education, where they could decide where and when to run the forms to appear as call to action boxes on the site.
7. For future CTAs, they duplicated the previous forms and deactivated the old ones.
8. When adding images, the audience producer found stock photos of Pittsburgh in the newsroom archives and added

text overlay in Canva. Those images uploaded easily into the Newstack campaigns.

## Launching the CTAs

Dan Oshinsky of Inbox Collective has suggested using images as a background as well as a graphic to help readers to visualize what they could expect. Canva was used to create different possible styles, and the options were uploaded to the Notion document.

## Measuring success

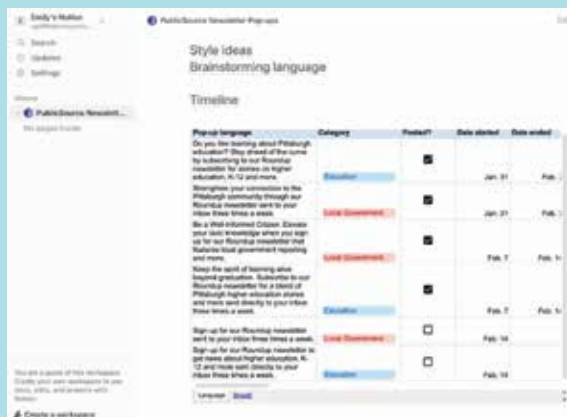
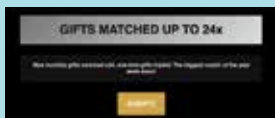
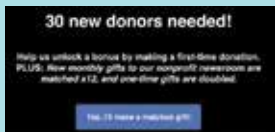
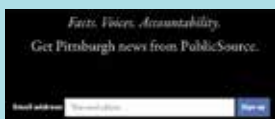
After this four-week experiment, PublicSource gathered the data to measure the effectiveness of changing the CTAs regularly and found they had gained 50 new

subscribers. They went on to repeat the experiment in March and April and drew an additional 150 newsletter subscribers.

PublicSource felt like this was a success and plans to continue the variations of CTAs going forward. With this workflow, they’re looking forward to setting specific language when they notice a story is trending. They also plan to use new language for investigative pieces they know will publish soon.

**Emily Lytle** is the  
Innovation in Focus  
Editor on RJI’s

Innovation Team. She  
produces the monthly  
web series *Innovation in Focus*.



Top left: An example of PublicSource’s general newsletter call to action before experimenting with language specific to local government and education.

Top center: An example of how the PublicSource team shared ideas for pop-up language. The +1 showed support for a specific line.

Right: An example of one of the local government-specific CTA tried during the experiment.

Bottom center and left: The team used Canva to create different CTA mockups using images and graphics to help readers visualize what they could expect.

Left center: Frequently changing the messaging, style and colors on call to action boxes increased donations.

Center: A screenshot of the Notion document used by the team during its experiment. Notion allows multiple editors and features such as generative AI tools, sortable tables and embeds.

# RJI News in Brief



## Students from Northwestern University win innovation competition

**IN APRIL**, student teams from universities all over the country were honored with more than \$13,000 in prizes, with a team from Northwestern University taking home the grand prize of \$10,000 in RJI's annual Student Innovation Competition.

The competition called for creating something that could help newsrooms measure the impact of their coverage, and 10 teams from universities all over the country competed over the course of a few months to implement their ideas in real-world settings.

Team Footprint.ai, made up of students Eugenia Cao, Elizabeth Casolo, Daniel Gross and Janya Sundar, built a tool enabling news organizations to analyze the impacts of specific stories over time.

Their software united tools like sentiment analysis, readership data and other metrics into an in-depth analysis capable of tracking a large-scale story — such as a hazing scandal covered by the university's student publications in the summer of 2023 — over time. In addition, the team created a guidebook covering how to tailor the data to a specific publication while explaining and visualizing the data in an accessible way.

"I think it's really important for journalists to consider that their language carries meaning," said Casolo, a junior at Northwestern University. "They have a responsibility to communicate in a way that does justice to their audiences."

The team hopes their method could be provided on a consultancy basis to newsrooms looking for more specific data about the impacts of their coverage on the communities they serve.

Lacey Reeves, a graduate student at the Missouri School of Journalism, and Team UG from the University of Georgia took second and third place, respectively.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE STUDENTS' PROJECTS, FOLLOW THE QR CODE**



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# New slackbot streamlines newsroom analytics

**AS NEWSROOMS SEEK** to better connect with audiences and develop innovative news products, data analytics is no longer the domain of specialists. Increasingly, everyone in the newsroom needs to know how stories and other media are performing across a variety of metrics.

Before earning her bachelor's degree in May from the Missouri School of Journalism, Emily Hood led the development of a Slackbot to help the Star Tribune, the largest newspaper in Minnesota, streamline analytics access in the newsroom.

The project began during Hood's RJI Student Innovation Fellowship, serving as part of a larger initiative at the Star Tribune to transition to more digital-focused workflows. But when the 12-week term of her fellowship came to an end, the outlet asked her continue her efforts as a part-time paid consultant.

"Emily did a great job coming in and understanding the newsroom's needs quickly," said Frank Bi, director of tools and technology at the Star Tribune. "...The focus and scope of this fellowship really allows the host newsroom to gain from someone who has one foot in product and one foot in the newsroom, which is something really all news organizations are striving to do."

The end result, known as Striblytics, unites data like page views, where and how users are accessing content, and the amount of time readers spend on stories, allowing reporters and editors to get all their analytics through the Slack app. Then they can easily compare the performance of a story against newsroom averages. Previously, the process of gathering this information across various different sources was burdensome.

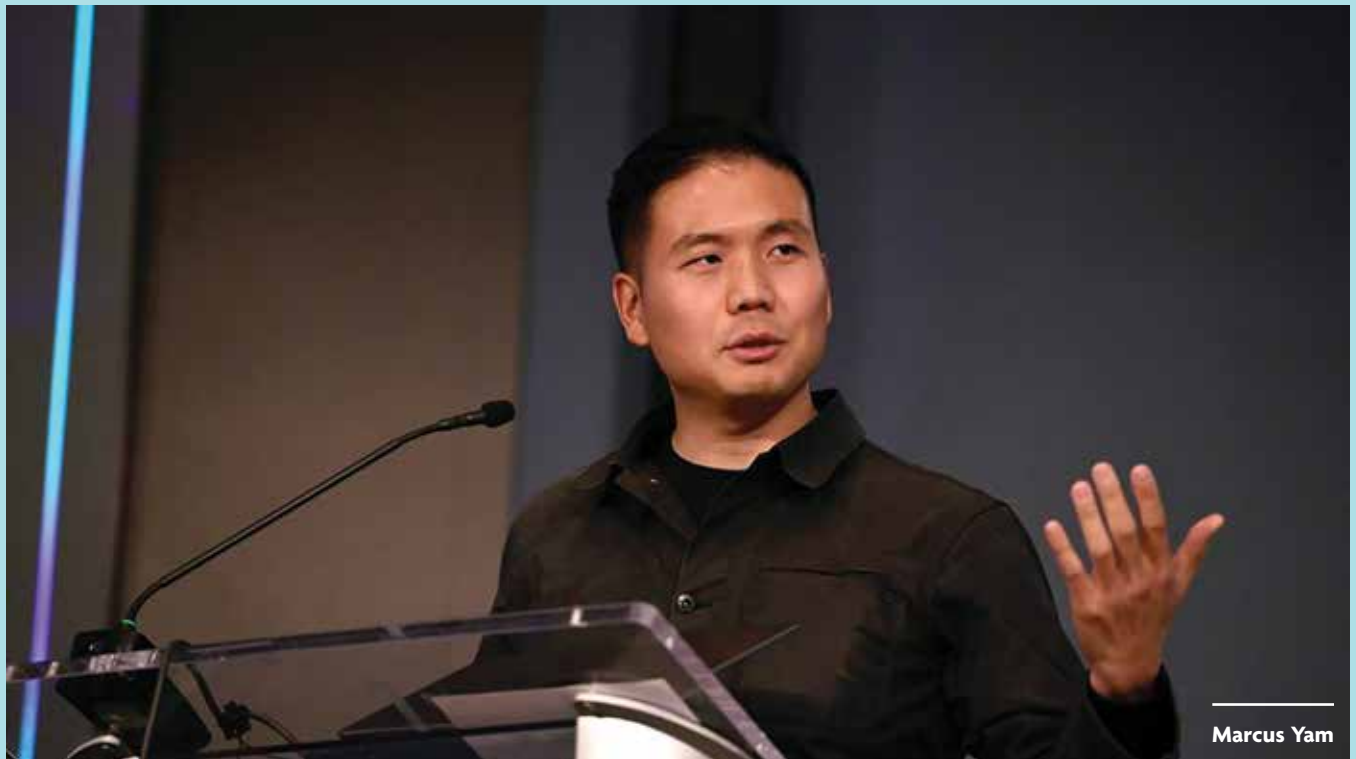
Hood is now working full-time for the Star Tribune as a discovery producer.



**READ MORE FROM HOOD ABOUT HER  
TIME AS AN INNOVATION FELLOW**



[bit.ly/4bQXxke](https://bit.ly/4bQXxke)



Marcus Yam

## Symposium unites journalism, law and the military

**EXPERTS IN JOURNALISM**, whistleblower laws and war crimes gathered in April at RJI to discuss what happens when media and the military converge.

Kicked off by a keynote address from Marcus Yam, a photojournalist and foreign correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, the event



Teodora Trifonova

featured a full day of panels focused on issues like maintaining mental health when covering war zones and the complexities of exposing and investigating war crimes.

In the keynote address, Yam described the evolution of his war photography, which began with his coverage of the Eisch family — two young boys whose single parent deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. Yam most recently spent time in Gaza covering the Israel-Hamas war.

“The gist of my work hasn’t been so much the ‘bang bang’ — I’ve tried to focus on civilians and on the impacts of war,” Yam said, visibly moved after sharing a video of the Eisch family.

One panel included Dan Clare — the whistleblower who brought attention to burn pits that exposed service members in Iraq to toxic fumes — alongside journalist Kelly Kennedy, to whom he broke the story.

In another, Missouri School of Journalism doctoral candidate Teodora Trifonova shined a light on the struggles faced by “fixers,” the people who often help journalists in foreign countries with tasks like translating, arranging interviews and providing background information.

“Their work is vital but is hidden from the public,” Trifonova said, emphasizing that fixers are often exposed to the same traumatic events as journalists but receive comparatively little recognition or support. “They do not appear on television and most of the time do not appear in the credits of stories.”

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# Introducing the 2024-2025 RJI Fellows

**THE REYNOLDS** Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism announced the 2024-2025 class of RJI Fellows, each of whom will work to create and test practical, free resources for journalists and newsrooms.

Four institutions and three individuals will work for eight months to put a real, proven solution to industry challenges in the hands of those who can benefit, with this year's class developing innovative technological approaches like data sonification — a cousin of data visualization in which data is converted into an audio format — as well as guides and toolkits for journalists looking to better understand and navigate algorithms on social media and elsewhere.

"This year's fellowship projects run the gamut from extremely practical to extremely cutting edge," said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. "But they share one attribute: they'll all be designed in ways that are accessible to community newsrooms of all sizes."

Over the years, the program has built up a sizeable repository of digital tools, apps, strategic guides and trainings, which are available at our innovation resource hub.

"Our 2024 RJI Fellows are going to build resources that are uniquely innovative, practical and vital to tackling current challenges and needs in community-centered journalism," said Kat Duncan, director of innovation at RJI. "I'm excited to see their projects come to fruition and be utilized by journalists around the world."

## Institutional fellows

### **AfroLA — Zoli Csernatony and Dana Amihere**

Zoli Csernatony and Dana Amihere will be building DigInThere, a tool that will give newsrooms an automated, customizable and verifiable way to reward their audiences for meaningful reading and interaction through short engaging quizzes on news content.



### **Prism Photo Workshop — Michelle Kanaar and Alyssa Schukar**

Michelle Kanaar and Alyssa Schukar will create an online toolkit for local newsrooms for using visuals to promote newsroom engagement and fundraising.



### **Project Censored — Andy Lee Roth**

Andy Lee Roth will build an interactive resource on Algorithmic Literacy for Journalists.



### **The Salt Lake Tribune — Alex Partida**

Alex Partida will build the "Article-as-Homepage" toolkit for independent local news publishers.



## Non-residential fellows

### **Kate Myers**

Kate Myers of Purple Pen Labs will create a comprehensive guide and free tools for better strategic operations for independent news organizations. This resource will help news organizations be more strategic, efficient and effective.



### **Auralee Walmer**

Auralee Walmer will build a web-based toolkit for applying data sonification to journalism. It will contain step-by-step guidance for creating data sonification projects.



### **Katherine Lewis**

Katherine Lewis will build an interactive freelancing quick-start guide for independent journalists, based on a business-of-freelancing curriculum that will arm freelancers with the knowledge and skills to reach financial and emotional sustainability.



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# RJI Research Focus

## Flexible shifts, supportive culture needed to tackle burnout

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH** research firm SmithGeiger, RJI in February released the results of one of the largest surveys ever conducted on burnout in the journalism industry. A white paper, based on responses from 1,140 active and former journalists, is available at [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org), and the data is available to researchers nationwide who can contact RJI to learn more.

“Honest, direct feedback about what it’s like to work in journalism translates to solutions that are grounded in reality,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “That’s the only way to move the needle, and that’s exactly what we got from this survey.”

Amid widespread pessimism (44% of respondents were pessimistic about the state of the industry), the vast majority of respondents agreed that greater flexibility in scheduling and work-from-home options are needed.

While some options, like a four-day work week (supported by 90% of current journalists and newsroom managers surveyed), might be more challenging for news organizations facing financial and staffing squeezes, others — like hybrid shifts that allow employees to complete their work from a combination of in-office and at-home work, or flexible scheduling that is more accommodating of life outside of work — could be implemented more easily.

“In a media landscape marked by uncertainty, SmithGeiger

researchers wanted to explore viable journalism burnout solutions that balance professional and personal success,” said Andrew Finlayson, executive vice president of digital media strategies at SmithGeiger. “Journalism cannot thrive unless journalists can keep the passion for their important work.”

To that end, the results offered plenty of reason to believe journalists are willing to stick

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***“Honest, direct feedback about what it’s like to work in journalism translates to solutions that are grounded in reality. That’s the only way to move the needle, and that’s exactly what we got from this survey.”***

***— Randy Picht, executive director of RJI***

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around if they feel heard. 91% of current professionals agreed with the statement, “I love what I do,” indicating that concerns about workplace culture (46% of former journalists and managers cited a need for improvements like ensuring people feel appreciated for their work) and flexibility need not override the passion journalists feel for their work.

At the same time, a striking 49% of respondents agreed journalism has become a dangerous profession, a number researchers believe potentially speaks to the pervasiveness of social media harassment and

the broader negative impacts of a distrustful, politically polarized public. Efforts like former RJI Fellow Jennifer Mizgata’s training resources to help newsrooms build more positive cultures, as well as an increasingly common move toward trauma-informed reporting, could help alleviate both direct and indirect stressors and traumas faced by people throughout the industry.

Building on the results, RJI and SmithGeiger plan to work with newsrooms all over the country to turn the research into real action through workshops, seminars and partnerships designed to tackle burnout head-on.

Joy Jenkins, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism and a veteran editor, said the survey showed that employees aren’t keen to let the workplace flexibility that blossomed during the COVID-19 pandemic wither away.

“There are expectations of flexibility now, and there need to be continuing conversations about how to make that happen,” Jenkins said. “People who are caregivers, for example, or have other things taking up their time — they want to stay in journalism but may not see that as an option right now.”

Flexible shifts and support for work-life balance have long been shown to effectively reduce stress, support equity and increase productivity despite common assumptions that these are costly, burdensome measures.



“When you offer flexibility to employees, you demonstrate that you trust them,” said Nick Mathews, an assistant professor at the School of Journalism.

Mathews connected the results to his prior experiences as a sports editor.

“The line I would always use with my journalists was when I saw them in the newsroom, they weren’t doing their jobs. They needed to be out in the community to tell the stories of that community. When a news organization says you have to come back into the office for the final three hours of the day, it sends the message that the boss doesn’t trust you to do your job.”

For Jenkins, the results mean there is work to be done not only in the newsroom, but in the classroom.

“As this generation heads into the newsroom, they are going to have some clear expectations about being able to express their concerns in ways that feel meaningful,” Jenkins said. “If we want to not only retain the journalists we have but create spaces new people want to work in, then they have to feel seen and heard. There are helpful insights from this survey that faculty can use in terms of, ‘here’s what we’re seeing on the ground right now. How does this make you feel?’”

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## A ground-level look into the burnout crisis

**AS YOU KNOW** from the story on the previous page, RJI released the results of its survey on burnout in the news industry earlier this year. The survey produced a lot of data to work with, and researchers are still combing new insights from the responses of current and former journalists, but data is only one piece of the puzzle.

It's important to know that the vast majority of respondents supported a four-day work week and more flexible scheduling, for example, or that more in-house resources to help people navigate the particular hazards and traumas of the industry are needed. But whether news

organizations are acting on these concerns — or are likely to do so — is another matter entirely.

In an industry that has been known to react cautiously when it comes to change, whether it was the shift to digital in the 90's and early 2000's or today's AI boom, some see a generational change in the way workplace concerns are handled.

"My generation, we put up with just about anything for a paycheck," said Chuck Maulden, vice president for content at Griffin Media, which owns a network of TV and radio stations in Oklahoma. "I can't tell you how many bad situations

I've worked through because I was married, I had kids, I had a mortgage to pay. That was just the way I was raised."

Maulden worked in broadcast news for 45 years before taking on his administrative role last year. In 1987, he covered the largest family mass murder in history when Ronald Gene Simmons murdered 16 people in and around Russellville, Arkansas. 14 were members of Simmons' own family, including his wife, children and grandchildren.

Maulden is not keen on sharing how that story affected him, admitting that his generation "just

didn't talk about those things."

But his approach with the content producers he oversees is markedly different: after learning that staff at one of Griffin's local TV newsrooms were reporting mental issues stemming from the stories they covered, he decided it was time for a more proactive approach.

"I said, 'We need to deal with this,' and the best way to deal with it is to ask, 'Why is this happening?'" Maulden said.

He recognized that today's reporters, editors, managers and even behind-the-scenes staff are dealing with a perfect storm of not only the same traumatic situations that have always existed, but the additional stress of public distrust of media — which can quickly and unexpectedly escalate into threats to safety — as well as the pressure of immediacy in an "always on" society. At the same time, they are more willing to speak up about the struggles they are facing, a trait he was eager to embrace.

Drawing from the research of Desiree Hill, a college administrator and Griffin Media alum who has sought to help news organizations develop trauma-informed resources, Maulden instituted training both for existing staff and as part of the onboarding process for new staff. Training materials are frank about the realities of the industry, quoting statistics like "98% will witness traumatic events as part of their work," but they also provide strategies and resources to help people prepare for, and recover from, such events.

Beyond emphasizing the availability of counseling and preparedness for traumatic situations, the training also urges staff

to step back from stories when necessary and to speak up when they are struggling. These are concepts that Maulden hopes will help cultivate a more supportive environment that does not place emotional vulnerability in opposition to journalistic principles — both self-care and upholding the public service mission of journalism are emphasized in the training.



Chuck Maulden

"'Seek the truth' and 'minimize harm' are in balance," Maulden said. "When you have a newsroom that doesn't understand what minimizing harm is, then they're not a compassionate room. They're just all about seeking the facts without any regard to what the impact is."

Still, he acknowledged that instituting more supportive training and policies can be a complex task depending on the newsroom.

"Some newsrooms are just hard-nosed," he said. "That comes down from the company and from the news director. I've worked for newsrooms where if you walk in

and bring up ethics, they go, 'that's that capital J stuff, we don't do that.'"

Indeed, while RJJ's anonymous survey had remarkably successful turnout with 1,140 responses, some declined and, privately, admitted they did not want to run the risk of making waves in their workplace. Likewise, in developing this story, it was not easy to find news organizations that were willing to go on the record about their efforts to combat burnout, suggesting that while newsroom culture might be improving, there remains a general hesitancy to openly draw attention to these issues.

The chief technology officer for a major public media network on the west coast, who requested that we withhold his name and that of his organization, said he has implemented a four-day workweek for some staff — though not for those in the newsroom.

For technical and media operations staff at this network, the work week now consists of four 10-hour days, and additional flexibility means those might not be the same days each week. IT staff are also allowed to work from home when possible.

It's a step in the right direction: behind-the-scenes staff in the news industry can experience vicarious trauma and face the same stresses as their newsroom colleagues when it comes to public hostility. Media operations staff assemble content to get it ready for publication, exposing them to the same footage, images and other potentially traumatic content that those in the newsroom are dealing with.

At the same time, the media operations team is itself relieving

some of the potential burnout-inducing strain on the newsroom.

“Currently, many of our news folks and content creators not only have to manage telling a story and creating the content, but they then have to version it and send it to all the different places where we deliver content,” the CTO said. “We’re trying to evolve this team to pick up that sort of process work in a highly automated way versus having our content folks spinning their wheels on things that aren’t creating content.”

He added that while he hasn’t seen a difference in productivity, the staff have shown a marked improvement in job satisfaction. In addition, the added flexibility has allowed managers of teams that essentially work 24/7 to spread their schedules across multiple shifts, allowing them to work with people they don’t normally see regularly.

He also agreed with a key, positive finding of the survey, which found that 91% of current professionals agree with the statement, “I love my job.”

“Working for a public media station, everybody here could probably make more money working somewhere else,” he said. “So most people are here for a purpose. It’s a purpose of public service.”

Still, echoing Maulden’s comments about a generational shift, the CTO added that his organization is making a concerted effort to ensure that a public service mission isn’t the only reason staff choose to stay, whether they work in or outside the newsroom.

“We have been focusing on the wellbeing and psychological safety of our staff for some time now,” he said. “At the leadership level, we’ve talked a lot about how we can make

sure we’re taking care of our folks and giving everyone more flexibility. Somebody of my age, we didn’t used to think about those sorts of things. We’re learning how to operate differently there.”

But the tendency to put the job’s public service mission ahead of personal wellbeing has been entrenched in journalism since its beginning, and changing that



Denise Rehrig

status quo means overcoming a still-widespread perception that de-prioritizing one’s health is necessary to succeed in the industry.

Denise Rehrig, co-executive producer at The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, spent 16 years as a broadcast producer, including eight years as a senior producer at Good Morning America. But in 2014, she reached a breaking point.

“It was like conducting an orchestra of crazy every single day, and I loved doing that, but I hit a wall one day,” Rehrig said. “I don’t know why — nothing changed at work, but I had changed. Something had clicked. It had been 16 years of

constant news cycles, overnights and holidays and weekends, and I was like, ‘I need a break.’”

Her break lasted for more than a year. She left her job and traveled the world with her husband, resolving not to browse LinkedIn or stay plugged into the job market. It was a choice she described as “the best gift I could have given myself.”

Eight years on, having found a fresh start at The Late Show, the experience of switching industries has taught her more about the intractability of certain stressors inherent in news than about what she might do differently today.

“If I chose to go back into news, I’d like to say that I’d go in as a calmer person, that I would have a different perspective,” Rehrig said. “But the reality is, you’re live on the air, you have to fill four minutes, and if a piece is missing and I find out 30 seconds before, it’s kind of a disaster. I’d like to think that I would go back as a kinder, gentler soul, but even if I did, I don’t think I would be as good as I was in that role.”

Then there is Marcus Yam, a photojournalist and foreign correspondent for the LA Times, who performs a job that is traumatic almost by design; as a war photographer, he has covered conflicts all over the world, including the bloody, chaotic fall of Afghanistan and the current violence in the West Bank.

Yam acknowledges the mental and physical toll of his job and wishes news organizations could afford to send larger teams with photojournalists in conflict zones — where he often has only a single partner or is alone — but he also admits to a certain streak of bold autonomy. He has lobbied reluctant



bosses to send him into highly dangerous regions where he felt he could capture stirring, untold stories of the human cost of war.

"I've learned how to be so self-sufficient that I don't really need much," Yam said. "I'd like more support, more resources, but that's never going to change."

Reflecting on a time when he took some time off for a knee injury, he said the need for rest and recovery is only one part of the equation.

"I also don't want to burden my employer," Yam said. "I don't want to make it so that I'm squeezing every last drop out of them. You want to be a productive member of the team."



Marcus Yam

Yam's job is an extreme example, but journalism is, by its nature, a sometimes dangerous and frequently unpredictable field populated by highly driven people. But more and more news organizations are realizing that journalists are not asking them to change the realities of the industry. Today's journalists want to move with the punches, to find a path forward that meets their responsibilities to the public without forgetting about their own needs. As more organizations experiment with flexibility, the merits of that approach become clearer.





# What makes local journalism local?

**NEWS ORGANIZATIONS** all over the country are home to talented editors and writers who produce important reporting on politics, education, transportation, health and other critical information needs in their communities. These organizations include alternative newswEEKlies, city magazines and other outlets that do not fit some definitions of “local news outlet.”

Defining “local” has been a notoriously challenging task for journalism scholars, with the rise of research on “news deserts” adding important layers to the conversation. And now, the issue has carried over into recent attempts by lawmakers to help local journalism.

Jared Schroeder, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, and I recently analyzed

laws, proposed and enacted, in each state that included the terms “journalism” or “news.” We found that between 2018 and 2023, lawmakers filed 29 bills in 12 states to support local journalism. Only three of those bills became laws. The bills proposed various kinds of support, but most presented tax exemptions or tax credits for news organizations. Three bills designated funds to state institutions to hire more journalists. A California bill aimed to establish bargaining expectations and revenue sharing between news organizations and social media companies.

These bills identify local news organizations as important components of the local news landscape, and lawmakers acknowledged and reinforced

the importance of local news organizations for informing communities. They also referenced local journalism as a public good. However, in seeking to support them financially and in other ways, lawmakers relied on inconsistent definitions derived from their own or their legislative peers’ experiences, rather than from scholars or experts.

They also presented “community” in a geographic or physical context, which is not surprising for state-based legislation, but this approach limited support for outlets focused on other types of communities.

A 2023 tax-credit bill in Virginia, for example, defined a “local news journalist” as anyone who “regularly gathers, collects, photographs, records, writes, or reports news or information that concerns local

events or other matters of public interest, who provides at least 100 hours of service during the taxable year to an eligible local newspaper publisher, and who earns no more than \$50,000 during the taxable year for such service.”

California’s Journalism Preservation Act defined a journalist as someone working at least 30 hours a week and engaging in activities such as “gathering, developing, preparing, the recording of, producing, collecting, photographing, recording, writing, editing, reporting, designing, presenting, distributing, or publishing original news or information that concerns local, regional, national, or international matters of public interest.”

New York’s four tax-credit bills used the same 30-hours-a-week standard but required that a journalist live within 50 miles of the community the news organization covers and produce “original local community news for dissemination to the local community.”

These definitions acknowledge core practices of news gathering, and some include journalists working outside of traditional news organizations, but they also create limitations based on hours, income and proximity, which could exclude outlets covering broader geographic areas or non-geographic-based communities.

Lawmakers’ definitions of a news organization tend to be just as varied. In describing “local journalism,” legislators discussed “community” as a physical or geographic location. The Virginia bill and another in Massachusetts described local newspapers as serving the needs “of a regional or

local community,” and a Washington bill discussed local print and digital outlets that provide “journalism in their communities.”

The New York Local Journalism Sustainability Act highlighted outlets that “serve a local community by providing local news,” particularly “a geographically contiguous area.” The New York bill also defined “local” in terms of readership, noting that readers of local newspapers should reside in “a single county within this state” or “a single area with a two hundred mile radius.”

In a notable deviation, an Oregon bill focused on supporting grants for local journalism referred more broadly to “local journalistic publications” and the value of researching “local news and information ecosystems across this state, especially those serving rural, underserved and other hard-to-reach communities, including multilingual, non-English and ethnically specific media ecosystems.” The bill also referenced “community-centered, solutions-oriented journalism,” which extends the definition of “community” to groups united by race, ethnicity, class and other factors.

These are important considerations, as “news deserts” conversations have tended to focus on legacy local newspapers and, as Nikki Usher, an associate professor of communication studies at the University of San Diego, argued, often lack exploration of the economic, social and political dimensions of communities. The roles of ethnic news media and the information needs of historically marginalized groups are also vital to incorporate. I saw firsthand

the distinctive ways alternative newsweeklies and city magazines serve a city and its surrounding areas. But these outlets’ coverage – which ranges from politics to education to business to food to arts and culture – may not be universally characterized as “news.”

In clarifying these definitions, legislators should consider not only easily recognizable examples of local news outlets — newspapers — but also other information and sources that hold value for communities, including local TV, nonprofit news outlets, Spanish-language media, and news outlets designed to serve underserved and marginalized communities.

The landscape for local news has become increasingly diverse and multifaceted, and if legislators want to help it survive and thrive, definitions encompassing anyone who follows processes and practices considered journalistic should have an opportunity to benefit.

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**Joy Jenkins** is an assistant professor of journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism. Her



research uses a sociological approach to examine changing organizational identities and practices in newsrooms, particularly among local media.

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Ryan Restivo promoting his YESEO app at ONA 23 in August 2023

## Newsrooms say YES to YESEO

**ONE YEAR AFTER** the launch of YESEO — a free Slack app created by Ryan Restivo during his 2022-2023 RJI Fellowship — the app is helping news organizations increase the visibility of their stories through guided search engine optimization.

YESEO has been downloaded into over 400 workspaces in the last year, and it has assisted with over 8,000 stories across the United

States, Canada and the world. It supports stories in English as well as 10 other languages.

“Ryan’s work is exactly the kind of success that the RJI Fellowships Program is meant to create,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “Using that support as a launching pad, he has built an app that has real, immediate benefits for newsrooms looking to grow their

audience. There is no better proof of that than the fact that the industry is embracing YESEO.”

The app differentiates itself from other AI-assisted tools with its emphasis on usability for newsrooms, focusing on using machine learning to deliver data on keywords and using ChatGPT to generate headline and subhead suggestions. But most of all, it’s designed to be easy to use and is available on Slack, where news audience workers already are.

“It’s cool that something I’ve put out there is being used by so many people who value it,” Restivo said. “Building something that simplifies how people can get information — lowering the barrier of entry for folks who want to be able to improve their stories — is what I’ve tried to do with everything I’ve built.”

### AI as collaborator

Planet Detroit, a nonprofit environmental and health equity news organization covering Detroit and the state of Michigan, largely uses the app to create optimized headlines. The outlet’s audience strategist, Jennifer Hack Wolf, said she uses YESEO with more than half the stories that come across her desk.

“[Restivo] has built something really incredible,” Wolf said, noting the app harnesses the creative potential of machine learning without the unwieldy, unfocused nature of a basic chatbot. “It means I don’t have to type in the same prompts over and over again when I’m trying to figure out, what is the SEO headline? What is the SEO description?”

Wolf sees the app as part of a journey toward stronger

collaboration in Planet Detroit's newsroom. She hopes the app will build on its Slack integration — which currently allows users to share their results with colleagues in Slack — to make closer collaboration possible.

"In a small organization, the whole team plays a role in audience," Wolf said. "As much as possible, I want the reporter who wrote the story and the editor, who has gotten to know the story, to be deeply involved in making these decisions about how people are going to find a story."

While Restivo continues to incorporate this kind of feedback into his work on the app, YESEO is also evolving to keep pace with an AI boom that can provoke anxieties about what happens to information input into AI models.

Jane Seidel, the audience analytics manager at nonprofit newsroom Rest of World, said the staff at her organization has had a lot of questions about what would happen to the information shared in YESEO.

"They are asking, when I paste in a story, where does that go?" Seidel said. "Where does that live? Are there data privacy protections in place?"

Rest of World, which, true to its name, covers global tech stories outside the West, is making the most of YESEO's ability to identify keywords that will increase a story's online visibility and incorporate them into headlines. This functionality requires users to paste in a story or excerpt.

"I tend to use it when I just don't know where to start," Seidel said. "Because our coverage is so wide-ranging — we report on

companies I've never heard of and regions I've never been to — I find it really useful just for getting a rough place to start on a headline or a deck."

By default, when ChatGPT is integrated into an app like YESEO, any data entered into the app is not used to train the model unless the developer chooses to opt in. Restivo does not plan to ever opt in.

Still, conversations with YESEO users and potential users have made it clear to him that relying on OpenAI's policies is not enough. Now, he has taken things a step further.

## Stringent security

"Over the last six months, I have heard concerns from newsrooms about information security," Restivo said. "That is why I am happy to announce that every story YESEO has processed to date is fully encrypted when stored. Every story, going back to prior to launch is encrypted and protected, so even if someone had unauthorized access before I could block them, they

would never be able to get any data from a story."

On top of that, Slack messages sent through YESEO that are related to a story are encrypted as well.

"It adds less than a second to secure this data, but it is worth it to protect everyone's story," Restivo said. "I am looking to protect as much data as possible."

These measures offer both a very real layer of data security and a sense of peace of mind amid what sometimes feels like the Wild West of the AI era.

It's also part of Restivo's effort to keep YESEO laser-focused on what newsrooms need from an SEO tool.

"So many trainings and guidance and tools are built for marketing products, but very few have the needs of news in mind," Seidel said. "It's not just about keyword stuffing but actually doing useful SEO that helps Google surface your content to readers who actually want to read your stories."

### Headline ideas generated by GPT

These are using GPT to suggest different headline options for you to try. Copy them and adapt them to your style of writing as you need.

1. "YES EO: Revolutionizing Newsrooms with AI-powered SEO Optimization"
2. "Over 400 Workspaces Embrace YES EO for Enhanced Story Visibility"
3. "How YES EO's AI-driven SEO is Changing the Game for Global News Stories"
4. "Maximizing Online Presence: YES EO's Impact on News Story SEO in Year One"
5. "From Slack to Success: YES EO's Journey in Boosting Newsroom SEO Efficiencies"

Ask GPT for some SEO friendly description suggestions for your story.

Get Descriptions

See if the GPT model can generate some subheads that you could try as h2's or h3's for your story.

Try Subheads

Were any of these suggestions helpful to you?

Yes

No

Not Sure

Examples of AI-generated headline suggestions generated by GPT in the YESEO app





## 2023-2024 RJI Fellows share free resources

**THE 2023-2024 CLASS** of RJI Fellows concluded in March, with the fellows presenting the open-source digital tools they designed to help newsrooms engage and represent their communities. In a public webinar, which readers can view by following the QR code at the end of this story, these eight innovative professionals offered deep dives into how the industry can benefit from and replicate their work.

Indeed, while the eight-month fellowships have ended, RJI Executive Director Randy Picht emphasized that the projects are designed to enter the industry ecosystem to be used and iterated upon for many years.

“In journalism, a valuable and practical tool isn’t just one that has immediate use, though that is important,” Picht said. “The work done over these eight months will continue to help journalists and news organizations implement the trainings, guides and other resources in ways that work best for them far into the future.”

Ariel Zych, director of audience at Science Friday, is leaning into that element of public participation. Her sensitivity toolkit has launched but will continue to incorporate feedback for the next several months as she builds toward a screen reader-friendly version. The toolkit covers everything from budgetary

concerns to the nuances of different roles that a sensitivity editor can fill, highlighting a clear path for newsrooms to represent a variety of identities in their community more fairly and accurately.

But as much as Zych hopes her work will provide learning opportunities for others, building the sensitivity toolkit with the support of the other fellows was a learning experience unto itself.

“The breadth of perspective, skill and experience among other members of this year’s cohort was one of the most valuable aspects of the program,” Zych said. “Every single member of this cohort



provided helpful feedback and insight into one another's projects."

Celia Wu, the managing director of Global Press News Services, echoed these sentiments. Wu developed a version of the Global Press style guide in the form of a Google Chrome extension, allowing journalists to quickly and easily access information on how to portray a diverse array of people, cultures and issues with dignity and precision. In addition, she created a toolkit to help other organizations do something similar with their own style guides.

"I learned a lot about how to think of product development and product management," Wu said, noting that support from the cohort of fellows came not just as feedback but as inspiration and motivation. "So much innovation and a passion shared by all to lift up the field we all made a strong commitment to."

Both Zych and Wu refer to their toolkits as "living documents," a nod to the crucial role of iteration and adaptation in not just improving their work but spurring its use in other news organizations throughout the industry.

To that end, each fellow published articles on [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org) throughout the fellowship period that delved into lessons learned and tips to help others implement similar programs and initiatives. For even more on these projects, the webinar available online offers a convenient introduction to these resources, which are freely available for the public to use and adapt as needed.

## Meet the fellows

**Maria Arce** built ARENA, a toolkit for journalists to learn to work with and become radio amateurs — also known as ham radio operators — to assist in times of natural disasters.



**Tamoa Calzadilla** built the bilingual Guide for Journalists Covering Latino and Spanish-Speaking Communities. This practical resource helps journalists improve their reporting and better identify and counter mis/disinformation in Spanish that specifically targets these communities.



**Stacy Feldman** built the Pop-up Community Newsroom Toolkit to help small local news organizations create pop-up newsrooms with — and for — their communities. This tool helps news organizations increase their ambition and impact, while providing emerging journalists or non-journalists the opportunity to be news shapers and make a difference in their cities and towns.



**Kate Maxwell** built the Local News Go Bag platform, which helps prepare and support local newsrooms, journalists, and communities



facing and reporting on natural and environmental disasters.

**Jennifer Mizgata** created the Building News Culture training, which provides actionable advice, templates and case studies for organizational policies, practices and programs which helps news leaders build more sustainable and caring work cultures.



**Arjuna Soriano** built the Community Sports Reporting toolkit and playbook. It provides step by step instructions for newsrooms to work with community reporters through SMS communication to produce high-value high school and community league sports coverage with limited resources.



**Celia Wu** built the Global Press Style Guide Google Chrome extension and a how-to guide that shows others how to build their own Chrome extension version of a style guide.



**Ariel Zych** built the Getting Started with Sensitivity Professionals toolkit to assist newsrooms in sourcing, selecting, compensating, and working with editors whose responsibility is to prevent the marginalization of specific communities and identities.





Community-Centered Symposium participants in November 2023 at the Reynolds Journalism Institute. Photo: Kat Duncan

# Follow-up on RJI's Community-Centered Symposium

**IN NOVEMBER 2023**, 28 journalists from community-centered newsrooms and roles across the country came together at the Reynolds Journalism Institute.

The mission of our Community-Centered Symposium is to help journalists share their challenges, build solutions, learn together, pursue new innovative ideas and build a cohort of support for the vital work they do in service to their communities.

Each participant walked away from the symposium with practical and new-to-them projects they planned to tackle in their newsroom with the support of RJI and their cohort over the following months.

As applications open for the 2024 Symposium, which will take place in October, here is a status update on some of the projects that came out of last year's experience. These reports have been edited for length and clarity.

## Public Good News – Valeria Ricciulli

*PGN is a bilingual, nonprofit newsroom dedicated to community health.*

We launched a Spanish-language biweekly WhatsApp newsletter on health news called “Hablemos de Salud” (let’s talk about health) as

a way to serve Spanish-speaking communities by providing them with service-oriented information about health and connecting with them directly to answer their questions. Their responses and questions are also meant to inform Public Good News reporting.

In the feedback we’ve gotten, we’ve heard that it’s very easy to read and it’s written in an





approachable tone. The copy's short, because there's a character limit in WhatsApp, and we include a ton of emojis. I also include my name in the intro and format it like a text from a family member or friend. I think this has helped make it feel more approachable.

So far, we've learned that our readers are really interested in learning about health resources, particularly surrounding their reproductive health. We've encouraged our readers to ask us questions, and they've asked us where to get information and resources about their reproductive health. We will use what we've learned to inform our future coverage.

### **Graham Media Group/WDIV-TV – Dustin Block**



*WDIV-TV, the NBC affiliate in Detroit, is the market leader in news, weather, and original local programming.*

We built a local news survey for seven different communities in Metro Detroit to gather community-specific feedback across the region. We've done many community surveys, but this is one of the first times we used first-party data to focus surveys to specific communities across the market. Dialogues linking to the surveys ran live across our digital channels, targeting people based on where they lived.

We received about 500 responses across the seven surveys during the three-week period. Answers were a mix of shared stories that seemed to resonate across the region, and local responses specific to the communities. Responses gave us

### **AP Source: GM to move Detroit HQ to new downtown tower, plans to redevelop iconic Renaissance Center**



two insights: the feedback itself and which communities responded to surveys at higher rates. Both helped us understand who we were reaching and how we may better serve them.

Our targeted dialogues had a CTR (the number of clicks that your ad receives divided by the number of times your ad is shown) of 7-11%, far above engagement with ad positions on our mobile and desktop sites.

### **Saco Bay News – Elizabeth Gotthelf-Othot**



*Saco Bay News is an independent, digital news source covering local news in Southern Maine.*



Under the guidance of the RJi Innovation Team, I partnered with a local artist, Nick Blunier, who created a whimsical and fun design with a coastal vibe for use

on merchandise. The design is on a T-shirt, coffee cup and sticker, which are all available for purchase online at Spreadshirt.

This was the first time Saco Bay News has offered merchandise, and it was also the first Saco Bay News has had this sort of collaboration with a local artist.

I learned that paying for a Facebook ad was not very cost effective. I got more mileage out of creating posts with local people wearing the shirt in different locations. Creating these posts occasionally helps keep up the momentum. Otherwise, I think the campaign would crash and burn a short time after launching. I'm thinking maybe I could look into a local vendor to sell products with the design or think of some more ways to get the product visible in real life.

It's been fun to see people post photos with the shirt or mug – especially people like the mayor, who has a mug in her office.

### **El Tímpano – Katherine Nagasawa**



*El Tímpano informs, engages, and amplifies the voices of the San Francisco Bay Area's Latino and Mayan immigrant communities.*

El Tímpano's ambassadors program will engage 8-10 highly engaged subscribers of our text message platform to provide feedback on our service journalism work and help us grow our SMS audience. The program is modeled after the "promotoras" — community outreach worker — model that is a popular strategy



within public health education to train community members on providing vital information to their networks of family and friends.

Because we haven't launched the program yet, the main feedback that's helped shape the idea has come from our Founding Director Madeleine Bair and our Editorial Director Maye Primera, who are overseeing my work on the program. Maye encouraged me to think about ways we can educate cohort members about the connection between our texting platform and our reported journalism, a relationship which is still unclear for many in our audience. Madeleine encouraged me to think of ways we can give back to our ambassadors and ensure they get something out of the program, like building community amongst the cohort and incorporating training in media literacy and disinformation defense.



### California Health Report – Claudia Boyd-Barrett

*The California Health Report partners with communities across the state to create solutions journalism that strives for social justice.*

We created an online survey inviting parents and caregivers who are caring for children with disabilities to share their thoughts on what

stories and issues they'd like to see more coverage of.

We have never done a survey like this before, in which we directly asked for feedback and story suggestions from our readers and the disability community. I started out trying to create this survey using paid site SurveyMonkey, but after creating the survey I realized it would cost \$300 to be able to send it out the way I wanted it to look. That's when I realized I could create a survey for free using Google Forms. I think it's a great option for a small newsroom like ours with a limited budget.

Even though this survey turned out to be relatively simple to create, I don't think it would have occurred to me to try this without the inspiration and goal-setting from the training I attended at RJL.

### Shasta Scout – Annelise Pierce

*Shasta Scout is a nonprofit, independent civic news organization focused on Shasta County's diverse and investigative stories.*

We designed the very first Shasta Scout stickers in collaboration with some of our super fans on Instagram. This was our first time developing merchandise. We

have not yet distributed the final version, but our Instagram followers weighed in on the designs with lots of excitement.

Our advice to those who want to try something new is: Just get started! The hard part was overthinking design. Once we handed the project off to a designer, it went very quickly. Costs were minimal. This is a very doable project even for a tiny newsroom like ours. We're inspired to add more designs over time and potentially to support mini-campaigns in future.



### Cardinal News – Megan Schnabel

*Cardinal News is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan news site reporting the untold stories of Southwest and Southside Virginia.*

Our goal was to better connect with our readers (and our potential readers) across our vast geographic coverage area. We hosted a series of five community open houses across the region, attended by Cardinal leadership and by the reporter(s) who lived in/covered that community. Additionally, our reporters all started holding weekly or monthly office hours at local coffee shops and libraries. We built out our "connect with us" page on our website to





Megan Schnabel meets with a member of the public during one of Cardinal News's open houses.

provide a calendar listing when/where the reporters will be stationed.

While we had hosted a number of community events in the past, these previous gatherings were all very specific in their focus: guest speakers, candidate forums, etc. This series of “Cardinal Connects” open houses marked our first stab at holding drop-in events. The reporter office hours were also brand new for us.

We were pleasantly surprised by the attendance at our open houses — we didn’t really know what to expect, but the events drew a great mix of local officials and readers who just wanted to meet us. We gathered some good story ideas, and we’ve gotten requests from readers in other parts of our coverage area to host similar events closer to them.

We learned that gatherings don’t have to be expensive or complicated to be effective. We partnered with coffee shops and breweries to host the events at no cost to us; the key was to hold our events during days/times when the venue would otherwise be very quiet. We paid for some coffee and beers, and we invested in small merch that we could give away to attendees (stickers, etc.). We also collected business cards for drawings for Cardinal hats.

## InfoMigrants – Sertan Sanderson

*InfoMigrants strives to supply migrants with reliable, verified, objective and balanced news and information about the countries they have left, those they travel through and those where they are headed.*



My project was to examine the migration route from France to the UK across the English Channel, as the vast majority of our reporting focuses on the Mediterranean. In particular, I wanted to learn about how the lives of migrants are saved in what is the busiest shipping route in the world.

I thought at first the newsroom would be skeptical of the idea, but they actually really liked it. However, the first hurdle was actually receiving the funds, as we normally have to go through a major legal procurement process to shore up funding and cannot accept “donations” of any sort. But the newsroom liked the idea so much that it was willing to look into financing it directly.

Don’t be afraid to approach your newsroom with out-of-the-box ideas. Believing in the spirit of collaboration is something that can and will inspire others.





# RJI Program Spotlight

## Pictures of the Year presents winners in its 81st competition



Science & Natural History Picture Story 1st place: Jaime Rojo, Saving the Monarchs. In the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Michoacan, Mexico, a single latecomer joins the others.

Photographer of the Year, Sports: Patrick Smith. Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic celebrates winning In the Women's Singles first round match at Wimbledon.



Photographer of the Year, International: Luis Tato, Agence France-Presse. Dancers Pauline Okumu (C) and Natalia Como (R) hug at the backstage during the production of The Nutcracker at the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi.



Photographer of the Year, Local: Erin Clark, The Boston Globe. Archbishop Williams basketball player Julian Sustache (4) jumps over chairs while celebrating their win against St. Mary's during the MIAA Boy's D3 Basketball Championship.

General News 1st place: Qiang Li, Nowhere to Escape — Under New York City's Worst Air Pollution Day. The smoke from Canadian wildfires made Manhattan Bridge and Brooklyn Bridge in New York City almost disappear behind wafting orange fumes.





# Where are they now

## David Caswell on the hunt for truly innovative newsroom AI

**DAVID CASWELL**, former executive product manager at BBC News, is the founder of StoryFlow, which helps media organizations apply AI tools to their news products and operations. As a 2015-2016 RJI Fellow, Caswell developed the concept of Structured Stories — AI-driven stories drawn from information reporters place into a database instead of into a text article, allowing for various narratives and forms of storytelling to emerge from a set of facts and resources.

In the midst of the AI boom, he is finding that the ideas behind Structured Stories are more relevant than ever.

### Where does Structured Stories stand today?

The big problem I had back in 2015–2016 was it was just super hard for journalists to encode stories as structured narratives. It was boring, it was difficult. But now we have machines that can do that, and that makes it simultaneously more useful and more feasible.

### So AI is becoming democratized?

When I was with the News Labs team at the BBC, we would develop probably 10-15 projects a year, and there were very few organizations that could afford to do those kinds of deep innovation projects. But what's happened now is that almost all newsrooms of any kind of size at all are doing similar projects.



So with something like Structured Stories, people are much more prepared for it now than they would have been a decade ago.

Last year, I led the AI in Journalism Challenge, which was kind of an AI accelerator program we applied to 12 newsrooms globally. The upshot was that small, digitally native newsrooms can go from a standing start to full-on production with AI in about four months. We saw that again and again.

### That was just one of many international AI projects you've taken part in. Where does the U.S. news industry stand in the global AI race?

The scarce commodities right now are things like risk tolerance and imagination, not money and expertise. So as a result, we see amazing things happening all over the world. Places like Zimbabwe are leading and doing incredible things. Loads of stuff is happening in South America, South Africa, Southeast Asia. Nordics, the German-speaking world.

But there are a couple of black holes in the world where surprisingly little seems to be happening. One is the U.S., and one is the UK. When something does happen in the U.S., it's relatively unambitious. We're not sure why that is.

### What's the next project for you?

I've been working on a project since January that is more related to the Structured Stories side of things. It's about looking at scenarios in the five to 15-year time frame for the influence of AI on the information ecosystem. The functionality that's appearing is such that the existing way journalism works is probably going to be very different at some point. We're trying to figure out what that might look like.

TO STAY UP TO DATE ON CASWELL'S WORK, FOLLOW THE QR CODE



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



#### **WOMEN IN JOURNALISM WORKSHOP**

Attendees admire their work — a wall filled with Post-it notes — during one of the collaborative sessions at the event held every April. All of the WIJ sessions are built to be interactive to help attendees learn through hands-on skills' building. Photo: Kat Duncan, RJI Director of Innovation.