

WINTER 2026 | VOLUME 5 NUMBER 1



RJI's Impact: 2025

'Engine Room' powers innovative approach to AI

The resource newsrooms have been waiting for

Note from the Director

Randy Picht

RJI Executive Director



WELCOME TO RJI INSIGHT'S WINTER 2026 EDITION. As we enter the year, the challenges facing community journalism are pressing, but the tools at our disposal are also more varied and accessible than ever before. Of course, so many options — especially when it comes to AI and short-form, multimedia content — can make it difficult to discern tried-and-true solutions from ones that are more aspirational or underdeveloped.

That's why RJI is dedicated not only to ideation, but to testing and implementing solutions developed in partnership with expert journalists and publishers in newsrooms all over the country. Within these pages, you'll find resources and strategies that can be put to use even by news organizations that don't have time to train staff on complicated new software, have limited staffing or lack the budget to upgrade their computer networks.

Take, for example, the Science Reporting Navigator, which helps any reporter on any beat incorporate accurate science into their storytelling (p. 6). Then there are the resources available through Public Policy and Journalism, RJI's new hub for tracking how state legislatures are working to support community journalism and protect news organizations from SLAPP lawsuits (pp. 8-9).

Perspectives from newsrooms at the forefront of innovation in community journalism also offer valuable case studies. The E.W. Scripps Company is redefining in-house AI development with its "Engine Room" system (pp. 16-19), and at the other end of the spectrum, a small, family-run community newsroom in Kansas City is proving that "AI" and "hyperlocal" are not mutually exclusive (pp. 22-23).

In addition, you can read about how public radio stations on either side of the Missouri-Kansas border teamed up and leveraged a college football rivalry to stage an innovative fundraiser in the middle of an already busy fundraising season (p. 2).

And in the center of this issue, find a breakdown of RJI's impacts in 2025, a year that showed how effective collaboration can be in an industry driven by competition (pp. 10-15). So much of the year's success would not have been possible without news professionals like you who reached out to RJI for help turning ideas into realities.

As these pages demonstrate, those partnerships don't just yield solutions for individual newsrooms — they result in guidance and resources for countless organizations facing many of the same difficulties.

On that note, if you have an idea that collaboration could bring to the next level, send us an email.



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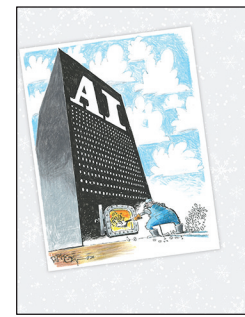
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Contents

ii	Note from the Director
2	Innovation in Focus: From football rivalry to public radio fundraiser
4	RJI News in Brief
8	RJI Research Focus: Introducing 'Public Policy and Journalism'
10	RJI's Impact: 2025
16	'Engine Room' powers innovative approach to AI-assisted journalism at Scripps
20	Introducing the resource that newsrooms have been waiting for
21	Community-Centered Symposium 2025
22	Excelsior Citizen harnesses AI to fill local news vacuum
24	CPOY: College Photographer of the Year
xxxv	Where are they now: Ryan Restivo
xxvi	Tomorrow's Media, Today's Challenges

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

John Darkow, the Columbia Missourian's editorial cartoonist, has created more than 7,000 political cartoons since the early 1980s. His award-winning work has appeared in The New York Times, Newsweek and national broadcasts. A two-time Missouri Press Association honoree, he is known for incisive, humorous takes on public life.



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Reynolds Journalism Institute
University of Missouri

Innovation in Focus

From football rivalry to public radio fundraiser

RJI's Innovation in Focus explores new tech, tools and methods of storytelling for newsrooms worldwide. The team interviews experts, tests ideas and provides findings to help media organizations.



KBIA's Rebecca Smith, Innovation in Focus Editor Emily Lytle, and Mizzou J-School students Claire Powell and Casper Dowdy at Memorial Stadium Sept. 6, 2025. They visited with tailgaters to raise funds for public radio as part of the Radio Rivals competition between KBIA and Kansas Public Radio. Photo: Nate Brown

AS FEDERAL DEFUNDING of public media has sent public radio stations all over the country into emergency fundraising mode, an outpouring of support from listeners has kept the industry above water for now. To endure beyond the short term, however, stations must not only engage their loyal base of donors but expand to reach new sources of support.

In light of that need, two public radio stations recently teamed up in a new way during college football season, building a friendly fundraising competition around a deeply rooted football rivalry. Crucially, the structure of the campaign — built in a partnership between the stations and RJI — is easily replicable, allowing public

radio stations to leverage the cultural spectacle of sports competitions to engage prospective donors in new ways. The QR code at the end of this article features templates and other resources to do just that.

The idea came from KBIA's health reporter Rebecca Smith. She knew that September 6 would mark the first time meeting between historic

rivals the Mizzou Tigers and the University of Kansas Jayhawks since 2011. What if the hometown radio stations — KBIA and Kansas Public Radio (KPR) — also competed to see who could rally the most donors for their station?

Every new gift to KBIA or KPR earned that station one point, while a gift from a first-time donor was worth double. KBIA, a station with a significantly smaller market than KPR's network, sweetened the deal with a merch incentive: Every donor who gave at least \$50 to KBIA would receive a Radio Rivals bandana in Mizzou black and gold.

Of course, the competition needed stakes. The station with the fewest points

at the end of the weekend would play the other team's state song on the airwaves and admit defeat.

From Thursday Sept. 4 through Sunday, Sept. 7, KPR received donations from 81 new donors and 110 from existing donors for a total of 272 points. KBIA earned 49 new donors and 40 gifts from existing donors for a total of 138 points.

This campaign raised about \$7,500 for KPR and just over \$3,000 for KBIA.

Outreach

Both stations recognized that they needed to lower the dollar amount listed first on the donation page since the goal was to reach new — often younger — donors. For KBIA, 33 people chose the \$50 level for the bandana incentive, and

the remaining mostly gave \$5, \$10 or \$20. Similarly, KPR reported the average gift as \$36.

The biggest challenge was identifying how to reach new donors who don't typically find KBIA or KPR on the radio. This first experiment featured a blend of on-air promotion, social media posts, emails and in-person engagement.

Two versions of on-air copy were created: a brief, pre-recorded promo that the host played, and a 29-second script the host could read

when they had time on-air. KPR's hosts also shouted out recent donors by name throughout the weekend, which seemed to rally both listeners and the hosts.

For social media, the team crafted language that both news organizations could use and created templates on Canva that could easily be updated with the tallied scores. Posts were generally scheduled ahead of time for a lighter lift during the campaign, and both stations also paid for some boosted Instagram and Facebook posts.

Because KBIA had a major pledge drive starting the following week, the station avoided email solicitations for Radio Rivals. An automated email from the station's general manager thanked donors. On the

other hand, KPR sent one email on game day and a thank-you message to donors. KPR also announced the competition in September's routine email and created a push notification on KPR's app.

To get face-to-face with potential new donors, KBIA opted to canvass tailgating lots surrounding Mizzou's Memorial Stadium. KBIA's Smith and RJI's Innovation in Focus Editor Emily Lytle brought along two student volunteers and walked across several different lots, carrying brightly decorated posters

and a spinning wheel where people could win prizes, such as KBIA swag or candy. The wheel served as a way to start a conversation before asking for donations.

There are plenty of ideas to build on the campaign's success next year, from bringing on a corporate sponsor to coordi-

nating game-day advertisements of the competition with the marketing teams in each school's athletics department. But with college basketball season heating up now, public radio stations around the country need not wait to meet audiences where they are.

SEE MORE ABOUT THE FUNDRAISING EFFORT



bit.ly/rjiradiorivals



RJI News in Brief



Some of the Missouri School of Journalism students who participated in RJI's Potter Digital Ambassador project in 2025: (from left to right) Elise Newman, Genevieve Smith and Cayli Yanagida.

Potter Ambassadors expands to support local newsrooms in four more states

Expansion into Iowa, Kansas, Tennessee and Vermont builds on nearly a decade of success in Missouri

LOCAL NEWSROOMS across Missouri have gained critical support in digital strategy and audience engagement thanks to RJI's Potter Digital Ambassadors Program, which pairs Missouri School of Journalism students with community news outlets. For nearly a decade, the program has helped small and rural organizations overcome challenges such as outdated technology, limited staffing and difficulty attracting young journalists, providing expertise and innovation that strengthen local journalism.

Now, that impact is growing. The program is expanding into four additional states: Iowa, Kansas, Tennessee and Vermont. This month, as Missouri students work with five newspapers and five television stations, RJI is partnering

with press associations and journalism schools in those states to send more students to newsrooms in need.

Just as the Potter Ambassadors adapt to meet the unique needs of each newsroom, states are tailoring the program to their own priorities. Kansas is following Missouri's lead by working with both print and broadcast outlets, while Iowa, Tennessee and Vermont will focus on newspapers this year. Iowa is also doubling the number of students per outlet to two. Regardless of location, the program's core mission remains the same: helping community news organizations harness digital tools to reach today's audiences.

"The challenges facing local newspapers are similar in every state," said Debbie Anselm, executive director of the Iowa

Newspaper Association. "Bringing the Potter Digital Ambassador Program to Iowa is a critical step in helping our local newspapers elevate their digital strategies — an essential component for long-term success in today's media landscape. At the same time, it opens a vital pipeline by giving students hands-on experience in our industry while showcasing the growth opportunities in local journalism."

The expansion is the latest example of RJI programs serving as models for efforts to support community journalism nationwide. It's also a testament to the continued impact of the Walter B. Potter Fund, established by School of Journalism alum Walt Potter, MA '81, in 2010 to support teaching and research around innovation in local journalism.

News series from ‘The Drone Professor’ helps news organizations take flight

THE JOURNALISM INDUSTRY has historically been slow to adopt new technologies, preferring instead to move gradually and cautiously. Drones, then, are a rare example of the industry getting in on the ground floor of a game-changing innovation.

Dominick Lee, a producer at NBC affiliate KOMU-TV and assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, wants to ensure journalists don't relinquish that foothold. Known to his students as “The Drone Professor,” he is launching a new series of articles for RJI designed to guide newsrooms through the rapidly expanding world of drone journalism.

The timing is critical; the drone industry is projected to reach a

value of \$65 billion in the U.S. over the next five years, and with innovation continuing to outpace regulation, news organizations still have a chance to help shape the industry's adoption and adaptation of a revolutionary tool. Lee's writing will provide critical guidance on the practical applications of drones in newsrooms, as well as the ethical, regulatory and economic factors surrounding their use.

For Lee, who has taught the School of Journalism's hands-on drone journalism course since 2021, the message for news organizations is clear: those who aren't actively considering how to incorporate drones into their news operations risk falling behind in a media landscape

that is increasingly embracing the remote-operated aircraft to tell stories from new angles.

Lee's first article shares resources to help journalists learn what they need to gain the essential Part 107 FAA certification, a “gateway” credential that allows operators to fly drones for commercial purposes (including journalism), to fly them at night and to fly them over people and moving vehicles.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO LEARN
MORE ABOUT THE ROLE OF DRONES IN
THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM**



bit.ly/3MlnNeG



Assistant Practical Professor Dominick Lee is a Part 107 commercial drone pilot with over 500 flight hours. He teaches the Drone Journalism course at Mizzou and flies the DJI Mavic 3 Pro to capture aerial videography for KOMU 8 newscasts.

Cam Medrano is a Part 107 certified student who earned the Top Drone title in 2024 and secured a reimbursement for her commercial exam for her excellence in academics and flight performance. She holds the record highest grade percentage in the class at 99%



During the flight lab portion of the course, students fly around Jesse Auditorium and the famous columns on Mizzou's Francis Quadrangle. There are 10 students in each of the four flight labs who get to fly once a week.

A new tool to integrate science into any story

SCIENCE REPORTING NAVIGATOR™



Bring Scientific Evidence into *Any Beat*

Every story is a science story. From education and public health to transportation and local policy, science intersects with every beat journalists cover. **The Science Reporting Navigator** will help you confidently incorporate scientific evidence, perspectives, or context into your reporting—no matter your background or deadline. While using this toolkit, you will encounter a mix of expert tip sheets, interactive learning modules, and actionable downloadable resources.

LOCAL JOURNALISM plays an integral part in informing the public and dispelling misinformation, but the misconception that science coverage falls solely under the purview of niche reporters with a science background persists. To close this artificial divide between science journalism and the rest of the industry, RJI partnered with The Open Notebook — a source of digital science training for journalists — to launch the Science Reporting Navigator.

This resource provides ready-to-use materials to simplify and demystify the science reporting process. For help emailing a scientist, journalists can copy, paste and customize an email template. Those reporting on a new study can complete a worksheet that helps to construct a rough draft with the key elements in place.

More broadly, the navigator shows how to access and digest scientific papers, find and interview

researchers with relevant expertise and interrogate scientific claims. And there is room to dig deeper with modules that explore how to analyze relevant scientific data, decipher statistical terms, cover controversial science and more.

To better inform audiences about the issues they care about most, journalists can choose how to navigate through the toolkit by selecting one of three options best suited to their needs:

- ◆ **Follow a learning path:**

Journalists can select one of six scenarios that aligns with their work and walk through a series of lessons addressing those reporting needs. This is the fastest way to get practical, immediate support for your stories.

- ◆ **Explore by topic:**

If you have a little more time or prefer to explore on your own, you can browse through

all ten lessons available in the toolkit and choose where you want to strengthen your skills. Dive into the lesson on covering fast-changing science, for example, to learn how to cover preliminary research with the right dose of caution. Or open the navigating data lesson for a primer on finding stories within scientific data.

- ◆ **Browse our resource library:**

Choose this option to quickly access a helpful resource for a specific task. The resource library includes a searchable glossary of key terms defined throughout in the toolkit.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO ACCESS THE
SCIENCE REPORTING NAVIGATOR**



bit.ly/4pl4sc3



New research examines ‘no comment’ deluge

ANOTHER WRINKLE is emerging in the crisis of public trust in news media: public figures are increasingly responding to reporters’ inquiries with “no comment.” And if they do comment, it’s no longer surprising for them to employ vitriol or personal attacks in place of reasonable conversation.

After a landmark study of burnout in journalism that concluded in 2024, RJI is once again partnering with research firm SmithGeiger to survey news professionals and members of the public alike about this evolving relationship between the industry and public figures. The goal is to spur the development of solutions with data on how audiences respond when news organizations disclose denied or hostile interviews.

“When people see ‘no comment’ in a story, do they think the reporter is just being lazy, or do they think we’re not cooperating?” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “On the newsroom side, how does this affect you doing your job? The experiments that come out of this are going to be research-based around potential solutions.”

While researchers are open to exploring the ideas and potential strategies that emerge from the survey, some of the consequences of hostility and disengagement from the journalistic process are already clear.

Informing audiences about government decision making at the local, state and national levels, for example, is more difficult

without lines of communication between those decision makers and journalists. The resulting information vacuum leaves the public vulnerable to misinformation from dubious sources that claim to have the answers.

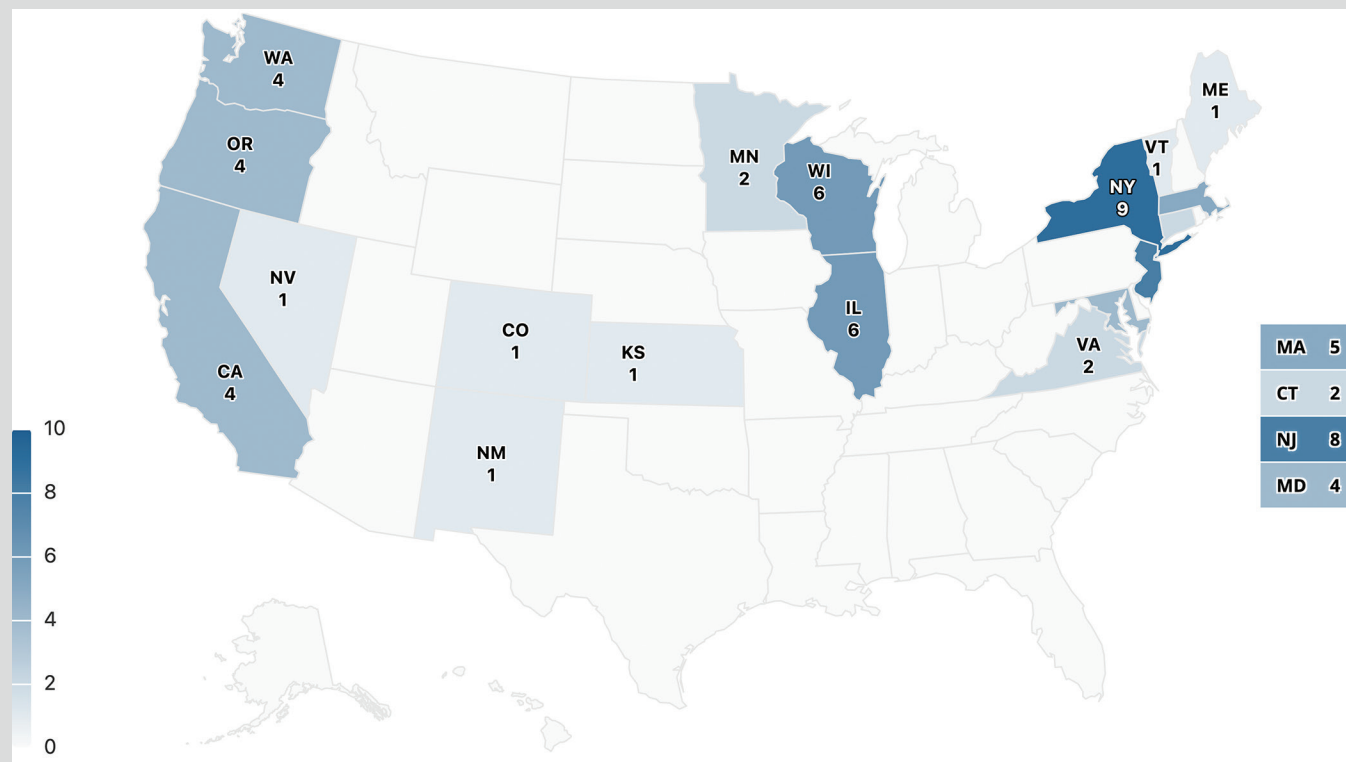
Picht added that journalists aren’t the only ones with a duty to serve the public interest.

“A lot of the folks who are responding with ‘no comment’ are people who are paid by taxpayers to comment,” he said. “Directors of communications and those kinds of roles — their job is to communicate. So it’s frustrating to have people who are paid to help us not doing their jobs.”

The survey launched in January.

RJI Research Focus

Introducing ‘Public Policy and Journalism’



STATE GOVERNMENTS are beginning to recognize the importance of preserving robust and independent local news at a time when misinformation and deceptive digital content — aided by generative AI — is more prevalent than ever. Legislators are drafting bills to establish tax credits, incentivize young people to pursue journalism degrees, protect news organizations from malicious lawsuits and more.

While many of these efforts have failed, momentum is building on the back of public opinion, which continues to uphold trust in local journalism despite the continued overall decline of trust in media.

In response, RJI has launched Public Policy and Journalism, a hub for resources that track how statehouses are working — or not

working — to support journalists and community journalism. The resources were developed and backed by research from Jared Schroeder, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, and his team, who have also contributed articles to RJI analyzing trends they uncovered in the course of their work.

Journalists, publishers and members of the public alike can use the Legislative Efforts to Support Local Journalism tool to see relevant descriptions of both failed and successful bills introduced by their state legislatures. Featuring an interactive map and searchable database that can be filtered not only by state but by the type, scope, outcome and date of the bill, the tool will continue to be updated as new

legislative efforts are introduced. The information available will also become richer over time as alternative methods of support, such as line items included in state budgets rather than in new legislation, are added in future updates.

Putting this information in one place allows policymakers and industry stakeholders to more easily identify trends and opportunities that could lead to more effective legislation.

“Exploring new revenue models and audience engagement tactics is important, and we do that every day at RJI, but you’re missing a growing part of the picture if you aren’t paying attention to what is happening in statehouses,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “Bringing all this information together can help the industry

“ We think of attacks on journalists in this era of polarization, but there are additional concerns like SLAPPs. They allow for this power differential; those with the means to punish publishers can censor journalists.”

— Jared Schroeder



learn from failures and repeat the successes at a time when community journalism is at a crossroads.”

The map is not without blank spaces. While momentum is growing, not all states have introduced relevant bills. But there are reasons for hope: The Kansas House of Representatives, for example, banned reporters from its chamber floor last January, breaking with longstanding precedent that allowed reporters to access a “press box” in a corner of the chamber. A month later, a bill proposing a tax credit to encourage small businesses to advertise in local news organizations was brought forward. Though it failed, it got the ball rolling; Kansas is no longer a blank space on the legislative map.

The uneven patchwork of legislation resembles the pattern

displayed by another new resource on RJI’s website: a state-by-state guide to anti-SLAPP laws. (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPPs, are frivolous or malicious lawsuits designed to intimidate news organizations and others into silence.)

The guide was developed by Schroeder’s team in partnership with the Society of Professional Journalists and was originally intended as an expansion of a guide provided by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. It provides both explanations of anti-SLAPP laws and — in their absence — overviews of cases that demonstrate potential options or tactics that news organizations can utilize if targeted.

“We think of attacks on journalists in this era of polarization, but

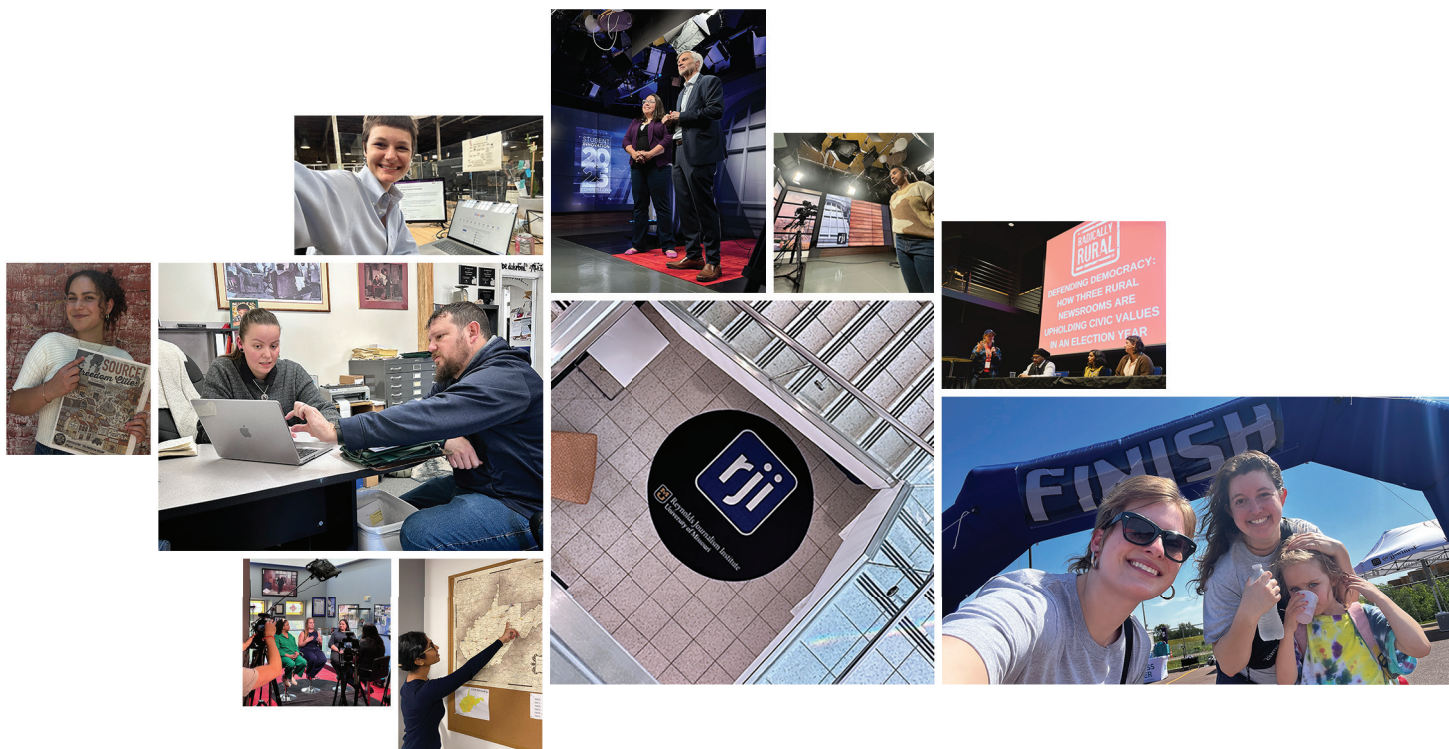
there are additional concerns like SLAPPs,” Schroeder said. “They allow for this power differential; those with the means to punish publishers can censor journalists.”

Together, these resources help fill in a nationwide picture of how state legislatures play an increasingly important role in efforts to protect and support community journalism. At the same time, they provide practical information to news organizations looking to secure a place for trusted, fact-based reporting in a quickly-evolving future.

VISIT PUBLIC POLICY AND JOURNALISM



bit.ly/48veotA



RJI's Impact: 2025

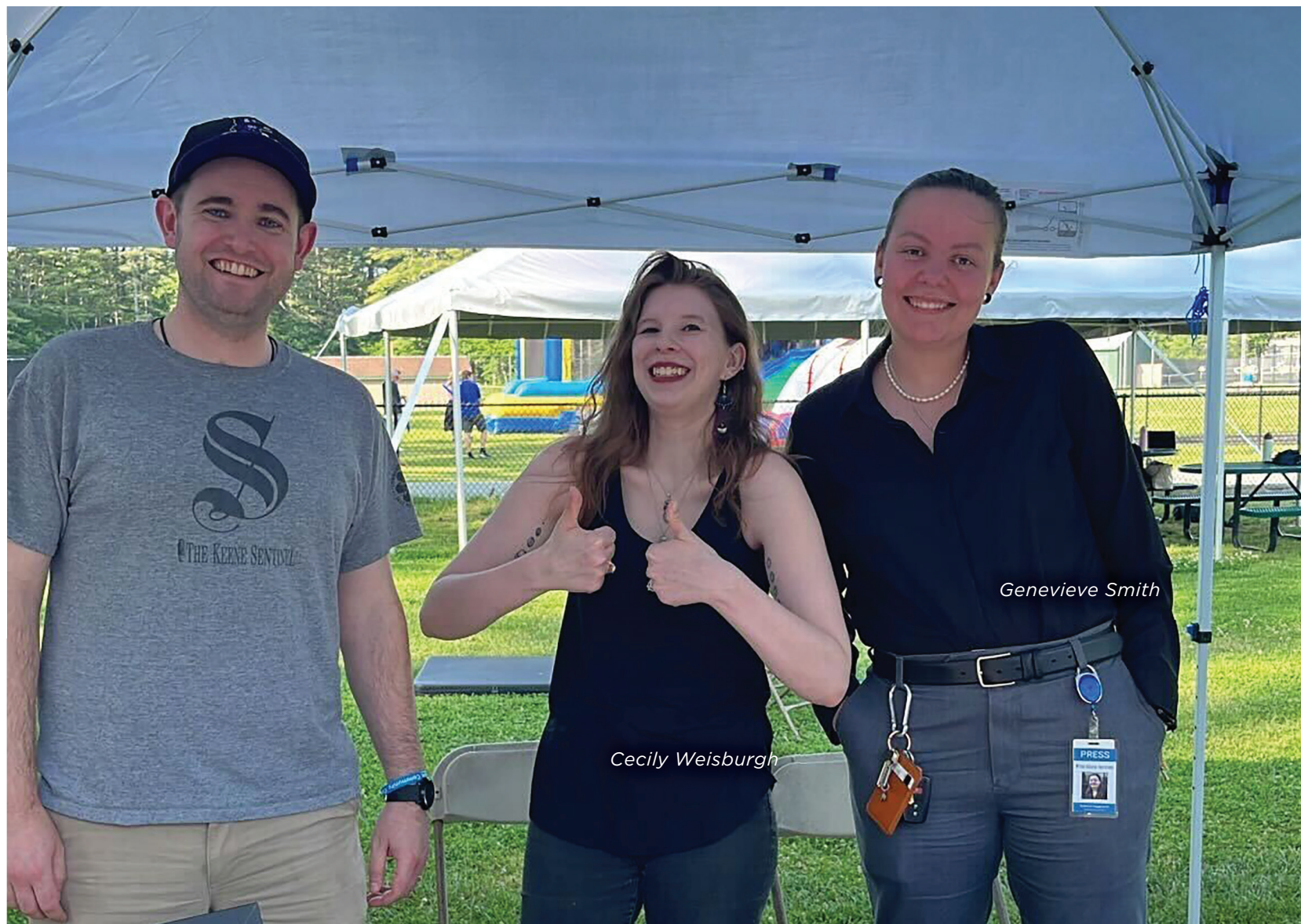
2025 at RJI has been a year of bringing people together to address the many challenges and changes facing the industry. As competitive as journalists can be, the future of news is not a race — it's a collective effort to support a fundamental pillar of democracy and keep local communities informed. In the following pages, it should become clear that solutions are strongest when they are the product of collaboration with journalists, news managers and audiences alike.

What should also be clear is the practical application of this year's work. From an interactive legislative tracker that charts how state legislatures are working in support of local news to projects built by the RJI Fellows — including a toolkit that helps reporters convert data into sound to provide audiences with an immersive and engaging experience — RJI's resources are designed to serve not just as philosophical guidance or thought provocation but as tools that newsrooms can put into action to grow audience engagement, produce accurate and authentic reporting and improve the health of their bottom line.

Insights from all this experimentation, research and testing were shared through more than 150 posts on RJIonline.org, featuring contributions from people working all over the country to build a strong, sustainable future for local journalism. That work seems to be resonating: RJI's newsletters and social media following grew in 2025, and Innovation in Focus — a monthly series dedicated to helping news outlets experiment with solutions to prevalent issues — shifted into overdrive to work with a total of 47 newsrooms.

Uniting it all was an ethos that could serve as a blueprint for how local journalism moves forward at a time when divisions define public discourse: an embrace of the value in bringing bright minds together to turn challenges into opportunities. Whether inviting experts and local news leaders to RJI for in-house symposiums or meeting them where they were at industry conferences, or even helping newsrooms build up their digital strategies with the help of student fellows and ambassadors, the core concept of partnership remained.

To learn more about RJI's impact in 2025, read on.



A summer fellowship that boosts newsrooms' digital capacity

Creating opportunities for newsrooms to get new ideas from digital natives has become a cornerstone project for RJJ through its summer Student Innovation Fellowship.

Last summer, Mizzou School of Journalism senior Genevieve Smith joined the Keene Sentinel in New Hampshire as an Innovation Fellow to focus on audience growth and digital subscriptions.

"Genevieve supercharged us over the summer," said Cecily Weisburgh, executive editor for digital at the Sentinel. "She was making an impact within the first week, coming in with enthusiasm and knowledge."

Editors at host newsrooms tell us they like the program for three reasons:

1. Students are tackling new challenges,
2. RJJ pays the students, not the newsrooms, and

3. RJJ's Emily Lytle, who oversees the summer fellowship program, provides structure and support to help projects reach the finish line.

One of the Sentinel's goals was to better understand how to make the most of its email newsletter in their effort to increase subscriptions.

Smith developed a system to track which newsletter readers become Sentinel subscribers and a model to predict which readers were most likely to subscribe.

She also worked on improving the newsroom's Google Analytics setup, created Instagram templates, expanded the Sentinel's presence on Bluesky, and developed an Airtable database to improve coordination between editors, reporters, and visual journalists.



An RJI Fellowship resource helping journalists make data listenable

Presenting data stories in fresh ways can make them more memorable and engaging, but finding time to develop new storytelling practices is difficult when reporters are already stretched thin.

That's where training resources like those developed by RJI Fellows come in. For her 2024-2025 RJI Fellowship, Aura Walmer developed a toolkit to help journalists tell data stories through audio — an approach known as data sonification.

Gulf States Newsroom radio reporter Drew Hawkins got the spark to tell a story about local temperature data through audio by attending one of Aura Walmer's presentations. A session description for her data sonification workshop caught his attention at the 2025 Investigative Reporters and Editors Conference in New Orleans. Hawkins wasn't very familiar with the technique, but he decided to attend.

"I was super excited because of the way she walked through what sonification is, the examples she used and how it can be used for different types of data to really make it resonate," said Hawkins.

With Walmer's guidance, Hawkins worked with local brass band Bettis + 3rd Degree to translate

data about rising temperatures in New Orleans into sound.

The story aired locally and nationally on NPR and audience feedback indicates that telling this data story through sound worked.

Listener Kaitlyn Trudeau wrote to Hawkins to say that she shared it with a friend who doesn't typically follow climate news. The sonified data caught their attention. "It helped something click in a way nothing else has," Trudeau said. "It's a true testament to the power of great storytelling."

The Data Sonification Toolkit provides a starting point for journalists like Hawkins to try sonic data storytelling. These audio stories can elicit emotion and curiosity, helping audiences make meaning out of complex data.

The RJI Fellowship gave Walmer the funding and support to turn her knowledge into a guide and workshop. Building on her background in data science and information design and work at the Georgia Tech Sonification Lab, Walmer came to RJI to refine her methods, document best practices, and share them with the field.



Jim MacMillan

Building better practices for covering gun violence

In 2019, Jim MacMillan started his Reynolds Journalism Institute fellowship with a hunch: that the common ways journalists reported on gun violence weren't helping the public understand the crisis and were often causing further harm to gun violence survivors and their communities. As a former photo-journalist for outlets including the Associated Press, The Boston Globe, and Philadelphia Daily News, MacMillan also knew many in the news industry were ready to take a new approach.

As an RJI fellow MacMillan convened the Better Gun Violence Reporting Summit at WHYY Public Media in Philadelphia and launched what would become a leading voice in the field: the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting (PCGVR). The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting has been a catalyst in helping reporters and editors adopt trauma-aware, public health-informed reporting practices and build trusted relationships with the communities most affected by gun violence.

From the Center's start, MacMillan has collaborated with trauma surgeon Dr. Jessica Beard to conduct multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed research rooted in lived experience. Their work

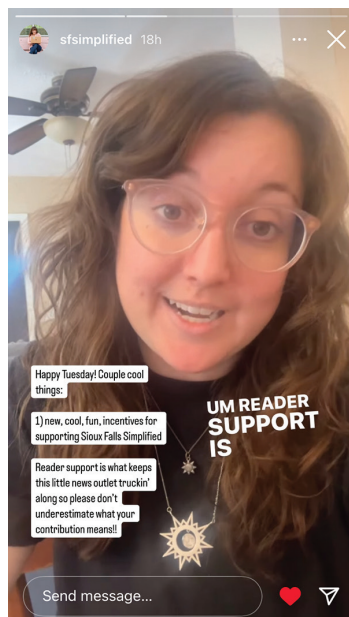
has investigated how gun violence reporting affects people injured by firearms and how different approaches to coverage can contribute to prevention.

In 2024, the Associated Press added a full chapter on criminal justice reporting to its stylebook, citing PCGVR among the recommended resources.

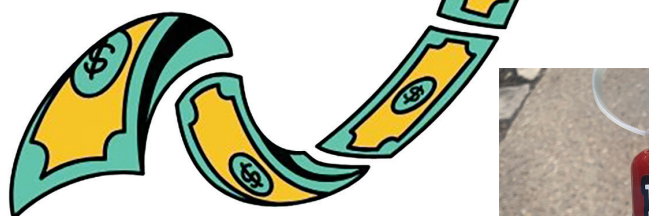
"I would contend that there is a large important movement advancing better gun violence reporting that wouldn't have happened if RJI hadn't taken a chance on me," said MacMillan.

And the work continues. The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting incubated The Association of Gun Violence Reporters, a national organization which launched in 2025.

In October 2025, PCGVR held the Gun Violence Prevention Reporting National Certification Conference which brought together more than 100 journalists, researchers and experts from the gun violence survivor community. Over 50 attendees took courses that count toward the newly developed Gun Violence Prevention Reporting Certification, signaling the continuing interest in this field.



Kathryn Dugal



Tiny revenue experiments can lead to big developments

In spring 2025, RJI's monthly Innovation in Focus series teamed up with the Poynter Institute to help more than 20 newsrooms test quick, low-lift revenue ideas. Each newsroom tried one of four approaches: offering perks for donating, finding creative ways to say thank you, targeting specific audience segments, or trying a registry-style donation page.

The experiments lasted just two-weeks, but the results were immediate. Some teams brought in between \$1,500 and \$5,000 in new revenue while others gained valuable insight into which messages don't resonate with their supporters.

One participating newsroom, Tradeoffs, a nonprofit health care and health policy news organization, wanted to move beyond the digital channels it typically uses to communicate with supporters. They tested a print alternative by mailing thank you notes and stickers to donors.

And the donors responded. People replied with messages of appreciation and photos of the swag they had received.

The experiment added a new dimension to Tradeoff's donor relationships and left a lasting impression on the team.

"One of the big takeaways from our participation in the Mini Revenue Experiments with RJI was learning how to do more nimble experiments," said Kathryn Dugal, Director of Marketing and Audience at Tradeoffs. "The cohort made me realize that our newsroom could, and should, be unafraid to try new things, even when things might not be perfect or exactly how we'd imagined them."

When raising revenue seems daunting, these small, practical tests show a way forward, one experiment or engagement at a time.



Jared Schroeder

Exploring the intersection of public policy and local news

As more people argue that local news is a public good, conversations about sustaining it have moved into statehouses. Across the country, lawmakers are testing new ideas to support local journalism through legislation, but tracking those efforts has been scattered and difficult.

To change that, the Reynolds Journalism Institute launched a state-level Legislative Tracker in 2025. Compiled by Missouri School of Journalism Associate Professor Jared Schroeder and graduate-student researchers at Mizzou, the searchable database offers a transparent view of how public policy might strengthen and protect local news.

The Tracker follows bills through legislative sessions and includes interactive maps and bill summaries. State press associations, advocates, policymakers, journalists, and publishers can use the tool to learn from states that are testing new approaches and to anticipate how public funding or policy frameworks may evolve.

“Lawmakers across the U.S. are experimenting with a variety of new ideas to economically support local news, with advocates often looking to other states for inspiration and innovation,” said Matt Pearce, Director of Policy at Rebuild Local News. “The Reynolds Journalism Institute’s new Legislative Tracker is an essential tool for journalists, scholars and lawmakers who want to track these efforts across the local news ecosystem.”

The Legislative Efforts tracker is part of RJI’s new Public Policy section on rjionline.org. This section also includes a database of Anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) statutes and related protections for publishers and reporters. Together, these resources offer a reliable source for anyone looking to understand and support policies to sustain independent, fact-based local news.



Reynolds Journalism Institute
University of Missouri



Christina Hartman (right) with Kate O'Brian, former president of news for Scripps.

‘Engine Room’ powers innovative approach to AI-assisted journalism at Scripps

ENGINE ROOM, a new AI suite the E.W. Scripps Company has rolled out internally to its network of more than 100 local television stations and broadcast networks, proposes an apt metaphor. A train’s engine room, for instance, houses the vital machinery — unseen by passengers — that keeps the behemoth moving and the lights on.

News organizations have always had their own version of an engine room: a staff of editors and designers who select and polish the stories that make their way into an attractive, engaging and ethical final

product. But with staffs shrinking industry-wide and an ever-growing demand for near-instantaneous, up-to-the minute news, Scripps has made the metaphor even more explicit: the engine is AI, and its mechanics are journalists.

The effort is notable not just for the technology itself — automated editing and SEO suggestions, interview summaries and a tool that turns a broadcast script into a website-ready news story, to name a few capabilities — but for the innovative leadership structure at Scripps that put it into place.

“Our goal is to apply some strategic discipline,” said Christina Hartman, vice president of emerging technology operations at Scripps. “News has seen incremental changes, but the majority has been around adding to the task list to deal with a fragmented, multiplatform world rather than truly transforming how we work.”

Hartman and colleague Kerry Oslund, vice president of AI strategy, both report to Laura Tomlin, who holds a title unique in the news industry: chief transformation officer.

A difficult math problem

Chief transformation officers are nothing new in the corporate world. When it's time to restructure or re-conceptualize a business, bringing in a CTO can help avoid the hesitant half-measures and haphazard approach that often characterize a failed overhaul.

Think of Cracker Barrel's recent rollout and nearly immediate scrubbing of a new, simplified logo, just the latest move in a long and painful modernization effort that has been generating negative headlines for the company since at least 2022. Cracker Barrel, it seems, could use a CTO.

You're not alone if you see a parallel between the old-timey restaurant — call it a “legacy” restaurant if you like — and journalism's propensity for late and disorganized reactions to changes in technology and audience habits. But at Scripps, a philosophy of change does not begin and end with the CTO but is infused into everything from reporting and editing workflows to administration more broadly. That's where Hartman comes in.

“I used to run our national network, and I was looking to rethink our weekend program lineup,” Hartman said. “I asked what I thought was a pretty simple question: What acquired programming do we have access to that we can run on both streaming and broadcast, can I edit them, and how much is it going to cost me to use them?”

Six months later, she still didn't have an answer. And when the answer finally came, it came in bits and pieces from 12 separate teams.

“There is a world,” she said, “in which 12 people and six months turns into 30 minutes of scenario planning with a computer.”

That notion provokes its own anxieties about potential realignments in the workforce. But if there is anyone with the experience and perspective to help the industry see its way through a period of change, it's Hartman, for whom the shuttering of Scripps News' 24-hour

“You can take a story and ask something really direct or just say, hey, here's the story I did — what records exist and who would I need to ask? After a couple minutes of thinking, boom! It pops out a list. Who wouldn't want to request all those records?”
— Ryan Takeo

over-the-air channel last year remains a painful but motivating reminder of the human cost of a changing news ecosystem.

“200 incredible souls lost their jobs,” said Hartman. Having served as Newsy's vice president of news since shortly after its founding until well after its purchase by Scripps in 2014, she still feels the sting of that difficult period.

In fact, the channel's demise had her contemplating leaving news altogether, until a call from Scripps CEO Adam Symson convinced her that making significant changes to news production was an inconvenient but necessary job.

“He said, ‘you know, it's not just Scripps News that has this math problem,’ she said. “It's basically all of news, and we need your help to

figure out how we rethink the way that we do our work.”

Shedding light on Sunshine Requests

One of the most impactful results of that rethinking is Engine Room, which stretches beyond the typical editing tools to democratize elements of news production that were once the domain of select figures in the newsroom.

One tool, for example, helps reporters optimize FOIA requests — no experience necessary.

“You can take a story and ask something really direct or just say, hey, here's the story I did — what records exist and who would I need to ask?” said Ryan Takeo, executive reporter at KSHB, a Scripps-owned local television station in Kansas City, Missouri. “After a couple minutes of thinking, boom! It pops out a list. Who wouldn't want to request all those records? It empowers some of our journalists who do not have a certain level of investigative skills, and giving them that possibility is really exciting.”

The suite's tools are organized into what the company calls “agents;” essentially AI-powered apps that address different chunks of a journalist's workflow. Takeo said another agent that sees a lot of use is the editorial review assistant, which can flag potential legal concerns or other issues before a script or digital story is sent further down the editing chain, resulting in stories that are cleaner by the time they reach the final stages of editing and — if necessary — legal review.

He added that there is another, perhaps unexpected, benefit: Having a figurative pair of AI

eyes run through a story can also reduce the potential for tension or disagreement between manager and reporter when it's time to make difficult editing decisions.

"As a manager, I can say: I really wish we could report it that way, but we can't," he said. "But sometimes, it can help to have something that cites, 'It's because of this and because of that, and here's another possible solution.' It comes off as empathetic, not just cold and calculated. It's actually written in a pretty thoughtful voice."

And from a public-facing perspective, Engine Room can also help with layout and design, as in the case of a special project covering the establishment of an electric vehicle battery plant and subsequent industrial developments in the small town of De Soto, Kansas. The project's eye-catching landing page features looping drone footage of De Soto, a 20-minute video overview of the plant's history and impact on the town, and a catalogue of more than 80 stories covering angles related to economics, social issues and local government.

Agents of change

As one might expect given Hartman's broad-but-systematic approach to reinvention, Engine Room and the guiding philosophy that powers it doesn't just touch the workflow of reporters and editors. Takeo's "executive reporter" role is itself a product of merging and reimagining the jobs of an executive producer and a managing editor, reflecting an approach to streamlining that isn't just efficiency for

efficiency's sake but is meant to support the craft of storytelling.

He oversees a team of 17 multimedia journalists (MMJs) and takes the lead on some of the station's long-form projects, but his relationship to his reporters is more like that of a coach. Rather than anchoring himself as a static



Jason Lamb

presence in the newsroom, he stays on his toes, helping out reporters in the field and providing other guidance as necessary.

"I'll review scripts, assign stories, talk about approaches and coach people through storytelling," Takeo said. "I'm responsible for the work of our reporting staff, but it's about being connected to the reporters and helping them out where necessary."

The same is true of Jason Lamb, another executive reporter at Scripps-owned NewsChannel 5 in Nashville.

"It was very much a needed role in this industry — it is a different beast being out in the community where the work of the journalism is being done," Lamb said. "Having been a reporter here at NewsChannel 5 and Scripps for 12 years, it

was a lightbulb moment when I understood I could have a multiplier impact in a management role where I could help many people in the field and in our own newsroom."

And speaking of a multiplier impact, one of Engine Room's clearest benefits is its ability to take some weight off the increasingly burdened shoulders of journalism's original impact multipliers: MMJs. Indeed, Lamb and Takeo both agree that one of the most oft-used, high-impact agents in their newsrooms is a tool that largely automates the time-sucking bane of an MMJ's existence: the process of transforming a broadcast script into text suitable for a digital article.

"I'll be honest, [converting a script to a web story] was absolutely the last thing on the back burner that I did every day at the end of my shift," Lamb said. "I wanted to get it out and go home. Now, this agent not only puts it together way more quickly, but it's paying attention to things like SEO and headline structure. And I've seen the impact. In terms of which content is playing well, it is almost night and day in terms of someone using that tool and then seeing their stories perform better."

Lamb emphasized that this and other agents require the human touch to ensure that any errors in style or content don't make their way to the final product. Of course, the time involved in editing an AI output does not begin to approach the time it takes to manually convert an entire script.

The extra time this buys for reporters and managers alike is a benefit of practically every agent in Engine Room, and what spills



Ryan Takeo (left) checks in with Braden Bates, a multimedia journalist at KSHB.

into that void can vary, but Lamb said one key benefit is time for brainstorming story ideas — itself another task that AI can assist with, especially given Scripps' openness to creating customized tools and agents that serve the specific needs of a given newsroom.

To help his reporters more easily come up with ideas for impactful stories, Lamb built a kind of makeshift agent combining an Outlook calendar that auto-populates with government economic reports and suggested prompts to help a chatbot generate relevant ideas.

"Research shows very clearly that people are financially stressed these days — the number one thing our viewers care about right now is preparing for the day ahead," Lamb said. "Reports like the consumer price index, monthly labor statistics and home sales are great, but the next step is, what does it mean for me?"

"So I created sample prompts that point specifically to data in these reports that can help consumers plan ahead and ease financial stress. If I'm a journalist looking for a story idea, these are stories that we know are going to have a big audience

impact and would have gone untold without the assistance of AI."

Like those consumers, the news industry itself is preoccupied with planning for tomorrow as AI firms up its role in news production. The train has left the station, it seems, but if organizations like Scripps have any say, its destination will be dictated not by tech companies but by the journalists toiling away in the engine room.



Introducing the resource that newsrooms have been waiting for

RJI, in partnership with the Local Media Consortium (LMC), has announced the launch of the News Media Help Desk, a centralized hub to provide local newsrooms with access to essential resources, expert assistance and fractional services.

Supported by a grant from The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the initiative aims to help news organizations navigate challenges and achieve long-term sustainability in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

“The key reason we pursued this project was sustainability,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “It’s easy to launch a news website, but sustaining high-quality journalism is hard. This initiative will make it a little easier. We’re optimistic about that because we’ve built the Help Desk on best practices, strong foundations and successful pilot programs.”

RJI is collaborating with the LMC, a strategic alliance of local media companies, to create a dynamic, evolving resource tailored to the needs of local newsrooms. Currently, the Help Desk includes:

- **RJI Learning Center**

A curated, journalism resource center featuring case studies, how-to guides and expert pieces that offer insights and showcase what’s working. New content will be prioritized by topics that are of urgent interest to journalists. The Learning Center will also house a database of tools called the Scorecard that allows users to compare capabilities and features in order to efficiently select a third-party platform that aligns with an organization’s goals.

- **DODS Fractional Services**

Digital On-Demand Services (DODS), an existing program managed by the LMC, connects newsrooms with quality, vetted digital media experts to fill resource gaps and complete projects efficiently. Services are offered at pre-negotiated rates. The DODS team assesses scope of work, matches newsrooms with the best

consultant or technologist for the job, and stays involved to ensure the project is successfully completed.

“Our members remain optimistic about the future of local journalism but face significant challenges,” said Fran Wills, CEO of LMC. “The value of shared knowledge available on the News Media Help Desk is immeasurable. We’re proud to partner with RJI to deliver expanded resources and sustainability tools to newsrooms nationwide.”

The Help Desk leverages RJI and LMC’s expertise, enabling the organizations to build on the success of their programs to support the industry with the tools and guidance they need to accelerate innovation and advance their shared mission. New features and resources will be rolled out based on media company feedback and priorities.

FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO SEE THE HELP DESK FOR YOURSELF



newsmediahelpdesk.org

Community-Centered Symposium 2025

IN FALL 2025, RJI hosted its Community-Centered Symposium at the Mirror Indy newsroom in Indianapolis, reaffirming its commitment to helping journalists innovate and strengthen connections with the communities they serve. 33 community-focused journalists, editors, entrepreneurs and news founders spent two days collaborating on ideas and solutions, with discussions and brainstorming sessions facilitated by RJI's Kat Duncan, Emily Lytle and Sriya Reddy.

Over the next few months, attendees will put their plans into action. For example, Caitlin Schmidt will partner with an Indigenous journalist to launch O'dham Media online and publish a print newsletter for the Tohono O'dham Nation. Jake Hylton of LOOKOUT aims to make stories more accessible by adding audio components.

This symposium creates space for honest conversations and bold thinking about how we can do better work in service to our communities. Look for a wrap-up of these projects and their impact on RJIonline.org in May.



Attendees of the Community-Centered Symposium convened and planned their projects at the Mirror Indy offices in Indianapolis on Nov. 13–14, 2025.



Excelsior Springs, Missouri, 1909

Excelsior Citizen harnesses AI to fill local news vacuum

This article is part of “AI is here,” a series from RJI highlighting AI innovation in journalism as part of a commitment to helping newsrooms adapt in a rapidly changing media landscape. In this installment, learn how one small newsroom is using AI to get closer to its community.

PROMISES OF technology that will “level the playing field” for newsrooms of all sizes and locales have a history of ringing hollow.

The internet and social media, hailed as democratizing forces, have often done just the opposite. “Low-maintenance” software has turned into monthly subscriptions that can be costly, especially for rural outlets with shoestring budgets.

But for Excelsior Citizen, a hyper-local digital news outlet serving the Kansas City suburb of Excelsior Springs, Missouri, the age of AI’s promises are ringing true. Husband-and-wife team Jason and Courtney Cole produce content for their website across seven news sections while also populating an events calendar and publishing letters to the editor from community members, and they are optimistic about AI’s potential to streamline time-consuming tasks.

“If I’m taking on a story that is complicated and has a lot of pieces, it helps me know that what I’m

doing is right and helps me speed it up,” said Courtney Cole. “What would take hours upon hours is now possible as a small team.”

And as for the promise that AI tools, in handling the most menial tasks, will open up more time for journalists to do important work?

“If I’m taking on a story that is complicated and has a lot of pieces, it helps me know that what I’m doing is right and helps me speed it up. What would take hours upon hours is now possible as a small team.”

— Courtney Cole

Jason Cole said that holds true in his experience.

“It’s definitely freed up some time, and it’s helped in writing grant applications,” he said. “We’re also training a few writers, and I’ll run their stories through an AI to format for AP Style. Our sportswriter will

send me a Google doc with a brain dump; I’ll tell AI to keep the wording but format it correctly.”

But while instant editing passes and efficient research are perks, the Coles see perhaps the strongest potential in making a community events calendar the crux of their AI strategy.

Excelsior Citizen’s weekly horoscopes are created by feeding events from the calendar into a large language model, resulting in tongue-in-cheek horoscopes that incorporate local events. The weekly newsletter, on the other hand, remains hand-built, but the Coles are experimenting with fully automating it by using a plugin to grab the week’s most popular stories (accompanied by relevant ads), using an RSS feed to pull upcoming events from the calendar and employing ChatGPT to give the newsletter a friendly, local-feeling voice.

If all goes well on that front, there is another stretch goal: supplementing the weekly newsletter with an automated daily version serving

the whole of Clay County, which boasts a market more than 20 times larger than the 11,000 residents of Excelsior Springs.

One might imagine that a hyper-local newsletter serving the entirety



Courtney Cole

of the fifth-most-populous county in Missouri is either impossible or fated for mediocrity, but an up-to-date, county-wide events calendar — coupled with customization options that allow readers to choose which content they see — could produce a tailored newsletter that feels relevant to audiences even as it serves communities all over the map.

That's an exciting prospect for a small news organization.

"If we could get less than one percent of Clay County to sign up, that would fund the entirety of Excelsior Citizen," Jason Cole said.

The Coles' digital, AI-forward publication belies their strong roots in traditional media. Jason Cole's background is in video production for a variety of publications and higher

education institutions. Courtney Cole's grandfather, Joe Morgan, owned the local Town & Country Leader for decades; the house where he lived and worked is the house the Coles live and work in today.

But at the same time, the family has never been about preserving the status quo. The Morgan family business, Morgansites — which provides website development and design services — began in 2000 as the print-to-online transition was kicking into high gear, helping local businesses embrace the digital era. Courtney Cole's own experience in social media, digital business development and civic organizations led her to create a community Facebook group dedicated to sharing news and information, a group that grew with shocking speed as it filled a vacuum created by local media's unwillingness to commit to digital content.

Founded nearly a decade ago, the Facebook group's 39,000 members now dwarf the population of Excelsior Springs (making the prospect of a county-wide newsletter look all the more reachable). The Excelsior Citizen grew out of that group, an organic origin story that has more in common with a rural, grassroots ethos than with the Silicon Valley mindset of AI-driven entrepreneurship.

Yet any label along the spectrum from folksy to cynical is probably too restrictive for the Coles, who are willing to adapt as they see fit. Or, put another way, they see what isn't working for legacy media and do the opposite. As local media began to fill with syndicated content, they took to livestreaming city

council and school board meetings. Seeing paywalls as antithetical to a community-focused mindset, they adopted a pay-what-you-want model that allows free access alongside direct-sale advertising.

There is hardly a better metaphor for this approach than what Courtney Cole's brother (also Joe Morgan) is doing in Kansas City's Crossroads neighborhood. The massive, glass-wrapped icon of a building that once housed the Kansas City Star's printing presses is now being repurposed into a data center for Patmos, an internet and AI infrastructure company.

As chief operating officer at Patmos, Morgan is focused on building what he calls "the next generation of data centers," but for those in the journalism industry, what he's doing shouldn't look all that different from what the Coles are doing: building a wake-up call.



Jason Cole

COLLEGE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR

cboy

IN OCTOBER, RJI held the 80th College Photographers of the Year (CPOY) competition. Founded by the Cliff and Vi Edom in 1945, the contest is co-sponsored by Nikon and offers a 12-week internship with Reuters to the winner of its premier Portfolio category. Students gain valuable feedback through the judging process and — at the Missouri School of Journalism — have the opportunity to help organize and administer the program.

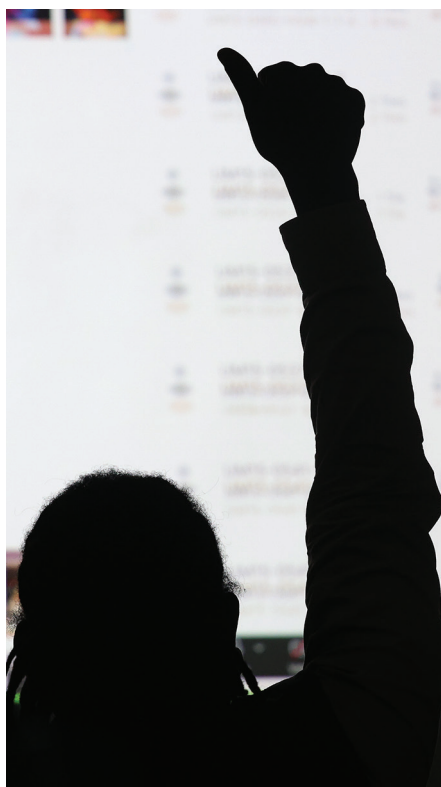
As the world's largest collegiate photojournalism competition, CPOY is open to college students anywhere in the world. For CPOY 80, more than 600 students from 190 colleges and universities worldwide entered the competition. Jordan Tovin, a senior at George Washington University, won the Portfolio category and the Reuters internship for images of community life in rural Kentucky and Washington, D.C.

Professional bull rider Allen Burkholder rides a bull during the first round of SEBRA Finals at the Virginia Horse Center in Lexington, VA. Burkholder came into the event ranked 25th, and fell off the bull before the buzzer, therefore getting a no score. Photo: Arwen Clemans



Robin Joseph hugs one of her Indio Gigante Chickens, which have the capacity to grow as tall as 4 feet, in Antioch, Kentucky, on June 30, 2025. Photo: Jordan Tovin

Judges for the still division of CPOY 80 met in Tucker Forum at Mizzou's School of Journalism.



Miami Herald Staff Photojournalist Carl-Philippe Juste casting a vote during CPOY. Photo: Marie D. De Jesús



Jayden Williams poses for a portrait in his father's mask next to his family's yard sale outside his house in Cynthiana, Kentucky, on June 29, 2025. The Williams family buys storage units often so they can resell what's inside them. Photo: Jordan Tovin



The University of Missouri women's gymnastics team celebrates advancing to the 2025 NCAA Women's Gymnastics National Championships at Alaska Airlines Arena in Seattle, WA, on Sunday, April 6, 2025. Photo: John Gronski

Where are they now

No rest for Ryan Restivo as YESEO continues to grow

RYAN RESTIVO is the founder of YESEO, built during his 2022-2023 RJI Fellowship to help newsrooms with search engine optimization best practices.

YESEO makes use of Natural Language Processing and AI prompting to quickly identify and resolve SEO issues at every stage of the news production process. Now, Restivo seeks to expand its capabilities by incorporating source tracking tools.

Three years later, how is YESEO doing?

YESEO has helped with more than 18,000 stories and has been installed in more than 675 workspaces since launching in March 2023. I am so excited for the future.

I just wrapped up a project in the JournalismAI Innovation Challenge — supported by the Google News Initiative — with The Oglethorpe Echo. I was able to work with Dr. Amanda Bright and students at the University of Georgia to learn more from their newsroom's 200-plus sources across more than 2,800 stories. (Editor's note: The Oglethorpe Echo is a 151-year-old newspaper now run by the University of Georgia and serving rural Oglethorpe County.)

The students report on their beats throughout the semester but never have a chance to tell the next class about who their sources are. So, I built a tool inside YESEO that can

understand who has been quoted and how many times, summarizes their quotes into meaningful positions and gives the students key information before they ever talk to a source.

What's next for the app?

On the heels of the work with The Oglethorpe Echo, I have been gathering newsrooms to test new features, because the use case is evolving. We're going to try and unlock even more source tracking capabilities for reporters to see where that leads. I have partnered with [2021-2022 RJI Fellow] Emma Carew Grovum and Kimbap Media to recruit newsrooms for testing similar ways of tracking sources in their own workspaces.

We're looking to test with a broad range of newsrooms and prove that these features can help sustain YESEO and its future.

It sounds like YESEO has remained relevant through this period of rapid change in the industry.

Yes, and that is partly because newsrooms are also using the app to inspire their own building in their own systems. I've been fortunate to hear so many stories about how different newsrooms are using it and build case studies out of them.

I presented at PMJA this year in Kansas City and referenced my



first-ever presentation after the end of the RJI Fellowship, which was a remote presentation to the Illinois News Broadcasters Association. Someone in the audience said they were at that presentation! What was really cool was this person had a notebook from every conference they went to, so I was able to see the notes they scribbled about "YESEO" way back then.

I remember when this launched, my biggest concern was: will anyone find this? Now, it's about observing how people are using it and adapting to their needs.

FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YESEO AND SEE HOW NEWS ORGANIZATIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY ARE USING THE APP



yeseo.app



Pictured (from left): Andon Baltakov, media business consultant; Lilia Arroyo Flores, founder and CEO of Digame Consulting; Candice Fortman, founder of Outlier Media; and Margot Susca, assistant professor at American University. Event hosted by Randy Picht, RJI executive director. Photos: Nate Brown.

TOMORROW'S MEDIA, TODAY'S CHALLENGES

On Oct. 16, the Reynolds Journalism Institute hosted Tomorrow's Media, Today's Challenges, bringing together leading voices to explore solutions for journalism's most pressing issues. RJI drives innovation by turning research into practical tools—like the Science Reporting Navigator—and testing strategies in live newsrooms to strengthen local news and ethical practices.