SUMMER 2026 | VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2

JOURNALISM INSTITUTE • MISSOURI SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

rji INSIGHT

RJI Fellows launch free guides, resources

New York Times' Mike Abrams on building trust

Journalism must retire 'no comment' phrase

Note from the Director

Randy Picht
RJI Executive Director

WELCOME TO THE SUMMER 2026 EDITION OF RJI INSIGHT. In this issue, you'll notice a recurring theme around building and rebuilding trust through transparency and community-centered innovation. Whether you manage a weekly print publication or a digital-native startup, I'm confident there is something here to help your newsroom adapt and thrive.

One of the most pressing hurdles the industry faces today is the growing disconnect and hostility between journalists and public figures. Our latest national research study reveals that "no comment" responses from these figures have become an alarming industry norm that actively erodes public trust in journalism (p. 16). Read on to learn why journalism must retire the "no comment" phrase, and don't miss our Q&A with Mike Abrams, deputy editor for trust at The New York Times, who breaks down how The Times is building trust through transparency (p. 21).

This issue also highlights the work of our 2025–2026 RJI Fellows, who have now launched their free, open-source guides and resources built to solve important challenges in community journalism.

Explore a digital toolbox for responsible immigration coverage, an evidence-based guide to reporting on substance use, a strategy for engaging audiences with walking tours and more (pp. 10-12). Then learn about Institutional Fellow Rebecca Ritzel's ethical and sustainable alternative to traditional press junkets, which she field tested right here in Columbia, Missouri (pp. 13-15).

And if you've read through an issue of RJI Insight before, you know that collaborative thinking is key to our work. Here, we break down actionable takeaways from 16 short-term experiments with news partners in our Innovation in Focus series, ranging from automated web-scraping to staging creative fundraisers around college sports rivalries (pp. 2-3). Then we dive into the Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop, which brought rural news leaders together at RJI to brainstorm realistic solutions catered to their specific needs (pp. 18-20).

Innovation is about much more than adopting state-of-the-art technology — for journalism, it's about a shared commitment to serving democracy and strengthening community engagement. I hope these pages spark new ideas for your own newsroom. As always, if you have a challenge you want to tackle or an idea you want to test, RJI is here to help you bring it to life.

Let's collaborate and make it happen.

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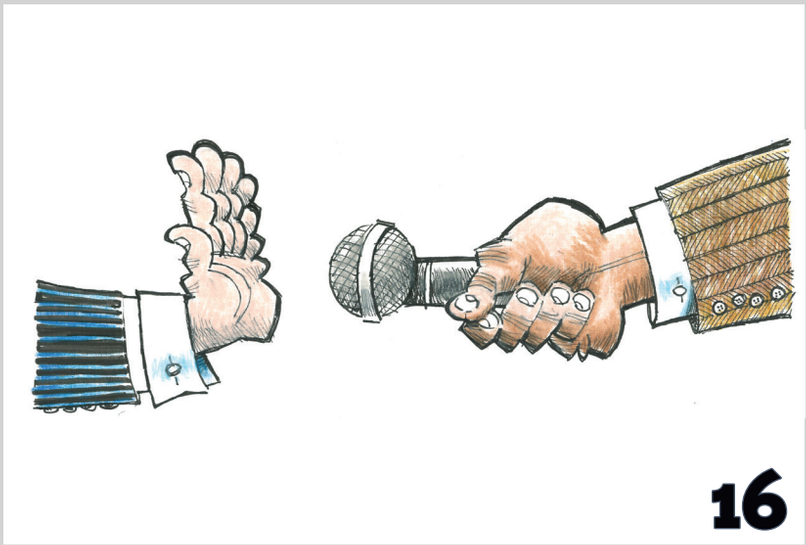

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The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) works with the news industry, professors, students and others to make sure journalism has a long and bright future. As a "think-and-do" tank that opened its doors in 2008, RJI uses its guaranteed funding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

ON THE COVER

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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Innovation in Focus

Insights from 16 short-term experiments

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.

Newsberg's founding editor, Branden Andersen, leads his first walking tour on May 1, 2025.

WHEN RJI BEGINS a project for the Innovation in Focus series, it always starts with a vital question: What is a challenge that your news organization has been meaning to tackle, but you haven't had the time or resources to address yet?

In 2025, this led to 16 different experiments lasting from a few weeks to two months each, and for every one of these experiments, RJI partnered with at least one newsroom — "at least" being the operative phrase. For Mini Revenue Experiments, which broke down large revenue and fundraising goals into short-term experiments, 25 news organizations participated together.

Partners served communities everywhere from Oregon, Texas, Kansas and Pennsylvania to Canada and the United Kingdom. Here are a few useful resources and strategies put to the test during their work with RJI.

Tools you can use

- **Octoparse with Zapier** — Partnering with The Haitian Times, we used Octoparse, a web-scraping tool with Zapier to automate the collection of information for a community guide. Here's how we did it.
- **Descript** — We used this tool with Dallas Free Press to transform long public meeting videos into short clips that they could use on social media. Here's what we learned, and how Dallas Free Press planned to incorporate this into their Documenter's program.
- **BillTrack50** — With legislation changing so quickly, we searched for a tool that would help The Appeal track updates for specific beats. We liked how BillTrack50 addressed this challenge and connected with Slack. See how it stacked up to other tools here.
- **GlitterAI** — We partnered with KASU to find more efficient ways to onboard new staff to the content calendar, and we appreciated how GlitterAI used

transcriptions and screenshots to save time.

Replicate these community engagement ideas

- **Walking tours** — Inspired by Cara Kuhlman's walking tours at Future Tides, we partnered with Newsberg to conduct a walking tour this summer, including a cute zine, and the small news organization hopes to keep them up! Here are some of the templates and early lessons learned.
- **Making community feedback fun and in-person** — We worked alongside CivicLex as they planned to gather feedback from their community on future growth and changes to their newsletter and website. The results were fun, helpful and provided good examples for future engagement!
- **Personal ads** — We partnered with Pittsburgh City Paper as they reimagined bringing back personal ads, opening up creative opportunities for social media interactions and in-person events. Here's what we learned.

Impactful revenue strategies

- **Competition and collaboration** — Partnering with KBIA and Kansas Public Radio, we ran a fundraising experiment that centered around a big college football rivalry. Find our templates and takeaways here.
- **Thinking creatively about sponsorships** — We interviewed Erica Schopmeyer who shared some practical strategies for building out sponsorships, and how to think outside the box when partnering with community organizations and businesses.
- **Breaking down big revenue goals into small experiments** — In our Mini Revenue Experiments, we identified and tested four ways that newsrooms can try something new related to fundraising in just one month.

To partner with RJI, reach out to Kat Duncan at DuncanK@rjionline.org.

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.

RJI News in Brief

Commissioning a local news ecosystem assessment

AS LOCAL PHILANTHROPY becomes a more essential revenue source for local news, news ecosystem assessments are becoming an important tool to streamline research into the forces and players that shape local news. For funders, civic leaders and newsroom leaders, these assessments reveal who is informing communities, where gaps persist and how resources can be deployed more strategically.

That's why RJI and the Local News Impact Consortium built a toolkit that offers practical walkthroughs grounded in real-world experience, aiming to help community leaders commission credible news ecosystem research that can effectively guide investment in local news.

"If you've been asked to come up with a report about your local news landscape that can translate broad goals like 'understand our audience' or 'support local journalism' into clear, scoped, and actionable research, this toolkit is for you," said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI.

Understanding a local news ecosystem means untangling the complex network of newsrooms, institutions, platforms, and people that communities rely on for news, information and civic engagement. A quality assessment of such an ecosystem means doing more than mapping the players in that network; it means revealing gaps in coverage, uncovering patterns of collaboration, learning how people actually access and use news, and determining where investments can have the greatest impact.

Authored by independent local news strategist Ariel Zirulnick, the toolkit walks users through the real decisions and steps these assessments require in order to align stakeholders, clarify goals, assess capacity and budget, understand research options and work productively with vendors.

These decision points are about more than producing a shiny new report — they ensure that any findings can be reliably used to inform future programs, partnerships and grantmaking.

Taken as a whole or in part, the toolkit can be used as a shared resource for a committee, a reference guide for a project lead or a checkpoint before engaging with vendors. It includes details and resources to help users establish organizational readiness, assess internal capacity and budget, identify research priorities and define vendor selection criteria and timelines.

And after a vendor has been selected, the second part of the toolkit focuses on organizing work with that vendor, developing community surveys and socializing findings both internally and within the community. Review the toolkit at the QR code below.

GO TO COMMISSIONING A LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT: AN OPERATIONAL TOOLKIT

bit.ly/rjiecosystem

A showcase for student innovation

Randy Picht, executive director of the Reynolds Journalism Institute, congratulates Lauren Harris of Team Spread, which won the 2026 RJI Student Innovation Competition. Picht and Kat Duncan, center, RJI director of innovation, hosted the live announcement from the RJI TV studios at the Reynolds Journalism Institute. Harris is a student at Columbia University in New York City.

THE REYNOLDS Journalism Institute awarded $13,500 in prizes earlier this year to the top three teams in its annual Student Innovation Competition, which focused on creating collaborative partnerships between news organizations and social media creators.

The $10,000 grand prize went to Lauren Harris, a graduate student at Columbia University. Harris created Spread, a model for connecting social media creators and newsrooms at live journalism events — in this case, listening tours held by statewide newsroom New York Focus.

"All of the teams in the competition were really doing incredible work, and so it was a very tough decision for us to come to," said Liz Kelly Nelson, founder of the Project C newsletter and one of three independent judges who evaluated the finalists. "But we were really impressed with the test and learn approach that [Lauren] took."

While Harris' initial plan was to facilitate digital connections between the two types of communicators using resources like Tiktok's internal marketplace for creators, she ultimately found that live events offered stronger opportunities for human connections and the forging of beneficial relationships.

This advantage was thrown into sharp relief when creators and journalists extended their relationships beyond the live events, with one creator even staging a debate with an economist he met at a New York Focus event.

But Harris' project was not the only success story. Team Newsfluencer Academy from the University of Southern California earned second place and $2,500 for their partnership with historic Black newspaper the Los Angeles Sentinel, which involved creating and testing a curriculum for journalists to learn how to think like social media creators.

Third place and $1,000 went to Team News Dawgs of the University of Georgia for developing Bridge, a training program that educates social media creators about newsgathering and ethics guidelines. Upon completion of the program, creators were given permission to brand their content with watermarks from WSB-TV, one of the largest television stations in Atlanta.

GO TO TO VIEW A RECORDING OF THE LIVE AWARDS SHOW

bit.ly/rjicompetition

How to reach news audiences on TikTok

TIKTOK HAS EXPLODED as a source of news for young people, and its rise offers key insights for news organizations looking to adapt to changing audience habits. New research from Missouri School of Journalism alum Kaia Tran, MA '25, highlights how to create news content that resonates with TikTok users.

More than half of TikTok users say they get their news on the platform, according to Pew Research, but only 14% follow the accounts of journalists or news organizations. With influencers and platforms playing an increasingly influential role in news consumption, news organizations have an opportunity to do more to harness TikTok's potential.

Tran's white paper breaks down insights from TikTok producers at 11 news organizations from metro desks to national.

"This is basically a guidebook for news organizations who want to really get into TikTok," Tran said.

The guide provides strategies for story selection, engagement, and navigating the quirks of the platform's guidelines and trend-driven, video-centric culture.

Key insights and strategies include:

- Using TikTok's in-app tools to create content natively rather than simply re-purposing content. Audiences take notice and respond negatively to highly polished content they consider inauthentic to the platform.
- Finding which coverage resonates on TikTok.
- Engaging with TikTok trends to promote relevant news stories or put a fun, human face on the newsroom.
- Story structures and techniques that mesh with the short-form video format, such as:
  - Loop-and-flashback narratives that begin with dynamic moments before providing context.
  - Character-driven explanations using multiple personas to role-play different perspectives.
  - On-location filming.
  - Which metrics to use to measure success.

Crucially, Tran finds that unlike Facebook's push to encourage short-form news video content beginning in 2016 — backed by creative and ultimately inaccurate interpretations of data — the rise of news videos on TikTok is a very real reflection of audience preferences shifting toward video-heavy platforms.

TO REACH THOSE AUDIENCES WHERE THEY ARE, LEARN MORE WITH TRAN'S WHITE PAPER

bit.ly/rjitiktok

Potter Ambassadors Program expands beyond Missouri

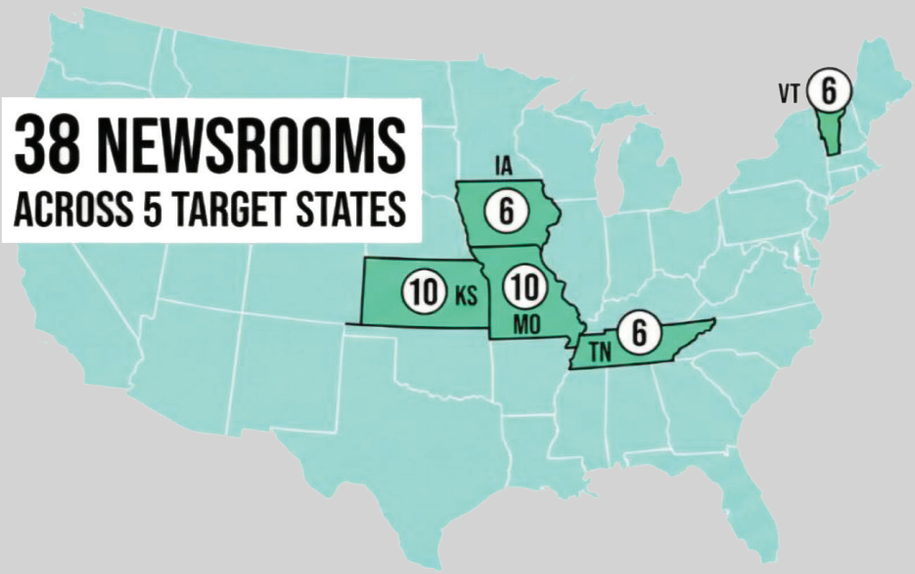
AS IT HAS EACH YEAR for nearly a decade, the Reynolds Journalism Institute's Potter Digital Ambassadors program sent journalism students to community news organizations all over Missouri in January. But unlike previous iterations, this year's program expanded to encompass four additional states through partnerships with universities and press or broadcast associations in Iowa, Kansas, Tennessee and Vermont.

There, students worked to create or expand on each newsroom's digital strategies and provide training on key tools, establishing long-term and sustainable improvements in audience outreach. Particular focus this year went into incorporating AI to streamline processes without creating content.

Feedback from the new participants has been positive. Take the Iowa Falls Times-Citizen, which hosted Iowa State University students Brayden Finley and Jenna Whalen:

"Jenna and Brayden transformed me from someone with zero social media knowledge into someone capable of producing, posting, tracking, and analyzing content," said Brent Leonard, the newly appointed digital content manager for the twice-weekly newspaper.

Walt Potter, MA '81, an alum of the School of Journalism and the founding donor of the program through his Walt B. Potter Fund for Innovation in Local Journalism, said the success of the expansion is further evidence for the merit of an approach that combines educational benefits for college journalism students with practical support for newsrooms.



"It's gratifying to see this program continue to grow in new ways to better serve students and news organizations," Potter said. "Last year added broadcast organizations into the mix, and now there are ambassadors in five states. It's clear that this model works."

Alongside the expansion, the program's impact on the state of Missouri remained robust. Student ambassadors went to five newspapers and five radio stations in the state to improve search engine optimization, build news products and create effective social media marketing.

From St. Louis to rural Carrollton, Missouri, the ambassadors catered their efforts to the needs of each outlet, even making use of Google Gemini to create "gems" — highly specific AI prompts that provide instant assistance with repetitive tasks like captioning videos, scraping public records and creating guides and templates.

For Carter Media Group, which recently acquired 15 new radio stations in Missouri, senior Zoe Saleem created brand kits that preserved each station's individual identity while allowing staff to easily adapt graphics for use across stations by swapping out color palettes and fonts.

"I learned a bunch of new things, like how radio production works and how stations monetize their social platforms," Saleem said. "It really helped me build confidence in myself and my work along with helping local news stations."

RJI plans to continue working with out-of-state partners for next year's program, with the potential to add additional states.

RJI Research Focus

The business of obituaries

CHARGING TO PUBLISH obituaries is nearly universal among weekly newspapers in the United States, and newsroom leaders say the practice is justified because it brings in needed revenue. But our new study in this largely unexamined corner of journalism finds that, for most news organizations, obituaries contribute only marginally to overall income.

It has long been recognized that newspaper obituaries hold value for communities, documenting lives and preserving local history. Their significance is rarely debated. Their value to the business of news and in sustaining local newsrooms is far less understood. To explore this, we surveyed 135 owners, publishers and editors of weekly newspapers from across the country to take stock of the current state of obituary practices in local news, providing a glimpse into both the practices and perspectives of newsroom leaders.

Of the publications surveyed, 88% charge a fee for publishing obituaries, and 64% of newsroom leaders say it is appropriate to do so because they provide needed revenue for the newspaper. Yet in 80% of the newsrooms surveyed, that revenue accounts for less than 5% of total income. While that may not be insignificant for weekly newspapers, which often operate on a razor-thin margin, it is far from a windfall.

Overall, our research found there is no widespread best practice for publishing obituaries in community newspapers. Still, weekly newspapers appear committed to providing this service as a public good, prioritizing their community role over revenue.

"We keep the fee low," one newsroom leader wrote in response to a series of open-ended questions. "We make no profit from obituaries, but their inclusion is important to our model."

"Obituaries are part of our community's history," another newsroom leader wrote, "and the newspaper is the documentarian of that history."

Our research sought to determine whether newsroom leaders considered obituaries an economic necessity or a public service to their communities.

Only 32% of the respondents agree or agree strongly that obituaries

should be free as a public service to the community, and 39% of the respondents said they personally would prefer obituaries were free to the public. Also, more than half (53%) said that the cost of obituaries can be a barrier for families.

When it comes to the pricing process, nearly half of surveyed news organizations charge either per word (26%) or a flat fee (23%). Others use a tiered payment system based on different variables, and some charge by column inch and use of photographs.

One newsroom leader highlighted the free nature of their obituaries, writing in their print edition, "We believe obituaries are an important aspect of a community newspaper and do not want to limit them by charging." Another was sharply critical of charging for obituaries at all. "I'm embarrassed that other newspapers charge an arm and a leg for what should be an essential service. Practices like theirs are helping to kill off the relevance of newspapers in their communities."

Weekly newspaper leaders also emphasized the value of their own organizations' obituary services, especially compared to higher-priced obituaries at regional news organizations.

"Our paper charges a fraction of what the daily newspaper in our area does," one leader wrote, with another noting that larger publications "really take advantage of the situation."

It is important to note that 82% of weekly newspapers said they offer obituaries or death notices for free under certain circumstances. These death notices typically include only the most basic information — the person's name, date of birth and death, location and date of services and, often, a small photo.

"We are specifically a community newspaper, so we try to get as many people included as possible in our free death notice section," one leader said. "I view our paid obituaries as a service for families to share more about their loved ones than we would in our death notices. (Obituaries are) a key component of what a newspaper can offer a community."

" Obituaries are part of our community's history, and the newspaper is the documentarian of that history."

Other notable findings from the survey include:

- 20% of obituaries submitted to weekly newsrooms were from family members, and 11% of respondents reported that their newsrooms use a third-party service provider — such as Legacy.com or Obituaries.com — to facilitate writing or publishing obituaries.
- 53% of respondents said the number of obituaries submitted has remained steady in recent years, with 26% reporting the volume has decreased or decreased significantly. "(Obituaries are) important but not as much as (they) used to be," one leader wrote. "Facebook has taken over for letting friends and families know their loved one has passed."
- 37% of newsroom leaders said they care about the online analytics for obituaries, with leaders noting that the obituaries link on a navigation bar remains incredibly popular. As one leader wrote, "ever since internet analytics became available, obituaries have always ranked in the top three of our traffic."
- 6% of newsrooms reported having a dedicated email newsletter for obituaries, which some larger news organizations use as a revenue source.

The written word remains one of the most powerful and universal ways to commemorate our loved ones. As long as newspapers can continue serving local communities, this commitment is likely to endure. As one leader noted, "People wake up to check the obituaries to make sure their name isn't listed!"

Hannah Artman *is a post-doctoral research fellow in local news at the Missouri School of Journalism.*

Nick Mathews *is an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism who specializes in local news and the economics of journalism*

RJI Fellows launch free guides, resources for community journalism

THE 2025-2026 RJI FELLOWS have completed their fellowships, though the end of their eight-month tenures is only the beginning for their free, open-source tools and resources built for community journalists.

From trauma-informed visual journalism and ethical reporting on substance abuse to guidance for nontraditional news startups, these eight Fellows each addressed an issue in community journalism by testing and implementing practical, accessible solutions that newsrooms can pick up and use without onerous financial or time commitments.

"These are projects that lower the barrier for newsrooms to grow and innovate," said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. "At the same time, they represent the collaborative, forward-thinking approach that is essential to the future of sustainable local journalism. I look forward to seeing newsrooms and news leaders continue to take advantage of these resources developed by their peers."

Upon the conclusion of their fellowships, the Fellows took part in a public webinar introducing their resources. Scan the QR code to view the webinar and learn more about each project.

"Each of these Fellows is moving journalism forward in innovative and thoughtful ways with the resources they built this year," said Kat Duncan, director of innovation at RJI. "From helping journalists and newsrooms find mission aligned grant funding to providing how-to guidance on building sustainable newsrooms from the ground up, they are leaders in striving to make sure that journalism has a strong and impactful future."

The Fellows and their projects

Monica Williams – Grants For Journalists

Monica Williams, an independent journalist and Fulbright specialist, built Grants for Journalists as a searchable, one-stop platform that centralizes funding opportunities for reporting and professional development. Newsrooms and individual journalists alike can search for fellowships, retreats and travel funding.

"Last year, I got an email from my small foundation about a grant," Williams said. "I hadn't seen it listed anywhere else, so I shared it with a younger journalist. He wound up getting the grant and said to me later, 'As a freelancer, you kept me in the industry.' We need more of that, and that's why I created this tool."

Grants for Journalists also features a list of funders to help journalists learn more about philanthropic institutions whose interests align with their work.

Rebecca Ritzel – Arts Journalism Initiative

As the cohort's Residential Fellow, Rebecca Ritzel worked on-site at RJI within the Missouri School of Journalism to compile online resources focused on the financial sustainability of arts and culture reporting. Newsrooms will soon be able to access a state-by-state arts grant list and templates for soliciting philanthropic funding for arts coverage — a crucial option given tightening budgets and shrinking staffs at many news organizations.

And as a proof of concept, she also developed and tested a model for "critic's residencies," which newsrooms can use to bring in specialized journalists to mentor students and cover local festivals ethically.

"Sometimes it takes knowing who's out there and forming connections," Ritzel said. "Philanthropists use the phrase 'trust philanthropy,' where the funder and the news organization have to learn to trust each other, and that's a really interesting model where news organizations go to philanthropy organizations. I'd like to see other places consider that and do it ethically."

Ritzel's website will also feature templates to help communities replicate her pilot critics' residency partnership between professional critics and an arts festival. To explore Ritzel's project in greater depth, go to page 13.

Tara Francis Chan – Powering News

Tara Francis Chan is director of operations for The Trace, a nonprofit investigative journalism outlet focused on gun violence reporting. As an experienced nonprofit newsroom leader, she built Powering News, a comprehensive resource hub for newsrooms exploring nontraditional and innovative business structures. Featuring a searchable database of such newsrooms, the hub also helps users understand how to replicate operating structures that prioritize staff agency and democratic decision-making.

"When we think about innovation in news, we're often thinking about innovating the actual journalism we produce or how we try and fund that work," Chan said. "But very rarely do we think about innovating the actual structure of our news organizations, how we operate and how we get everything done. There has been an exciting rise in newsrooms trying to think about this differently in the last couple of years, and that's why I built Power News."

At the same time, traditional newsrooms are not excluded. The hub's library of insights and policies can help any newsroom address operational gaps, serving on the whole as a practical roadmap for creating more resilient and equitable journalism organizations.

Nicole Lewis and Lam Vo – Audacity Media Lab

Nicole Lewis, deputy editor of engagement for ProPublica, worked with investigative reporter and educator Lam Vo to develop Audacity Media Lab. The suite of guides, worksheets and case studies offers a "theory of change" framework to help reporters and editors make data-driven decisions about which communities they need to reach and the impacts they are aiming to achieve.

"A theory of change allows you to imagine and plan for what some people call the missing middle, meaning the steps between the beginning of your project and the end goal that you're hoping to achieve, and that will hopefully help many journalists structure their work," Vo said.

"Believing that journalism can go beyond simply informing the public towards sparking meaningful change in people's lives is an audacious idea for sure, but it's also a really practical one," added Lewis. "Prioritizing journalism that engages community stakeholders and identifies important issues, and then practicing reporting and storytelling in a way that brings them along can create a very loyal and sustained audience that truly understands the value of our work."

Claudia Yaujar-Amaro – Covering Immigration

Claudia Yaujar-Amaro is the editor-in-chief, founder and owner of bilingual newsroom Planeta Venus. She built Covering Immigration, a digital toolbox filled with ready-to-use materials to help reporters cover immigration responsibly, rigorously and with a human-centered approach.

"Immigration is central to public life and intertwined with our community's daily lives," Yaujar-Amaro said. "And yet, most of us were never trained on how the immigration system actually works

or how to safely interview undocumented sources, and this gap creates inconsistent coverage, oversimplification and sometimes unintended harm. So I asked a simple question: what if journalists had a shared toolbox for immigration coverage?"

That toolbox also includes infographics that newsrooms can use to help explain migration trends and related issues to audiences.

Susan Stellin – Covering Drugs

Writer, educator and researcher Susan Stellin produced Covering Drugs, a media resource guide that aims to modernize how journalists report on substance use, abuse and recovery. Building on the intersection between Stellin's academic and journalistic experience, the guide organizes complex information into digestible categories, including drug use trends, behavioral health therapies and recovery research.

"When I proposed this project, I really wanted to make it easier for people to find the information that was out there that wasn't really organized in any way," Stellin said. "My focus was on answering questions journalists and the public are likely to ask and helping generate ideas for stories and investigations about topics that haven't received as much coverage."

Newsrooms can use the guide's surveys, data sets and research to ensure their reporting is grounded in evidence. The guide also provides specific guidance to help newsrooms shift to a health-centered reporting approach that centers the needs and experiences of their communities.

Sarah Blesener and Jennifer Jacklin-Stratton – Enter/Exit

Created by educator, artist and visual researcher Sarah Blesener alongside multimedia journalist and Catchlight Local director Jennifer Jacklin-Stratton, Enter/Exit is designed to help visual journalists navigate the ethical complexities of reporting on trauma's aftermath. The toolkit includes inclusive strategies for collaborative storytelling and educational materials synthesized from the perspectives of more than 40 trauma survivors.

"Too often, images are made and stories are told without returning to the people living them," Blesener said. "Feedback rarely reaches the newsrooms, the editing desk, or the photographer — feedback that is foundational to centering both in ethics and aesthetics of care."

"We're interested in moving beyond visually documenting trauma, memory, or story, and instead exploring how we might create more communal processes and frameworks, not just in journalism and documentary media, but in our own personal and collective visual storytelling practices," added Jacklin-Stratton. "And with this shift to centering process, we're asking what does collaboration look like, but also just as importantly, what does it feel like?"

Cara Kuhlman – Future Tides

Cara Kuhlman is the founder of maritime news outlet Future Tides, which serves the Pacific Northwest. She created a digital guidebook that teaches newsrooms how to use walking tours as a fresh approach to local journalism, incorporating a framework to help publishers assess if tours are a strategic fit for their specific community and coverage area. The guide also shows news organizations how to leverage these events for audience engagement, impactful reporting and a sustainable revenue stream.

"I believe tours offer an exciting opportunity for local newsrooms, independent journalists and niche media," Kuhlman said. "They can be customized for different audiences and communities, generate revenue, and provide a new medium to share the high-quality news and information central to our mission. Your beats and coverage areas can become tour routes."

Kuhlman's method seeks to turns journalists into community guides who connect with their audience in new, tangible ways.

Launching the Arts Journalism Initiative

Guest critics at the Critics in Columbia event included at table from left: Alyssa Wilkinson; Pelin Çilgin; Marina Fang; Monica Castillo, The A.V. Club; and Sam Adams. Standing is RJI Fellow Rebecca Ritzel.

FACED WITH A declining landscape for traditional arts coverage, shrinking newsroom budgets and an explosive rise in digital influencers filling the vacuum, 2025-2026 Residential RJI Fellow Rebecca Ritzel set out to pioneer a sustainable alternative that preserves the quality and integrity of arts and culture journalism.

Ritzel, an independent arts and entertainment reporter and longtime contributor to the Washington Post, launched the Arts Journalism Initiative with two goals: to map out fresh philanthropic funding models and resources that can support independent arts reporting, and to develop a pilot program demonstrating how journalists can covering arts festivals while honoring editorial independence. It was the latter goal that forced her to confront the press junket, an arrangement that often offers journalists subsidized travel and special access at events like arts and music festivals.

On the surface, junkets look like mutually beneficial arrangements. But for journalists working for media outlets with strict ethical codes, accepting benefits in return for coverage is a no-go.

"It creates this stratified environment where sometimes 'lower-tier' journalists or trade publication journalists can accept these trips, and people who are connected to larger mainstream outlets cannot," Ritzel said.

Ultimately, she came up with an idea that served all the goals of her fellowship: Critics in Columbia, a successful pilot program launched during a celebrated documentary film festival in Columbia, Missouri — True/False Film Fest — that offers an innovative roadmap for the industry.

Dismantling the junket: The Critics in Columbia model

For Critics in Columbia, five professional guest critics were selected from a competitive pool of 22 applicants to receive travel expenses and an educational stipend in return for working with student journalists covering the festival. Crucially, the funding was provided through a neutral intermediary — in this case, the Reynolds Journalism Institute — meaning the critics were under no obligation to review the festival's films, interview specific filmmakers or otherwise provide positive coverage of the festival.

By framing the residency around education and community engagement rather than raw publicity, the program bypassed the ethical hurdles that tend to disqualify both staff writers and independent journalists writing for major news organizations.

The visiting critics spent much of their residencies directly engaged with students, including one-on-one time with students editing film and concert reviews and offering high school students some hands-on guidance through a free workshop.

Ritzel intentionally kept the critics' schedules flexible for the weekend, allowing for unscripted drop-in visits to The Maneater, Mizzou's student newspaper. She said the informal interactions proved to be some of the most profound of the entire fellowship.

During one of those drop-ins, guest critic Sam Adams of Slate brought along Alyssa Wilkinson, a staff writer for The New York Times who was in town independently covering the festival. They "went around the table," Ritzel said, offering practical guidance that left indelible marks on the students and their pieces.

At one point, Adams sat down with a Maneater reporter working on a review of "How to Clean a House in 10 Easy Steps," a film exploring the realities facing a Colombian immigrant and her family. He read through the draft and identified a compelling line hidden deep in the copy.

"He told the student that her lead was actually the second to last paragraph," Ritzel said. "There was a really good line and he said, 'That's your lead. Move that line up to the top.' It's a good review anyway, but it's a great review because it now has a really good lead and that student now has a really solid clip that she might not have had if it weren't for Critics in Columbia."

By the end of the festival, The Maneater published more than 70 distinct multi-platform stories, including deeply reported reviews and photo essays. And the benefits went beyond the stories themselves — the guest critics also met directly with students from the School of Journalism's Vox Magazine, visited journalism classes and partnered with KBIA-FM, the school's NPR-member radio station, to record an audio conversation. Separately, they also took part in a panel moderated by Katelynn McIlwain, KBIA's managing editor, and attended by students and alumni.

"It was very illuminating for students to see how these accomplished critics have carved out careers," McIlwain said. "All of them had different paths to get to where they are, and the students were able to learn that it's okay to have an unconventional path to get to your dream job — that it's okay if, in the middle of that path, you're unsure about where you're going. And some of the students were writing their own reviews for student publications, so it helped to turn around and apply advice to their own work right away."

Monica Castillo and Marina Fang

The community engagement also stretched further than the campus orbit. Ritzel said True/False Film Fest's organizers and visiting directors were thrilled with the depth of the student output, while filmmakers noted they were struck by the sophistication of the coverage coming from student journalists. Furthermore, the program left five national critics with an appreciation for the School of Journalism's "Missouri Method" of hands-on journalism education.

"They had never had any connection to our J-School and now they know how our J-School works," Ritzel remarked. "They understand the Missouri Method. And I think that was really sort of an unintended but very good consequence that now we have these five people who are out in the field who now are going to, if they get a pitch or if they see a job application from a University of Missouri student, they're going to have a positive association."

Rethinking the broader arts ecosystem

While Critics in Columbia showcased the validity of localized residencies, the broader scope of Ritzel's fellowship focused on structural, long-term survival strategies for cultural journalism. Throughout the year, she tracked emerging operational models across the country, highlighting creative funding partnerships that could save local culture reporting from extinction.

One path involves cultivating deep relationships with non-traditional arts philanthropies. Ritzel highlighted a recent landmark initiative by the Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation in Indianapolis, which stepped out of traditional arts endowment bounds to issue its first-ever journalism grants to nonprofit news site Mirror Indy. The grant directly funds the

salaries of the newsroom's arts editor and art director, establishing a model for localized philanthropic backing.

Another model involves structural content-sharing agreements between legacy media and digital-native, hyper-local arts sites. Ritzel pointed to a collaborative agreement between ARTS ATL and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution as a prime example of a legacy giant leveraging the specialized expertise of a dedicated arts and culture news site to preserve coverage standards amid newsroom staff cuts.

For Ritzel, rebuilding these institutional frameworks is vital for journalistic accountability, as without independent, trained arts reporters, coverage can collapse into uncritical community boosterism or PR-driven fluff.

Open-source resources

To ensure the results of her fellowship translate into real progress for arts journalism in communities all over the country, Ritzel has launched an open-source hub at artsjournalism.org. The digital repository acts as a blueprint for journalists, newsrooms, and festival directors looking to build their own independent networks.

Available resources on the site include:

- How to cover festivals – A guide to replicating the Critics in Columbia project, allowing other communities to build ethical and collaborative critic residencies
- State-by-State Philanthropic Directory – A detailed, searchable guide listing arts foundations, philanthropic organizations and other sources of funding for arts journalism
- Ethical Frameworks & Q&As – Practical guides and templates designed to help nonprofit newsrooms and emerging digital culture sites maintain editorial independence and ethical standards while pursuing new funding streams

Sam Adams and Alyssa Wilkinson

With her time at the Reynolds Journalism Institute at a close, Ritzel already sees potential opportunities for her or other arts journalism advocates to replicate her model on a larger scale. With the Sundance Film Festival planning a historic move to Boulder, Colorado, for example, she can imagine a prime opportunity to establish a new critics' residency in partnership with the University of Colorado.

Ritzel estimates that a basic festival residency requires roughly $10,000 to cover travel and stipends — what she considers a modest sum for community foundations or university systems compared to the many returns she believes the model generates.

And as McIlwain added, those returns aren't limited to benefits for professional critics and community organizations when higher education is involved.

"A goal of journalism school is to prepare students to tell a compelling story in any medium," McIlwain said. "My hope is that those skills are so transferrable that they not only know how to write a good story, but they can recognize a good story when they see one in a film. I truly believe it all works together — if you can tell a good story, you can identify and critique a good story, and with those building blocks you'll have success in any arena you're thrown into."

Alongside the resources Ritzel has collated to assist with finding and utilizing new funding sources, the Critics in Columbia blueprint offers a path forward for arts journalism that is both collaborative and ethical. To learn more and peruse the available resources, follow the QR code below.

LEARN MORE

bit.ly/rjiarts

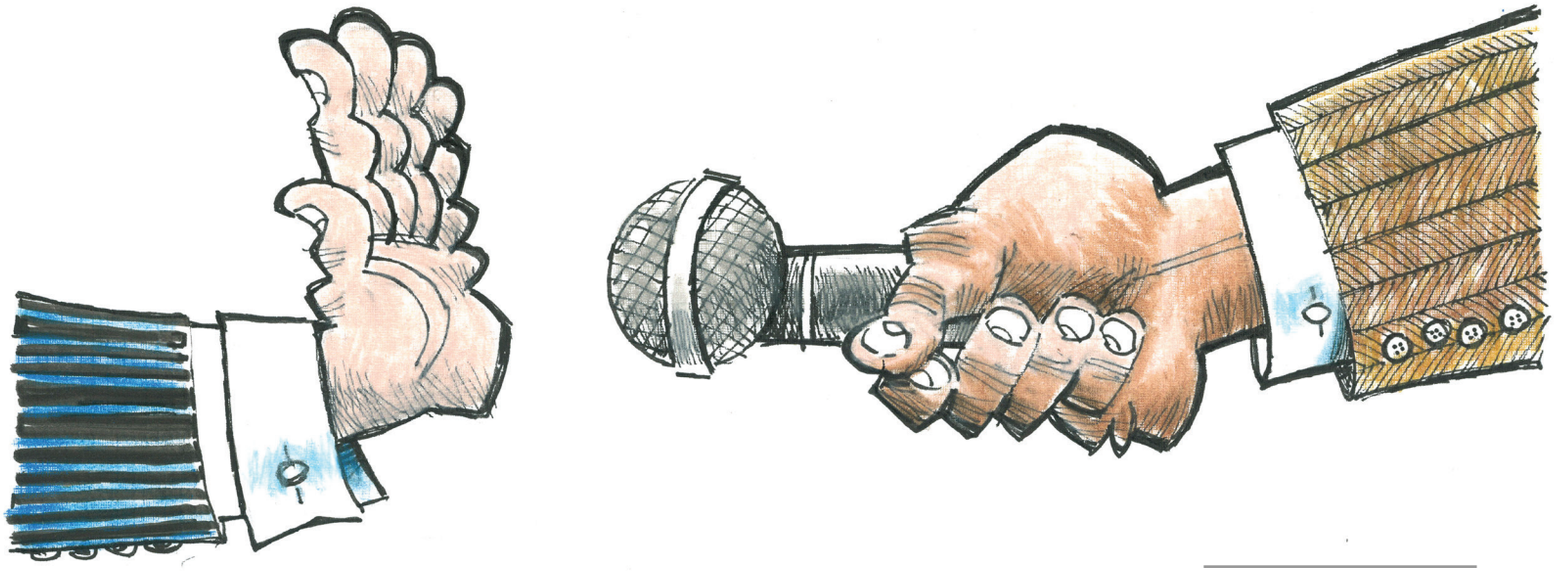


Illustration: John Darkow

Journalism must retire 'no comment' phrase, new survey shows

PUBLIC FIGURES refusing to comment for news stories is now the norm — not the exception — according to the results of a new national survey.

Conducted by the Reynolds Journalism Institute in partnership with research firm SmithGeiger, the survey asked both audiences and current and former journalists about their perceptions regarding "no comment" responses from sources. It quickly became apparent to researchers that a comment refusal is not a benign reality of the industry but, in fact, a major point of convergence for the crises of trust and hostility facing journalism.

Nor is it just an occasional occurrence: According to the survey, nine in 10 current reporters have received a no-comment response in the last three years, and they agree that politicians, government officials and other public figures in particular are exhibiting increased hostility toward the press.

Among the most striking results was the immediate consequence of including the phrase "no comment" in a story: 20% of audiences said they trust such stories less than others. Nearly 40% said they believe the phrase indicates the source is hiding something. This was paired with broad agreement from both news professionals and audiences that journalists should be more transparent about their efforts to contact sources.

"It's clear that saying someone 'had no comment' doesn't cut it anymore," said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. "We need a new approach that shows the public how hard reporters are working to collect the facts."

The need for an alternative was supported by an experiment within the survey, which showed audiences two different versions of a television news story: one with traditional "no comment" wording and another with the phrase, "the story will be updated when we hear back." Regardless of the order in which these videos were viewed, audiences preferred the option with the "will be updated" language on every measure of credibility.

Funneled through a system

Major Garrett, chief Washington correspondent for CBS News, said the findings highlighted a gap in the public's understanding of the challenges journalists face in the current climate.

"If you're a young reporter now and you go to a crime scene, the

chances that any lieutenant or sergeant is going to talk to you are almost zero," said Garrett, who also hosts political podcast "The Takeout." "That doesn't mean you're a bad reporter. It just means they won't talk to you, and if they do, they won't talk to you on the record. But the audience doesn't know that."

The vast majority of journalism professionals and 60% of audiences surveyed saw increasing hostility toward journalists as a threat to democracy, but Garrett said that while conflict between reporters and interviewees has risen alongside the no-comment phenomenon, he also sees the PR infrastructure around public figures as a significant driver of their disengagement from the journalistic process.

"Everything gets funneled through a system, a public information system," Garrett said. "This has become routinized in government; even small city governments, county governments, state legislatures, the federal government. Fewer and fewer people are now empowered to say anything on the record, even though they might be directly involved in it. So, the no comment thing is reflective of that impulse. They want to have one story, and they want to put that story though an internal process before it goes out. As a journalist, especially a young journalist, what do you do?"

The answer seems at first glance to be rather complex. While news organizations are well aware of this issue, they have focused largely on examining behind-the-scenes processes — how reporters respond to sources who give them a "no comment," for example (there is no rule that says the conversation has to end there, said Poynter's Fernanda Camarena), or giving emailed questions another look for any potential biases that could lead to an uncooperative response.

But when journalists do point to a public-facing solution, it's usually the same one: a transparent accounting of efforts the reporter made to obtain a comment, whether it's a list of questions the source refused to answer or documenting the number of times the reporter reached out. This approach was also the preferred solution among audiences and journalists alike who responded to the survey.

> ***" It's clear that saying someone 'had no comment' doesn't cut it anymore. We need a new approach that shows the public how hard reporters are working to collect the facts."***
> *— Randy Picht*

"I think generally you'll see that in spots, not in every article, and then hopefully more and more," said Mike Abrams, deputy editor for trust at The New York Times. "We do want, over time, our staff to say more of what they've done in the reporting beyond 'this person could not be reached for comment,' just so we don't assume that readers know why we were reaching out for comment."

Camarena, who co-authored a 2024 report examining how journalists can address source disengagement, echoed that sentiment but added that reporters can add another layer of transparency by explaining "how the lack of access (to a source) affects the community," or, put more directly, "Here is what the public still does not know because this office declined to answer."

"That kind of transparency would be much more useful than a flat 'could not be reached for comment,'" she said. "Otherwise, we do a disservice to the audience and give the sources who shut us down a free pass. It's not only about stating facts as they happen but providing enough information on all aspects of our reporting."

Learn more

To dig deeper and explore other findings from the survey, read the full white paper by following the QR code below. The report grapples with additional insights, including the fact that while audiences and news professionals agreed on many points in the survey, they diverged when it came to the question of whether hostility between sources and journalists goes both ways. 47% of the public agreed that journalism is increasingly hostile to public figures, compared to only 18% of news professionals who felt the same.

VIEW OUR RESEARCH

bit.ly/rjinocomment

Bringing rural news leaders together

NEWS LEADERS from all over the country gathered this April at the Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) to tackle the revenue challenges facing rural news. The Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop provided a space for news leaders from Appalachia to Alaska to brainstorm innovative, actionable approaches to making news more sustainable.

Attendees reported that the workshop came as a breath of fresh air; while the industry is deeply aware of the news desert crisis and its continued impact on news accessibility in the small and rural towns of America, conferences and other industry events can pose cost and transportation issues for rural news professionals and might not feature many presentations or products that specifically fit rural needs.

For the Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop, RJI Director of Innovation Kat Duncan tried something different: a workshop built around the necessities of rural journalism and its audiences. Duncan prioritized attendees from organizations that were both geographically rural and not part of larger organizations that could help mitigate revenue issues. Hotel rooms and two meals a day were provided for all attendees, and some travel scholarships were awarded to make the workshop as accessible as possible.

"Rural news leaders shared with me how typical suggestions from conferences and training for revenue generation don't work for them and how frustrating that is," Duncan said. "They get told to build TikTok campaigns and galas, festivals and paywalls, when these options aren't solutions for rural communities and their information leaders. I built this workshop to help them build solutions and support to reach their communities and a sustainable future."

That approach was much appreciated by attendees.

"The news crisis ground zero is in rural and small-town America," said Corinne Colbert, co-founder of the Athens County Independent in Ohio, who helped inspire the workshop after conversations with Duncan about what an ideal rural news conference could look like. "We are far more likely to be news deserts. We're far more likely to be served by ghost papers. Understanding our unique challenges and

finding a way to address them is really important."

Colbert further praised the workshop for being "rooted in the actual work that journalists do and providing practical solutions and ideas" and "getting actual journalists to test ideas and then share those ideas out."

Speaking of practical solutions, one of the workshop's most popular presentations came from Anna Marie Martin, a grant writing consultant who walked attendees through strategies to land more grant funding.

For RJI, setting up attendees for success in the future is just as important as the short-term workshop experience. Cue Martin's 37-page toolkit handed out to everyone at the workshop as a guide to grant fundraising, allowing attendees to go back to their newsrooms with a handy reference tool for themselves and their colleagues.

Ray Cooney — president, publisher and editor of The Commercial Review in Indiana — found that despite his publication's for-profit status, the grant fundraising strategies were indispensable (grants directed at for-profit newsrooms can be significantly harder to come by than those for nonprofits, for whom grants often constitute a major chunk of revenue).

"It's rare to say that none of it was fluff, but none of it was fluff," Cooney said of Martin's toolkit. "It was all useful information that I can take forward for the newspaper."

Other sessions explored finding and retaining talent for rural newsrooms, cross-sector collaborations, mixed methods mapping for rural communities and more. Each session included hands-on activities that gave the attendees resources and skills to take home with them.

Navigating 'choppy seas'

The workshop proved to be about more than the nitty gritty of problems and solutions. Several attendees were struck by how a few days in the company of kindred spirits helped alleviate some of the feelings of isolation that can come with rural reporting. Tim Stauffer, managing editor of the Iola Register in southeast Kansas, was glad to have the opportunity to commiserate with others who are producing news in towns like his, a town he describes in a way that could just as easily describe rural news more broadly: "a well-run sailboat in a very choppy sea."

Attendees work together in a session where they identified challenges and opportunities for new ideas to increase revenue for their rural publications.

"As news deserts become increasingly a thing, I just don't have a lot of thought partners," Stauffer said. "There are not a lot of people in rural journalism anymore. And so it's nice to meet people that you can follow and get a handle on. What are they doing? What ideas can I steal or adapt?"

Amy Bushatz, founder of the Matsu Sentinel in Alaska, had a similar reaction to meeting peers who could relate to what she usually considers "Alaska stuff," such as 70-mile-per-hour winds and extreme connectivity issues that present periodic obstacles to getting the news out.

"Running a rural newsroom is really lonely," she said, "so it was fun and helpful and comforting to see that yes, we have unique challenges because we're in Alaska, but many rural newsrooms nationwide have their own versions of that."

This wasn't the only form of support the workshop provided. At the end of the workshop, RJI surprised participants with $500 in funding to implement an experimental revenue idea, encouraging attendees to return to their newsrooms with a plan for implementation based on what they learned at the workshop.

Some of those ideas are already percolating:

- Cooney is thinking about tying into the America250 festivities set for later this year in honor of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, possibly by selling limited edition postcards that would double as a marketing tool.
- Colbert's team is considering a quarterly "best of" print edition or a practical map of flood routes for her community in southeast Ohio.

- Bushatz is experimenting with printing original news photography on note cards to send to specific donors as part of a birthday fundraising campaign.

Attendees also came away impressed by the earnestness with which RJI and the School of Journalism are addressing the needs of rural journalism.

From Stauffer, a University of Kansas graduate:

"I was very impressed with the University of Missouri's commitment to rural journalism. I think that's part of the solution; to work with these universities, with their expertise and their ability to experiment and collect data. Because I don't have time to survey 40 other papers across rural America and see what they're doing. I do feel like this is a good model for other states to follow."

As the news leaders returned to their respective corners of the country — marking the end of what was, for some, their first "vacation" in years — they left RJI with what they described as a renewed sense of mission and the motivation to innovate.

Like all veteran journalists, Cooney filtered that feeling through some of the mentorship he has picked up over the course of his career. He recalled a Hoosier State Press Association seminar given by Thomas French, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and educator, more than a decade ago.

"He used the phrase, 'don't become a journalism zombie,'" Cooney said. "That simply means, as you get into your career, it can be easy to just do the same thing every day. Even before coming to RJI, we've tried to get out of that limbo of just trying to get the paper out and do more with our local schools and local personalities. In a small community, that is really well received."

Amy McCleese Nichols lead a session on mixed-methods mapping for rural communities at the Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop.

Anne Marie Martin leads a session on grant funding at the Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop.

Attendees work on an activity to help them find opportunities for collaboration with assets in their communities at the Rural Revenue Transformation Workshop.

VIEW THE EVENT VIDEO

bit.ly/rjiruralrevenue

Photos: Kat Duncan

The architecture of trust

An interview with The New York Times' Mike Abrams on building trust through transparency

MIKE ABRAMS is the deputy editor for trust at The New York Times, where he leads initiatives aimed at helping audiences understand what reporters do, why they do it and how it all adds up to valuable journalism.

It's a new role (announced by The Times last December) for an evolving problem: How does the industry convince skeptical audiences of the value and authenticity of news, particularly in an era of generative AI, chaotic social media chatter and public figures who are openly hostile to inquisitive reporters? In the Q&A below, lightly edited for clarity, Abrams addresses what The Times and the industry at large can do to turn the tide.

RJI has released research showing that public figures are increasingly refusing to engage with journalists and responding with more hostility. At the same time, the public views stories that report "no comment" responses as less trustworthy. What are your thoughts?

It's tricky. There was an era where there were three anchors on television and people were largely silently, passively accepting and generally believing what they said. We've all gotten savvier about our media and also not at the same time. There's just a lot more of it and it's hard to sort through. Is it AI? Is it real? Is it disinformation?

I do think we should all recognize that when influential people make a statement publicly or demean journalists who are honestly going about their work — that does influence people. It does sway audiences, and there are sophisticated networks of bots and people who then pile on and just amplify that. So we're swimming upstream against a really strong current. That's really why you like reporters to work source relationships and communicate over long periods of time; hopefully you won't have people who burn you that way. But it does almost feel like there are no rules these days, in some cases.

I don't think that means we should give up; I just think it means we have to work harder. One, the journalism needs to be rock solid, and when it's not, we need to have humility and own up to it and correct it publicly. And then two, we need to provide that journalism in lots of different forms where people are seeing it. It can't all be the one long article; it has to be different formats, and we need to step back and show the work as much as possible.

What about responding to statements that, as you say, demean journalists? Is there a benefit to jumping into that conversation after the story is published?

One thing you've seen The Times do a little more: our comms team is more aggressive about pushing back against what we see as untrue or bad faith attacks on our journalism.

Another thing is that you'll see us write a Times Insider piece, which is what we call these pieces about our process to try to show the how and the why of our work. We don't want to assume people know what we're up to all the time.

We see it in the comments; there's what we as journalists think we're doing and what audiences think we should be doing, and there's often a gap between those. We're trying to fill that gap. We're just trying to explain a little bit like, "Here's who we talked to. These are the documents we got. Here's how we know what we know and why we feel solid about it." And the hope is that reaches people who see it as they scroll through their feeds. Maybe it'll shift their thinking a little bit.

Does that kind of transparency work best as a proactive or reactive solution?

I think it's both. The comms statements are really reactive. But there are things we're doing more and more on our site and on social where we're trying to do this actively as part of the journalism. So if we do a long investigation now, there's almost always a "takeaways" version of it that's shorter. There will often be a Times Insider or a first-person "how I got the story" that goes with it. There will be a reporter video, a vertical video where they talk through the story in a minute or so. We don't expect everybody in the audience to look at all of those things, but we hope to reach people where they are. Some people only watch videos, some only read the short version. We don't think these things cannibalize each other; they serve each other.

> *" We don't expect everybody in the audience to look at all of those things, but we hope to reach people where they are."*

Sometimes this work, I think, can be baked into the story. For example, in a piece where we had a reporter fly on a very lavish, premium, first-class experience, we had in that piece just a little reference to the idea that the Times paid for this ticket according to our ethics policy. We don't want to assume readers know how it works; we don't want them to think this airline just bought and sold us. A lot of the travel writing universe out there does operate that way, and we wanted to make it known in a subtle way — but clearly — we did this story on our own and we paid for the ticket.

As another example, late last year we had a bunch of stories on the industry that recycles car batteries. These batteries are processed in Africa, and the factories are polluting communities. There were several stories in that series, but as part of the reporting, there were takeaways. There was a file written by one of the reporters who talked about his journey, including the headaches he got from spending time in those communities and how that's an actual side effect of lead exposure.

> *" The truth may reside entirely on the right in one story. It doesn't mean the left shouldn't be in it, but one of our challenges is trying to translate why you want all of these views reflected."*

There was a video where he talked about his process and showed the factories, how he got comments, what was happening after he was seeking comments. To me, it was a great example of reporting that wouldn't have happened if they hadn't done the work.

So one, you're doing important reporting that has impact, and two, we're showing you how we did the reporting, including the personal connection of the reporter's process to learn about it. We think it resonated with readers. We saw comments on the site that showed people who genuinely were interested in this and didn't know anything about it were thinking differently about companies they were going to support or not support. And then we also saw discourse on social media that said the same thing. And if you're a reporter, the best thing you want is to be complimented by readers. They learned something from you and they appreciated the work.

If public trust in journalism is at a low point and the relationship between reporters and public figures is deteriorating, where do we go from here? What is the biggest obstacle standing in the way of a stronger relationship with the people journalism serves?

Good quality independent journalism can challenge all of us; there can be uncomfortable facts as part of it. Things that people say that are part of the debate, part of the policymaking that we may personally disagree with, but they're part of what's going on. I think one of the biggest challenges is getting people to understand why we're including all of that material. You see these sort of journalism cliches: the "both-sidesing" of issues or the writing from the view from nowhere. Sometimes, you'll hear "sanewashing."

When journalism is done poorly, all of those things do happen, but just because you include multiple views in a story doesn't mean you have to do it in an equal way. You're trying to find the truth, and the truth may reside entirely on the right in one story. It doesn't mean the left shouldn't be in that story in some way, but I think one of our challenges is trying to translate, well, here's why you want all of these views reflected. Here's why you don't want to just ignore the facts you don't like. And I think that's a challenge: trying to get people to understand not only why we're doing it, and two, why it's not just medicine you have to swallow. It's part of understanding the world, we think.

POY83

THE 83RD ANNUAL Pictures of the Year International (POY83) competition has recognized outstanding achievements in visual journalism from 2025. The competition, judged in February 2026 at the Reynolds Journalism Institute in Columbia, Missouri, celebrated the best in photojournalism across 32 categories such as news, sports, portraiture and environmental storytelling.

To explore the full list of winners and their work, scan the QR code.

Sports Photographer of the Year, Award of Excellence
Grace Smith
Indianapolis Star
Indiana Fever guard Sophie Cunningham (8) and Golden State Valkyries guard Tiffany Hayes (15) go for the ball during a game between the Indiana Fever and the Golden State Valkyries at Gainbridge Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, Ind., on Wednesday, July 9, 2025.

Sports Photographer of the Year, Finalist
Joel Marklund
Bildbyrån
Miguel Garcia Celis of Colombia competes in men's high diving 27 meters rounds 1-2 during day 14 of the World Aquatics Championships on July 24, 2025 in Singapore.

Local Photographer of the Year, First Place
Erin Clark
Boston Globe
"Dorothy's Birthday"
Dorothy Burnham's hand reaches toward a guest during her 110th birthday celebration Saturday, March 22, 2025.

Sports Photographer of the Year, First Place
Tess Crowley
The Davis Darts compete against the Brighton Bengals in a football game at Cottonwood Heights on Thursday, Aug. 14, 2025.

Local Photographer of the Year, First Place
Erin Clark
Boston Globe
"Where Music Meets the Shore"
Abigale Clapham sounds a horn from the diving board to announce the start of the boat regatta race at Miles of Music Island Camp on June 10, 2025.

Environmental Vision Award, First Place
Loren Eliott
New York Times
A coyote photographed with a remotely-triggered camera walks in front of the downtown skyline in San Francisco. Native to the area, coyotes were once eradicated from the city limits but have returned in recent decades following an absence of more than 75 years.

bit.ly/rji-poy83

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Pictured (from left): Muhammad Osama Farooq, Mariia Novoselia, Elizaveta Orlova, Laiba Khan Zai

STUDENT INNOVATION FELLOWS SPARK CHANGE AT FOUR NEWSROOMS AROUND THE COUNTRY

Four international master's students from the Missouri School of Journalism have been selected as 2026 Student Innovation Fellows at RJI. Each will spend 12 weeks this summer helping a news outlet advance community journalism. Muhammad Osama Farooq heads to the Detroit Free Press to enhance social media marketing and vertical storytelling. Mariia Novoselia joins Technical.ly, a digital entrepreneurship and innovation outlet, to streamline workflows through automation. Elizaveta Orlova will work with Mirror Indy in Indianapolis on a project amplifying youth voices, with children interviewing peers about city life. Laiba Khan Zai will work at the Times Union in New York's Capital Region, building a state legislative tracker to help audiences easily follow past and present legislation.