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Life at Local Newspapers in a Turbulent Era: Findings from a survey of more than 300 newsroom employees in the United States

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The observations in this report are based on an online survey conducted between Tuesday, August 4, 2020 and Tuesday, September 8, 2020.

We received 324 eligible responses from a mix of editors, reporters, publishers, and other roles at small-scale local newspapers — print publications with a circulation below 50,000 — in the United States.

Set against the backdrop of COVID-19, survey respondents shared how the pandemic — as well as wider deep-rooted challenges — were redefining their work. Some of the key issues that emerged include:

- **The pervasiveness of COVID-19:** 74 percent of respondents reported they had covered coronavirus-related stories. However, under half (44 percent) felt that they — or their colleagues — had access to the equipment and protection they needed. Just over a third (35 percent) took an opposing view, and 41 percent indicated they had not been given adequate training or support for COVID-related reporting.
- **Satisfaction with COVID coverage:** 65 percent of participants were satisfied with how their newspaper has covered the pandemic. In doing this, only a third of respondents (35 percent) told us their paper had introduced COVID-related products, like newsletters or podcasts.
- **Long hours:** Even with COVID-era furloughs, pay cuts, and reduced contracted hours, more than a third of respondents (37 percent) told us they work 50 to 60 hours a week, with half (50 percent) saying they work 40 to 50 hours a week.
- **Growing job insecurity:** Nearly half of those surveyed (43 percent) said they felt less secure in their jobs than at the start of the COVID crisis. Just under a third (31 percent) indicated no changes in terms of their sense of job security. Interestingly, 11 percent indicated they felt more secure than at the start of the pandemic.
- **Revenue and business models:** Respondents spoke candidly about the challenges of attracting advertisers and subscribers, alongside the impact of ownership models on their work. Participants were often highly critical of hedge-fund ownership and frequently cited nonprofit models as the way forward for the sector.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI):** Conversations being had at a national level have not always permeated down to local newsrooms. Respondents highlighted lack of resources, buy-in from management, demographics (especially in rural America), and gaps in their own skills and knowledge as potential obstacles to addressing these issues. DEI was typically seen through a racial lens, although other considerations were also discussed.

Building on a similar survey conducted in late 2016, this study also gives us an opportunity to see how local journalism is changing. We did this in two ways: by comparing findings across the industry snapshots captured in 2016 and 2020, and by asking respondents to compare their working experiences in 2020 with three years prior (the period just after our last survey). Notable shifts include:

- **Digital increasingly dominates:** More than half (57 percent) of respondents said they spend more time on digital output than three years ago. Print remains important, with 54 percent of respondents working across both print and digital products.
- **Output levels have increased:** Juggling these demands means that almost half (49 percent) of survey participants told us that in the past three years, the number of stories they personally produce in an average week has increased.
- **Social media is an integral work tool:** In 2020, a majority of (62 percent) respondents told us that social media platforms had grown in importance for their paper. This was ahead of increased local coverage (36 percent of respondents) and the range of sources and voices featured (32 percent), in terms of major changes that had been seen over the past few years.
- **Trade publications remain essential for learning:** The majority of respondents (67 percent of our total sample in 2020 vs. 57 percent in 2016) told us they learn about new tools and technology through articles in publications like Nieman Lab, Poynter, and CJR. This is some way ahead of other methods such as attending conferences or more formal training sessions.
- **Online training has grown considerably since 2016.** However, based on our participants, it's still used by under a third of those working in local newspapers.

Despite a challenging financial landscape, coupled with wider issues such as trust in journalism, our 2020 cohort — like their predecessors in 2016 — retained a sense of optimism about the future of their industry. In particular, they highlighted the importance of hyperlocal news, embracing digital and filling information gaps by covering stories not offered elsewhere.

In doing this, respondents are alive to the economic challenges their sector faces, as well as the difficulty of attracting younger audiences and issues of retention, especially of midcareer journalists. Many are also conscious of the need to address issues of engagement and diversity more fully,¹ but tell us that they often

lack the bandwidth to do so.²

Elsewhere, we encountered journalists keen to reinvent the sector and let go of legacy attitudes and behaviors, as well as those who wanted to focus more fully on principles of objectivity and detachment, from which they felt the industry had drifted.

Subsequently, despite seeing potential for the industry, 61 percent of respondents in 2020 hold a “slightly negative” or “very negative” opinion about the prospects for the future of small-market newspapers. Four years ago, the situation (to our surprise) was reversed, with 61 percent of 2016’s sample being “very positive” or “slightly positive” about the future of their industry.³

Through these findings, our data further underline the complexity of this sector⁴ and its lack of homogeneity. The breadth of the local newspaper landscape, and the range of experiences within it, are both an opportunity – and a challenge – for anyone interested in helping to preserve, strengthen, and enhance local journalism in 2021 and beyond.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“What is it like to work at a small-market local newspaper in the United States?”

That’s the question at the core of this new research report, which seeks to capture the experiences of local journalists and people working at local newspapers across the country.

According to a previous Tow study, 97 percent of U.S. newspapers (6,851 out of 7,081 daily or weekly news) are “small-market” – titles with a circulation below 50,000.⁵ These experiences don’t always capture the headlines, but we still rely on local journalists to do the things they have always done: act as a check on those in power (http://www.oregonlive.com/editors/index.ssf/2017/10/the_oregonianoregonlives_toxic.html), translate national developments into a local context, create an informed citizenry (http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/page/draining_oregon_day_1.html), and encourage civic engagement (<http://www.journalism.org/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/>).

Despite this important role, it’s well known that local journalism in the United States has been navigating difficult terrain for some time. Subsequently, it’s essential that we understand how local journalism – and the experience of those who produce it – is evolving. This evidence base can inform efforts to support the local news industry by policymakers, funders, and researchers, as well as communities themselves. Without it, these efforts may lack direction or simply fall on deaf ears.

In terms of why this support is needed, the statistics speak for themselves:

- Over the previous 15 years, more than one-fourth of the country’s newspapers have disappeared, with 300 newspapers closing in the past two years alone.⁶
- Around 1,300 to 1,400 communities that had their own newspapers in 2004 now have no news coverage. Close to half of all counties — 1,540 — only have one newspaper, usually a weekly. Almost 200 counties in the country have no newspaper at all.⁷

- As a result of the pandemic, by the end of April 2020, this number had increased: more than 90 local newsrooms in the U.S. had already closed — many for good.⁸
- Newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers (including local titles) dropped by nearly half (47 percent) between 2008 and 2018, from about 71,000 workers to 38,000.⁹
- More widely, across the news media, around 37,000 workers in the U.S. were laid off, furloughed, or had their pay reduced during the first year of the COVID crisis.¹⁰ These numbers have continued to rise across the country.¹¹¹²
- Yet at the same time, based on 2019 research of 100 randomly sampled communities across the U.S., local newspapers remain the largest source of original local journalism,¹³ stressing the importance of local newsrooms not just to their communities¹⁴ but also to the wider news ecosystem.¹⁵

Given this, we need to do more as journalists and researchers to highlight the day-to-day reality of the majority of American journalists. If democracy dies in darkness, then it's vital that we shine a light on a sector that remains vital at both a local level and to the wider news and information ecosystem.

This report helps to tell that story. Like many studies produced in the COVID era, this research has had a long gestation and has been a labor of love for those involved in birthing it.

In late 2019, we decided to revisit an early Tow study (authored by Damian Radcliffe, Christopher Ali, and Rosalind Donald) that had surveyed 420 people working at local newspapers in the United States. Published in May 2017, its findings described a (surprisingly) optimistic industry that was trying to balance the need to “respect print and grow digital.” (https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/local-journalists-digital-tools-optimism.php)

Respondents showed a strong interest in using digital storytelling tools, but these efforts were tempered by resources challenges and changing workloads.¹⁶ That research also highlighted a disconnect between local newsrooms and the conversations taking place in boardrooms, at journalism conferences, and in the trade press. This led to us calling for a more nuanced conversation when it came to talking about the experience of the newspaper industry, recognizing that it is not an homogenous entity.

Our initial plans to revisit and update this story were stymied by the dramatic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. As newsrooms saw advertising income plummet overnight, and many publications fought for their survival, we postponed our fieldwork and revisited our survey questions to accommodate the impact of the COVID crisis.

Early analysis (<https://www.poynter.org/locally/2021/the-coronavirus-has-closed-more-than-60-local-newsrooms-across-america-and-counting/>) by Poynter showed that more than 50 newsrooms had closed since the virus hit the United States.¹⁷ That number has subsequently grown to more than 90,¹⁸ as thousands of journalists have been furloughed, had their wages cut, or lost their jobs. At the same time, while battering

journalism, the pandemic also underlined the need for reliable local news — access to accurate information tailored and relevant to your community can be crucial

(<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-revealing-why-local-news-so-important-it-s-also-nca1186261>) during a public health crisis.¹⁹

Given these dual considerations, it's more important than ever to have an up-to-date evidence base that can inform discussions about the future of local news.

Launching several months later than planned, this study captures a local newspaper industry grappling with the implications of COVID-19 (<https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2020/here-are-the-newsroom-layoffs-furloughs-and-closures-caused-by-the-coronavirus/>), as well as wider long-term systemic challenges. The pandemic has accelerated the need²⁰ to identify new and sustainable²¹ business models, as well as the creative and financial opportunities afforded by digital.²² Alongside this, underlying concerns persist about “fake news,” mistrust in journalism, and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As we have noted, this new study builds on the findings

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21670811.2018.1513810>) of earlier research

(https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/local-journalists-digital-tools-optimism.php) in 2016 and 2017²³ while also acknowledging that since then, the local newspaper industry, like the media as a whole, has gone through a period of further change and disruption.

Other notable developments which have affected the news industry in the years since a version (https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/local-journalists-digital-tools-optimism.php) of this survey was last conducted include concerns about growing “news deserts,” the impact of the Trump presidency, widespread adoption of the term “fake news” and the spread of misinformation, the emergence of the Stories format on social media, a podcasting renaissance, and a move away from the “pivot to video,” as well as a shift to subscriptions and a focus on reader revenue.

Fundamental to our research is the desire to hear, and amplify, the experiences of those working on the frontline across the country.²⁴

We believe that these voices need to be heard, and that these insights can play a key role in helping to inform efforts to invest in — and support — the future of local journalism.²⁵ As a result, these voices are front and center throughout this report. We hope you enjoy reading it.

Damian Radcliffe and Ryan Wallace

August 2021

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This study was initially designed with the intention of revisiting a 2016 study and updating the story of life at small-market newspapers in the US.²⁶ As with that initial research, we defined “small-market” as daily and weekly newspapers with circulations under 50,000. These outlets make up the majority of newspapers in the United States.²⁷

As we note in our introduction, a lot has happened since 2016, and so we wanted to chart some of the most significant changes by identifying points of comparison and also providing fresh perspectives on the reality of life at local newspapers.

Initially, our survey was intended to go out into the field in late March 2020. This was during the early stages of the pandemic, and following feedback from industry stakeholders we postponed the survey until the summer. During that time, we carefully monitored what other surveys of journalists were being undertaken and we further revised our survey to take greater account of COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on local newspapers.

The survey was open from midnight (PST) Tuesday, August 4, 2020, to 11:59 p.m. (PST) on Tuesday, September 8, 2020.

Following this activity, we received a total of 332 responses. Of these, eight were deemed ineligible due to location (participants were not based in the United States), circulation levels, or platform (only outlets with a print product were included). After these responses were removed we were left with a sample of 324 from across the United States. Participants who started the study but did not complete any questions (of which there were more than 100) were also excluded.

This sample works entirely in US local newspapers. They hold a variety of roles, including editors, reporters, and those working on the business side of local newspaper operations.

As in 2016, respondents were guaranteed anonymity so as to protect participants and facilitate the sharing of honest opinions.

Similarly, we also allowed respondents to skip certain questions, or parts of questions, while still enabling them to complete the remainder of the survey. Because of this, completion rates varied by question, and these numbers are clearly identified in each chart used in this report.

As with the previous survey, this decision was made to help ensure the highest possible completion rate, recognizing the time constraints respondents were under (especially during a pandemic); this also meant participants could potentially bypass questions that were not relevant, or possibly unclear, to them.

To help reduce risk of confusion and unclear language, we undertook a small pilot survey with some of Damian's former students, all of whom work in local newspapers. We are grateful for their feedback and for testing our survey software.

Because respondents were self-selecting, our findings do not constitute a representative sample of people working in local newspapers. Our conclusions should therefore only be seen as indicative of the state of the wider small-market newspaper industry.

Nonetheless, we made every effort to recruit as widely as possible. We sought to achieve this both in terms of geographic spread — engaging with stakeholders in each state as well as nationally, as well as contacting organizations that advocate for, and represent the interests of, minority journalists.

As demonstrated in our map of survey respondents, participants cover a broad spectrum of geographic locations, as well as daily and weekly newspapers.

The latter, as we noted in 2016, is important, “given that weekly newspapers — which comprise the bulk of American newspapers — seldom receive the attention we believe their circulation figures suggest they deserve.”²⁸

CHAPTER 3: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

We asked respondents to provide us with key demographic data including geographic location, age, race, job title, and how long they have worked in local journalism. Given wider concerns about the impact of different ownership models on the industry,²⁹ we also asked about the proprietorship of their paper.

3.1 Location of Respondents

The 324 respondents, journalists, and other participants working in local newspapers come from outlets in 44 US states.

The greatest number of respondents came from Oregon (10 percent), Kentucky (9 percent), California (8 percent), Virginia (6 percent), and New York (6 percent).

Notable here is the more rural nature of several of these states, ensuring that this perspective is featured extensively throughout our conclusions. Rural news outlets play an important role in meeting the information needs of communities,³⁰ especially during a public health crisis,³¹ and their presence matters for the well-being of the wider local newspapers industry.³²

Despite our extensive outreach efforts, there were no eligible respondents from six states (Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) or Puerto Rico.



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Location of respondents

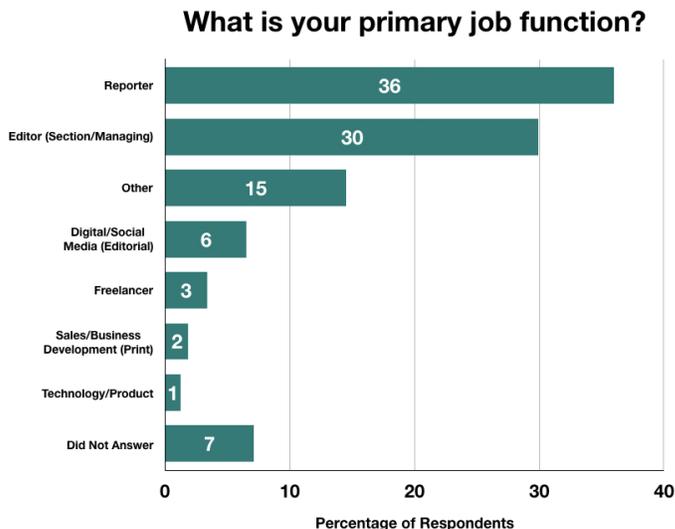
3.2 Primary Role

Among the self-reported job titles, reporters and editors (section/managing) accounted for nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of our total respondents.

However, many other categories of job roles were also represented. Positions ranged from digital/social media editors (6 percent) to freelancer (3 percent) and print sales/business development (2 percent). Alongside the six roles we outlined, 15 percent indicated “other,” a category that included roles such as publisher and owner.

Although we asked respondents to identify their primary role, as several survey participants noted, especially at smaller outlets, this can be hard to differentiate. After all, people wear many — and sometimes all — hats.

“Only hat I (almost) never wear is invoicing,” one participant told us, while another said, perhaps half-jokingly, *“Actually, I’m publisher, editor, reporter, sales, technology, and [my] mother comes in every other week as janitor.”*



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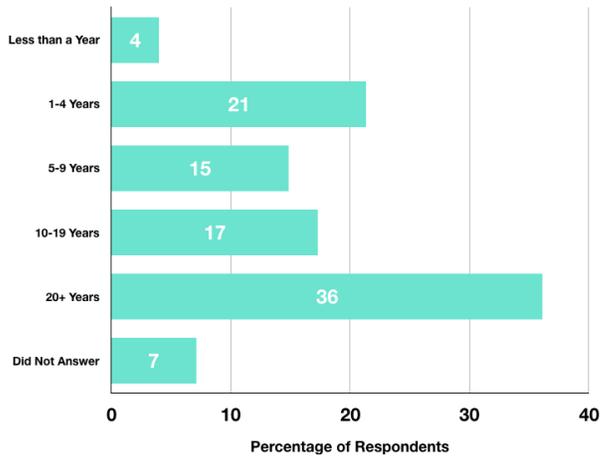
Q5 What is your primary job function?

3.3 Length of Service

The largest number of respondents, nearly four in ten (36 percent), were veterans of the industry, with more than 20 years of experience.

Those in the second-largest group, more than one in five (21 percent), have been working in journalism for 1 to 4 years. We received the fewest number of responses from journalists who had less than a year of experience (4 percent).

How long have you been working in local media?



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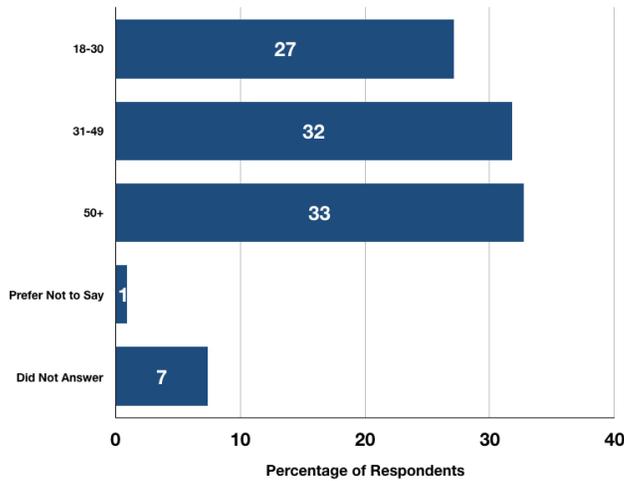
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Q8 How long have you been working in local media?

3.4 Age

Within this, despite their wide range of experience in local newspapers, our respondents were fairly evenly split in terms of their age profile.

How old are you?



(<https://www.cjr.org/wp->

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Q6 How old are you?

3.5 Race and Ethnicity

Despite efforts to reach a diverse range of respondents, our cohort overwhelmingly identified themselves as white (82 percent). The second-largest group identified as Hispanic/Latino (e.g. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban) representing only 2 percent of respondents. A further 12 percent (38 respondents) did not respond to this question.

Given the vital importance in representing diverse populations and their perspectives, significant efforts were made to contact professional journalism organizations that work with media employees from different backgrounds — this included race, ethnicity, orientation, gender, and even area of expertise.

While representation in the final sample was predominantly white, and some groups like Native Americans and Pacific Islanders had virtually no representation in this survey, organizations that were contacted to encourage participation in this study included the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association, and the South Asian Journalists Association, as well many local chapters of these bodies.

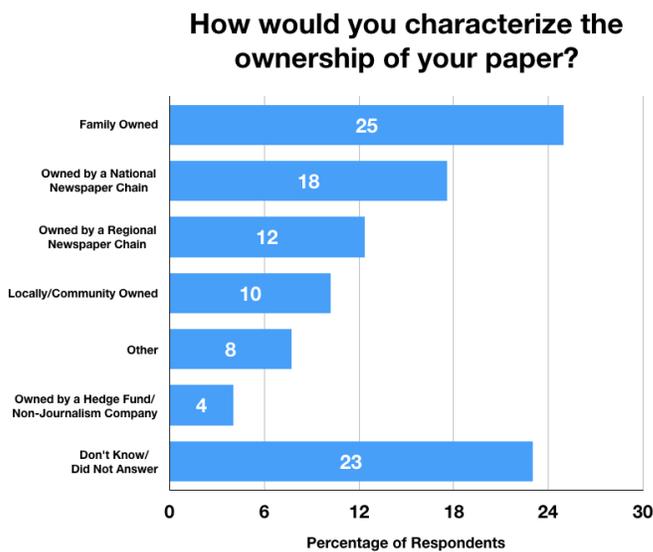
Despite these efforts, the lack of diversity³³ in this survey reflects the challenging — and well-known — lack of diversity in local newsrooms (as well as their larger counterparts) across much of the United States.³⁴

3.6 Newspaper Ownership

Finally, we asked respondents to tell us who owned their paper.

Among our survey participants, the largest group come from family-owned newspapers (25 percent). This was followed by major chains such as Gannett and Hearst (18 percent).

One in ten respondents (10 percent) indicated “locally or community owned” for this question, while 8 percent indicated “other.” Several of these respondents noted that they were the owners, some suggested that as nonprofits there was no real owner, whereas others were affiliated with universities or faith groups.



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Q36 *How would you characterize the ownership of your paper?*

CHAPTER 4: WORKING HABITS IN LOCAL NEWSROOMS

Key Findings:

- 54 percent of respondents told us they work across both print and digital output.
- Where respondents work on a single channel, they are more likely to be focused on print (27 percent vs. only 11 percent that are digital-only in their role).
- More than half (57 percent) of participants said they spend more time on the digital product than they did three years ago.
- Just over a quarter (27 percent) of survey participants dedicate more time to print products than they did three years ago. A third (34 percent) said their time on print had stayed the same.
- Over a third of respondents (37 percent) work more than 50 hours a week, with half of our sample (50 percent) telling us they work 40 to 50 hours a week. These hours are taking place despite furloughs, pay cuts, and reduced formal hours being the norm in many newsrooms at the time of our survey.
- Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) said that in the past three years, the number of stories they personally produce has increased.
- Despite the pandemic, nearly half of respondents (45 percent) said they felt secure in their jobs, although they feel less secure than at the start of the crisis.

In this section we look at the experience of local journalists. These measures don't specifically address questions related to the coronavirus, but many responses are inevitably shaped by them, given that participants took our survey during the late summer and early fall of 2020.

We explore the tightrope many outlets have to navigate between digital and print operations,³⁵ working conditions, and how some of these elements have changed since Tow's first local journalism survey in late 2016.³⁶

4.1 Print vs. Digital

Where journalists spend their time

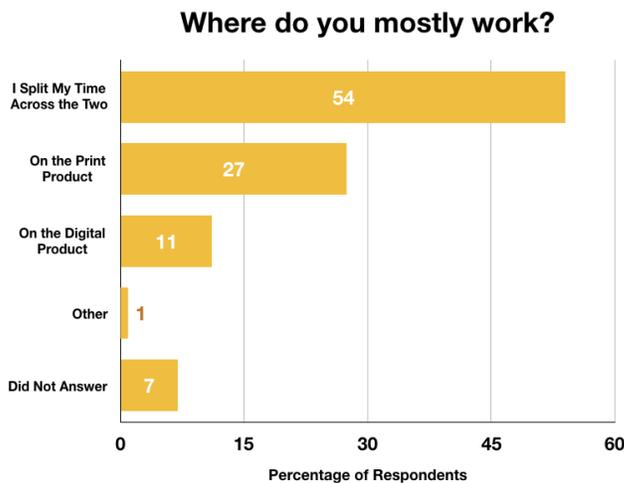
With internet takeup in the USA now at 90 percent,³⁷ it’s not surprising that many journalists — even at operations with a print product — spend considerable amounts of time focused on digital output.

More than half (54 percent) of respondents told us they work across digital and print products. This reflected challenges that respondents indicated in fulfilling, for example, a “*digital-first philosophy*” and appealing to “*younger readers [who] prefer digital editions,*” while also serving existing print audiences.

“*Getting and keeping the attention of our readers is important,*” one respondent told us, “*and we have to do that with our print and digital products.*” For local newspapers, this juggling act across platforms — especially in an era of diminished personnel — shows no signs of abating.

Interestingly, those who are working on only one of those options tend to be focused on the print side (27 percent) versus 11 percent for digital-only, reflecting the continued importance and priority that local newspapers attach to their physical product.

Our 2017 report noted the tightrope local newspapers need to walk, as they “respect print and grow digital.”³⁸ The resource allocation described by our 2020 sample suggests that outlets must continue to navigate this dynamic, not least because of their continued reliance on print advertising.³⁹



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Q9 Do you mostly work?

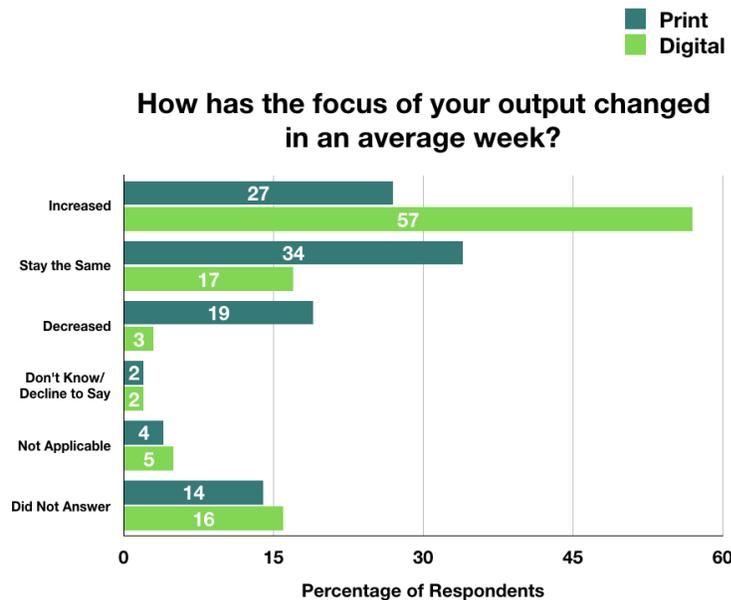
How focus of efforts has changed

In 2016, our first survey demonstrated how journalists’ time was increasingly being spent on digital output. This trend — and digital emphasis — was evidenced even more strongly in our 2020 survey.

We asked respondents to reflect on whether the focus of their work had changed in an average week. More than half (57 percent) told us that their focus on digital products and tasks had increased, with a further 17 percent indicating their time commitment to digital had stayed the same.

Interestingly, only one in five (19 percent) said the time they spent on print had decreased. More widely, based on feedback from our respondents, the increased time spent on digital is *not* offset by spending less time on print.

Around a third (34 percent) indicated that their focus on print has remained relatively stable over the last three years. Interestingly, just over a quarter (27 percent) of survey participants reported they now dedicate more time to print products, reflecting the continued importance of this medium at local newspapers.



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Q16 (1+2): Thinking about your work over the past three years. How has the focus of your output changed in an average week? Consider the hours, demands, tasks, and expectations for your role. – Print/Digital

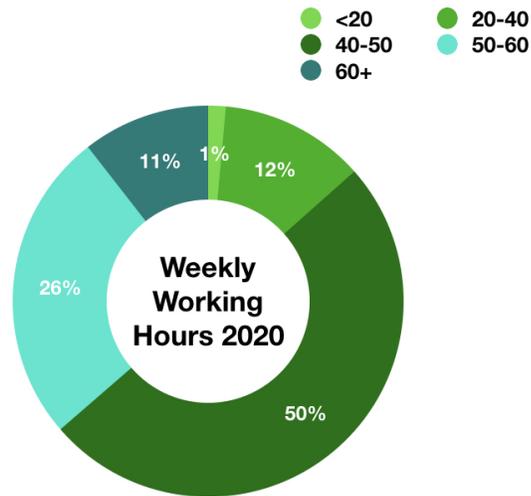
4.2 Working hours

A long-hours culture

A long working week is nothing new for Americans,⁴⁰ or indeed most journalists.⁴¹

Respondents told us they worked anywhere between 10 and 80 hours a week. Many journalists may feel that it's impossible to do their job, or “get the paper out,” if they do not. As one respondent told us:

“Our publications have decreased in the number of pages, specialty publications and promotions have been cancelled, editorial staff hours reduced, yet they continue to work hard to fill the pages each week. There have been areas within our company where people have lost their jobs – either temporarily or permanently.”



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Q12: How many hours a week do you work on average?

The impact of COVID

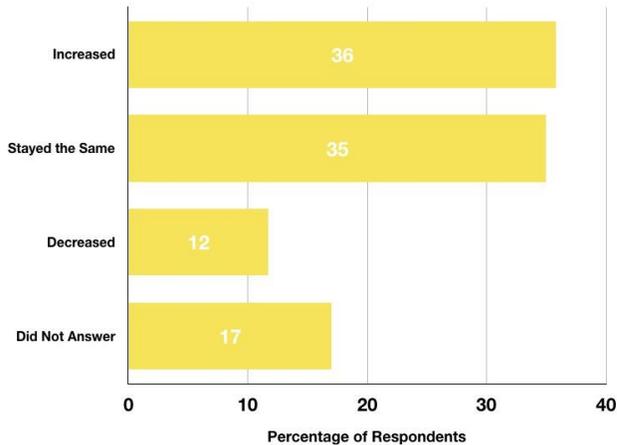
Due to financial pressures of the pandemic, many journalists have had their paid hours cut.

Nevertheless, although some respondents told us that for the past six months they had been required to furlough one day a week, they work overtime by choice. Others repeated this sentiment that they are often only paid for a reduced work week, but continue to work well beyond their contracted hours.

Collectively, their descriptions paint a picture of newsrooms where management continues to cut the hours of full-time employees without modifying expectations. As a consequence, part of local journalists' labor at times may go uncompensated.

Indeed 36 percent of respondents reported that their working hours had increased during the pandemic, with a similar number (35 percent) reporting that working hours had stayed the same. Only 12 percent said their hours had decreased, despite numerous formal labor reductions.⁴²

Thinking back to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how have your hours changed?



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Q13 Thinking back to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have these hours:

4.3 Workloads

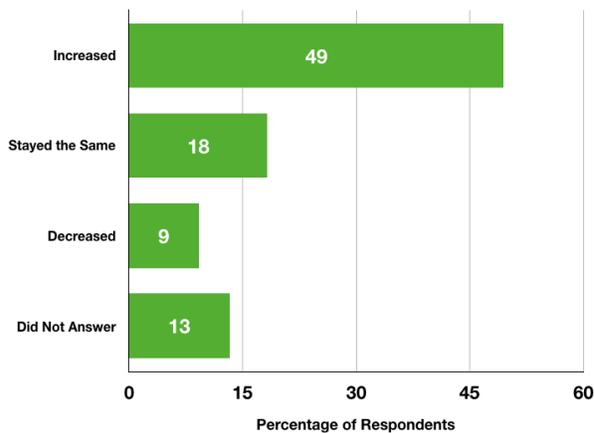
Output levels have increased

Alongside asking respondents to share with us how many hours a week they work, we also asked them about the volume of content they produce.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the jobs cuts we have seen across the industry, and the fact that our survey took place during the middle of a pandemic, when asked about the number of stories they produce, almost half of respondents (49 percent) indicated that the number of stories they personally produce has increased in the last three years.

Given that working hours appear to be relatively stable, this means journalists are having to work quicker; this may have knock-on effects for the types of stories they cover, the number of sources they interview, and their ability to report in the field rather than from the office.

Thinking back over the past three years, how has the number of stories you personally produce changed?



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Q17 Thinking back over the past three years, has the number of stories you now personally produce:

In addition to this, the breadth of responsibilities has often increased too. As one respondent explained:

“Aside from lack of funds and tight time constraints, another challenge we’re facing at small newspapers is the necessity to wear several hats, while only getting paid for one job.

For example (at least at our publication), an editor also has to be a reporter, photographer, newsletter writer, and social media expert, and a graphic designer also has to be the webmaster, community outreach point-person, and legal notice compiler/writer.

This all contributes to stress and burnout, and the issue ties into the fact that we don’t have enough money to hire more people.”

Pace of work, coupled with progression opportunities (or lack thereof), was identified by another survey participant as an issue for the industry in terms of retention.

“There’s no clear future for journalists these days and few advancement opportunities, so burnout seems to occur much more quickly.”

4.4 Job Security

A mixed bag

Beyond concern about burnout and an aging industry, respondents also expressed misgivings around job security. Changing work patterns, long hours, and layoffs all contribute to instability.

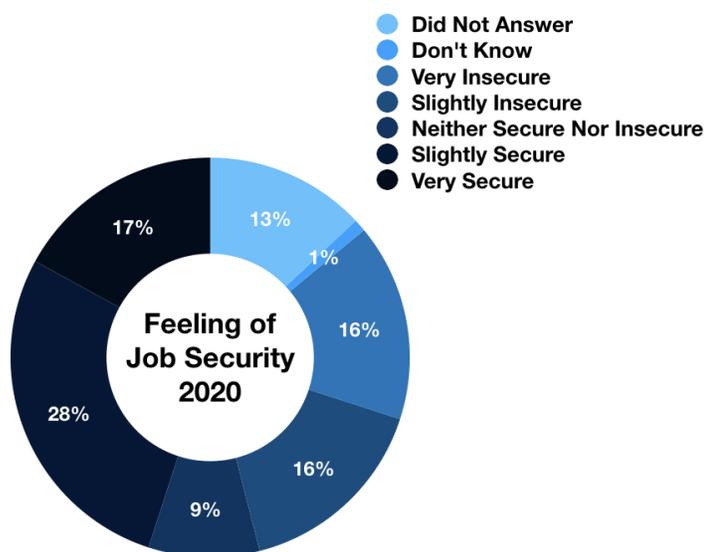
Despite this, many respondents (45 percent) indicated that they felt secure in their jobs. Within this, 28 percent said that they felt “slightly secure” and 17 percent “very secure.”

This may come as a surprise, given the climate that journalism is operating in. As a majority of our respondents represent veteran (more than 20 years of experience) editors and reporters, we can speculate that these greater than expected levels of job security may potentially be attributable to seniority within newsrooms.

Alongside this, the timing of this survey (August-September 2020) came at a time when many people had already been laid off from newsrooms, meaning that those who remain at a paper may feel more secure about their positions.

At the other end of the spectrum, just under a third (32 percent) of respondents felt “slightly insecure” (16 percent) or “very insecure” (16 percent) about the job.

Overwhelmingly, respondents felt secure (45 percent) or insecure (32 percent) in their jobs, demonstrating very little center ground on this topic.



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Q14: How secure, or not, do you feel in your job?

4.5 Conclusion and Commentary

Issues of burnout, long hours, and the tensions between print and digital are nothing new. Based on our survey responses, these issues are as prevalent now as they ever have been. At the same time, our respondents also suggest some additional — recent — dimensions that are adding to these difficulties.

One facet of this can be seen in the impact of attacks on the press. We are seeing “*burnout of folks working in journalism due to negative comments thrown at journalists (fake news, uncaring, biased),*” one respondent observed. Others highlighted “*dealing with online trolls*” as well as “*bullying and harassment of staff*” as challenges that take their toll.

Reduced staff and resources can also limit efforts to do things differently.⁴³

Reflecting on addressing issues of equity and inclusion, a topic we explore more in Chapter 6, one participant noted that *“there is no opportunity for such work — we are woefully underpaid and understaffed, so we pretty much have to use what we have and do what we can with it.”* This was a sentiment we heard from multiple respondents.

At the same time, some respondents were also critical of newspaper owners. *“They saddle reporters with all the work as they let vacancies go dark, leaving readers in the dark, too,”* one participant said. Others noted recruitment challenges, which again has an impact on working hours and habits. *“So much gloom and doom has circulated about small towns and about newspapers that no one is willing to work for them,”* one respondent told us.

For some employees, lack of resources means local newspapers are unable to realize their potential.

“My experience is that the big guys are missing the boat. Many of the small papers owned by the big boys are squeezed to reduce costs which has put the local papers on a forever downward cycle. Many local editors/publishers want to do a good job but they cannot handle the work load with the resources given.”

Others see an inherent tension between the pressures of the print and digital products. *“Take out the monetary aspect and the amount of time we have to divert from the print publication to keeping up the website and social media, and local newspapers are capable of holding our own,”* one respondent said.

To remedy this, instead of increasing workloads and story quotas, a few participants argued for more radical solutions.

“I’m optimistic about the number of print subscribers we would convert to digital if there is no print option,” one suggested. *“How many advertising dollars we would convert is [the] more fraught question. But maybe more than we would think. Revenues will be less in a world without print, but margins will be better, and we once again could be a growth industry.”*

CHAPTER 5: PRODUCTS AND PLATFORMS

Key Findings

- 62 percent of journalists said that social networks had become more important to their work in the past three years. Only 4 percent felt their importance had declined.
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63 percent) said that they or their newspaper used metrics to measure audience engagement.
- Just under two-fifths (39 percent) said that audience metrics influenced how they produced a story.
- Paywalls have been introduced in the past three years at newspapers where 15 percent of our sample work. A further one in five respondents (22 percent) indicated that modifications to their paywalls had taken place during this period.

- Employees are not just interested in new products, but also fresh approaches to journalism, with strong levels of interest seen across our sample to find out more about engaged journalism and solutions journalism.
- The majority of people working in local newsrooms learn about new technology through articles in the trade press and are self-taught in using these tools, mirroring a finding also seen in 2016.

In this part of our report we delve into changing digital habits in local newsrooms. We begin with an examination of established tools and some of the changes we’ve seen in the past four years, before looking at relationships with social networks and emerging tools and technologies.

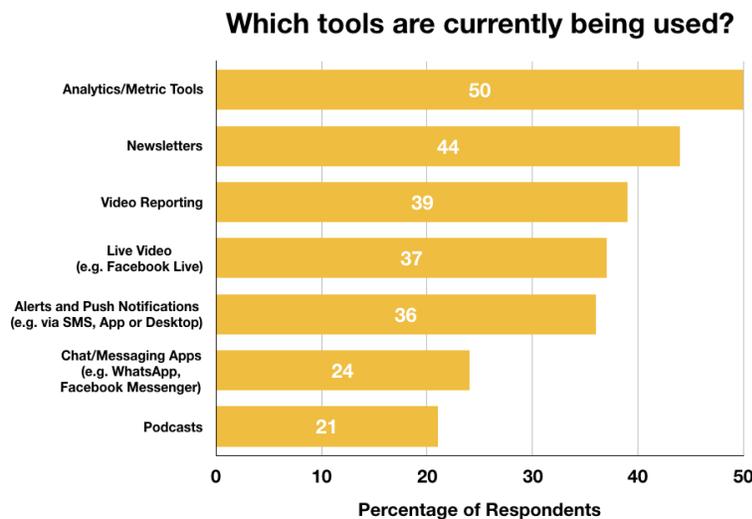
5.1 What tech and products do newsrooms use?

Established tools

Respondents indicated usage of a broad range of tools and platforms in their work.

Of the seven categories we asked for input on, the most commonly used were analytics and metric tools (50 percent), newsletters (44 percent), video reporting (39 percent), and live video services like Facebook Live (37 percent).

Alerts and push notifications (36 percent), chat and messaging apps (24 percent) like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, and podcasts (21 percent), are also popular.



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Q25: Do you use any of the following at your publication? (Tick all that apply)

We also asked respondents about a range of products and services that are commonly used across the industry, and how their usage has changed since our last survey.

One area that we were particularly interested in was the use of paywalls. Since the start of 2017, paywalls have been introduced at newspapers where 15 percent of our respondents work.

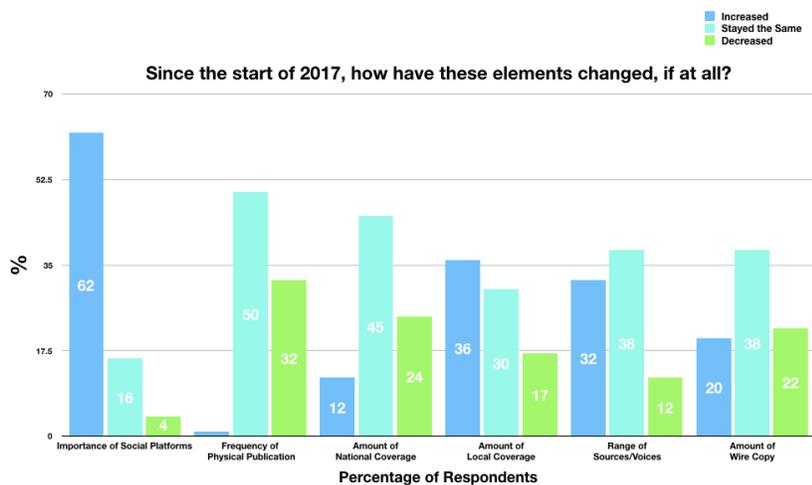
Nearly a third of respondents (32 percent) indicated that they had a paywall and access levels had stayed the same during that time, while around one in ten (13 percent) respondents indicated that they had decreased the number of free stories, with similar numbers (9 percent) increasing the number of pre-paywall stories available.

5.2 Social Media Usage

Friend and Foe

Reflecting the importance of social networks to local newspapers, a majority (62 percent) of respondents indicated that the importance of these platforms had grown in the four years since our last survey. Only 4 percent indicated that this importance of social had declined.

Of six different elements that we explored, social media’s importance was determined to have increased the most, ahead of increased local coverage (36 percent of respondents) and the range of sources and voices in the paper (32 percent).



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Q21 (1-6): Thinking about your paper. Since the start of 2017, how have these elements changed, if at all? Tick all that are applicable. (Results do not total 100 percent as non-responses are not displayed.)

Although social media platforms are integral to the work of journalists, especially for story gathering and distribution, our respondents also commented on how social networks also act as a prime competitor in terms of content and revenue.

“The advertising dollars are going away and not coming back,” one participant told us. “Google and Facebook have just eviscerated the business.”

And despite Facebook’s 2018 pivot to prioritize local news sources,⁴⁴ some respondents were skeptical about whether this had delivered — from the perspective of local newspapers — on its promises. *“Facebook’s algorithm changes over the past few years means people who follow local newspapers may not see that post on their feed.”*

Alongside this, concerns were also expressed about the freedom of users to say what they want, often unchecked. *“Facebook comments can be genuinely detrimental to a paper,” one respondent wrote, “through ways such as troll posts and people copy-pasting paywalled articles in the comments.”*

5.3 New tools and storytelling techniques

Given the increasing prevalence of digital news consumption, as well as emerging approaches to reporting — such as engagement and solutions journalism — we were keen to understand how local newsrooms are adapting to new tools and techniques in the digital landscape.

How journalists learn new skills

Staff at small-market newspapers often have to be resourceful when learning about industry developments and the opportunities afforded by new digital tools. Our sample suggests that they seldom receive formal training and support for this activity. Only a small minority of respondents (15 percent) told us that they have undertaken training paid for by their employers.

This reflects, perhaps, the pressure many local newsrooms face in terms of both time and budgets, meaning that professional development can feel like something of a luxury.

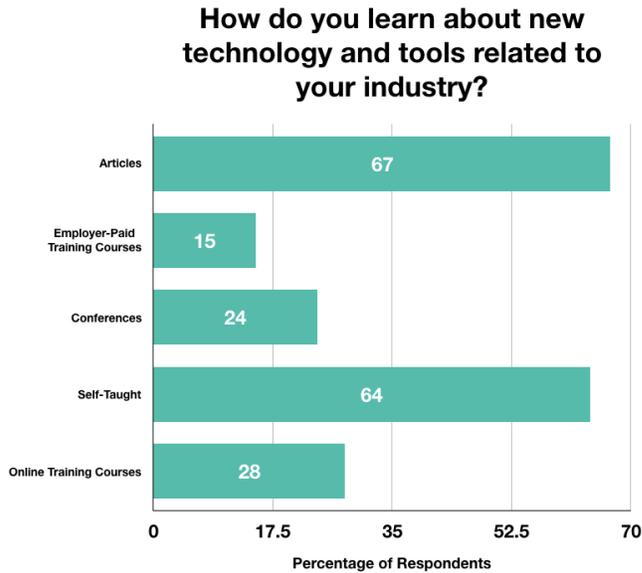
As a result, this is not a cohort who is able to easily travel to conferences. Instead, the majority of respondents told us that they learn about new tools and technology through articles (67 percent of our total sample in 2020 vs. 57 percent in 2016) from publications like Nieman Lab, Poynter, and CJR.

Alongside this, when it comes to using new technologies, people working at local newspapers also tend to be self-taught (64 percent).

It’s notable that in each of these areas — training paid for by employers, the importance of learning through the trade press, and the emphasis on being self-taught — the numbers in both 2016 and 2020 are remarkably similar.

Meanwhile, although (often free) online training courses from organizations like Poynter, Facebook, and Google represent an important resource for these journalists, only a quarter of our full sample of 324 respondents (28 percent) said they are actively using them.

Factors which may influence this include time, awareness, and relevance. Given the commitment of these organizations to supporting local newsrooms, it would be worth exploring more why takeup — based on the findings of our sample — seems low, and how this can be further encouraged.



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Q27: How do you learn about new technology and tools related to your industry? (Tick all that apply)

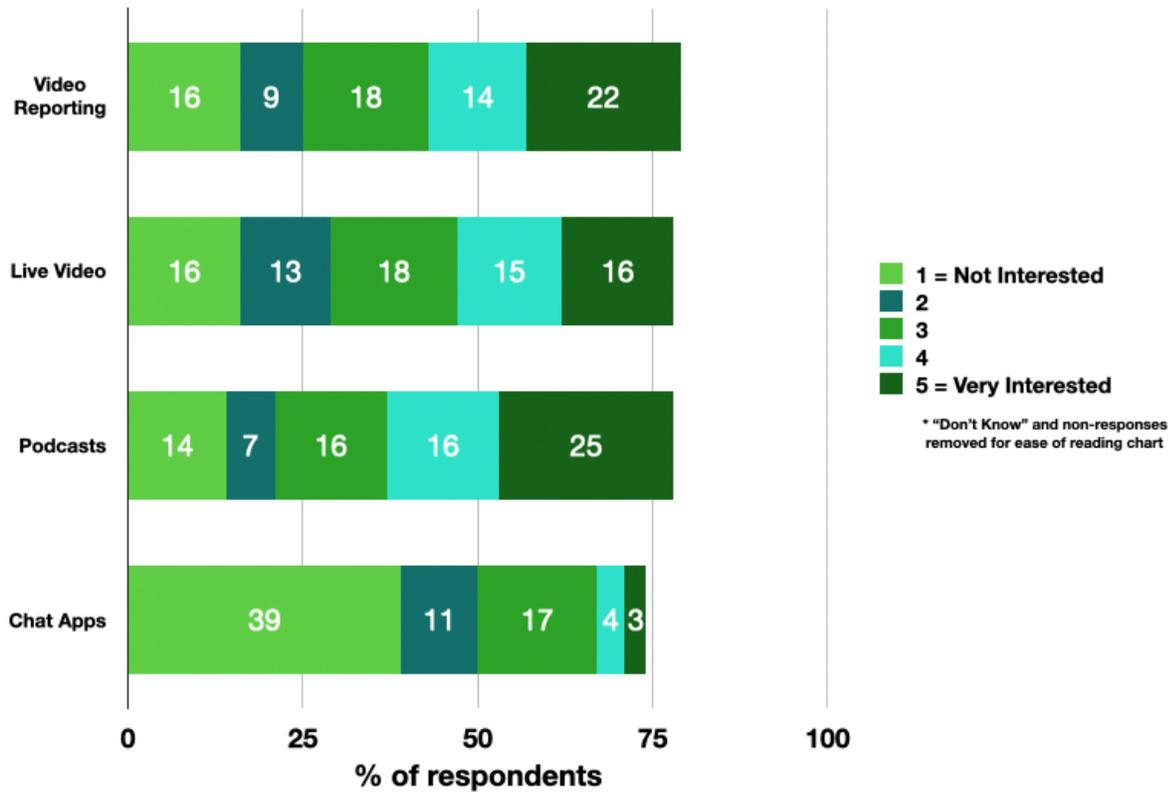
Interest levels in new technology and platforms

Alongside asking how journalists learned about new digital tools and ways of working, we also wanted to ascertain their interest in specific areas.

In 2016, of the options we provided, journalists were most interested in learning more about video reporting, live video, and podcasting (even though usage of the last of these was low). They were less interested in emerging formats like augmented reality/virtual reality (AR/VR) and chat apps.

Again, not much has changed in this regard. Intriguingly, while chat applications like WhatsApp are often a focus for journalism and journalists outside of the United States, particularly in Latin America,⁴⁵ interest in these technologies was low among respondents in 2016 and continued to decline in 2020.

Interest in New Technologies (%)



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Q26 (Options 1, 2, 4, and 6): How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?

Reflecting low levels of take-up for the application in the US,⁴⁶ half of respondents (50 percent) indicated low levels of interest in learning about chat apps such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger.

Only a small minority (3.4 percent) are “very interested” in this technology, which may be surprising given that WhatsApp has two billion users around the world⁴⁷ and Facebook Messenger reaches more than 133 million people in the US⁴⁸ and 1.3 billion globally.⁴⁹

In terms of tools that we asked about for the first time in this survey, areas with the highest ranking (4-5 “Interested” and “Very interested”) by our respondents were emerging philosophies of journalism such as engagement and engaged journalism (53 percent) and solutions journalism (49 percent), as well as the use of newsletters (38 percent).

Q26: How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?				
Scale of 1 — "Not Interested" to 5 — "Very Interested."	1-2 Low interest	3	4-5 High interest	Don't Know / Not Applicable / No Response
Engagement and Engaged Journalism	10%	12%	53%	25%
Solutions Journalism	11%	14%	49%	26%
Newsletters	25%	15%	38%	22%

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Q26: How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches? Scale of 1 — "Not Interested" to 5 — "Very Interested."

There were relatively low levels of interest in some areas that may help local newsrooms, given the challenges they face with resourcing and the shift to consumption of news via social media.

More than four in ten respondents (42 percent) indicated a low level of interest (1-2 out of 5) for finding out about tools such as automation; over a third (36 percent) expressed a similar lack of interest in the Stories format on social networks, as did just under a third (30.5 percent) about alerts and push notifications.

Reflecting potential discrepancies between their own social media usage and the tools they use for work, half of respondents (50 percent) expressed low levels of interest in using chat apps for work, with fewer than one in ten (8.6 percent) indicating a high desire to learn about how to tap into these tools. This is despite a sizable number (38.4 percent) indicating that they use these very same products outside of their job.

Q26: How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?*				
Scale of 1 — "Not Interested" to 5 — "Very Interested."	1-2 Low interest	3	4-5 High interest	Don't Know / Not Applicable / No Response
Alerts and Push Notifications	31%	19%	28%	22%
Stories format for Social Media	36%	14%	26%	24%
Automation Tools	42%	15%	17%	26%
Metric Tools	22%	18%	36%	24%
Chat Apps	50%	17%	8%	25%

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*Numbers may differ slightly from earlier chart due to rounding.

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Q26: How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches? Scale of 1 — "Not Interested" to 5 — "Very Interested."

5.4 Conclusion and Commentary

According to our sample, social media appears to be playing an important role in local newspaper journalism. Nonetheless, this growth can sometimes be challenging, and potentially out of step with behaviors present at larger outlets and across the wider media industry.

Twitter — a popular network among many journalists — was identified as being potentially problematic by respondents, with criticism of the network cited by one respondent as symptomatic of wider trends and issues.

“Similar to challenges facing all newspapers, [there are] changes in our society and the decline of institutions like democracy. Young people are less likely to read articles, care about local news. There is a seemingly increasing lack of basic media and government literacy.

Twitter appears to be fueling a culture where younger media consumers expect to be pandered to, and disagreement or shades of gray is dismissed as ‘both sidesism.’ Cultural polarization is bleeding into people’s attitudes toward news.”

Our cohort was also less interested than perhaps might be expected at deploying some functionality, such as the use of the Stories format (27 percent being “Not Interested” compared to 14 percent being “Very Interested”). According to Sprout Social, “Stories have been one of the biggest social media trends of the past couple of years and 2020 looks to be no different.”⁵⁰ That’s a trend that looks set to continue in 2021 and beyond as the format is adopted by LinkedIn⁵¹ and other platforms.⁵²

Given the wider popularity of the Stories format, this finding may give further credence to the notion that there’s a disconnect between how people working in local newsrooms use social media for personal versus professional purposes. Among our sample, we saw this idea manifest itself in a few areas. One example was the disconnect between usage of chat apps outside of the day job, compared to interest in learning about these tools for work. Similarly, just under a quarter of respondents (23 percent) said they used Instagram for work, compared to nearly half (45 percent) who said they used it outside of their job.

Despite this, our sample clearly indicated an interest in doing things differently. This was particularly apparent in terms of fresh approaches to their craft, as reflected in levels of interest in engagement and solutions journalism, and more established products like newsletters and metric tools.

Other seemingly mainstream applications also piqued the interest of many of our sample, most notably podcasting and video reporting, where over a third of respondents were keen to know more.

Q26 (1, 2, and 4): How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?*

Scale of 1 — “Not Interested” to 5 — “Very Interested.”	1-2 Low interest	3	4-5 High interest	Don’t Know / Not Applicable / No Response
Podcasts	21%	16%	41%	22%
Video Reporting	25%	18%	35%	22%
Live Video	30%	17%	31%	22%

*Numbers may differ slightly from earlier chart due to rounding.

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*Q26 (1, 2, and 4): How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?
Scale of 1 – “Not Interested” to 5 – “Very Interested.”*

In terms of how local journalists are learning about these new technologies and techniques, our survey shows that they rely on various resources, although opportunities supported financially by their employers appear to be decreasing.

As a result, the local journalists we surveyed are often dependent on self-teaching and articles from organizations like Nieman Lab, Poynter, and CJR — with more than two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) listing these as resources that they use for learning, and a similar proportion (64 percent) indicating that they are self-taught when it comes to learning about new technology and tools related to the industry.

And despite the rise in online training resources from Google, Facebook, and others, only just over a quarter of respondents (28 percent) indicated that they had used them, suggesting that industry-led approaches to support innovation and skills development in smaller newsrooms may still need further promotion and refinement if local newsrooms are to harness them in greater numbers.

CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES

Key Findings:

- Not surprisingly, given the financial challenges (even pre-COVID) faced by the sector, issues related to the economics of local newspapers were identified as challenges by many of our respondents.
- Survey participants noted “*dwindling opportunities for local advertising*” alongside “*competing with national newspapers if people only want to have one subscription*” as well as “*fucking Facebook*” as among the biggest challenges facing small-market newspapers.
- Respondents repeatedly identified issues with the commercial model for local newspapers, particularly ownership by large corporations and hedge funds, which they felt were more interested in profit rather than investment in communities and local journalism.
- A near majority of those surveyed felt their paper does a good job with diversity in their news coverage regarding gender (51 percent) and age (48 percent). This sentiment was lower when considering political (36 percent), educational (30 percent), and racial (35 percent) diversity.
- In terms of the make-up of newsrooms, respondents felt their organization is doing a good job with diversity of age (50 percent) and gender (47 percent); however, these sentiments dropped to 18 percent when it comes to racial diversity.

- Other challenges identified by participants include attracting talent — especially younger reporters — as well as younger audiences.

Toward the end of our survey, we included a number of open questions, enabling respondents to tell us about the biggest opportunities — and challenges — they saw facing their industry. In this section, we explore some of the major problems that respondents told us they faced.

In addition, we also asked newsrooms about engagement, diversity, equity, and inclusion — both in terms of their newsroom *and* their coverage — the findings of which we have determined sit best in this section of the report.

6.1 Business and Revenue Models

Ownership models

One of the more discernible trends of the past four years has been the rise of hedge fund ownership in local news.⁵⁴ The impact of this was a recurring theme among our respondents.

“The biggest challenge for small newspapers is distant, corporate owners who don’t give a crap about journalism and are bleeding their ownings dry before they sell them to the next vulture.”

“Large corporate ownership is ruining local newspapers,” another participant told us. *“They introduce large fix-it-all solutions that actually make local conditions worse for reporters, editors, and readers. Websites are made to be cookie-cutter and run spam and ads mixed in with our local content that erodes the trust from the public.”*

Multiple respondents highlighted issues such as lack of investment and *“Corporate ownership that is not invested in local communities.”* Or, put another way, *“Corporate owners who are out to milk every penny they can from small papers.”*

By way of an example, one survey respondent told us: *“I write for four papers in my news group, all community newspapers. All have met their budget in recent years, but cuts are still being made and more are expected.”*

There’s no expectation that this will change. *“We anticipate that most of our editors will be cut and each paper left with a single reporter,”* while *“Copy will be sent to a central hub many states away.”*

At many local newspapers, these predictions are already the reality.

Revenue structures

Respondents noted both the long-term structural challenges local advertising has been facing as well as the impact of the pandemic on many local businesses. As one participant pithily put it: *“When businesses were closed they had no need for advertising, which is our biggest source of revenue.”*

“It takes money to pay salaries and keep the lights on,” one respondent reminded us. *“We’re hurt by a combination of businesses using the Internet for advertising, and local businesses being hurt by Internet competitors.”*

“When economic times get tough, the first thing that tends to go at local businesses is the advertising budget. Also, our number of local businesses have decreased in the last 20 years, particularly larger businesses that used to spend quite a bit on advertising.”

Another of our biggest challenges (again goes back to money) is customers not wanting to pay for content. Everybody thinks everything on the Internet should be free.”

This final sentiment was expressed by multiple respondents who identified the detrimental impact of “free online news” on news literacy and willingness to pay for journalism. *“People think that they don’t need to read a newspaper because they saw some headlines on the internet or they follow the local gossip Facebook page,”* one participant said.

Others expressed concern about the impact of paywalls. Reporters commented on their work (and page views) being *“throttled by [a] paywall that isn’t getting subscriptions and hasn’t saved the newsroom from drastic staffing cuts.”*

One potential impact of this, a response expressed by multiple participants — although not necessarily through the lens of paywalls — was that *“with us locking down so much behind the paywall, I worry it creates an information hierarchy where there’s a lot of people out there learning half-true things from other social circles where media engagement is at a minimum (i.e. Facebook groups).”*

Another respondent pointed out that although an increasing number of local newspapers have a paywall, *“the flip-side is the number of media outlets, particularly television station website[s]”* that do not. Often running on a smaller staff, they were critical of the fact that these channels *“accept PR, Twitter, and Facebook as good enough for their audience.”*

6.2 Diversity

In news coverage

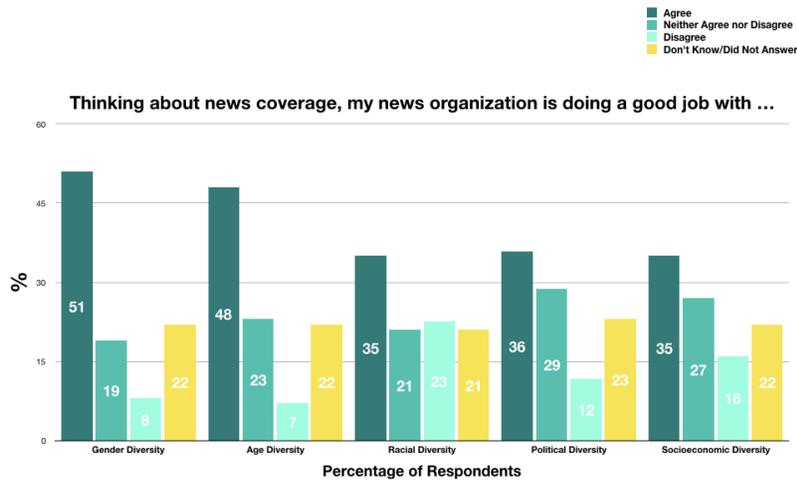
Alongside *“Hedge funds buying up small newspapers en masse to bleed them dry,”* one respondent also noted that *“As a rule, small-market newspapers do not employ staff that reflect the diversity of the population they cover.”*

“We need more Black journalists, more Latinx reporters,” they wrote. *“Our coverage has major blind spots, which deteriorates community trust.”*

Not every respondent accepted this, and several participants were at pains to point out the ethnic homogeneity of their areas they covered. *“I’m not saying that racism isn’t a thing here,”* one respondent shared with us, *“but it doesn’t make much sense to report on issues of diversity, because there really aren’t any [in this area], besides small-scale anecdotes.”*

When asked to evaluate their news coverage and what their news organizations are doing with varying types of diversity, a majority of respondents felt that their newspaper was doing a good job in their coverage with regards to gender (51 percent) and age (48 percent).

HOWEVER, ONLY AROUND A THIRD OF PARTICIPANTS AGREED WITH THIS SENTIMENT WHEN IT CAME TO RACIAL (35 PERCENT), POLITICAL (36 PERCENT), AND SOCIOECONOMIC (35 PERCENT) DIVERSITY. THESE LAST THREE CATEGORIES ALSO HAD A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DID NOT ANSWER THIS QUESTION, OR INDICATED “NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE.”



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Q29 – Thinking about news coverage, my news organization is doing a good job with ...

In the newsroom

Alongside diversity in news coverage, we also asked about these dynamics in terms of the newsroom.

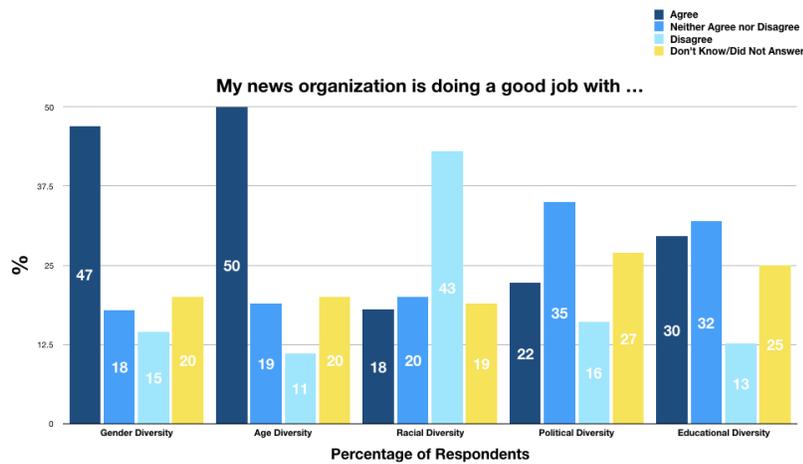
“My paper is owned by Alden Capital,” another respondent said. “The only diversity it is interested in is mixing up the models of BMWs the executives drive to work on any given day.”

“Engagement requires investment, which the paper wouldn’t do even if it had the resources. It is clearly not interested in advancing journalism, rather maintaining a brutal profit margin (e.g. ~ 20%) while driving readers away with overpriced subscription rates.”

Others shared similar perspectives, expressing that in terms of efforts to address issues of engagement and diversity *“from where I sit, it’s not even on their radars as a problem.”*

Of the five diversity indices we asked respondents about, racial diversity was identified as the biggest issue. A near majority of respondents (43 percent) indicated that they disagreed with the statement: *“My news organization is doing a good job with racial diversity.”* Only 18 percent agreed with this assertion.

Survey participants expressed more confidence in gender diversity (47 percent) and age (50 percent), although again it’s worth noting around a third of respondents skipped this topic, or selected “neither agree nor disagree” for these questions.



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Q28: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? “My news organization is doing a good job with ...”

6.3 Attraction and Retention

Audiences

Multiple respondents spoke of the challenge of attracting younger audiences, alongside the wider issues of “just getting an audience.”

“Some people don’t care, don’t feel like they have to subscribe because XYZ issue doesn’t affect them.”

At the same time, others spoke of “dealing with readers who distrust the media” and “a public that does not care nor understand the importance of knowing what happens where they live.”

Changes to the wider media and information ecosystems were branded as key contributors to this situation.

“People think that they don’t need to read a newspaper because they saw some headlines on the internet or they follow the local gossip Facebook page,” one respondent said, expressing a reaction that many others shared.

Similarly, multiple respondents also talked about the need to better communicate what journalism is and the impact it has. That means “getting readers to understand the value in local journalism, and to understand the difference between their local news outlet and national cable ‘news.’”

These dynamics may have a further effect on the type of journalism that’s produced. As one respondent explained:

“It’s been difficult for us to keep our readers interested, especially in our long-form, investigative pieces, which also cost the most money and time. In an age of quick-hit news, promoting those pieces upon which alt-weeklies are built has been a particular challenge, and we’re having to shift to a more daily-like model for our digital content.”

The attention span for long, investigative pieces just isn't there, especially if it's 'bad' news, like the kind dealing with systemic racism, environmental injustice, corruption in government. ... It's all so important, but it's depressing in large quantities. Everyone has information fatigue these days, and we just can't get readers to invest in those important stories."

Talent

Alongside the relationship with audiences, numerous respondents cited the difficulty of making local newspapers appealing workplaces for younger reporters.

"It seems like all young journalists want to work in NY or DC. The position I filled was open for 6 months before they hired me, and the salary is well above average for an entry-level journalist."

Participants also pointed to limited opportunities for progression and the reality of burnout in small newsrooms. This affects all reporters, of course, but for younger journalists witnessing this may be a factor in them leaving local newspapers, or the industry altogether.

"There's no clear future for journalists these days and few advancement opportunities, so burnout seems to occur much more quickly."

"We have to cover the same amount of events with less people in every area of the newspaper (news, graphics, advertising, you name it) and no pay raises. Retaining people has been harder than ever because it's a high-stress, low-pay environment."

It can also affect efforts to diversify coverage and the workforce.

As one respondent told us, their paper *"had a diversity plan which was synced with the hire of more reporters, but now all new hires are off, so my plan is no longer relevant."*

Conclusion and Commentary

The challenges we have identified in this part of our report are not exhaustive. Collectively, our sample identified a broad spectrum of issues facing small-market newspapers, but time and again core problems emerged concerning business models, diversity, and attraction and retention (of both readers and staff).

There's also a strong interplay between these different elements. One respondent succinctly summarized some of these interconnections and the challenges they represent:

"I think the high turnover in local newspapers is a serious challenge to building institutional memory and cultivating the long-term relationships that are necessary for strong news coverage. Because of the low pay reporters frequently leave small papers as soon as they get a better position, which harms the quality of the paper's reporting and makes it difficult to build trust with the community."

Similarly, participants also shared how the multifaceted nature of working at many local newspapers can also take its toll.

"Aside from lack of funds and tight time constraints, another challenge we're facing at small newspapers is the necessity to wear several hats, while only getting paid for one job."

For example (at least at our publication), an editor also has to be a reporter, photographer, newsletter writer and social media expert, and a graphic designer also has to be the webmaster, community outreach point-person, and legal notice compiler/writer.

This all contributes to stress and burnout, and the issue ties into the fact that we don't have enough money to hire more people."

Alongside this, of course, is the fact that "significant decreases in staffing have led to less time and resources devoted to each story and decreased the variety of stories we are able to cover." This in turn has contributed to the "many hats" scenario present in many local newsrooms.

Reduced resources can also be seen as a contributing factor to the challenges of addressing⁵⁵ multiple issues of diversity, both in terms of coverage and the make-up of local newsrooms.⁵⁶

Several respondents shared their challenges with recruiting diverse staff. However, many participants also outlined that their efforts went beyond recruitment, to include expanding editorial boards and op-ed contributions, through to diversity audits of stories and "a greater push for find[ing] diverse voices, under-reported voices, and stories that reflect experiences outside what may be considered the norm."

At most local newsrooms, as elsewhere, tackling representation, diversity, equity, and inclusion remains very much a work in progress.

CHAPTER 7: THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SMALL-MARKET LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Key Findings

- 74 percent of respondents reported that they had been involved in covering COVID-related stories.
- 44 percent of journalists said they and their colleagues had received the equipment and protection (e.g. PPE) *they* needed, although more than a third (35 percent) said they had not.
- Under a third (30 percent) said they, or their colleagues, had been given adequate training or support for COVID-related reporting. 41 percent took the opposing view.
- 43 percent of respondents said they felt less secure in their job compared to the start of the pandemic.
- Just over three in five (61 percent) participants told us that their paper had dropped its payroll for COVID coverage at some point. However, nearly one in five (18 percent) said they had not at any point.
- Around a third of respondents (35 percent) said their outlets had introduced new COVID products, like newsletters or podcasts. The majority (50 percent) did not.

- 65 percent of respondents were satisfied with how their paper has covered the pandemic.

7.1 Impact on Journalists

Coronavirus Reporting

Given the all-encompassing nature of COVID-19, it is perhaps no surprise that the vast majority of respondents (74 percent) have been involved in COVID-19 reporting. This is, after all, a story that affects every journalistic beat.

Within that, a majority of our online survey respondents (58 percent) told us that they had not covered health or science issues previously.

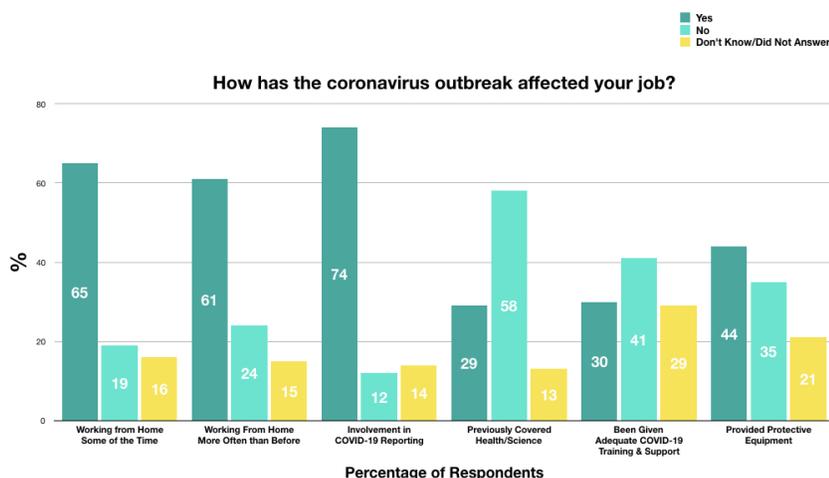
This may help to explain why more than four in ten respondents (41 percent) indicated that they did not feel that they, or their colleagues, had been given adequate training or support for COVID-related reporting. In contrast, fewer than one in three (30 percent) felt they had received enough support.

Alongside specialist knowledge, other factors that may contribute to this finding include the challenges of socially distanced reporting, the distributed nature of newsrooms, and the speed of change prompted by the pandemic.

COVID Safety

Beside this, over a third (35 percent) of those taking our survey suggested that journalists in their newsroom had not been provided with the equipment and protection (e.g. PPE) they needed.

Nearly half of respondents (44 percent) indicated that they had received this, with more than one in five (21 percent) declining to answer the question or indicating that they didn't know.



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content/uploads/2021/10/Image21.jpg)

Q11: How has the coronavirus outbreak affected your job?

Working hours

Considering the initial hunger for COVID news,⁵⁷ the fast-changing nature of the pandemic in its early days, and the reality of job cuts and furloughs in many newsrooms,⁵⁸ we were also keen to understand the impact of the coronavirus on wider working habits.

One area of interest, especially given wider concerns about the mental health impact of the crisis on journalists,⁵⁹ was working hours. Although not the only source of mental health challenges, longer working days clearly contribute to this situation.

With lines between work and home becoming increasingly blurred, Bloomberg reported as early as April 2020⁶⁰ how workers were suffering from burnout and stress, with the average work day typically three hours longer.

Among our sample, respondents were fairly evenly split on the impact of the crisis on the hours they worked. Although they didn't go into the details, 36 percent indicated that their working hours had increased, while 36 percent also said they stayed the same.

Of those who said their hours had decreased (12 percent), this may be as a result of formally reduced hours — for example, many Gannett staffers were furloughed for five days a month between April and June 2020⁶¹ — and other factors such as increased childcare responsibilities.

Job Security

Nearly half of our respondents (43 percent) said that they felt less secure in their job than at the start of the pandemic.

Interestingly, 11 percent said they felt more secure in their jobs, which may be attributed to the increases in traffic and subscriptions seen at some local outlets.⁶² One reason for this may be that people taking our survey had already survived the major cuts seen at publications across the country. As a result, this might give some respondents an element of reassurance about their jobs, based on an assumption that their paper might not introduce further cuts, as many outlets were already pared back to a minimum.

7.2 Changes to working practices and products

From a practical perspective, COVID-19 has affected not only what local journalists are covering, but also where — and how — they are covering it.

Working from home

The reality of distributed newsrooms⁶³ can be seen at a local level, as well as larger outlets.⁶⁴

One manifestation of this can be seen in the rise of homeworking. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of respondents said “the newsroom is working from home, where possible.”

However, not everyone is able to do this. Among our sample, just under two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents said they were working from home some of the time, with nearly one in five (19 percent) continuing to work from the office.

Similarly, just over six in ten journalists (61 percent) said they were “working from home more often than before.” Just under a quarter (24 percent) had seen no changes to their working from home habits.

Changing products and coverage

Not surprisingly, given that no one is immune from the impact of the pandemic, 73 percent of respondents told us that their paper had introduced special coverage related to the pandemic. However, 15 percent said their paper had *not* made any particular changes in coverage.

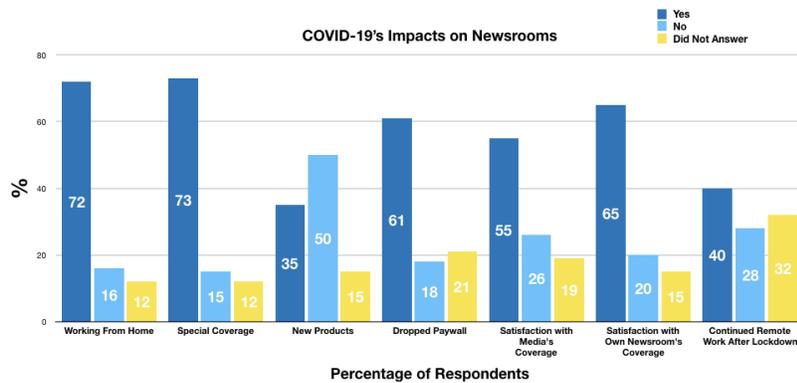
In many cases (61 percent), paywalls for coronavirus coverage (either now or in the past) had been dropped, to ensure that audiences had access to public health information and other COVID coverage.

This approach was not one that everyone agreed with,⁶⁵ and interestingly, around one in five respondents (18 percent) told us they had not dropped their paywalls during the crisis. One in five respondents (21 percent) indicated either they did not know or they skipped this question.

For smaller outlets, reliance on local reader revenue might mean that such moves were not financially viable.⁶⁶ Others may have taken the view later adopted by McClatchy⁶⁷ and others, who have subsequently reinstated their paywalls as the pandemic continued that they could not (or should not) give away this content for free.

Alongside dropping paywalls for some key COVID-19 content, many larger outlets also rushed to introduce new coronavirus products at the start of the crisis.⁶⁸ This practice was less prevalent at the smaller outlets where our respondents are based, possibly due to resourcing challenges.

A majority of respondents (50 percent) indicated that their newsrooms had *not* introduced new products — such as coronavirus-focused newsletters or podcasts — in response to the pandemic. Meanwhile, only a third (35 percent) of respondents indicated that their paper had introduced new COVID-related products.



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content/uploads/2021/10/Image22.jpg)

Q10: We recognize that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is impacting newsrooms across the country. How has this affected your newsroom?

7.3 The potential legacy of the pandemic

Alongside widely expressed concerns that the pandemic could be an “extinction level event” for the news media,⁶⁹ the crisis might also help emphasize the value of local journalism.

“Local, local, local,” one contributor told us in response to a question about the opportunities for local newspapers. *“Our readership has exploded since COVID,”* they wrote, *“and we believe it’s due to how local our coverage is.”*

Satisfaction with coverage

We asked our respondents to reflect on coverage of the coronavirus at their paper, as well as the media in general.

Overall, respondents were more satisfied (65 percent vs. 55 percent) with how their paper has covered the pandemic, than with the media in general. Conversely, over a quarter of participants (26 percent) said they were dissatisfied with how the media had covered the outbreak. A slightly smaller number (20 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with coverage at their own paper.

“COVID-19 is increasing interest in news and people recognize local papers’ coverage can be more relevant than national outlets,” one participant said.

A new era of working from home

One potential legacy of the pandemic is that it has helped to usher in a new era of homeworking.⁷⁰ Newsrooms are not insusceptible to this shift.

“We publish a couple of papers and all my workers are remote,” one respondent told us. *“That has almost gone to 100% due to COVID-19 and seems to be working well.”*

In August 2020, Tribune Publishing Company announced it was closing five newsrooms, including *The Morning Call* in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and the *Carroll County Times* in Maryland.⁷¹ McClatchy is also moving to close seven physical offices, as employees continue to work from home.⁷²

Our respondents identify with this trend. Four in ten (40 percent) indicated that they felt that their paper will continue to embrace remote and distributed working, although more than a quarter (28 percent) disagree.

Notably, nearly a quarter of respondents (20 percent) declined to say, or responded that they didn’t know the answer to this question, with a further 12 percent skipping this question, perhaps reflecting much of the continued uncertainty around the pandemic and some of its long-term effects.⁷³

7.4 Conclusion and Commentary

Given the focus of this survey was to better understand changes in local journalism since 2016, COVID-19 is obviously a key point of interest.

The coronavirus crisis has been a catalyst for significant change, not only in what local newsrooms have been covering, but also in the ways in which local journalism is being carried out. From an economic perspective, the pandemic brought to light many changes that were already under way, including the shift to reader revenue, efforts to pivot from a reliance on advertising dollars, and a desire to diversify revenue streams.

More widely, newsrooms have closed or reduced coverage, patterns of coverage have changed, and jobs have been lost. Local journalism has long faced a precarious future — COVID-19 has merely accelerated and accentuated many underlying trends and exacerbated them.

However, paradoxically, the pandemic has at the same time made the importance of local journalism far more relevant. And in many cases, outlets have seen record traffic, even at the same time as their revenues were often plunging.⁷⁴ Whatever form local journalism emerges in at the end of the crisis, it’s unlikely to look the same as it did going in.

“COVID-19 is increasing interest in news,” one respondent told us, offering a potential insight into the picture painted by our survey participants, *“and people recognize local papers’ coverage can be more relevant than national outlets.”*

Others agreed, arguing that *“We have to be there for our readers and business owners and provide both with what they need from us, especially during the current pandemic, but also beyond it as they emerge and things eventually get back toward a sense of normal.”*

“We’re grateful to have survived the pandemic so far,” another respondent said, perhaps reflecting the attitudes of many other participants, *“but know we all have a long way to go before we’re on the other side of this horrific crisis.”*

CHAPTER 8: MOVING FORWARD — THE FUTURE FOR LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Key Findings:

- Nearly half (49 percent) of respondents hold a “slightly negative” or “very negative” opinion about the prospects for the future of small-market newspapers.
- Respondents shared their concerns about the impact of big tech, in terms of the visibility of local news and its role in shaping the willingness of audiences to pay for local news.
- The ability to engage with younger audiences, and to make local journalism appealing to younger journalists, were also recurring themes.
- Issues of diversity and inclusion are being discussed, and implemented, at local newspapers, but these efforts can be hampered by lack of resources, buy-in, and awareness.
- National-level issues — such as trust in journalism, the ability to discern between news and opinion, and getting people to pay for news — have long permeated local news environments.
- Respondents may have different approaches on how to best address challenges facing the sector, but the value and importance of local news coverage is something they agree on.

In this final chapter we look to the future. We explore how employees at local newspapers feel about the prospects for their industry, and highlight some of the key issues and approaches they identified as needing to be addressed.

8.1 Sentiments toward the future

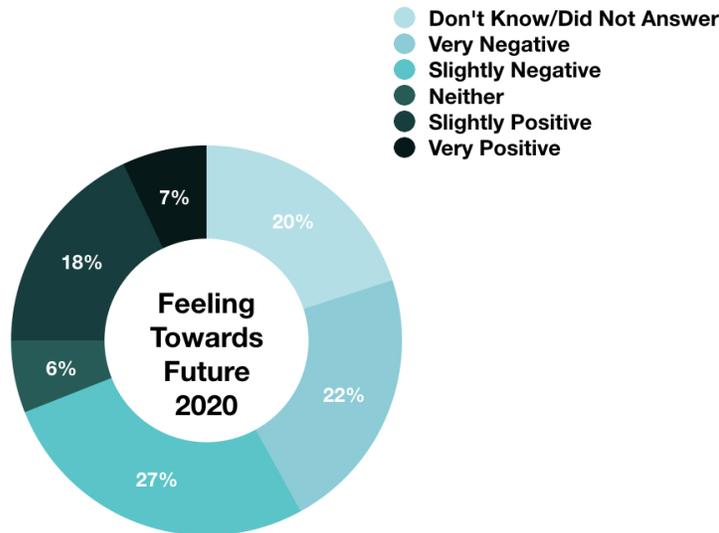
A less positive outlook than four years ago

One surprising takeaway from the 2016 study was a cautious optimism found in the local newspaper industry. Despite a decade of consolidation, closures, and lay-offs, when asked “*How positive do you feel about the future of local newspapers?*,” the majority of the 2016 sample were more positive than might have been expected.

By 2020, this trend had been inverted. Positivity had tilted toward pessimism, with 49 percent of survey participants subscribing to a negative view of the future for their industry, compared to 25 percent who held a “very positive” or “positive” perspective.

Given that this survey was conducted in the middle of a pandemic, these conclusions should not come as a great surprise.

As our survey has demonstrated, nearly half (43 percent) of local journalists indicated that they now feel less secure in their jobs than they did prior to the pandemic, with just under a third (31 percent) being neutral on the issue, saying they felt “the same” (neither more secure or less secure). This sentiment inevitably shapes wider attitudes toward the future of the industry.



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[content/uploads/2021/10/Image23.jpg](https://www.cjr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Image23.jpg))

Q31: How positive do you feel about the future of local newspapers?

It's not just about COVID

But job security is just one proxy by which we can gauge shifting sentiments about the future of local news. We know from other questions asked in the survey that respondents also highlighted issues of trust, the impact of social media on both revenues and media habits, and the American public's changing relationship with journalism, as areas that have all negatively affected prospects for local newspapers.

From a business perspective, as one respondent starkly stated, *“The advertising dollars are going away and not coming back. Google and Facebook have just eviscerated the business.”*

Similarly, although our survey has shown a substantial upswing in terms of the importance of social media for local newspapers, it remains an uneasy relationship.

Respondents noted how *“Facebook’s algorithm changes over the past few years means people who follow local newspapers may not see that post on their feed,”* despite Facebook announcing these changes as being designed to increase the visibility of local content.⁷⁵

They also cited the tension between being active on social media, *without* it cannibalizing your business.

“Ten years ago I was nervous about newspapers coming to an end soon,” one respondent recalled. *“I was wrong.”* They added, *“It may help that I am in an area with a high population of seniors who do not rely on Facebook for their news.”* *“The obstacle I face is finding that balance about what to post on social media*

without giving too much away — and still having a product people want to buy. You really have to be aggressive with keeping your paper's name out there and being relevant. That's why I try to post snippets of news or teasers of what is in the paper as often as possible."

Lastly, there was a sense of both sometimes struggling to get some audiences to engage and a feeling that too often local journalism was at risk of being undervalued.

As Pew showed in 2019, most Americans (71 percent) think their local news media are doing well financially, when the reality is typically quite different. Moreover, few Americans (just 14 percent) had paid for — or financially supported — local news.⁷⁶ Yet at the same time, Americans felt that local journalists, in the main, are doing a good job.⁷⁷

Reflecting on this dichotomy, *"People welcome news coverage of their communities,"* one participant told us. *"I think people just take it for granted that a reporter somewhere can be found to write about some injustice or crime or corruption or freak event that happened in their hometown."*

"There is not only a huge need for local news, there is a huge desire for it," they continued. *"Professional news coverage is a product in demand — why can't it be monetized?"*

8.2 The Youth Challenge

Attracting younger audiences

Our respondents identified not one, but two issues related to youth and younger people and their relationship with local newspapers.

The first was a perception that this was an audience that was often apathetic about local news, or disinterested in the current ways in which it was delivered.

As one respondent bluntly put it: *"Attracting young readers (20- and 30-somethings) is a big challenge aside from attracting advertisers. Through attrition, our circulation continually declines because death rates outpace young, new subscribers."*

More widely, multiple respondents indicated that younger audiences tended to be less interested in local news. *"They do not follow local issues unless it hits home and it is probably too late,"* one participant told us.

Another correspondent noted the media and shopping habits of younger audiences, a combination that affected both consumption of local news and created a compelling proposition for advertisers: *"Younger readers prefer digital editions and do not value supporting local businesses. They prefer to buy online for just about everything."*

Attracting younger journalists

Alongside this, participants also underlined the challenge that many of them faced with attracting or retaining young journalists.

“I worry that journalism will be increasingly unable to recruit smart, talented young people who may rightly see better opportunities in other fields,” one respondent wrote, while another specifically identified the challenge of hiring younger journalists.

“Much of this goes back to monetary resources being scarce,” they said, *“but I’m surprised by the lack of applicants whenever a position perfect for an entry-level reporter was posted. With eight public universities in our state I’d be lucky to get one applicant per graduating class.”*

And for those outlets who do attract younger reporters, it can be hard to keep them. *“We have lots of young reporters and some older reporters, but have lost that [sic] 30-40-year-old reporters who used to be a keystone of newspapers,”* one participant said, identifying *“retaining midcareer staff”* as a key challenge for their paper.

8.3 Connecting with communities

Mind the Gap

In addition to the challenges of attracting both younger audiences and journalists, respondents also spoke about wider issues of diversity — in terms of both coverage and newsroom demographics.

For some newsrooms, attracting younger journalists is less of an issue than the potential divide between this cohort and their lives — and those of their audience.

“The main disconnect between our staff and our readers is not politics, race, gender, or even where we are from’ (about half our newsroom grew up here). It’s age. Our readers are old, older, and oldest, and usually there’s a 40- to 50-year age difference between our reporters and our readers. That’s a difference in perspective and outlook that’s hard to overcome.”

Other journalists spoke of differing approaches to journalism, with some (presumably older) respondents expressing the view that this was detrimental to the profession.

“Too many young journalists are bringing their personal politics to work and letting it influence their stories,” one respondent told us, following on from their concerns about *“lack of trust in news because of perceived (and real) liberal, progressive, socialist Democrat leanings and blatant activism journalism. ... We need to be neutral, period,”* they advised.

“This youth movement is also destroying newsrooms across the nation,” they added, *“as they do not want to work with people ‘not on their side’ and engage in libel, defamation, and abuse and harassment of older journalists because we do not pay fealty to their progressive, socialist, un-American causes that fracture our nation.”*

Others took a different view, suggesting that at some local news outlets there is a feeling that things need to be done differently.

“I think there’s a culture that needs dismantling too,” one participant said. *“I think the target audience of newspapers has historically been the upper middle class, such as lawyers and lawmakers. But I think if we want to capture a younger audience, we need to write about things they care about too.”*

Equity and Inclusion

Similar tensions and differences of opinion could also be seen when we asked respondents more widely about issues of diversity and engagement.

“We are professionals and we report the news fairly and objectively,” one respondent wrote. *“That’s how we address issues of engagement and diversity.”*

Another discussed how *“the paper is trying to introduce unfair affirmative action policies in hiring and story sourcing that are basically discrimination.”* *“Affirmative action is wrong and evil,”* they wrote. *“It has no role in news nor any other facet of life. Hire the best qualified candidates, period.”*

Other participants shared the challenge of tackling issues of diversity — typically identified by respondents through a racial lens — given the resource constraints that many local newsrooms have and the demographics of many rural communities.

“My county is 90% white,” one respondent explained, *“so racial diversity is difficult. We do tell stories of the POC communities when we can.”* Another participant told us that *“as the sole reporter, I try to cover events, local businesses, and the like in an equitable way.”*

Others spoke of their frustration in trying to address these matters. *“No matter how often the editorial staff tries to address these issues our publisher is concerned only with profit. It’s demoralizing and exhausting,”* one respondent said.

“We haven’t even addressed it,” another participant admitted, *“and as a reporter, I don’t know how to.”*

Elsewhere respondents outlined efforts to promote “diversity hires,” broaden editorial boards and opinion sections, sponsoring debates, creating Spanish-language content, speaking to more diverse sources, and a recognition that *“in the summer [of 2020] Black Lives Matter protests have extended to more rural areas.”*

“People who have long been interested and part of social justice movements are rallying in their small communities,” one respondent observed. *“These stories continue to have weight.”*

Many of our respondents expressed a desire to tackle these issues, and their survey responses portrayed a cohort doing its best to address issues of equity and inclusion with limited resources.

“I have been thinking about ways to possibly do this,” one respondent told us, talking about their experience of working with Native communities, *“but we are such a small staff that it’s hard to add anything else to our already very full plates. That makes it a difficult challenge.”*

“To be clear, this is basically a one-man operation with some outside assistance as far as news coverage goes,” one participant wrote, articulating the reality at many local newspapers. *“Luckily, I have good contacts in the Black community in my area and work hard to include stories featuring people from a multitude of backgrounds. I don’t always succeed, but I do try.”*

8.4 Conclusion and Commentary

Local newspapers, like the mainstream media writ large, are contending with issues of relevance, reinvention, and reputation.

In terms of reputation, while many respondents noted that local journalism is more widely trusted than mainstream national news media, fostering trust remains one of the biggest challenges facing the industry today.

“The deluge of ‘fake news’ accusations taint people’s view of us,” one respondent told us. *“Even though, when confronted, they backpedal and say, ‘Oh, not you guys. You’re local.’ They’re still shouting from the rooftops about how ‘the media’ can’t be trusted.”*

“Countering that will be difficult,” they added, *“because it will mean we as an industry and individual reporters and publications will have to be more transparent — about our methods, motivations, and process. We demand it of others; it’s time we returned the favor.”*

Nonetheless, there is an argument that because of their proximity to audiences, and the fact that local journalists may be the only journalists people ever meet, they become — by default — a proxy for attitudes toward the wider industry.⁷⁸

This is especially important given a backdrop in which local journalists felt that trust in journalism was under threat by *“a government that actively and tirelessly promotes distrust in journalism”* and *“a president attempting to make [journalists] the enemy of the people.”*

A major conundrum for local newspapers is how to effectively tackle this situation when they have limited resources and a longstanding content mix that typically blends original local reporting with material from wire services.

“Many readers comment that they enjoy and appreciate our local coverage but can’t stand how ‘biased’ we are against Trump and/or Republican elected officials,” one respondent said. *“That’s a reaction to AP coverage, and among the reasons why we continue to cut back on wire news.”*

Given cuts in newsrooms, it’s perhaps surprising that respondents didn’t suggest that their paper was increasingly reliant on wire services to fill content gaps.

One reason for this is a recognition that the lifeblood of local newspapers *has* to be local journalism.

“Local papers run too much national and regional news from wire services and other content providers which readers already get from better equipped outlets. National outlets can’t provide news on that local area, which local newspapers should cover deeper than anyone else.”

Arguably by doubling down on local coverage newspapers can best demonstrate their continued relevance and importance, potentially encouraging audiences to pay for local news in the process.

Of course, this isn’t easy at a time of cutbacks, COVID, and declining revenues. Moreover, our survey participants were conflicted on the best ways to move forward.

For some, there was a sense that local journalism (and its wider cousins) had lost its way. Local newspapers should *“be the last place where there is an attempt at objectivity,”* one participant told us, while another argued that *“there is plenty of commentary to go around, even in small towns. But a reported story without a specific political/social bent is rare.”* They added, *“The problem is getting the public to care about having that voice.”*

Others argued that things needed to be done differently. As one participant put it:

“Small-market newspapers must hire reporters and tell stories that reflect their community.

We’re catering to our imagined audiences: White, old, and conservative. We’re not reporting on the issues most affecting young readers, people of color, and marginalized communities. This is an area of opportunity we’re squandering.

Why would I subscribe to a paper that isn’t telling my story?”

There’s no silver bullet for the challenges small-market newspapers are facing, but respondents often spoke of the potential audience for local news and the opportunity to provide hyperlocal content not covered elsewhere.

Put another way, this means meeting *“people where they are at ... emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, politically, structurally.”*

Small-market newspapers in their coverage and approach should be *“focusing on building healthy communities,”* one respondent memorably argued. *“I don’t think you can have a thriving community without local media.”*

CHAPTER 9: FINAL THOUGHTS

This report revisits a study first undertaken in late 2016 to shine a light on a key, yet often overlooked, segment of the newspaper industry: small-market newspapers. Like the earlier iteration, a key driver for this research has been to create a platform for people working at local newspapers across the United States to tell us about their experiences.

This cohort continues to work long hours, contending with job losses and competing with other media for attention and advertising dollars, as well as a rapidly changing work environment.

Even pre-COVID, journalists at local newspapers told us they were producing more stories — for more platforms — than ever before. They’re doing this while also trying to learn new tools and approaches, as journalism continues to reinvent itself.

Many of the challenges that local newspapers were contending with pre-pandemic have accelerated over the past 18 months, and these issues have been exacerbated by the unique circumstances of the pandemic itself.

Journalists have often been thrown into covering the crisis without necessarily being given adequate training or access to equipment such as PPE. Many are also being asked to cover public health matters, which are outside of their existing skillset and past experience.

Furthermore, they are doing this against a backdrop where the consequences of COVID on local businesses, especially those that are not part of wider chains, have also been substantial. By May 2020, more than more than 100,000 small businesses in the U.S. had already closed.⁷⁹

Long the backbone of advertising in local newspapers, the local business and newspaper landscapes may well look very different on the other side of this crisis, affecting both Main Street and the local media industry.

The long-term consequences of these COVID-era developments will intensify structural challenges that the sector was already facing. Our respondents highlighted many of these issues, including questions relating to audiences, newsroom composition, and continued relevance to readers and the wider community.

“Getting younger generations to get their news from papers has and will continue to be a huge uphill battle,” one respondent reminded us.

Others highlighted demographic challenges within newsrooms, pointing to turnover and concerns about the ability to adjust course.

“Most editors are longtime reporters near the end of their careers not interested in changing how they do their jobs,” one participant told us, with this leading to *“a lack of innovation and growth.”*

Concerns about burnout and an aging industry also have knock-on effects for creativity, building trust, and engendering community support.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties faced by the industry, we continued to find local journalists eager to engage with ideas and suggestions about how to galvanize and reinvigorate the local news business.

In some instances, as we have noted, this involves taking new approaches — using new platforms and doubling down on local coverage, while others advocate returning to first principles with an emphasis on *“reporting, not stenography”* and holding authority to account.

These are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, there was a strong appreciation from many of our respondents that — whatever your approach or business model — the key is to be emphatically local.

“We have a rare opportunity to be the voices of our communities, and to share our community’s stories with the wider public,” one survey respondent told us.

“We have a rare opportunity to say ‘we are in this WITH you, not just outside observers, but people who are invested in the health and future of this town.’ We don’t have to weigh both sides equally if they aren’t equal, but so many news outlets do, and it makes us seem out of touch and OUTSIDE the things we’re writing about. We should be IN IT. We should be INVESTED. We should call things what they are. THAT is where the value of small-market journalism lies.”

Those are sentiments that we strongly agree with.

The rise of news deserts and concerns about misinformation and disinformation, coupled with the value of local journalism during a public health crisis, have all acted as stimulus for welcome discussions about the importance of local journalism and the value that it provides to local communities, as well as the wider news and information ecosystem.

Our hope is that these survey results offer a valuable insight into the challenges — and opportunities — for small-market newspapers, and that in turn, this report will support continued dialogue about how to best support this important industry.

We look forward to contributing to this important, ongoing conversation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report provides a snapshot of the struggles and opportunities faced by local newspapers in the USA in the second half of 2020. It builds on previous research produced for the Tow Center by Damian Radcliffe and Christopher Ali in 2016 and 2017.

Thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts and insights to inform this report, including the 324 respondents across the United States who took part, and everyone who shared the survey and encouraged participation in this study.

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APPENDIX

TOW Survey 2020

Thank you for clicking on a link to take this short survey.

This questionnaire explores what it is like to be a local newspaper journalist in 2020. It’s part of a wider project, begun in 2016, by the University of Oregon (project # RCS 06062016.010) and supported by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

As part of the research, we want to hear about the experiences of local journalists and people working at local newspapers across the United States.

The survey is entirely optional and will take approximately 8-12 minutes.

By participating, you consent to us using your answers to inform our research. However, the data will be anonymized in the final report. There is no risk to taking this survey and you are free to withdraw at any time. You may also skip any questions you do not wish to complete.

If you would like to see a copy of the published report, then please leave your email address at the end of the survey. Your name, email, and newspaper will not be featured in the research findings, or linked to any conclusions from the data that we will publish.

Thank you for taking the time to tell us your experiences.

If you have questions about the survey, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Before we start, please tell us a little bit about yourself.

This survey is designed to shed light on the experiences of people working at local U.S. newspapers with a print circulation below 50,000 readers.

Q3 What state do you live in?

▼ Alabama (1) ... I do not reside in the United States (53)

Q4 Do you work at a newspaper with a print circulation below 50,000 readers?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Q4 = No

Thank you for your interest in this study. Although at this time we are only seeking responses from individuals working at newspapers with a print circulation below 50,000 readers, we appreciate your interest and would be delighted to keep in touch with you about the results.

Do share your contact details if you would like us to send you a copy of the final report when it is published.

Display This Question:

If Q4 = No

If you would like us to send you a copy of our report when it is published, then please enter your email address here:

Skip To: End of Survey If Condition: If you would like us to sen... Is Equal to. Skip To: End of Survey.

Display This Question:

If Q4 = Yes

Q5 What is your primary job function?

- Editor (Section/Managing) (1)
- Reporter (2)
- Digital/Social Media (Editorial) (3)
- Technology/Product (4)
- Sales/Business Development (Print) (5)
- Sales/Business Development (Digital) (6)
- Freelancer (7)
- Other (Please State) (8) _____

Q6 How old are you?

▼ 18-30 (1) ... Prefer Not to Say (4)

Q7 Which of the following describes your race? Please select as many as apply. *Options as defined in the 2015 Pew Research Center study (<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/>) on Multiracial Identity in the United States.*

- White (e.g. Caucasian, European, Irish, Italian, Arab, Middle Eastern) (1)
- Black or African-American (e.g. Negro, Kenyan, Nigerian, Haitian) (2)
- Asian or Asian-American (e.g. Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese or other Asian origin groups) (3)
- Native American/American Indian/ Alaska Native (4)
- Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian (5)
- Hispanic/Latino (e.g. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban) (6)
- Some other Race (*please specify*) (7) _____
- Don't Know (8)
- Prefer Not to Say (9)

Q8 How long have you been working in local media?

▼ Less than a Year (1) ... Decline to Say (6)

Q9 Do you mostly work:

- On the Print Product (i.e. physical newspaper) (1)

- On the Digital Product (e.g. social, website, etc.) (2)
- I Split My Time Across the Two (3)
- Decline to Say (4)
- Other (Please Specify) (5) _____

We will now ask you some questions about covering the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Q10 We recognize that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is impacting newsrooms across the country. How has this affected your newsroom?

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| The newsroom is working from home, where possible (1) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Paper has introduced special coverage (6) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Paper has introduced new products (e.g. coronavirus newsletter) (7) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Dropped paywall for coronavirus coverage (either now or in the past) (8) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Are you satisfied with how the media has covered the coronavirus outbreak? (9) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Are you satisfied with how your newspaper is covering the pandemic? (10) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |
| Do you believe your paper will continue to use remote/distributed working after lockdowns end? (11) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know /
Decline to Say (3) |

Q11 How has the coronavirus outbreak affected *your* job?

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------|---|
| I am working from home some of the time (1) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |
| I am working from home more often than before (6) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |
| Have you been involved in COVID-19 reporting? (7) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |
| Prior to the start of the pandemic, were you involved in science or health reporting? (8) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |

- | | | | |
|--|--------------|-------------|---|
| Have you, or colleagues involved in COVID-19 reporting, been given adequate training and support? (9) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |
| Were you, or colleagues involved in COVID-19 reporting, provided with the equipment and protection (e.g. PPE) you needed? (10) | • Yes
(1) | • No
(2) | • Don't Know
/ Decline to
Say (3) |

We will now ask you some questions about your role.

Q12 How many hours a week do you work on average?

Q13 Thinking back to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have these hours:

- Increased (1)
- Stayed the Same (2)
- Decreased (3)
- Don't Know (4)

Q14 How secure, or not, do you feel in your job?

- Very Secure (1)
- Slightly Secure (2)
- Neither Secure or Insecure (3)
- Slightly Insecure (4)
- Very Insecure (5)
- Don't Know / Decline to Say (6)

Q15 Compared to before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how secure do you feel in your job?

- More Secure (1)
- Same (*neither more or less secure*) (2)
- Less Secure (3)
- Not Applicable (4)
- Don't Know / Decline to Say (5)

We are now going to ask you some questions about changes in your role since we last surveyed local journalists at the end of 2016.

Q16 Thinking about your work *over the past three years*. How has the focus of your output changed in an average week? Consider the hours, demands, tasks and expectations for your role.

Increased (1) Stayed Same (2) Decreased (3) Don't Know / Decline to Say (4) Not Applicable (5)

Print (1)	•	•	•	•	•
Digital (2)	•	•	•	•	•

Q17 Thinking back over the past three years, has the number of stories you now personally produce:

- Increased (1)
- Stayed the Same (2)
- Decreased (3)
- Don't Know / Decline to Say (4)
- Not Applicable (6)

We are now going to ask you some questions about the role and status of journalism in the U.S.

Q18 To what extent do you believe that the role of journalism is changing in the United States?

- "Not at All" 1 (1)
- 2 (11)
- 3 (2)
- 4 (3)
- 5 (4)
- 6 (5)
- 7 (6)
- 8 (7)
- 9 (8)
- "Very Much" 10 (9)

Q19 To what extent do you believe that the public's trust in journalism is changing in the United States?

- "Not at All" 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- "Very Much" 10 (10)

Q20 To what extent do you think that the public’s trust in journalism has increased or decreased in the last year (12 months)?

- Increased a Lot (1)
- Increased (2)
- No Change (3)
- Decreased (4)
- Decreased a Lot (5)
- Do Not Know (6)

We are now going to ask you some questions about changes at your paper since we last ran this survey at the end of 2016.

Q21 Thinking about your paper. Since the start of 2017, how have these elements changed, if at all? Tick all that are applicable.

Importance of Social Platforms (e.g. Facebook) (1)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)
Frequency of Publication of Physical Paper (2)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)
Amount of National Coverage (e.g. Politics and Policy) (3)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)
Amount of Local Coverage (4)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)
Range of Sources/Voices (5)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)
Amount of Copy from Wire Services (6)	• Increased (1)	• Stayed the Same (2)	• Decreased (3)	• Considering Changes (4)

Q22 Thinking about products used by your paper. Since the start of 2017, have you introduced – or changed – any of these activities? *Tick all that are applicable.*

Paywall (3)	• Introduced (1)	• Increased No. of Free Stories (2)	• Stayed the Same (3)	• Decreased No. of Free Stories (4)	• Considering Introducing/Changing (5)
Podcasts (1)	• Introduced (1)	• Increased Number/Frequency (2)	• Stayed the Same (3)	• Decreased Number/Frequency (4)	• Considering Introducing/Changing (5)

- Newsletter (2)
 - Introduced (1)
 - Increased Number/Frequency (2)
 - Stayed the Same (3)
 - Decreased Number/Frequency (4)
 - Considering Introducing/Changir (5)

Q23 Do you – or your newspaper – use metrics to measure audience engagement?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Decline to Say (3)

Skip To: Q23b If Q23 = Yes

Skip To: End of Block If Q23 = No

Skip To: End of Block If Q23 = Decline to Say

Q23b If yes, do key performance metrics influence how you personally produce a story?

- All the Time (1)
- Most of the Time (2)
- Some of the Time (3)
- None of the Time (4)
- Decline to Say (5)
- Not Applicable (6)

We are now going to ask you some questions about how you, and your paper, use social media.

Q24 What social media platforms do you use? [Use means actively post to the account not simply have administrative access to] *(Please select all that apply)*

- | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Facebook (1) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |
| Twitter (2) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |
| Instagram (3) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |
| Snapchat (4) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |
| YouTube (5) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |
| Tik Tok (6) | • Use For Work (1) | • Use Outside of Work (2) | • Used by Your Newspaper (3) |

Chat Apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger) (7)	• Use For Work (1)	• Use Outside of Work (2)	• Used by Your Newspaper (3)
Slack (8)	• Use For Work (1)	• Use Outside of Work (2)	• Used by Your Newspaper (3)
Other (9)	• Use For Work (1)	• Use Outside of Work (2)	• Used by Your Newspaper (3)

We are now going to ask you some questions about digital tools and new approaches to journalism.

Q25 Do you use any of the following at your publication? *(Tick all that apply)*

- Video Reporting (1)
- Live Video (e.g. Facebook Live) (2)
- Podcasts (3)
- Newsletters (4)
- Analytics/Metric Tools (5)
- Alerts and Push Notifications (e.g. via SMS, App or Desktop) (6)
- Chat/Messaging Apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger) (7)

Q26 How interested are you in using or learning more about these tools and approaches?

Video Reporting (1)	• “Not Interested 1 (1)	• 2 (2)	• 3 (3)	• 4 (4)	• “Very Interested 5 (5)	• Don’t Know/ Not Applicable (6)
Live Video (e.g. Facebook Live) (2)	• “Not Interested 1 (1)	• 2 (2)	• 3 (3)	• 4 (4)	• “Very Interested 5 (5)	• Don’t Know/ Not Applicable (6)
Stories (Video/Images Available for 24-hours on Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) (3)	• “Not Interested 1 (1)	• 2 (2)	• 3 (3)	• 4 (4)	• “Very Interested 5 (5)	• Don’t Know/ Not Applicable (6)
Podcasts (4)	• “Not Interested 1 (1)	• 2 (2)	• 3 (3)	• 4 (4)	• “Very Interested 5 (5)	• Don’t Know/ Not Applicable (6)

Newsletters (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Chat Apps (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Alerts and Push Notifications (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Engagement and Engaged Journalism (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Solutions Journalism (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Automation Tools (Scheduling, Robo-Reporting) (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)
Metric Tools (Chartbeat, Pars.ly, CrowdTangle, Google Analytics etc.) (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not Interested 1 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very Interested 5 (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t Know/Not Applicable (6)

Q27 How do you learn about new technology and tools related to your industry?

(Tick all that apply)

- Articles (e.g. in Nieman Lab, Poynter, CJR etc.) (1)
- Training Course Paid by my Employer (2)
- Conferences (3)

- Self-Taught (4)
- Online Training Courses (e.g. from Poynter, Facebook, Google, First Draft etc.) (5)
- Other (7)
- Not Applicable (8)

We are now going to ask you some questions about how you, and your newspaper, are thinking about equity and inclusion.

Q28 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

My news organization is doing a good job with ...

Gender Diversity (1)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Age Diversity (2)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Racial Diversity (3)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Political Diversity (4)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Educational Diversity (5)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)

Q29 *Thinking about news coverage, my news organization is doing a good job with ...*

Gender Diversity (1)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Age Diversity (2)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Racial Diversity (3)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Political Diversity (4)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)
Socio-economic Diversity (6)	• Agree (1)	• Neither Agree nor Disagree (2)	• Disagree (3)	• Don't Know (4)

Q30 Can you share some examples of how you – and/or your paper – are seeking to address issues of engagement and diversity?

Finally, we are now going to ask you some questions about the future of local newspapers.

Q31 How positive do you feel about the future of local newspapers? *(Select one)*

- Very Positive (1)
- Slightly Positive (2)
- Neither Positive nor Negative (3)
- Slightly Negative (4)
- Very Negative (5)
- Don't Know (6)

Q32 We recognize that money and time are scarce resources for newspapers in the digital age. Aside from these two factors, what is the biggest challenge facing small market newspapers?

(In our study we're defining this as publications with a circulation below 50,000 daily readers)

Q33 What is the biggest opportunity for small market newspapers?

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this questionnaire.

Can you please answer three final questions about your publication?

None of your answers from this survey will be attributable to you, or your newspaper.

Q34 What is the title of your publication?

Q35 Where is your publication located? *(Zip Code)*

Q36 How would you characterize the ownership of your paper?

- Owned by a National Newspaper Chain (e.g. Gannett/Hearst) (1)
- Owned by a Regional Newspaper Chain (e.g. Shaw) (2)
- Owned by a Hedge Fund/Non-Journalism Company (e.g. Alden Global Capital) (3)
- Locally/Community Owned (4)
- Family Owned (5)
- Other (*please specify*) (6) _____
- Don't Know (7)

If you would like us to send you a copy of our report when it is published, then please enter your email address here:

Damian Radcliffe and Ryan Wallace

