



BUILDING CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN OREGON'S INDEPENDENT NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A Baseline Assessment of Independent Local News Organizations

Prepared for

Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism (FORJ)

Prepared by

NW Opinions

July 2026

This report presents findings from a statewide survey of independent Oregon publishers, in-depth publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments conducted to better understand the capacity, sustainability, and future needs of Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

Contents

Introduction	1
Executive Summary	2
1. Why Local Journalism Matters	6
2. Building Capacity and Sustainability	8
3. Reporting Capacity: The Foundation of Local Journalism	9
4. Financial Sustainability: Building the Resources to Grow	12
5. Digital Capacity and Audience Development	15
6. Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems	19
7. Oregon Publisher Profiles	21
Branden Anderson — Newsburg	
Chelsea Marr — Columbia Gorge News	
George Custer — The Oakridge Herald	
Kathleen Istudor — Row River Review	
Scott Swanson — The New Era	
8. A Baseline and a Roadmap	34
Methodology	38
Bibliography	41

Introduction

Over the past decade, an extraordinary body of research has transformed our understanding of local journalism in America.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, LION Publishers, Muck Rack, and many others have documented the changing landscape of local news, the growth of news deserts, emerging business models, the evolving digital environment, and the essential role trusted local information plays in healthy communities.

Here in Oregon, the Agora Journalism Center has added an important statewide perspective, helping us better understand our statewide news ecosystem and the enduring value Oregonians place on local journalism.

Together, this work has given publishers, researchers, funders, policymakers, educators, and community leaders a much deeper understanding of where local journalism stands today and why it matters. This report is intended to build on that foundation.

While much of the existing research has focused on the changing landscape of local news, FORJ sought to explore a complementary question:

What do Oregon's independent publishers need to build sustainable organizations that will thrive for years to come while positioning the next generation of independent publishers for success?

Independent publishers represent a vital part of Oregon's local news ecosystem. Deeply rooted in the communities they serve, they often operate with fewer financial and organizational resources than larger media organizations while maintaining a strong commitment to local accountability and community service. Understanding their unique opportunities and challenges was the focus of this research.

Since our founding in 2021, FORJ has had the privilege of working alongside Oregon's independent rural and small-town publishers through operational support services, annual publisher gatherings, legislative engagement, ongoing advisory services, and our Future Journalists of America (FJA) workforce development program. Those experiences reinforced our belief that strengthening local journalism begins with understanding the needs of the organizations and people doing the work every day.

My hope is this baseline assessment of Oregon's independent local news sustainability shifts the conversation away from simply documenting the challenges to identifying practical ways all of us together can strengthen the organizations that make community-based journalism possible.

Heidi Wright
President
Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism (FORJ)

Executive Summary

Building Capacity and Sustainability in Oregon's Independent News Ecosystem

Local journalism remains a vital component of civic and community life in Oregon's small towns and rural communities. It provides residents with information about local government, schools, public safety, community events, economic development, and the issues that shape everyday life. In doing so, it helps foster civic participation, strengthen community connections, and reinforce a shared sense of place and belonging.

Recognizing both the importance of local journalism and the challenges facing independent news organizations, the Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism (FORJ) commissioned this research to better understand the needs, priorities, and opportunities facing Oregon's independent publishers. Independent publishers were the focus of this research because they are often deeply rooted in the communities they serve while operating with fewer financial and organizational resources than larger media organizations.

This report draws upon a statewide survey of independent Oregon publishers, in-depth publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments to create a baseline evaluation of Oregon's independent local news ecosystem. The survey was distributed to the known universe of approximately 43 independent publishers serving rural, small-town, and community-based audiences throughout Oregon. A total of 25 organizations responded, representing a 58 percent response rate among the 43 known independent publishers identified statewide and providing a highly representative snapshot of the sector.

A Central Finding: Capacity and Sustainability

Across organizations of varying sizes, business models, and geographic markets, one overarching challenge emerged from the research: building the capacity and sustainability necessary to serve Oregon communities effectively over the long term.

Publishers consistently demonstrated deep commitment to their communities and a strong belief in the value of local journalism. Many reported growing audiences, strong community support, and opportunities to expand coverage and services.

The challenge is not a lack of dedication, innovation, or public demand for local information.

The challenge is capacity.

Publishers repeatedly described limitations in staffing, revenue, technical expertise, organizational infrastructure, and available time. These constraints affect nearly every

aspect of local news operations, including reporting, audience development, digital innovation, revenue generation, and long-term planning.

While these challenges often appear separate, they are closely interconnected. Revenue supports staffing, staffing supports reporting, reporting strengthens audience relationships, and audience growth increasingly depends upon digital capacity. Collaboration, mentoring, and shared support systems help strengthen each of these areas.

Together, these factors shape an organization's ability to fulfill its mission and sustain local journalism over time.

Four Dimensions of Capacity and Sustainability

The research identified four interconnected dimensions of organizational capacity and sustainability.

Reporting Capacity

Staffing and organizational capacity remain the most significant barriers to expanding local coverage.

Many publishers operate with exceptionally lean staffs while simultaneously serving as reporters, editors, publishers, sales representatives, audience-development specialists, and organizational leaders. Communities often want more local coverage than organizations have the capacity to provide.

Strengthening reporting capacity remains one of the most direct ways to increase local news coverage, improve public affairs reporting, and expand service to underserved communities.

Financial Sustainability

Publishers continue to face significant financial challenges as traditional revenue models evolve.

Organizations are experimenting with subscriptions, memberships, advertising, philanthropy, sponsorships, special publications, events, and other revenue strategies. Yet many continue to operate with limited financial margins and little room for unexpected setbacks.

The findings suggest that long-term sustainability depends not only on generating revenue but also on building the organizational systems and expertise necessary to manage growth and adapt to changing market conditions.

Digital Capacity and Audience Development

Most participating publishers have already adopted websites, newsletters, analytics platforms, and digital publishing tools. Digital readiness assessments suggest that many organizations have established a solid technical foundation, with the greatest

opportunities lying in optimization, audience growth, and revenue generation rather than basic technology adoption. The challenge is increasingly not access to technology but the ability to use those tools effectively.

Publishers frequently cited limited organizational capacity—including time, technical expertise, and staffing—as barriers to improving audience development, analytics, digital advertising, and digital revenue generation. The findings suggest that the primary challenge is not access to digital tools, but the capacity to use them strategically and consistently. Investments in training, technical assistance, and audience-development support could help publishers translate digital readiness into sustainable growth.

Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Many publishers operate in relative isolation while facing challenges similar to those confronting their peers across the state.

Survey respondents and interview participants consistently expressed interest in mentoring, technical assistance, peer learning, and collaborative support. Shared services, professional networks, technical expertise, and collaborative problem-solving represent significant opportunities to expand capacity across Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

Reasons for Optimism

Despite the challenges identified in this report, the findings are fundamentally hopeful.

Oregon's independent publishers continue to launch new organizations, preserve longstanding community institutions, experiment with new business models, adopt new technologies, and create innovative ways to serve their communities.

The publisher profiles featured in this report illustrate the resilience, creativity, and determination that characterize independent journalism across the state. Whether building a digital startup, sustaining a legacy newspaper, operating a nonprofit newsroom, or creating a community information network, these publishers share a commitment to ensuring that local communities remain informed, connected, and engaged.

A Roadmap for Future Investment

The findings suggest that investments designed to strengthen reporting capacity, financial sustainability, digital capacity, and collaborative support systems have the potential to significantly improve the long-term health of Oregon's local news ecosystem.

Rather than viewing these as separate challenges, funders, policymakers, and community leaders should recognize them as interconnected dimensions of a broader capacity-building effort.

The future of local journalism in Oregon will depend not only on the strength of individual organizations, but also on the strength of the ecosystem that supports them.

This report provides both a baseline assessment and a roadmap for action. The opportunity ahead is not simply preserving local journalism, but building the capacity and sustainability necessary for it to thrive.

1. Why Local Journalism Matters

A National Challenge

Across the United States, local journalism is undergoing significant change. Economic pressures, declining advertising revenue, changing audience habits, and technological disruption have contributed to newsroom reductions, ownership consolidation, and the loss of local news outlets in many communities.

Research by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism has documented the continued growth of news deserts and declining local reporting capacity. At the same time, research by the Pew Research Center indicates that Americans continue to value local news organizations and view them as important contributors to community well-being.

Against this backdrop, FORJ commissioned this research to better understand the strengths, challenges, and future needs of Oregon's independent local news organizations. Through a statewide publisher survey, in-depth interviews, and a digital readiness assessment, the study sought to identify the factors most affecting the capacity and sustainability of Oregon's local journalism ecosystem.

Oregonians Continue to Value Trusted Local Information

Research conducted by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center indicates that local journalism continues to play an important role in the lives of many Oregonians. Three-quarters of Oregon residents report relying on local news at least occasionally, and seven in ten say they trust their primary local news source somewhat or a great deal. In addition, eight in ten report placing the same amount or greater trust in local news organizations than in national news organizations.

These findings suggest that concerns about local journalism should not be confused with a lack of public interest. Oregonians continue to seek trusted local information and view local news organizations as valued community institutions. While residents may express skepticism toward some national news sources and public institutions, trust in local journalism remains comparatively strong.

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center has also found that community and neighborliness remain among the qualities Oregonians value most about where they live. At the same time, many residents express concern about growing isolation, declining civic understanding, and a weakening sense of connection to their communities. Beyond providing information, local journalism can help address these challenges by creating shared awareness of local issues, highlighting community accomplishments, and informing residents about opportunities to engage in civic life.

Local Journalism and Oregon's Information Ecosystem

Research conducted by the University of Oregon's Agora Journalism Center reinforces the importance of local journalism within broader community information systems.

Agora's assessments of Oregon information ecosystems have found that residents frequently associate access to reliable local information with community well-being and civic health. Across multiple Oregon communities, researchers documented frustration when information becomes fragmented across social media, word-of-mouth networks, bulletin boards, and disconnected information channels. Communities consistently identified the need for trusted sources capable of bringing information together in ways that are accessible, relevant, and locally meaningful.

Studies conducted in communities including Oakridge, Florence, Lincoln County, Hermiston, and the Rogue Valley highlight the important role that local journalism can play as part of a healthy information ecosystem. These studies suggest that when local reporting capacity declines, communities often struggle to replace the civic and community functions that local journalism provides. Residents continue to seek information, but frequently encounter fragmented, incomplete, or inconsistent sources.

The findings emerging from Oregon communities align with broader national conversations about the role of local journalism in supporting informed communities and democratic participation. They also suggest that strengthening local journalism is not solely a media issue. It is also a community health issue, a civic engagement issue, and a public information issue.

Local Journalism as Community Infrastructure

One of the most important themes emerging from both the Oregon research and the publisher interviews is that local journalism often serves functions extending well beyond traditional news reporting.

Publishers described providing information during wildfires, supporting emergency preparedness efforts, helping residents navigate public services, covering local government and schools, documenting community history, and creating opportunities for residents to remain connected to one another. Particularly in rural communities, local journalism frequently serves as one of the few institutions dedicated to gathering, verifying, and sharing information that residents need to participate fully in community life.

Several publishers described their work in explicitly community-centered terms. Some spoke of strengthening social connections, reducing isolation, and helping residents better understand the communities in which they live. Others emphasized local journalism's role in creating common ground, supporting public dialogue, and fostering civic participation.

Taken together, the findings from the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, the University of Oregon's Agora Journalism Center, and the publishers who participated in this research suggest that local journalism should be understood as an important form of community infrastructure. Like schools, libraries, public health systems, and community organizations, local journalism helps communities remain informed, connected, and resilient.

This broader understanding provides important context for the findings that follow. The challenges facing Oregon's independent news organizations are not simply organizational challenges. They are challenges that affect the information systems, civic life, and community connections that help Oregon communities remain informed, connected, and resilient.

2. Building Capacity and Sustainability

The survey findings, publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments revealed challenges across multiple areas of operation. At first glance, these challenges appear distinct. Publishers discussed staffing shortages, revenue generation, digital tools, audience development, business operations, professional support, and organizational growth.

Yet a common theme emerged throughout the research: these challenges are deeply interconnected.

Revenue affects staffing. Staffing affects reporting. Reporting strengthens audience relationships, while audience growth contributes to financial sustainability. Technology improves efficiency, engagement, and organizational effectiveness. Collaboration expands access to expertise, training, mentoring, and shared resources. Together, these factors shape an organization's overall capacity to serve its community.

For many publishers, the central challenge is not a lack of ideas, commitment, innovation, or public support. Oregon's independent publishers consistently demonstrated deep dedication to the communities they serve and a strong desire to expand their coverage, strengthen their organizations, and better meet local information needs.

Instead, the central challenge is building and sustaining the organizational capacity necessary to do that work.

This distinction is important because organizational capacity is more than staffing. It reflects the combined ability of an organization to produce journalism, engage audiences, generate revenue, adopt new technologies, develop leaders, and adapt to changing conditions. Likewise, sustainability is more than financial survival. It involves developing the systems, skills, resources, and partnerships needed to maintain and strengthen local journalism over time.

Viewed through this lens, the findings that follow are not separate challenges competing for attention. Rather, they represent four interconnected dimensions of a larger capacity-building effort.

The survey, interviews, and digital readiness assessment point to four areas where investment, support, and strategic focus could significantly strengthen Oregon's independent local news ecosystem:

- Reporting Capacity
- Financial Sustainability
- Digital Capacity and Audience Development
- Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Together, these areas provide a roadmap for strengthening the long-term capacity and sustainability of Oregon's independent publishers and, by extension, the communities they serve.

3. Reporting Capacity: The Foundation of Local Journalism

Reporting Capacity Is the Foundation of Local Journalism

If local journalism serves as an essential form of community infrastructure, then reporting capacity is the foundation upon which that infrastructure depends. Across Oregon, independent publishers are working to provide consistent, professional coverage of local government, schools, businesses, public safety, community events, and quality-of-life issues. Yet the survey and interviews conducted for this research suggest that many organizations are attempting to fulfill these responsibilities with extremely limited staffing and organizational capacity.

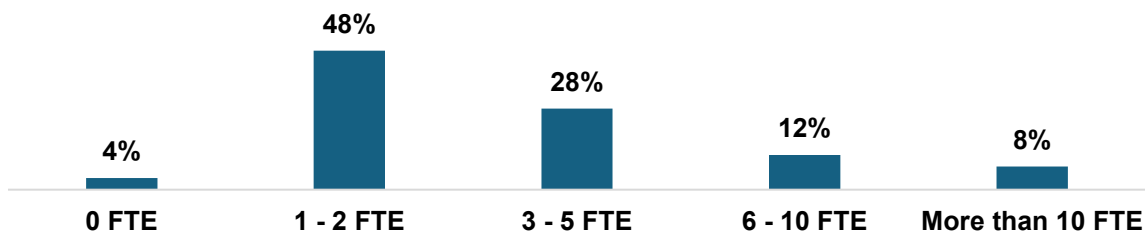
What We Learned From the Survey

The survey revealed that staffing levels remain exceptionally lean across Oregon's independent local news ecosystem. Nearly half of respondents (48%) reported operating with only one to two full-time equivalent employees. Another 28% reported staffing levels of just three to five FTEs. Only a small number of organizations reported staffing levels above ten employees.

These staffing realities shape virtually every aspect of operation. Publishers reported responsibility for a wide range of functions, including reporting, editing, publishing, advertising sales, audience development, website maintenance, social media management, business operations, and administrative tasks. In many organizations, a small number of individuals are responsible for nearly every aspect of the enterprise.

The survey also found that publishers viewed sales growth as their most significant organizational challenge, followed by advertising operations, business operations, audience growth, and subscription strategy. These responses suggest that staffing constraints affect both newsroom operations and overall organizational performance.

Figure 1. Staffing Levels Among Participating Publishers



NWO-FORJ Survey March 2026

Figure 2. Top Organizational Capacity Challenges Identified by Publishers



NWO-FORJ Survey March 2026

Publishers Are Wearing Multiple Hats

The survey's open-ended comments provide additional insight into how capacity challenges are experienced on a daily basis.

One publisher described the challenge bluntly:

"I need to figure out how to increase my digital online revenue and grow subscriptions. Unfortunately, I need a person who can do this. I run out of time and can't keep it fresh and track the results."

Another characterized their role this way:

"I've been a player-coach for the last year-plus who's mostly been playing rather than coaching."

These comments reflect a reality encountered repeatedly throughout the research. Publishers are often serving simultaneously as reporters, editors, sales representatives, marketers, web managers, audience-development specialists, and organizational leaders. When staffing is limited, immediate operational needs frequently take precedence over strategic planning, innovation, and growth.

Several publishers acknowledged that important projects remain unfinished because organizations lack the capacity to pursue them.

Capacity Challenges Extend Beyond the Newsroom

While reporting resources remain critically important, publishers frequently described capacity challenges that extend beyond journalism itself.

Many organizations struggle with:

- Advertising sales and revenue development
- Audience growth and retention
- Subscription and membership programs
- Analytics and performance tracking
- Technology management
- Grant writing and fundraising
- Community engagement

Most independent publishers lack the staffing levels needed to develop specialized roles, requiring a small number of individuals to manage a growing range of responsibilities.

Publishers consistently described communities that wanted more coverage, stronger engagement, and additional reporting. However, many lacked the staff, time, or financial resources needed to respond.

As a result, organizations are often forced to balance competing priorities, choosing between equally important activities such as reporting, audience development, revenue generation, community engagement, and long-term planning.

Community Demand Often Exceeds Available Capacity

Several organizations reported growing audiences, strong reader engagement, and deep community connections. The challenge is not a lack of public interest in local news, but the ability to match organizational capacity with community need.

Publishers described opportunities to expand coverage, launch new initiatives, and strengthen community engagement, but limited staffing and organizational resources frequently constrained what was possible.

Key Finding

Staffing and organizational capacity remain the most significant barriers to expanding local coverage in Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

Publishers consistently reported strong demand for local information. The primary challenge is securing the people, time, and resources necessary to meet that demand.

Reporting capacity represents the first pillar of organizational capacity identified in this research.

4. Financial Sustainability: Building the Resources to Grow

Financial Sustainability Supports Organizational Capacity

If reporting capacity is the foundation of local journalism, financial sustainability provides the resources necessary to maintain and strengthen that capacity over time.

The survey and interviews revealed a local news ecosystem operating under significant financial pressure. Publishers described the ongoing challenge of balancing mission and sustainability while adapting to changing business models, evolving audience expectations, and a shifting advertising landscape.

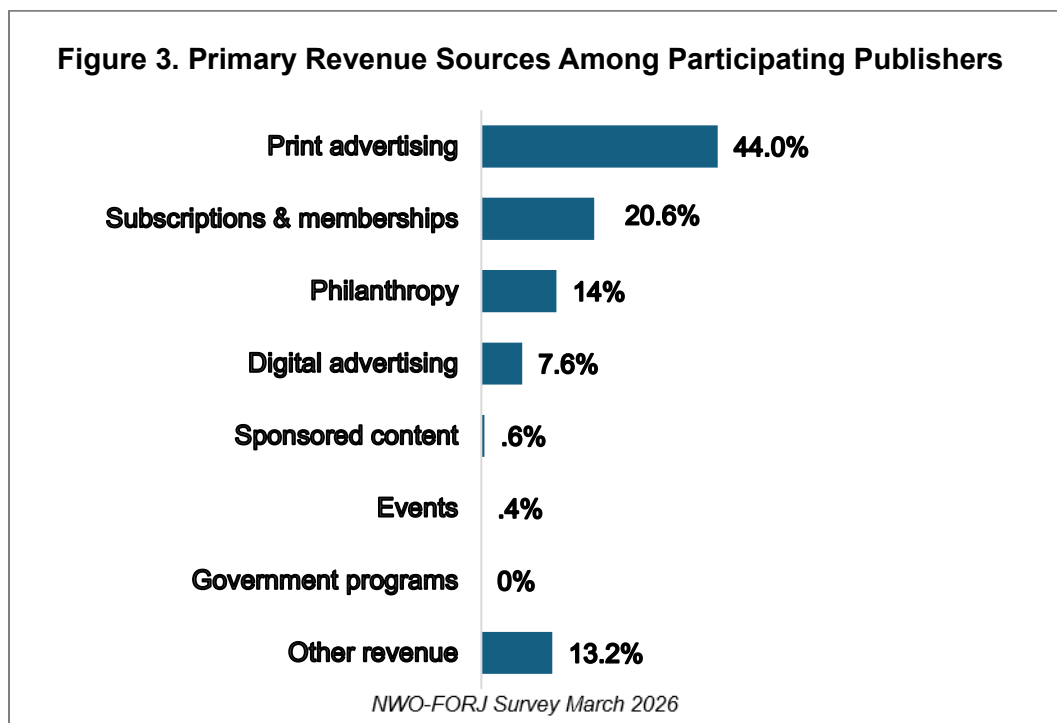
Although Oregon's independent news organizations vary considerably in size, structure, geography, and mission, the research suggests they share a common challenge: generating sufficient and reliable revenue to support long-term organizational stability and growth.

What We Learned From the Survey

More than half of respondents (52%) reported launching their organizations with less than one year of operating runway. While publishers have demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity, many continue to operate with limited financial margins and little room for unexpected setbacks.

Print advertising remains the most important revenue source for many organizations, with 68% of respondents identifying it as a significant contributor to their income. Digital advertising and subscriptions were each cited by just over half of respondents, while

philanthropic support plays an important role for many nonprofit and community-supported organizations.



Publishers are increasingly pursuing multiple revenue streams, yet many remain dependent on revenue sources that continue to face economic pressure.

Publishers Are Building New Revenue Models

Publishers are actively experimenting with different approaches to sustainability.

Some organizations have expanded membership and subscription programs. Others rely on philanthropy, donations, sponsorships, events, special publications, or nonprofit funding. Several publishers described efforts to diversify revenue specifically because they no longer viewed any single income source as sufficient for long-term stability.

One publisher emphasized the importance of special publications and supplemental products:

"Our special publications are allowing our news to survive and without them we'd have a difficult time bringing in enough revenue and would be forced to cut staff and expenses."

Another reflected on the challenge of growing digital revenue while managing existing responsibilities:

"I need to figure out how to increase my digital online revenue and grow subscriptions. Unfortunately, I need a person who can do this."

Publishers demonstrated considerable creativity in assembling multiple revenue sources. The challenge was finding sufficient time, staff, and expertise to fully develop those opportunities.

Financial Stability Remains Uneven

While some organizations reported growth and optimism, others described continuing uncertainty about their future.

One publisher reflected on a successful recovery:

"Covid and wildfires almost wiped us out, but we have sustained and now we're growing."

The *Highway 58 Herald* offered perhaps the starkest assessment:

"The Herald is on the precipice of closing. I sincerely hope that something emerges that will keep east Lane County from becoming another news desert."

Some publishers are identifying promising paths toward sustainability, while others remain vulnerable to financial shocks, staffing changes, and economic fluctuations.

Sustainability Requires Organizational Capacity

Publishers frequently discussed the need for stronger business operations, audience development strategies, digital advertising expertise, fundraising support, and subscription growth. Survey respondents identified digital advertising operations, audience development, grant writing, subscription growth, and additional staffing as some of their most important support needs.

Long-term sustainability depends not only on generating income, but also on building the organizational systems necessary to manage growth and adapt to changing conditions.

Several publishers described opportunities for audience growth and revenue expansion that they lacked the capacity to pursue.

Key Finding

Financial sustainability remains a critical challenge for many independent publishers across Oregon.

Publishers are experimenting with a wide range of revenue strategies, including subscriptions, memberships, advertising, philanthropy, sponsorships, events, and special publications. Long-term success will likely depend on developing multiple income streams and the organizational capacity required to manage them effectively.

Financial sustainability represents the second pillar of organizational capacity identified in this research.

5. Digital Capacity and Audience Development

Digital Capacity Expands Organizational Reach and Resilience

Digital publishing is no longer a supplemental activity for local news organizations. It has become central to how publishers engage audiences, distribute content, generate revenue, measure performance, and build long-term sustainability.

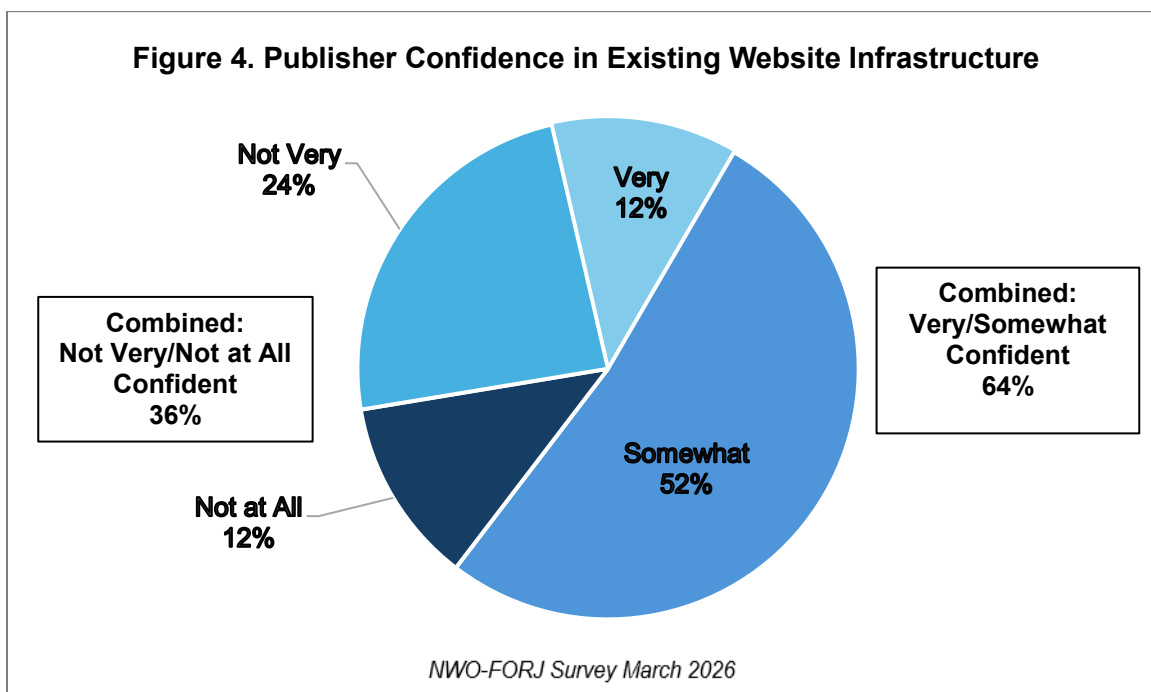
The publishers who participated in this research overwhelmingly recognized the importance of digital tools and platforms. At the same time, many described ongoing challenges related to analytics, audience development, website management, digital revenue generation, and the effective use of emerging technologies.

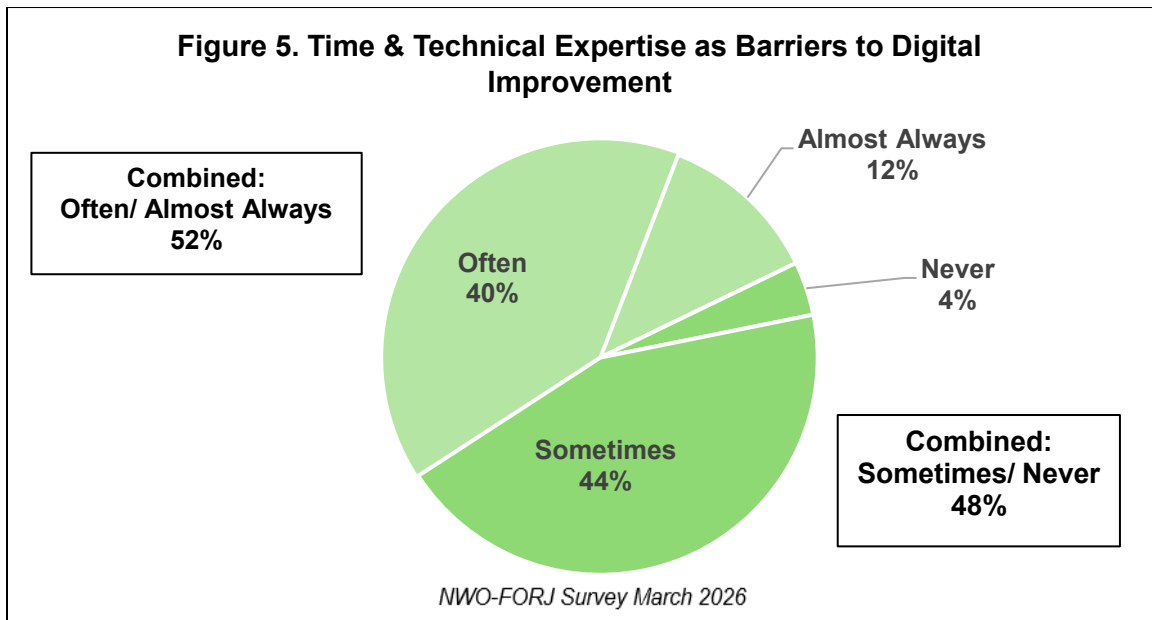
While financial sustainability remains a critical concern, the research suggests that digital capacity increasingly influences an organization's ability to achieve that sustainability.

What We Learned From the Survey

The survey revealed a local news ecosystem actively engaged in digital publishing but often constrained by limited expertise, staffing, and time.

More than half of respondents (52%) reported that a lack of time or technical expertise often or almost always prevents them from making needed digital improvements. Only 12 percent reported being very confident in their website infrastructure, while more than half indicated they lacked access to key audience metrics.





Although most publishers maintain websites and many distribute newsletters, the survey found significant variation in how organizations measure audience performance, track user behavior, and evaluate the effectiveness of digital strategies.

One publisher explained:

"We probably can track a lot of things but don't have the knowledge or expertise with tools like GA4 to set up the tracking."

Another described the challenge this way:

"I barely have time to look at basic analytics because I have too many balls in the air."

These comments reflect a recurring theme throughout the research: digital tools are increasingly available, but many organizations struggle to fully utilize them.

Establishing Oregon's Digital Readiness Baseline

To complement the survey and interviews, FORJ commissioned a statewide digital readiness assessment to better understand the technological capabilities of Oregon's independent publishers.

The assessment evaluated organizations across multiple dimensions of digital publishing and audience development, including website performance, analytics deployment, audience engagement, search visibility, content publishing practices, and revenue infrastructure.

The resulting analysis provides one of the first statewide benchmarks of digital readiness among Oregon's independent local news organizations.

More importantly, it establishes a baseline from which future progress can be measured. As publishers gain access to training, mentoring, technical assistance, and shared resources, future assessments can help identify improvements, emerging needs, and opportunities for additional support.

Digital Foundations Are Already in Place

The digital readiness assessments suggest that many Oregon publishers have already established a solid digital foundation. No participating websites failed the assessment outright, and the average audit score was 73 percent, indicating that most organizations have adopted many core digital publishing practices.

The assessments found widespread use of established publishing and analytics platforms. WordPress remains the dominant content management system, while Google Analytics and Parse.ly serve as primary audience measurement tools for many organizations. Content production was also strong, with most publishers regularly producing and updating local news content.

At the same time, the assessments identified opportunities to improve audience development, search visibility, website performance, digital revenue generation, memberships, subscriptions, donation pathways, and conversion strategies. Revenue-related digital capabilities emerged as one of the most significant opportunities for improvement, suggesting that many organizations could better align their digital operations with long-term sustainability goals.

Figure 6. Digital Readiness Assessment Results

- **73% Average Digital Readiness Score**
- **Pass 2%, Need Improvement 79%, Failure <1%**
- **Strong Digital Foundation already exist**
- **Training and better utilization can help convert digital engagement into sustainable revenue through subscriptions, memberships, donations, and advertising**

NWO-FORJ Survey March 2026

These findings reinforce a broader conclusion emerging throughout the research: many publishers have already adopted the core technologies needed to compete in the digital environment. The challenge is increasingly how to optimize and strategically utilize those tools to support audience growth, engagement, and revenue development.

The Digital Utilization Gap

One of the most important findings emerging from both the survey and digital readiness assessment is that the primary challenge may not be access to digital tools. Rather, it is the ability to fully utilize those tools.

Many publishers have already adopted websites, newsletters, analytics platforms, and audience-development tools. Yet adoption alone does not guarantee meaningful results.

Publishers may have analytics installed but lack the expertise to interpret the data. They may publish newsletters without a dedicated audience-growth strategy. They may have valuable audience information available but lack the time to review and act on it.

The result is what might be described as a digital utilization gap: the difference between possessing digital tools and using them strategically to strengthen audience relationships, increase revenue, improve decision-making, and support organizational growth.

In many ways, this reflects a broader theme identified throughout the research. Capacity—not motivation—is often the limiting factor.

Audience Development and Direct Reader Relationships

The survey suggests that publishers increasingly recognize the importance of building direct relationships with readers.

Newsletters have become a particularly important tool. More than three-quarters of respondents reported using newsletters as part of their audience-development strategy. Publishers described newsletters as a way to build loyalty, maintain contact with readers, promote subscriptions, and reduce dependence on social media algorithms.

Digital tools also provide opportunities to better understand audience behavior, identify content interests, improve user experience, and support revenue generation. However, achieving these benefits requires both technical infrastructure and organizational capacity.

Several publishers expressed a desire to improve audience analytics, strengthen digital advertising performance, expand subscription programs, and better understand how audiences engage with their content. Many viewed these activities as important opportunities for future growth.

Key Finding

Most participating publishers have already adopted important digital tools and platforms. The primary challenge is not access to technology, but the time, expertise, and organizational capacity required to use those tools strategically and consistently.

Building digital capacity will require continued investment in training, technical assistance, audience development, analytics, and organizational support that helps publishers translate digital readiness into sustainable growth.

Digital capacity and audience development represent the third pillar of organizational capacity identified in this research.

6. Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Independent Does Not Mean Isolated

Oregon's independent publishers are known for their entrepreneurial spirit, local knowledge, and strong connections to the communities they serve. Many operate with a high degree of autonomy, allowing them to respond quickly to local issues and build trusted relationships with readers.

At the same time, the survey and interviews suggest that independence can bring isolation.

Many publishers described confronting business, technology, audience-development, and operational challenges with limited access to mentors, technical experts, professional networks, or specialized support. As organizations work to strengthen reporting, financial sustainability, and digital capability, many are doing so with small staffs and limited opportunities to learn from peers facing similar challenges.

The research suggests that building stronger networks of support represents one of the greatest opportunities for strengthening Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

What We Learned From the Survey

Audience development, digital advertising operations, grant writing, subscription growth, analytics, and staffing emerged as some of the most frequently cited support needs. These are challenges that transcend geography, market size, and organizational structure.

Figure 7. Areas Where Publishers Most Need Additional Support

- Audience Development (64%)
- Digital Advertising Operations (64%)
- Grant Writing (56%)
- Subscription Growth (52%)
- Additional Newsroom Staff (44%)
- Analytics Capacity (36%)

NWO-FORJ Survey March 2026

Figure 8. Publishers' Highest Immediate Organizational Need

- Digital Advertising Operations (24%)
- Subscription Growth (20%)
- Additional Newsroom Staff (16%)

NWO-FORJ Survey March 2026

Many barriers to sustainability are shared across Oregon's independent local news ecosystem rather than unique to individual organizations.

Those shared challenges create opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, mentoring, and technical assistance.

Publishers Want Access to Expertise

Publishers spoke about needing assistance with:

- Audience analytics
- Digital advertising
- Subscription strategies
- Membership development
- Newsletter optimization
- Technology infrastructure
- Fundraising and grant writing
- Business operations

For larger organizations, these functions may be distributed among specialized staff. For many Oregon publishers, they are handled by a small number of individuals already balancing numerous responsibilities.

As a result, organizations often know what improvements are needed but lack the time, expertise, or support necessary to implement them.

Shared Learning Creates Shared Capacity

Publishers consistently emphasized the value of learning from one another. Many organizations are experimenting with membership programs, newsletter strategies, nonprofit models, audience-development techniques, digital tools, and revenue initiatives. Publishers repeatedly expressed interest in understanding what has worked elsewhere and how those lessons might be adapted to their own communities.

As Oregon's local news ecosystem evolves, the ability to share practical knowledge and successful practices may become increasingly important.

Building a Stronger Ecosystem

A broader theme emerging from this research is that the future of local journalism depends not only on the strength of individual organizations, but also on the strength of the ecosystem that supports them.

Strong ecosystems create opportunities for:

- Mentoring and peer support
- Technical assistance
- Professional development
- Shared services
- Resource sharing
- Collaboration
- Innovation
- Leadership development

These supports allow publishers to expand capacity without requiring every organization to independently develop every skill or capability.

Key Finding

Many of the challenges facing Oregon's independent publishers are shared challenges rather than isolated organizational problems.

Publishers consistently expressed interest in mentoring, technical assistance, peer learning, and collaboration. Strengthening statewide networks and support systems could help organizations build capacity more efficiently while reducing the isolation many independent publishers experience.

Collaborative capacity and shared support systems represent the fourth pillar of organizational capacity identified in this research.

7. Oregon Publisher Profiles

The People Behind Oregon's Independent News Ecosystem

The survey findings, publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments presented in this report identified four interconnected dimensions of organizational capacity and sustainability: reporting capacity, financial sustainability, digital capacity and audience development, and collaborative support systems.

Yet behind every survey response and assessment is a publisher, newsroom, or community organization working to serve local audiences under unique circumstances.

The following profiles illustrate how Oregon publishers are navigating these challenges in different ways. While no single organization represents the full diversity of Oregon's local news ecosystem, together these stories demonstrate the resilience, creativity, and determination that characterize independent journalism across the state.

The profiles also reveal the human dimensions behind the findings. Questions of reporting capacity, financial sustainability, digital readiness, and organizational support are not abstract concepts. They affect real organizations serving real communities, often with limited resources but a deep commitment to local journalism and civic life.

Some are building new digital-first organizations. Others are sustaining legacy newspapers, operating nonprofit newsrooms, or creating entirely new approaches to community information. Despite their differences, they share a common goal: ensuring that local communities continue to have access to reliable, locally produced news and information.

These stories underscore a central finding of this research: Oregon's independent publishers are not lacking in commitment, ideas, or community support. More often, they are working to match the needs of their communities with the resources available to serve them.

Branden Anderson

Building Local News for a Growing Community Newsburg | Newberg and Dundee, Oregon

Illustrates: Reporting Capacity, Digital Capacity



NEWSBURG 🌸

Three years ago, Branden Anderson launched Newsburg with little more than a website, a social media account, and a belief that his community needed stronger local news coverage. Today, the publication serves Newberg and Dundee through a free, digital-first model supported by memberships, advertising, community contributions, and philanthropic support.

A University of Oregon journalism graduate and former marketing agency owner, Anderson represents a growing generation of independent publishers helping fill local information gaps across Oregon. He believes communities continue to want trusted local news, but sustaining a news organization requires far more than reporting alone.

For Anderson, local journalism is fundamentally about connection.

“We do this for free for this community because it's important that there's no gate to understanding what's happening around you, with the hopes of developing a more connected and trusting community of people that know what's going on in their town and feel deeper roots here because of it.”

“I Feel Underwater Every Single Day”

Newsburg currently operates with a staff of one.

Anderson serves as reporter, editor, publisher, salesperson, fundraiser, website manager, audience-development strategist, business operator, and community ambassador. He covers city government, schools, parks, business news, and community affairs while simultaneously handling the business side of the organization.

“I feel underwater every single day. There are so many stories that, on top of doing the sales, doing the marketing, making sure that my books are clean, filing reports I need to file, fundraising—there are a lot of stories that I just can't get to.”

His experience mirrors one of the central findings of this report: publishers face persistent constraints related to staffing, time, and organizational capacity.

Building a New Business Model

Like many independent publishers, Anderson is experimenting with revenue strategies that blend traditional and emerging approaches.

His model is built around three primary sources of support: community memberships, local business advertising, and philanthropic or grant funding. Recently, a simple appeal to readers produced 25 new memberships and increased recurring monthly revenue by approximately \$260.

“The real test that I have put out there to all of the readers has been, if this is something that's valuable to you, please consider contributing.”

Newsburg recently established a fiscal sponsorship relationship with Tiny News Collective, creating new opportunities for charitable contributions and grant funding while maintaining its independent structure.

Technology as a Force Multiplier

Anderson routinely uses recorded public meetings, digital publishing tools, analytics platforms, and AI-assisted workflows to cover multiple beats and manage operations that once required much larger staffs. He recently used AI tools to redesign Newsburg's website, newsletter templates, and visual identity, helping present a more polished and professional product to readers and advertisers.

At the same time, he cautions against becoming overly dependent on analytics.

His philosophy centers on what he calls “eat your veggies” reporting—the routine but essential coverage of local government, schools, and civic life that forms the foundation of trusted community journalism.

“If you're paying too much attention to analytics, you're going to develop a blind spot.”

Looking Ahead

Anderson sees independent publishers as part of a growing movement helping communities remain informed, engaged, and connected. He believes the future depends on creating pathways for new publishers and stronger support networks. As he put it:

“There are a lot of growth and answers to our problems that are coming from the hacks with Macs.”

For Anderson, the future of local journalism will be shaped not only by legacy institutions, but also by entrepreneurs, community builders, and independent publishers willing to step forward and serve the communities that need them most.

Chelsea Marr

Sustaining Local Journalism in a Changing Media Landscape
Columbia Gorge News | Columbia River Gorge Region, Oregon and Washington

Illustrates: Financial Sustainability, Digital Capacity



When Chelsea Marr purchased Columbia Gorge News during the COVID-19 pandemic, she inherited more than a newspaper. She inherited a community institution.

Today, Columbia Gorge News provides coverage across Hood River, The Dalles, and neighboring communities on both sides of the Columbia River. The publication combines a weekly print edition with a growing digital presence and serves as one of the most comprehensive local news sources in the region.

Like many legacy newspapers across Oregon, Columbia Gorge News faces a difficult balancing act: preserving the strengths that have served communities for decades while building the digital capabilities necessary for long-term sustainability.

A Community That Still Needs Local News

Marr’s newsroom covers local government, schools, sports, community events, and regional issues that would otherwise receive little or no coverage.

“If we weren't here, we would have Portland's papers covering the area somewhat, but we really wouldn't have anything else. We wouldn't have the local sports, the local school coverage, the meetings, the relationships that we have in our communities.”

For Marr, the mission remains clear.

“My goal is to keep this thing going for years in some capacity to continue to have the community informed. There's a dire need for it.”

“We Are Bursting at the Seams With Local News”

There is more local news than Marr's organization has the capacity to cover.

Despite operating with four full-time employees, two part-time staff members, and freelance contributors, she sees opportunities for additional coverage throughout the region.

“We are bursting at the seams with local news.”

Additional revenue would allow Columbia Gorge News to hire more reporters, expand coverage, pursue investigative projects, and provide more sustainable career opportunities for journalists in the region.

“It's really hard to get ahead, even though you feel like you're doing everything you can.”

The Revenue Challenge

Marr's staffing concerns ultimately lead back to revenue.

As traditional advertising revenue continues to decline, digital revenue remains difficult to scale at a level that fully replaces those losses.

Marr believes the greatest barrier is no longer technology itself, but the expertise required to compete effectively in the digital advertising marketplace.

“To be able to go out to an advertiser and prove to them that we are as good as what they're doing on Google ads or Facebook ads... I think that would make a huge difference.”

Competing in an Uneven Landscape

One issue that repeatedly surfaced during Marr's interview was the growing presence of nonprofit news organizations.

While she welcomes more local journalism, she expressed concern that legacy newspapers often find themselves competing against organizations that have access to resources unavailable to for-profit publications.

“What about us? What about the legacy papers that have been here for so long? Where is our support?”

For Marr, the challenge is ensuring that legacy newspapers have access to the resources needed to continue serving their communities.

Looking Ahead

Marr sees opportunities to expand digital advertising, improve audience engagement, develop podcasts and video content, strengthen partnerships with schools, and cultivate the next generation of journalists.

She is particularly excited about efforts to involve students directly in local reporting and help young people understand the value of community journalism.

Most importantly, she continues to believe deeply in the public-service role of local news.

“We’re those watchdogs. We’re the ones that help keep things at least in the public’s view, as much as we can, while we still can.”

For Marr, sustaining local journalism is about more than preserving a business; it is about preserving an institution that helps communities stay informed, connected, and accountable.

George Custer

Keeping Local News Alive in Rural Oregon The Oakridge Herald | Oakridge, Oregon

Illustrates: Reporting Capacity, Financial Sustainability



Six and a half years ago, Oakridge lost its local newspaper.

For many communities, that might have been the end of the story. Instead, a group of concerned residents decided they could not afford to lose their primary source of local information.

Among them was George Custer.

Today, *The Oakridge Herald* continues to provide local news coverage to one of Oregon's most economically challenged rural communities. The nonprofit publication

relies heavily on volunteers and is sustained through grants, donations, community support, and determination.

It exists because a handful of people refused to let local journalism disappear from their community.

Answering a Community Need

The Herald was launched after the closure of a longtime local newspaper that had served Oakridge for decades. As advertising revenue declined and the newspaper's publisher approached retirement, the publication eventually shut its doors.

“The people in this town don't know what's going on when there is no news and information platform.”

Determined to address that gap, local leaders recruited veteran journalist Doug Bates, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner with deep roots in Oakridge, to help launch a new nonprofit news organization.

When Bates was forced to retire for health reasons less than a year later, Custer—who had no professional journalism experience—volunteered to take over as editor and publisher.

Looking back, he still remembers Bates's warning:

“George, you have no idea what you're getting into.”

A Labor of Commitment

For the next four and a half years, Custer served as editor, publisher, reporter, fundraiser, grant writer, and organizational leader.

The work was entirely volunteer.

“I do this for four to six hours every day, seven days a week.”

Even vacations included newspaper work.

Operating a small rural news organization meant balancing reporting, fundraising, grant writing, mentoring student reporters, administrative responsibilities, and community outreach—all while maintaining rental properties that provided the family's primary source of income.

“It's been a job that I loved and hated. It's been a lot of work.”

Starting Poor and Staying Poor

The Herald was launched on what Custer describes as a shoestring budget.

The startup capital came largely from board members who pooled their COVID relief checks, generating approximately \$8,000 to \$10,000 to get the publication off the ground.

“We started out poor, and we’ve been poor ever since.”

Attempts to develop subscription revenue were unsuccessful. A paid subscription model dramatically reduced readership while generating insufficient income to offset costs.

Advertising has proven equally difficult.

Oakridge is among Oregon's most economically challenged communities, with more than 40 percent of residents living below the poverty line. Small businesses often have limited advertising budgets, while online platforms offer inexpensive alternatives.

Custer continues searching for creative solutions, including attracting advertisers from Eugene and Springfield who serve residents across eastern Lane County.

Journalism Where It Matters Most

Throughout the interview, Custer repeatedly returned to a simple idea: local journalism remains essential because larger news organizations do not cover the issues that most directly affect people's daily lives.

Regional and metropolitan outlets may cover statewide issues and major events. *The Herald* covers city council meetings, water rate increases, new businesses, community events, and the local issues that affect daily life.

“The community itself is the one that really needs the help with the newspaper because if water rates go up, they need to know about that. If it’s coming before city council, if they want to go in and either listen or protest or acknowledge it, that’s what we’re here for.”

For Custer, journalism is not simply about reporting what happened. It is about helping citizens participate in their communities.

Looking Ahead

Today, Custer has stepped away from day-to-day editorial responsibilities, although he remains deeply involved with The Oakridge Herald and continues working to secure advertising revenue and financial support.

The organization continues to face financial challenges and much depends on its ability to secure sustainable funding. Yet Custer's faith in local journalism remains unchanged.

“Local newspapers are what makes this country. It’s the glue that holds communities together.”

That belief explains why a retired Marine Corps officer with an MBA, no journalism training, and countless other ways to spend his time devoted years of volunteer effort to keeping a community newspaper alive.

It also helps explain why independent publishers continue fighting for local journalism in communities across Oregon.

Kathleen Istudor

When Information Becomes Infrastructure Row River Review | Row River Valley, Oregon

Illustrates: Community Information Infrastructure, Collaborative Capacity



More than twenty years ago, Kathleen Istudor moved to Oregon's Row River Valley looking for a safe place to raise her four daughters. What she found was a beautiful rural community surrounded by forests, mountains, and strong traditions, but also one facing challenges that many Oregonians rarely see.

The valley's residents live with significant isolation. Cellular service is limited or nonexistent in many areas. Internet access remains inconsistent. Many households face economic hardship. Wildfire risk is a constant concern. For years, even basic emergency services and community infrastructure lagged behind community needs.

Today, Istudor is known for helping organize fire protection efforts, advocate for community resources, and build connections among residents. Central to those efforts is the Row River Review, a small community newspaper that has become an important source of local information for hundreds of valley residents.

Building Community Through Information

Unlike many publishers, Kathleen did not begin with a vision of starting a newspaper. Her work began with a different challenge: helping neighbors organize around issues affecting the entire community.

As local residents worked to improve fire protection and address other community needs, it became increasingly clear that people needed better ways to communicate with one another. Information was scattered. Residents were isolated. Many people did not know what resources existed or how to become involved.

Today, the publication shares updates on community events, fire safety, local history, public meetings, emergency preparedness, local organizations, and the people who call the valley home. What began as a communication tool has evolved into a community newspaper serving one of Oregon's most isolated rural areas.

Why Print Still Matters

In many discussions about the future of journalism, the focus is on websites, apps, social media, and digital subscriptions. Row River Valley operates under different realities. Many residents have limited internet access.

As a result, print remains essential.

The Row River Review is mailed directly to approximately 500 households throughout the valley. Additional copies are distributed through community locations and quickly picked up by residents seeking information about local events, services, and issues.

The importance of local information became even more apparent when Lane Electric discontinued *Rural Light*, a longtime publication that connected rural communities throughout the region. Residents frequently discussed its stories because they reflected their lives, their communities, and their experiences.

The Row River Review now fills a similar role for many valley residents because, as Kathleen observed, the stories are about them.

A Small Team With a Big Mission

Recognizing the growing need for reliable local information, Kathleen brought Laura into the effort to help produce and manage the publication. Today, Laura plays a central role in coordinating production, content development, and the day-to-day work required to keep the publication operating.

Together with local contributors and volunteers, they coordinate content, produce each issue, manage distribution, and ensure that information reaches residents who might otherwise remain disconnected from community life.

The publication relies on contributions from local historians, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, and residents who help tell the story of the valley.

Funding helps cover printing, postage, equipment, and staffing. A small production printer must be carefully managed to avoid overheating during large print runs. Volunteers assist with folding and preparing copies for distribution. Every issue represents a significant community effort.

More Than a Newspaper

The Row River Review serves functions that extend beyond traditional journalism.

It provides information about food resources, community meetings, local organizations, emergency preparedness, and wildfire mitigation.

It helps newcomers understand the community.

It preserves local history.

It highlights neighbors helping neighbors.

It creates opportunities for connection in a place where isolation can otherwise become a defining feature of daily life.

In many ways, the publication functions as a community gathering place in printed form.

Looking Ahead

Kathleen sees opportunities to strengthen and expand the publication's reach, but doing so will require additional capacity and support.

More staff time would allow for increased publication frequency, stronger coordination of contributors, and broader coverage of community issues and events. Additional resources could improve production capabilities and help ensure the publication remains sustainable over the long term.

The goal is not simply to publish a newspaper. It is to strengthen the community it serves.

Her story illustrates an important lesson that emerged throughout this research: in rural communities, local information is often part of the infrastructure that helps communities remain informed, connected, resilient, and prepared for the challenges they face.

In Row River Valley, the newspaper is not simply reporting on the community; it is helping hold the community together.

Scott Swanson

A Community That Refused to Lose Its Newspaper The New Era | Sweet Home and Lebanon, Oregon

Illustrates: Financial Sustainability, Reporting Capacity



In January 2025, *The New Era* was on the verge of collapse.

After reclaiming ownership of the newspaper, he and his wife had operated for nearly two decades, Scott Swanson faced an uncertain future. Advertising revenue had fallen, staffing was stretched thin, and the publication's survival was far from certain.

So, he decided to be honest with readers.

In a front-page editorial, Swanson wrote that the newspaper was in danger of disappearing and that he could not save it alone. The response was immediate.

“The day after the editorial ran, there were six people outside the front door waiting to come in with checkbooks in their hands.”

For Swanson, the experience was a powerful reminder that local journalism still matters to the communities it serves.

Almost One Hundred Years of Local News

Founded in 1929, *The New Era* has served the Sweet Home area for nearly a century.

The newspaper covers local government, schools, sports, community events, and public affairs across a broad rural region. In recent years, it expanded coverage into neighboring Lebanon after residents became concerned about the decline of their longtime local newspaper. Community leaders approached Swanson before the competing publication ceased operations, asking whether *The New Era* could help fill the growing information gap. The result was an expansion that evolved into weekly coverage of both communities.

Today, *The New Era* serves approximately 45,000 residents across Sweet Home, Lebanon, and surrounding communities.

Saving a Local Institution

When Swanson and his wife resumed ownership of the newspaper, they faced significant financial challenges, but the community's response exceeded every expectation. Residents donated thousands of dollars to help sustain operations while the newspaper rebuilt its staff, stabilized finances, and strengthened local coverage.

One longtime reader provided what Swanson described as a “shockingly large” contribution after learning the newspaper was in jeopardy. The support helped bridge a critical period and gave the organization time to recover.

“If you want your newspaper, you're going to have to help us out.”

The community answered.

Covering What Matters

Today, *The New Era* covers multiple city councils, county government, fire districts, schools, sports programs, and community events across the region.

Despite recently adding reporting capacity, Swanson believes additional staff would allow the organization to pursue more investigative projects and deeper reporting.

“We could probably use one or two more reporters.”

Swanson sees capacity as the primary limiting factor. The challenge is not finding stories, but having enough people to cover them.

Whether attending city council meetings, reporting on local sports, or investigating public concerns, Swanson believes local journalism succeeds when it focuses on the issues that directly affect community life.

Building Sustainable Revenue

Swanson describes advertising as both essential and increasingly difficult. Many longtime advertisers have retired or closed their businesses, while younger business owners often need to be convinced that local newspapers remain valuable.

“You have to battle for everything now.”

In response, *The New Era* has diversified its revenue streams. The newspaper supplements traditional advertising and subscriptions through specialty publications, tourism guides, printing services, classified advertising, community event publications, and sponsored graduation sections that celebrate local students.

The graduation edition has become especially popular, pairing sponsorships with student profiles and creating a publication that families treasure. The newspaper has also maintained a paid subscription model for both print and digital editions.

For Swanson, local news requires community investment.

“How do you expect me to get a reporter to your meeting if you're not contributing in some way?”

Looking Ahead

Recent hires have strengthened reporting capacity and brought new expertise in social media, search optimization, and digital engagement. Swanson sees opportunities to expand into podcasts, audio journalism, and new formats that better serve residents who spend significant time commuting between communities.

He has also been surprised that many younger readers continue to prefer print.

“Even younger people tell me, ‘I'd rather read the paper.’”

The experience has left him less certain that local journalism's future will be entirely digital.

For Swanson, the lesson of the past year is simple: communities still value local journalism when they believe it serves them well.

The New Era survived not because of a national initiative, a large grant, or a corporate owner. It survived because readers decided the newspaper was worth saving.

And when asked for help, they showed up at the front door with checkbooks in hand.

8. A Baseline and a Roadmap

The findings presented in this report provide a baseline assessment of Oregon's independent local news ecosystem at a pivotal moment.

Across the survey, publisher interviews, digital readiness assessments, and organizational profiles, a consistent theme emerged. Oregon's independent publishers remain deeply committed to serving their communities, but many operate with limited organizational capacity and fragile financial sustainability.

At first glance, publishers described different challenges: staffing shortages, advertising declines, technology needs, audience growth pressures, and limited access to expertise. Yet these challenges are closely connected. Revenue supports staffing, staffing supports reporting, reporting strengthens audience relationships, digital tools improve efficiency and growth, and collaboration expands access to knowledge and resources. Viewed together, these findings suggest that Oregon's independent local news ecosystem is fundamentally confronting a capacity challenge.

The opportunity ahead is not simply preserving local journalism. It is building the capacity and sustainability necessary for local journalism to thrive.

Oregon's Independent News Ecosystem Today

This research identified four interconnected dimensions of organizational capacity and sustainability:

- Reporting Capacity
- Financial Sustainability
- Digital Capacity and Audience Development
- Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Together, these dimensions shape an organization's ability to serve its community, adapt to changing conditions, and sustain its work over time.

Publishers consistently reported that they could cover more meetings, investigate more issues, develop stronger products, deepen community engagement, and pursue new growth opportunities if they had additional time, staff, expertise, and resources. The findings suggest that Oregon's independent publishers are not struggling because they lack ideas. Rather, they often lack the capacity needed to implement the ideas they already have.

The Capacity Challenge

One of the clearest findings of this study is that capacity constraints affect nearly every aspect of local news operations. Limited staffing reduces reporting coverage, limited revenue restricts hiring, limited technical capacity slows digital growth, and limited access to expertise makes innovation more difficult. Limited time further constrains strategic planning, experimentation, and professional development.

As a result, many publishers find themselves balancing multiple roles simultaneously—reporter, editor, publisher, fundraiser, marketer, salesperson, technology manager, and community ambassador. This reality was evident across organizations of every size and type.

For some organizations, capacity limitations result in stories that go uncovered. For others, they mean delaying digital improvements, postponing audience-development efforts, or narrowing geographic coverage. In many cases, publishers are forced to focus on maintaining current operations rather than investing in future growth.

Addressing capacity, therefore, represents more than a workforce issue. It is the central challenge affecting sustainability, growth, innovation, and long-term resilience across Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

What Success Could Look Like Five Years From Now

The findings from this research suggest that Oregon has an opportunity to build a stronger and more resilient local news ecosystem in the years ahead.

A successful future might include:

- More local reporters covering underserved communities.
- Stronger and more diversified revenue streams.
- Increased adoption of digital tools and audience-development strategies.
- Expanded use of newsletters, podcasts, video, and emerging technologies.
- Stronger pipelines for future journalists and publishers.
- More opportunities for collaboration among organizations.
- Shared services that reduce costs and increase organizational capacity.
- A statewide network that supports continuous learning, mentoring, and professional development.

Most importantly, success would mean that more Oregon communities have access to reliable, locally produced news and information that helps citizens participate in civic life, hold institutions accountable, and remain connected to one another.

A Roadmap for Building Capacity and Sustainability

While every organization's circumstances differ, the research points toward four strategic priorities for investment and support.

1. Strengthen Reporting Capacity

The strongest need identified throughout this research was additional reporting and editorial capacity. More reporters would allow organizations to expand coverage, pursue investigative work, increase coverage of local government and schools, and better serve underserved communities. Support for internships, fellowships, emerging journalists, and publisher-development programs may also help strengthen the pipeline of future local news leaders.

Ultimately, local journalism depends on people. Strengthening reporting capacity remains one of the most direct ways to improve community news coverage.

2. Strengthen Financial Sustainability

Revenue remains the foundation upon which all other improvements depend. Publishers are experimenting with subscriptions, memberships, local advertising, philanthropic support, sponsorships, events, specialty publications, and community fundraising.

The findings suggest that sustainable growth will require continued diversification of revenue sources rather than reliance on any single business model. Publishers also expressed interest in additional training and technical assistance related to fundraising, membership development, digital advertising sales, sponsorships, and business operations.

Strengthening business capacity may be just as important as strengthening reporting capacity.

3. Accelerate Digital Capacity and Audience Development

Digital tools increasingly influence audience growth, engagement, operational efficiency, and long-term sustainability. While many publishers have made significant progress in website development, newsletters, social media engagement, analytics, and digital publishing tools, meaningful gaps remain.

The research points to continued needs in audience analytics, search optimization, newsletter growth, digital advertising, subscriber conversion, artificial intelligence applications, video and audio publishing, and product development. The goal is not simply adopting new technology, but helping organizations use technology strategically to expand impact, strengthen audience relationships, and improve sustainability.

4. Expand Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Throughout this research, publishers repeatedly emphasized the value of learning from one another. Many operate in relative isolation, with limited opportunities to exchange ideas, share expertise, or collaborate on common challenges.

A stronger statewide support network could provide access to peer mentoring, technical assistance, professional development, shared business services, digital expertise,

funding opportunities, and collaborative reporting initiatives. Strengthening these connections may be one of the most cost-effective ways to increase capacity across the entire ecosystem.

A Final Observation

This research began with a simple question: What do Oregon's independent publishers need in order to succeed?

The answer is both straightforward and hopeful.

Across Oregon, independent publishers continue to demonstrate remarkable commitment, creativity, and resilience. They are creating new organizations, preserving longstanding community newspapers, rebuilding local information systems, and serving communities that might otherwise have little or no local coverage.

What they need is the capacity to do more of the work they already believe in.

The opportunity now is to ensure that their commitment is matched by the resources, support, and investments necessary for long-term sustainability. This report provides a baseline assessment of where Oregon's independent local news ecosystem stands today and a roadmap for strengthening it in the years ahead.

The future of local journalism in Oregon will not depend on any single organization, funding source, or business model. It will depend on the collective ability of publishers, communities, institutions, and funders to build the capacity and sustainability necessary for local news to continue fulfilling its essential role in civic and community life.

Methodology

Research Design

This research was commissioned by the Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism (FORJ) and conducted by NW Opinions to better understand the operational realities, organizational capacity, digital readiness, and support needs of Oregon's independent local news organizations.

The study was designed to provide a baseline assessment of Oregon's independent local news ecosystem and identify opportunities to strengthen publisher capacity, sustainability, and long-term resilience.

Publisher Survey

The survey was distributed to the known universe of 43 independent publishers serving rural, small-town, and community-based audiences throughout Oregon. A total of 25 organizations participated, representing a 58 percent response rate among the 43 known independent publishers identified statewide.

The survey was administered online and took most respondents approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary, and responses were managed confidentially by NW Opinions. Publishers were given the option to allow FORJ to view their individual responses or to have their data included only in aggregated and de-identified form.

The questionnaire included a combination of single-select, multi-select, rating-scale, and open-ended questions. Skip logic was used where appropriate to improve respondent experience and ensure relevance.

Survey topics included:

- Organizational characteristics and market served
- Staffing and reporting capacity
- Revenue sources and financial sustainability
- Digital publishing practices
- Audience engagement and growth
- Technology adoption and analytics
- Professional development needs
- Collaboration and networking opportunities
- Strategic priorities and future plans

Results reflect self-reported organizational information and operating conditions at the time of the survey.

Publisher Interviews

To supplement the survey findings, NW Opinions conducted in-depth interviews with independent publishers representing diverse organizational models, market sizes, and community contexts across Oregon.

Interview participants included:

- Branden Anderson, *Newsberg*
- Chelsea Marr, *Columbia Gorge News*
- George Custer, *The Oakridge Herald*
- Kathleen Istudor, *Row River Review*
- Scott Swanson, *The New Era*

These interviews provided additional context regarding organizational challenges, revenue strategies, staffing needs, community relationships, digital transformation efforts, and future aspirations.

The publisher profiles included in this report were developed from these interviews and are intended to illustrate many of the broader themes identified through the survey, Interviews, and digital assessments.

Digital Readiness Assessment

The study also incorporated digital readiness assessments developed in collaboration with Rebuild Local News and Steven Waldman.

The assessments evaluated participating organizations across multiple dimensions of digital publishing and audience development, including:

- Website functionality
- Newsletter development
- Analytics usage
- Search optimization
- Social media engagement
- Digital revenue strategies
- Audience growth practices
- Technology adoption
- Emerging digital capabilities

Findings from these assessments helped identify common strengths, capability gaps, and opportunities for future training and technical assistance.

Analysis

Survey findings, publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments were analyzed collectively to identify recurring themes, shared challenges, and strategic opportunities across Oregon's independent local news ecosystem.

One overarching challenge emerged throughout the research: building the capacity and sustainability needed to support independent local journalism over the long term.

Four interconnected dimensions of capacity and sustainability were identified:

1. Reporting Capacity
2. Financial Sustainability
3. Digital Capacity and Audience Development
4. Collaborative Capacity and Shared Support Systems

Together, these dimensions form the foundation of the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

Limitations

This research focuses specifically on Oregon's independent local news organizations and is not intended to represent every media outlet operating within the state.

Findings reflect the perspectives, experiences, and self-reported information of participating organizations during the study period. As with most survey research, responses represent organizational perceptions and operating conditions at a specific point in time.

A Baseline for Future Assessment

The local news landscape continues to evolve as organizations adapt to changing audience behaviors, revenue models, technologies, and community information needs.

By combining survey data, publisher interviews, and digital readiness assessments, this study provides both a baseline assessment of Oregon's independent local news ecosystem and one of the most comprehensive examinations of the state's independent local news sector conducted to date.

Bibliography

Oregon Research and Information Ecosystem Studies

Agora Journalism Center.

Community Information Needs Assessments and Information Ecosystem Research conducted in Oregon communities including Oakridge, Florence, Lincoln County, Hermiston, and the Rogue Valley.

Oregon Values and Beliefs Center (OVBC).

Statewide surveys examining trust in local news, civic engagement, community connectedness, and Oregonians' values and priorities.

Local Journalism Research

Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Research on local journalism, news deserts, local news sustainability, and community information ecosystems.

Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. University of Kentucky.
Research and resources related to community journalism, rural news organizations, and local information systems.

Institute for Nonprofit News (INN).

Research, benchmarking, and resources related to nonprofit journalism, sustainability, organizational development, and local news ecosystems.

LION Publishers.

Research, benchmarking studies, and surveys examining independent local news publishers, audience development, revenue strategies, and sustainability.

Medill Local News Initiative. Northwestern University.

Research on local news deserts, local journalism economics, audience trends, and community access to local information.

Muck Rack.

State of Journalism studies and related research examining newsroom operations, journalism trends, technology adoption, and audience engagement.

Rebuild Local News.

Research and analysis regarding local journalism sustainability, public policy, community information needs, and support for local news ecosystems.

Journalism, Trust, and Civic Engagement

American Press Institute.

Research and resources examining trust in news, audience engagement, local journalism, and civic participation.

Pew Research Center.

Research related to news consumption, local news trust, audience behavior, media trends, and public attitudes toward journalism.

FORJ Research and Supporting Materials

Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism (FORJ).

Organizational records, publisher engagement activities, annual publisher gatherings, advisory services, Future Journalists of America (FJA) program materials, and related organizational documentation.

NW Opinions.

Oregon Independent News Sustainability Survey. Conducted for the Fund for Oregon Rural Journalism, February–March 2026.

NW Opinions.

Publisher interviews conducted with:

- Branden Anderson, *Newsburg*
- Chelsea Marr, *Columbia Gorge News*
- George Custer, *The Oakridge Herald*
- Kathleen Istudor, *Row River Review*
- Scott Swanson, *The New Era*

Conducted as part of the Oregon Independent News Ecosystem Study, 2026.

Surf Analytics (Steven Howsley).

Digital Readiness Assessments conducted for participating Oregon independent news organizations, 2026.

Digital Publishing and Audience Development

Google Analytics 4 (GA4).

Audience measurement and website analytics platform referenced by participating publishers.

Parse.ly.

Audience analytics platform utilized by participating publishers for performance measurement and audience insights.

WordPress.

Content management system utilized by many participating publishers and referenced in the digital readiness assessments.