THE PIVOT FUND

# Michigan Media Ecosystem Report

*Public Media Network community show. Photo by Public Media Network.*

**BY JEAN MARIE BROWN AND ERIC ORTIZ**

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# Executive Summary

Michigan's media ecosystem is undergoing a profound transformation, presenting both challenges and opportunities for communities across the state. As traditional newspapers shrink and trust in legacy media erodes, Michiganders are increasingly turning to independent, community-focused outlets to meet their information needs. These outlets play a critical role in filling coverage gaps, amplifying underrepresented voices, and fostering civic engagement.

Unlike other states we've studied, many Michiganders still maintain deep ties—and even a sense of hope—when it comes to legacy news organizations, including long-standing newspapers and television stations. This enduring loyalty is largely driven by Michigan's aging population. Yet even those who feel affection for legacy media acknowledge that it is no longer meeting all their information needs. That's why residents across the state are embracing newer, digital-first outlets that provide more relevant, localized, and accessible reporting.

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At the same time, Michiganders—like people across the country—are increasingly being forced to do the work of reporters themselves. In the absence of consistent, trustworthy local news, residents are parsing through multiple sources in search of critical information, from Facebook groups and Reddit threads to neighborhood WhatsApp chats and even direct phone calls to City Hall. This patchwork approach reflects a growing national trend: citizens stepping into the role of information seekers and verifiers in order to stay informed about issues that affect their daily lives.

Pioneering digital newsrooms like Outlier Media and Flint Beat have earned community trust by focusing on accountability journalism and direct engagement, often addressing the very gaps legacy newsrooms leave behind. They've paved the way for emerging outlets like NowKalamazoo, which are building on this foundation to meet the evolving information needs of underserved communities.

Throughout our study, we found diverse communities—Indigenous peoples, Black Michiganders, Latino Michiganders, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Chaldeans, rural residents, and older adults—seeking reliable and culturally relevant local news. While digital platforms have created new avenues for information sharing, the digital

divide remains a barrier for many, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Media entrepreneurs are stepping up to bridge these gaps, but they face significant hurdles, including financial sustainability, lack of infrastructure, and limited resources for technology and staffing.

Despite these challenges, the outlook is bright. Michigan boasts a vibrant mix of established outlets like Flint Beat and The Chaldean News, alongside emerging innovators like Dragon Eagle TV and Detroit One Million. These outlets are not only delivering news but also building community trust through collaboration, cultural representation, and grassroots storytelling. Investments in digital innovation, media literacy, and sustainable business models can empower these organizations to thrive and continue serving as vital information hubs.

This report underscores the urgent need for funders to invest in hyperlocal and community-centered media. By supporting initiatives that expand access, improve representation, and foster collaboration, funders can play a pivotal role in rebuilding Michigan's local news ecosystems, strengthening democracy, and ensuring every community has a voice. Together, we can create a future where quality local journalism informs, empowers, and unites Michigan's diverse communities..

**Tracie Powell** / CEO / The Pivot Fund

# Michigan overview

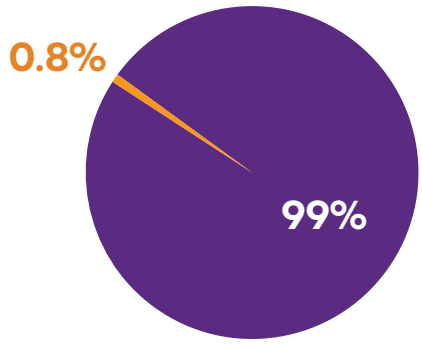
While Michiganders are still loyal to legacy news outlets—largely due to the state's aging population—several mature and emerging digital platforms are stepping in to fill critical information gaps.

Yet the state's news ecosystem remains a case study in the disruption that has roiled journalism for much of this century. Residents over 40 continue to rely on traditional sources such as daily newspapers and local TV newscasts. Meanwhile, younger Michiganders are turning to social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Reddit to stay informed.

These generational shifts were evident in a pre-assessment survey conducted by Consumer Focused Opinion (CFO), which engaged more than 250 residents while assembling two focus groups for our media landscape research. The findings paint a picture of a public hungry for local news but unsure where to find it.

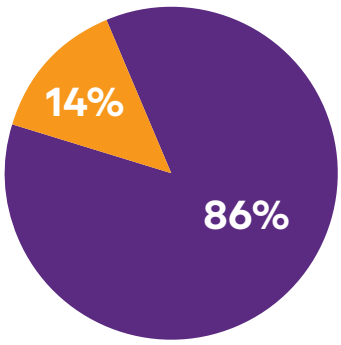
In our research, nearly all respondents said they consume news multiple times a day, yet only 14 percent described themselves as "very well informed."

**Q: "How often do you consume news?"**




- Once per day.
- Several times per day.

**Q: "How informed are you about local and state issues?"**




- Very well informed. I know who the players are and what the issues are in my community
- Somewhat informed and aware of what's happening in my community.

Interestingly, these responses show that residents often associate "news" with national outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, or NBC. When it comes to local coverage, they tend to describe it instead as "information"—and that information is frequently hard to find. In many cases, it's only available, and only partially, on social media platforms.

To fill these gaps, respondents say they take it upon themselves to seek out local information by joining Facebook groups, conducting Google searches, visiting government or candidate websites, or even calling city hall to speak directly with someone who can help. While these DIY approaches may offer some answers, the pitfalls—disinformation, limited access, inconsistent accuracy—are well documented.

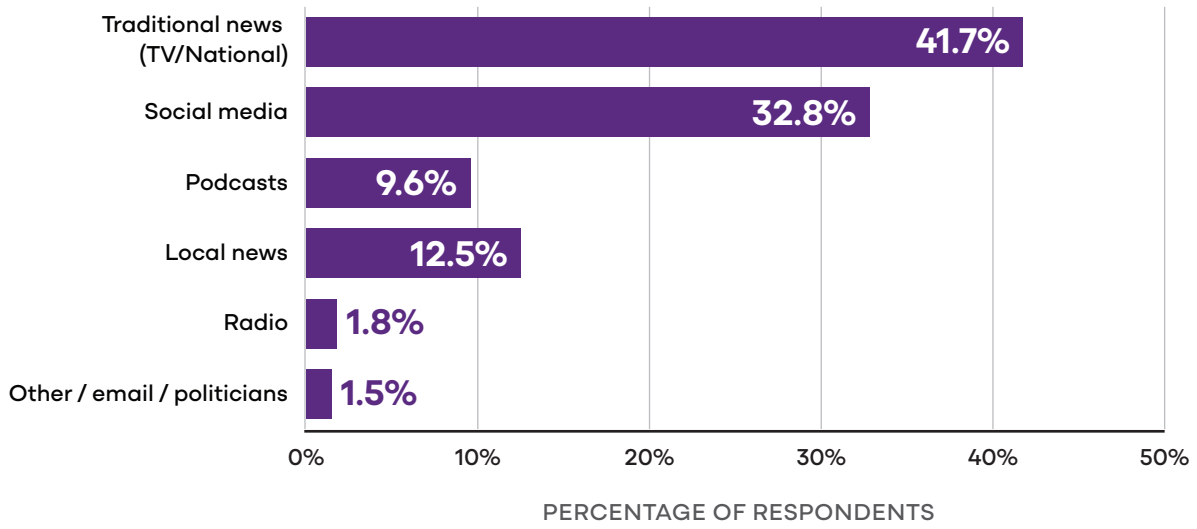
According to Northwestern University's 2024 State of Local News Outlook, nearly every Michigan county still has at least one news outlet. But when residents can't find what they need from these sources, they rely on ad hoc strategies that reflect both ingenuity and frustration.

"I will Google the specific topic I'm interested in, search it on FB or other social media apps," said a man in his 40s who listed NBC, CNN, and TikTok as his top news sources.

"I would Google it or go to the influencer's page," said a woman in her 20s who turns to Instagram, TikTok, and local news.

A woman in her 50s, who cited CNN, NBC, and MSNBC as her primary sources, said she "will Google directly to the source, try for .gov sites."

### Q: "Where do you get your news?"



***These insights provide the backdrop for two of the central questions driving our research:***

## WHO DO MICHIGANDERS TRUST FOR NEWS— AND WHERE ARE THEY ACTUALLY GETTING IT?

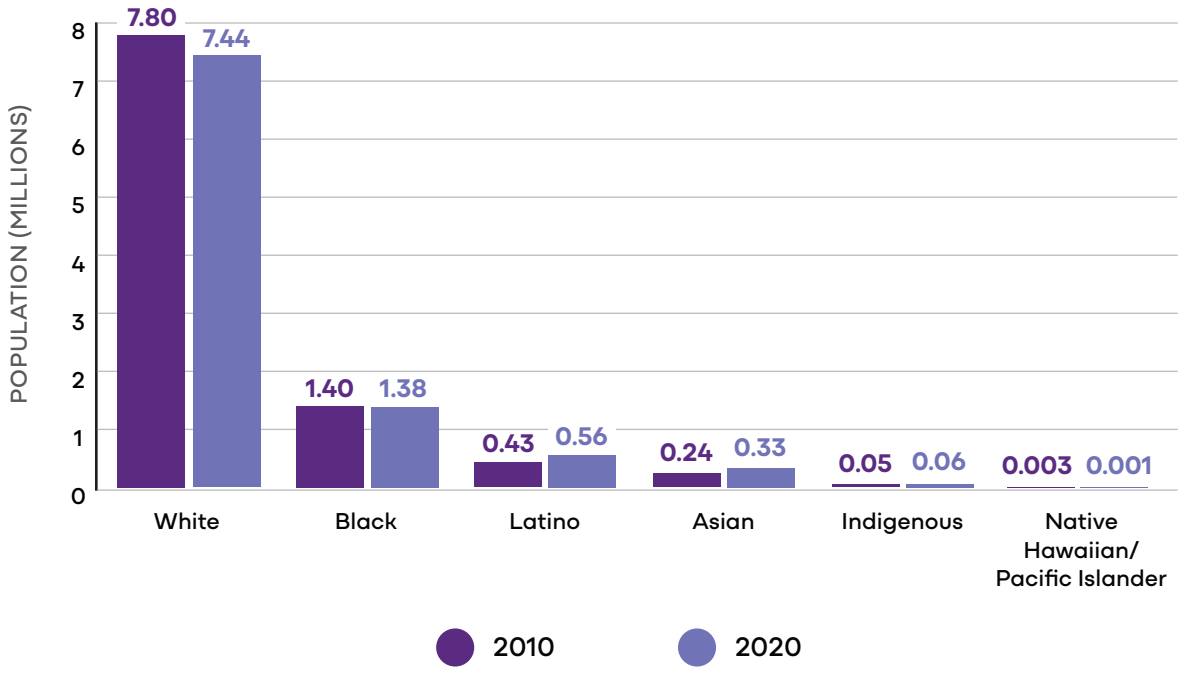
Kevin Miller, a 46-year-old self-described "news junkie" from western Michigan, has watched his favorite newspapers shrink in size and scope over the years.

"They're getting thinner and thinner," he says, reflecting on the decline of traditional print media. Frustrated with the lack of in-depth local coverage, Miller turned to NowKalamazoo, an independent news outlet, which he says "fills the gap and then some." Its coverage of issues like road construction and park upgrades might not grab national headlines, but to Kevin, they are the lifeblood of his community. "Things like that help the community. They might not be the most sexy news, but they make our community go round."


*Flint Michigan Black community listening session. Photo by Zipporah Abarca.*

The Pivot Fund's ongoing examination of news ecosystems in the Great Lakes states of Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois is charting the changes being wrought by the disruption that has marked this century. But in Michigan, an aging state, people are also still very loyal to traditional news outlets, print and TV. This phenomenon differentiates Michigan from other states we've studied, and it poses strong opportunities for collaboration between legacy organizations and entrepreneurs.

## Michigan Population Distribution: 2010 vs. 2020




*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census*

Miller, a business owner who works in education, said he's been reading newspapers for more than 30 years, since when he was 12 or 13. He said legacy newspapers continue to play a role in rural communities where options can be limited. He defended the value of newspapers when others in his focus group noted that social media has made news more accessible.

Their conversation was emblematic of the broader shift in Michigan and beyond as traditional news outlets continue to struggle. Michiganders want trusted sources to provide them with the day-to-day information that people need in their daily lives. Our research highlighted three paths that people said they take in search of local news and information.

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More people are turning to independent, community-centered sources for reliable information or searching the internet and social media. In some cases, people are getting their information from the very organizations—law enforcement, local government and school districts—that they are trying to learn about. This trend is especially troubling as these organizations may be loath to cast themselves in anything but a positive light.

Our research continues to show that while there seems to be a wealth of national news, local news—when the trash is being picked up, what's being done about neighborhood blight, or who's running for school board—is elusive. In fact, when speaking about news, we found that most people were referencing national events and coverage by default in our initial conversations. In both Minnesota and Michigan, local coverage was often referred to as information.

As traditional journalism fails to meet consumers' need for information, media entrepreneurs are helping to fill the gap. What's more, many are also giving voice to people who have long been misrepresented or ignored by traditional media. Some of these media entrepreneurs are long-standing. Others are emerging.

It doesn't matter the ethnicity, age group or occupation, the people we spoke with pursue their news based on their experiences, locations and goals. Media entrepreneurs have long stepped in to help fill the void. Among the familiar outlets are **Planet Detroit** (2019), **Flint Beat** (2017), **Outlier Media** (2016), and **Urban Aging News** (2015). They have joined outlets that have existed for decades, including **El Central Hispanic News**, (1988), **The Arab-American News** (1984), **The Jewish News**, (1944) and the **Michigan Chronicle** (1936).

But there's also an emerging generation of digital journalists who are often tied to third-party platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

- **Eric Stephon Thomas** has nearly 13,000 followers on his Instagram.
- Wyntis Hall is a popular voice for the people of Flint with "**Tha Morning Bump**" podcast.
- Sierra Clark is a reporting specialist for **Miigwech, Inc.**, a nonprofit Indigenous community organization.
- **Dragon Eagle TV** promotes itself as "Bridging communities to advance diversity and inclusion through cultural understanding."
- After launching in December 2024, Sam Robinson already has over 2,000 subscribers to his **Detroit one million** newsletter.

Though popular, these outlets are far from thriving. Emerging and longtime digital outlets are lacking succession plans, and long-range coverage models are dependent upon freelancers and stringers to gather news. While they are crucial links of communication in their communities, for owners they can represent financial uncertainty.

In 2022, Robert Dewaelsche and his wife Eva Garza Dewaelsche bought El Central, the bilingual newspaper on Detroit's southwest side, from Dolores Sanchez, its

owner and founder. Outlets such as El Central provide vital information, but their reach is often limited and their long-term survival uncertain. Many of these operations struggle with tight budgets that leave little room for technology, upgrades and full-time staff. Their longevity is a testament to the tenacity of their owners, as well as the loyalty and trust they have cultivated with their audiences.

Robert Dewaelsche, a former corporate communications executive, is pleased with the purchase of the free tabloid, which has a readership of about 14,000.

He said they "bought El Central to sustain it as a resource and a sense of pride for our community." But they've faced challenges financially. They've redesigned the masthead and added a website for the popular Spanish-centered publication. The website requires a freelance webmaster. El Central was one of the four Michigan outlets that in the fall of 2024 received a $100,000, two-year operating grant from Press Forward, a journalism initiative that is trying to stabilize local news across the nation. The $50k a year for two years will allow El Central to hire and improve pay for freelance writers, but it will not allow them to hire the capacity they need nor achieve long-term sustainability.

*Sierra Clark reporting on the Catholic Church's role in Michigan Indian Boarding Schools at the Diocese of Gaylord in Gaylord, Michigan. Pictured (L) Meredith Migizi, Sierra Clark, and other reporters. Photo by Philip Hutchinson, Northern Territory Imaging and Design.*

The digital disruption that has marked much of this century has re-centered journalism. People no longer have limited choices when seeking news and information. Today, readers, viewers or listeners can pick and choose from an array of sources. As a result, audience is one of the key elements that must be considered when news ecosystems are examined. The Democracy Fund defines **these ecosystems** "as the network of institutions, collaborations, and people that local communities rely on for news, information and engagement."

Michiganders we spoke with are determined to get answers to their questions. Some remain loyal to legacy, some have moved to an ecosystem built around influencers and media entrepreneurs, others seem frustrated and have turned away from both. Instead, they rely on word of mouth or internet searches. The common thread

between all of them—even when they find information, they aren't always sure what to believe.

**The common thread between all of [the Michiganders we surveyed] — even when they find information, they aren't always sure what to believe.**

## RUST BELT ROOTS, NATIONAL REFLECTIONS: MICHIGAN'S EVOLVING POPULATION STORY

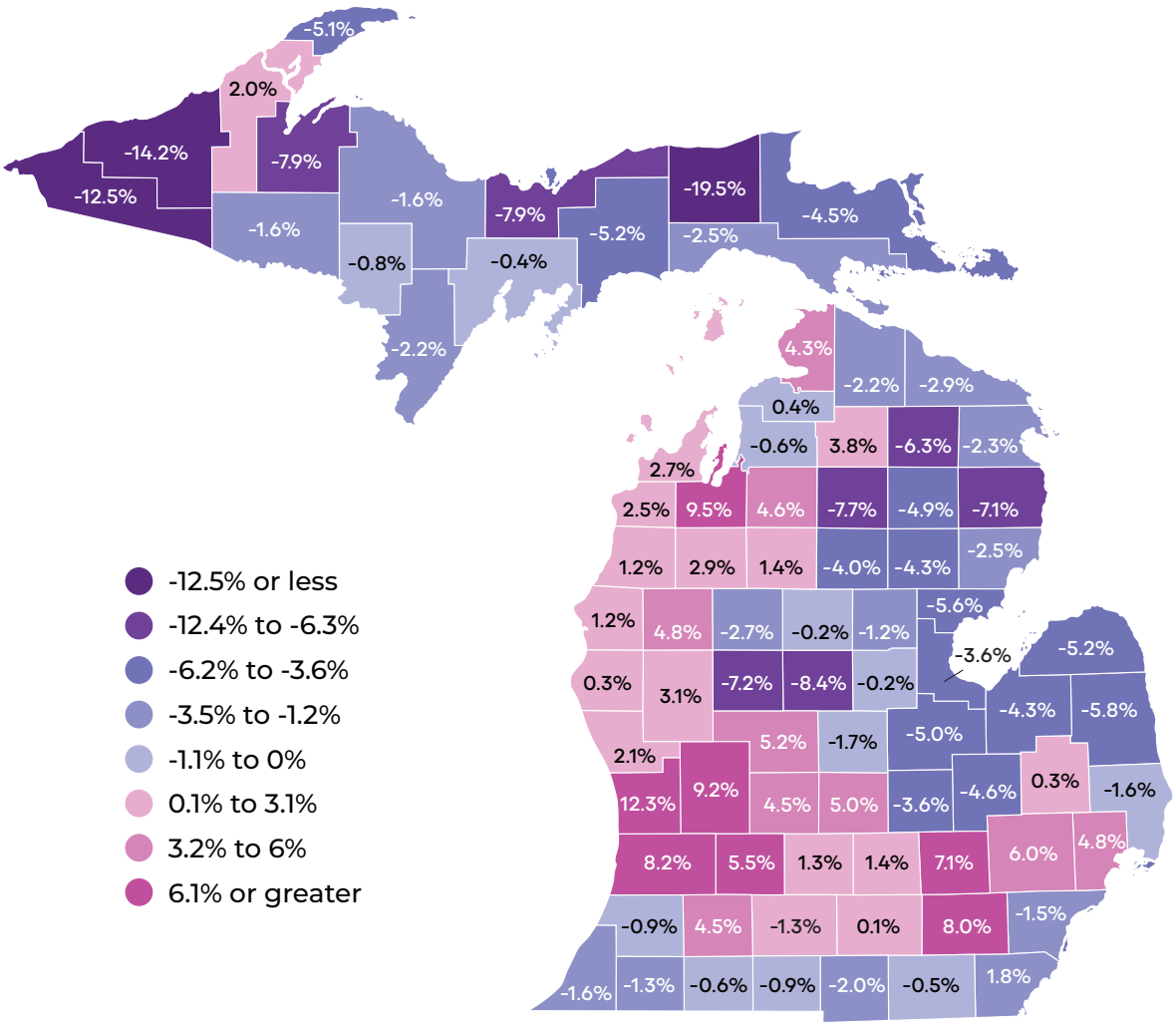
A key player in the nation's industrial history, Michigan, the 10th largest state, is now part of the declining **Rust Belt**. Its population diversity is longstanding, dating back to its Indigenous populations.

In modern times, the manufacturing plants at the heart of the state's economy attracted Eastern European and Middle Eastern immigrants and African Americans leaving the South during the Great Migration. Today, the state's population aligns well with that of the nation. For example, Michigan is 79 percent White, compared to the U.S., which is 75 percent White. Meanwhile, Black people make up 14 percent of the state, compared to 13.7 percent of the nation.

Michigan is **aging at a faster rate** than the country. In 2001, Michigan was the 29th oldest state when ranked by populations of people 65 and older. By 2021, it was **the 14th oldest state**, according to the Washington D.C.-based Population Reference Bureau. Almost 50 percent of the **state's population of 10.03 million people** (more than 4.7 million people) are over 40.

It was among 19 states that experienced a population decline from 2020 to 2022. It saw slight growth, 2 percent from 2010 to 2020, compared to 7.5 percent for the nation as a whole, according to a 2023 report by the Michigan Center for Data and Analytics.

## Population Change by County in Michigan from 2010 to 2020




*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

# Methodology

In addition to the market research team, and to better understand Michigan's news ecosystem, The Pivot Fund dispatched a team of researchers across the state to hold listening sessions with a range of communities and learn about their news and information needs, as well as how they consume news.

The Pivot Fund sought out racial and ethnic groups that were represented in Census reports, as well as people of Middle Eastern and North African descent whose presence hasn't been recorded in the decennial reports. Geographically, special attention was paid to people living in rural areas, since 53 of Michigan's 83 counties are **considered rural.**The state has **over 1.8 million people living in rural areas and saw a growth in rural population from 2020 to 2023 driven by domestic migration** after the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the Michigan Center for Data and Analytics.

Historically, all of these audiences in Michigan have often been underrepresented in traditional news coverage. Our approach focuses on gaining an understanding of the communities being served, media entrepreneurs who are filling news gaps, the information communities are seeking and finally understanding who people consider to be trusted sources.

During the nine, 90-minute community listening sessions, participants, who came from a variety of professions and range of incomes, spoke about their news consumption habits and the news and information they feel they need to make informed decisions about their community.

Two of the virtual sessions were assembled by **Consumer Focused Opinions** (CFO), a Southfield, Michigan, market research firm. The firm pre-screened more than 250 people before selecting participants.

In addition to the listening sessions, our researchers conducted more than 135 one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders to understand the issues facing Michigan's news and information ecosystems.

In all, nearly 800 people were contacted for this research project, which took place between August and November 2024.

# Key findings

Pivot Fund researchers spoke with hundreds of Michiganders from all regions of the state, including urban centers such as Detroit and Dearborn to the higher education hubs of East Lansing and Ann Arbor and rural areas such as Attica and Houghton Lake. The residents we spoke with represented the state's diverse populations.

Their responses mirrored those heard in prior research and underscored the findings of researchers. In its 2024 report on news consumption habits, researchers from **Pew Research Center** found digital devices are the preferred way of getting news for 58 percent of adults.

- When asked where they got local news and information, people spoke of legacy newspapers, broadcast channels, cable outlets, and of course word of mouth, but they also cited app and digital sites ranging from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp to LinkedIn, Facebook and local websites.
- Some people rely on Nextdoor and the Ring security app to learn about what's happening in their neighborhoods. This means they might know more about crime and animal sightings than they do about what their mayor is doing, the city budget or township budget. Though local elected officials, citizen journalists and event promoters are starting to post more and more on NextDoor.
- Michigan is chock full of media entrepreneurs who were spurred on by dis-satisfaction with legacy publications and decided that they could serve the community better or at least augment the current offerings of media choices. These outlets run the gamut and serve communities and audiences based on ethnicity, interest, geography, language, and other distinctions.
- People in every community we spoke with said they are not receiving hyperlocal community-specific news and information from traditional channels.
- Distrust of traditional media sources is overwhelming. People spoke of trying to determine what's true or not, who they think they trust or think they know. They seek information on their own, looking at candidate social media profiles and Facebook pages to figure out who even their local candidates are.

# In search of local news

The digital media disruption of this century has left many traditional outlets with shrinking staffs, even as their potential audience continues to grow. Both The

Detroit News and the Detroit Free Press only offer home delivery three days a week. Michigan's newspaper industry continues to contract, seeing a 22 percent decline in weekly and daily newspapers between 2023 and 2024, according to researchers with **Northwestern University's Local News Initiative**.

The U.S. news industry lost 2,700 jobs in 2023, and began 2024 with layoffs, according to a **Digital News report**. The job losses are across all fronts, from national outlets to local papers as the industry struggles to remain profitable in a world that is seemingly awash in free news and information through social media and the internet.

While this would seem to be a boon for news consumers, our research into news ecosystems continues to find people in community after community searching for reliable news sources that provide local news and information. In this case, local news and information represent everything from neighborhood zoning cases to crime and public safety to schools.

"All of the things that are going on in our community, we don't know anything about it," said Mary Tinsley, 70, a retiree who volunteers at **Mack Alive**, a nonprofit that has been serving east Detroit since 1991.

"Information is not getting out as to what is going on in this neighborhood," said Tinsley, who was part of the east Detroit listening session.

*Black community listening session at Mack Alive in Detroit Michigan. Photo by Oralandar Williams.*

All of the participants in our listening sessions said they would pay attention to a more complete story told or shared about their community, whether it's good or bad.

They just want a fuller, more accurate story.

"More attention to things that are, you know, it's your community, that's where you live," said Kristie, a 40-something White woman who lives in Attica and is an industrial seamstress. "You want to know what's going on and what's happening versus just watching a funny show on TV."

Participants in the sessions said rather than depend on one or two trusted sources for information they gather information from different sources. They said it's common to hear something and then search Google for more information. They also talked about using AI tools, such as ChatGPT, subscribing to newsletters, going to events, and using QR codes to access news and information.

In one instance, a woman in her late 20s from a Detroit suburb said she would call the mayor herself or the family member of a local government leader.

"I'll take on what they tell me," she said. "And I can 'research' it also."

## A ruptured relationship

It was also clear that people are distrustful of media coverage. Legacy news outlets—print and broadcast—also face perceptions of bias and negative coverage, as well as open distrust.

Participants talked of the role local media play in shaping community narratives, with participants noting that local coverage often emphasizes negative stories while neglecting positive, more complicated and/or nuanced developments.

Joan Blount, 88, a Black woman living in Detroit, described herself as "an avid newspaper reader" and longtime reader of **The Detroit Free Press**.

"I'm an educator, so I'm very accustomed to seeking out information," said Blount, who worked at **Wayne State University** for 20 years as a parenting specialist. "I like to know what's going on. I like to seek out information. I know a lot of people who are social workers, so I know people who know people. I know the people that have the knowledge that I want and need."

Participants in the Flint listening sessions overwhelmingly voiced concerns about getting positive news covered by local news stations or print news outlets.

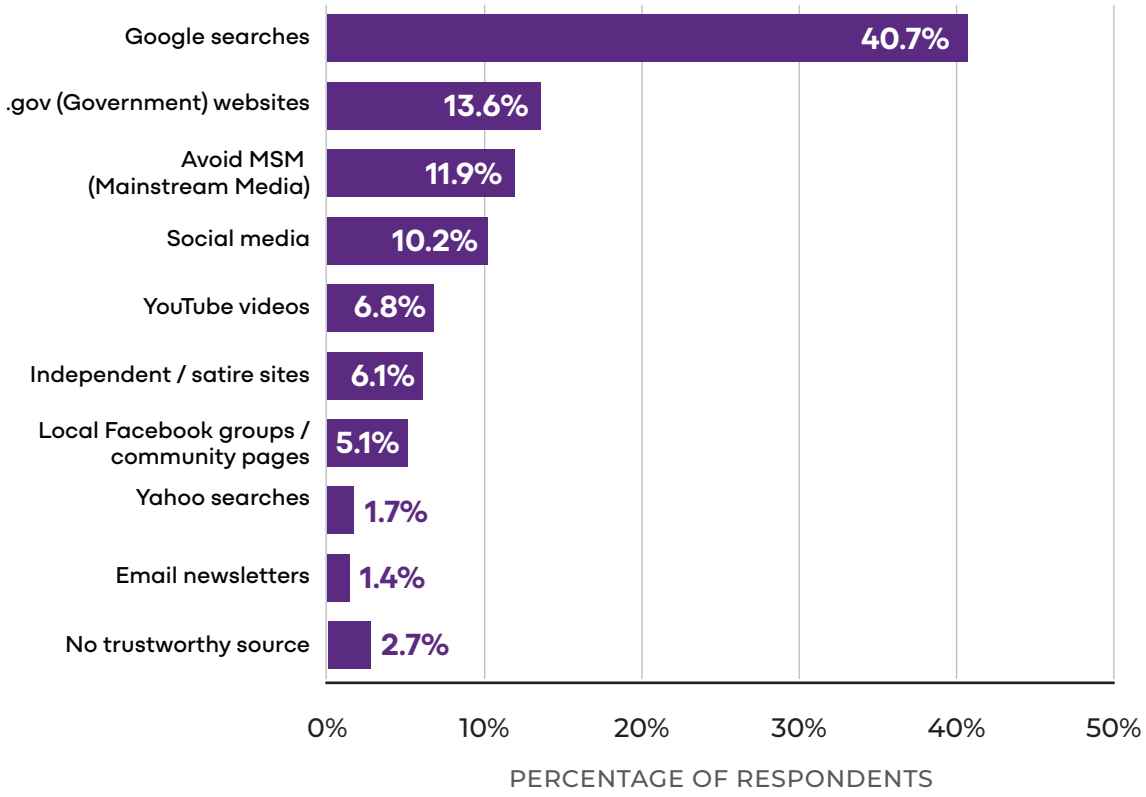
"The media, especially national and international, largely don't see past the water disaster and ignore other important stories going on in our city," said Percy Glover, a 52-year-old community engagement specialist.

Flint participants were frustrated with "the media's" focus on negative aspects, like the water crisis and violence, and highlighted the role of neighborhood associations in driving change. They wanted to showcase positive developments in Flint, such as community-led initiatives and improvements in local infrastructure.

"We've got nice things here and it's never showcased," said Glover. "I would like to see them push more positive narratives."

Alexis Love, 30, lives in Flint and works at the Greater Flint Health Coalition in community outreach. She sees a huge disconnect between news outlets and their audiences. "The narrative is definitely being controlled by someone else," she said. "There is an agenda being pushed."

### Q: "Where and how do you learn about specific topics?"




Marcel Wiggins, 24, of Flushing, a suburb of Flint, is an emergency medical technician who doesn't have a regular source for news. He has soured on the national press, is skeptical of local outlets, and doesn't trust social media.

"On both Google and social media, people are just trying to make money at the end of the day even by fabricating lies," he said.

If you don't know what you're looking for, the internet can be overwhelming, said Wiggins, who noted that some of the older people he knows depend on television because they don't know how to navigate the internet as well.

Wiggins said that dependence is often equated with loyalty as they watch the news channels every day.

Carnell Poindexter, 20, of West Bloomfield, is a campus ambassador at **Central Michigan University** and a fellow for the governor's office. Poindexter, who is Black, said he doesn't like how the media represents Black people.

He said he frequents national news platforms like the New York Times, CNN and MSNBC, but he doesn't have a local go-to. He said he deleted his Instagram account because it "was a waste of his time." Instead, he relies on Google searches.

Representation, or the lack thereof, is why Eric Pouncil, 31, of Mount Pleasant, also doesn't engage with traditional media. A queer Black man, Pouncil said his job as an academic advisor at Central Michigan University doesn't require him to be engaged in the way he had to be when he worked in the office of diversity, equity and inclusion.

"And so now that I don't work in that role anymore, and I have more of the freedom not to engage with it, I choose not to," he said. "If I can, I try not to."

He relies on word of mouth for information, talking with friends, or his partner who gets his news from TikTok and Facebook.

## The rise of digital and social media

Digital devices—smartphones, tablets—have become the dominant news platforms, according to **Pew researchers**. They are preferred over all other platforms, including television, radio and newspapers. The starkest difference is between digital and newspapers, 58 percent to 4 percent.

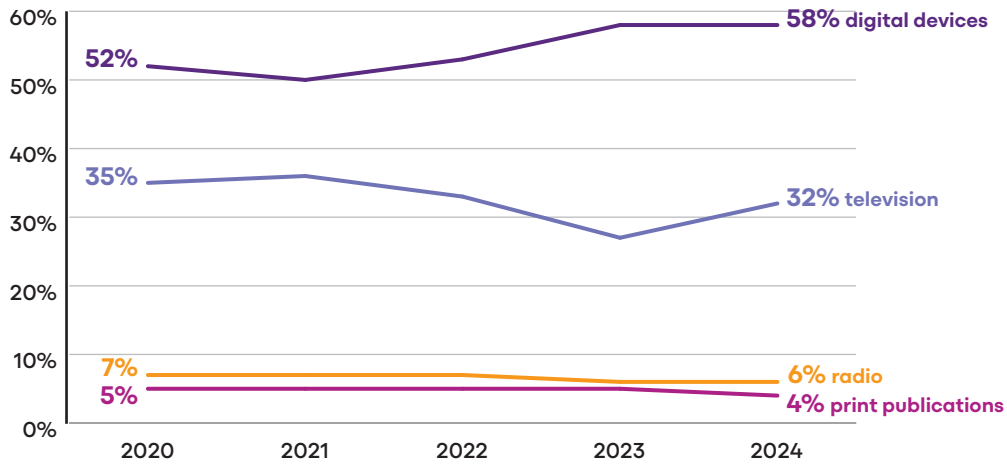
The switch to digital is complicated by access to broadband. While 90 percent of Americans have smartphones, only 80 percent of homes have broadband. In Michigan, the Census reported that 89 percent of households had a broadband internet subscription between 2019-2023.

About 30 percent of Michigan households lack affordable and reliable high-speed internet, according to the federal **Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment Program** (BEAD). BEAD estimates that 500,000 households in Michigan are "unserved or underserved by high-speed internet infrastructure."

Affordability, adoption, device access and digital literacy are issues for an additional 730,000 Michigan households, according to BEAD.

## News Platform Preferences

*% of U.S. adults who prefer _____ for getting news*




*Note: "Digital devices" include smartphones, computers and tablets. Source: Pew Research Center, Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 15–Aug. 4, 2024.*

Roughly 20 percent of Detroit households don't have an internet subscription, and 42 percent of Detroit households **lack access to high-speed internet**, according to BridgeDetroit. As a result, some people can't access information meant for them.

Monica Williams is the director and editor of the **New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative**, a group of 20-plus news and community partners that cover caregiving and health equity in two states. She noted that they created a guide to assist low-income caregivers that was accessible online and with a QR code without taking into account how people would get the information.

"And I remember saying, 'OK, well, what about the people who don't have the internet and don't use QR codes, right?' And you're talking about older people to poor people and somebody remarked, well, I guess they don't get anything."

There's also a technology gap. Guadalupe Lara, a licensed social worker who retired after 26 years at Children's Hospital of Michigan, now volunteers at **Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development** (LA SED), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency serving Hispanics and residents of southwest Detroit since 1969. Lara said LA SED has received computers for seniors, but the stumbling block was people who didn't know how to use the computer or navigate the web.

"The whole internet—requesting bill pay, deposits online—everything is going to that," she said. "But this population is not there. There are people who are retired and educated that have made themselves learn all these things. But I know many people who are professionals—doctors—who decided, 'I'm not going to learn that.'"

Despite the hurdles. the Michiganders with whom we spoke are increasingly turning to social media and digital news sites for information. People have come to rely on their own communities and interpersonal networks for news, and resources, and to feel represented. They access this information via Facebook groups, e-newsletters, digital radio, YouTube, Reddit, NextDoor, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, word of mouth, in person, at events, and many more nontraditional channels.

Renee Milton, 47, of Kalamazoo, said she uses multiple online outlets to get news. Milton, who moved from Chicago two years ago, said she feels like the only place to get real news is Facebook groups.

"Facebook is the only place for free news," she said. "Everywhere else you have to pay to read the full article."

She said she is actively in 11 Facebook groups for Kalamazoo and southwest Michigan residents. "I've been here for two years, and I don't know what our local news is. … I see something on Google News and I go over to Facebook to hear the details about it. … It's more tangible (and accessible).

"It's definitely more of a hassle to have to go to social media to get all of your information, but collectively you can find the right story," Milton said. "Each group has different intentions. Like "Nosey Kalamazoo" will tell you the downright grit of the situation. But if you go to "Residents of Kalamazoo" or something of that effect, they'll just tell you the formalities. And if you just flip back and forth between the two, you find out the whole story."

She said even though being in all of these Facebook groups is a nuisance, she still believes that she gets more information that way than she would from news outlets. It's like "word of mouth" but online, said Milton.

Gabriela Cordova, 27, of Grand Rapids, is the director of engagement at the **Hispanic Center of Western Michigan**, a human and social services nonprofit that has been serving the Latino community since 1978. Cordova said they use Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn to spread the word about the center's resources and some news.

They use Facebook because it was one of the first social media platforms that came out, many people have it, and that makes it easier to find people, Cordova said. As for Instagram, that is to reach younger audiences.

Kennedy Butler, 20, of Canton, a full-time student at Central Michigan University, said she doesn't rely on legacy media.

Butler said she isn't a "big reader" and doesn't watch a lot of TV so reading or watching the news isn't a part of her routine.

"I would have to go out of my way to do it," she said. "So I get my information off of social media, because I don't have to, like do anything."

Andrea Hubbard, 58, a Black woman living in Kalamazoo, is the mother of three and grandmother of eight. She said she has been skeptical of legacy media since her son was murdered in 2012. "There was a lot of information that they were sharing that was not correct or accurate," said Hubbard, who is a small business owner. "Several times, I've had to contact Channel 3 news about different situations where their information just was not correct."

> **"I would have to go out of my way to [get news from non-social media sources]. So I get my information off of social media, because I don't have to, like do anything."**
>
> *Kennedy Butler, age 20*
> *Student at Central Michigan University*

Hubbard said she'd rather get her news from Facebook groups and other people online, although she said it's not credible either.

"You can't believe everything on Facebook," she said. "There's a lot of information on here that is not correct."

She said it's good when people post what they observe in the community. "There's a young man that I've noticed that records every time the police show up on the scene, he's recording and so I've gone to personal live videos that local people have had and got information that way, that I've seen with my own eyes."

Hubbard, who has 5,400 Facebook followers, said she posts observations in the community to her personal Facebook page.

Christion Calloway, 24, of Grosse Pointe, said he never watches the news. His parents always had the news on as a kid, and he noticed that it always talked about the negative, and it just made him depressed. Calloway is a program lead for **Give Merit**, a Detroit-based nonprofit.

Instead, he relies on TikTok and X, formerly known as Twitter.

## The price of news

Cost also plays a factor in the appeal of social media and some digital news. Much of the content that people source online can be accessed at no cost.

Many of the people we spoke with objected to paywalls for local news sites, which they consider barriers to information.

"I don't think news should be monetized," said Steve Cieko, a 53-year-old White man who lives in a Detroit suburb. "To me, news is information about things that could be or may not be relevant to you. A lot of people get their information off of the news. And I don't think that that should be something that … you have to pay like a monthly subscription or something like that. Information, it should be available to everybody because it's news. It's not a creative work. … I mean somebody types it out, but it's not like you know you're selling it as a product, and I don't think that should be the case. News isn't really a product. It's information, and a community grows and thrives on information."

**"I don't think news should be monetized… Information, it should be available to everybody because it's news. It's not a creative work. … I mean somebody types it out, but it's not like you know you're selling it as a product…"**

*Steve Cieko, age 53*
*White man from a Detroit suburb*

Kristie, from Attica, agreed.

"I think that people don't want to pay for news or information when you can go online and get the same information and maybe more because you get the feedback from people who may have been on the scene or have (expertise about) specific news," she said.

"You can't, you know, who do you trust?" added Kristie. "How do you know Channel 2 or Channel 4 or The Detroit News is telling the truth? … And I know firsthand from a news article being done years ago on our family in a specific situation that the journalist put in what they wanted, and left out what they wanted, to make it newsworthy."

Multiple listening session participants shared a similar sentiment. They said they saw a story presented in different ways by different outlets, either framed in a positive or negative light. Most people in Michigan today do not see value in paying for news that does not provide sufficient insights or may be biased and untrustworthy.

"Are they really telling us the truth or is it biased by like, say a political party, the left wing, right, you know, whatever, I mean, blue, red, you know, whatever you want?" wondered Randy, a 41-year-old White sanitation engineer and party bus chauffeur from Hazel Park. "Or is it, are they catering to or, you know, sometimes making something lighter for one side, but then trying to scare the crap out of other people. Or is it just their perception?"

# A Native American perspective

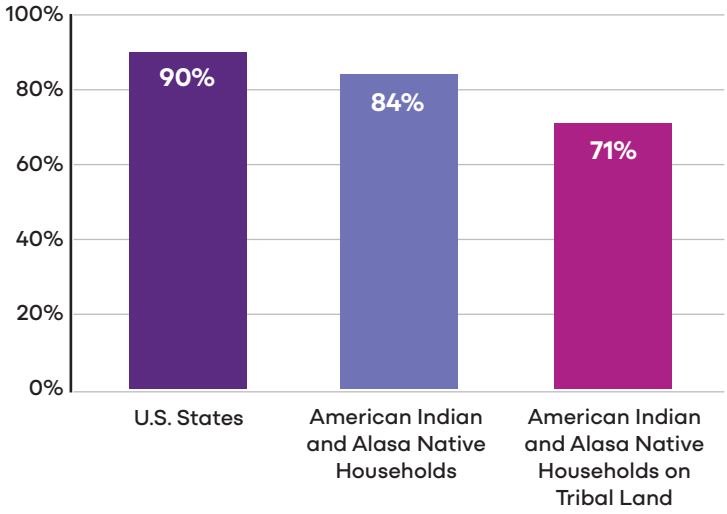
There are 12 **federally recognized tribes** in Michigan. Some of them were represented in the listening session, including the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, and the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians.

Native Americans account for about .08 percent of Michigan's population, or 45,662 people in 2021, according to the U.S. Census.

On tribal land, media is controlled by the leadership of the tribe. Information and news can be framed or censored to the tribal government's liking. But focus group participants said they also struggle to find news and information outside the reservations.

We had a virtual listening session with nine people from Native American communities in the Upper Pennisula and southeastern Michigan. Despite distrust and dissatisfaction with traditional media, they said they still want traditional media to tell their stories. They said they want to be represented in traditional media. So they are looking for ways to ensure that they interact with traditional media outlets.

**Share of U.S. Households with Broadband Access by Select Characteristics: 2021**




*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates*

The digital divide—homes with broadband access compared to those without—is more acute on tribal land. In 2021, the latest year statistics are available, 71 percent of Native American and Alaskan Indian households on tribal land had broadband, compared to 84 percent of Native American and Alaskan Indian households located outside of tribal land, according to **Census data**. The gap between tribal and nontribal households shrank from 10 percentage points to six percentage points between 2016 and 2021, and the latest survey found both lagged behind the national average of 90 percent.

Radio is a dominant source of information for many living on tribal lands because it's the most accessible platform. It doesn't have the printing press and distribution requirements of a newspaper, the infrastructure of cable, or the subscription and infrastructure costs of the internet.

"It'd be nice if we had our own radio station," said Tom Peters, an Indigenous elder from Traverse City. "Like an AM radio station or an FM radio station, and not necessarily tied to the government, but an independent radio station that you can give music and you can give news, you can have people interviewed, and that type of thing."

The Native Americans we spoke with talked about developing an Indigenous media network made up of new and existing stations.

"So there's a lot of different situations, but it would seem like we have a lot of tribes that have their own radio station," Peters said. "If you could figure it out, maybe they could even work together, broadcasting what jobs are available, you know, and what training is available, actually doing that type of thing, you know, for the communities."

He added there has to be some way to reach more people quickly and not in a monthly newspaper.

**"I came from a Native community where access to finances wasn't taught to me on any level... I don't know anything about government... I don't know nothing about my tax dollars or what it does, I'm not sure."**

*Schantell Taylor*
*Native American woman in Auburn Hills*

The differences between life on tribal land and in nontribal communities can leave some people at a loss when it comes to understanding civic issues.

"I came from a Native community where access to finances wasn't taught to me on any level," said Schantell Taylor, who lives in Auburn Hills. "I don't know anything about government."

She said the 2024 elections were "just really confusing. ... Yeah, I don't know nothing about my tax dollars or what it does, I'm not sure."

Tribal governments don't face the scrutiny of local, state, and national bodies, and Native Americans are rarely included in traditional media coverage.

"Now, a lot of that has to do with the fact that there is a lack of education within Michigan curriculum about Native people," said Meredith Kennedy-Fisher in October 2024 on "Stateside," a Michigan Public radio show, to discuss **ensuring voting access for tribal voters**. "We're always in the past. We're never in the present or the future."

Kennedy-Fisher is the executive director of **Miigwech, Inc.**, a nonprofit community organization led by Native American women in Harbor Springs in northern Michigan (92 miles from the Canadian border). Miigwech is an Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) word that means thank you, and the nonprofit orgaization is driven to change systems and lives through the practice of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, "the good life," by making their community around Little Traverse Bay a better place for all.

Kennedy-Fisher said she hired Sierra Clark to be a reporting specialist for their organization. Clark is an Indigenous writer and storyteller and independent freelance journalist who helped organize the listening session.

Word of mouth is an essential source for local information in the Indigenous community, as it is in many other underserved communities, and often is the primary source for news.

*Sierra Clark Interviewing Indigenous International Board Certified Lactation Consultant Elizabeth Montez Giras for a story for New York and Michigan Solutions "Indigenous Communities Revive Cultural Practices to Save Mothers' Lives." Photo by Philip Hutchinson, Northern Territory Imaging and Design.*

"I've noticed a lot of word-of-mouth news," said Clark, an award-winning journalist who used to work for the Traverse City Record-Eagle as a Report for America corps member. "We definitely get it from the aunties, and the aunties are like the older women generation. And it's not gossip or hearsay. It's keeping community safe. … That's been a really big role is keeping the community safe. So if there is, you know, a predator or there's like police issues or there's discrepancies in the larger community, like I've always gone to the aunties to get that information.

"And this is all local community news, what's happening in our area, not so much, state and stuff," Clark added. "But I've always also looked up to the aunties in the older generation to get their understanding of what's going on in the world, because I've also become pretty biased on what the media says."

Sharing information by word of mouth can be done in person, at community events or through digital channels such as text messaging.

"Sometimes it's someone messaging me like, hey, you need to know this," said Clark. Kennedy-Fisher talked about when a community member's brother was attacked.

"So if you think I'm gonna read about that anywhere, no," said Kennedy-Fisher. "I heard that from an auntie as a like, 'Hey, be safe, because you got Brown kids . . .'"

Monica Cady, a member of the Sioux Tribe of Chippewa, said she used to get her news from alternative media such as Free Speech TV, Democracy Now!, Amy Goodman, The David Pakman Show, The Young Turks and Unicorn Riot.

"But, honestly, I took a break. … I definitely feel like there's a void of not much Indigenous media," said Cady "… We definitely need more Native journalists and reporters. We're way underrepresented."

The participants questioned the framing of stories involving tribes and tribal land. Those from the St. Ignace area were critical of the framing for news coverage of plans to replace an underwater segment of an oil pipeline that runs under the Straits of Mackinac, which connects Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.

Line 5, which was built in 1953, runs under the Straits of Mackinac and raises concerns about potential oil spills in the Great Lakes. Community members noted that plans to house Line 5 in a tunnel were framed around the homes, vehicles, businesses, hospital, schools, and other facilities that rely on the light crude oil, natural gas liquids and synthetic crude for energy and power.

The Indigenous communities argued there wasn't enough emphasis from traditional local media on the potential for spill and the environmental impact.

"You're not gonna hear anything about Line 5 or about the oil spills," Kennedy-Fisher said about local news coverage.

## A longtime presence

Black people have had a presence in Michigan since at least the 18th century. Jamon Jordan's history of Black people in Detroit notes that in 1736 an "unnamed negresse" was buried at St. Anne's of Detroit. Today, they make up 14 percent of the state's population and are the largest racial group after White people. Many Black Michiganders are descendants of Blacks who traveled to the North during the Great Migration. In an examination of the Black experience in Michigan, the Brookings Institute explains that redlining, White flight and urban renewal negatively affected Blacks.

Detroit has **over 631,000 people** and is **77.8 percent Black** (495,000-plus people), making it one of the **largest majority-Black cities in America**. As part of our study of

Michigan's news ecosystem, Pivot Fund researchers held a listening session in east Detroit at Mack Alive, a nonprofit serving the community since 1991.

The session was held in a brightly decorated second-floor room of Mack Alive's offices. It was set up like a classroom with informative posters on Black history dotting the wall and filled with fliers announcing upcoming important city council meetings and other events that local residents might find beneficial to them.

Mack Alive's executive director, Artina Hardman, a former state lawmaker and a past member of the Michigan Parole Board, did not participate in the listening session but helped organize it.

"Information is powerful for everyday living," said Hardman, who makes sure information is always on hand for those who use the community center, which was founded by Hardman's sister and former Detroit City Council member Alberta Tinsley-Talabi.

"Communication is vital when it comes to our community," explained Hardman. "Many times our community is the last to know and ends up missing out on information about a government project."

> **"Many times our community is the last to know and ends up missing out on information about a government project."**
>
> *Artina Hardman*
> *Mack Alive executive director*

Hardman believes community groups not only should share key information that impacts citizens' everyday lives but they must make sure the information is given out in a timely manner.

Hardman added that sometimes residents might miss key deadlines on information that could affect their property, jobs and other aspects of life because "many times they just don't know where to get it."

The group of eight women and two men at our Mack Alive listening session ranged in age from the late 30s to 70s.

Most people in our session said they no longer trust traditional media. Some said they do not even tune in to traditional media anymore.

When pressed, many cited news sources that included local **Fox 2 Detroit**, **950 AM radio (WJN)**, Detroit News, Detroit Free Press, Michigan Chronicle, **Metro Parent**, **Urban Aging News**, **Blac Detroit**, **BitChute**, Rumble Detroit, forums on Facebook, and YouTube.

*Urban Aging News founder and owner Patricia Ann Rencher (far right to left), Angelena Taylor, Richard Reeves, and Monica Williams at a community event. Photo by Shawntay Lewis.*

Some older participants of the listening session also said they got their news from their religious leaders such as priests or bishops at their respective houses of worship. For example, Kay Brundidge, an ordained elder and the executive director of **Healing for the Soul Ministries**, said her pastor, Bishop Edgar Vann, is a source of news and information.

"Facts. That's what I'm interested in, is the facts," said a 70-year-old Black woman. "I go to YouTube, because on YouTube, I can pull up just about anything. And YouTube has all the elections, the news, anything you want, you can go to YouTube and put it in. And it'll show up, so I don't have to go from station to all these different networks. YouTube is very important."

Participants said it was important to have trusted sources. They said that traditional media can be elitist. They also noted that diverse perspectives and independent reporting have declined as traditional media outlets have consolidated or shrunk.

Anton Spann, a middle-aged man, said he takes pictures of the informational flyers at Mack Alive on his phone to read them.

The leaflets at Mack Alive provide information that once was a staple of newspapers, including how to get utility help, and information on energy programs, which, in some cases, help people with furnaces and water heater replacement. There's also information about tax preparation and voter registration at election time as well as where to get free food.

Participants in our listening session said neighborhood associations in neighborhoods such as **Yorkshire**, **Morningside**, and **Haverhill**, along with the **Whittier Business Association** provide similar information.

All of the participants noted their preference for factual content and the significance of community organizations like Mack Alive in disseminating information. The discussion also touched on the role of trusted individuals and word of mouth in sharing local news.

## Distrust in Dearborn and beyond

The Census reported that in 2020 there were more than 3.5 million people in the United States who identified as being of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent. More than 2.5 million identified as MENA alone. The MENA designations were write-in responses under the "White" category.

Michigan's MENA population of 310,000 was second only to California's 740,000. Dearborn has the largest MENA population of any city in the U.S., and in 2023, 55 percent of Dearborn's 110,000 residents identified as having Middle Eastern or North African ancestry.

A 29-year-old Palestinian-American artist in Dearborn who wanted to remain anonymous criticized traditional media's tendency to rely on "officials" and "community leaders" rather than community members. They said powerful people in the community are overrepresented while other perspectives go unreported.

*WSU Arab American Listening Session. Photo by Oralandar Williams.*

"The only way to get access to a platform in the community is through the police, through the mayor, politicians, through Arab American businesses," they said. For example, they noted that if the mayor posts on social media, news media will amplify what was said by including it in coverage.

The Israeli-Hamas War sparked protests at colleges and universities across the nation, including the University of Michigan and Wayne State. The conflict divided much of the nation, in particular along generational lines, with older generations sympathizing with Israel, while many young people were sympathetic with Palestinians.

Although the networks had extensive coverage of the conflict, people we spoke with said they see a clear pro-Israel bias. They said the network reporting didn't align with what they had seen in the region and what their parents and grandparents taught them about the decades of conflict between Israel and Palestine. As a result, participants in our focus groups say they approach news outlets and journalists in general with intense suspicion.

Their deep investment in news from Palestine and Lebanon and their lack of trust in coverage from traditional U.S. outlets means that they turned to Palestinian journalists who livestreamed the war, like **Bisan Owda** and **Wissam Nassar**.

Several Arab Americans mentioned independent publishers like the Arab American News, the **Yemeni American News**, and the **TCD Dearborn News**. While they are happy that these dedicated outlets exist, they think they should be supported and improved.

MENA focus group participants said they worry that powerful business, political and police leaders in Dearborn and Hamtramck (two Detroit suburbs with substantial Arab communities) have a lot of influence over these publishers. Several interviewees said coverage skews toward the achievements of wealthy individuals over broader community developments and concerns. In this case, audience members said they feel unrepresented even in the few outlets that exist to serve their community.

Some want more positive community news, while others want more scrutiny of local leaders and politicians and others still want better coverage of community organizing efforts in their cities. They also want news that offers solutions and impact journalism. They want to know how the news affects their lives, not just what events happened.

**Some want more positive community news, while others want more scrutiny of local leaders and politicians and others still want better coverage of community organizing efforts in their cities. They also want news that offers solutions and impact journalism. They want to know how the news affects their lives, not just what events happened.**

They believe one of the ways to achieve this is by having diverse reporters who bring different perspectives to these outlets, which would require larger operations and more employees.

They want their journalists to be more engaged in the community, but also to maintain journalistic integrity, and they are aware of the tension between the two needs.

"It's tough to report things in a non-biased way when you have a stake in it, but that's what I believe a journalistic degree will teach," said Tariq, 26, an Arab American who works in medicine. "Yeah, you're invested in this, but this is how you present the information in a balanced way."

Arab Americans said coverage of their communities completely lacked nuance and fair representation. Many interviewees cited coverage in 2022 of a conservative proposal to ban LGBTQ+ books from Dearborn public libraries.

They said Islamophobia drove the framing in national and larger local papers, including the Detroit News and Free Press. The effort was launched by a white resident of Dearborn, but coverage portrayed it as a monolithic and regressive Muslim attempt at censorship by Dearborn's Arab and Muslim majority.

At the same time, specialty news outlets failed to cover the nuanced perspectives within the community itself and platformed only the loudest, most conservative voices, they said.

Arab American students at Wayne State University in Detroit want more human-centered journalism, representation of marginalized voices, independent local sources, and trusted media platforms. The war in Gaza and divestment from Israel is the top issue for many students on campus. Palestinian students see a lot of bias in media coverage.

Young people want news and information that reflects reality without edits or voice-overs, underscoring the value of uncensored narratives in journalism. "We want all sides of the story," said a female student of Arab descent. "We want the raw and the real truth."

During a community listening session with students at Wayne State, an Arab American student emphasized the role of Instagram in accessing local news, pointing out the effectiveness of Instagram pages like **TCD Dearborn News** (334K followers) and **Metro Detroit News** (633K). Both pages are leading sources for breaking news and information. Moussa Dakroub is the **owner of TCD News** and **started the page in 2013** as a 21-year-old. Dakroub stays out of the spotlight while TCD News and Metro Detroit News have an anonymous team of independent reporters and crowdsource news.

Despite the lack of transparency, they are considered trusted sources. There was a discussion about the potential reasons for anonymity. Fear of consequences is a big reason for people being afraid to speak publicly or be seen in photos or videos. One student talked about how people were doxxed for expressing their beliefs.

The young participants in the listening session were from Metro Detroit's Arab American  communities of Dearborn and Hamtramck and shared personal stories

about the fear of job loss among Palestinian Americans who expressed their beliefs, highlighting the disparity in financial power that affects media narratives.

Another raised concerns about the reliability of social media for news, noting that while it can be useful, it often lacks credibility. The group also acknowledged the challenges of engaging influencers in meaningful discussions about important topics.

*Community listening session with students at Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan. Photo by Eric Ortiz.*

The meeting focused on the importance of authenticity in media representation, with participants agreeing on the need for unedited content that reflects real-life experiences. They discussed the challenges of sharing unfiltered narratives, especially on social media, and the complexities of navigating news in the digital age, emphasizing critical thinking when consuming information online.

The inadequacy of current information on global crises was addressed, with a desire for more in-depth coverage of issues affecting countries like Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The role of social media in raising awareness was recognized, citing influencers who share personal experiences to connect with broader audiences.

The conversation focused on the need for deeper understanding and coverage of global crises, and how global issues could be put into local context. These participants spoke of "news" in a general sense that folded local, national, and international coverage under one umbrella, in part because of their ties to communities abroad.

One male student raised concerns about media biases in the coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts, noting the differences between networks like CNN and Al Jazeera.

He stressed the importance of supporting local news outlets and journalists committed to accurate reporting.

Students realize the challenges of obtaining unbiased news regarding Middle Eastern conflicts, noting that local sources often provide a clearer picture than larger networks. They pointed out the stark contrast in reporting styles, where some outlets focus on statistics while others show the human impact of events. Additionally, they mentioned the need to support journalists and entrepreneurs who provide trustworthy coverage.


*Students for Justice in Palestine encampment protest at Wayne State University. Photo by Shawntay Lewis.*

Syeda Mahreen is 21 years old and lives in Lansing, but resides in Mount Pleasant to attend Central Michigan University. She works as a media technician.

Mahreen is South Asian and Muslim. She said she notices how the news has had Muslim sources and misrepresented these individuals to call them terrorists when they are simply talking about their religion. This contributes to her lack of trust in the news.

She said it makes her sad because people believe that is the truth since it is being reported by the news.

"I don't always blame the news, but I think the news has a really really big hold on people," Mahreen said. "Because you'll be shocked how much research people don't do for themselves, and they'll just copy and paste whatever the news says."

Mahreen's Samsung phone came with the app "Newsbreak" on it. She said she uses it for her daily intake of local news. She never questioned its credibility since it was pre-downloaded.

# The stories that aren't told

During the community listening session with Black residents of Detroit, they complained about important local issues that are not getting covered, and as a result, city officials and departments aren't being held accountable.

East Detroit residents said garbage pickup was a critical issue in the city. They have a priority waste management system, and some neighborhoods are not getting their garbage picked up. Participants expressed concerns about waste management issues in Detroit, attributing them to staffing problems and a lack of urgency from the city.

"Blight is a huge problem in our community that we are trying to shift as well," said Keisha Brooks, a 48-year-old licensed massage therapist and lifetime Detroit resident.

**The community would benefit from having local media cover this story, but the information is not being reported by any traditional media outlets.**

The community would benefit from having local media cover this story, but the information is not being reported by any traditional media outlets.

People spoke of not knowing what was happening in their community or how to influence what is happening.

"I remember my daughter was trying to set up a dog park," said Tinsley, the Mack Alive volunteer. "They wouldn't let her do it. Next thing we know, there's a dog park down the street here."

She said residents weren't aware of plans to install speed humps on the streets. "That kind of information needs to get out," Tinsley said. "And we don't get it until we see it."

They talked about the need for improved information distribution to keep residents informed about local developments and community events.

Participants in our listening sessions said they want a more complete story told or shared about their community, whether good or bad. They just want a fuller story.

During a listening session, several members of the Latino/Hispanic community in Detroit talked about

*Black community listening session at Mack Alive in Detroit. Photo by Oralandar Williams.*

LA SED (Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency that has served Hispanics and residents of southwest Detroit since 1969.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, LA SED played a vital role in informing the community, often through social media, they said. However, LA SED doesn't have the resources—time, money, staff, expertise—to provide consistent information to the community.

Other Latinos in the group said they wanted more useful community news and neighborhood news.

## Asians and invisible communities

About 337,000 people, or just under 4 percent of Michigan's population, identify as Asian. During a community listening session with people from Michigan's Asian American communities, participants talked about preferred platforms and community resources.

The Association of Chinese Americans (ACA) manages a mailing list that shares community news and events, reaching around 3,000 subscribers, said Tao Liu, 43, who works in marketing and development for ACA.

ACA has three service centers—in Detroit, Madison Heights, and Canton. It plays a leading role in enriching the lives of Asian-Pacific Americans in the metro Detroit region.

Liu said he watches **Dragon Eagle TV**, which has **1.6K subscribers on YouTube** and is headquartered in Detroit. Dragon Eagle TV was founded by Lisa Gray, who is Chinese American and worked for 15 years as a TV/radio reporter in China as well as the BBC. She launched the channel with an inheritance she received from her father-in-law, an Air Force veteran.

Gray is the executive producer and host for Dragon Eagle TV, which provides mostly cultural content. But if one scrolls through all of the channel's videos, you'll find interviews with local newsmakers and lawmakers as well as reports on the city's disappearing Chinatown neighborhood.

One of the more interesting features of the channel is its youth initiative. Dragon Eagle works with Asian American youth to broadcast on environmental, local and global issues.

Liu said Gray is "one of the busiest ladies in town, I think. She's everywhere. Anywhere, all the special like ethnic, Asian, you know, minority ethnic groups, the events. She's there."

Gray sometimes collaborates with other local Asian media outlets such as Michigan Korean Today, a biweekly Korean newspaper that publishes 2,000 printed copies for each issue and also posts articles in Korean on **Detroit Korea**, a site for the Korean American community of metro Detroit.

Justin Ahn, a 19-year-old freshman at Georgetown University from Rochester Hills, Michigan, said he turns to Michigan Korean Today for general information about voting, "like when it's absentee ballot, those kinds of information."

Publisher Bruce Park said the newspaper publishes a voter guide that includes all election candidates.

> **"[Dragon Eagle TV executive producer and host Lisa Gray] is 'one of the busiest ladies in town, I think. She's everywhere. Anywhere, all the special like ethnic, Asian, you know, minority ethnic groups, the events. She's there."**
>
> *Tau Liu, age 43*
> *The Association of Chinese Americans (ACA)*

Ahn said he would like even more in-depth coverage, such as information that summarizes candidate backgrounds and going into policy issues. He knows firsthand the limitations of Google searches.

"I definitely wanted more information when I was choosing who to vote for during the election," said Ahn. "Because you have a variety of options, like judges and school board leaders." He said he did Google searches on most candidates, but didn't really find helpful information. "I would say a majority of them didn't really have a lot of information that I could actually vote on."

His solution would be a web page, especially from the local news summarizing each candidate's background or their policy standing, especially if it's education related."

Voters guides, once a staple in daily newspaper coverage, have diminished as newsholes, budgets and staffs have shrunk. They typically provided detailed insights about candidates and other ballot issues, such as referendums or amendments.

Chaerin Park, a junior at Stony Creek High School in Rochester Hills, said while some basic results are available, in-depth coverage of candidates is generally lacking.

Pratham Agarwal, a 19-year-old junior at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, majoring in computer and data sciences with a minor in psychology, said Mt. Pleasant city council members visit their campus regularly to provide updates on local projects, and Mt. Pleasant city commission also posts information on **their website**.

"They come here and just talk about what they've done this past month and just give their news over here because we have an affiliation with them," he said.

This approach, however, doesn't scrutinize the information being put forth, and it's unlikely that public officials are going to provide information that puts them in a bad light.

There is a local paper, the **Morning Sun**, in Mt. Pleasant, but much of its digital content is behind a paywall. Although there are discounts for signing up—$3 for a year with ads, $1 for six months of premium—the standard prices are $182 a year with ads and $363 a year for ad-free.

**Central Michigan Life**, the school's student-run campus media company, also **covers Mt. Pleasant city commission meetings** at city hall and provides **coverage of city government issues**.

For unofficial news, Agarwal said college students often use the anonymous app **Yik Yak**, which works within a five-mile radius of colleges and allows students to share information.

Yik Yak was launched in 2013 and enjoyed some popularity on college campuses before falling out of favor around 2017 after people complained about racist posts and cyberbullying. Agarwal also follows the subreddits **r/Detroit**, **r/AnnArbor** and **r/Lansing** for local updates. These subreddits often feature local news, including updates about crimes and other community-related topics such as affordable housing for teachers, paying high school students for perfect attendance, and job leads for disabled people in Wayne County.

During our listening session, Agarwal mentioned a **specific post about public safety** entitled "Why is it significantly safer north of 8 mile road?" that generated over 55 comments.

However, the discussion on crime reporting also highlighted concerns about negative stereotypes and community division, particularly regarding content shared on platforms like Reddit.

Anna Pham, 18, moved from Louisiana to Mount Pleasant to work at her uncle's nail salon and attend Central Michigan University. She said she doesn't always tune in to traditional media because it's not always readily available.

She said she engages more with news through social media because it is easier to have news on your phone. There is more accessibility and control over the news you are engaging with, Pham said. She's more of a passive social media follower, relying on what the algorithms send to her feeds, rather than seeking out specific channels or creators.

In a separate interview, Chou Chang, a 45-year-old Thai immigrant from Waterford, said he watches his news on YouTube and Facebook pages like **Hmong Michigan**, to keep up with his community's happenings and also those in Metro Detroit.

Chang said he listens to YouTube stories while driving.

"I like listening to political stories," said Chang. "Sometimes I watch soccer and hunting and fishing."

Sunyoung Lee, 47, of Rochester, said the **Korean American Cultural Center** in nearby Southfield is a hub for community events and information gathering.

Lee said that local schools communicate important updates to parents, emphasizing the role of Facebook and school district emails.

Asian Americans are among the fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups in the United States, yet their representation in media remains disproportionately low. According to the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), only a small fraction of mainstream newsrooms and independent outlets adequately cover issues affecting this diverse community. Furthermore, media organizations led by Asian Americans often face funding disparities, resource constraints, and structural barriers that hinder their growth and impact.

Asian American communities are among the most linguistically and culturally diverse in the U.S., with media outlets communicating in a wide range of languages, including Korean, Urdu, Chinese, Vietnamese, and more. This diversity creates unique challenges for ensuring equitable access to quality news. The expertise required to support media outlets that cater to such varied languages and cultural contexts demands specialized resources and knowledge. This complexity is arguably greater than in other underserved media sectors, such as Latino-serving outlets, which often share a common language.

**The expertise required to support media outlets that cater to such varied languages and cultural contexts [as in Asian American communities] demands specialized resources and knowledge. This complexity is arguably greater than in other underserved media sectors, such as Latino-serving outlets, which often share a common language.**

Language and cultural barriers often contribute to a disconnect between Asian Americans and local media, but the disconnect between what's happening in the U.S. versus globally further divides.

Participants in our focus group shared their personal connection to global issues, emphasizing the pain of witnessing suffering in their home countries while feeling disconnected. That disconnect to local and national news in the U.S. was echoed by Sonia Sutter, a Filipina woman who owns a Filipino grocery store in Warren, a suburb east of Detroit, who said she watches YouTube channels for news because they are free. Sutter says she only watches **ABS-CBN News**, a Filipino media company based

in the Philippines, to get news. She says she does not keep up with local news but keeps keyed in on news from the Philippines where her family still lives.

## Focusing on Flint

Flint, Michigan, made international headlines in 2014 when the city switched its water source from Lake Huron to Flint River to save money. The switch **created a water crisis** by exposing tens of thousands of Flint residents to lead and other contaminants in their drinking water. Flint residents suffered health issues and protested the crisis, but officials insisted the water was safe to drink and use. Action was not taken until independent testing by scientists proved the water was not safe.

The Flint water crisis highlighted the need to hold officials accountable and still impacts community members today. During our research, Flint residents expressed their dissatisfaction with the framing of their community by traditional media. The largest city in Genesee County and the principal city within the region known as Mid Michigan, Flint is about 20 percent Black. Many of the Black people we spoke with said they are underrepresented and misrepresented.

*Flint community members engage in Pivot Fund Listening Session. Photo by Oralandar Williams.*

Participants said they feel that they have been largely ignored, especially after the Flint water disaster, by the local and mainstream media.

Percy Glover, the organizer of the listening session, said he uses LinkedIn, which he said is consistently accurate, and named **The Flint Courier News** and 810 News Media Group as trusted sources.

The Flint Courier News was founded in 1976 and informs the Flint community on what affects them. The Flint Courier "grew out of the need to provide a voice for the ecumenical community" and remains a respected newspaper in the mid-Michigan region with a readership of more than 35,000.

810 Media is a local Flint-based urban news media network led by Wyntis Hall that has **a YouTube channel** with 2.34K subscribers and **a Facebook page** with

4.6K followers. 810 Media's mission is to "expose corruption." It launched with a crowdsourcing campaign in 2023, with a goal of raising $2,500. It raised $940 from 34 donations, according to the **crowdsourcing page**.

Hall, a retired hospital worker who is Black, grew up in Flint and has co-hosted "**Tha Morning Bump**," a podcast on YouTube, for a year and a half. Her co-host is Mickey Jordan.

Hall, 48, said she advocates for the citizens of Flint, especially for clean water, and averages 1.5K views/listens per stream.

"The water is still coming out of our faucets brown," said Hall. "I see so many people in our Black community suffering."

Hall attends Flint City Council meetings to keep abreast of what city officials are discussing and voting on. She said she wants to see residents live in better conditions.

"There are roofs that need to be fixed," said Hall of the state of some of Flint's neighborhoods. Hall says she is here to expose wrongdoing. "This is the truth era," proclaims Hall. "This is the truth era."

Those who participated in Flint's listening sessions also want to change the narrative in Flint. They said good things are happening in their community that do not get much coverage.

Some older members of the group continue to rely on longtime broadcast channels, including Channels 12 (WJRT, local ABC) and 5 (WNEM, local CBS) for local news.

But neither station serves as a sole source of information. Instead, participants also mentioned **Flintside** and **MLive**, part of the **MLive Media Group** owned by **Advance Local Media**, a private, family-owned media company based in New York, which in turn is owned by **Advance Publications**, a media company founded in 1924 by American broadcasting businessman Samuel Irving Newhouse Sr.

Flintside is an **award-winning weekly online news magazine** that specializes in neighborhood-level journalism," stories told by Flint people about Flint people" to make their community stronger and more prosperous. Flintside started in 2017 and is published by **Issue Media Group**, a Michigan-based network of digital publications that was incorporated in Detroit in 2005 and publishes community-based solutions journalism in five states (Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, and Florida).

In August 2024, **Issue Media Group was acquired** by **Fourth Estate Inc.**, an Indiana-based **public benefit journalism organization** that provides funding for media companies at the intersection of news, journalism, technology and community.

**Flint: Our Community Our Voice** is the main communications arm of **Flint Neighborhoods United**, a coalition of block clubs, neighborhood associations, crime watch captains and presidents (or their designated representative). The collaborative meets on the first Saturday of each month to share information and leverage resources to create positive change in the greater Flint community.

Glover said Flint's neighborhood associations, block clubs, and community organizations are akin to unofficial newsrooms, as they keep local residents informed on key issues such as water, crime and other issues that make daily life run smoother.

Glover said community groups "understand the needs of the community" and enjoy a trust with the community because they have formed bonds between residents and communities.

He sees the benefit of having a journalism training program where these community centers could add community newsrooms to their services and be possible sources for collaborative journalism in a more official capacity.

Residents have also turned to niche groups for specialty reporting and information about health and healthcare.

The Flint listening session participants also mentioned **Greater Flint Health Coalition**, which has **2K followers on Facebook** and **2K followers on LinkedIn** and is an important community organization and resource for all of Flint. The goal of the Greater Flint Health Coalition is to help Genesee County community members practice healthy lifestyles and provide access to effective health and medical care to ensure optimal health for all people. The organization has a podcast and a monthly newsletter to increase reach and impact.

Dr. Kenyetta Dotson, a participant in the Flint listening session, is the director of community-based implementation and engagement for Michigan State University, College of Human Medicine. She is a respected community leader and partner with the Greater Flint Health Coalition and also recently launched a local podcast that focuses on community resources.

The group also mentioned a newsletter at **Flint ReCAST** (Flint Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma), a program of the City of Flint and the Greater Flint Health Coalition that was **started in 2021** and works with high-risk youth and families. Flint ReCAST has a **community advisory board** and is dedicated to changing Flint's narrative by uplifting the voices of residents and crafting policies and programs to motivate positive changes.

As in Mt. Pleasant, local officials have also taken to social media to get their message out.

Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton also has **a popular Facebook page** with 3.5K followers. Sheriff Chris Swanson's **Facebook page** has 15K followers. Listening session participants said Swanson provides weekly updates and often goes live with the **Genesee County Sheriff's Office** and gets 30K-50K views per live stream on average, such as a **Christmas stream** that got 54,000 views.

Focus group participants said Swanson streams from anywhere in the community, including with kids at elementary schools. He has established a strong bond with the community and built trust with an open approach to community engagement.

"He's probably not your typical law enforcement officer," said Glover.

Flint listening session participants described him as "very personable," "rather colorful," and "really beloved."

"I would say from my perspective, he got a lot of buy-in after he did like a peaceful protest," said Dr. Dotson. "He put his gun down, and he walked away with the people that were protesting. And so that was really impactful after George Floyd."

Carma Lewis, 57, a Black community liaison in Flint who **works in government as an office manager** for U.S. congressmen, cited **Flint Beat** among the news outlets she turns to for news because it's hyperlocal, people-focused and run by a Flint resident, publisher Jaquanda Johnson.

"She talks to people," said Lewis during our listening session. Everyone in the Flint listening session agreed that Flint Beat, which also received a Press Forward grant, is a respected and trusted go-to source.

## The Chaldean community

Chaldeans are Aramaic-speaking Eastern Rite Catholics and Christians, and they are another underrepresented community in Michigan. An estimated 187,000 Chaldeans live in Metro Detroit, the largest community of Chaldeans in the U.S. There are 10 Chaldean Catholic Churches in Metro Detroit.

We met with 11 members of the Chaldean community at the Chaldean Cultural Center in Bloomfield Township, a northern suburb of Detroit.

They were critical of the media's narrow focus on Islam, which they feel misrepresents the broader Middle Eastern community. There is frustration with being "lumped" in as one big demographic of Arab Americans, rather than recognized as Christians from Iraq.

"Getting my news kind of varies," said Leydya Yatooma, a young Chaldean American woman in her late 20s who is a professional photographer. "It's definitely not watching Fox or NBC. … I never turn my TV on and I'm like, let me watch the news. I feel like it's maybe an older generation. My dad does all the time."

She added, "But honestly, Twitter and Reddit sound kind of horrific sometimes. You're thinking, 'This is crazy on there.' But it's kind of nice because you can pick and choose what you want to really indulge in, and then you can fact-check it yourself."

The **Chaldean Moms of Metro Detroit**, a private Facebook group with 14,900 members, was cited as a popular source of information and a place to share ideas, ask questions, and stay connected.

Natally Shahfi, a woman under 30, has 25,000 followers on her TikTok account, **Unleashed Holistic**. But the holistic and spiritual practitioner said the popular social media platform has censored some of her posts that included people sharing health experiences, noting that content related to chronic illness is often suppressed.

*Chaldean community listening session at the Chaldean Community Center in Bloomfield Michigan. Photo by Chaldean Community Center.*

"How can lived experiences be censored," asked another participant in the listening group, expressing the lack of control that comes with being reliant on third-party platforms.

Weam Namou, a respected Chaldean American elder woman and community leader in her 50s, said she is concerned about mainstream media's reliability, drawing from personal experiences. Namou, who was born in Baghdad, said she is skeptical of the traditional media's coverage of the Middle East.

The group we spoke with said they read the **Detroit News** and **Detroit Free Press**, but they are loyal to the **Chaldean News**, which is still a major source of news for Metro Detroit's Chaldean community.

Founded in 2006, Chaldean News is a monthly print magazine with a circulation of about 10,000 and more than 12,000 monthly digital readers. The print edition has 44-52 pages, and subscribers pay $35 a year for the Chaldean News, which also has a digital version and companion podcast. Between editions, the outlet shares stories,

news, and information online and on social media. The website gets 15,000 unique visitors per month with social outreach to more than 11,000 people. The publication is now located in West Bloomfield after being based in Farmington Hills.

"We're actually growing," said Sarah Kittle, managing editor of the Chaldean News. "Partly, because we did introduce an app last year and we're doing more stories in Arabic, and we are engaging the younger community as well. So we're trying to keep our older readers happy by introducing the Arabic, and we're trying to get young readers by writing stories about them."

Recent stories centered around younger readers feature local youth, including a piece on Chaldean girls who play hockey and another one on teen philanthropists.

But Kittle also stresses that the Chaldean News is "keeping our readers abreast of what is going on in Iraq." The migration of Chaldeans to Michigan started in the 1920s when Iraqi Christians came to Michigan after automotive manufacturer Henry Ford offered $5-a-day jobs.

More recently, in 2003, Chaldeans escaped to Michigan fleeing the turmoil in their homeland of Iraq.

Leydya Yatooma is one of those people born in Iraq. She came to the United States in the early 2000s at the age of 7 or 8 to escape war, and during our listening session, she pointed out the importance of trust and genuineness in news.

Yatooma finds that authenticity in Eric Stephon Thomas (a creator/speaker/story-teller popular on Instagram, Facebook, and X/Twitter) as a community reporter she trusted. Thomas is the senior vice president of external relations for Invest Detroit, a mission-driven organization that supports business and real estate projects to ignite economic growth in Detroit. Thomas is also a digital creator and senior partner at Saga MKTG (a storytelling agency), and the former chief storyteller for the city of Detroit.

"I follow him everywhere on social media," said Yatooma, who called Thomas a friend. "He has a big following everywhere. And he just kind of touches on every single topic that happens. And it always goes back to being local."

**"I follow [Eric Stephon Thomas] everywhere... He has a big following everywhere. And he just kind of touches on every single topic that happens. And it always goes back to being local."**

*Leydya Yatooma*
*Iraqi-born woman who participated in the Chaldean listening session*

# Rural voices and pink slime

Most of Michigan, 95 percent, is considered rural, according to the Census Bureau, but only 20 percent of Michiganders live outside of the state's population centers. While Michigan is 79 percent White, according to 2023 Census data, many of the state's 53 rural counties are more than 90 percent White. (Arab Americans were categorized as White in the 2020 Census.)

The loss of local newspapers in rural areas has given rise to poor quality, biased news sites known as "pink slime." Metric Media is one of the largest purveyors of these sites with nearly 40 in Michigan alone. These sites thrive in part because of the ability to duplicate content and work remotely, according to a report from the **Tow Center for Digital Journalism**.

As part of our research, the Pivot Fund worked with **Consumer Focused Opinions**, a market research firm based in Southfield, Michigan, to organize two groups that included people from rural areas. The 90-minute sessions were held Nov. 6-7, 2024.

The first session consisted of 13 people (seven women, six men) from inner-ring suburbs and rural areas outside Detroit in southeastern Michigan.

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 53 and included a software developer, sanitation engineer/chauffeur, industrial sewer, clerical associate, college student/mom, social worker, IT technician, sales rep (Nabisco), graphic designer, network security analyst (software firm), manager for a rehab facility, hair stylist, and a software developer.

Their go-to sources for news and information included Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, X, YouTube, podcasts, Apple News and Samsung News.

**Participants ranged in age from 25 to 53... Their go-to sources for news and information included Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, X, YouTube, podcasts, Apple News and Samsung News.**

Some mentioned radio stations: 107.9, 88.7, 96.3, 97.1, 97.9, 950 AM, WWJ AM, 95.5.

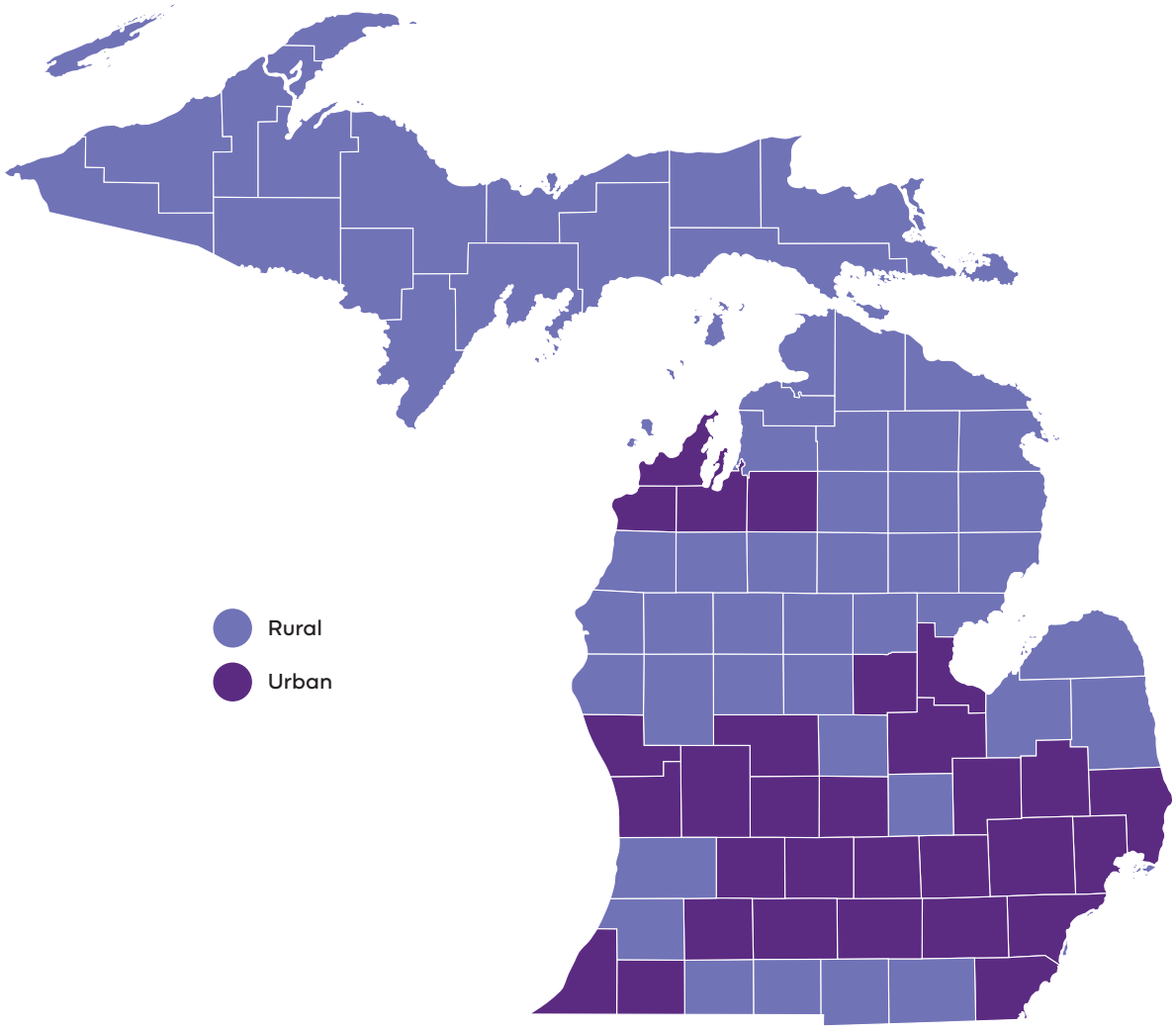
Others mentioned TV channels and networks: CNN, Fox (local), NBC, ABC (local and national), MSNBC, C-SPAN. While traditional media included the Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, Wall Street Journal, BBC News, Time and the Daily Mail.

When asked about local media, they cited **Madison-Park News**, the **state of Michigan website**. Three participants said they "occasionally read" the Port Huron **Times Herald**, **The News Herald**, and **The Trenton Times**.

Madison-Park News is owned by **C and G Newspapers**, Michigan's largest non-daily newspaper group, which publishes 19 local papers in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties. The Trenton Times is a multimedia news magazine published by Go Big Multimedia, a media organization that publishes five monthly community news magazines for communities in Wayne County: **Grosse Ile Grand**, **Riverview Register**, **Southgate Star** and the **Wyandotte Warrior**.

## Michigan Has 83 Counties, 53 of which are rural

*Michigan has 53 rural counties according to the most recent federal classification standards. Counties are classified as rural if they are not part of a 2020 metropolitan statistical area.*




*Source: 2023 Rural Urban Continuum Codes, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture*

The Gannett Company owns the Port Huron Times Herald, a daily newspaper in Port Huron, Michigan. The Times Herald is the only daily newspaper in St. Clair County and also serves parts of Sanilac and Lapeer counties. The Times Herald was founded in 1869 and joined Gannett in 1970. It is part of the USA Today Network and a USA Today print site for Michigan. In addition to publishing USA Today and the daily paper, the Times Herald does commercial printing for 13 clients.

Participants in the Nov. 7 session ranged in age from 25 to 44 and worked in law enforcement, education, and IT. Participants included a business owner, INS agent, cashier, a shipping and receiving supervisor, and students.

They represented seven counties (Grayling, Kalamazoo, Arenac, Genesee, Roscommon, Ogemaw, Mecosta) and lived in seven cities: Crawford, Kalamazoo, Standish, Clio, Houghton Lake, West Branch, and Big Rapids.

The conversation revealed a mix of traditional media, such as local TV stations, and social media platforms, which participants rely on for hyperlocal updates. The importance of community-driven news sources, including Facebook groups and neighborhood apps, was emphasized as essential for staying informed about local events, reflecting the changing landscape of news consumption.

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The conversation underscored the idea that when it comes to local news and information there's a range of coverage and expectations.

Martina George, a White woman in her early 40s, said she relies on a printed school newspaper, The Clio School Bell, for local news about her children's education in **Clio Area Schools**. The school district also provides a weekly online news update called the **School Bell Weekly Review**, which highlights happenings in the district. Again, this highlights the trend of institutions stepping in to fill and control their narrative in areas where there is no other news outlet.

George held up a copy of the Clio School Bell newspaper during our listening session and values its community reporting. She said traditional coverage often focuses on larger cities, like Saginaw and Bay City, while the Clio School Bell publishes everything from photos of the homecoming dance to stories about teacher firings. George said she can't get that kind of information anywhere else.

The 10-page newspaper is mailed out to 10,000 subscribers every other month, said Craig Nelson, who is director of marketing and communications for Clio Area Schools. He is the reporter, editor, and publisher of the newspaper, which only covers "100 percent" positive stories, and there is no student input except for an occasional photo taken by yearbook staff upon Nelson's request.

At the same time, many of the people in this session were concerned about the rise in coyote sightings linked to the increasing deer population, but there was no coverage to help guide them on what to do as a local response.

One person who lives in Standish, a small city in central Michigan, noted that mountain lions have been spotted in northern Michigan and questioned whether the Department of Natural Resources is forthcoming with information.

Without a dominant trusted news source, participants said they had to develop strategies on how to verify information.

Kevin Miller, the business owner mentioned at the top of this report, and Alyse, a 34-year-old woman who works in law enforcement and is a school lunch aid, said they often cross-reference information. Alyse added that the emphasis on negative news coverage discourages her from watching. She believes that good news stories are often overlooked because they don't generate as much discussion. Miller echoed her sentiments, pointing out that local news frequently emphasizes crime and accidents, with positive stories appearing only as an afterthought.

Participants want more than flyover coverage, or one-and-done stories. Tracy, another participant, recognized that more detailed follow-ups on news stories can ensure accountability.

Miller was among those who still read the newspaper, a habit he said started more than 30 years ago. He noted that legacy newspapers continue to play a role in rural communities where options can be limited. He defended the value of newspapers when another participant, a woman in her early 30s who is a shipping and receiving supervisor, noted that social media has made news more accessible.

In addition to news sources, participants said they learn what's happening in their neighborhoods from apps such as Nextdoor and Ring. But this information is limited.

Neither provides the civic news and information that's often needed to act as a responsible citizen—information such as what their mayor is doing, updates on parks and local development, or the city or township budget.

**[Participants] echoed each other, saying nobody is watching out for them and nobody is holding local officials accountable.**

People need more than a city's website for information. Miller noted that many residents are disconnected from daily news that isn't relevant to where they live or how they live. Other participants expressed frustration over rising property taxes and the difficulty in finding reliable information. They echoed each other, saying nobody is watching out for them and nobody is holding local officials accountable.

## Michigan voices

To prepare for these two focus groups, 256 people were screened about their news consumption. Their responses to the screening questions reflected what we heard in our in-person and virtual sessions.

Most people, 87 percent, considered themselves "somewhat informed" when it comes to local and state issues. More than that, all but three said they consume news "several times a day." The three outliers said they consume news once a day.

These Michiganders rely on a variety of sources for their news and information. Most had at least one traditional news source, ranging from CNN, Fox, the networks, the Detroit News, and other legacy newspapers to social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook as well as podcasts.

When they want to explore a specific topic, those screened said they turned to the internet for information. They go to .gov websites, Google, news sites, social media and social media influencers.

"I go to the source, whether it be local or federal government sites, then I go to YouTube to watch the full episode or whatever," said a White man in his late 30s.

"I go directly to the source," said a White woman in her late 40s. "If I'm looking into politics, .gov sites. If I'm looking into news about what happened in certain area, I go to city websites and so forth."

"I will search topics in my social media accounts and see what my favorite influencers have to say," said an Asian American man in his late 20s.

The listening sessions provided additional insights into consumption habits and attitudes about journalism. A 65-year-old participant, who is originally from China, asked to remain anonymous. The participant has lived in Michigan for the last 30 years.

They said they get their news mostly from the internet, in particular the Chinese site **Wenxue City**, because they do not subscribe to cable. Wenxue City draws its audience from Chinese individuals who are living in the United States or Canada.

It allows them to stay current with news going on in China and around the world, the participant said.

When it comes to trust in news, they said it is not about trust, it is about the received information. The participant said they do not fact-check any of the information they engage with. "If you want to check every piece of news, you probably don't have time to do anything else," they said.

Keira Mules, 19, of Port Huron, attends Central Michigan University where she works as a residential assistant at CMU and a Jimmy Johns. Mules said she gets her news through her friends, professors and Instagram. "I feel like I should be able to keep up with the news, like actually watch the five o'clock Fox News, but I don't."

Mules said she will fact-check some of that information by looking at headlines of articles online. She added that she only trusts information that comes from multiple sources, and has a lot of "evidence."

Rosa Morales, 76, of Saginaw, works for the statewide chapter of LLEAD **(Latino Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development**), focused on journalism and media coordination, and to empower Latino voices for the 2024 election and jumpstart NAHJ student chapters.


*LLEAD holds a gathering at local Saginaw Mexican restaurant to discuss 2024 U.S. presidential election. Photo by Rosa Morales.*

"Now, the **Saginaw News**," she said, "I mean it's a shadow of what it used to be."

Morales said two Latina journalists who worked with the Saginaw News publication a few years ago connected with the Latino community. Once they left, that is no longer happening, she said.

She referred to Saginaw as a news desert for the Latino community. Researchers found that Latinos disproportionately rely on social media for news and information, and this habit leaves them **vulnerable to misinformation**.

"Based on the research done in Florida, California, Texas, probably New York, wherever the population is more concentrated, the false information is hitting its target, which is the Latino person," Morales said.

Israel Saputo, 26, of West Bloomfield, a team leader for a window installation service in Wixom, said he trusts local news more than national news.

The Detroit News is his main source of local news to know what major things have happened in the area, he said. But he elaborated that his use of the paper is limited.

"I don't really use it (local news) for narratives," he said. "I don't use it for politics. I just use it really for the stuff that's going on in my area that I should be aware about. I feel like a lot of local news, for the most part, is just informing you on 'this is what just happened.' I trust citizens more than I trust the news."

## News sources

During our research, we identified dozens of media entrepreneurs whom people said they trusted and turned to for information. Michigan's news ecosystem has many established independent news outlets, but the disruption has also spawned media entrepreneurs dedicated to working in underserved communities. These organizations are a mix of privately owned enterprises and nonprofits.

"I think with the rise of nonprofit media, which is also coming to people through their text streams, it's giving people more local news about things that affect their lives," said Wayne State University journalism professor Alicia Nails. "That's definitely a trend. And then also to niche publications about their special interests, affinity groups, age groups, cultural groups, the things that people relate to, they want to filter the news through those voices."

**"I think with the rise of nonprofit media, which is also coming to people through their text streams, it's giving people more local news about things that affect their lives... and then also to niche publications about their special interests, affinity groups, age groups, cultural groups, the things that people relate to, they want to filter the news through those voices."**

*Alicia Nails*
*Wayne State University journalism professor*

"They're picking and choosing where they get their news from," she added. "They use that term, 'echo chambers,' and they're looking to reinforce what they already kind of believe or know or the information that they'd like to know about."

Many of the Michiganders we spoke with rely on online pages and groups more than traditional local news outlets. People share videos, photos, and information on these pages. This is happening in multiple counties, including Wayne, Macomb, Oakland, Kalamazoo, and Calhoun.

While they can be useful, social media news pages are often published anonymously. Oftentimes, community members will know who is behind the pages and have personal connections with them even if that information is not publicly available. Many of those focusing on people living in Metro Detroit and inner-ring suburbs such as Dearborn cover crime, document civic issues, and share information about community resources.

Their followers range between 80,000 to 800,000, and they have heavy engagement based on likes and comments. They include **The Metro Detroit News/TMDN**, **Dearborn/TCD News**, **Dearborn Scope**, and **Detroit Uncut**. There is also a Reddit page r/Detroit with 203K members, where people share news stories and discuss any and all things about the city.

*Planet Detroit reporter Isabelle Tavares engaging with community in southwest Detroit. Photo by Planet Detroit.*

Some pages have been operating for over a decade. And some describe themselves as "independent reporters born in the Detroit area who have an interest in covering breaking stories, community development, and positive stories."

Press Forward's **$20 million investment in 205 local newsrooms** across the country included four from Michigan, with **El Central**, **Flint Beat**, **NowKalamazoo**, and **Planet Detroit** each receiving a $100,000 grant over two years.

"The grant gives us breathing room," said Ben Lando, publisher and founder of NowKalamazoo. "On the fundraising side of things, it's a safety net. On the growth side, it gives us the confidence to take the steps we planned to take. We need to hire people."

Their need for full-time staff is apparent. They currently operate with three full-time independent contractors, three half-time, and a handful of freelance journalists.

NowKalamazoo's coverage focuses on four key areas of coverage:

- Beyond Bullets (coverage of the widespread gun violence in Kalamazoo)
- Policies and Power (coverage of municipalities, policies, and how they impact citizens)
- Explore and Connect (coverage of the fine arts, culture, humanities, and creativity in Kalamazoo) and
- Businesses and Entrepreneurs (coverage of small businesses in Kalamazoo).


*NowKalamazoo's David Benac and unknown participant at NowKalamazoo's Voters' Forum community event. Photo by Ben Lando.*

"As an organization, we need people to be doing the work of the business, and people to be building the business," said Lando. "We'd hire editors and journalists to take on more of the burden that is currently shared by our small staff, and expand the journalistic work. And then the current staff who are wearing many hats can wear a few fewer hats and do a lot more with the ones they still have."

Likewise, Dewaelsche of El Central said the Press Forward grant will allow them to continue to hire freelancers to write stories and stay afloat financially without worrying about paying the bills.

**Outlier Media** trains and employs Detroit citizens as "Documenters," or citizen journalists, as part of a national city bureau program. Outlier and nonprofit community news organizations like **BridgeDetroit** are engaging with Detroiters in a personable way and using journalism to identify issues community members face. By hosting community **listening sessions** and **resource workshops**, they find out what the public is missing in their local media and will work to cover it.

Local news organizations and community members told us there is great demand for more community journalism training. Newsrooms and the community could benefit and strengthen civic health.

Small-town local media operations will likely need a multilayered approach.

**Local news organizations and community members told us there is great demand for more community journalism training. Newsrooms and the community could benefit and strengthen civic health... Small-town local media operations will likely need a multilayered approach.**

In June 2024, Northern Michigan started a Press Forward chapter with the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, becoming the 22nd Press Forward local chapter.

The Traverse City Record-Eagle is a daily newspaper with a circulation of 17,209 (21,846 on Sundays) that bills itself as "Northern Michigan's Newspaper." It is the paper of record for Grand Traverse County and serves 12 other counties: Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Crawford, Emmet, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, Otsego, and Wexford counties.

Founded in 1858 as the Grand Traverse Herald, the Record-Eagle is part of Community Newspapers Holdings, Inc. (CNHI), which owns more than 200 non-daily newspapers and 90 daily newspapers across 22 states. CNHI newspapers are grouped together and sometimes share editorial content and sell packages to advertisers.

Home delivery for the Record-Eagle starts at $26.99. Monthly digital subscriptions cost $17.99. They also offer articles for 99 cents and a day pass for $1.99.

The Traverse City Record-Eagle is one of 22 partners in the New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative, a group of news, academic, and community organizations pooling time, talent, and resources to cover chronic problems in communities with a solutions lens. It is modeled on other successful news collaboratives supported by the **Solutions Journalism Network**.

Launched in 2020, the collaborative works to report on and reflect the diverse communities they serve. But collaboration is not without challenges.

"In terms of being cognizant of communities of color, it's still a big hole," said Monica Williams, a Black journalist who was born and raised in Detroit and now is project manager and director of this news collaborative.

She said some people cling to a competitive mindset.

Williams is a veteran journalist and native Detroiter who serves as executive director and editor for the New York and Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative, a nonprofit news collaborative that includes Urban Aging News, the Arab American News, Planet Detroit, Detroit Free Press, The Detroit News, and others.

Williams previously worked at Bridge Michigan, a nonprofit, and then helped launch BridgeDetroit in 2020.

"I was a Detroiter and frankly, the only person of color on staff," said Williams. "I pretty much helped launch BridgeDetroit, which is community-based for Detroiters, by Detroiters was the tagline at the time."

Today, Williams has seen the local media landscape in Michigan evolve to serve communities of color more than in the past. But while progress has been made with legacy papers and new startups like BridgeDetroit and Outlier Media, all the needs of communities of color are not being met, and significant gaps in coverage remain, she said.

**"I was a Detroiter and frankly, the only person of color on staff... I pretty much helped launch BridgeDetroit, which is community-based for Detroiters, by Detroiters was the tagline at the time."**

*Monica Williams*
*A Black journalist, project manager and director of Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative*

News and information for other underserved Michigan communities also face critical gaps.

**Pride Source**, an Ann Arbor-based LGBTQ+ media organization, has provided news and representation for the state's queer community since 1993. In addition to the website, Pride Source produces a biweekly newspaper, "Between the Lines," and a national wire service, "Q Syndicate." The organization

works to deliver local, regional, and national stories, often on a limited budget and with a small team.

The organization prioritizes diversity and inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, said editorial director Chris Azzopardi.

"Over the last three years, I have made it a point to ensure ample coverage for subgroups within our LGBTQ+ community," said Azzopardi. The effort has brought greater attention to Black and trans individuals. However, it is constrained by the organization's reliance on freelancers and limited financial resources.

"Between the Lines" serves as a key source of information for Michigan's LGBTQ+ population. It connects readers, particularly younger ones, to the broader queer community.

"When I was 19, just coming out, I'd pick up Between the Lines and see people like me on every page," Azzopardi said. "It showed me a world I never thought I could be a part of."

Financial limitations are a persistent obstacle for Pride Source, affecting its ability to recruit and retain a diverse pool of writers. Their operation is funded from a combination of sources: print advertising (70 percent), digital advertising (15 percent), sponsored editorial projects (10 percent), and subscribers and donations (5 percent).

"We don't have the resources to hire full-time additional staff, which means we often miss out on great stories or have to encourage writers to pitch elsewhere," Azzopardi said.

The organization also faces difficulty finding writers from underrepresented backgrounds, such as trans and non-binary individuals, due to a lack of outreach resources and financial incentives.

Pride Source produces an annual magazine that includes directories of queer-affirming services, such as healthcare providers and realtors, distributed across Michigan.

**"We don't have the resources to hire full-time additional staff, which means we often miss out on great stories or have to encourage writers to pitch elsewhere."**

*Chris Azzopardi*
*editorial director of Pride Source*

The organization measures its success not only through awards, such as its first NLGJA Award for Excellence in LGBTQ+ journalism, but also by how its content resonates with the community.

"Sometimes I'll see someone pick up our paper at a coffee shop, and it reminds me of the 19-year-old I was—finding myself in those pages," Azzopardi said.

# Media entrepreneurs and sustainability

Michigan has a more mature ecosystem for media entrepreneurs than other states we've researched. But we found a diverse mix of independent journalism innovators, from young college students to community elders, serving underserved communities.

## Planet Detroit

Planet Detroit was founded in 2019 with a $25,000 grant from the Facebook Journalism Project. As noted above, it is one of four Michigan outlets awarded a $100,000 grant from the Press Forward Foundation.

Planet Detroit's goal is to cover issues around climate, environment, equity, and health for the Detroit area. Founder and editor Nina Ignacza has also worked to keep her organization free of the elitism that characterizes traditional news coverage.

She said it's important to help the public understand the role of journalism and its value. Doing this means taking down barriers to access between the public and journalists.

*Planet Detroit team. Photo by Planet Detroit.*

"We just finished up a campaign on our site which was like, help us craft questions for election leaders," Ignacza said. "I emailed everybody who participated in that campaign and thanked them and told them what we're gonna do with the information. And I got like three replies back right away, like thanking me for even putting it out there."

Planet Detroit also produced a **comprehensive environmental voting guide** for the 2024 Michigan general election.

"Anything we can do to help make people feel a part of the process and demystify it, which is hand-in-hand with like 'de-elitifying,' if that's a word, helping people understand that this is for them and here's how you can be a part of the process," Ignaczak said.

**"Anything we can do to help make people feel a part of the process and demystify it... helping people understand that this is for them and here's how you can be a part of the process."**

*Nina Ignacza*
*Planet Detroit founder and editor*

She said that unlike traditional journalism which primarily reports on issues identified by journalists, institutions or other sources, Planet Detroit makes an effort to find out what issues are important to its audience.

Planet Detroit has a **neighborhood reporting lab**, where neighborhood reporters hit the streets to capture local perspectives. For election season, neighborhood reporters **focused on voting and civic participation**.

Through interviews with community members across Detroit, Planet Detroit explored the challenges, motivations, and hopes that shape how neighbors engage with the democratic process. These stories spotlighted the diverse voices and experiences that define voting in their city, offering a window into the ways Detroiters view their role in shaping the future.

Social media and digital sources have eroded the gatekeeping power of traditional media. Now, everyone can push information into the public domain at any time of the day.

Part of good journalism, says Laprisha Daniels, the executive director of Planet Detroit, is helping people understand their own power.

# Flint Beat

In 2017, Flint-area native Jiquanda Johnson returned to the city to bring local news to its residents and started **Flint Beat**. Since Flint Beat launched, they have been a leading news platform for the Flint community to be heard.

The 40-something Johnson is a former reporter for The Detroit News where she covered local news and the city's neighborhoods. Flint Beat covers local government and education and practices **solutions journalism**.

Flint Beat's parent company is **Brown Impact Media Group**, started by Johnson in 2014 and focused on developing news products in underserved and marginalized communities, starting in Flint.

Flint Beat's coverage has been recognized nationally, and Johnson has been lauded by journalism institutions such as the Poynter Institute.

As noted above, Flint Beat is one of four Michigan outlets awarded a $100,000 grant from the Press Forward Foundation.

"I know we're impacting and we're making changes," Johnson told The Pivot Fund. "We cover gun violence… we do a special issue for the aging and the people who care for them. We focus on the underserved and marginalized population."

> **"I know we're impacting and we're making changes… We cover gun violence…we do a special issue for the aging and the people who care for them. We focus on the underserved and marginalized population."**
>
> *Jiquanda Johnson*
> *founder of Flint Beat*

Johnson is part of the community. On any given day, she can be found doing the daily life chores of regular citizens, whether it's going to the local food market or having her car serviced. These interactions help Johnson understand the needs of the community and meet them through community journalism.

As the Flint Beat website says: "Flint residents are not voiceless. They have a voice. Flint Beat is here to give them an opportunity to share that voice and to empower, impact and inform the community we serve."

Johnson has a staff of herself, a reporter and a photographer.

# BridgeDetroit

**BridgeDetroit**, a digital-first outlet that recently launched a free magazine to reach audiences who are not online, is approximately 80 percent grant-funded. In addition to informing communities, BridgeDetroit works to connect residents with services and, in some cases, provide the services itself.

"It's also nerve-racking because if you do your job right, you're becoming essential and you're becoming trusted," said executive director Laurén Abdel-Razzaq. "You cannot be there one day and leave the next, because then you're leaving this information gap and this hole in services that are just not right to do to people."

> **"You cannot be there one day and leave the next, because then you're leaving this information gap and this hole in services that are just not right to do to people."**
>
> *Laurén Abdel-Razzaq*
> *executive director of BridgeDetroit*

In the fall of 2024, BridgeDetroit was uncertain about its primary funding, as it neared the end of the grant cycle with a significant Press Forward partner who had not yet confirmed whether it would renew its support.

Launched in 2020, BridgeDetroit operates as a project under **The Center for Michigan**, which provides administrative support such as HR and financial services in exchange for a fee. Paying money to the Center for Michigan is frowned on by some in the nonprofit world.

Abdel-Razzaq said the benefits outweigh the costs and it's an essential component of their business model.

Unlike their statewide counterpart, **Bridge Michigan**, which can seek individual donations from wealthier regions in the state, BridgeDetroit serves Detroit's more impoverished communities.

"Sometimes we'll get a notification that someone sent us $3 and they'll be like, this is the last of the money I have at the end of the month after paying all my bills," said Abdel-Razzaq. "I think that we will never be in a situation where we're fully funded by our readers. It's just not gonna happen."

To diversify revenue, Abdel-Razzaq has secured values-aligned corporate sponsorships and is expanding ad sales while maintaining the organization's strict advertising policies. They want to offer discounted ad placements for businesses and individuals from underserved communities to cover the $40,000 annual cost of printing their recently launched magazine. She has also been advised to expand the pool of grants for which she applies to include those supporting projects that promote democracy, civic engagement and the First Amendment.

To continue providing robust information to its audiences while working with limited resources, BridgeDetroit relies on partnerships with other local outlets. One notable collaboration involves a shared reporter with the Detroit Free Press, a legacy newspaper, where the publishers split the reporter's salary and share her work. Abdel-Razzaq described this partnership as a success.

"Good relationships with the editors at the Free Press mean that we're able to collaborate and have meaningful content from the shared reporter despite very different models of journalism and business models," she explained.

They also publish content from **Chalkbeat Detroit**, and partner with El Central to spread the word about their community engagement events to the latter's Spanish-speaking audience.

> **"Good relationships with the editors at the Free Press mean that we're able to collaborate and have meaningful content from the shared reporter despite very different models of journalism and business models."**
>
> *Laurén Abdel-Razzaq*
> *executive director of BridgeDetroit*

Central to BridgeDetroit's mission is their **Community Priorities Model**, which establishes a continuous feedback loop with residents to identify coverage needs and adapt their offerings. This model informs the outlet's outreach strategies, including neighborhood resource fairs and town halls. Abdel-Razzaq stressed the importance of community presence.

"The right way to reach people is you have to go to them," she said. "People have issues with transportation, childcare, they work multiple jobs, and so the answer is to really be in the community with them."

One recent example of this community presence was a refugee resource fair the organization held in Detroit, targeting immigrant communities in Detroit and nearby Hamtramck and Dearborn.

The refugee event offered housing and immigration support, with Arabic and Spanish translators on hand to help. With strapped resources, Bridge had to rely on volunteer translators, including Abdel-Razzaq's own father who is Jordanian. Due to the precarious legal statuses of attendees, Bridge did not collect identifying information that they would have normally collected for events.

One of the main services available on the day was help applying for a Detroit city ID, which is available to undocumented migrants and facilitates housing and employment opportunities, and allows people to get their driver's licenses. Representatives from the city of Detroit attended the event and signed people up, waiving the associated fees.

"People were coming in and out all night. We were not prepared for how many people would be there. I counted at least 75 people," said Abdel-Razzaq. "We always feed everybody at every event that we have, so that even if you don't get anything else out of this, you can be in community and get a meal. And at this was, I thought at some point 'yikes, we're gonna run out of food.'"

Bridge made flyers and postcards in Arabic, Spanish and English. They canvassed neighborhoods for multiple days and partnered with immigration service agencies to both publicize the event as well as offer their services at the event itself.

## Riverwise Magazine

The team at **Riverwise Magazine** grapples with similar concerns about sustainability in different ways. We spoke with managing editor Megan Douglass.

Riverwise is a quarterly social justice-focused community magazine based in Detroit. It is dedicated to amplifying Detroit's Black and marginalized voices and fostering grassroots organizing.

Founded in 2017 by former journalists from the now defunct The Michigan Citizen, Riverwise was born out of a commitment to preserve independent media in Detroit. The magazine serves as a platform for storytelling, education, and community building, and publishes community news, poetry and art.

The magazine is both free and ad-free, ensuring it remains available to all while avoiding external influences on its editorial content. Each issue is printed in a run of 8,000 copies and distributed across Detroit and beyond, with demand growing around 25 percent in the past year.

**In addition to the magazine, Riverwise hosts workshops, political education sessions, and community gatherings, positioning itself as both a publication and a hub for organizing and connecting grassroots movements.**

In addition to the magazine, Riverwise hosts workshops, political education sessions, and community gatherings, positioning itself as both a publication and a hub for organizing and connecting grassroots movements.

Funding remains a critical challenge. Riverwise's $200,000 annual budget is primarily supported by institutional grants from funders such as the **Boggs Center**, the **Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan**, the **J3 Fund** and New Visions. Individual donors and subscribers provide additional support but account for only about 5 percent of the total funding.

The reliance on grants highlights systemic inequities in philanthropy, where access often depends on personal relationships.

"Almost all of the grants we've ever gotten came through the personal relationships that White people who sat on the Boggs board have," Douglass explains, adding, "It's often not based on merit."

Riverwise faces significant barriers to sustainability. The organization operates with only one and a half full-time staff members and so relies on a small volunteer editorial collective to support putting the magazine together every quarter. Contributors are often not professional writers but passionate community members, requiring careful editing to balance authenticity with quality.

**Riverwise faces significant barriers to sustainability. The organization operates with only one and a half full-time staff members and so relies on a small volunteer editorial collective to support putting the magazine together every quarter.**

"People are submitting their personal stories—sometimes all they have," Douglass noted.

Limited resources make it challenging to compensate contributors and volunteers adequately, further straining capacity.

Finding ways to monetize the magazine to compensate contributors without transferring the cost onto readers is a top priority for Douglass. One avenue they have had success with and would like to expand is using the community magazine as a template for nonprofits that want to produce special editions highlighting their communities and work.

Riverwise charges interested nonprofits to collaborate with them to produce these publications. This includes an organization that wants to create a workbook to teach people about civic engagement and the basics of government.

Douglass also wants to develop partnerships with local colleges and educational institutions to run student workshops and potentially create a curriculum based on the magazine's community-first ethos.

# Tostada Magazine

Serena Maria Daniels started **Tostada Magazine** in 2017 to fill a need in food journalism.

But the independent Detroit-based digital platform is more than just a publication for sharing stories about food and restaurants and describes itself as "dedicated to community, español, food, immigration, Mexican food, neighborhood, news, solutions."

Daniels, 43, who is Mexican-American and was raised in the Southern California community of the San Fernando Valley, is a former Detroit News reporter and Reuters stringer, and sees food as a unifying force that breaks down barriers and preserves culture.

*Tostada Magazine founder Serena Maria Daniels. Photo by Sara Baust.*

"We are sorely lacking in culture and arts journalists in Michigan," Daniels told The Pivot Fund. "There's so much focus on politics in local news, but a focus on the arts or culture is crucial to defending our democracy. We, as a society, need to be able to see our communities fully represented in all our beauty. Without that, communities are marginalized or invisible in the media and (therefore) misinformation and disinformation thrive."

Tostada celebrates the many communities of our food world and has published the work of dozens of journalists of color. The online publication also has given Daniels an opportunity to "take another approach" to food journalism while providing a new perspective on covering the immigrant community.

"I'm trying not to produce fluff," said Daniels. "We are going to interview everybody. We're going to interview the woman who runs taco trucks in Detroit to support and hires perhaps undocumented people but whatever that's her business. It's an economy of itself. It deserves to be treated with the same level of respect."

Tostada went dormant in 2023 after Daniels was given an editorial opportunity at Eater and could no longer focus on the startup. But since she created Tostada, she didn't want to let it go.

"I do not know what the future holds for Tostada," said Daniels, who currently is an editor at Eater for the Midwest region. "But I keep the URL alive in the event I ever want to relaunch it."

# Detroit One Million Newsletter

Sam Robinson, 27, of Detroit, launched his **Detroit one million newsletter** in December 2024 to give the people what they have been telling him they want: original local politics coverage.

Robinson, who was laid off from Axios Detroit, said local legacy media and more corporate-driven new media outlets fail many times at covering local issues. Robinson, who is Black and mixed-race, covers local issues like crime, city government, and other hot topics while also addressing the question prompted by outgoing popular Detroit Mayor Mike Dugan as to **why young people are leaving Detroit**.

Robinson focuses on how local issues affect millennials and Gen Z.

"I want to do news that is covering the daily issues and the biggest stories just through the lens of young people," said Robinson. "Young people have a really hard time staying here in Michigan. I'm in the same boat. I'm one of those young people. I could leave and go somewhere else. But I don't want to leave."

"I see Michigan and Detroit being at a really unique point in history," he said. "For me to leave would just be eliminating one more Black voice. We need more young voices, more Black voices and perspectives on local news and issues across the state."

A former college newspaper editor at Western Michigan University, Robinson was born in Baltimore but raised in Midland, Michigan.

Robinson is covering the city council, Detroit's mayoral race, and the continued redevelopment of the Motor City.

On Giving Tuesday, he got 50 paid subscribers shortly after announcing the formation of Detroit One Million, a nod to the city's once bustling population of a million people.

> **"I want to do news that is covering the daily issues and the biggest stories just through the lens of young people... Young people have a really hard time staying here in Michigan. I'm in the same boat."**
>
> *Sam Robinson, age 27*
> *founder of Detroit one million*

"What does a Detroit with a million people in it look like?" Robinson **asked his 13.3K followers on X** a few days before launch.

That's the question Robinson wants to answer with Detroit one million.

# Native News Online

Levi Rickert, 68, of Grand Rapids, founded **Native News Online** in 2011. He is currently the publisher and editor and also does reporting for the online news organization.

Native News Online produces daily national news that affects the lives of Native Americans nationwide and is internationally recognized with around 7 million annual readers, Native American and non-Native.

Rickert became involved in reporting because of the lack of awareness about Native Americans.

"We have our own flavor, and we have our own way of presenting our news that is newsworthy," Rickert said.

Rickert said he has spoken in classes and hosted workshops with the **Michigan Indian Education Association** in hopes of inspiring young people to get involved with journalism.

"I really do believe we need to get the message out about who we are, why we think the way we do, and that type of thing," he said. "It's just, to me, very critical that we have a voice."

Native News receives press releases from tribes throughout the United States as well as op-eds about issues happening within those communities.

"We provide the forum so they can put the record in and get their message out," Rickert said.

In October, Rickert spoke with a White House representative about issues concerning Indian boarding schools across the U.S.

> **"We have our own flavor, and we have our own way of presenting our news that is newsworthy."**
>
> *Levi Rickert, age 68*
> *founder of Native News Online*

"Sometimes people think we're small potatoes, but I don't see it that way, and that's not an arrogant statement," he said. "We are a voice that is accepted by members of Congress. … I get emails from various departments that deal with Indian affairs throughout the federal government, and we have tremendous credibility."

Rickert said as Native News grows, he wants to retain a grassroots feel to it. That is so Native readers can still reach out via email and by phone to share story ideas and concerns.

Like Planet Detroit and others, he emphasized the importance of engaging the audience and not getting too far ahead of readers.

"We want to bring our readers along with us," he said.

While Native News Online covers news and events that impact Indigenous people on a national level, the Indigenous community in Michigan lacks community news outlets.

## Miigwech, Inc.

Miigwech, Inc., a nonprofit community organization led by Indigenous women in Harbor Springs, could change that. Sierra Clark went to work at Miigwech, Inc., as a reporting specialist after a stint working at a traditional newspaper.

"We are the only tribally incorporated nonprofit in the state of Michigan under tribal code that is not run by a government, which is a huge deal because the IRS recognized us under our tribal business codes," said Meredith Kennedy-Fisher, the executive director, during our Indigenous listening session.

Miigwech, Inc., has the structure in place to create a community newsroom.

Clark is an award-winning Native American writer, storyteller, and freelance journalist. She began her career in 2020 with an internship at Indigenizing the News and the Traverse City Record-Eagle.

*Sierra Clark reporting in the Indigenous community. Patrick Shea, Jennifer DeMoss, and Marie Raphael were in the middle of a manoomin (wild rice) field in Michigan. Story with IPR and Interlochen Public Radio: "The Food That Grows on Water." Photo by Philip Hutchinson, Northern Territory Imaging and Design.*

Indigenizing the News was a digital news organization dedicated to raising the voices, culture, and history of Native Americans and **educating non-Native allies**. They partnered with the Record-Eagle to bring Native American stories to northern Michigan. Clark produced stories via a network of media that were published throughout Michigan.

In 2021, Clark was selected to become a Report for America corps member through the Record-Eagle, becoming the state's first full-time Native American affairs reporter and the Record-Eagle's first Native American journalist. She won a multitude of awards, and her work shined a light on Indigenous culture, contemporary issues, and historical events.

But Clark said traditional newsroom culture did not allow her to honor Native American culture and traditions.

"I basically learned on the job," Clark said. "I learned how to be a journalist, how to research, how to go in the community and get these stories. But as I was learning, I really kept my foot down on how I approached stories. Because I'm an Anishinaabe woman, I wanted to respect my community and respect my cultural background."

**Clark said traditional newsroom culture did not allow her to honor Native American culture and traditions.**

She said she felt unsupported and shifted to freelance journalism, focusing on local Native American stories.

She highlighted her commitment to representing her Anishinaabe culture in her work, often clashing with editorial demands.

"I've kind of taken control in what I want to write when I want to write it," she said.

Clark said trust in journalism can be rebuilt through community engagement and storytelling, and advocates for a media ecosystem that reflects the diverse needs of modern communities.

"I think that sometimes things get over complicated," said Clark. "And we look at it too largely when it can just be going back to our roots, going back to who we are as people and who we are in the community and what we want the community to look like … and kind of taking that ideology in these journalists, in these newsrooms and applying that to going back to the community."

# Urban Aging News

Serving underserved communities in unconventional ways also can have positive financial results. Instead of marginalizing underserved communities, Patricia A. Rencher believes local businesses and media should embrace them.

"This might sound crazy, but I think that if entities that serve seniors like in my case were to partner with local outlets that already have the trust of the organization, it would help the actual outlet in terms of funding," said Rencher. "We could sell this to potential advertisers or sponsors that here you've got a Pat Rencher who's a trusted local leader in the community. You should support it."

Rencher, a 69-year-old Black woman, is the founding publisher and editor of **Urban Aging News**, a successful quarterly publication that provides news and information for older adults in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. She thinks companies that profit from communities should support local media that serve those communities. For older populations, that means healthcare companies, the home healthcare companies, the hospital systems, and durable medical equipment companies. It also could mean other media companies.

"These folks make an awful lot of money off of seniors," said Rencher. "They aren't living up to what I think should be some of their responsibility in ensuring that older adults get the information. So I think strengthening some of those kinds of partnerships."

> **"I think that if entities that serve seniors like in my case were to partner with local outlets that already have the trust of the organization, it would help the actual outlet in terms of funding."**
>
> *Patricia A. Rencher, age 69*
> *founder of Urban Aging News*

These types of nontraditional-traditional partnerships with other businesses or local media could increase trust with underserved communities and enhance media credibility by showing their sincerity in serving the community.

"One of the biggest challenges is people don't trust media," said Rencher. "You've got to combat misinformation and disinformation."

The nontraditional-traditional partnerships also could present an opportunity with mutual benefits to build trust and the bottom line for Urban Aging News.

"It'd be interesting to see what the business model would be," added Rencher.

# Ravenna Independent

Mike and Mary Pierson, both now in their 70s, created the **Ravenna Independent** in 1976 when the paper in their far-western Michigan town, the Ravenna Times-Clipper, went out of business.

Mike Pierson had worked as a printer at the 88-year-old newspaper and didn't want to see the small Michigan town lose an independent newspaper.

The couple said they have "forged a resilient and meaningful connection with the weekly" and that their newsletter has become a "pillar of trust and reliability" for the local community.

The Piersons' weekly magazine-formatted newsletter has 670 subscribers. The newsletter is printed in a room of their home in the "bedroom" community 30 minutes outside of Grand Rapids.

**The couple said they have "forged a resilient and meaningful connection with the weekly" and that their newsletter has become a "pillar of trust and reliability" for the local community.**

Mary Pierson said the newsletter covers politics, legal minutes, zoning issues, sports, fishing and hunting, and costs $40 a year.

She said the newsletter lost readership during the presidential election because of her conservative stances and convictions.

Mary Pierson said she stands firm in her beliefs, adding she holds an anti-Palestinian stance and was critical of the Biden administration.

# Deadline Detroit

Allen Lengel, co-founder and owner of **Deadline Detroit**, said he was tired of working for someone else and for editors who didn't always share the same vision of a good story.

After more than a decade at The Washington Post, Lengel returned to Detroit and launched Deadline Detroit in 2011 along with Bill McGraw, another veteran journalist. He also started **Tickle the Wire**, which covers federal law enforcement.

He started Deadline Detroit with the financial backing of Peter Karmanos, the co-founder of the software company Compuware.

*Deadline Detroit co-founder and owner Allen Lengel*

Lengel said he has to sometimes sell advertising and pitch in as a reporter and writer.

He said the key to succeeding as an independent journalist is, "You have to figure out a financial model."

Deadline Detroit has had a huge following. When Lengel **considered stepping away** permanently in 2022, the calls for the independent news site to continue were loud enough to not only carry on the news operation but also produce a companion podcast called "**Detroit In Black and White**."

## Arab Women United

The nonprofit **Arab Women United** publishes the "The Empower Her Blog," monthly. It spotlights women who have excelled in their chosen fields. Arab Women United was founded in 2020 by Zahraa Alrafish, 22, who's studying social work at Wayne State University.

*Arab Women United organization in Michigan. Photo by Zahraa Alrafish.*

## Michigan Korean Today

Bruce Park started Michigan Korean Today 11 years ago to keep metro Detroit's Korean community abreast of news that impacts communities made up of immigrants and persons of color.

The biweekly printed newspaper is published in Korean. It is free at local stores and restaurants, largely Korean businesses, and has a circulation of 2,000 readers.

Park said his content is mostly feature stories. He said he has plans to move to an English version because that's the preference of younger local Koreans.

# Public Media Network

Community media grows by listening to the community. **Public Media Network** in Kalamazoo is proof of that.

The community media center has been providing community media services to the greater Kalamazoo area for over 40 years. A few years ago, the independent nonprofit organization realized it needed to adjust its commitment to community engagement and better understand the media needs of underserved audiences.

Findings from a needs assessment conducted during the pandemic indicated a demand for more positive narratives and accurate representation in local media.

> **"I spent about nine months listening to the community, learning from the community about what they wanted to see more of, what they're looking for, and focus those outreach efforts into the underserved communities more than just the general area at large."**
>
> *Matt Schuster*
> *executive director of Public Media Network*

"I spent about nine months listening to the community, learning from the community about what they wanted to see more of, what they're looking for, and focus those outreach efforts into the underserved communities more than just the general area at large," Public Media Network executive director Matt Schuster told The Pivot Fund. "We were really interested in getting a snapshot of what underserved communities or those who have been underrepresented in media really wanted to see more than just the general public. So we see that as a unique role we can play."

*Public Media Network Community Producer Talk Show. Photo by Public Media Network.*

In response, the organization, which covers local government and broadcasts Kalamazoo city council and school board meetings, has launched documentary training programs and established a local news team to empower community members to share their stories.

Another new feature they are testing is with AI closed captioning.

*Public Media Network youth production. Photo by Public Media Network.*

## Dragon Eagle TV

Dragon Eagle TV is headquartered in Detroit and led by Lisa Gray, its founder. Its mission is to build social, cultural, business, educational, and political bridges between the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community and greater metropolitan Detroit.

Gray serves as executive producer and host for Dragon Eagle TV, which broadcasts original shows, programs, reports and live coverage with local newsmakers on its YouTube channel (which she started in 2017).

Gray is a well-respected community leader and journalist with a passion for bringing diverse East and West cultural backgrounds together. But Gray, who is Chinese American, shares the frustration of her fellow independent media outlet owners: Lack of financial resources leads to limited staff.

With over 5 million all-time views for Dragon Eagle TV, Gray has at times lamented the long hours she spends on her media work, but she puts in the long hours for her community because she wants to "elevate and amplify" the voices in Michigan's diverse Asian American communities. Part of Gray's work is to "build cultural education" and to stamp out hate.

Some of the biggest challenges for Gray is having enough financial resources to hire reporters, editors and a webmaster to keep her website and YouTube channel churning with much-needed news and information.

"I don't have enough manpower," explains Gray. "You need expertise, you need talent. Having enough of a workforce [is important]. Funding is the main thing."

> **"You need expertise, you need talent. Having enough of a work-force [is important]. Funding is the main thing."**
>
> *Lisa Gray*
> *founder of Dragon Eagle TV*

Currently, says Gray, she relies on sponsorships and reader donations, and echoes other independent media owners in Michigan.

Gray has partnered with some of Metro Detroit's biggest cultural institutions and sports teams, like the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Pistons and Detroit Tigers, to bring in readers and awareness about Dragon Eagle TV.

Gray says her days are endless, but that providing useful government and community information to her readers and audience is necessary. Creating revenue streams is key, and Gray says she does that through partnerships and advertising.

Gray's list of future changes includes implementing AI technology, which would allow her to efficiently offer her content in multiple languages.

If money were not an issue, Gray's main wish list is to hire a marketing manager for social media, which Gray believes could translate into bigger audience numbers.

Gray has overcome some hurdles, but she believes obstacles still burden media upstarts owned by racial and ethnic minorities and prevent them from getting the same treatment or recognition and access to news events.

"We're looked over because we're not mainstream," says Gray, who added that this includes being "passed over for media credentials."

Gray is undeterred and determined to be the voice for her community and continue giving them valuable news and information.

"I'm actually the media for immigrants," says Gray. "I want to be the voice of the community, especially the Asian community."

# What's next?

## Recommendations for Funders Supporting Grassroots and Community News Ecosystems in Michigan

The digital disruption of the 21st century has transformed how communities access and trust news and information, leaving significant gaps in coverage, especially for underserved and marginalized groups.

Many communities—such as Indigenous peoples, Black Michiganders, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Latino Michiganders, Chaldean Americans, rural residents, and older populations—rely on hyperlocal, community-centered media to meet their unique information needs. However, these outlets often face challenges in sustainability, representation, and technology access. To rebuild trust, amplify underrepresented voices, and strengthen civic health, we recommend the following actions for funders:

### 1 INVEST IN MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY

- Provide multiyear operational funding to help independent media outlets stabilize and plan for long-term growth.
- Support media entrepreneurs with resources for leadership development, succession planning, and business model innovation.
- Create grant opportunities that prioritize outlets serving under-served communities, ensuring consistent coverage of local issues.

*Public Media Network Next Lens media lab program. Photo by Public Media Network.*

## 2 STRENGTHEN REPRESENTATION AND TRUST

- Fund diversity initiatives to bring underrepresented voices into newsrooms, including Indigenous, Black, Latino, Asian American, and Arab American perspectives.
- Support culturally and linguistically relevant reporting to reflect the demographics of the communities being served.
- Invest in programs that train journalists in culturally sensitive reporting to combat harmful stereotypes and rebuild trust with communities.

## 3 PROMOTE DIGITAL ACCESS AND INNOVATION

- Expand broadband infrastructure and create Wi-Fi hotspots for underserved areas, especially in rural and tribal lands.
- Fund the development of mobile-first platforms and apps that deliver news in Indigenous languages and other non-English languages.
- Support the use of AI tools for translation, closed-captioning, and multilingual reporting to make news accessible to diverse audiences.

## 4 ENHANCE HYPERLOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEMS

- Support hyperlocal outlets like Flint Beat, Dragon Eagle TV, and the Chaldean News, which serve as trusted sources in their communities.
- Provide resources for community organizations like neighborhood associations and block clubs to act as unofficial newsrooms and civic hubs.
- Encourage collaborations between traditional legacy media and independent outlets to share resources and amplify local stories.

## 5 EMPOWER INDIGENOUS MEDIA

- Invest in tribal radio stations, which serve as vital information hubs for Indigenous communities.
- Support organizations like Miigwech, Inc. to establish community newsrooms equipped with digital tools for video production, podcasting, and social media.
- Fund archival technology to preserve Indigenous oral histories and cultural artifacts in digital formats.

## 6 BRIDGE THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

- Support hybrid print-digital models for outlets serving older adults who prefer print while also engaging younger, digital-first audiences.
- Fund initiatives that teach digital literacy to older adults and provide them with the tools needed to navigate online news.

## 7 ADDRESS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

- Provide funding for affordable and reliable high-speed internet access in areas where broadband connectivity is limited.
- Support SMS-based news delivery systems and offline solutions for communities with low internet penetration.

## 8 COMBAT MISINFORMATION AND PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY

- Fund programs that teach critical thinking and media literacy in schools, libraries, and community centers to combat misinformation.
- Invest in community journalism training programs that equip residents to verify and produce credible news.

## 9 FOSTER COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM

- Support regional and statewide collaborations that enable local media to share resources, content, and expertise.
- Encourage partnerships between grassroots media, public radio, and legacy outlets to reach broader audiences and cover critical issues comprehensively.

## 10 AMPLIFY COMMUNITY STORYTELLING

- Fund multimedia storytelling initiatives, including video production, photography, and podcasting, to empower communities to tell their own stories.
- Invest in immersive storytelling technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), to preserve and share cultural narratives.

### 11 SUPPORT CIVIC JOURNALISM

- Fund hyperlocal reporting on civic issues, such as municipal budgets, school boards, zoning laws, and environmental justice.
- Provide grants for voter guides, election reporting, and solutions journalism that empower communities to engage with local government.

### 12 ADVANCE HEALTH AND PUBLIC SAFETY INFORMATION

- Partner with local healthcare providers and public safety organizations to fund content related to health equity, aging, and community safety.
- Support collaborations between local media and healthcare systems to distribute accessible, accurate public health information.

## Why These Recommendations Matter

Grassroots and community-focused media are essential for a healthy democracy and informed citizenry. They address gaps left by declining legacy media and offer trusted, culturally relevant information that empowers communities to take action. By supporting these recommendations, funders can help build resilient local news ecosystems, amplify underrepresented voices, and restore public trust in journalism. Investing in technology, sustainability, and community engagement will not only strengthen media organizations but also ensure that all communities have access to the information they need to thrive.

# Appendix

## Michigan Media Entrepreneurs

These are the media entrepreneurs The Pivot Fund found in Michigan for our statewide assessment of the community news landscape. You can also view them on **this map**.

Planet Detroit

Detroit One Million

El Central Hispanic News

Arab Women United

Tha Morning Bump (810 Media)

Mack Alive

Chaldean News

The Detroit Jewish News

Yemeni American News

TCD News
(The City of Dearborn, Instagram)

The Flint Courier News

Flint: Our Community, Our Voice

Dearborn Scope (Instagram)

Eric Stephon Thomas

Tostada Magazine

Pride Source (Between the Lines)

Ravenna Independent

Michigan Korean Today

Public Media Network

Flint Beat

Outlier Media

NowKalamazoo

Miigwech, Inc.

Dragon Eagle TV

Urban Aging News

The Arab American News

Michigan Chronicle

Metro Detroit News (Instagram)

Detroit Korea

Flintside

Chaldeans Moms of Detroit (Facebook)

Detroit Uncut (Instagram)

Riverwise Magazine

BridgeDetroit

Native News Online

Deadline Detroit

Hmong Michigan Public Services (Facebook)