



Wisconsin Community News and Information Ecosystem Report



A Pivot Fund analysis of news consumption in Wisconsin.

BY JEAN MARIE BROWN AND ERIC ORTIZ

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Executive Summary 4

Introduction 6

 Why Wisconsin matters 6

 Wisconsin’s ecosystem today. 7

 An overview and methodology. 14

 News deficits 16

 Rural information gaps and emerging alternatives 21

 Neighborhood reporting people actually use 22

Community Sessions: What We Heard. 26

 Black Communities: Trust, representation, and the search for
 balanced coverage 26

 Fragility of local media and rise of digital voices 29

 Shifting trust and the role of nonprofits 33

 Indigenous Communities: Information, identity, and representation. 36

 Hispanic Communities: Representation, access, and empowerment. 39

 Asian and Asian American Communities: Visibility, voice, and
 barriers to access 45

 ‘If you build it, they will come’ 48

Conclusion: Let Wisconsin’s Communities—and NNS—Lead	49
Recommendations	50
A New Model: Audience-centered investment	50
The Wisconsin Imperative	52
Appendix	53
Existing and emerging media entrepreneurs	53
Spotlight: Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service (NNS)	69

On the cover: Community journalists collaborate in the WORT FM newsroom in Madison. Strengthening local news in Wisconsin begins with investing in people, relationships, and the next generation of trusted community storytellers. (Photo by Chali Pittman for WORT FM)



Executive Summary

Wisconsin stands at the frontline of America's local news crisis.

Among the Great Lakes states, its news ecosystem is the most eroded. This is a reflection of deep demographic shifts, limited philanthropic support, and growing public disengagement.

Whether in Milwaukee's segregated neighborhoods, Madison's fast-changing suburbs, or the rural towns stretching toward Lake Superior, residents across Wisconsin are struggling to access credible local news and information they can trust.

What's happening in Wisconsin is not an isolated challenge. It's a warning. The erosion of trust, the collapse of traditional newsrooms, and the flood of partisan and algorithm-driven content have converged here in ways that mirror national trends, only faster and more acutely.

At the same time, Wisconsin's people—from Indigenous elders and Black community organizers to rural cooperatives and bilingual broadcasters—are showing what resilience looks like. They are creating new models of information-sharing that are hyperlocal, digital, and community-led.

One of the strongest examples is Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service (NNS). Founded at Marquette University's Diederich College of Communication, NNS provides daily coverage across 18 Milwaukee neighborhoods, telling stories that reflect community life rather than crime statistics or crisis headlines. In 2024, the newsroom merged with Wisconsin Watch following an investment from the American Journalism Project, aligning statewide investigative capacity with NNS's deeply rooted, neighborhood-centered reporting.

In listening sessions, participants across Milwaukee and even in north-central Wisconsin named NNS as a **trusted source** for practical, relevant information—from school board updates to neighborhood initiatives—often mentioning it before larger outlets such as the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel or local television news. That level of audience

Wisconsin's people—from Indigenous elders and Black community organizers to rural cooperatives and bilingual broadcasters—are showing what resilience looks like.

loyalty underscores what's at stake: When people find journalism that reflects their daily realities, they use it.

The success of NNS offers a roadmap for funders. Its model—community-anchored, service-oriented, and responsive to residents' needs—demonstrates how local journalism can regain trust and relevance. If people in rural and northern Wisconsin are asking for “their own version of Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service,” then that’s the model philanthropy should replicate statewide.

But without sustained investment, these emerging voices risk disappearing before they can take root.

A path forward

Wisconsin’s story underscores a simple truth. Journalism cannot survive without an audience.

Rebuilding trust and connection requires shifting investment toward community-rooted media that reflect and serve the lived realities of Wisconsin’s people—rural, Indigenous, immigrant, and urban alike.

Models such as Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service show what this can look like: audience-first reporting that informs, connects, and empowers communities.

If funders and policymakers want to see what’s at stake, they need look no further than Wisconsin, a state where the absence of information is reshaping civic life, and where the seeds of renewal are being planted one community at a time.



Tracie Powell / CEO / The Pivot Fund



A community member shares her experiences during a multicultural listening session at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). Listening sessions across Wisconsin revealed how residents access, share, and trust local information. (Photo by Eric Ortiz)

Introduction

Why Wisconsin matters

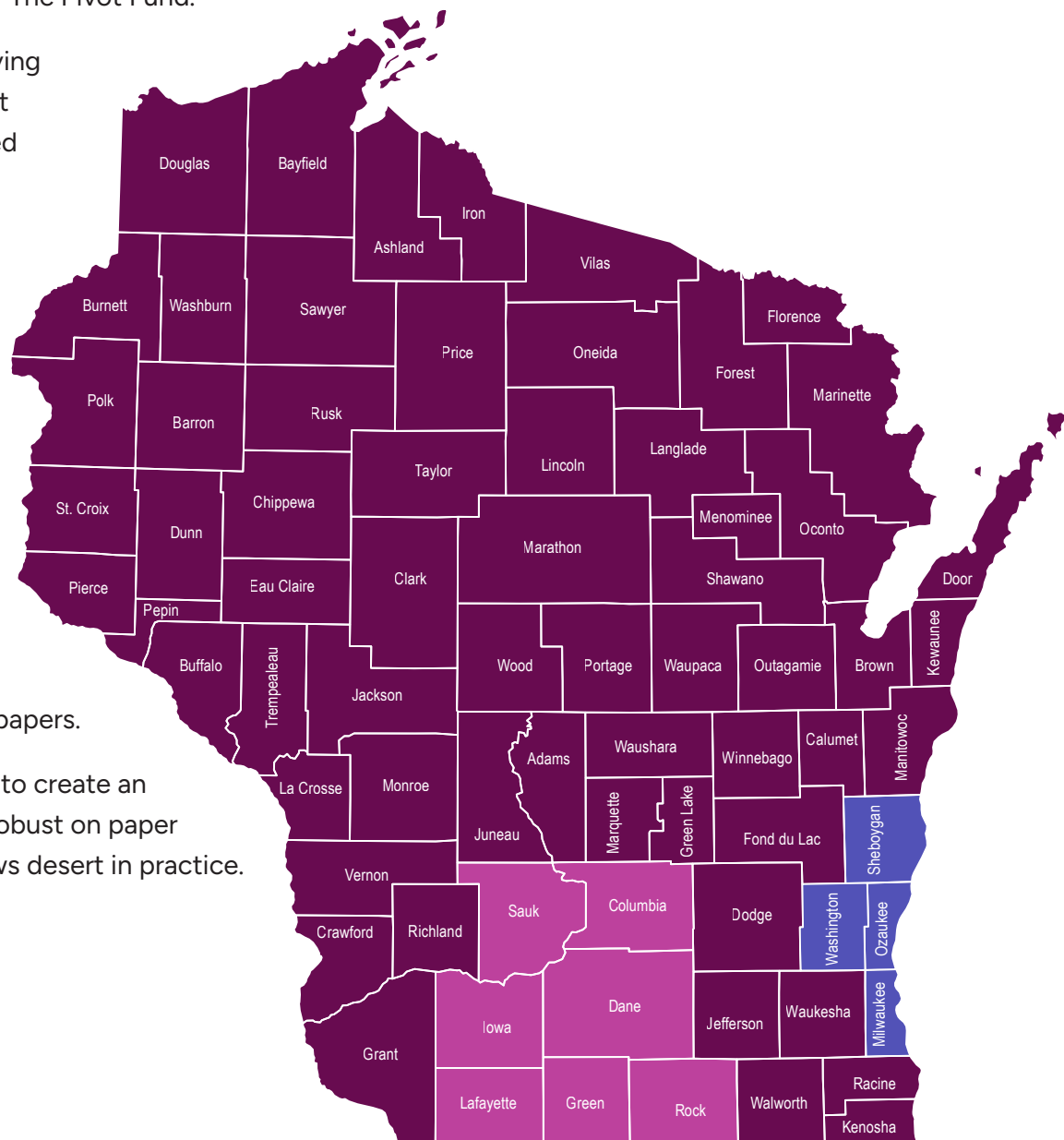
Wisconsin has the smallest population and the shallowest philanthropic bench of the Great Lakes states studied by The Pivot Fund.

It has a rapidly diversifying population but the least diverse and least trusted media landscape.

Residents rely more on Facebook groups, friends, and government newsletters than on local news outlets.

Hyperpartisan networks, including 25 Metric Media outlets, have filled the void left by collapsing community papers.

These factors combine to create an ecosystem that looks robust on paper but functions like a news desert in practice.



Wisconsin's ecosystem today

In Wisconsin, the local news system is running on fumes. Once a reliable bridge between neighbors, schools, and city halls, that bridge is crumbling. People across the state feel the gap.

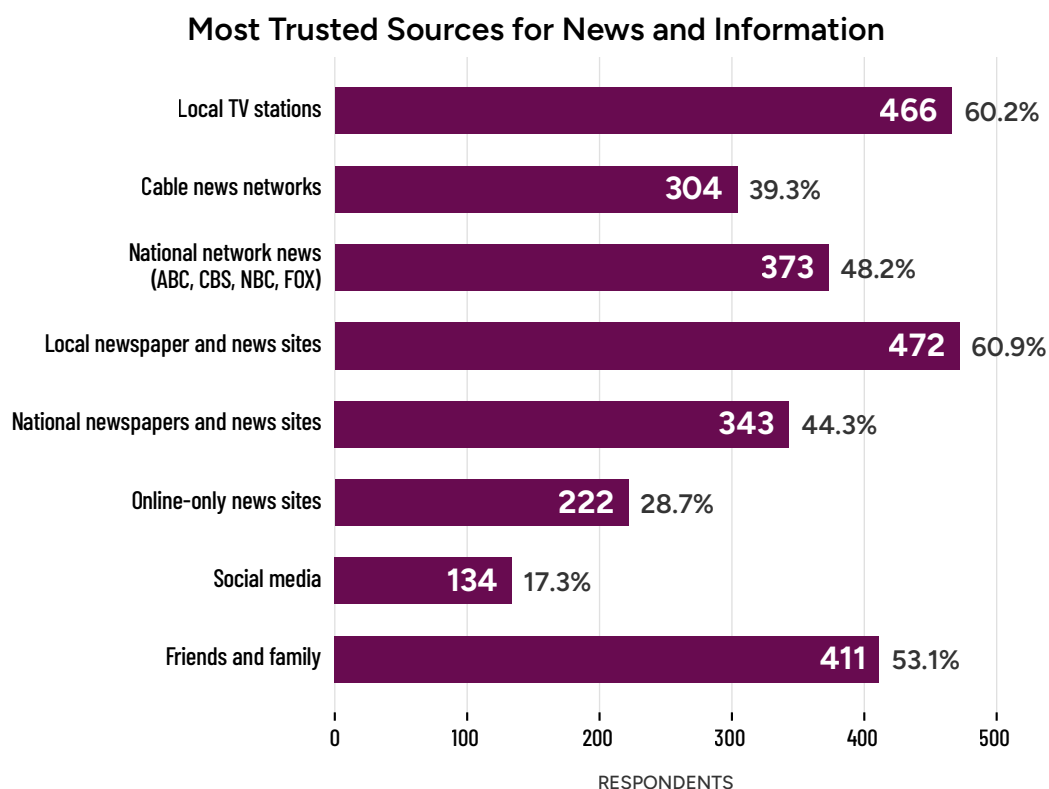
It's not just happening here, of course. Across the country, local news has been in free fall since the digital revolution turned the industry upside down. The old business model—the one that supported newspapers, TV, and radio for generations—no longer works. ProPublica has found a path to success, but even the venerable Texas Tribune has struggled. Award-winning journalists, powerful storytelling, and good intentions haven't been enough to stop the slide.

Because journalism doesn't survive without an audience.

And in Wisconsin, the audience has moved on.

Q: How much do you trust each of the following sources for news and information?

774 Respondents



People aren't flipping through the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel or tuning into local broadcasts the way they used to. When they want to know what's happening in their neighborhood, most Wisconsinites pull out their phones, search Google, check Facebook, or ask a friend.

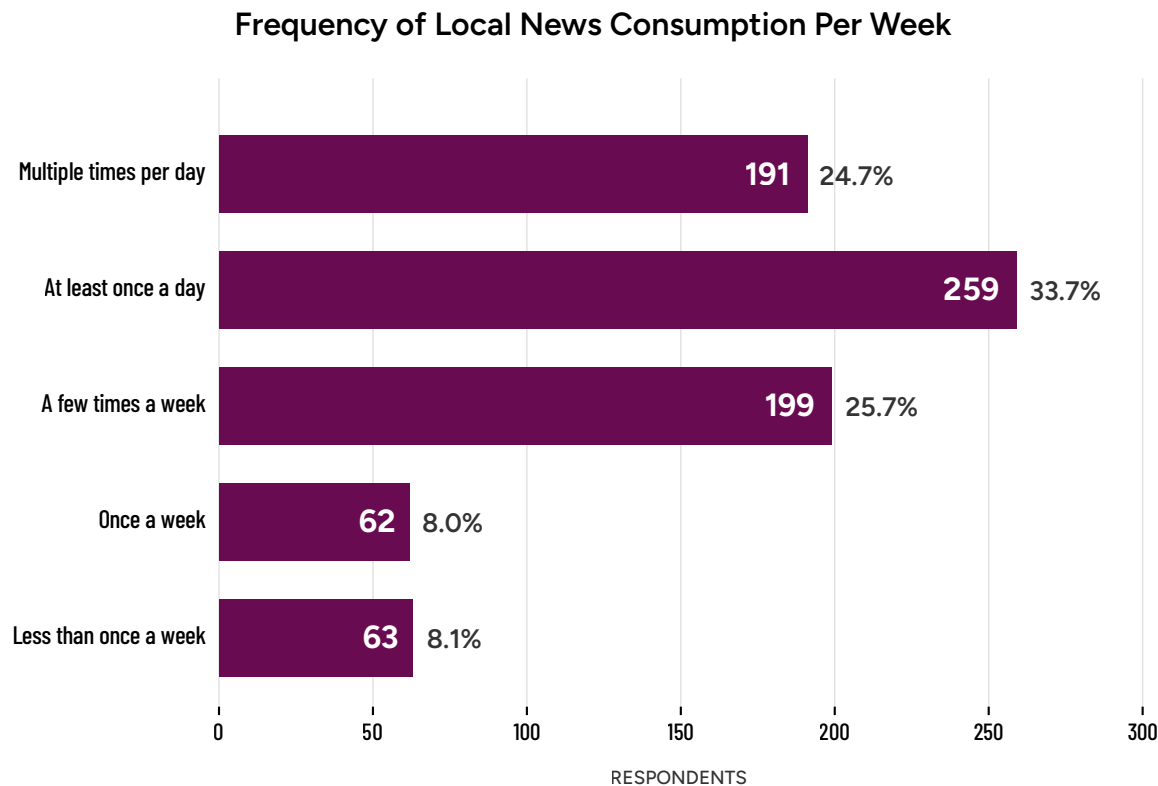
In rural towns, government newsletters sometimes fill the void once occupied by community papers.

In Milwaukee, Madison, and Kenosha, younger residents turn to podcasts, influencers, or social media pages like [Carvd N Stone](#) and [USFiR](#) (Urban Suburban Fire Incident Reporting) to get the news that feels relevant to their lives.

Traditional outlets haven't kept pace with where people are or how they get information. That disconnect between news production and audience needs is what's threatening the very idea of local journalism in Wisconsin.

Q: How often do you consume local news in a week?

774 Respondents



This shift and what it means to journalism and society as a whole are at the heart of this landscape report and the work of The Pivot Fund. Formulas for giving and measurements for success are more focused on the people producing journalism than on the audience meant to consume the information.

Most recently, the lessons of the [Houston Landing](#) and the [National Trust for Local News](#) reinforce the idea that funding, great journalists, and strong journalism cannot save the practice of journalism without an audience.

Funders and journalists have to recognize that without an actively engaged audience, journalism risks becoming irrelevant. There are already early signs of this occurring in Wisconsin, the smallest and most rural of the Great Lakes states studied by Pivot.

Of the four states—Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, and Michigan—Wisconsin’s news ecosystem is the most eroded. Whether in the urban centers of Milwaukee and Madison or across the rural communities that define much of the state, residents rarely turn to traditional outlets for local news and information.

Loyalty to newspapers has largely faded, though some still described reading out of habit or catching a local newscast, often streamed later on YouTube rather than watched live.

People want information in the moment and expect it to be readily at hand. When they hear of something, those we spoke with said their first instinct is to do an internet search.

They fill information gaps with details gleaned from social media platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok. They ask a friend or relative. Others rely on newsletters and emails from the very governments they are seeking information about.

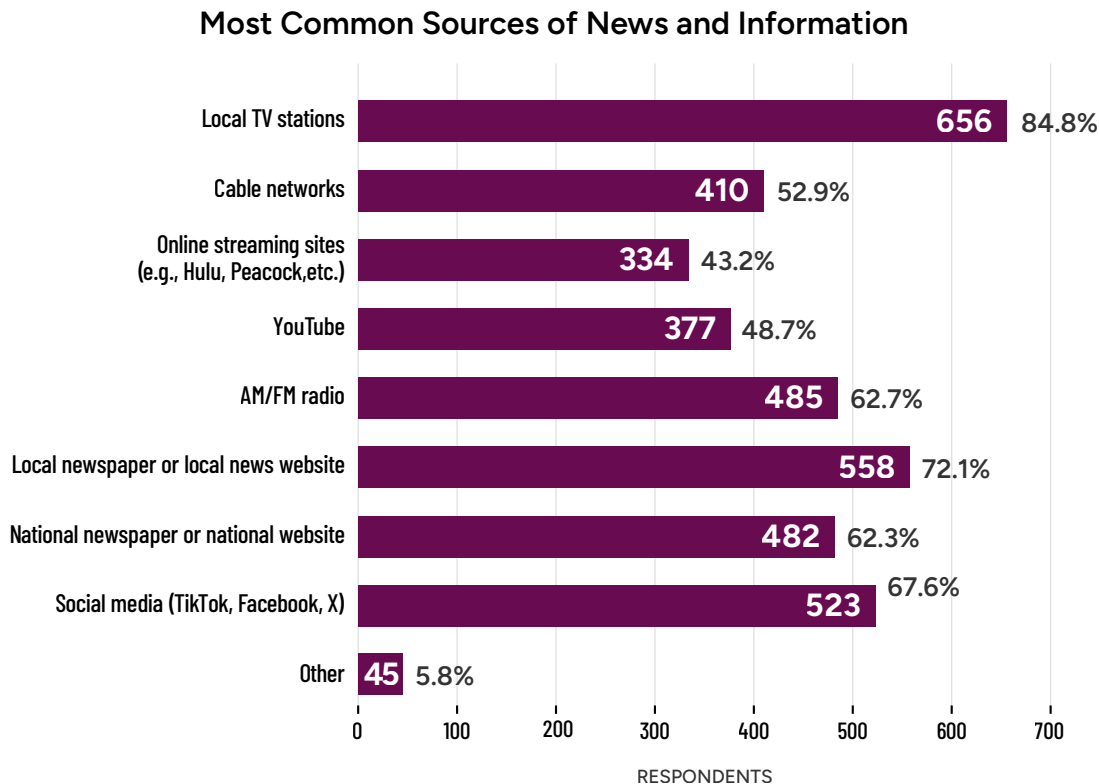


Milwaukee community members at a Martin Luther King Day dialogue in 2025. Community conversations like these help residents share information, build relationships, and engage in issues affecting their neighborhoods and communities. (Photo by Walter Lanier)

People want information in the moment and expect it to be readily at hand. When they hear of something, those we spoke with said their first instinct is to do an internet search.

Q: Within the past seven days, which of the following have been your most common sources of information?

774 Respondents



Perhaps the most telling example of this information gap was a plywood billboard posted on the side of a neighbor's house.

- While there has long been a disconnect between local news media and communities of color, our research found that it now extends across demographics. People we spoke with cited a myriad of reasons, including news bias, transient staff, paywalls, and a lack of coverage, when asked why they don't rely on traditional news outlets in their communities. But it was also clear, news outlets aren't in the channels the public frequents.
- A community model that already works. In Milwaukee, residents consistently named [Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service \(NNS\)](#) as a trusted, neighborhood-focused source that fills day-to-day information gaps around schools, housing, safety, health, and city services. NNS was founded at Marquette University's Diederich College of

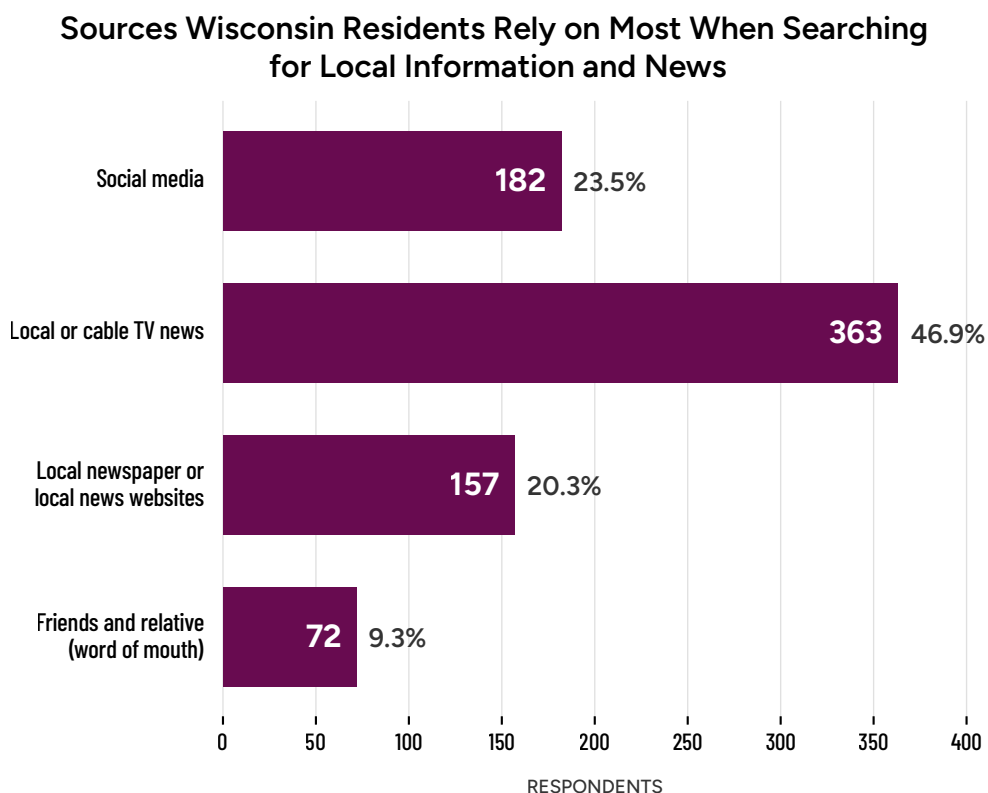
Communication to cover communities often overlooked by legacy outlets, and in 2024 it formally merged with [Wisconsin Watch](#) to expand capacity while retaining a community-rooted mission.

- Class has emerged as a dividing line between traditional media and their audience. The people we spoke with talked about stories not reflecting their reality. The disconnect touched on crime coverage, but there was also frustration with coverage that doesn't reflect the economic constraints facing lower-income households and marginalized people.

Our findings in Wisconsin emphasize the importance of looking beyond the number of news outlets when evaluating the health of a news ecosystem through the lens of the audience.

Q: When searching for local information and news, which source do you rely on the most?

774 Respondents



There are no simple solutions to the ever-widening news and information gaps. The issues surrounding the different populations in Wisconsin have some overlap, but there are also key distinctions.

- Hispanics represent the fastest-growing ethnic group. While the largest population is in the Milwaukee area, there is also a growing presence in the Madison metro area. Our discussions touched on the need for Spanish-language outlets, as well as immigration coverage that isn't always framed from a governmental perspective.
- Black people living in Wisconsin had the highest rate of poverty in the Great Lakes states studied for this project. Wisconsin's Black population is concentrated in the urban centers of Milwaukee and Kenosha/Racine. There is a deep distrust of traditional media centered around a history of biased coverage. There was also a feeling of isolation, as their stories, especially positive ones, aren't told to the community at large.
- The Indigenous population in Wisconsin includes members of 11 recognized tribal nations; the Brothertown Indian Nation is not recognized at the federal or state level. Indigenous presence in news coverage is nearly invisible. Indigenous coverage is complicated, as coverage of tribal communities is often controlled by tribal leadership, and traditional media coverage rarely goes beyond features. For example, Indigenous people have been disproportionately affected by some of the budget cuts that took effect in 2025, particularly when it comes to [health care](#), but much of the coverage has been centered in the Indigenous press and publications from organizations such as the [Brookings Institution](#).
- Rural communities are also at risk in Wisconsin. Depending on how it's defined, about 30% to 35% of the state's population is rural. There are also small towns and cities caught in the reach of the metro area that are starved for local information. Some rural communities seem to exist in isolation with only a weekly or no local outlet at all. Hyperpartisan publications, particularly conservative publications, have moved into the void. There are [25 outlets](#) run by Metric Media across the state.

Wisconsin's Black population is concentrated in the urban centers of Milwaukee and Kenosha/Racine. There is a deep distrust of traditional media centered around a history of biased coverage.

There are media entrepreneurs in Wisconsin attempting to provide information. Their numbers lag behind those in the neighboring states of Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois. It's also worrisome that many of these small operations are far from sustainable. The situation is more acute because Wisconsin lacks the deep philanthropic dollars available in the other states.

The leading donor in Wisconsin is the Greater Milwaukee Foundation with \$91.8 million in giving in 2024, according to the Grantsmanship Center. By comparison, the leading donors in Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois gave more than three times that amount during the same time period, according to the Grantsmanship Center.

Terms such as accountability, solutions, and watchdog are often used by journalists to signal work being done on behalf of the public. But in our conversations, these words carried little meaning. None of the people we spoke with associated these words with local journalism, or any kind of journalism for that matter.

Unlike residents in Michigan who claimed beloved on-air news personalities and longtime ties to newspapers such as the Detroit Free Press, or Chicagoans loyal to WGN, Wisconsin residents didn't cite similar relationships. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the state's largest daily newspaper, was rarely mentioned and never with the affection that Michiganders had for the Detroit Free Press or the Detroit News.

Many of these small operations are far from sustainable. The situation is more acute because Wisconsin lacks the deep philanthropic dollars available in the other states.

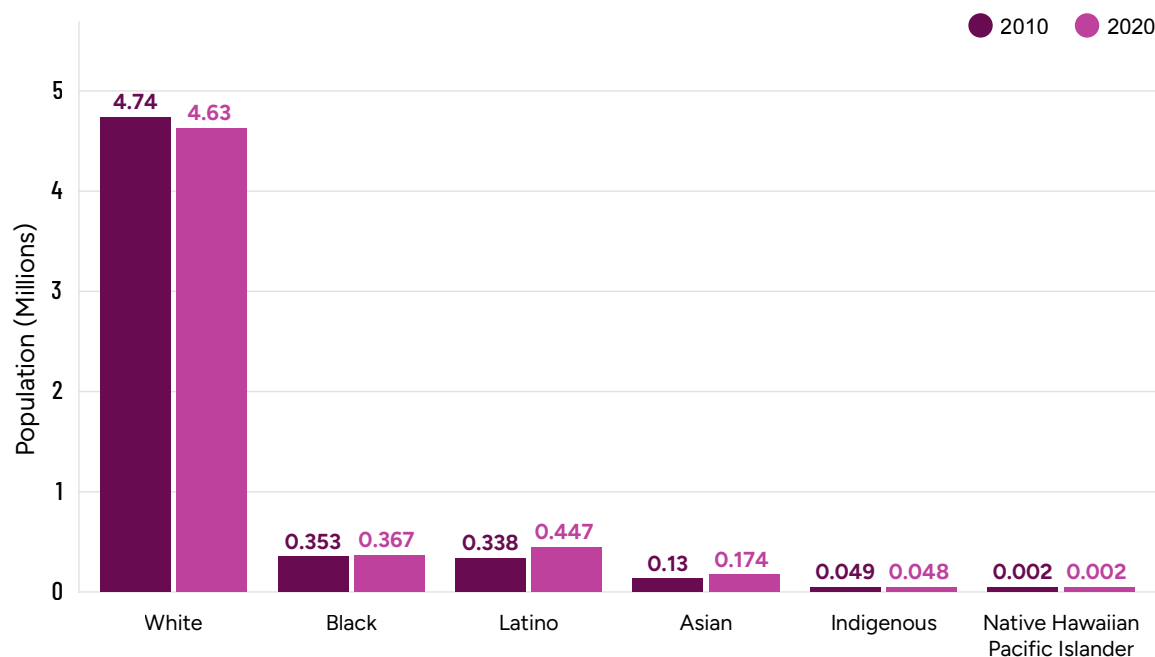


Viterbo University students holding copies of *El Sol* newspaper. (Photo by *El Sol*)

An overview and methodology

Milwaukee and Madison are by far Wisconsin's two largest urban centers. Milwaukee's population is around 550,000, with an estimated 1.57 million people in the Milwaukee-Waukesha–West Allis MSA. Madison's population is about 283,000, with an estimated 707,606 people living in the Madison MSA, which includes Columbia, Dane, Green, and Iowa counties. Wisconsin is 79.2% White, 7.6% Hispanic, 6.2% Black, 3.5% multiracial, 3% Asian, and 1.2% Indigenous. About 90% of Black Wisconsinites live in the Milwaukee/Racine area. (All population figures are from Data USA.)

Wisconsin Population Distribution: 2010 vs. 2020



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

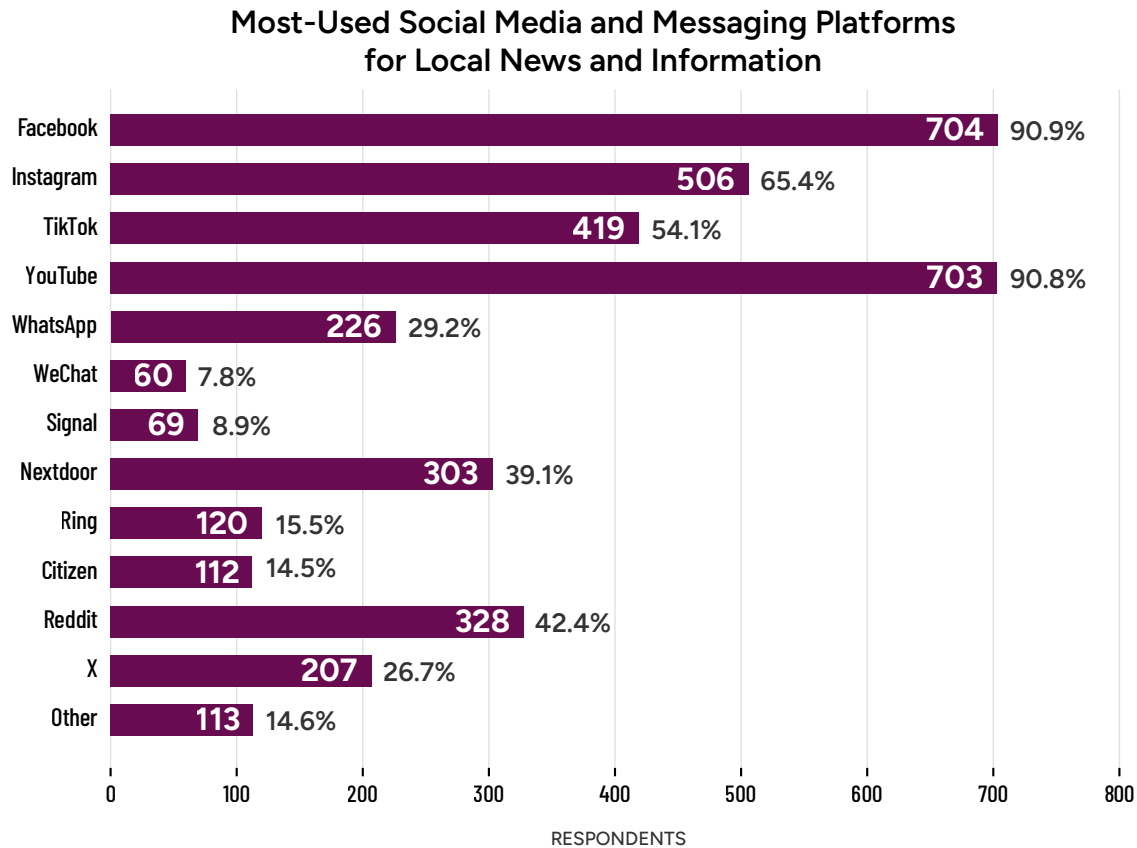
For this study, we broke the state up geographically into the two most populous areas and then northeast/central and rural. We also held listening sessions with racial and ethnic groups that traditional media have historically misrepresented and underrepresented.

We did both qualitative and quantitative research, including one-on-one interviews, listening sessions, and focus groups. All conversations were centered around the question of how do you get local news and information, and what are your trusted sources.

We also conducted a three-state survey of 2,800 people: 1,000 each in Michigan and Illinois and 800 in Wisconsin. This survey was sampled to follow the demographic percentages for each state and complemented our qualitative research.

Q: In the past seven days, which social media or messaging platform have you used for local news and information?

774 Respondents



News deficits

In recent years, there's been much discussion about so-called news deserts. The University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media has defined them as areas with "limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level." Much of the basis for this declaration centers on the number of credible media outlets available in a community.

On paper, Madison and Milwaukee appear to have strong news ecosystems. The state capital claimed nine newspapers, six standalone digital sites, four network sites, three ethnic outlets, and three public broadcasters in Northwestern's 2025 Local News Initiative Survey. Milwaukee, the state's most populous city, has one newspaper, two digital sites, four network sites, six ethnic outlets, and one public broadcaster, according to the LNIS.

Our research found that this definition doesn't go deep enough. It assumes that the mere presence of news outlets translates into an exchange of information with audiences. Ron Smith, executive director of Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, doesn't see the desolation that the term news desert can invoke. Instead, he spoke of "news deficits," or areas or topics where news and information is lacking.

This term tracks with our findings. While people often consider themselves well-informed, significant gaps exist beneath the surface. In most cases people lack information about everyday parts of life that are connected to civic engagement. This can range from information property assessments to local elections and local public schools.

The origins of Milwaukee Neighborhood News are rooted in news deficits. The news service grew out of a study funded by the Zilber Family Foundation that examined how Black and Brown people were getting news and information, Smith said. He said the findings found a lack of trust in traditional media and that the communities were not being covered in "a professional way."



Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service executive director Ron Smith addresses a crowd assembled for an NNS event in Milwaukee. (Photo by Narayan Mahon)

Smith said people rely on NNS for community news and information, both positive and critical.

“No one’s coming to NNS for breaking news,” Smith said. “They’re coming to us for what that news means into the communities that we serve and care about.”

It’s not enough for news outlets to simply exist within a community. **To have impact, they must reach and actively engage audiences that regularly consume their content.** When this connection doesn’t happen, the news deficits that occur make the existing outlets irrelevant.

Pre-screening for a listening session in Madison found that six people considered themselves “very informed” while nine said they were “somewhat informed” about local news and issues. They cited television stations, cable news and social media sites. But once panelists began talking, it was clear that most struggled day-to-day to find basic information about local government, schools and their respective communities. Few said they sought answers from local news media.

Apathy toward traditional media was apparent across all races and ethnicities. The people we spoke with didn’t see traditional media as relevant to navigating their daily lives. Some were critical of the information being provided, while others sought additional information and sources to address specific issues.

For example, Bradley, 44, of Madison, wanted information about water conservation and zero food waste initiatives. Erik, 51, of Madison, relied on a local newsletter to keep up with events happening in his community. “The local news,” he said, “is just kind of a lot of fluff.”

Ashley, 30, a young Asian woman, previously lived in cities that were larger than Madison, which had a population of about 285,300 in 2024,



A community member signs a participant agreement after contributing his perspective during a Wisconsin community listening session in Milwaukee. Residents across the state helped identify strengths, challenges, and gaps in Wisconsin’s local news and information ecosystems. (Photo by Walter Lanier)



“No one’s coming to NNS for breaking news. They’re coming to us for what that news means into the communities that we serve and care about.”

*Ron Smith, executive director,
Milwaukee Neighborhood
News Service*

according to the Census Bureau. She was critical of the news and information provided by traditional media.

“So this is like the smallest city that I’ve lived in,” she said. “And I think that’s been pretty surprising in terms of like, what makes the news here compared to in other cities that I’ve been in.”

She said she follows one of the local stations on Instagram but isn’t impressed with what they post. “Recently, it’s been pretty insignificant things in terms of the news in my opinion.” She cited posts about a new sauna opening, beers people can drink or a local taproom. “I don’t necessarily consider that to be news as much as it is just like day-to-day things that happen.”

Leron, an African American man in his late 30s, said he was discouraged by reports that had little to do with him. He complained of “clickbait” stories that he thinks are about Madison, but actually happened elsewhere.

Bradley questioned the ownership and motives of local media, “They say they’re diverse, but it’s really not. That’s by design ... there’s so much corporatization within local news, like Sinclair, you know, buying up all the news organizations, local news stations across the country, and all the regulation being dissolved to allow for that to happen.”

For others, their dismissal of local media goes deeper.

Not accessing traditional media was a deliberate act for Chris, who is in his late 30s and of African American and Asian descent. He grew up in the Detroit area and previously lived in the Chicago area, and questioned the way news is framed in Madison. “Being in this city and experiencing a lot of the local news channels is always centered around White people.”

He spoke passionately about coverage laden with “dog whistles,” such as referring to “people from Chicago” rather than saying “Black people.”

Chris cited coverage on topics he considered mundane, like someone being at a gas station or speeding, that garner coverage because they involve Black people or people of color.

“And so that actually forces me to tune it out,” he said, even acknowledging that these topics could be legitimate issues.



“Being in this city and experiencing a lot of the local news channels is always centered around White people.”

Chris, an African American and Asian man living in Madison

“But the moment I see what I perceive to be racism or I see what I perceive to be like that level of bias, I tune this stuff out,” he said. “It makes it hard for me to participate in a lot of the local news cycles that are here because it’s always, it’s very surfacy, it’s very topical. It’s not really about the real issues that I feel like are affecting our community that we could actually use to make things better.”

Regina Rhyne, a Black woman in her mid-60s, shared Chris’s disdain for broadcast media. “When it comes on TV, it’s so ... I want to use the word,” she said. “It can be biased.” The substitute teacher and Lyft driver from Madison, said youth disengage from news because “they don’t see themselves represented.” More youth voices, she added, could mean “less biased reporting and more positive community stories.”

Rhyne also spoke of classism in coverage, where housing is framed as “affordable,” when it’s not. “Affordable around here is not affordable,” she said.

Instead, she relies on hyperlocal media. “The [Isthmus](#) is a good paper, the [Capital City Hues](#), they’re newsworthy, and the [Umoja Magazine](#), they’re newsworthy. They uplift, all kinds of people, not just Black people or Brown people. But our locals, our local news, I don’t know.”

Karen, an Indigenous woman living in the Meadowlands, also had little use for traditional media. “It’s irrelevant to anything that’s going on,” she said, noting that coverage of her neighborhood is almost always negative. She dismissed the emphasis on crime coverage.

She lives in a mixed-income, multifamily residential development on the east side of Madison. “This is not a very good neighborhood, but it’s like they always wanted to post bad videos of what goes on over here or bad stuff,” she said. “Let’s talk about the bigger things, where the community, we can make an impact on it, especially for our youth.

“Our youth are really good,” she said. “Let’s talk about that instead of negative stereotypes. Big outlets ignore the positive stories.”

Latinos who participated in a community session in Madison talked about a need for coverage about immigration, as well as content that is culturally relevant. But like African American participants, they have little trust in traditional media.



“Our youth are really good. Let’s talk about that instead of negative stereotypes. Big outlets ignore the positive stories.”

Karen, an Indigenous woman living in the Meadowlands, a neighborhood in Madison



Community members participate in a bilingual advocacy and kayaking event focused on environmental health and water safety, hosted in partnership with Wisconsin EcoLatinos and the Catholic Multicultural Center. (Photo by Catholic Multicultural Center)

Levi, a Latino living in the Madison area, said he has shifted away from mainstream sources due to negativity and expressed a desire for more culturally relevant and positive content, particularly in Spanish.

All of the residents spoke as if they lived in a news desert where access to news is limited.

"I don't hear about anything until family reaches out," said Monica, a 29-year-old Latina.

Erik joked that family members living in Amsterdam seem to get news about Madison on a more timely basis. "They'll text me. They'll be like, 'Oh, did you hear such and such happened in Madison?'"

All of the residents spoke as if they lived in a news desert where access to news is limited.

Rural information gaps and emerging alternatives

Roughly one-third of Wisconsinites live in rural areas, while many others reside in small towns near urban centers. Yet proximity to larger cities often means their communities' stories are overshadowed by metropolitan coverage.

Residents described a fragmented information landscape where local news is scarce, trust is low, and people rely on a patchwork of sources—television, social media, search engines, and government pages—to stay informed.

According to Northwestern's State of Local News report, most rural Wisconsin counties still have at least two newspapers, yet few residents read them regularly. Those who do often skim newsletters or online editions rather than print copies.

Most rural Wisconsin counties still have at least two newspapers, yet few residents read them regularly. Those who do often skim newsletters or online editions rather than print copies.

Facebook and its myriad local pages have become the dominant source for local information, often supplemented by official posts from schools, towns, and county agencies.

"Facebook is my primary news source for local stuff," said Amanda, 32, of Platteville. "A lot of local organizations, including the schools and the city, have their own pages."

Frustration over limited coverage has prompted residents to fill the gaps themselves. In Grand Chute, for instance, a neighbor **frustrated by the lack of transparency around property assessments** built a makeshift bulletin board in his yard.

"He posted updates on a sheet of plywood," said James, 51, of Outagamie County. "Anytime something changed, he'd add the new information—and even list his sources so you could verify it."

Across the state, residents described similar do-it-yourself approaches: attending city council meetings, following government newsletters, or relying on friends who "know what's going on."

"It's like playing a game of telephone," said Catherine, 69, of Osceola. "Sometimes it's really hard to get good information unless you're talking directly to an official."

Neighborhood reporting people actually use

Several focus group participants, including those outside Milwaukee, cited Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service as a practical, trustworthy way to learn about school board decisions, neighborhood programs, and services.

This is evidence that audience-first, hyperlocal coverage travels by word-of-mouth well beyond city limits.

With its recent merger with Wisconsin Watch and philanthropic investment from the American Journalism Project, NNS now has infrastructure that could support replication in other regions that want “their own version” of neighborhood news.

Many participants echoed national research from Pew showing adults increasingly rely on social media for news.

“Whatever news I get comes through when I’m scrolling through Facebook or Twitter,” said Jared, 33, of Green Bay.

A few still maintain newspaper subscriptions—like Kristin, 34, of Fond du Lac, who skims her local paper’s daily email—but most said they get updates online.

Others, such as Paula, 57, of Eleva, rely on regional TV broadcasts or Facebook groups in the absence of local outlets.

Despite these workarounds, distrust of information runs deep.

Several participants suspected that Facebook comments were being deleted or filtered, and many questioned whether local papers, often owned by the same corporate groups, reported stories fully.



Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service managing editor Edgar Mendez, left, interviews a man during a pro-immigration march. (Photo by Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service)

A few still maintain newspaper subscriptions ... but most said they get updates online.

“If you’re gonna write about it, put the whole story,” said Angel, 39, of Boscobel. “Don’t just put what’s best for you.”

Participants voiced frustration with local governments they saw as withholding information, noting that ordinary citizens face consequences for mistakes that officials often avoid. With limited professional coverage, community members are stepping into the role of information providers. In Wausau, Vicki Harness, who leads the [Community Outreach Task Force](#), uses her organization’s Facebook page (2,500 followers) to share updates and challenge local policies.

“Nobody wants to cover it,” she said, referring to homelessness. “We’re paying \$60 a day to jail people when we could house them instead.”

Harness’s efforts highlight how trusted community leaders often fill reporting gaps left by shrinking local media.

Participants praised outlets such as the [Wausau Pilot and Review](#) and [Civic Media](#), a statewide radio network based in Madison, as among the few sources offering balanced, in-depth reporting.

Still, residents said these outlets lack the capacity to serve the entire state.

In northern Wisconsin, Melissa, 50, described the [Antigo Daily Journal](#) as “mostly small-town gossip and conservative politics,” reflecting how limited coverage often mirrors prevailing ideologies rather than challenging them.

An all-White listening session brought together residents from northern and southern Wisconsin, who spoke candidly about the conservative environments in towns like Antigo, Elcho, and Mercer. They described open displays of racism—Confederate flags, discriminatory rhetoric, and even an active KKK chapter in Mercer.

“It’s scary,” said Christine, a 55-year-old educator from Wausau. “But it’s an extension of the rest of the community.”

Participants said right-wing media and misinformation dominate local narratives, making it difficult for progressive or community-centered voices to be heard.

Even so, residents expressed determination to create trusted, locally rooted platforms that can elevate diverse perspectives.

Participants said right-wing media and misinformation dominate local narratives, making it difficult for progressive or community-centered voices to be heard.



Aiyana Machado, left, seated, board chair of the Philadelphia Community Farm, joins fellow community members at the farm. Together, they reflect the farm's commitment to community-led stewardship of land, food systems, and collective well-being. (Photo by Philadelphia Community Farm)

"If we had a platform—maybe even a podcast—to talk about local issues, it could work," Christine said. "It just takes time and resources that most of us don't have. But we need to do something."

Amid the challenges, a few rural outlets continue to sustain meaningful local journalism.

The [Amery Free Press](#), founded in 1892, remains a trusted weekly in Polk County. The [Hay River Review](#), a cooperative paper serving the Hay River Valley since 1987, transitioned online in 2024 to reach younger readers and diversify revenue streams. Its community-owned model.

Other rural initiatives are redefining what local information sharing looks like. [The Philadelphia Community Farm](#) in Osceola, a 300-acre nonprofit near the St. Croix River, blends sustainable agriculture, art, and storytelling to connect historically marginalized residents.

“Our independent networks are how the word gets out,” said Philadelphia Community Farm community member and board chair Aiyana Machado.

Through Instagram and community events, the farm shares stories and cultural celebrations, reaching over half the local population online.

Despite progress, inequities in representation persist. Jessica Fischer, layout designer for the Hay River Review, sees untapped opportunity.

“We have Somali, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in our readership area, and I want to connect,” she said. “I want everyone represented. I just need to figure out how to reach them in a way that feels right.”

Across rural Wisconsin, residents’ creativity and persistence reveal both the depth of the information crisis and the potential for renewal. In communities where institutional media have pulled back, trust now grows through relationships, resourcefulness, and local leadership.



Community members share a moment of connection in rural Wisconsin, reflecting how trust and information often travel through relationships and local networks. (Photo by Philadelphia Community Farm)



“We have Somali, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in our readership area, and I want to connect. I want everyone represented.”

Jessica Fischer, layout designer for the Hay River Review

Community Sessions: What We Heard

Black Communities: Trust, representation, and the search for balanced coverage

Community listening sessions across Wisconsin brought together diverse groups, including African Americans in Milwaukee, Racine, and nearby communities. These conversations revealed consistent concerns about representation, trust, and access to reliable local information.

In other states, we've seen the rise of media entrepreneurs who have become trusted community sources. Wisconsin lags in this regard, though a few individuals and organizations are beginning to fill that role. Participants said they often cross-check information across Google, YouTube, and social media to get a more complete picture.

These conversations revealed consistent concerns about representation, trust, and access to reliable local information.

Context and demographics

Black Wisconsinites make up 6.6% of the state's population, compared with 13.2% in Michigan and 13.6% in Illinois. Nearly 90% live in five southeastern counties: Milwaukee, Dane, Racine, Kenosha, and Waukesha.

Milwaukee remains among the most segregated cities in the country, with 23.3% of residents living in poverty—and 37% of Black residents facing poverty compared to 12% nationally.

These disparities shape how and where people seek information, as funders and service providers already stretch resources to meet community needs.

The segregation in Wisconsin has created segregation of information, a separation of access to knowledge, data, or media. This information segregation is based on factors such as socioeconomic status, political affiliation, geographic location, race, or education levels.

Information segregation can be deliberate or unintentional and has led to misinformation, social division, and power imbalances in Wisconsin, reinforcing existing inequalities in society.

"I think a lot of people feel this way. ... [T]hey recognize that these channels that we've been conditioned into believing as true because of propaganda or whatever reason, are not trustworthy," said Elijah Porter, a 28-year-old Black man, during an intergenerational listening session with the Black community from Milwaukee. "And it's getting more and more apparent by the day, literally. Especially here in Milwaukee.

"I definitely do feel like we don't have that kind of trusted for the people, by the people, independent journalism here in Milwaukee. ... [T]here is a lack of connectedness. And that's apart from all the segregation that we know happens here in the city."

There is a great need to build community connections and foster dialogue to address issues of segregation and social isolation in Wisconsin.



Community members come together at a Milwaukee event focused on building collective power, civic connection, and shared resources across neighborhoods. (Photo by Walter Lanier)



PrincessSafiya Byers, the basic needs reporter for the Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, engages with community members. (Photo by Institute for Nonprofit News)

Media habits and distrust

In Milwaukee and Racine, participants' initial responses to questions about news sources mirrored those in other states: national outlets, cable stations, influencers, and podcasts. When probed further, local websites and radio surfaced, but no single trusted local source emerged.

Three patterns stood out:

- Deep skepticism toward media, especially local outlets.
- Trusted information often comes from nontraditional sources.
- A perception that coverage of Black communities skews negative or incomplete.

"The media needs to tell more of people's stories and people's needs," said Byron Johnson, 33, of Wauwatosa. "Report on youth programs, first-generation achievers, and Black professionals."

Ola Baiyewu, 70, from Kenosha County, added, "Increase reporting on Black youth excellence. We need journalists from within our communities."

Many participants expressed frustration with the tone and substance of local reporting.

"It's so negative. It's so biased," said Ayana, 64, a Milwaukee educator. "I'm more frustrated after seeing a local news story than before."

Pamela, 58, from the Falls, echoed this sentiment: "It's rare that you hear something positive about African Americans—and if you do, it's short and lacks detail."

Seeking alternatives

Lacking trust in traditional outlets, participants turn to a mix of word-of-mouth, social media, and community networks.

"I like to get my information from neighbors and outreach programs," said Kenya Taylor, a 43-year-old Milwaukee homemaker.



Residents engage in a community discussion in Milwaukee, exchanging insights, ideas, and local information outside traditional media channels. (Photo by Walter Lanier)

Samantha Collier, 45, a nonprofit executive, described listening directly to the community: “That’s where you get the real view of what’s going on—beyond what the news captures.”

Collier highlighted the importance of creating a safe and healthy environment for the community to thrive.

“Gaining trust in the community is not an easy thing regardless of the sponsors, funders, and media,” she said. “If we can change the minds of the community, we can change the news as well.”

Several community members pointed to Black-led platforms such as Carvd N Stone, [Blow Radio](#), and the [African American Roundtable](#) for local or political news.

Julien, 23, a substitute teacher, said he relies more on “conversations with people” and social media: “Twitter’s my best source because you can sort through things.”

Kelly, 32, uses USFiR, a Facebook page that monitors scanner traffic, for real-time crime updates.



“Gaining trust in the community is not an easy thing regardless of the sponsors, funders, and media. If we can change the minds of the community, we can change the news as well.”

Samantha Collier, a Milwaukee resident and nonprofit executive

Fragility of local media and rise of digital voices

Participants lamented the loss of community-based outlets in Milwaukee and Racine after the deaths of founders or publishers.

“We don’t have our newspaper anymore,” said Alfonso Gardner, 72, of Mount Pleasant. “The people passed away.”

They viewed this fragility as evidence of the need for succession planning and sustainability in local Black media.

At the same time, digital voices are emerging. [Vaun Mayes](#), a self-described “social justice and civil rights warrior,” has become one of Milwaukee’s most-followed independent news figures, with 53,000 Facebook followers—a reach that covers roughly 23% of the city’s Black population.



Vaun Mayes speaks at a community news conference in Milwaukee. Mayes has emerged as one of the city's most trusted voices for independent news and information, using digital platforms to engage residents and amplify community concerns. (Photo by ComForce MKE)

"Vaun shows up. He's there," said Ericka Sinclair, 55, the founder and CEO of Health Connections, a nonprofit organization that brings health care services to some of Milwaukee's most vulnerable populations "That's news we can trust because it's factual and grounded in community."

Mayes, 39, who works as a violence prevention specialist, said he saw the potential of social media as an organizing tool and began using it to reach people in his community. He said he started providing information in 2012. He said maintaining the balance of professionalism is always a challenge.

This work did not begin as journalism in the traditional sense. "Initially, it didn't start that way or in the lens that I work now," Mayes said.

Known first for his presence on social media and at the scene of breaking events, he gradually shifted from capturing viral moments to documenting community realities. Between 2014 and 2016, he said, that work became more intentional.

“For whatever reason, I just always ended up in the middle of stuff that was going on,” he said. “So I started crafting that. Being there, capturing what happens in real time.”

His approach differs from traditional media coverage, which he believes often misses the emotional and human dimensions of trauma.

“You can do an interview and not get the real grasp of what happens or how the victim or the family feel,” he said. “To be the person that covers that live, and that folks trust enough to speak to candidly and openly, that gives them an extra lens.”

Mayes’ reporting expanded beyond Milwaukee during pivotal national moments. He traveled to Baltimore, Maryland, during the unrest following Freddie Gray’s death and to Flint, Michigan, during the water crisis. In both cases, he said, residents told him “what they felt the real story was that media wasn’t capturing.” Those experiences reinforced his belief that grassroots platforms can surface perspectives that legacy outlets overlook.

Over time, his Facebook page evolved into a hybrid platform: part breaking news source, part advocacy hub, part community services connector. During protests, COVID-19, and local crises, Mayes said his platform became “a central figure in advocacy, activism, and assistance.”

Beyond information sharing, he helps residents navigate systems: connecting families to burial assistance, helping file police reports and restraining orders, linking people with attorneys, and facilitating communication with elected officials.

“It has become who do we trust more. Vaun Mays would be a perfect example,” said Milton Byers, a 28-year-old nature educator. “He’s done work to build trust in the community. So people are going to believe what Vaun Mays says over someone else.”

Many residents feel the same way.

“Vaun Mayes was able to gain the trust of the community,” said Dr. LaTonya Baker, a 47-year-old leadership coach. “People follow the information he provides because he has a presence in the community.”

“If the mainstream media does it, they don’t put the full story,” said Cristal Shipp, a 45-year-old



Milwaukee community leader and media entrepreneur Vaun Mayes, left, founder of ComForce MKE (Community Task Force Milwaukee), talks with youth at a Milwaukee alternative high school alongside fellow ComForce MKE member Blakc Shiffe, a local music artist. ComForce MKE serves as a trusted community information hub, connecting residents with resources, opportunities, and civic engagement. (Photo by ComForce MKE)

educator. “They tidbit it, which doesn’t give us a complete picture of what is going on. Those are the things that you will see Vaun Mays at these places. It’s not highlighted outside of people that we depend on to bring that vital information to us.”

Samantha Collier, a 45-year-old Milwaukee resident, summed up the impact of Mayes:

“We don’t have a media source that’s devoted to reporting just direct action around urban, vulnerable, and resilient communities. We don’t have that. We do have some community leaders that’s working their butt off. Vaun is one of them.”

Much of the work Mayes does has been unpaid. “For many of those years, this was almost 100% volunteer free service,” Mayes said.

Only in the past three years has he received limited compensation through a subcontract connected to Milwaukee’s Office of Community Wellness and Safety, formerly the Office of Violence Prevention.

For years, Mayes avoided paying himself through grants, directing funds instead to community needs and building trust at his own expense.

Recently, he has begun budgeting more sustainably. “I’m getting into the space of writing myself in for costs,” he added, acknowledging the need to balance mission with personal stability.

Mayes’ trajectory reflects both the promise and precarity of Wisconsin’s emerging digital news leaders. His platform demonstrates the reach and trust that independent, community-rooted media can achieve. At the same time, his experience underscores the structural fragility of relying on uncompensated labor to fill information gaps left by shrinking legacy outlets.

When asked what keeps him going, even when the work is controversial or exhausting, Mayes answered without hesitation: “It has to be done.”

“I only get paid for very specific work for a very specific amount of hours,” Mayes said. “Most of what we do—informing people, assisting people—that’s still free.”

When asked what keeps him going, even when the work is controversial or exhausting, Mayes answered without hesitation: “It has to be done.”

Mayes built ComForce MKE, short for Community Task Force Milwaukee, as the central platform for his work, structuring it legally as a limited liability company (LLC). The LLC functions as the operational and contractual arm of the work.

At the same time, Mayes is establishing a nonprofit branch of ComForce. The shift is partly driven by grant requirements and the need to receive philanthropic funds directly rather than relying on a fiscal sponsor.

More broadly, it reflects the evolving reality of grassroots leadership in Milwaukee. The LLC provides flexibility and a vehicle for earned revenue through city contracts. The nonprofit arm is intended to expand fundraising capacity, formalize governance, and build long-term sustainability for community-centered programming. Unlike legacy outlets that struggled with succession planning, Mayes is attempting to formalize governance and diversify revenue while the platform is still growing.

This hybrid structure also shapes how Mayes distributes information. Much of his influence flows through his personal Facebook page. While ComForce and related initiatives have their own pages, transferring that audience remains challenging. As a result, most information still originates from his personal account and is then shared outward to affiliated pages.

The reach is powerful but fragile. It is deeply trusted and highly centralized in one individual rather than distributed across an organizational infrastructure.

In a media landscape where traditional outlets have scaled back neighborhood-level reporting and residents increasingly rely on social media for real-time updates, Mayes operates at the intersection of community organizing, emergency response, and independent broadcasting.

The LLC enables him to contract with the city and deliver services. The emerging nonprofit is meant to stabilize and scale the broader mission. But the audience remains anchored to his personal brand, highlighting both the strength and vulnerability of grassroots information leadership.

In Milwaukee's ecosystem of safety response and community news, Mayes and ComForce represent a bridge, connecting residents, government systems, and digital networks in ways that formal institutions alone often cannot.

Shifting trust and the role of nonprofits

Many participants said trust has shifted from journalists to nonprofits that directly engage residents. “United Way and Walnut Way help connect us to things that affect our community,” said Dorothea Macon, 60, of Brown Deer.

Elijah Porter, of Milwaukee, voiced a broader concern: “We don’t really know what’s going on—not even on our own block. We don’t know what’s happening in the city, and we should fix that.”

Fostering the full potential of people

Shannon Ross is biracial and brings a unique perspective to the community-rooted information work he leads in Milwaukee.

His personal journey, which includes founding a newsletter in prison in 2014 while serving a 17-year sentence in Wisconsin, shaped his commitment to providing accurate, accessible information to those affected by the criminal legal system.

Upon his release in 2020, the newsletter evolved into a formal nonprofit organization, now known as [The Community](#), which focuses on outreach, narrative empowerment, and connecting incarcerated individuals and service providers to resources.

The organization produces multiple newsletters tailored to different audiences: incarcerated residents, those in transitional facilities, community reintegration programs, and the broader public. Content ranges from policy updates and resources to stories from residents and successes nationwide.

“We try to be a place where people can get really good news about this specific topic only,” Ross said, referring to the criminal legal system.

The Community’s communication strategy has evolved to meet practical constraints, shifting between print and digital as prison tablets became available and message limits



Shannon Ross, the founder and CEO of The Community, speaking to community members at a local event. (Photo by The Community)

dictated. It currently reaches roughly 6,000 readers inside Wisconsin prisons and 1,700 external subscribers, with plans to expand further.

Inside, engagement is measurable through resident feedback and facility ambassadors, who provide regular input and help verify information.

Ross described hundreds of instances where newsletter recipients credited The Community with connecting them to housing, programs, or critical services upon release.

The organization operates with a small but dedicated staff of six full-time and two part-time employees. Funding is primarily philanthropic, largely from outside Wisconsin, with little state-level support. The Public Welfare Foundation has been the largest funder, providing multiyear grants for narrative work and some fiscally sponsored projects, while local funders, like the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, provide smaller annual grants or event sponsorships.

Ross noted the challenge of sustaining grassroots organizations. Until a major grant in 2023, most funding only covered projects, not personnel.

Ross emphasized the importance of collaboration and systemic thinking in nonprofit work. He advocates for philanthropy to prioritize community impact over competitive metrics and for funders to require collaboration, particularly for large grants, to ensure grassroots organizations receive meaningful support alongside legacy institutions.

At the organizational level, he stresses that nonprofits must deeply understand their ecosystem—partners, users, and community needs—to avoid siloed, redundant, or ineffective efforts.

“It’s hard for people to collaborate,” Ross said. “We have people that we won’t collaborate with. It’s a value system thing. ... But when organizations have a better understanding of why they don’t collaborate, they can start building trust and partnerships that actually work.”

Ross has an ambitious vision for The Community: “We want to be the place people think of when they have questions, curiosity, or concern about criminal justice issues—the trusted source for answers and connections.”

Ross emphasized the importance of collaboration and systemic thinking in nonprofit work. He advocates for philanthropy to prioritize community impact over competitive metrics.

He hopes to expand programming in every facility, develop ambassadors, and implement a leadership model to support a “guerrilla re-entry” process that fills gaps the system cannot address.

Despite challenges, Ross remains optimistic about the potential for systemic change.

“When you see what other societies have figured out, it’s disappointing and eye-opening,” Ross said. “But it also shows that change is possible. Our narratives, our engagement, our structures can shift. It’s about collective effort and strategic storytelling.”

Through The Community, Ross has built a platform that combines information dissemination, advocacy, and community engagement. It reflects both the potential and the challenges of nonprofit-led media in Milwaukee: trusted, mission-driven, and rooted in lived experience, yet reliant on limited resources and collaborative networks.

His leadership, vision, and innovative approach position The Community as a bright spot in Wisconsin’s community information ecosystem—a model for how small, dedicated organizations can create meaningful and lasting change.

Indigenous Communities: Information, identity, and representation

Wisconsin is home to 11 federally recognized tribes and the Brothertown Indian Nation, which lacks state and federal recognition. About 1.7% of the population—roughly 107,000 people—identify as Indigenous.

Our listening session included participants representing the Lakota, Oneida, Stockbridge-Munsee, and Potawatomi Nations. Across tribes, participants emphasized the importance of trusted, culturally grounded information—but said it is often difficult to find. Many described living in two worlds, needing news about both the places where they live and their tribal communities.

Most rely on their nations’ newsletters or publications to stay informed about tribal affairs, culture, and events. “I know more about what’s going on in the City of Milwaukee than in Brookfield,” said Tracie Sparks, 41, an Oneida Nation member living in Waukesha County. She follows Milwaukee news, Oneida platforms on

Across tribes, participants emphasized the importance of trusted, culturally grounded information—but said it is often difficult to find.

Facebook and Instagram, and local politicians to stay connected.

Holly Moore, 41, of Milwaukee, said she doesn't watch local news but follows the [Urban Indigenous Collective](#), co-founded by Wisconsin native Sutton King of the Menominee and Oneida Nations. "The Collective covers some regional and national news," Moore said, adding that she shares information she finds with friends and family.

Participants cited a shortage of Indigenous-led media and authentic representation in broader coverage. The [Milwaukee Natives](#) Facebook group, with over 9,000 members, was highlighted as a vital community hub. Averie Anderson, 38, of Greenfield, follows both the group and the [HIR Wellness Institute \(Healing Intergenerational Roots\)](#), which offers free mental health services and advocacy for Indigenous survivors of violence.

Many Indigenous community members express exhaustion from unreliable or overwhelming news cycles and feel disconnected from news sources that fail to center their realities. Lea Denny, a 44-year-old Hawaiian woman who lives in Milwaukee and is the founder and CEO of the HIR Wellness Institute, said during an interview that mental health looks different in the global majority and that therapists must understand "what it means to sit across from someone who has experienced systemic oppression, racism, and colonization."

Denny discussed the importance of engaging Indigenous elders, adults, and youth together to ensure a holistic approach to media trust and information access.

"Organizing isn't just boots on the ground. It's also about how we're feeding our minds," she explained, underscoring the role of trusted influencers in shaping news perspectives.

Several participants said they bypass traditional media entirely, preferring direct sources. "If I want information about a social issue or a tribal matter, I go straight to the source," said Carla Jones, 37, of the Lakota tribe. "I visit tribal websites, social media pages, or call someone I know."



HIR Wellness Institute team members engage with community members at a community event. Trusted community organizations play an important role in connecting Indigenous residents to information, resources, cultural knowledge, and support. (Photo by HIR Wellness Institute)



Tashina Williams, 35, of Milwaukee and a member of the Potawatomi Nation, said she relies on social media and workplace conversations. “I don’t purposely look for news. It’s what pops up on my iPhone,” she said.

Renee Pfaller, “pushing 70,” said she follows the Oneida publication [Kalihwisaks](#) and the [FNX](#) (First Nations Experience) app, which streams Native and world Indigenous content. “It has all Indian Country’s videos and stories that reflect what we believe in,” she said.

Kim Reyes, 66, an Oneida member living in Milwaukee, said she follows both the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and Indigenous news beyond Wisconsin, including coverage from Minnesota and Akwesasne Mohawk territory. “That’s where a lot of our protests and movement stories come from,” she said.

Participants also identified key community institutions they rely on for updates and resources—including the [Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center](#), the [Indian Community School](#), and [UMOS](#), which supports migrant and seasonal workers.

The group noted the loss of urban Indigenous media outlets due to funding shortages and the absence of succession plans. They also described uneven access to information within tribal communities, where leadership often controls communication.

Lloyd Powless, 80, an Oneida elder and former tribal legislator, reflected on the gap between Indigenous communities and political systems: “The level of competence among local, state, and federal politicians is terrible. They don’t understand our issues and don’t want to learn.”

His 27-year-old grandson, Alex Powless, said he relies on family as his primary news source.

Participants described barriers to building sustainable Indigenous media. Williams, who grew up on the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation, once tried to launch a magazine called wisconsinNDN to showcase contemporary Indigenous life. “I used \$12,000 of my own money,” she said. “But it’s hard. I don’t have time to chase grants or change my message to fit them.”

“The level of competence among local, state, and federal politicians is terrible. They don’t understand our issues and don’t want to learn.”

Lloyd Powless, an Oneida elder and former tribal legislator

Anderson agreed that sustainability is the biggest challenge: “It would take someone dedicated full-time to unify what’s happening in Native communities and secure funding. People want to, but we’re already in survival mode.”

Finally, participants stressed that the media plays a key role in cultural preservation.

“The preservation of Indigenous languages and traditions needs more media attention,” said John Stones, an Ojibwe member from Shawano County. “Without strong representation, our cultural identity is at risk.”

Hispanic Communities: Representation, access, and empowerment

Hispanics are Wisconsin’s largest minority group, making up 7.6% of the population, more than 458,000 people as of 2023, according to DataUSA. Most live in the southern half of the state, with Milwaukee home to 118,000 Hispanic residents, about one-fifth of the city’s population.

While the city’s African American population has deep roots in the Great Migration, much of Wisconsin’s Hispanic population is immigrant-based. Mexico is the most common birthplace for foreign-born residents. Nearly 90,000 Wisconsinites identify it as their country of origin. About 9% of households are non-English speaking, with Spanish spoken in 55% of them.

Our fieldwork in early 2025 revealed both the vibrancy and vulnerability of Wisconsin’s Hispanic information ecosystem. Efforts to convene



Members of Ballet Folklórico de Carlos y Sonia Avila perform traditional Mexican dances at a community event in Madison. Cultural traditions, shared experiences, and community celebrations help strengthen identity, belonging, and connections across Wisconsin’s Hispanic communities. (Photo by Catholic Multicultural Center)



Members of FUNNE (Familias Unidas con Niños con Necesidades Especiales), a support network for Latino families raising children with special needs, gather in Wisconsin. Community organizations often serve as trusted sources of information, connection, and support for families navigating complex systems. (Photo by Catholic Multicultural Center)

small focus groups were challenging because of fears around immigration enforcement, but Hispanic residents participated actively in larger gatherings and shared insights on how they access, share, and create news.

How people get information

Eva, a Mexican woman in her early 40s, said she relies on podcasts, Facebook pages, and investigative reporting from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She also follows [Voces de la Frontera](#), a Milwaukee-based membership organization led by low-income workers, youth, and immigrants. “I follow them for immigration news,” she said.

Voces de la Frontera has built a statewide network of small community groups that meet monthly in cities such as Sparta, Arcadia, Wisconsin Dells, Waukesha, Milwaukee, and Green Bay, organizing around immigrant rights and civic engagement. “There’s a lot of misinformation on social media,” said Nindik Figueredo, the group’s logistics coordinator

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“There’s a lot of misinformation on social media. That’s why we only use trusted allies. Our goal is to use social media accurately and responsibly.”

Nindik Figueredo, logistics coordinator in Dane County, Voces de la Frontera

in Dane County. “That’s why we only use trusted allies. Our goal is to use social media accurately and responsibly.”

In Madison, Jorge, 55, said he listens to [WORT](#) (89.9 FM) and reads [The Capital Times](#), as well as [La Comunidad News](#), a Spanish-language publication that interviews Latino leaders and businessowners. He also follows [Capital City Hues](#), a bilingual, multicultural outlet that highlights people of color across the region.

Founded in 1975, WORT is a nonprofit community radio station that amplifies underrepresented voices.

“I view journalism as a trade, not something you need a degree for,” said Chali Pittman, WORT’s former news and public affairs director, now with Civic Media.

Under her leadership, the station trained high schoolers, retirees, and Spanish-speaking residents in reporting and audio production. “You can’t teach confidence in a classroom,” she said. “You just have to do it.”

Participants praised this approach.

“Letting communities tell their own story is powerful,” said Jeliel Peña de First, 40, of the Catholic Multicultural Center in Madison, who completed WORT’s community journalism pilot program in 2024. “Why don’t we train Latinos to become journalists? If I learn how to do the news, I can be my own voice—the voice of my community.”

Trust, barriers, and representation

Many said they rely on social media, neighborhood groups, or direct contact with officials rather than traditional outlets. “All you hear is negative press,” said Mônica, 29. “It’s frustrating not knowing what’s real.”

Jennifer, 43, added, “I keep up through our neighborhood Facebook group, the [City Cast Madison](#) podcast, and the city’s website.”

Others described learning about civic issues only when they directly affected them. Johnnie, 42, said he didn’t know his property taxes were increasing until he got a notice in the mail. “I contacted my alderman,” he said. “We have to stand up and let our voices



Fellows in WORT Summer Journalism Collaborative prepare to be interviewed. Programs like this help build the next generation of community journalists by providing hands-on training in reporting, production, and storytelling. (Photo by Chali Pittman for WORT FM)

be heard. If I don't say anything, nothing's going to get fixed."

Participants in Madison and Dane County said the Latino community has limited access to consistent, reliable information. Outlets like [La Sabrosa](#), an internet radio station, and [La Movida](#) provide some coverage, but both struggle with funding and staffing. La Sabrosa's reach—about 9,200 Facebook followers—represents roughly 35% of Madison's Latino population, but participants said it cannot meet the community's full informational needs.

La Comunidad News was cited as a valuable bilingual source, though they too face resource constraints. "La Comunidad lets people post their own stories," said Laura Green, grants and communications coordinator at the [Catholic Multicultural Center](#) in Madison. "It puts the narrative in our hands—deciding what matters and showing the good our community is doing."

Dante Viscarra, who co-founded La Comunidad News in 1989 with his parents, Rafael and Gladys Viscarra, continues to publish alongside them. The paper remains one of the few Latino-owned media outlets in Wisconsin.

"If you're going to be a journalist, you can write your own ticket, but you have to also take some entrepreneurial classes," explained Dante Viscarra. "It doesn't mean you have to get an MBA. You just have to understand the basic entrepreneurial concepts. Today, it could be even more profitable than yesterday because you live in a digital era."

Viscarra sees opportunity in storytelling. "Having the right skills to tell a good story, that's a sellable product," explained Viscarra. "Connect emotionally with the audience. That's a skill."

Focusing on underserved communities, he added, can deliver social and economic power.



Community members gather at the annual "Fiestas Decembrinas" fundraiser hosted by the Catholic Multicultural Center with La Movida Radio in Madison. Across Wisconsin, ethnic media, community organizations, and trusted local institutions play an important role in connecting residents to information, resources, and one another. (Photo by Catholic Multicultural Center)



Rafael Viscarra, right, co-founder of La Comunidad News, conducts an interview. The publication launched in 1989 and remains one of Wisconsin's oldest Latino-owned media outlets. (Photo by La Comunidad News)

“There could not be a better time to be a journalist than today,” he said. “If you provide value to the community, people will pay for that.”

A call for positive and informed coverage

Participants said mainstream outlets too often highlight problems instead of progress.

“When people outside the neighborhood only see the negative, that’s what they think we are,” said Antonio Quintanilla, 74, a food pantry coordinator in Madison.

“The smaller outlets by and for people of color are doing a really good job,” said Green, “but mainstream media rarely covers us with depth or context.” Peña de First added, “Just give the facts. Let people make their own conclusions. It’s too biased.”

Green said stronger local coverage—especially around politics, housing, and policy decisions—would help bridge cultural and language gaps.

“The media does a horrible job letting people know when lawmakers are voting on important legislation,” she said. “People in our community don’t know because no one tells them in a way they can understand.”

Intergenerational mentorship offers a path forward

El Sol in La Crosse, Wisconsin, was founded in 2016 by Dr. Jesús Jambrina, a Spanish professor at Viterbo University and has evolved from a classroom print newspaper project into a dynamic Spanish-language online newsroom serving Wisconsin’s Latino community.

“I try to have the classroom as a newsroom,” Jambrina said. “Students can just be journalists, reporters, talking in the newsroom. Those conversations are very fertile. ... What I like about journalism is that you can integrate a lot of other disciplines.”

Jambrina sees journalism as a hands-on craft, one that teaches communication, confidence, and civic engagement. El Sol teaches students writing, editing, interviewing, and publishing, integrating art, design, and Spanish language learning. They also organize events and learn about entrepreneurship.

“If we weren’t doing this, where’s the Latino community in our area going to get information? There is none,” he said.

Located on the western border of Wisconsin, along the Mississippi River and Minnesota state line, La Crosse sits midway between

Dr. Jesús Jambrina sees journalism as a hands-on craft, one that teaches communication, confidence, and civic engagement.



Dr. Jesús Jambrina, third from right, with students during the launch year of El Sol in 2016 at Viterbo University in La Crosse. El Sol began as a classroom print newspaper project and has grown into a Spanish-language digital newsroom serving communities in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. (Photo by El Sol)

Minneapolis–St. Paul (about 150 miles northwest) and Madison (about 140 miles southeast) in the heart of what is known as the [“Driftless Region,”](#) a rugged geographic area with [great natural beauty](#) covering southwestern Wisconsin and extending into parts of Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois.

Digital expansion has extended El Sol’s reach across Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, making it the only Spanish-language news source serving the tristate region.

Jambrina mentors students to think like creators and community builders, producing culturally grounded content while learning business fundamentals.

El Sol embodies a trade-school model born of necessity, with experiential learning and real newsroom experience emerging where no journalism school or infrastructure exists. It’s a grassroots approach to teaching civic storytelling.

“We don’t have a journalism program,” he said. “We have to do it through creative ways.”

Models like El Sol show how community-based journalism can prepare bilingual storytellers, strengthen local media ecosystems, and bridge trust gaps in underserved communities.

With targeted investment, mentorship, and intergenerational collaboration, Wisconsin can scale these models statewide, turning classrooms and community centers into incubators for trusted, community-rooted journalism that rebuilds civic trust from the ground up.

Asian and Asian American Communities: Visibility, voice, and barriers to access

Asian and Asian American residents make up a small but diverse part of Wisconsin's population—about 168,000 people, or just under 3% of the state's total, according to DataUSA. The largest groups are Hmong (54,000), Indian (36,000), and Chinese (31,000). Most live in Milwaukee and Dane Counties, with additional communities in nearby Waukesha County.

Our listening session in the Milwaukee area brought together participants from Lao, Hmong, Burmese, Karen, and Japanese backgrounds, ranging in age from 33 to 84. Attendees included professionals across fields—education, psychology, social work, engineering, health, and media—reflecting the community's diversity and depth of experience.



Desia Xiong, co-host and producer of Hmong Radio on WORT, working the booth during the Hmong New Year in Madison. (Photo by Chali Pittman for WORT FM)

Representation and local news

When asked about local news habits, participants cited a blend of traditional outlets and digital platforms. Among them was Thay Yang, 50, a longtime PBS Milwaukee media professional, and his wife Dawn, 49, a social worker. Together, they founded Nyob Zoo Milwaukee—"Hello Milwaukee" in Hmong—a bilingual digital network highlighting community success stories. Its 6,300 Facebook followers represent roughly 12% of Milwaukee's Hmong population.

"Nyob Zoo Milwaukee is just a passion project, a side project for us," Thay said. "We both work nine to five, too. So we kind of just want to push this out to the community and then grow from there."

Originally aired on public television, the show moved online to reach audiences more easily. “FCC regulations made it hard to use the airwaves, but digital gives us freedom,” he said.

“With the change in technology and the way people are consuming media right now, we decided to switch over and really just focus on the digital platform to really target our audience and meet our audience and their needs,” Thay said.

Hinhpalom Phouybanhdyt, 55, a Laotian psychologist, said his community needs a similar outlet.

“As Laotians, we’re behind the Hmong in organizing and advocating for ourselves,” he said. “They’ve built councils, gained visibility, and connected in politics. We need to learn from that.”

Cultural barriers and civic engagement

Participants across ethnic groups described cultural norms that discourage confrontation or public advocacy. “The leaders in our community should go to city council meetings,” one attendee said, “but we don’t even know where to start. We weren’t raised to interact with government.”

That hesitation has tangible consequences. Soumaly Bounke, 60, from Milwaukee’s Riverwoods neighborhood, said her Lao Buddhist temple struggles with people illegally using its dumpster and parking lot.

“We don’t know how to get help from the city,” she said. “We’re afraid that if we put up a sign, it’ll cause more trouble.”

Limited civic knowledge, language barriers, and the lack of Asian representation in local media leave many unsure where to turn for support or solutions. Participants said they want to see more Asian journalists, anchors, and locally tailored news to help communities engage and be seen.



Maleeya Xiong, an anchor for Nyob Zoo Milwaukee TV, during a broadcast in 2020. (Screenshot from Nyob Zoo MKE/YouTube)

Limited civic knowledge, language barriers, and the lack of Asian representation in local media leave many unsure where to turn for support or solutions.

Trusted networks and information gaps

Without robust media coverage, people turn to community centers, informal networks, and social media. The [Lao Community Center of Wisconsin](#) and the [Hmong American Friendship Association](#) were cited as trusted but underfunded sources of information and support.

“Misinformation and bias are constant problems,” several participants said. When Asian communities do appear in mainstream coverage, it’s often negative or stereotyped. “Every time you see Asian people on the news, it’s always bad news,” said Thay. “We need to showcase the successes and achievements. Our people have been here for 50 years now—let’s see that.”

Niaph, 47, said she relies on local TV and the Milwaukee Public Schools weekly newsletter for more positive, community-based updates. “It’s about the schools, events, and resources like coat drives for families in need,” she said.

Maria Chay, 35, follows Facebook pages that serve her Karenni community, such as [Shadaw Journal](#) (49,000 followers on Facebook) and the [Karenni-American Association](#), which translates U.S. news for immigrants. She also uses Nextdoor to stay aware of neighborhood safety issues. “It’s not fun news,” she said, “but I sign up because I want to know what’s happening around me.”

For Burmese news, participants mentioned [Moe Aung](#), a digital creator whose Facebook following (17,000) doubles the state’s Burmese population, estimated to be over 7,000, with the majority residing in Milwaukee. The city serves as a major hub, hosting one of the largest communities of Rohingya and Karen refugees from Burma in the United States and has seen significant community growth since 2008.

Other sources include the [Milwaukee Consortium for Hmong Health](#), [Shepherd Express](#), and the Wausau Pilot and Review—one of the few independent outlets providing consistent local reporting.

Generational and language divides

Participants described generational gaps in how people consume and interpret news. Younger residents favor social media and digital platforms, while elders depend more on community networks and translated content.

Kaitlin Ma, 33, emphasized the critical role of translation and interpretation: “It’s always a language barrier—whether it’s voting or getting resources. Translation alone isn’t enough

if people can't understand it. Interpretation is even more important because not everyone can read. It's a lost form of culture disappearing with every generation."

Channy Rasavong, 50, echoed this need for connection. "For our community, news travels by word of mouth," he said. "We don't really have a dedicated news source just for us."

'If you build it, they will come'

Every underserved community we spoke with in Wisconsin expressed a desire for more access to local news.

Wisconsin is home to many innovative media entrepreneurs producing creative community journalism. They have ideas, skills, and trusted networks. But they need support to grow their community media initiatives.

"If you build it, they will come," said Bekki Yang, an experienced Asian media executive and business strategy consultant from Milwaukee. "That could be for Hmong, Latino, Black, Indigenous, any underserved communities. It's just no one has the funding, no one has the capital to build it."

With resources, Wisconsin's local media landscape could thrive as a hyperlocal network of inclusive, bilingual, and culturally connected newsrooms.

As Yang explained, "We only rely on each other... and there's only so much people can cover individually."

Without sustained investment and support, communities remain underinformed.

With resources, Wisconsin's local media landscape could thrive as a hyperlocal network of inclusive, bilingual, and culturally connected newsrooms.



A community member smiles during a Wisconsin listening session. Across the state, residents expressed a desire for more trusted, culturally relevant, and community-rooted sources of local news and information. (Photo by Eric Ortiz)

Conclusion: Let Wisconsin's Communities —and NNS—Lead

The voices in this report reveal a statewide shift in how Wisconsinites find and trust information. From Milwaukee and Racine to Madison and townships, people rely on community messengers, social platforms, and service organizations because traditional outlets have not kept pace with where audiences are or what they need.

This is not the end of local news. It's an invitation to rebuild around communities. In Wisconsin, Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service (NNS) shows what audience-first reporting looks like: consistent neighborhood coverage, practical service journalism, and everyday relevance that people name and use. NNS's merger with Wisconsin Watch gives the state an aligned structure capable of pairing deep community reporting with statewide accountability—if funders back it accordingly.

Reimagining success means measuring penetration, engagement, and usefulness—not prestige. It means investing in small, trusted outlets (urban and rural) and replicating models that residents already endorse. In short: let the audience—and proven audience-centric teams like NNS—set the course for strengthening Wisconsin's information ecosystem.

From Milwaukee and Racine to Madison and townships, people rely on community messengers, social platforms, and service organizations.



Ron Smith works with students as part of NNServes, a project between the Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service and Audubon Technology and Communication High School. (Photo by Jonathan Aguilar for Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service and Catchlight Local)

Recommendations

A New Model: Audience-centered investment

Philanthropy has attempted to fill the information void, but too often through legacy models that prioritize traditional journalism metrics—story counts, newsroom size, or awards—over audience reach and impact. To build a sustainable, equitable information ecosystem in Wisconsin, funders must recenter their strategies around audience and community, not institutional preservation.

An audience-centered approach requires:

- **Investing in organizations with proven local trust and reach**, even if they operate outside traditional journalism frameworks.
- **Measuring success through audience engagement, penetration, and influence**—not just content output.
- **Supporting organizations that reflect and serve specific communities** rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model.

These are action steps to take.

- **Make audience the core metric—and publish the targets.**
Require every grantee to set community-specific penetration goals (e.g., reach within Milwaukee’s Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Asian communities; rural county benchmarks), report year-over-year growth, and show how stories convert into service usage (meetings attended, forms filed, resources accessed).
- **Back NNS to lead replication statewide.**
Fund NNS as the lead partner to incubate, mentor, or franchise NNS-style neighborhood desks in Waukesha, Kenosha/Racine, north-central counties, and select rural hubs. Use the NNS–Wisconsin Watch structure to connect neighborhood reporting to statewide accountability.



ComForce MKE team members conducting outreach and neighborhood patrols on Milwaukee's Northside. Community-based media organizations like ComForce MKE reflect a growing model of journalism rooted in presence, trust, and real-time information sharing, often intersecting with community service efforts that strengthen neighborhood resources. Sustaining this work will require long-term investment in local reporting networks, training pathways, and community-led civic infrastructure. (Photo by ComForce MKE)

- **Invest meaningfully in small, trusted outlets in urban and rural areas.**

A newsroom serving 10,000 residents with 15–20% penetration can outperform a statewide outlet on local impact. Fund hyperlocal reporting alongside community partners (schools, clinics, libraries, farms, co-ops) to restore the civic fabric newspapers once stitched together.

- **Adopt multichannel distribution by default.**

Budget for radio, newsletters, podcasts, SMS, Facebook groups, WhatsApp, and in-person events—the channels people actually use—so information is available when and where residents need it.

- **Support durability: talent pipelines, succession, and operations.**

Require plans for succession, editor development, community engagement staffing, and back-office capacity. Pair grants with audience research and translation/interpretation budgets to reach multilingual communities.

- **Counter misinformation with service reporting, not just debunks.**

Prioritize explainers, how-to guides, and calendars tied to local decision points (zoning, school deadlines, elections). NNS's service DNA is the blueprint.

The Wisconsin Imperative

Wisconsin's communities—urban and rural, immigrant and Indigenous—have made clear that they want accurate, affirming, and accessible local news that reflects their lives. They are not waiting for legacy media to rediscover them. They are already building solutions of their own. What they need now is sustained support that meets them where they are.

- **Build audience trust at the community level;**
- **Measure and reward engagement and impact, not legacy prestige;**
- **Support small, community-led media as essential public infrastructure; and**
- **Invest equitably across Wisconsin's racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity.**

The future of local news in Wisconsin will not be measured by the number of newspapers that survive. It will be measured by how well communities are informed, connected, and empowered to tell their own stories.



The Community founder and CEO Shannon Ross, center, participates in a panel discussion. Wisconsin community leaders, journalists, and media entrepreneurs are demonstrating that trust, relationships, and local investment are essential to building stronger news and information ecosystems. (Photo by The Community)

Appendix

Existing and emerging media entrepreneurs

The digital age has opened new opportunities for nontraditional media entrepreneurs. With the decline of traditional print newspapers and the consolidation of mainstream media, independent digital outlets, nonprofit news organizations, and community-driven platforms have emerged to fill the information gaps for underserved communities in Wisconsin.

These entrepreneurs leverage social media, podcasts, YouTube channels, and hyperlocal news websites to provide tailored content that reflects the voices and concerns of their communities. Many focus on issues affecting Black, Latino, Indigenous, immigrant, and rural populations. They offer bilingual reporting, investigative journalism, and civic engagement resources that mainstream outlets often overlook.

The community media landscape in Wisconsin, like the demographics of the state's population, is growing more diverse. Grassroots and ethnic organizations are catering to specific cultural communities and serving as vital sources of local news. However, funding and sustainability remain a big challenge, as many independent media ventures rely on grants, memberships, and sponsorships to sustain their work.

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The digital revolution has allowed for lower barriers to entry, but the need for financial support, media literacy, and digital infrastructure remains critical to ensuring long-term viability and growth for community media in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin community members identified over 75 emerging and existing media entrepreneurs as trusted sources for local news and information. They include nontraditional community media organizations, individuals, creators, solopreneurs, and nonprofit community organizations.

The Community

The Community is the most widely read publication in the Wisconsin prison system. It was founded in 2014 by Shannon Ross while he was serving a 17-year sentence. With the support of his family, Ross turned the newsletter into a nonprofit and continues to gather stories, perspectives, and resources to empower and connect people affected by the criminal legal system. The organization is dedicated to correcting the narrative about people with criminal records by highlighting their successes, humanity, and agency. Its audio, video, and event series, "Correcting the Narrative," is directed by Carl Fields, further amplifying these important stories.

The GRPCHT

The GRPCHT is a community engagement platform launched in June 2024 that fosters individual and collective healing through safe, open dialogue with Milwaukee's Black community. Founded and facilitated by Keisha (@lowwkei), a "lifelong curator of safe spaces," the organization hosts bimonthly group sessions and special events to promote unity and wellness. The GRPCHT engages its community through Instagram (171 followers) and a Substack launched in January 2025, providing ongoing connection and resources.

Sun-Seeker MKE

Sun-Seeker MKE is a Black and trans abolitionist collective in Milwaukee that emphasizes in-person, grassroots outreach due to concerns over platform surveillance. Formed during the George Floyd protests in 2020, the group operates without a formal nonprofit structure, prioritizing trust, mutual aid, and crowdfunding over traditional funding models. Sun-Seeker MKE provides essential information, resources, and training to support the Black and queer community, focusing on activism, mental health, and holistic safety. Led by Yante Turner, Darlene Johns, and Lucifer Adams, the collective produces "radical literature" to foster community safety through relationships. While they do not maintain a traditional website, they have over 3.06K followers on Instagram and share resources via a LinkTree that includes access to their digital publications. As one member explained, "The internet is a tool, but it's not for everyone. Some of us have to move differently."

Vaun Mayes

Vaun Mayes is a Milwaukee-based community activist often described as "Milwaukee's Malcolm X." With 53K Facebook followers, he uses his platform to inform, inspire, and mobilize the local community around social justice issues. He also produced the "Activist and Advocacy Podcast" (1.4K Facebook followers).

Jamere Blu

Jamere Blu is an independent community reporter and digital content creator based in Milwaukee, reaching 76,000 followers on Instagram. In addition to his reporting and storytelling, he operates a food truck and runs Expensive Taste Milwaukee, a food-focused Instagram account with 16,000 followers, combining media and culinary entrepreneurship to engage the local community.

DJ Jerry (Da Voice of Da Streetz)

Jerry Coleman, known as DJ Jerry, is a Milwaukee-based interviewer who spotlights local musical artists and entrepreneurs. He engages a growing audience with 8.38K Instagram followers and 18.2K YouTube subscribers, sharing stories that amplify community talent and culture.

Xavier Simmons

Xavier Simmons, aka “Big Boy General,” is a community activist dedicated to uplifting and empowering youth in Milwaukee. With 3K Facebook followers, he shares initiatives, resources, and insights aimed at supporting young people and fostering positive community engagement.

Kalihwisaks

Kalihwisaks, meaning “She Looks for News,” is the official bimonthly print and digital publication of the Oneida Nation. It serves as a trusted source for tribal members, providing updates on local and federal legislative matters and acting as a vital resource for the community.

Spotted Eagle

Spotted Eagle is a nonprofit organization serving the American Indian community in southeastern Wisconsin. The organization provides programs, resources, and support to promote cultural preservation, community well-being, and empowerment for Native residents in the region.

La Comunidad News

La Comunidad News is a Spanish-language digital newspaper in Madison serving Wisconsin’s Latino community since 1989. Founded by Dante Viscarra with his father, Rafael Viscarra, and mother, Gladys Viscarra, La Comunidad News is dedicated to empowering and advocating for the Latino community. They provide coverage on everything from Latino soccer teams to profiles on successful Latino businesses, baptism

announcements, and special seminars on issues impacting the community, such as domestic abuse. Their mission is to amplify the voices within the Latino community by delivering powerful stories, comprehensive news, and essential information that impacts their lives. They generate revenue through advertising custom-tailored content for businesses (entrepreneur profiles, sponsored storytelling), and sponsored events.

Healing Intergenerational Roots (HIR) Wellness Institute

The [Healing Intergenerational Roots \(HIR\) Wellness Institute](#) in Milwaukee provides free mental health and advocacy for Indigenous communities and is dedicated to fostering holistic wellness and healing across generations. Through programs and services, the institute ([3.2K followers on Facebook](#)) addresses physical, mental, and emotional well-being, emphasizing community connection, cultural roots, and intergenerational empowerment.

HYFIN

[HYFIN](#) is a digital-first media platform on [Radio Milwaukee](#) (88.9 FM) that celebrates richness and diversity of Black culture through storytelling, music, entrepreneurship, and local coverage. While Milwaukee is 40 percent Black, Black media struggles for funding, visibility, and sustainability. HYFIN seeks to fill the gap in Black media representation and create transformational journalism that amplifies community voices. “How do we wield power in a city known to be the worst for African Americans?” said Jordan Lee, the executive director for Radio Milwaukee. “Media is a tool for power and change.”

La Sabrosa

[La Sabrosa](#) is an internet radio station based in Monona that offers fun, information and entertainment to the Latino community.

Philadelphia Community Farm

The [Philadelphia Community Farm](#) in Osceola, Wisconsin, engages historically marginalized communities through agriculture, education, and cultural programming. Its circle leadership model and trusted networks amplify community voices, while social media updates (1.6K followers on [Instagram](#) and 1.5K followers on [Facebook](#)) and in-person events function as nontraditional community journalism. The farm’s success and growth stem from the trust the organizers have built with the community.

Northside News

The [Northside News](#) is a free, nonprofit newspaper reaching over 13,500 households and 25,000 readers on Madison’s Northside every two months. Launched in 1995 to counter

negative media coverage, it has become a trusted community resource, covering schools, neighborhoods, seniors, recreation, local business, and more. Residents rely on it to connect with neighbors and access essential resources, while local leaders praise it as a vital community asset. With engaging journalism and thoughtfully curated advertising, the Northside News celebrates and strengthens Northside pride with every issue.

Indian Council of the Elders

The [Indian Council of the Elders](#) serves Indigenous urban elders in Milwaukee, providing support, resources, and programs that promote cultural connection, well-being, and community engagement. The organization, which has 388 followers on Facebook, focuses on honoring and empowering elders while addressing their social, health, and cultural needs.

Umoja

[Umoja](#) Magazine, a monthly print and digital magazine based in Madison, is the oldest Black-owned magazine in Wisconsin. Launched in 1990 by Milele Chikasa Anana, Umoja has long provided positive news and stories about the local African American community, featuring beautifully illustrated covers commissioned from local and national Black artists. In 2018, Umoja was acquired from Anana, by Umoja Magazine-Madison, Inc., a nonprofit organization created by the Urban League of Dane County. The magazine reaches thousands of Black readers, and thousands more from diverse backgrounds, distributed to schools, universities, businesses, community organizations, churches, and offices throughout Dane County and beyond.

Hay River Review

[Hay River Review](#) is a monthly community newspaper serving the greater Hay River community (western-central Wisconsin) since 1987.

Marquise Mays

[Marquise Mays](#) is a documentary filmmaker, film programmer, and professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee who uses storytelling as a form of [community reporting and reflection](#). With 3.5K Instagram followers, [his work](#) highlights local narratives and explores the intersections of culture, identity, and social justice.

Nyob Zoo Milwaukee

[Nyob Zoo Milwaukee](#), which means “Hello Milwaukee” in Hmong, is a bilingual video network that creates and captures community success stories in both English and Hmong languages. Nyob Zoo’s mission is to provide impactful news to enrich the lives

of underserved Hmong Americans in southeastern Wisconsin and beyond. The YouTube channel has 808 subscribers, while their [Facebook page](#) has 6.3K followers.

Voces de la Frontera

[Voces de la Frontera](#) in Milwaukee is Wisconsin's leading immigrant rights organization. Led by low-wage workers, immigrants, and youth, the membership-based group works to protect and expand civil and workers' rights through leadership development, community organizing, and empowerment initiatives.

Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center

The [Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center](#) is an urban health center in Milwaukee serving Wisconsin's Indigenous community. Through its [Facebook page](#) with 4.3K followers, the center shares health updates, resources, and information to support the well-being of Native communities across the state.

WOJB Woodland Community Radio (88.9 FM)

[Woodland community radio](#), an Indigenous station of Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Public Broadcasting that "participates in, reports on, and reflects upon all aspects of life in northwestern Wisconsin." WOJB-FM informs citizens of important issues, conveys the cultural past of their region (before and after European settlement), and provides entertainment with music, arts, and ideas to enrich the lives of their listeners and provide opportunities for personal growth. They also promote participation in public radio broadcasting through access programming, volunteer activities, advisory outreach committee planning, informal and structured learning experiences, and event sponsorship.

Catholic Multicultural Center

The [Catholic Multicultural Center](#) (CMC) in Madison has been providing vital support to individuals and families in need since 1946. Formed from the unification of St. Martin House and the Guadalupe Center, CMC offers holistic services that care for the whole person—spiritually, socially, and economically—while fostering a welcoming, multicultural community.

Black Leaders Organizing for Communities (BLOC)

[Black Leaders Organizing for Communities \(BLOC\)](#) is a Milwaukee-based community organization dedicated to creating opportunities and uplifting the Black community across Wisconsin. Led by executive director Angela Lang, BLOC engages residents through programs, advocacy, and events, reaching audiences on [Instagram](#) (5.7K followers) and [Facebook](#) (8.9K followers).

African American Roundtable

The [African American Roundtable](#) is a Milwaukee-based assembly led by and serving the city's Black community. The organization focuses on organizing, nurturing, and developing Black leaders to build collective power in pursuit of Black liberation.

Madison Commons

[Madison Commons](#) is a student-led hyperlocal news source for Dane County. Founded in 2006 under the guidance of Professor Lew Friedland, it is powered by undergraduate and graduate students in the [UW–Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#). One of the oldest university-based community newsrooms, Madison Commons takes its name from the idea of a village commons, a place for news, discussion, debate, and entertainment that's open to all.

El Sol

[El Sol](#) is a Spanish-language student newspaper at Viterbo University serving La Crosse and the surrounding tri-state area of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. Founded in 2016 by Spanish professor Jesus Jambrina as part of his curriculum, the print publication moved online during the pandemic to expand reach and reduce costs. Integrated into Viterbo's Spanish-language program, El Sol teaches students journalism, ethical reporting, and community engagement while fostering bilingual and cultural connections. Despite limited resources, it highlights the potential of community-centered journalism to fill gaps in Latino civic coverage and empower the next generation of bilingual journalists.

La Movida

[La Movida](#) is a Spanish-speaking, for-profit [community radio station serving Madison's Latino community](#). Co-founded by Luis and Lupita Montoto, the station provides music, news, and cultural programming that connects and empowers local residents.

Wausau Pilot and Review

[Wausau Pilot and Review](#) is an independent, nonprofit newsroom dedicated to serving central Wisconsin with high-quality community journalism. Focused on local news, events, and issues that matter to residents, it provides in-depth reporting that strengthens civic engagement and community awareness. As a trusted source for unbiased information, Wausau Pilot and Review amplifies local voices and holds institutions accountable. Through its work, the newsroom fosters an informed and connected central Wisconsin community.

Milwaukee Reports

[Milwaukee Reports](#) is a video-focused community reporting platform covering North Milwaukee. With 67.1K Instagram followers, it shares local news, stories, and updates, connecting residents and amplifying neighborhood voices.

Milwaukee Courier

The [Milwaukee Courier](#) is a weekly Black-owned newspaper serving Milwaukee since 1964. Founded and owned for decades by Dr. Jerrel W. Jones, an accomplished businessman and the [first Black owner of a newspaper and radio station](#) (WNOV 860 AM) in the U.S., the Courier has long been a trusted source of news and information for Milwaukee's Black community. Published in print throughout Milwaukee and available nationwide by subscription, the Courier also maintains an online presence that extends its reach beyond the city. Following the passing of Dr. Jones in June 2025 at the age of 85, the Jones family entrusted the Courier and WNOV to [Civic Media](#), a Wisconsin-based public benefit corporation. Under the leadership of editor [Roemel Brown](#) and operations manager [Dr. Robert "Biko" Baker](#), the Courier continues to publish in print and online while carrying forward the mission that has guided the organization for more than six decades: providing a platform where Black Milwaukee can tell its own story. "We are the news," Dr. Jones said in a 2024 interview. "We are everywhere, in everything. We need to be the ones to tell our stories." Known as "The newspaper you can trust," the Milwaukee Courier continues to provide reliable, community-centered reporting rooted in the experiences, perspectives, and priorities of Milwaukee's Black community.

Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service

[Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service](#) is a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to covering the city's diverse neighborhoods. Housed within Marquette University's [Diederich College of Communication](#) and led by executive director Ron Smith, Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service provides in-depth reporting that highlights local issues and community stories. Recognized by multiple communities as a reliable source, the organization amplifies underrepresented voices and strengthens civic engagement across Milwaukee.

Milwaukee Turners at Turner Hall

Founded in 1853, [Milwaukee Turners](#) is the city's oldest civic organization and a nonprofit dedicated to fostering a "sound mind in a sound body." Based at historic Turner Hall, the organization promotes social justice, community engagement, and physical and cultural well-being. Milwaukee Turners maintain an active presence [on Facebook](#), where they engage a community of 8.8K followers.

Ozaukee Press

Ozaukee Press is Wisconsin's largest paid-circulation community weekly newspaper. Locally owned and printed in Port Washington, about 27 miles north of Milwaukee, the paper serves Port Washington, Saukville, Grafton, Fredonia, Belgium, and Ozaukee County government, and has won the Wisconsin Newspaper of the Year award seven times. Its mission is to deliver hard-hitting news, in-depth reporting, engaging features, and striking photography, along with thoughtful editorials and letters to the editor.

WORT FM-89.9

WORT 89.9 FM is a community radio station in Madison that has been amplifying local voices since 1975. More than 300 volunteers power its programming and operations each week, producing diverse content that informs, challenges, and connects listeners. WORT's mission is to provide a public forum for civic dialogue, share community information, and give a platform to audiences underrepresented by other media.

WNOV Radio (106.5 FM, 860 AM)

WNOV Radio, known as "The Voice," offers programming designed to engage and empower the Black community in Milwaukee. The station features a mix of news, music, and cultural content that reflects and amplifies local voices. It serves as a trusted platform for information, connection, and community dialogue.

Racine County Eye

Racine County Eye is an independent, digital-first news outlet serving Racine and surrounding communities since 2013. Led by CEO Denise Lockwood, the publication is dedicated to providing comprehensive, accurate, and timely reporting on local news, events, and issues across Racine and Kenosha counties. Its mission is to keep residents informed and engaged with trustworthy, community-centered journalism.

El Conquistador

El Conquistador is a Spanish-language newspaper based in Milwaukee that serves the city's Latino community. The paper provides news, cultural coverage, and information relevant to local residents, helping to connect and empower the community.

The Milwaukee Times

The Milwaukee Times is a weekly newspaper serving Milwaukee's Black community. Owned by HT Group, LLC, the organization also operates as a printing and publishing company, providing news, cultural coverage, and community resources to local residents.

Milwaukee Community Journal

The [Milwaukee Community Journal](#) serves as the official journal for Milwaukee's diverse Black community. It provides news, cultural coverage, and community-focused content that informs, connects, and amplifies local voices.

Carvd N Stone

[Carvd N Stone](#) is a news company and marketing agency that provides positive news and positive branding for Black and Brown communities. Founded by Nyesha Stone in Milwaukee in 2017, Carved N Stone now covers local and national news.

The Black Voice

[The Black Voice](#) is a student-run publication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that has been dedicated to amplifying the [voices of Black students](#) since 1971. It features independent reporting, commentary, and creative work, providing a platform for students to share perspectives, highlight issues, and celebrate culture within the campus community.

Centro Hispano

[Centro Hispano](#) is a Madison-based organization rooted in esperanza (hope), working to strengthen Latino families and communities through youth programs, immigration services, and family support. Its mission centers on healing, empowerment, and addressing the social determinants of health. With an engaged online community across [Facebook](#) (16K followers), [Instagram](#) (2.4K), and [LinkedIn](#) (1K), Centro inspires Latino residents to take action and define their life journeys on their own terms.

Wisconsin Muslim Journal

The [Wisconsin Muslim Journal](#) is an independent online newspaper led by the Milwaukee Women's Coalition. Publishing community stories semiweekly, it highlights news, events, and perspectives relevant to Wisconsin's Muslim communities.

Community Shares of Wisconsin

[Community Shares of Wisconsin](#) is a network of 70 nonprofits that brings communities together to support local social and environmental justice initiatives. The organization raises funds and awareness for its member groups, amplifying efforts to create positive change across the state.

Full Circle Television

Full Circle Television is a media platform that produces entertainment at the intersection of TV, culture, and community, with a mission to build stronger, self-sustaining communities. Founded by Kayla Lewis Allen (5.78K followers on Instagram), the platform creates content that engages, informs, and empowers audiences while highlighting local stories and cultural connections.

MATC Times

MATC Times is the award-winning student newspaper of Milwaukee Area Technical College, published monthly in print. The newsroom covers campus news, events, and student perspectives, and plans to launch a podcast to expand its reach and storytelling.

Wisconsin Voices

Wisconsin Voices is a nonprofit civic engagement organization that empowers residents through its “Be a Voice” podcast, radio program, and newsletter. Led by executive director David Bowen, the organization amplifies community perspectives and encourages active participation in local civic life.

PWR FWD Media

PWR FWD Media (674 followers on Facebook), based in Milwaukee, is a multimedia platform combining storytelling, activism, and visual media to inspire social change. Founded by Jeff “Shakes” Cannady, the organization (322 subscribers on YouTube) produces content that engages communities and amplifies underrepresented voices.

Civic Media

Launched in 2022, Civic Media is building a statewide radio network in Wisconsin with a local-first strategy, covering 20+ stations. Their mission is “to champion the practice of democracy through the power of honest and informative local voices.” Civic Media owns WRJN in Racine and sister station WAUK in Milwaukee, and is led by founder and CEO Sage Weil.

Nalan Media Group

Nalan Media Group is a Racine-based community news outlet with a Facebook following of more than 3.1K members. The group focuses on sharing local news, stories, and information that connect and inform residents across Racine and the surrounding areas.

Wisconsin Town Hall

Wisconsin Town Hall is a Facebook community with 39.8K members that shares local news and information across the state. The page provides a platform for residents to stay informed, engage with current events, and connect with fellow Wisconsinites.

Milwaukee Natives

Milwaukee Natives is a Facebook page with 9.3K followers dedicated to keeping local residents informed about events and news in the community and beyond. The page serves as a hub for sharing information, connecting neighbors, and fostering community engagement.

The Truth (101.7 FM)

The Truth (101.7 FM) is a Milwaukee-based audio platform that focuses on news, stories, and issues affecting the city's Black community. The station provides a space for local voices, culture, and perspectives that are often underrepresented in mainstream media.

WGTB (91.1 FM)

WGTB 91.1 FM is owned and operated by Gateway Technical College in Kenosha and is an affiliate of Wisconsin Public Radio, broadcasting the WPR News format. The station's Facebook page, with 12K followers, shares news stories, program notes, and features, including WGTB Sports, which provides video coverage of local sporting events.

Shepherd Express

Shepherd Express has been Milwaukee's alternative news source since 1982, offering in-depth reporting, commentary, and cultural coverage. The publication focuses on local news, arts, music, and progressive issues, providing a distinct perspective for the Milwaukee community.

MiWisconsin Media and Community Inc.

MiWisconsin Media and Community Inc. is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan Spanish-language media organization connecting Wisconsin's Latino community. Serving as a defender and voice for underrepresented communities, the organization shares bilingual news, stories, and resources with its 18K Facebook followers to inform, engage, and empower audiences across the state.

Milwaukee Independent

The [Milwaukee Independent](#) is an award-winning, advertising-free daily news magazine, dedicated to transformative journalism and fostering inclusive social understanding in Milwaukee. The publication emphasizes positive news, photojournalism, and analytical reporting across a wide range of topics to serve as a catalyst for community development. Its editorial staff focuses on storytelling and translating complex issues, providing readers with in-depth, community-centered coverage beyond traditional reporting.

Simpson Street Free Press

[Simpson Street Free Press](#) is a student-run media organization where 3rd–12th graders create and publish content across multiple platforms. Middle school writers focus on subjects like science, history, geography, and books, while high school students take on leadership roles and college-age alumni serve as editors. Guided by experienced volunteers, students read and write extensively, producing work that engages local schools, libraries, retired educators, and journalists, fostering collaboration and rewarding young writers.

RJ Smith

[RJ Smith](#) is an independent documentary filmmaker and graphic designer who creates powerful stories centered on [healing, transformation, and social justice](#). His work blends visual creativity with a deep commitment to community storytelling and positive change.

Community Outreach Task Force

[Community Outreach Task Force](#) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) grassroots organization in Wausau dedicated to supporting the most vulnerable members of the community. Staffed by volunteers, their “boots on the ground” outreach team provides meals, survival items, and services to unhoused individuals, low-income elderly, families in need, and people with disabilities. The organization shares its work and advocacy on [Facebook](#), where it has 2.8K followers.

UMOS

Founded in 1965 by community and faith leaders, [UMOS](#) began by addressing the unmet needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Headquartered in Milwaukee, the organization has since expanded its programs to support people of all backgrounds seeking to improve their lives. Today, UMOs serves thousands of families daily across Wisconsin, Texas, Missouri, Illinois, Florida, and Minnesota, offering services that promote opportunity, stability, and well-being.

Forward Latino

[Forward Latino](#), headquartered in Franklin, Wisconsin, empowers affiliates to inspire communities, strengthen democracy, protect civil rights, and improve the lives of working families. The organization cultivates, trains, and supports a diverse national network of Latino community leaders addressing civic, economic, and political challenges, with members in 29 states, including Wisconsin.

Ubuntu Research and Evaluation

[Ubuntu Research and Evaluation](#), founded by Dr. Monique Liston, fosters research-based accountability to promote equity and social justice. The organization works with communities and organizations to apply data-driven insights that support fair, inclusive, and impactful decision-making.

Racine Women for Racial Justice

[Racine Women for Racial Justice](#) is a women-led organization dedicated to advancing racial equity in Racine. Under the leadership of executive director [Kelly Scroggins](#), the group engages in advocacy, education, and community initiatives to promote justice and inclusion.

Muskego Way Forward

[Muskego Way Forward](#) is a community organization in Milwaukee working to build strong, opportunity-rich neighborhoods since 2014. The group engages residents through local initiatives and maintains an active presence [on Facebook](#), where it has 2.1K followers, and [on Instagram](#), where it has 815 followers.

Amani United

[Amani United](#) is a diverse group of Milwaukee residents committed to fostering a healthy and sustainable community. Formed in 2012 in response to the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program under the White House's Revitalization Initiative, the organization is led by community organizer Jerusa Johnson and engages local residents in community development and leadership.

Take Root Milwaukee

[Take Root Milwaukee](#) is a consortium of more than 50 community organizations, neighborhood groups, housing counselors, realtors, and lenders dedicated to promoting sustainable homeownership. The network works collaboratively to support residents in achieving and maintaining long-term, stable housing in Milwaukee.

Wisconsin Black Chamber of Commerce

The [Wisconsin Black Chamber of Commerce](#) is dedicated to strengthening Black-owned businesses and creating economic opportunities within the Black community. Its mission is to make Black businesses the largest employers of Black people in the state, promoting entrepreneurship, growth, and economic empowerment.

Running Rebels

[Running Rebels](#) is a Milwaukee-based organization focused on mentoring and supporting youth in the community. Through programs in education, athletics, and personal development, the organization empowers young people to reach their potential and build positive futures.

Wisconsin Public Education Network

The [Wisconsin Public Education Network](#) is a central hub for public education advocacy across the state. The organization supports educators, students, and communities by promoting policies and initiatives that strengthen and advance public education in Wisconsin.

5 Points Neighborhood Association

The [5 Points Neighborhood Association](#) in Milwaukee serves as a liaison between residents, city agencies, businesses, schools, and other community groups to enhance the quality of life in the 5 Points neighborhood and surrounding areas. The organization fosters collaboration, community engagement, and neighborhood development to strengthen local connections and resources.

Heal the Hood MKE

[Heal the Hood MKE](#) is a Milwaukee-based organization that fosters community collaborations to promote a more progressive and peaceful city. Its annual block party celebrates life and community, drawing over 1,000 participants to connect, celebrate, and engage in local initiatives.

Lao Community Center of Wisconsin (LCCW)

The [Lao Community Center of Wisconsin \(LCCW\)](#) provides social services, educational programs, and professional development opportunities to support the Lao and broader Southeast Asian community in Wisconsin. The organization focuses on empowerment, cultural preservation, and strengthening community well-being.

Hmong American Friendship Association

The [Hmong American Friendship Association](#) is a Milwaukee-based nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of Hmong and other Asian families in Wisconsin. Through education, advocacy, and community programs, the organization promotes cultural understanding, economic empowerment, and family well-being.

Bianca Talks (Bianca Shaw)

[Bianca Talks](#), led by [Bianca Shaw](#), brings together people from diverse backgrounds to engage in meaningful and necessary conversations. Bianca Shaw is also the president of the [Wisconsin Women's Network](#). While the [Bianca Talks podcast](#) last posted in March 2021, the Instagram channel remained active until December 2023, continuing to highlight dialogue and community engagement.

Wisconsin Eye

[Wisconsin Eye](#) is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that provides comprehensive coverage of public affairs across the state. The network broadcasts government meetings, legislative sessions, and civic events, offering residents transparent and accessible information about Wisconsin's political and policy processes.

Spotlight: Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service (NNS)

What it is: NNS is a nonprofit newsroom founded at Marquette University’s Diederich College of Communication to consistently cover Milwaukee’s central-city neighborhoods and communities of color—topics traditional media too often approach episodically or only when news is negative.

NNS received early recognition and support from the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund at Borealis Philanthropy, where Pivot Fund founder Tracie Powell served as fund manager. Powell invested in 2021, during the height of racial uprisings following George Floyd’s murder in neighboring Minneapolis, MN.

What’s new: In September 2024, NNS formally merged with Wisconsin Watch—the statewide investigative newsroom—aligning fundraising and core operations while maintaining a neighborhood-driven mission and identity. The goal: stronger local reporting that connects daily, community-level needs to broader statewide accountability journalism.

Why it matters: In our listening sessions, people named NNS—not Wisconsin Watch—when asked about trusted, everyday local information. That signals a distinct kind of audience trust and penetration: NNS’s neighborhood reporting resonates, spreads, and sustains use in ways larger institutions often don’t. For funders, this is a clear signal to let NNS lead on audience strategy and replication.

A track record of investment: In 2021, the American Journalism Project awarded NNS and Wisconsin Watch \$1.4 million to strengthen local journalism across the state—capital that helped lay the groundwork for today’s integrated structure.

Replicability: Given how often residents inside and outside Milwaukee cited NNS, the model is portable: neighborhood beat structure, service-oriented explainers, strong community relationships, and consistent presence. As regions in north-central Wisconsin and elsewhere asked for “their own version” of NNS, philanthropy should prioritize seeding and mentoring NNS-style operations statewide.

