



Georgia News Landscape Analysis



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Methodology

As part of its effort to strengthen local news in Georgia, the Georgia News Collaborative commissioned researchers with the Pivot Fund and the University of Texas to conduct a landscape analysis of the state's media ecosystem. To accomplish this, researchers took a holistic approach meant to provide the broadest look possible. This whitepaper was assembled using information from the Census Bureau, datausa.io, and Pew Research. Researchers with the Pivot Fund conducted interviews across the state with key stakeholders and a poll of members of the Georgia Press Association, and built a database of media properties and county demographics.

Separately, researchers with the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas analyzed 200,000 articles from 228 outlets that were published online in Georgia between Sept. 15 and Oct. 15, 2022, to determine what localities and topics were being covered. Their research findings will be published in a separate report.



COVER PHOTO BY HENRI MATTHIEU SAINT LAURENT / PEXELS
THIS PHOTO BY DAVIS SÁNCHEZ / PEXELS

Introduction

The Georgia News Collaborative is looking for ways to support local news media across the state. This is a formidable challenge. This crisis isn't merely about rebooting the business model that sustained news media for more than a century. There's a lack of confidence from the public that goes well beyond the long held suspicions of people who are ignored or muted. Competition from the digital platforms has all but decimated legacy media's stranglehold on the public's attention. What's more there is a major disconnect between the content and platforms used by journalists and the preferences of the public.

Finally, the U.S. population has changed dramatically in the last 100 years. From 1920 to 1950, **90% of Americans** were white, by 2020 59% of Americans classified themselves as "White not Hispanic."¹ All of this is reflected in Georgia, which is eighth among the top 10 states that have seen the greatest declines in white citizens. More than a century of cultural incompetency in coverage that marginalized or stereotyped people who weren't white, especially Black people, has left a legacy of antipathy.

Strategies and solutions must be multi-faceted, rather than universal or a one-size fits all approach. The digital disruption of the 21st century shattered norms that characterized news media since the onset of the penny press. The internet and the communications tools that it supports, in particular social media and websites, diminished legacy media's ability to control what news was disseminated to the public, as well as when and how it was received. The adage to "never argue with a man who buys ink by the barrel," no longer holds. The U.S. population increased 40% between 1940 and 2020. But by 2020, Sunday and daily newspaper circulation had plummeted below 1940 levels. Sunday circulation stood at 25.8 million in 2020, compared to 32.4 million in 1940; weekday circulation in 2020 was 24.3 million, compared to 41.1 million in 1940.²

Strategies and solutions must be multi-faceted, rather than universal or a one-size fits all approach.

1 Peshek, Sam. "The US White Majority Will Soon Disappear Forever - Texas A&M Today." Texas a&M Today, May 6, 2019. <https://today.tamu.edu/2019/05/06/the-us-white-majority-will-soon-disappear-forever/#:~:text=When%20the%20U.S.%20was%20established,where%20it%20stayed%20until%201950.>

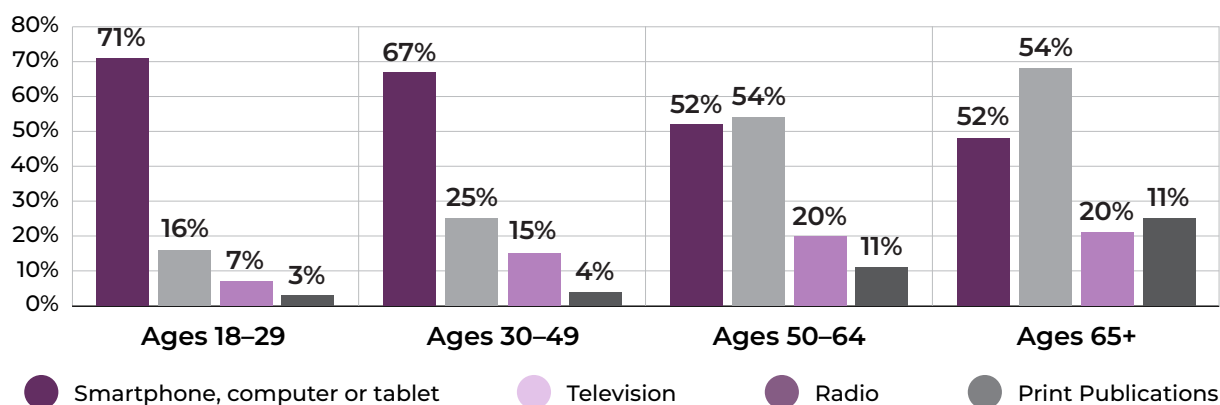
2 Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. "Newspapers Fact Sheet," January 9, 2023. [https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/.](https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/)

Legacy newspapers have borne the worst of the hardships faced by newsrooms this century. Between 2008 and 2020 the number of employees working for newspaper publishers declined 57%; radio broadcasting saw employment levels shrink 26%; while the number of people working in cable television fell 4%, according to analysis of labor statistics done by the Pew Research Center.³ Conversely, the same analysis found broadcast employment growth negligible at 5%. While digital natives saw exponential employment growth, the 10,630 jobs created during this period, falls well short of the 41,560 jobs that were lost. Broadcasters remain viable, but their true reach is limited by the time dedicated to news and geography. Most have an immediate coverage area that they only move beyond for major news events.

Georgia Public Broadcasting has Spanish-language programming for young children, but the target audience for “Salsa” isn’t the majority of Hispanic children who are speaking Spanish in the home. It’s for children in grades kindergarten to third, who are learning Spanish.⁴ Conversely, many of the state’s Hispanic children attend Georgia public schools, where they speak English; it’s their parent’s who don’t.

Those under 50 turn more frequently to digital devices for news

Percent of U.S. adults who get news “often” from digital devices, television, radio and print publications



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug 31–Sept 7, 2020

3 Walker, Mason. “U.S. Newsroom Employment Has Fallen 26% since 2008.” Pew Research Center, April 8, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/13/u-s-newsroom-employment-has-fallen-26-since-2008/>.

4 Georgia Public Broadcasting. “Salsa,” n.d. <https://www.gpb.org/salsa>.

Georgia’s storied legacy outlet — *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* — has also seen its fortunes fall. In 2009, the AJC fell out of the ranking for the top 25 U.S. newspapers.⁵ At the time its daily circulation was 214,303; Sunday was 405,549. A ranking of the top 25 newspapers in 2021 saw the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in the 25th spot with a daily circulation of 47,832, which means the AJC’s circulation is less.⁶

The fall in circulation has been met with a rise in the use of social media and websites for news. Researchers with Pew reported polling on news consumption found that 86% of adults get their news digitally — smartphone, computer or tablet. Just 10% of adults said they “often” get news from print products⁷. More than half of young adults, 18- to 29-year olds, have come to trust information on social media.

“Gen Z doesn’t read newspapers,” said Tanya Milton, editor of the Savannah Tribune, one of the oldest African-American newspapers in Georgia. Still, her weekly press run is small — 850 copies are distributed through a network of churches and news racks in select businesses.

Researchers with the University of North Carolina have labeled 17 counties in Georgia as news deserts, meaning there is no newspaper. That classification however, assumes that the mere presence of a newspaper — most counties have at least one weekly — is an indication that local news and information is readily available. Other factors — platform preferences, generation, along with race and ethnicity — only exacerbate the crisis.

Researchers with the University of North Carolina have labeled 17 counties in Georgia as news deserts, meaning there is no newspaper.

5 “GDPR Support,” n.d. <https://www.ajc.com/business/circulation-falls-ajc-other-big-papers/UCaajlw1q9b0hguBfzE9YM/>.

6 Koop, Avery. “Visualized: The Top 25 U.S. Newspapers by Daily Circulation.” Visual Capitalist, July 30, 2022. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualized-the-top-25-u-s-newspapers-by-daily-circulation/>.

7 Shearer, Elisa. “More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices.” *Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

Consuming and Covering News in the Digital Age

In the fall of 2021, a media consumption poll of registered voters, age 18 - 39, was conducted across southwestern Georgia on behalf of the Pivot Fund. The survey provides insight into a crucial demographic, including shifts in how media is consumed and information is accessed. The results underscore the public's reliance on Facebook and other social media platforms, rather than legacy media:

- After **word of mouth from family or friends**, Facebook was the second most frequent response when asked how community information is accessed: 49% for white respondents; 58% for Black respondents.
- **Social media** was the most common response — 46% overall; 42% for white respondents and 54% for Black respondents — when asked about the type of media used “most frequently” to learn about what’s happening in their community.
- **Facebook** was also overwhelmingly preferred when asked about using websites, apps or social media platforms to “learn about events in your community,” 58% overall; 58% for white respondents; 60% for Black respondents. By comparison, the next most popular response was Instagram — 7% overall, for white respondents and Black respondents.
- **Facebook** was even more popular than “television” when asked about preferred platforms to access local news; 37% overall; 37% for white respondents; 42% for Black respondents. “Television,” came in second, 21% overall; 21% for white respondents; and 28% for Black respondents.
- What’s more, **Facebook is part of their routine**. It was the top response when asked “In the last 10 days, which of the following have you done?” Overall, 72% of all respondents gave this answer; 69% of white respondents; 77% of Black respondents. The next answer was “watched television news,” at 50% overall; 52% of white respondents; 50% of Black respondents.

The media consumption poll makes it clear that social media plays an outsized role in these communities, particularly for those 40 and younger — Millennials and Generation Z. Although the church has long served as a key primary source of information for Black people, its role and influence is waning — 2020 marked the first time that membership

in a church, synagogue or mosque dropped below 50% in the 80 years that Gallup has been tracking it.⁸ The Georgia poll responses reflect this change:

- When asked “what type of person do you most frequently hear from when learning about things that have happened in your community?” **just 2% of respondents in all categories responded, “church member.”**
- When it comes to accessing community information, “church” lagged behind, “word of mouth from family or friends,” “Facebook,” “Television,” “Radio,” and “Newspaper,” falling just shy of one-quarter of respondents, with **23% of all respondents and white respondents, respectively; and 21% for Black respondents.**

“I mostly consume internet sources,” said Chelsea, a 30-something Black woman from Douglas County. “I follow sources like Teen Vogue articles, independent zines, pages like Change or Impact on Instagram, some comedian political reporters and cartoonists.” She added, “I also try to follow more media sources with certain perspectives like Black perspectives, Asian perspectives, Indigenous, and international, etc.”



I mostly consume internet sources.”

Chelsea, a 30-something Black woman from Douglas County

Laura Sousong, who’s in her 40s and from DeKalb County, said she relies mostly on Facebook and NPR. Mario May, a Black man in his 40s from Cobb County, said he gets a lot of information from Facebook and Instagram.

In 2021, researchers at Pew reported that out of 11 social media platforms, Facebook was the dominant social media source for news and information. The reach and accessibility of social media and websites have allowed anyone with an internet connection to vie for audience share and to present their point of view on an issue. This has given voice to people and communities who have long been muted or whose image has been distorted negatively or stereotypically.

Suburban Atlanta’s Forsyth County, which includes the city of Cumming, has a sizable — 19% — foreign born population, including a significant number of people from South

8 Jones, Jeffrey M., “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for the First Time,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>, accessed Nov. 28, 2021.

Asia. Richa Aggarwal launched a Facebook page targeting an audience with South Asian roots. “Indians in Cumming, Ga.” is a private group with 16,400 members. There’s a larger public group, Indians in Atlanta-Cumming-Marietta-Smyrna-Alpharetta-Dunwoody-Decatur, which has 25,600 members. Indians in Atlanta by Seema Garg has 44,000 members. The majority of members of Indians in Cumming Ga. are women in their 30s and 40s, living in Cumming and John’s Creek, Aggarwal said. “It’s a channel to round up the community and everyone finds something,” she said.

Pasa la Voz Noticias (formerly *Pasa la Voz Savannah*) in Savannah, Georgia grew from a Facebook page to a website, text/Whatsapp news alerts service. Founder Elizabeth Galarza started the page in 2018 to report on things like accidents, road closures, weather and storm conditions for the South Georgia immigrant community. By 2021 the Facebook page had about 20,000 followers. “I believe we have so many followers because no one else is serving the community this way,” Galarza said.

By this spring, *Pasa la Voz’s* audience had grown by 35%, plans were underway for a weekly video news wrap-up and it had secured grants and sponsorships, including \$150,000 from the Pivot Fund. *Pasa la Voz’s* approach to journalism is “very much community first, community centered, and trying to think how we can provide people with information and resources to make it feel like they’re part of a greater community,” Editor-in-Chief Fernando Soto Gauden told the Pivot Fund.

Notivision Georgia has a similar story. Monica Pirela, a former Venezuelan journalist, and her husband and cameraman, Jay Cruz, broadcast a

12-minute weekly Spanish-language newscast on Facebook, but also syndicates content to Spanish-language radio stations. Based in Warner Robbins in Houston County, Notivision reaches Hispanic communities in Tift, Worth, Crisp and other South Georgia counties. The focus is on local events, education, public health, immigration and crime. In addition to the newscast, there’s a website and a presence on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook.

“There are the two big channels, Univision and Telemundo, that report on Atlanta, but we saw a lack of local news serving the rural Hispanic community,” said Cruz.



I believe we have so many followers because no one else is serving the community this way.”

*Elizabeth Galarza,
founder of Pasa La Voz Noticias*



BEE TV Network, which is based in LaGrange, Georgia, also used Facebook as an incubator. CEO April Ross saw a need for news coverage and began streaming news reports. “If something happened in our community, we had to wait for (media from) Columbus or Atlanta,” Ross said. In 2021, Ross purchased a TV station; the news and information her company produces now reaches into 11 South Georgia counties.

Fannie Flono grew up in Augusta, Georgia. Now a retiree, Flono divides her time between Augusta and Charlotte, North Carolina. When asked if she read the *Augusta Chronicle*, Flono answered with an unequivocal, “no,” and explained that the paper still lacked cultural sensitivity.

Flono cited the podcast, *Local Matters*, when asked about local news sources she turns to to stay informed about her Georgia community.

Janice Allen Jackson, a business consultant in Augusta, launched the *Local Matters* podcast in March 2020 — 163 episodes have been posted as of April 28. Jackson, a former city manager of Albany and an administrator for Augusta, said she began her podcast to help people better understand the role of local and state government.

“You have to realize that most quality of life issues happen here at the local level — parks and recreation, public safety, road repairs — all of that is local government.” She said her content isn’t partisan and she doesn’t endorse candidates. “I just give information that helps answer the question of ‘Does this person’s outlook jibe with yours?’”

Jackson said she started her programming after talking with a minister who was “filling up church vans” taking people to polls even though many didn’t understand what or who they were voting for.

“It became a way to educate, empower and engage people so that they have a better understanding of the political process and how to have control over their quality of life,” Jackson said.

Initially she was hosting a radio show on WKZK, a talk station based in North Augusta, and uploading the recordings as podcast episodes. She said both platforms help get



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*Janice Allen Jackson,
founder of the Local Matters podcast*



stories out. But she noted that podcasting has a “lower barrier” of entry than traditional forms of media.

She echoed the skepticism other African Americans expressed about Georgia’s traditional commercial media outlets. She said growing up in Augusta there were always concerns about how Black people were represented in the *Augusta Chronicle*, the city’s 238-year-old daily newspaper that was recently sold to GateHouse by family-owned Morris Communications. *The Chronicle* is known for covering the Masters Tournament, a private invitational tournament launched by Augusta National Golf Club in 1934 that didn’t invite a Black competitor to play until 1975, when Lee Elder finally broke the color barrier. Facing mounting pressure, the club finally allowed women to join just 11 years ago in 2012.

“There has always been a need for alternative media for the African American community in Augusta,” Jackson said. “My show takes it to a new level with current technology.

Gaps in coverage spurred Dan Whisenhunt to launch *Decaturish*, a news site covering DeKalb County’s county seat of Decatur, a fast growing city in the Atlanta Metropolitan area. He has been very deliberate in developing the site’s voice. In addition to a reporter and an intern, he has a diverse line up of contributors. He also developed standards around crime coverage — media has long been guilty of overrepresenting Black people when it comes to the police beat, Whisenhunt said. This approach has become even more problematic in the digital age because a story about an arrest will remain online, even if the charges were dropped or there was an acquittal. As a result, *Decaturish* doesn’t name people charged in crimes unless there’s a commitment to follow the story through the justice system.

Whisenhunt said *Decaturish* has coverage gaps when it comes to covering Black people and people of color; Black people make up about 16% of the population, Hispanics 7% and Asians 4%. “We have a sizable number of Black readers and people of color, but we’re not doing nearly as good a job as we could.”



We have a sizable number of Black readers and people of color, but we’re not doing nearly as good a job as we could.”

Dan Whisenhunt, founder of Decaturish



The Rise of Pink Slime in Georgia

But there is a dark side to digital access — it has also provided a platform for propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. For the purposes of this report, please note that the American Psychological Association characterized misinformation as “false or inaccurate information,” while disinformation is characterized as “false information deliberately meant to mislead.”⁹ The U.N. labeled disinformation and fake news stories “a symptom of ‘global diseases’ undermining public trust.”

The rise of disinformation and misinformation comes as trust in news media is nearly at an all-time low, according Gallup, which has tracked American trust in media since 1972.¹⁰ Last year, 32% of Americans said they had “a great deal” or “fair amount of trust” in news media — that’s two points higher than the low set in 2016.

“I feel that all media is biased one way or another,” said Mary, a 30-year-old white woman from Coweta County who didn’t want to use her last name because of privacy concerns. “I think there is more to the story and it isn’t being reported.”

Kay Wynn, 50, of Whitfield County, who is also white went further, “I have stopped watching the daily local and national news simply because it stresses me out about things I have no control over.”

In the U.S., Black people and people of color are considered at-risk for disinformation campaigns meant to disenfranchise them.

Dr. Samuel Wooley, program director of the Propaganda Research Lab at the University of Texas has warned¹¹: “Minority groups are targeted by unique strains of propaganda:

In the U.S., Black people and people of color are considered at-risk for disinformation campaigns meant to disenfranchise them.

9 <https://www.apa.org>. “Misinformation and Disinformation,” January 27, 2023. <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation>.

10 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403166/americans-trust-media-remains-near-record-low.aspx>

11 Center for Media Engagement. “Testimony: ‘A Growing Threat: The Impact of Disinformation Targeted at Communities of Color’ - Center for Media Engagement,” April 26, 2022. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/the-impact-of-disinformation-targeted-at-communities-of-color/>.

Specific content is drafted as well as tactical behavior employed to influence minority groups. These targeted messages undermine our democracy as they work to alienate and disengage minority groups. The specific, often transnational, tactics challenge content moderation and fact checking efforts and regularly rely on cross-platform communication.”

One method of introducing disinformation or propaganda into a community is “pink slime.”¹² In this case websites present as local or national news sites, but they promote partisan disinformation and are often tied to political donors. **Iffy News** estimates that there are more pink-slime accounts than all of the sites operated by Gannett/Gatehouse, the nation’s largest newspaper chain¹³. Last year, **Metric Media**, which has 30 sites in Georgia, was accused of using its network of local sites to promote conservative candidates. (Bengani, CJR). The nonprofit has more than 1,000 sites across the nation, according to Charity Navigator.

AllOnGeorgia is the predominant news web presence in more than 20 Georgia counties. The sites are slick, very local, and timely. However, it’s unclear how many staffers there are, if there is staff in each community or if the work is being done remotely because all of the articles carry the byline, *AllOnGeorgia*, in lieu of an individual’s name — a tell-tale sign of pink slime outlets. The site doesn’t include content specifically for or about Black people or people of color living in these communities. *AllOnGeorgia* is the Patch.com for the state of rural Georgia. It appears that the owners are successfully building a brand. It is based in Statesboro, Georgia, in Bulloch County.

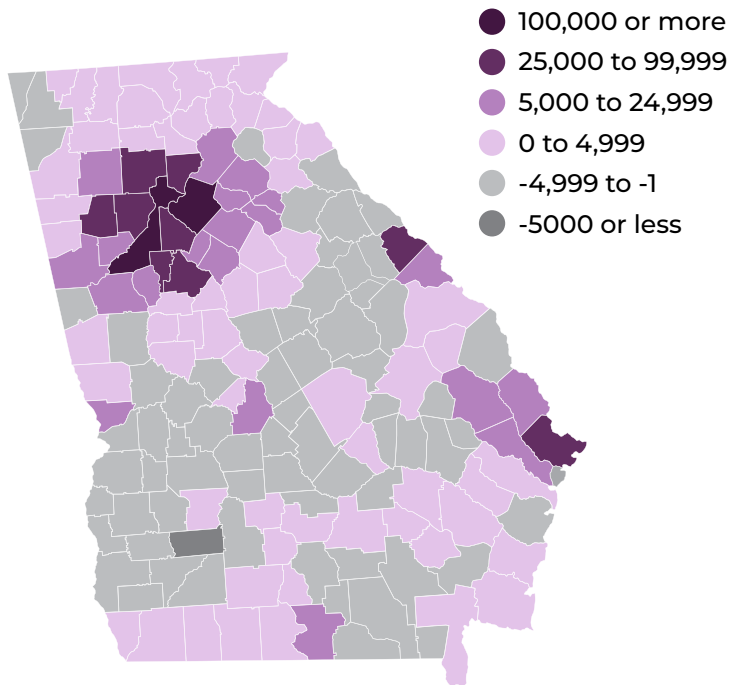
Bulloch County Includes:

- **Brooklet**
- **Portal**
- **Register**
- **Statesboro**

12 Columbia Journalism Review. “‘Pink Slime’ Network Gets \$1.6M Election Boost from PACs Backed by Oil-and-Gas, Shipping Magnates,” n.d. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/pink-slime-network-gets-1-6m-election-boost-from-pacs-backed-by-oil-and-gas-shipping-magnates.php.

13 <https://iffy.news/pink-slime-fake-local-news/>

Numeric Change in Population for Georgia Counties 2010–2020



Sources: Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia and U.S. Census Bureau

Numeric Increase		#
1	Gwinnett County	151,741
2	Fulton County	146,129
3	Cobb County	78,071
4	Forsyth County	75,772
5	DeKalb County	72,489
6	Cherokee County	52,274
7	Clayton County	38,171
8	Henry County	36,790
9	Columbia County	31,957
10	Chatham County	30,163

Largest Numeric Decrease		#
150	Baldwin County	-1,921
151	Pulaski County	-2,155
152	Macon County	-2,658
153	Tattnall County	-2,678
154	Sumter County	-3,203
155	Crisp County	-3,311
156	McIntosh County	-3,358
157	Dooly County	-3,710
158	Telfair County	-4,023
159	Dougherty County	-8,775

Bulloch County is heavily Republican; a majority of its voters chose Trump in the 2020 election. AllOnGeorgia was launched in 2015 by former Republican State Representative Delvis Dutton and it is supported through advertising and the *AllOnGeorgia Accountability Fund*, which bills itself as a mechanism to “accept donations from the community to assist in advancing the cause of transparency and accountability in local and state government.” The other seemingly partisan statewide digital news option is *Newsbreak*, a news aggregator which purports to cover Georgia counties. But it’s not hyperlocal like *AllOnGeorgia*, and much of the content appears to be national in scope. The site is also not as easily navigable or as attractive as AllOnGeorgia.com.

Communities where there is already a void of information due to a lack of coverage or where institutional mistrust already exists may be more susceptible to disinformation.

Some anti-vaccine disinformation that targeted Black people during the COVID-19 pandemic referenced the Tuskegee syphilis experience, Henrietta Lacks and Jim Crow.¹⁴

The danger of misinformation and disinformation is compounded by the fact that Black, Latino and Asian Americans have fueled the growth of Georgia's registered voters, according to researchers with Pew. Black voters have accounted for 48% of the state's electorate

growth.¹⁵ "Voters of color are targeted with disinformation narratives specifically designed to appeal to each community's concerns in ways that will alienate voters and suppress turnout," Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-N.C. said in remarks during a May 2022 House Administration subcommittee hearing on misinformation targeting Black voters and voters of color.¹⁶

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14 First Draft. "Covid-19 Vaccine Misinformation and Narratives Surrounding Black Communities on Social Media - First Draft," September 2, 2022. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/covid-19-vaccine-misinformation-black-communities/>.

15 ———. "Black Eligible Voters Have Accounted for Nearly Half of Georgia Electorate's Growth since 2000." *Pew Research Center*, December 21, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/12/15/black-eligible-voters-have-accounted-for-nearly-half-of-georgia-electorates-growth-since-2000/>.

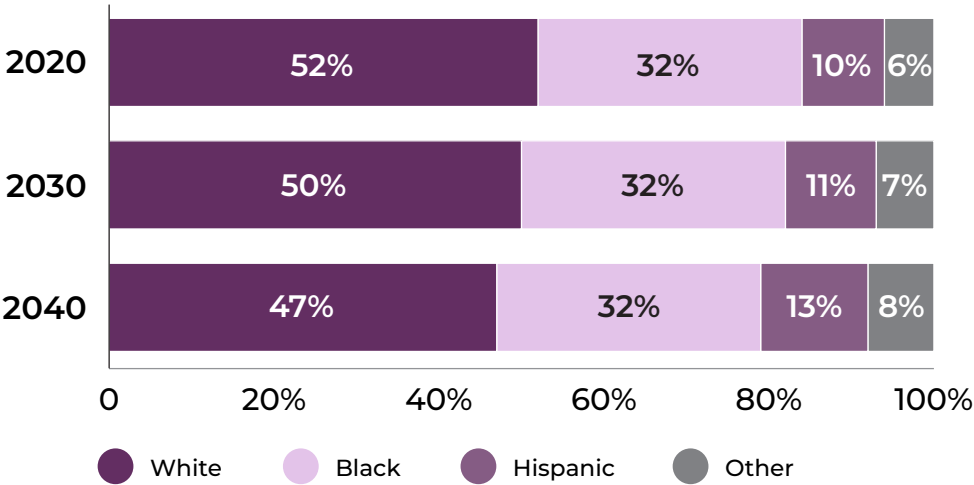
16 NBC News. "Misinformation May Only Worsen for Black Voters in Lead-up to Election, Experts Warn," May 3, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/misinformation-may-only-worsen-black-voters-lead-election-experts-warn-rcna26924>.

Understanding Georgia

Georgia has 159 counties and a population of 10.8 million people. It is the 13th fastest growing state, according to the Census Bureau — when numeric change is considered its growth rate accelerates to the fourth fastest, behind Texas, Florida and California. This growth is reflected in the Atlanta Metropolitan and coastal areas, including Savannah. Ten counties account for 70% of the state’s growth in the past decade. Meanwhile, the state’s rural population is shrinking — 68 counties lost population, according to the 2020 census. The state’s poverty rate of 14% is higher than the national rate of 11.6%.

Georgia is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. In the last census, Georgia was 51%, white, not Hispanic. The white population is shrinking — 65.1% of Georgians were white in 2000, that number declined to 52% in 2020. At the same time, the Black population grew from 28.7% to 31.5%. The percentage of people identifying ethnically as Hispanic, rose from 5.3% to 10.2%. While the percentage of people who were foreign born, increased from 7.1% to 10.3%. In 2020, 79% of Georgians lived in an urban area, compared to the 21% who lived in rural areas, according to census data. The [USDA](#) estimated that about 22% of rural Georgians aren’t white; with the fastest growing segment being white Hispanics at 9%, compared to 8% for African Americans.

The trend toward greater racial and ethnic diversity is projected to continue



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget Population Projections (2020 Series)

By 2040, demographers with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government predict that no racial or ethnic group will claim more than 50% of the state population. White Georgians see their numbers fall to 47%. The Black population is expected to hold steady at 32%. The percentage of Hispanics is expected to increase from 10% in 2020 to 13% by 2040.

This demographic shift will prove to be a challenge to legacy media and traditional coverage models. These brands are haunted by a century of cultural incompetency along with outright racist practices. African Americans in particular often view coverage efforts by long-time traditional newspapers, weekly and daily, with skepticism. Bri Roberson owns the SoulBean Coffeehouse in Waynesboro in Burke County. Located in southeast Georgia, Burke County has a population of 24,310; it's 48.1% white and 46.2% Black. Its lone news outlet is the *True Citizen*, a weekly newspaper with a website and Facebook presence. Roberson said she doesn't view the *True Citizen* as a viable outlet for news or for marketing her business. She questioned negative coverage of the county sheriff, who is Black. "It just seems like the newspaper is just trying to hammer the sheriff and ruin his reputation."

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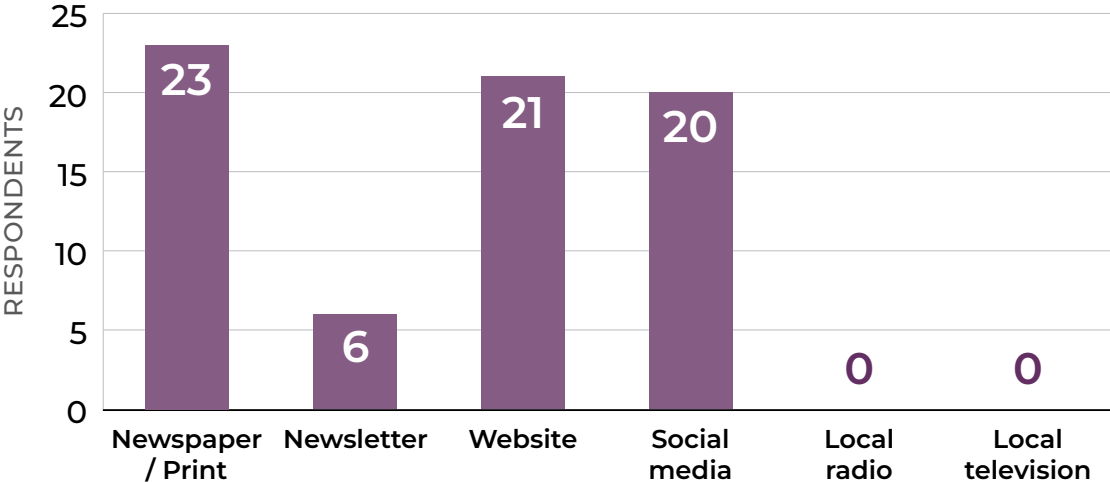
Sherrell Byrd, with advertising and marketing firm, The BAM Agency, in Albany, Georgia, published one edition of what was to be a quarterly lifestyle publication for African Americans living in South Georgia. Albany, which is 75% Black, has four broadcast networks and a daily newspaper, *The Albany Herald*. Byrd said her first and only published issue struggled because of problems with distribution and revenue strategies. But Byrd is convinced there's a need for this type of product. "Our community is predominantly Black," Byrd said. "While there are other print publications in South Georgia, they don't reflect that. I wanted to create something that showcases Black people's work and how they're contributing to the community."

Byrd isn't giving up. She has two nonprofits that she hopes can fund the publication. "We need to do more research around business models and start-up costs, but we are having conversations in the community every day about how there is a real need here for more Black news media."

Georgia’s Disappearing News Coverage

By most measures, Georgia’s media ecosystem is in critical condition. In 2022, the once robust Georgia Press Association counted only 24 daily newspapers among its members. That’s a 35% decline from 2013 when it claimed 37 dailies. Those dailies had a combined circulation of 123,000 — that’s roughly 1% of the state’s population. Circulation totals for individual properties ranged from 15,908 to 1,969. The number of weekly publications held steady with 109 members in 2022, compared to 112 in 2013. These weeklies are delivered via second and third class mail, leaving little room for urgency. Broadcast and cable outlets aren’t likely to pick up the slack, as their viewership is being outpaced by streaming services.¹⁷ As a result, digital news coverage isn’t only giving voice to previously muted people, in some cases it’s providing content that was once a staple of legacy media. In addition to shrinking staff and circulation, dailies have seen news holes shrink. Weekly coverage is also limited. Even communities with papers that are part of national companies have seen coverage suffer.

**Q: “What platforms do you use to deliver news?
Select all that apply:”**



17 “GDPR Support,” n.d. <https://www.ajc.com/life/radiotvtalk-blog/streaming-outpacing-cable-viewership-for-first-time-ever-according-to-nielsen/2ZGEJLFM4VHCXGXP6BECYJQV4/>.

Macon, Georgia, the county seat of Bibb County located southeast of Atlanta, has had a similar experience. *The Macon Telegraph* is owned by McClatchy. It has a circulation of 9,353, according to the Georgia Press Association. *The Telegraph* and *The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, circulation 9,868, are directed by McClatchy's Georgia editor.

Macon-Bibb County, a consolidated city-county government, is 54% Black. The paper isn't viewed favorably by many Black residents. "I don't think there is any resource that adequately represents the Black community," said Alex Habersham, publisher of the Macon-Middle Georgia Black Pages, a resource for Black-owned businesses in Bibb County. "I guaran-damn-tee it that they will publish every homicide but there are other issues, as well as a lot of good things going on, that go unreported. We have a real need for legitimate news coverage from a Black perspective, not only about crime, but factors that contribute to it, like poverty and the resources needed to alleviate it."

A former newspaper editor, who asked not to be identified, said daily newspapers just aren't capable of providing residents with a robust news product. He cited cuts to both staff and newshole. "There are no local feet on the street," he said. What's more, there are competing sources for local news."



I guaran-damn-tee it that they will publish every homicide but there are other issues, as well as a lot of good things going on, that go unreported. We have a real need for legitimate news coverage from a Black perspective, not only about crime, but factors that contribute to it, like poverty and the resources needed to alleviate it."

*Alex Habersham,
publisher of the Macon-Middle Georgia Black Pages*

Sylvania, which is in Screven County, relies on the *Sylvania Telephone*, which was acquired by GateHouse Media and folded into the *Augusta Chronicle*. The *News and Farmer*, which once billed itself as "Georgia's oldest weekly," suffered a similar fate. Each has a website that redirects the audience to a page on the [Augusta Chronicle](#) website, as well as a Facebook page.

The *Augusta Chronicle*, which started as the weekly *Augusta Gazette* in 1785, is one of the oldest newspapers in the United States and the oldest active newspaper in Georgia. In 2019, The *Augusta Chronicle*, along with Morris Communications' entire newspaper division and various **periodicals** that included *The Savannah Morning News*, was sold to **GateHouse Media** for \$120 million. The company's Gastonia, NC location, which is nearly 200 miles or more than 3 hours away, prints The *Augusta Chronicle*. This means earlier deadlines for the *Chronicle*, which can negatively impact the paper's timeliness

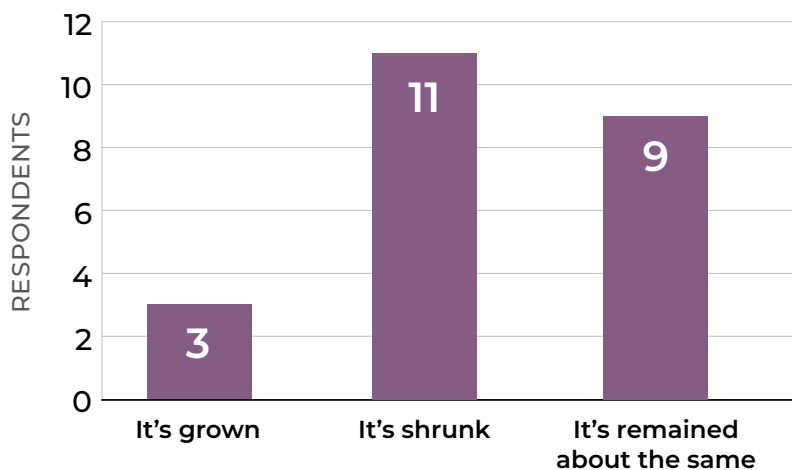
and depth of coverage. Stephen Wade and Billy Morris retained their roles as president and publisher respectively of the *Savannah Morning News*. The Morris family also retained ownership of the *Augusta Chronicle* building and property in downtown Augusta. The sale ended 232 years of local ownership, the last 72 of which had been under the Morris family. The *Augusta Chronicle* leans conservative and its coverage focuses on Augusta's downtown, predominantly white business and civic community. However, Augusta, the county seat of Richmond County, is 54.2% Black or African American, 39.7% white, 1.7% Asian, 0.3% American Indian, 0.2% Pacific islander, 1.3% from other races, and 2.6% from two or more races. Those of Hispanic or Latino origin make up 4.1% of the population, according to U.S. Census data.

The Augusta Metro Courier, owned by long-time resident Barbara Gordon, serves Augusta's predominantly Black communities. Up until a year ago, *The Metro Courier* had a digital presence, but now is print-only. Gordon, who has struggled in recent years to keep the paper going, says she has no plans of re-starting a digital edition. She also says that she is considering stopping the paper altogether. *The Augusta Metro Courier* may reach a traditionally older audience including the city's Black elite. It struggles to meet the information needs of more diverse Black and digital audiences, and what's more, the owner has no strategy or energy to engage these audiences. That said, Augusta's Black residents know about the *Metro Courier*, and understand the historically important role the *Metro Courier* has played in their communities.

The Darien News, which is in Southeast Georgia's McIntosh County, isn't considered a news source for Black residents. County Commissioner Roger Lotson, who is also pastor at Carneghan Emmanuel Baptist Church. He said Black people rely "on word of mouth more than the *Darien News*. Black people find out what's going on mostly from church." He added, "Older citizens will gather at the Senior Citizens Center. Younger people talk among themselves, getting information from parents." This observation of this primitive means of information sharing is representative of many of the counties surveyed. Upson County, which includes Thomaston, relies on the *Beacon Journal*. The weekly offers local coverage, but it leans hard to the right on the political spectrum. In the column "Dog Whistling Past the Graveyard," Alan Landers wrote this about the 2020 election: "...Joe Biden and the racist Radical Democrats seized the government..." *The Thomaston Times* and the *Free Press*, which was published from 1977-2000, was the news source for African-Americans, according to a local historian.

There's little local media representation for one of Georgia's smallest populations — Native Americans. Instead, some in Georgia's indigenous population of 42,316, subscribe to out-of-state tribal papers. *The Cherokee Phoenix*, based in Oklahoma, has 518 subscribers in Georgia, while the *Muscogee News*, also based in Oklahoma, has 128.

Q: “During the past five years, which best describes your circulation?”



It also doesn't appear that the decline of newspapers has leveled off. As part of the research for this paper, the Georgia Press Association membership was polled about the health of their organizations. About one-third of the membership responded to the poll. Of those responding, advertising and paid circulation remain the chief revenue streams. And while 29% said they have enough cash reserves to sustain operations for more than a year, 14% said their reserves couldn't sustain operations for three months. The remaining respondents had enough cash on reserve to see them through three months to a year.

While a few of the respondents were part of privately held media groups, most had been family-owned properties for two generations or more. Few of these properties had done any long-range planning that include plans of succession:

- **30%** said they had succession plans
- **40%** didn't have a plan
- **30%** said it was under consideration

Only 13% have seen circulation increase during the past five years. Forty-eight percent reported that their circulation shrunk, while 39% said it had remained about the same.

Digital behemoths Facebook and Google undercut the business model for legacy news media. Ad revenue for publicly held media dropped to \$14.3 billion from \$37.8 billion between 2018 and 2008. Although Facebook and Google have lost some market share, news media haven't seen their advertising fortunes rebound.

On the same day national digital news site, *BuzzFeed*, announced it was shutting its news division, Whisenhunt of *Decaturish* discussed the digital business conundrum. "Nobody has figured out yet how to make money, giving away stuff for free... the problem with all of that is, as you're seeing today with *BuzzFeed* and all these places, is the digital ad growth doesn't go to news websites, they go to places like Facebook, that don't care about journalism."

Whisenhunt said he fell into the trap of believing that Facebook and Google were would-be saviors. "They took all the digital ad growth with them," he said. "I don't know how you fix that because... Google and Facebook are a very integral part of what we do."

He said it's important for journalists to recognize that while they have "a very dependent relationship," with tech, "they're not our friends." Instead, he's hoping that subscription revenue can drive his business model. He said that he has about 2,700 subscribers who pay \$6 a month. He's making a push to add 500 more subscribers, and ultimately, he'd like to claim 10,000 subscribers. "If we can get 10,000 people paying the six bucks a month, I'll cover the s--- out of the county... I just gotta get people over the hurdle... people aren't accustomed to paying for news, people aren't accustomed to supporting it financially."



If we can get 10,000 people paying the six bucks a month, I'll cover the s--- out of the county."

Dan Whisenhunt, founder of Decaturish



Philanthropy steps in

Small papers — the majority of outlets in Georgia — have been somewhat insulated from the digital drain on advertising, but they haven't been spared from the overall impact of digital technology. When the *Waycross Journal-Herald* in Ware County ended operations after a century of publishing it issued a statement acknowledging:



It's been a long time coming as advertising accounts fled to Facebook, websites, data streaming, 'marriage mail,' TV, radio and several other mediums, followed by reduced print subscriptions as Americans and Waycrossans turned to cell phones to get their news. The Waycross Journal-Herald, which has been owned and operated by the Williams family since 1916, will cease publication as of September 30, 2019.”¹⁸

No one has been spared from print's woes. Rather than be dependent on an advertising-circulation revenue stream, some organizations are exploring philanthropy and non-profit status. *The Red and Black*, the 130 year old independent publication that serves the University of Georgia and Athens, has reduced its print presence while developing a digital footprint. The venerable student-run outlet, which employs some professional staff, went from a daily print paper to now only publishing in print once a month. “We've been forced to pivot,” said Charlotte Norsworthy, executive director at Red and Black Publishing Co. In addition to filling the community news coverage vacuum created with the decline of the city's daily newspaper, *The Athens Banner-Herald*, *The Red and Black* is also a training ground for the next generation of journalists. A nonprofit, *The Red and Black* counts on donations and advertising revenue. Norsworthy said they often have to look to fill gaps, which includes assessing audience and digital platforms. As advertising revenue has shrunk, *The Red and Black*, which has had nonprofit status since 1981, has started to seek out foundation grants to help cover costs.

18 “GDPR Support,” n.d. <https://www.ajc.com/news/crime--law/south-georgia-newspaper-publisher-found-dead-office/RKP0B61UjhbRYIAkcv2ZfK/>.

Student journalists from the University of Georgia are also helping to provide coverage for Lexington, Georgia. UGA faculty and students stepped in when they learned the *Oglethorpe Echo*, a 148-year-old weekly, was planning to cease publishing. The 11th hour rescue plan involved hiring seven students to step in and provide coverage. The paper was folded into a nonprofit, now it serves as the foundation for a capstone course on community journalism. The business model is built around ads, subscriptions and donations and is an experiment that could possibly serve as a national model if it works.

Capitol Beat launched as a digital site covering the Georgia legislature in 2019, as a nonprofit, meaning it too is chasing foundation dollars to fund its operations. “I have a boss who’s the executive director of the Georgia Press Association, so she basically does the dialing for dollars,” said Dave Williams, the site’s bureau chief. Williams said the success of the site is dependent on the largess of donors.

“We’ve done well so far... We’ll see what happens, the economy is supposed to be taking a downturn, maybe later this year.”

The site is built around a traditional coverage model, centered around covering institutions. “We try to cover the board meetings of the agencies in the most significant ones,” said Williams. But this approach often fails to focus on the communities being affected by laws and regulations of the institutions, and as a result many rank-and-file residents of Georgia don’t engage with it.

In addition to the loss of ad revenue to digital technology, news media also lost significant audience segments. When it comes to print publications, most audiences have all but abandoned them. Research from Pew underscores the habits noted in the Georgia media consumption poll. According to Pew, 86% of adults get their news digitally — smartphone, computer or tablet. Just 10% of adults said they “often” get news from print products.

Websites and older social media sites, such as Facebook, have long been part of the digital toolbox, but there are others. “We have a variety of more innovative pieces of content that we’ve been working on,” said Norsworthy. “We’re on TikTok. Now we produce podcasts, we produce videos, we’re engaging more on the advertising and sales side, more innovative ways to bring in digital revenue.”

In addition to the loss of ad revenue to digital technology, news media also lost significant audience segments.

Susan Catron, Managing Editor of *The Current*, sees a future in newsletters. She said *The Current* is also exploring texting systems, noting that her organization recently bought 100,000 phone numbers, “We don’t have that many people opting out because people want their information that way.”

Legacy newsrooms aren’t giving up

Last year, the Dublin Courier Herald Publishing Co. acquired *The Home Journal*, in Houston County; *The Leader Tribune*, in Fort Valley-Peach County; *The Citizen Georgian*, in Macon County and the *News Observer*, in Dooly County largely with support from national philanthropic institutions. The publishing group, which has a total of 14 publications through middle and west Georgia, is operated by DuBose Porter, who says he is committed to local news.

“Good old community journalism, it works,” said Porter who has worked to make sure his papers are connected to the communities they serve. “We’re reconnecting the communities,” he said.

Roy Chalker has been editor and publisher of the *True Citizen* in Waynesboro for 53 years. The weekly paper has been published for 140 years — Chalker’s father was editor and publisher for 25 years. Chalker said his property is strong. “Weekly newspapers aren’t as threatened as the dailies in bigger cities because we don’t have as much competition for ad dollars, like TV, radio and other media,” he said. In recent years, the *Citizen*, which has three full-time employees, has expanded its coverage to include surrounding communities. It has also developed a digital footprint. In addition to a website, the paper has 11,000 followers on Facebook, that’s three times more than its print run. The *Citizen* is also considered a “legal organ,” meaning it’s designated to publish legal public notice advertisements. This provides a revenue stream, independent of competition.

Chalker and Porter are also examples of how legacy publications are fighting to be viewed as fair and relevant in their coverage areas. “We’ve expanded our coverage of rural communities — if they have local government, we try to be there to let people know what their elected officials are doing,” Chalker said. He cited coverage that



We’ve expanded our coverage of rural communities – if they have local government, we try to be there to let people know what their elected officials are doing.”

Roy Chalker, editor and publisher of the True Citizen

included allegations that the county sheriff had falsified records, but those were among the stories that Roberson, the coffeehouse owner, questioned.

Porter's presence in Warner Robins, Centerville and Perry wasn't enough for Rutha Jackson. In July 2021, Jackson launched the *African American Tri-City Newspaper*, which has a monthly press run of 300. Her rationale echoes that of the founders of the up and coming digital sites previously mentioned — the need for information that was reflective of her community. "We publish the main events and issues pertaining to the African American community with the idea of getting people more involved and impacting future generations," said Jackson. "The paper also focuses on local politics, publishing voting information and inter-

views with candidates." Still, it's been a struggle. Jackson, like many in media, is looking for a sound business model. "Revenue remains an ongoing challenge," she said. "Several churches have bought bulk subscriptions and the newspaper received a small sponsorship from a local business." But staffing is limited. Volunteers write

content, or it's submitted by community members. The paper's website isn't updated as often as she would like because of staffing limitations.

"We're still on the ground floor," she said. "We're revamping and getting organized so we can plant some roots."



We publish the main events and issues pertaining to the African American community with the idea of getting people more involved and impacting future generations."

Rutha Jackson, founder of the African American Tri-City Newspaper



What's next?

Any long-term strategy for stabilizing Georgia's media ecosystem has to look well beyond rescuing media. In addition to investing in similar experiments like the one in Oglethorpe County, focus should also go to cultivating audiences and using platforms that they are already using to convey information. The reluctance to recognize this is partially why pink slime sites have been able to establish themselves — they are filling an information void.

This void likely predates the digital age, we know that Black people and others who have had their voices muted have long had a jaundiced view of legacy media, but there were few options. This is what led to the creation of publications such as *The Atlanta Voice*, *The Champion*, *Georgia Asian Times*, *The Courier Echo Latino*, and others.

Purchasing legacy news outlets — newspapers, television stations and radio stations — once would have seemed an obvious strategy. But even applying multipliers to circulation figures and market share doesn't create a substantial audience. That audience is likely limited because of the shrinking reach of legacy media to Generation Z and Millennials. What's more, the good will of these legacy properties is limited, as they are met with skepticism and sometimes outright dismissal by Black people and others who represent the communities where Georgia expects to see population growth. There is an appetite for content and information, but audiences don't necessarily want it on the platforms that news media want to use.

One of the key caveats to shifting to digital is the longtime divide between rural, urban and suburban America. In recent years, rural areas have closed the gap somewhat, Pew reports a 9% increase in rural broadband connections, from 63% in 2016 to 72% in 2019.¹⁹ The U.S. Census reports that roughly 87% of U.S. homes had a broadband internet subscription between 2017-2021; 86% of Georgia residents reported that their homes had a broadband subscription during this same period.

In addition to investing in similar experiments like the one in Oglethorpe County, focus should also go to cultivating audiences and using platforms that they are already using to convey information.

19 Vogels, Emily A. "Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/19/some-digital-divides-persist-between-rural-urban-and-suburban-america/> Accessed Nov. 7, 2021

Catron, the managing editor of *The Current*, said that gap is worrisome, especially for people in rural areas. She said out of 15 people in a meeting of the GPA's Educational Foundation Board, only four had broadband. "If your consumers can't get it, you can't do it," Catron said. "We're doubling our efforts every day, but there's a lot of people... with crap broadband."

In the Best and Worst States for Broadband, 2023,²⁰ Georgia was ranked 15th out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia for best internet. The ranking is based on access to broadband, including low priced fiber optics plans. Although Georgia ranked relatively high overall, access to low-priced broadband comes in at 29%, meanwhile access to fiber optics is 54%.



If your consumers can't get it, you can't do it," Catron said. "We're doubling our efforts every day, but there's a lot of people... with crap broadband."

Susan Catron, managing editor of The Current

The Georgia News Collaborative must also look beyond the racial and ethnic divides in Georgia, and factor in divides in class and education. Roughly a third of adults 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher. About 15% of Georgians live at or below the federal poverty level. Most journalists have at minimum a bachelor's degree. In addition to those for whom English is not their first language, about 24% of Georgia's population is foreign born. Care must be taken to make sure that coverage and coverage efforts don't come off as elitist, disconnected, irrelevant, or condescending.

Building cultural competency in newsrooms will have to be a component of any plan. Declaring objectivity along with hiring Black people and people of color won't eliminate conscious or unconscious bias. Some level of training will have to be factored in, especially in light of the state's projected growth.

It might be more prudent — and more appealing — to invest social impact dollars into Bee TV, Notivision, Pasa La Voz and other news outlets like them to add to their digital capacity and community reach. Analytics and other tools can be used to discern viable properties. Intermediaries, including The Pivot Fund, exist solely for the purpose of providing dollars to build capacity and access to expertise and consultants to support these digital newsroom so that they can more deeply engage with communities and expand

20 Shevik, Jason. "Best & Worst States for Broadband, 2023." BroadbandNow, February 8, 2023. <https://broadbandnow.com/research/best-states-with-internet-coverage-and-speed>.

their influence and reach. By investing in these more culturally competent news outlets, funders would also help shift where power rests in these communities by better informing entire communities, especially those that are predominantly and/or nearly predominantly populated with people of color, but led by white elites.

The Georgia News Collaborative could consider developing a social media incubator. This would acknowledge that social media is often the first platform for media start-ups, but it's not always sustainable. Facebook, in particular, has become known for changing its algorithm and deprioritizing news which disrupts online relationships with content creators and their audiences. An errant complaint or hack can shut sites down with little recourse. Meanwhile TikTok is facing federal scrutiny and calls for an outright ban. It's important to begin identifying these sites and helping mature ones develop a business model that supports them transitioning to proprietary digital platforms, including newsletter products.

Providing training opportunities and legal access to Georgia newsrooms should certainly be part of the mix in what the Georgia News Collaborative's offerings. But first, Georgia newsrooms, especially those that are independent and/or family-owned, need capacity and stability.

By investing in these more culturally competent news outlets, funders would also help shift where power rests in these communities by better informing entire communities, especially those that are predominantly and/or nearly predominantly populated with people of color, but led by white elites.

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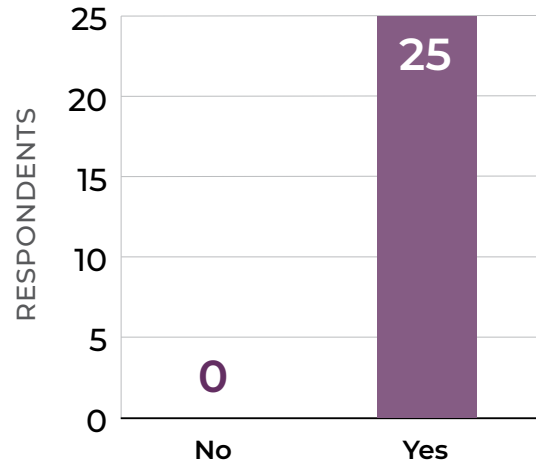
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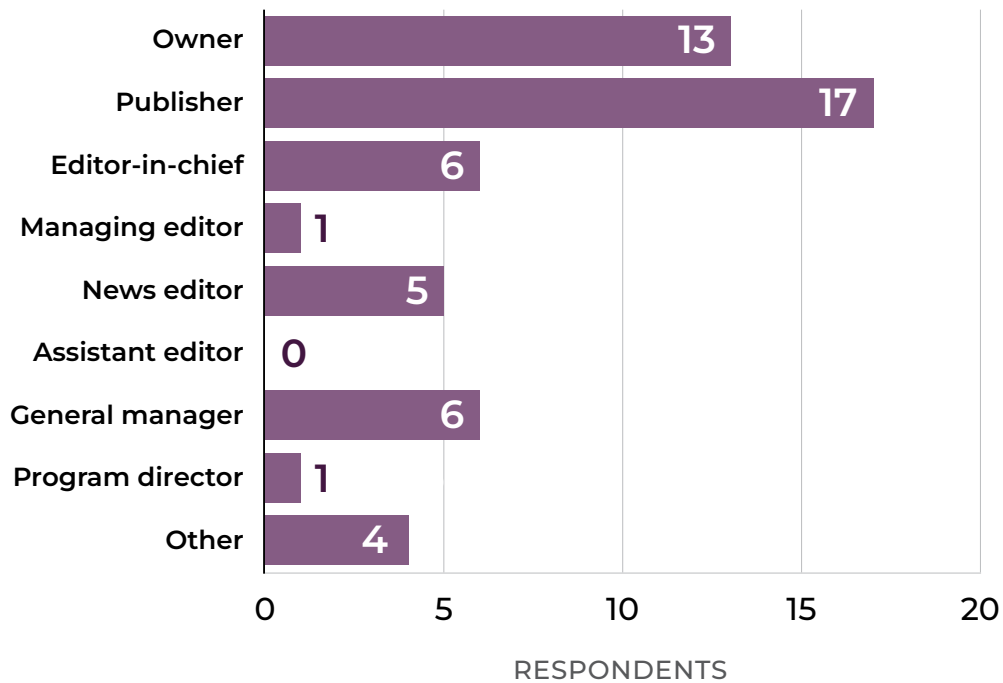
Appendix

The following charts represent survey data collected in our study.

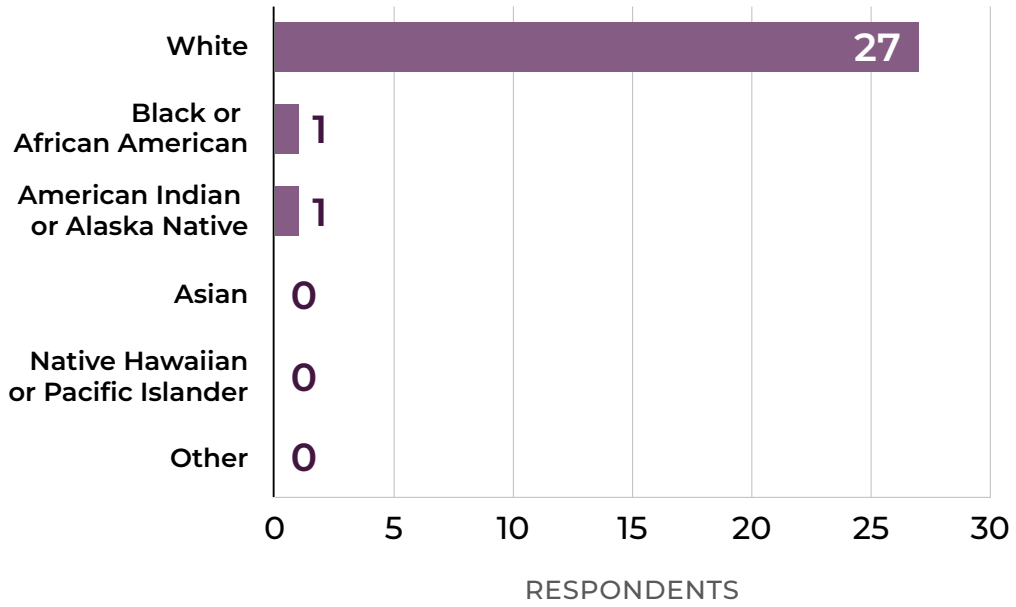
Q1: “Are you a representative of a Georgia news organization?”



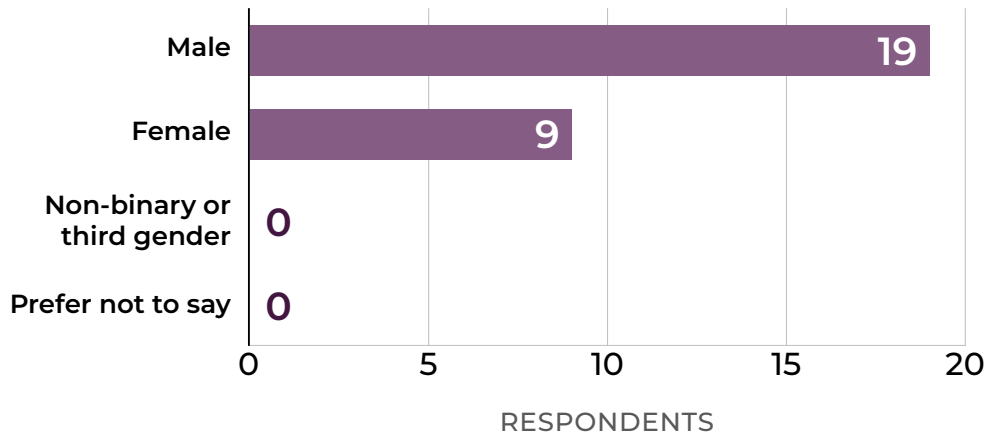
Q2: “What is your role? Select all that apply.”



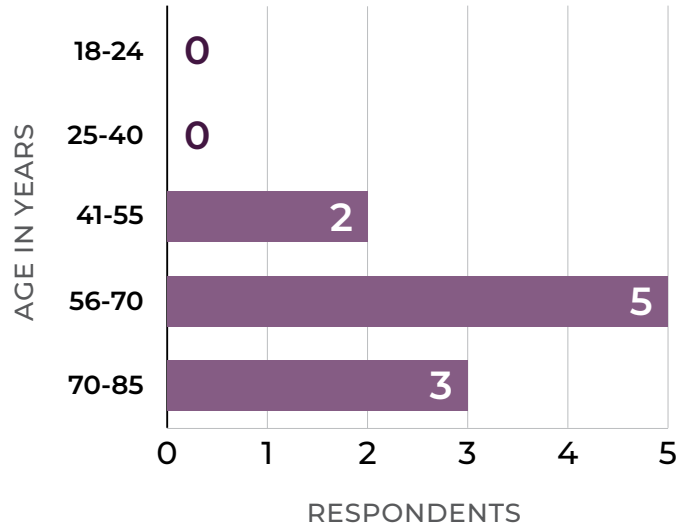
Q3: “What is your race or ethnicity?”



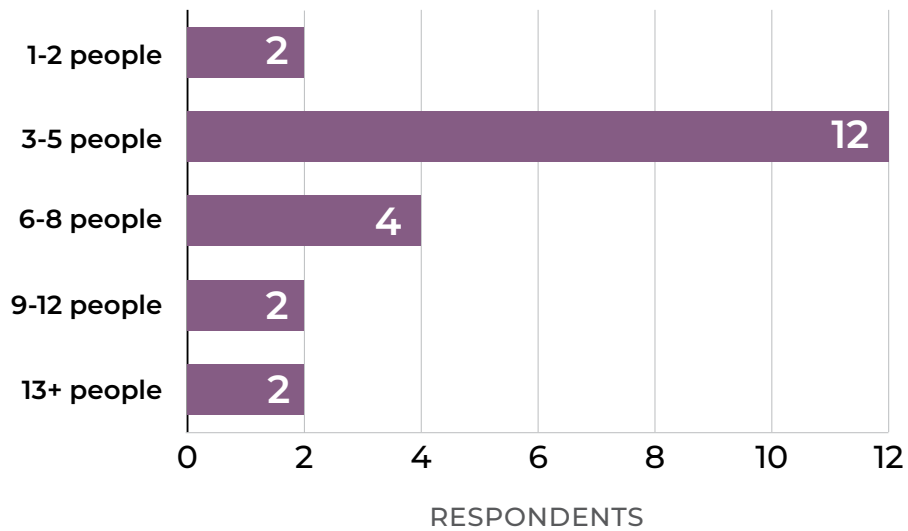
Q4: “What is your gender?”



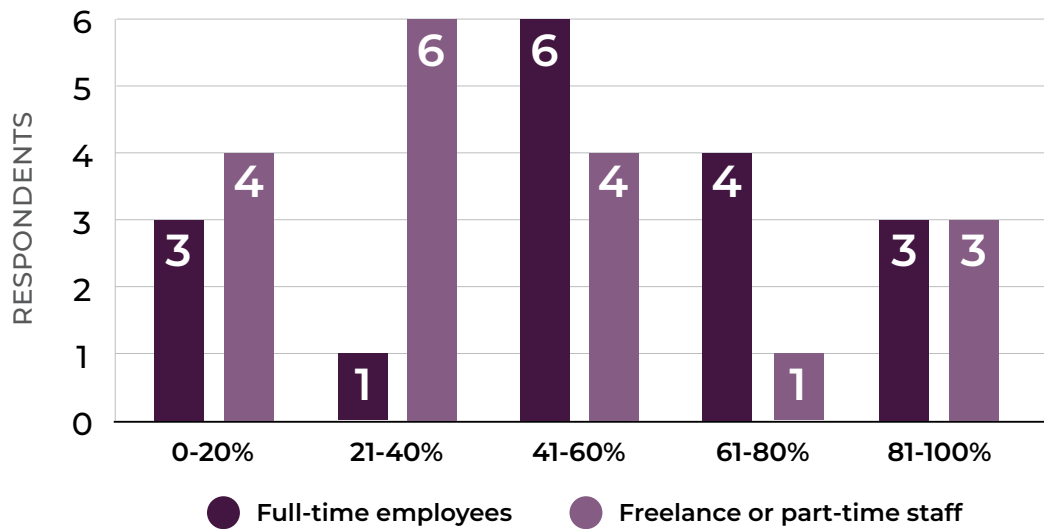
Q5: “What is your age?”



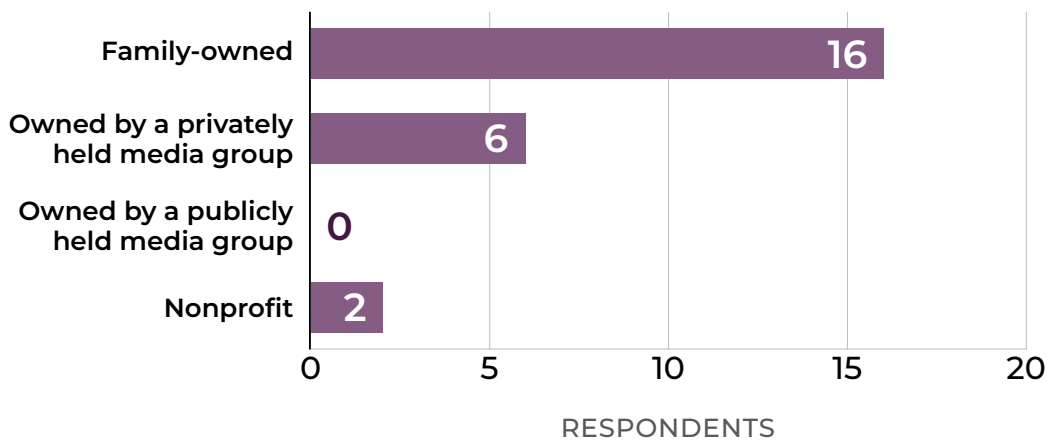
Q6: “How many people are employed in your newsroom?”



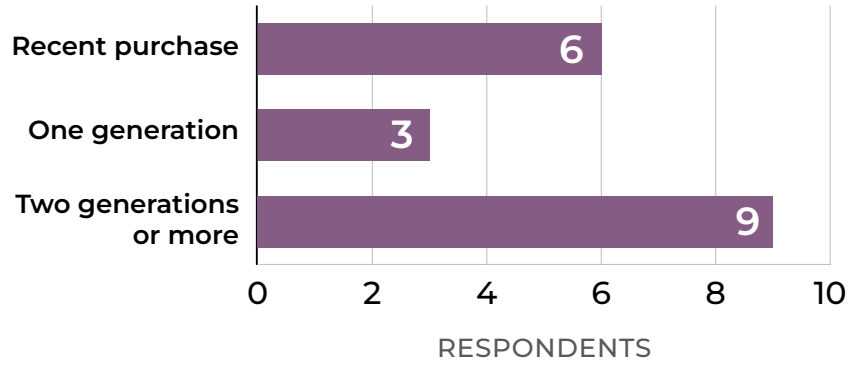
Q7: “Thinking about your newsroom or editorial staff, how many freelancers are there compared to full or part-time staff?”



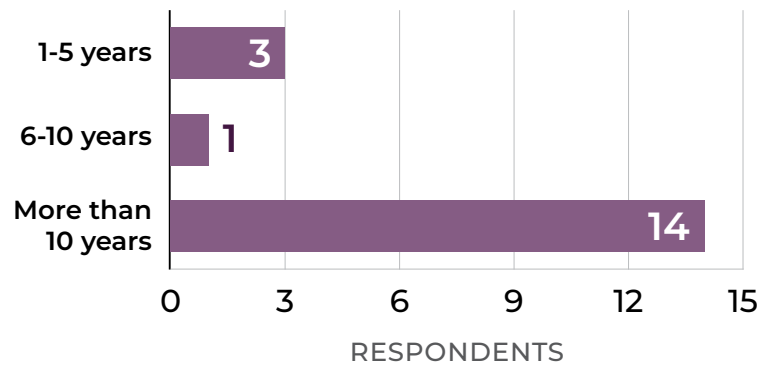
Q8: “How would you best describe ownership of this property?”



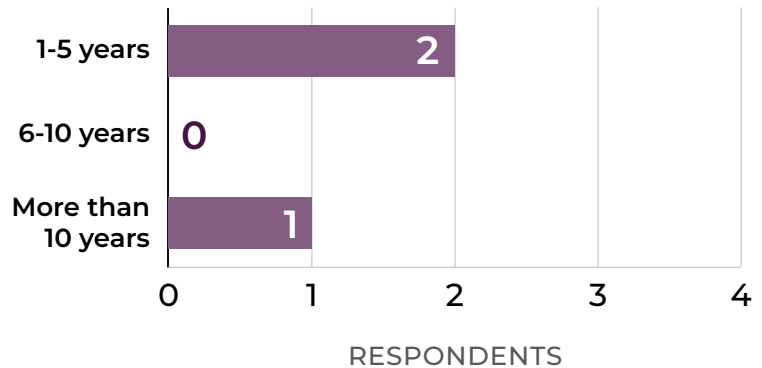
Q9: “How long has this property been family-owned?”



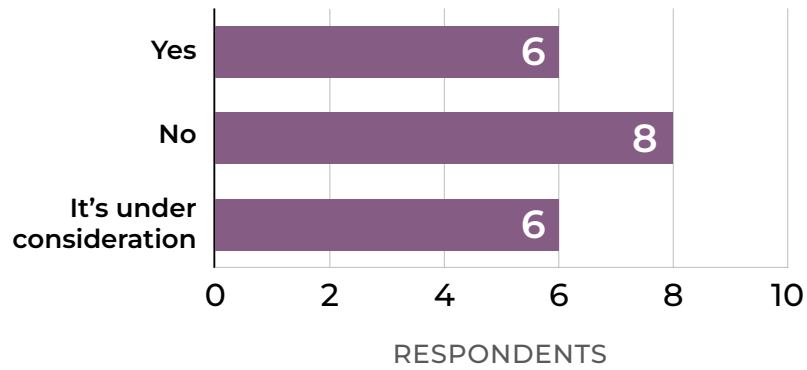
Q10: “How long has this property been privately held or part of a holding company?”



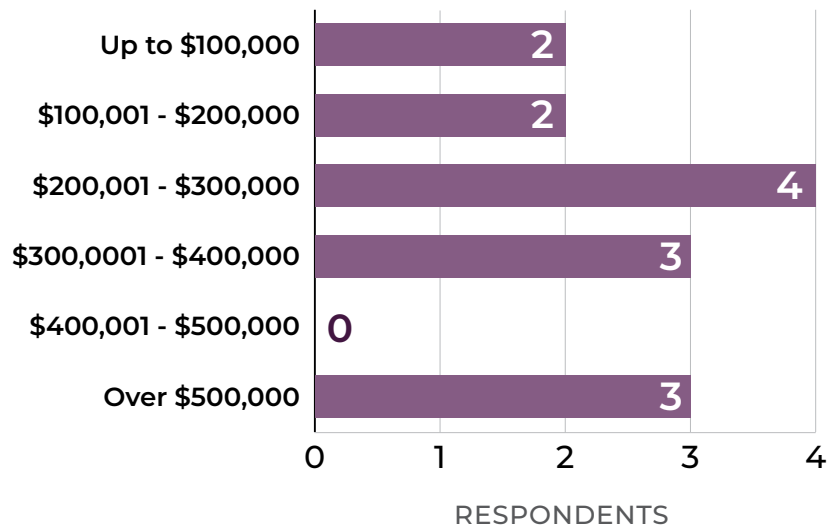
Q11: “How long has this property been a nonprofit?”



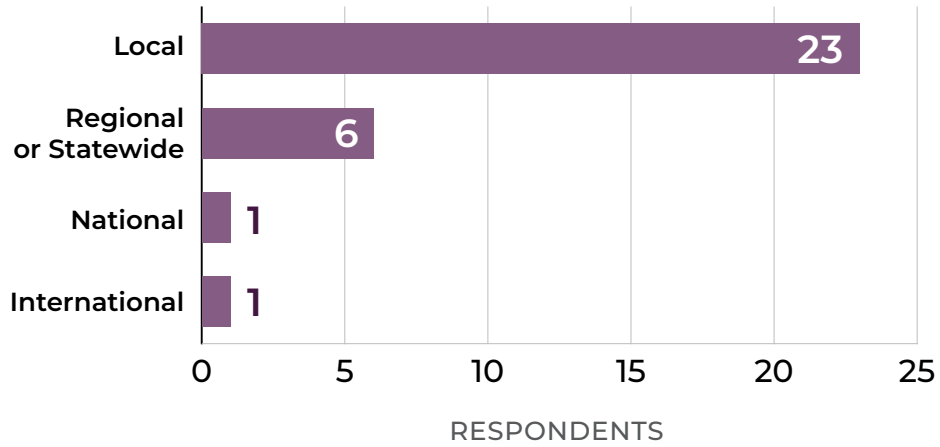
Q12: “Does your organization have a succession plan?”



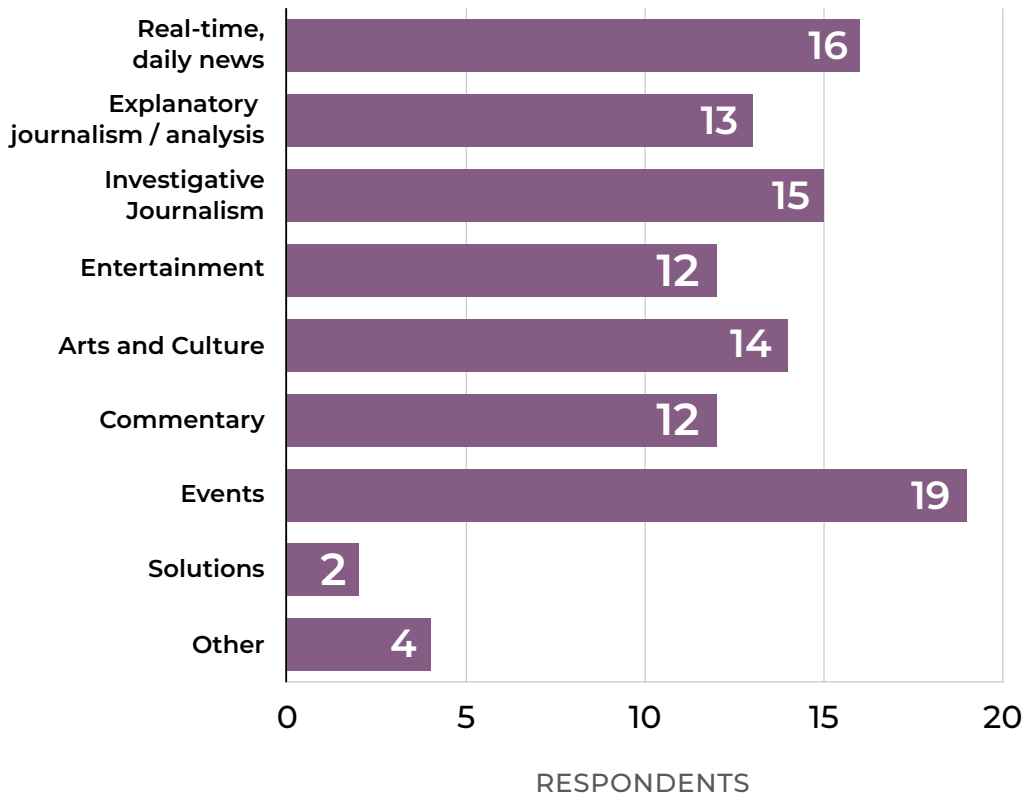
Q13: “What is your annual budget?”



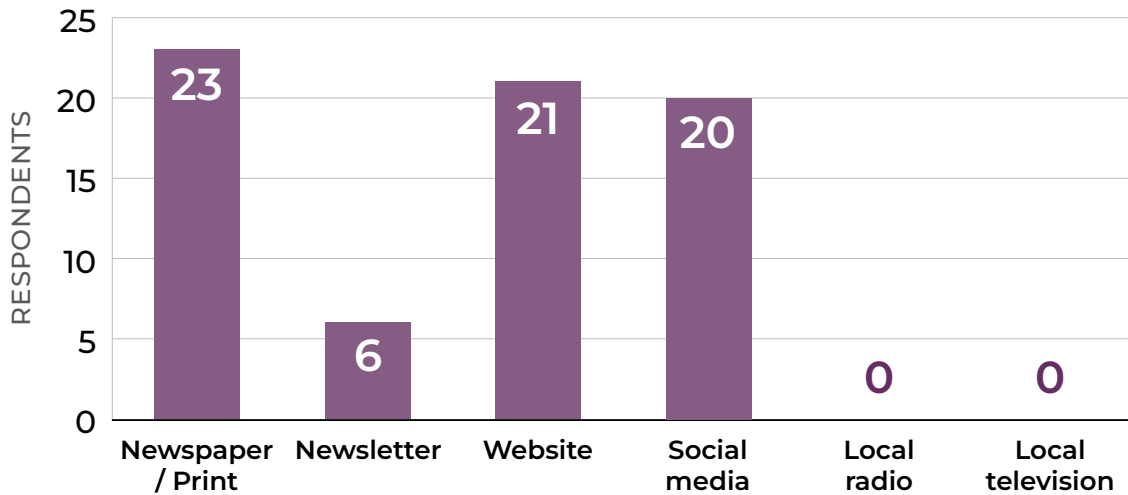
Q14: “How would you describe your coverage model?”



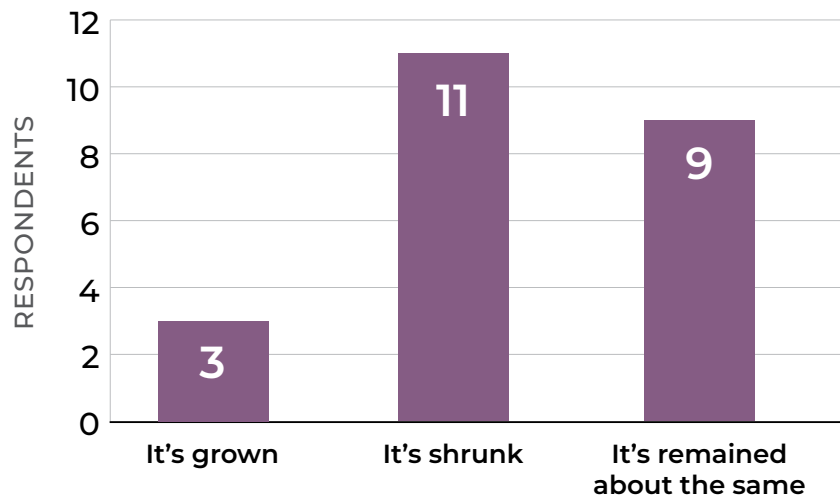
Q15: “What is the focus of your coverage? Select all that apply.”



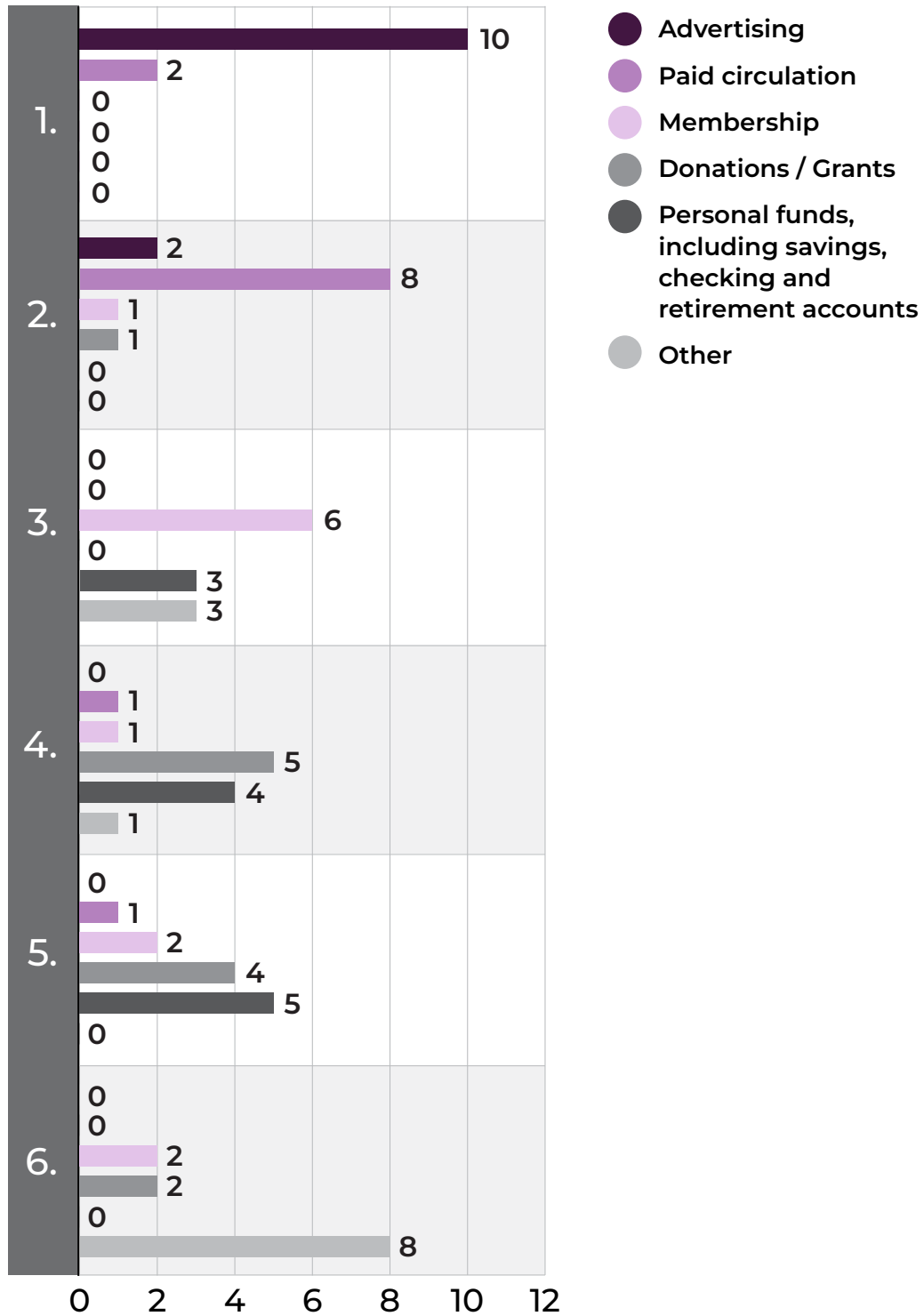
**Q16: “What platforms do you use to deliver news?
Select all that apply.”**



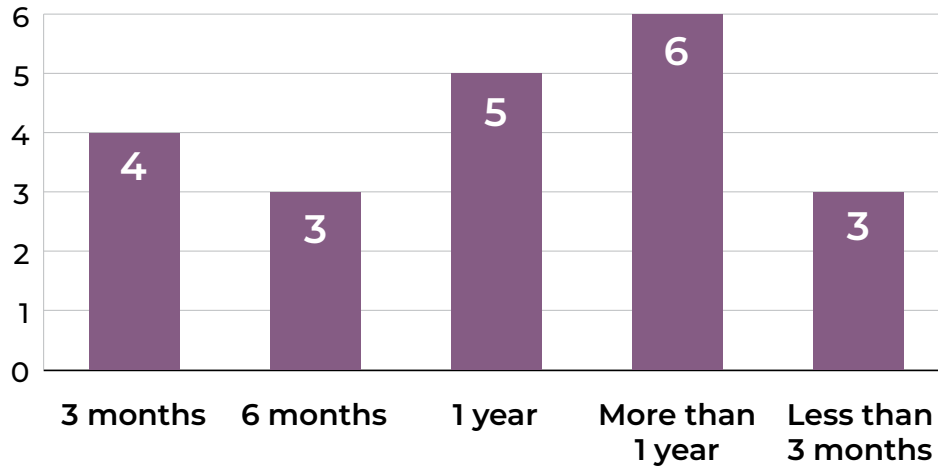
**Q17: “During the past five years, which best describes
your circulation?”**



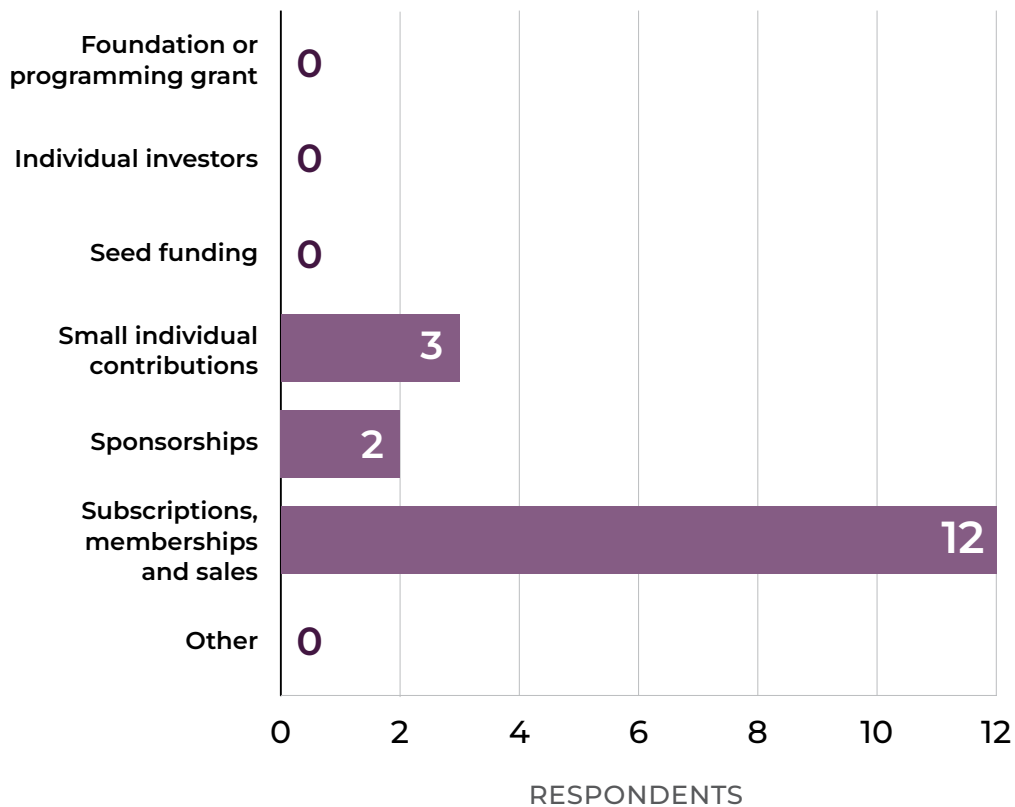
Q18: “Rank these sources of revenue starting with the largest and going to the smallest.”



**Q19: “Financially speaking, how healthy is your organization?
How long could your organization survive on current
cash reserves?”**



**Q20: “Do you receive funding from any of the following sources?
Check all that apply.”**



Q21: “Have you received funding from any of these organizations?”

