2025 Local Visual Journalism Survey Report

BY

Alyssa Schukar
Jenny Stratton
Michelle Kanaar



Francisco Kjolseth/The Salt Lake Tribune

CATCHLIGHT | local | Prism Photo

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Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune

A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

This report is based on a survey completed by nearly 70 local newsroom leaders and journalists, offering high-level insights into the resources and challenges surrounding access to visual journalism for local news outlets. The findings highlight the ongoing importance of visuals in local news coverage and build upon the work of the CatchLight x Rural News Network survey published earlier this year. The goal of this report is to provide a clearer understanding of the obstacles newsrooms face in utilizing visual journalism effectively and to explore the opportunities for strengthening the visual capacity of local news outlets.

Visual journalism plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between communities and newsrooms, serving as a visible connection between local stories and the people they impact. Through powerful imagery, visual journalists capture the daily realities of life, shedding light on both the struggles and successes that define local communities. These visuals help deepen the understanding of the issues that matter most to residents, making them an essential element of local news. Photojournalists, in particular, serve as a bridge, cultivating trust and engagement by telling the stories that resonate most with their communities. Now, more than ever, amid increasing divisiveness and the rise of AI-generated content, local visual journalists are essential in authentically representing communities and delivering trusted, human-driven narratives.

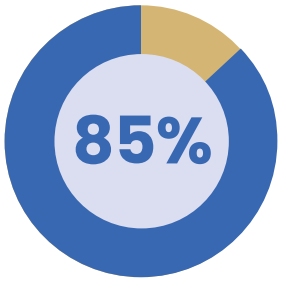
> "Visuals drive traffic on every single platform and every single initiative that our media organizations are undertaking. [We] need strong visuals…It's imperative that we continue to communicate how important it is to have professional photojournalists and [to] value what we do…especially where everyone's just fighting for the attention of eyeballs on their work…We need not only strong visuals but ethical visuals."
>
> - Jasmine Goldband, Philadelphia Inquirer photo editor

In today's rapidly evolving and complex local media landscape, visuals have become an essential component in capturing audience attention and conveying stories effectively. Nearly 85% of respondents consider visuals a "high" or "very high" priority. Yet, despite the overwhelming recognition of their importance, many newsrooms face a stark contrast between the value they place on visuals and the resources they allocate to them. A significant 63% of newsrooms report dedicating less than 10% of their overall budget to visuals, signaling a discrepancy that highlights a critical challenge in the industry.



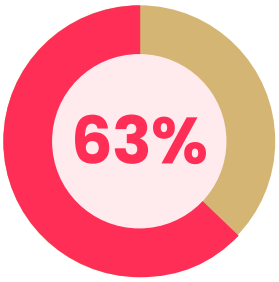
David Rodriguez/CalMatters/CatchLight Local

HIGH PRIORITY:



of respondents consider visuals a **“high”** or **“very high”** priority

LOW BUDGET:



dedicate **less than 10%** of their overall budget to visuals

OVER 30% OF RESPONDENTS HAVE LOST FULL-TIME VISUAL STAFF IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS.



The demand for visual content continues to grow, with **87% of respondents either maintaining or increasing their budgets for visuals** over the past three years. However, there remains a significant gap in staffing and training to meet this demand. A limited number of newsrooms employ full-time visual journalism leaders, and many lack the necessary visual staff to fulfill the increasing needs. As a result, numerous newsrooms rely primarily on reporters to provide visuals, and **over 30% have lost full-time visual staff in the past five years.** This staffing shortage hampers their ability to cover breaking news and produce high-quality visual storytelling. The future of local visual journalism depends on sustained investment in both resources and training to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of visuals in an increasingly challenging and evolving media landscape.

8 KEY FINDINGS

1. 85% of respondents consider visuals either a **“very high”** or a **“high” priority.** And yet, **63% noted less than 10% of their overall budget** was allocated to visuals.

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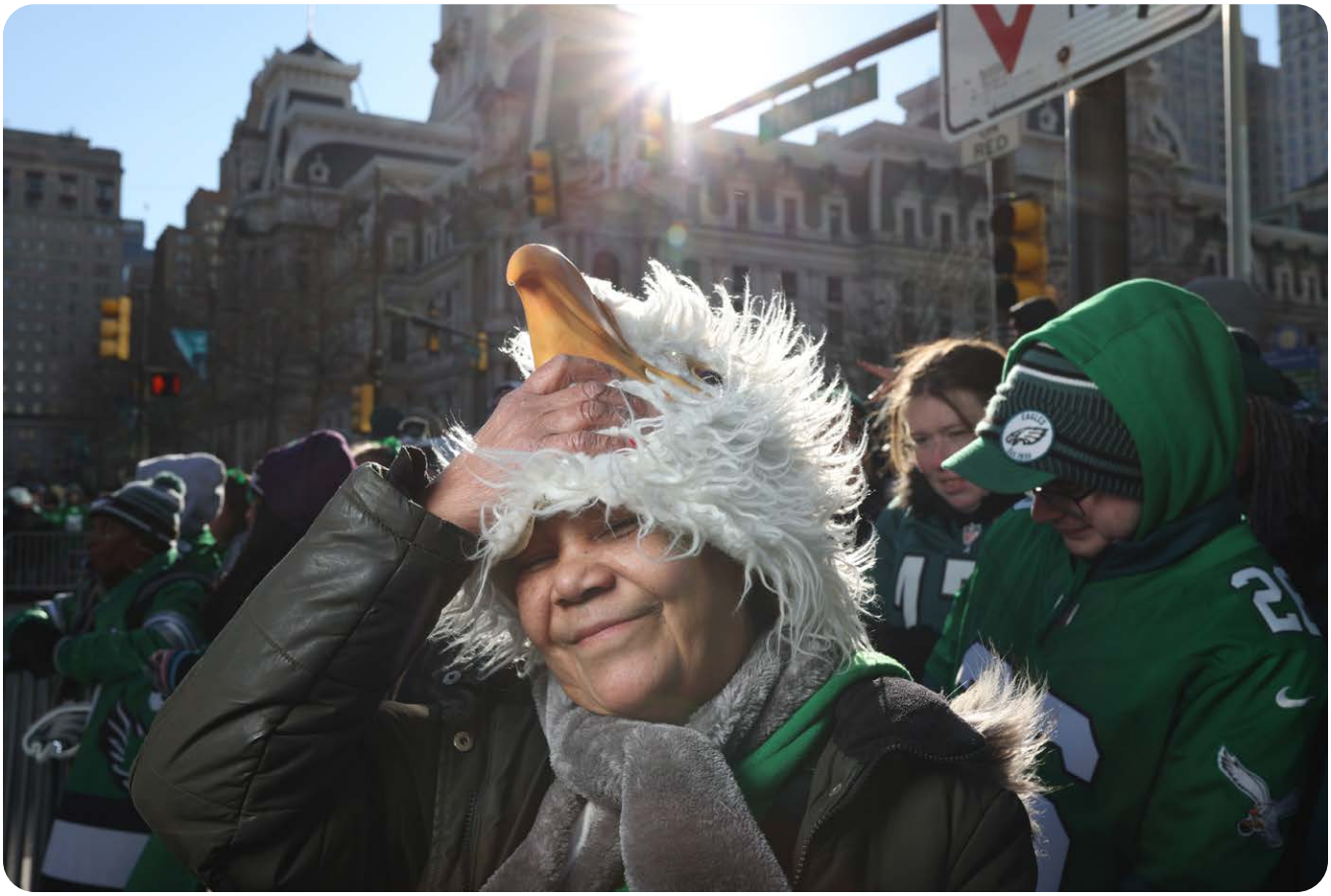
2. Most respondents **(87%) increased or maintained their budgets dedicated to visuals** in the last three years.

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3. **57%** of respondents said they **want to increase their visual staff.**

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4. **Only 21 (31%) newsrooms report using a full-time staff photographer.** Just 21 (31%) newsrooms report having a full-time visual journalism leader or photo editor on staff. And just 28 (42%) newsrooms report having a full-time visual staffer (either photographer or editor).



Jessica Griffin/The Philadelphia Inquirer

5. **48%** of responding newsrooms reported that the primary decision maker for visuals had **no visual background or training,** making visual training at the leadership level an opportunity for growth.

One newsroom noted two future visual journalism goals:

> "having experienced photojournalists in editor and senior staff positions and mentoring the new staffers to allow for them to take over in upcoming years," and
>
> "making progress towards deeper visual storytelling and less literal depiction of reporters' words".

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6. **30%** of newsrooms reported **losing full-time staff** that work on visuals for at least 25% of their job (including designers, photojournalists, visuals editors, videographers and illustrators as well as visual interns and fellows) in the past five years.

One challenge of losing staff is the ability to cover breaking news.

> "When it comes to covering news, it's really difficult to commission photographers for news, right? News breaks. I can call a staff member, and I also know where they are, generally speaking, geographically [but I don't know that for freelancers], so commissioning news is going to be a very big challenge."
>
> -Jasmine Goldband, Philadelphia Inquirer photo editor

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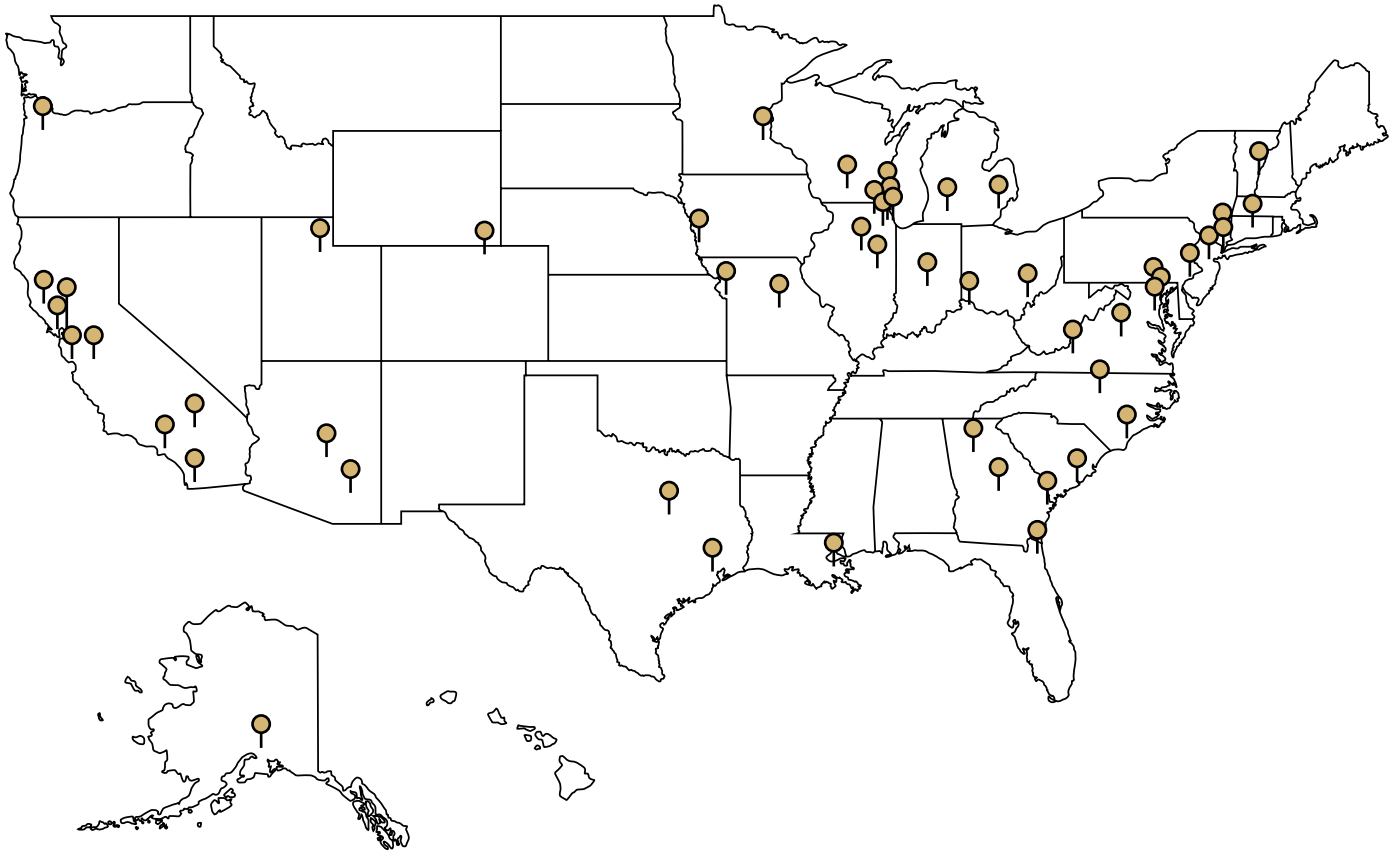
7. **76% of newsrooms noted reporters taking photos** as a primary source of visuals. Additional sources were reported in the following order, from most to least utilized: staff photojournalists, commissioned photojournalists, images sourced from audience members, subscription wire services and subscription stock services.

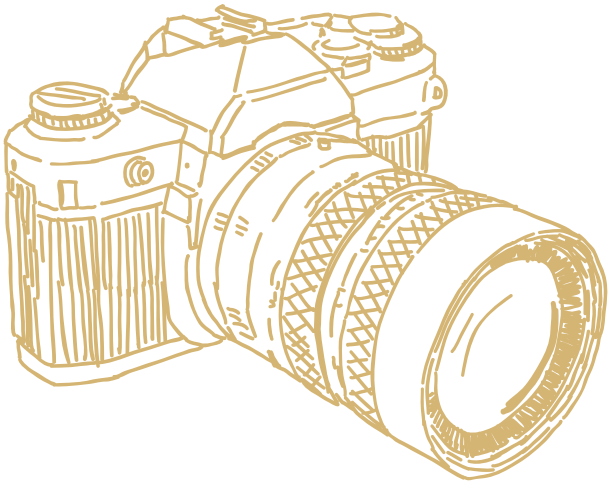
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8. **Only 5% noted using photoreal AI-generated images or video** in their newsroom and an overwhelming 90% of newsroom respondents said it was one of the visual products they were least interested in.

SUMMARY AND METHODOLOGY

Survey Respondent Profile: Visual Journalism in Local and Regional Newsrooms





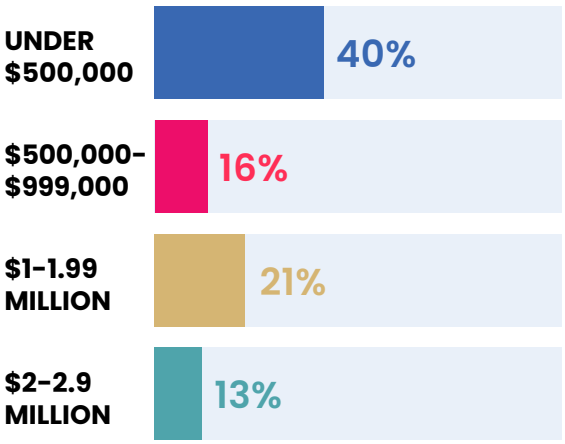
This profile represents our recent survey on the state of visual journalism in **67 newsrooms across the United States.** Of those 67 respondents, **45 were local newsrooms and 15 were regional,** providing a valuable snapshot of current practices and challenges among community-based publications.

NEWSROOM CHARACTERISTICS

A significant portion of these local newsrooms serve marginalized and underserved communities, including young people of color, Spanish speakers and residents of U.S. border regions. These communities often constitute the majority of their audience. While specific staff size and audience reach data varied, the survey suggests a wide range of organizational scales, with the top buckets being:

40% operating on budgets under $500,000
16% with budgets between $500,000-$999,000
21% with budgets between $1 million-$1.99 million
13% with budgets between $2 million-$2.99 million

What is your news organization's current general operating budget?

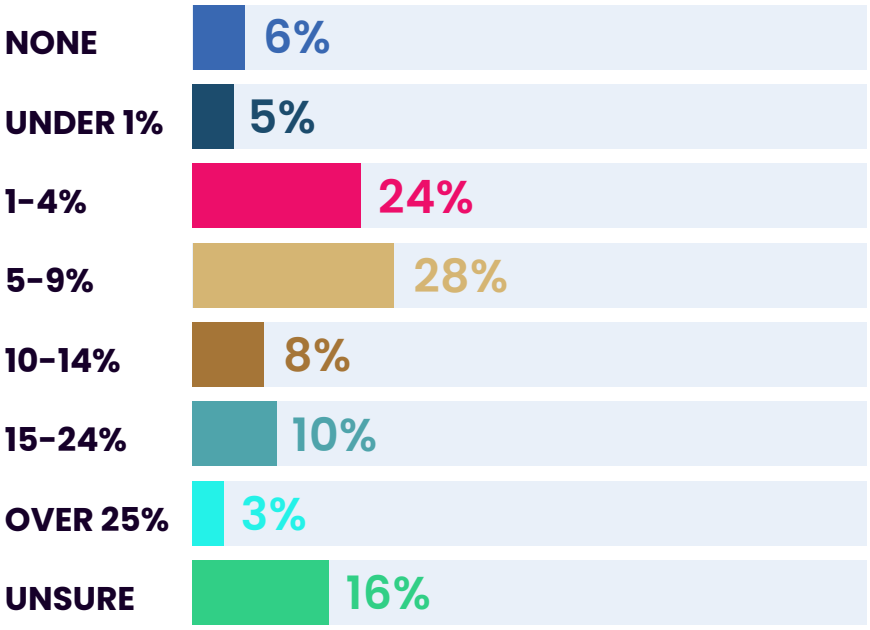


Prioritizing Visuals:

Visual storytelling is clearly a priority for the newsrooms surveyed. A remarkable **85% of respondents consider visuals either a "very high" (top three priorities) or "high" priority.** This commitment is evident in the finding that **73% of respondents typically begin working on visuals during the reporting process,** not as an afterthought. The majority of **newsrooms allocate 5-9% of their total budget to visuals,** including staff salaries, freelance budgets, stock image subscriptions, wire subscriptions, AI subscriptions, software and equipment.

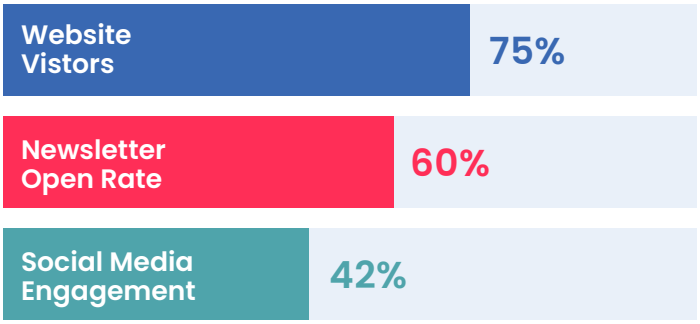
PERCENT OF TOTAL BUDGET ALLOCATED TO VISUALS

What percentage of your news organization's current annual budget is allocated towards visuals?



Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

The top three KPIs as identified by these newsrooms, are:



Interestingly, traditional metrics like paid subscribers (31%) and donors (33%) were less frequently cited as top KPIs, suggesting a focus on broader audience engagement and reach. This aligns with the numerous qualitative responses emphasizing local, on-the-ground connections.

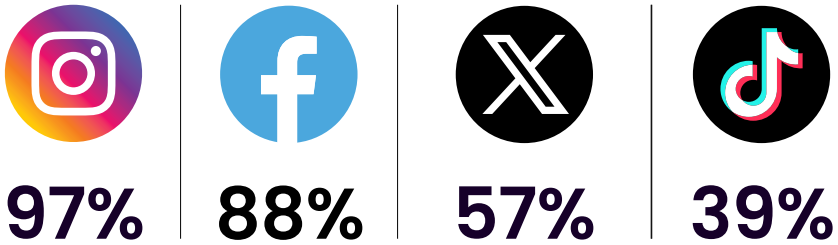
All three top KPIs focused on visual-first platforms. Though the newsletter open rate is often correlated with the newsletter subject line, publishers, such as Andrea Bruce, have noticed an increase in their returning audience when producing visual-first newsletters.

> "For us, good photography has been the key to keeping readers. The photos are from me and the high school students I work with through our community partner. From conversations with people in the county, this is what people say has reached them—people from both sides of the political aisle."
>
> -Andrea Bruce, Photojournalist & Publisher, Down in the County

Social Media Landscape:

Social media remains a crucial channel for these newsrooms. The most actively used platforms are **Instagram (97%), Facebook (88%), and X (formerly Twitter) (57%). TikTok use was noted by 39% of respondents.** Notably, there is a growing interest in **Bluesky, with 17 respondents** currently using the platform or in the process of adopting/transitioning to it, signaling a potential shift in the social media landscape for news organizations.

Active Platforms
Which social media channels is your newsroom actively using?





Colby Rabon for Enlace Latino NC/CatchLight Local

> "With good visuals, that story actually got the most social media hits that we've ever had. So that made a huge difference in that person's story taking off and being seen by more people."
>
> -Jennifer Coombes, Managing Digital Editor of KUNC, regarding using funds from the Reflecting Colorado Photo Desk grant

Challenges and Tools:

Despite the prioritization of visuals, newsrooms face significant challenges. The most commonly reported obstacles are time constraints, expense and the need for skills training.

Some newsrooms noted specific grants that helped them increase their visual budgets. One newsroom noted a $15,000 grant that allowed them to hire a photographer and receive more engagement with their work.

39% **noted image archive and the search optimization of that internal archive as a challenge** they currently face.

62% **rely on Google Drive for Digital Asset Management,** indicating a potential opportunity for more specialized visual archiving solutions or resources for building search-optimized libraries.

57% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WOULD LIKE TO HIRE A FULL-TIME PHOTOJOURNALIST



FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Most newsrooms reported a desire for additional visual staff and skills training.

57% of respondents said they would like to hire a full-time photojournalist in the next three years.

The most commonly reported challenge in newsrooms in regard to visual journalism was the **need for skills and training (noted by 54% of respondents).** Many newsrooms noted a desire to learn and grow in this field.



Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune

"A full-time staff photojournalist has the ability to do that deeper visual work and that narrative storytelling that's so powerful and compelling... I have not figured out how to get back to that with freelancers, and I don't know that you can. We have several people on staff who have photojournalism skills, but reporters who also hold cameras don't necessarily have the time to commit to projects like that."

-Jamie Self, inewsource managing editor



Amy Bushatz/Mat-Su Sentinel

The information and insights gathered from this survey is a vital step towards building more visual journalism infrastructure, resources and training specifically geared towards the local news ecosystem, including individual journalists, news leaders and organizations. If you would like to learn more about this collaborative effort please contact local@catchlight.io.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SURVEYS & RESEARCH:

Local Visual Journalism Survey 2023
State of Photography 2022

VISUAL RESOURCES FOR NEWSROOMS:

Prism Photo Visual Journalism Toolkit
CatchLight Local Visual Desk

CATCHLIGHT | local Prism Photo