CENTER for NEWS, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION.

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U.S. Indie Info Providers: Professionally Diverse, Mission-driven, Sometimes Lonely, Rarely Earning Profit

A first look at the people shaping independent information in the United States — and the challenges keeping most of them from breaking even.

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Read the full report online:
https://cnti.org/reports/understanding-us-indie-info-providers/

Overview

As of September 2024, about one in five people in the United States get news from individuals rather than organizations. This trend is even more common among younger people.

There have always been news sources beyond institutional legacy media. Zines, alt-weeklies and blogs have provided alternatives, as have publications serving immigrant, queer, Black and other minoritized communities. Somewhat more recently, YouTube inaugurated the current era of platforms. Still, the current swell of interest in indie media and the rapid rise of new entrants feel new.

This study aims to better understand who indie info providers are, and how they approach their role in the broader news landscape.

Why & How We Did This

Note on Terminology

There is no consensus on terminology, even among our interviewees. We primarily use the term "indie info provider" and sometimes "creator-journalist," which was the term used in our survey and interviews. If anything, creator-journalists are a subset of indie info providers: they have journalism backgrounds and typically see themselves as journalists, even if they don't use the term publicly. Both terms appear throughout the report to refer to the same group: *"people who are working to provide verified factual information with a personality- or voice-driven brand that leverages the creator economy."* That definition encompasses a tremendous amount of variation.

Why we did this

According to our research, about one in five people in the United States get news from individuals rather than organizations, and it's more common for younger people to get news and information this way. A glut of new platforms and technological tools also make it easier to run a solo or small info provider business.

Featuring individual voices over institutional brands has been paying dividends in terms of both audience trust and the flexibility to try out different formats, tools and platforms. Legacy media is paying attention to this trend and newsrooms like The Washington Post and ESPN are now partnering with indie info providers.

To date, research on this trend has largely focused on the broader landscape of content creators, including entertainers, politicians and other creators who do not necessarily focus on informing their audiences. And most research to date has focused on content

sourcing and linking strategies. To enable a future for a plurality of fact-based sources that readers and viewers find relevant, our project sheds light on who indie info providers are, and how they approach their role in the broader news landscape.

How we did this

In partnership with Project C, CNTI recruited 43 adults in the U.S. to take a screening survey and chose 26 for a 60- to 90-minute virtual interview. CNTI selected interviewees to represent a range of professional backgrounds. This report is based primarily on insights from the interviews, with data from the survey as a secondary source.

In keeping with Project C's focus, most interviewees were former journalists — but we prioritized interviewing people from non-journalism backgrounds, and we were able to interview science communicators, subject-matter experts and civic-minded community members without journalism experience. Throughout this report we call out contrasting examples that suggest larger differences between former journalists and indie info providers from other backgrounds. We also spotlight examples from indie info providers outside our sample, where relevant to point to the broader diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

In interviews, we asked participants about their backgrounds and motivations, audience engagement, their relationships with other indie info providers and legacy news outlets, platforms and algorithms, revenue and business strategies, and their view of success and satisfaction with their own work.

We developed codes using a bottom-up and iterative approach as themes emerged through the analysis. Code categories largely reflected the range of interview topics as well as the addition of the broader themes "freedom" and "small business owner." These methods provide richness and depth; however, it's not possible to generalize about the frequency of behaviors from these interactions, so we limit our use of quantitative terms to our interviewees throughout this report.

CNTI research and professional staff prepared this report. This project was made possible by the financial support of the Lenfest Institute and a second anonymous donor.

There is a growing mix of networks supporting what CNTI refers to in this report as "indie info providers" in the U.S. alone. To name just a few, Project C, our recruitment partner for this report, primarily serves former journalists building independent ventures; the Tiny News Collective brings together community members trying to meet their own community's information needs; News Creator Corps trains creators from non-journalism

backgrounds in media literacy; Listening Post Collective supports communities and community info providers; and the Evidence Collective supports health and science communicators with deep professional expertise. Many indie info providers are engaged with more than one of these organizations, emphasizing how diverse their professional backgrounds are — which makes it difficult to generalize about them.

CNTI sought to better understand this active arena of indie info providers playing increasingly important roles in people's daily lives. What are their backgrounds, motivations, relationships with their audiences, revenue streams and strategies and their sense of their role in the broader news information landscape?

To offer a starting point, CNTI conducted a series of in-depth 60- to 90-minute interviews with a mix of U.S. indie info providers, defined as "*people who are working to provide verified factual information with a personality- or voice-driven brand that leverages the creator economy.*" The group was drawn from within Project C's broad network, with an emphasis on hearing from science communicators, subject-matter experts and civic-minded community members in addition to the largely journalistic base. (We have also conducted a similar set of interviews with these types of providers in South Africa, which we look forward to reporting on soon.)

Among this set of U.S. indie info providers interviewed, we learned that they are:

→ **Navigating instability in the journalism industry:** This cohort of emerging indie info providers is quite professionally diverse. Most we spoke to (19 of 26) had at least some experience inside journalism before becoming an indie info provider. For 10 of them, newsroom reporting had been their *only* career job. And while some former journalists chose to make their passion a full-time focus, the most common reasons for making the transition were job loss and field-wide instability. Non-journalists, on the other hand, largely started their indie project on the side of a full-time job. One thing they all share, regardless of background: a sense of mission that helps them stick with this work. Reflecting on how prepared they were for the transition, the 10 interviewees who had only worked as newsroom reporters largely felt ill-equipped for the realities of entrepreneurship; the 7 with no newsroom background largely want to learn more about journalism practices. But across the board, this group of indie info providers said their dream job can't be found within other institutions. As one interviewee put it, *"Unless I build the thing that I want to work for, it's not going to exist."*

→ **Learning on the job, together:** No matter what skills they already had, everyone described on-the-job learning as a major component of their current work. Less than half of interviewees (11 of the 26) had taken some kind of structured course. For those who did, it was primarily on business or financial skills. Instead, most learning occurs through trial and error as well as sharing among colleagues. As one interviewee put it, *"The biggest teacher was either personal experience or chatting with peers."* Interviewees tend to learn from and with peers with similar backgrounds; nobody mentioned opportunities in adjacent fields such as the broader creator sector, open-source development or public scholarship. There was little if any indication of strong resource sharing with adjacent fields or even awareness at this point.

→ **Bridging humanity and rigor:** In contrast with legacy media, these indie info providers tend to marry authenticity with authority, with a very clear sense of their voice and the way they build credibility with their audiences. Offering markers of personal and shared experience such as ethnicity, parenthood or community engagement is critical to their work, particularly because "*humans trust humans*" more than institutions or machines. Rigorous ethics policies and transparent reporting techniques add value, but these traditional tactics are not enough to build a following. Interviewees are highly engaged with their audiences, getting story ideas and tips from direct exchanges and audience surveys. At the same time, this sort of engagement does not always translate to detailed knowledge about exactly who they are reaching. Much of that knowledge depends on their use of various audience software and analytics apps; some say it's simply not a priority given all the things they have to juggle.

→ **Offsetting risk with a multiplatform distribution strategy:** Most of the indie info providers we interviewed are on at least three distribution platforms, including newsletters, their own sites and a variety of social media accounts. They make platform decisions by weighing their preferred formats, perceived audience reach and perceived

revenue potential. Many expressed frustration at the need to stay present across so many platforms. They've experienced platforms "*nuking the reach of links*" without notice, so it doesn't make sense to put all their eggs in one basket. For some, there's a tension between informing readers and viewers and paying the bills: the platforms that make it easiest to reach the most people aren't always the ones where they make the most money. What flies largely under their radar is differences in how platforms are built and run. While indie info providers do not see LLMs as a major factor in distribution right now, some worry about them becoming competitors.

→ **Struggling to build sustainable revenue:** It's no wonder that indie info providers are stressed about their platform strategy: very few are making all of their money through this work. They share the same financial challenges as both legacy journalism and other small business start-ups. For former journalists, building a brand and monetizing their work often feels like a distraction from what drove them to this work in the first place. And less than one in three interviewees has a developed business strategy; instead, they're "*hoping it will become more financially viable.*" How "hope" could translate to a more structured business strategy is unclear, though entrepreneurial skill-building and collaboratives are possible vehicles.

→ **Finding this work fulfilling but difficult:** Like early entrepreneurs in any industry, interviewees tend to work alone, and a lot – as one described it, "*every waking thought*" – dividing their time between working on content and working on the business. They keep at it because they find it fulfilling, and value their editorial and managerial independence. That said, nearly all would like some level of emotional support and help troubleshooting. Many do find that with their peers, but those who come from non-journalism backgrounds feel less supported in the current ecosystem. Many former journalists miss the day-to-day community they had working in larger organizations, but they are also pessimistic about the job prospects in legacy journalism. One thing that makes it possible to work alone, especially with limited time and resources, is access to technology. Still, they wish their tools were better integrated into their workflows to save them even more time. While many use LLMs for some tasks, these aren't their most valuable resource, and they prefer specialized tools for most areas of their work.

In all, this first deep look into emerging indie info providers paints a picture of a group from diverse professional backgrounds dedicated to providing factual information to their audiences, even as they face the challenges of fast paced work, building a business and finding community with other indie info providers. But by far the most common theme among the interviewees was that they wish they had thought about business before launching, not as an afterthought.

> *"[If I could do it all over again], maybe I could have thought [out] the roll-out in a little bit of a smarter way to try to beef up my subscribers*

before I started ... maybe done a teaser campaign or been more shameless about promoting myself."

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Contents

Professional backgrounds

Indie info providers are navigating instability in the journalism industry. There is no single pathway to become an indie info provider or even consensus on how they refer to themselves.

From the public's perspective, indie info providers may seem like a cohesive category. But indie info providers don't necessarily have a shared professional identity, and broad networks of indie info providers are not yet well established. To begin to understand this disparate group, CNTI worked closely with Project C, one of the first and largest networks of indie info providers, to recruit interviewees for this report. Project C interfaces with a tight network on Slack and reaches a broader set of indie info providers through their newsletter. Currently, their network largely consists of former journalists, who may not be representative of the range of indie info providers and their professional backgrounds. We prioritized recruiting people from non-journalism backgrounds, and we were able to interview science communicators, subject-matter experts and civic-minded community members without journalism experience.

Even among this relatively small group of 26 interviewees, we observed some clear differences between those with and without significant journalism experience.

Most of the indie info providers we interviewed have at least some experience in journalism. Losing a job was the impetus for many, but not all, to go out on their own.

Out of the 26 interviewees, 19 have worked in journalism at some point. Four of the former journalists also have management experience in journalism, and five have worked in other fields. The other ten have primarily worked as individual reporters or producers.

One reason journalists become indie info providers is in response to structural instability across the journalism industry. As one person said, *"This industry is the Wild West. I'm four [Wild West moments] in at this point … I feel like a veteran of that constant reinvention and also like I'm constantly at the beginning of my career, every time there's a big change in how this work is made."* Another raised similar concerns: *"I can see that the SEO agency is editing more than my actual editors. I saw this and thought, 'I'm going to be extinct.'"* Most of the former journalists had been laid off at least once in their career or had pivoted away from journalism relatively early in search of stability, like one person who failed to find a full-time job after several successful internships.

In addition to layoffs pushing them out of legacy journalism, indie info providers coming from journalism backgrounds also highlighted concerns about intellectual property and creative freedom. If they built a product with a clear personal voice inside legacy journalism organizations, they said, that product belonged to someone else. As one

former journalist said, *"Unless I build the thing that I want to work for, it's not going to exist."*

For most of the former journalists, industry-wide instability was a direct reason for their indie pivot. Of the 19 former journalists we interviewed, 10 had been laid off from their most recent role, whether in journalism or outside it, and four were full-time freelancers adding a new component to their work. While freedom was a draw, it was not the primary reason for their pivot. Three other former journalists quit full-time jobs to start their indie venture and the last two launched theirs as a side project while holding down other jobs.

Among the seven indie info providers with no journalism experience, all but two started their indie venture as a side project while either working a full-time job in another field or receiving retirement income. That meant they did not face the same pressure to be profitable nor the anxiety of building a career in a field that has been contracting for twenty years.

Across backgrounds, indie info providers are mission-driven.

Every single indie info provider we interviewed is doing this work because they want to inform people. (That's also built in to who we were seeking out, *"people who are working to provide verified factual information."*) The sense that their work is important is one of the reasons they stick with it, even when it's difficult. Their commitment to the mission is not the only factor that led them to this work, but it is an important factor. This is true across topics and audiences, although they also expressed a sense that the stakes of informing people varied widely by topic.

Creators? Journalists? Experts? Naming the field is still in progress.

When asked if they considered themselves journalists, 20 interviewees said yes, five said *"it's complicated"* and a single person said no. These answers do not correlate with their professional backgrounds: both former journalists and non-journalists were uneasy with the title of *"journalist."* Even among those who do see themselves as journalists, whether they use the title or not depends on the context. For example, one interviewee describes themself as either a creator or journalist based on who they are interacting with. For this person, the *"creator-journalist"* title still does not fully cover everything they do because they also write, edit, publish and manage a business. Another interviewee feels silly comparing themselves to *"friends who are journalists who are war correspondents"* because of the lifestyle content they cover, and described themself as a *"lowercase j journalist"* or *"magazine journalist."* (It is worth noting that there are indeed some indie war correspondents. Bisan Owda reports from Palestine on Instagram and TikTok. Tim Mak reports from Ukraine on The Counteroffensive.) Quite a few indie info providers are hesitant to use the *"journalist"* title outwardly because they think audiences don't trust — or like — journalists.

Indie info providers feel similarly about *"creator"* as a title. It's both too broad — *"creator can mean a gajillion different things"* — and too narrow in that no indie info provider spends their whole day being creative. Some people also worry about the incentives associated with the *"creator economy,"* which rewards engaging content over informative content. As a result, they distance themselves from this term: *"The creator economy can inadvertently draw people to maybe not the best version of themselves. ... If professionally you're out there trying to get personal attention, it just kind of makes you insufferable."*

For some, *"expert"* is a more comfortable label than *"journalist."* Indie info providers know a lot about their subject areas — whether it's a hobby, a geographic region, a professional area of expertise or a journalistic beat — and they communicate the facts clearly and well. In fact, some of them became indie info providers because legacy journalism covered their area either poorly or not at all. This is another reason the *"journalist"* title can be uncomfortable.

There is one area of near-consensus: almost nobody likes to call themself an "influencer." That's consistent with other research in this area.

The long-held firewall between the newsroom and the business side of legacy journalism makes going it alone harder for former journalists.

Of the people we interviewed, 10 had only ever worked inside the newsroom; the other 16 had either held management positions, worked in other fields or both. When we asked about the parts of the job they felt most — and least — prepared for, we saw clear differences between these groups.

Overall, those who had only worked as a journalist in a newsroom were more likely to say they were unprepared for some of the business and operations aspects, while those with other experience mostly said their prior roles prepared them to run a business. These skills include structuring workflows and deadlines, managing budgets and finances, and overseeing sales and marketing.

Among those who discussed business skills, those with newsroom experience only were less prepared

	Newsroom only	Newsroom-plus	Non-journalists
Structuring workflows and deadlines and managing a business	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared
Budgeting & finance	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared
Sales & audience	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✗✓ More people say not prepared	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared
Marketing	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✗✓ Equal say prepared and not prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared
Networking	✗✓ Equal say prepared and not prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	Most didn't mention this at all
Technology & technical skills	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared
Graphics	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared
Search engine optimization	Most didn't mention this at all	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared

We interviewed 10 participants with newsroom-only experience, 7 non-journalists, and 9 with mixed experience (newsroom plus either non-journalism roles or journalism management). This chart shows skills mentioned in interviews. No skill was cited by all 26 participants; each was mentioned by at least three.

Source: Center for News, Technology & Innovation, US Indie Info Providers.

It is worth pointing out that the challenges faced by indie info providers aren't specific to journalism. Many who move from holding a specific position inside a larger organization to doing their own independent work run into similar issues with steep learning curves around operations, finances and business development. But the firewall between editorial and financial functions in legacy news organizations — put in place to preserve journalistic independence from commercial influence — may make the learning curves even steeper when journalists take an entrepreneurial path.

Meanwhile, where former journalists feel more prepared than those coming from other industries is in communication and reporting tasks, though the differences are not as stark. Many of the interviewees with non-journalism backgrounds still felt prepared to take on these tasks — or did not mention them at all.

Among those who discussed communication skills, non-journalists were less prepared.

	Newsroom only	Newsroom-plus	Non-journalists
Writing & editing	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✓× More people prepared than not	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared
Reporting	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✓ Everyone who discussed was prepared	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared
Communications & social media	✓× More people prepared than not	✗ Everyone who discussed was unprepared	✗✓ Equal say prepared and not prepared

We interviewed 10 participants with newsroom-only experience, 7 non-journalists, and 9 with mixed experience (newsroom plus either non-journalism roles or journalism management). This chart shows skills mentioned in interviews. No skill was cited by all 26 participants; each was mentioned by at least three.

Source: Center for News, Technology & Innovation, US Indie Info Providers.

Professional development

Indie info providers are learning on the job, together. Learning from — and with — peers from similar backgrounds represents an opportunity.

Nearly every indie info provider came to this role as a result of a professional pivot, and the learning curve looks different depending on one's background. Trained journalists may struggle with the business side, while those without journalism experience may feel they need to develop their communication skills or their sourcing or verification practices. As there is no standard career path into this field, there is no standard path for professional development either.

While many of the interviewees had taken a structured course of some kind, self-teaching, trial and error and a strong entrepreneurial spirit are critical.

Eleven out of 26 U.S. interviewees said they had taken some sort of structured course relevant to their creator work. All but one took courses in business skills, ranging from accounting and budgeting to more advanced strategy and revenue development. Without exception, the business courses they took were journalism-specific. They turned to Project C, CUNY's entrepreneurial journalism program, LION Publishers, Tiny News Collective and others. That's particularly surprising because so many of their business challenges are relevant to new entrepreneurs across disciplines, not just journalism.

Indie info providers also found ways to learn on their own. Self-teaching could mean learning through trial and error, or it could involve accessing free materials online or from a library. Social media, in particular, seems to be a skillset that creators learn by trying things out (although three people took courses on producing vertical video). Most interviewees decide what to post by soliciting audience feedback or monitoring analytics and identifying patterns over time. One person also described their strategy for avoiding trolls and harassment as something they learned primarily through experimentation. They also teach themselves technical skills like website building, basic programming, video editing, ad sales and more.

They mostly learn new skills alongside one another.

Indie info providers turn to their formal and informal networks to learn new skills. They rely on friends, former colleagues and *"mentors from all different types of worlds."* Like the structured courses they told us about, the more formal networks they named were similarly journalism-centric: Project C, which manages a Slack community of 200+ creator-journalists, was the only community that more than one interviewee mentioned by name. (That's likely because we recruited participants in partnership with Project C. Many

other communities for indie info providers exist, among them the Evidence Collective, News Creator Corps, Listening Post Collective, CUNY's Entrepreneurial Journalism Creators Program, LION Publishers, SciCommers and the Tiny News Collective.)

While indie info providers from journalism backgrounds and those from other backgrounds have complementary skills and growth areas, interviewees tend to learn from people with similar backgrounds. Just one person said they had joined a local small business networking group, which they found immensely valuable for skill development, relationships and finding local advertisers. This person thought their peers would benefit from broadening their networks in this way, especially if they serve a local audience.

Because so much of their professional learning takes place within networks, many of our interviewees engage in mentorship programs with journalism schools, professional societies or conferences. They all said these were important professional relationships for them, both to stay connected to the field and to pay forward the way they had learned. As one person explained, *"I still dedicate a lot of time when people ask me about starting your own business or about being a solo in the newsletter world. Because people did that for me and I have an ethical obligation to share that, especially now that I've been doing this a little bit longer."*

Many available resources that are not journalism-specific have largely gone un-utilized by interviewees due to time, access or awareness.

Most interviewees see themselves as small business owners (see "making money"), yet only one interviewee mentioned participating in a local small business networking group. Nobody mentioned taking advantage of resources or services from the Small Business Administration or from Small Business Development Centers, although they would likely be eligible. It's hard to know why interviewees didn't talk about these opportunities, but it is possible they do not have time to take advantage of them, or are not aware that they exist at all.

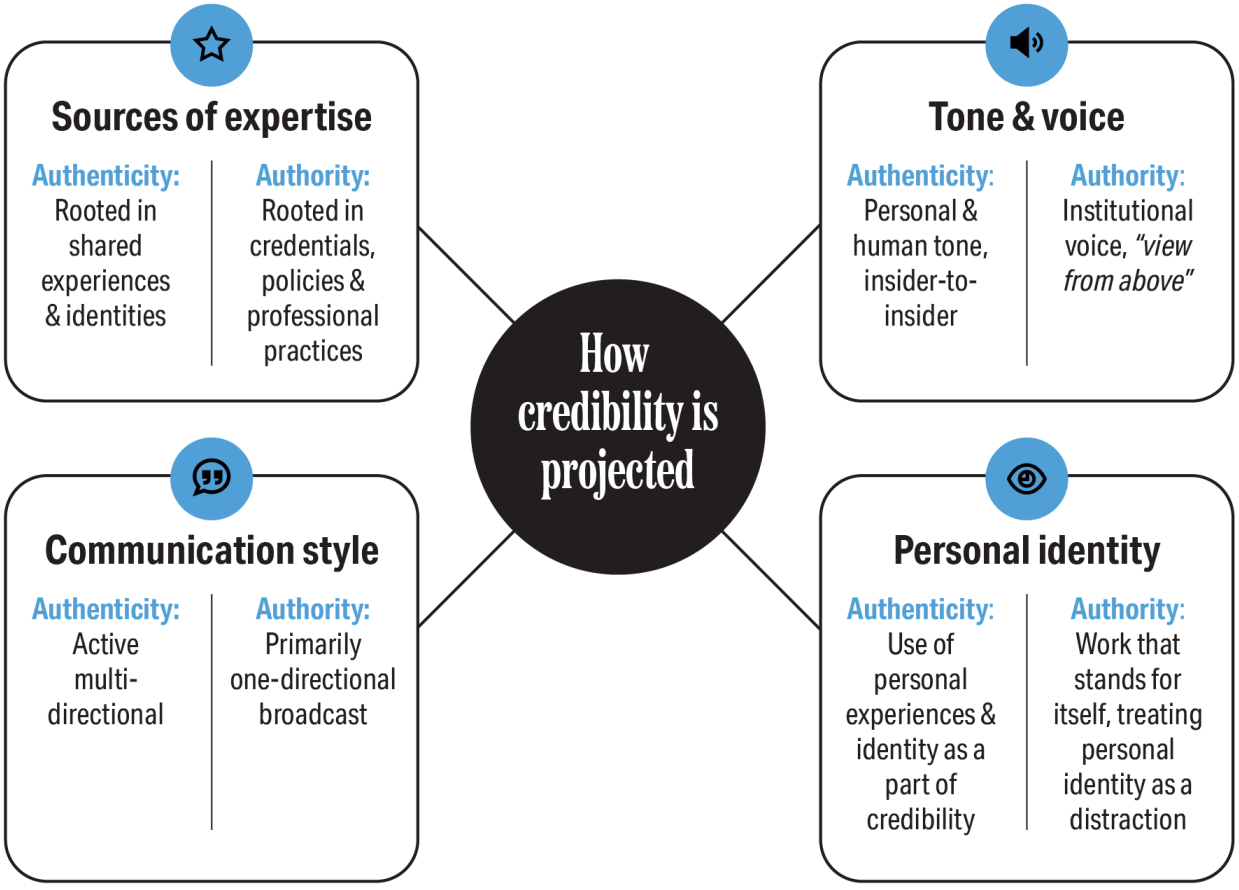
The relative insularity of the professional development ecosystem could mean that the indie info providers we interviewed are unaware of relevant opportunities from adjacent fields. For example, the broader creator field has built a great deal of knowledge about monetizing independent work; indie web developers have long focused on building an audience on owned sites rather than depending on platforms; the open-source community has given deep thought to the sustainability of independent projects; and public scholars have deep expertise in research and communication.

This finding suggests that indie info providers would benefit from networking broadly and considering business models and resources outside their original industry.

Credibility

Indie info providers are bridging humanity and rigor. In contrast with legacy journalism, they tend to marry authenticity with authority, with a very clear sense of their voice and the way they build credibility with their audiences.

The public has access to more and more sources of information these days: they turn to individuals like the ones CNTI interviewed, legacy media institutions, all manner of social media platforms, news aggregators, search engines, AI chatbots and many other sources. The indie info providers we interviewed think deeply about credibility, trust and how they differentiate themselves for their audiences in ways that frequently differ from the legacy journalism approach. During interviews, they returned time and again to two concepts that they draw on to signal credibility: *"authenticity"* and *"authority."*



If legacy media idealizes the "view from above," indie info providers reject it, taking on an "insider-to-insider" tone that starts with shared concerns and priorities.

Many interviewees critiqued the overly impersonal tone of *"corporate"* or *"conglomerate"* media and positioned themselves explicitly in contrast to it. Even those with a strong background in legacy media expressed this frustration. One person even described being discouraged from reporting on certain topics because of their personal background while working in legacy media even though their perspective could have been valuable.

Several participants linked the notion of authenticity with an observation that audiences prefer individual voices to institutional ones. *"In a creator economy, the brand is you,"* one told us. As another observed, *"Humans trust humans. They don't really trust brick walls. And so I try to show up in a very human way."* Strategies include adding occasional personal content or details, being *"voicy"* rather than relying on a dry institutional style, and spelling out the values and goals behind the reporting. All of these approaches allow indie info providers to distinguish themselves from other media outlets.

As the editor of a hyperlocal news site said, *"We need to show people, 'Hey, we are your neighbors. We are invested here.' I am not owned by an out of state or out of country entity. I'm not owned by a billionaire. I'm just somebody who wants to contribute to this town and do a job that helps here."*

For the most part, indie info providers emphasize both authority and authenticity as elements of their credibility.

As the indie info providers described it, authenticity relies on being a community member and a *"whole person,"* while authority relies on credentials, institutions and professional processes.

Being an insider or community member could be a question of geography: one local news creator observed, *"I don't really see a reason to break down my credentials, degrees, all that stuff if no one is asking for that. And I also feel like it's kind of elitist. ... I was born and raised here. I'm not someone who is just popping up and saying I'm an expert on something about [this city] when I'm not from here. People know me."* It could be a question of professional identity: a B2B creator used this strategy, noting, *"A lot of the communication of credibility for me occurs within the context of references and word choice. ... It's much more a performance of authenticity than a traditional media performance of credibility."*

There is no one-size-fits all approach. Several interviewees, including both former journalists and non-journalists, push back against the logic of authenticity entirely. One of them, whose project contains almost no personal content, observed, *"I think that playing yourself on social media is exhausting. You reach a point where you're at your limit. It's also basically inviting people to scrutinize your personal life and your decisions in a way*

that, as a journalist, you don't face nearly as much attention." Another person hadn't anticipated *"that I would need to be as much of a present face in my community as I am currently"* and finds it challenging.

The two most common ways indie info providers signal credibility via authority are by *"showing your work,"* often by citing or linking sources, and emphasizing their prior experience in journalism or other institutions.

Both former journalists and non-journalists emphasized **showing the work**, which makes conclusions traceable. It is also consistent with journalistic practice more broadly. *"Everything I do is based on source documents. It's not based on rumor or innuendo,"* one person said. Transparency about funding, ethics policies and other institutional processes are another form of *"showing the work"* that is consistent with legacy journalism outlets. Former journalists and non-journalists alike highlighted this kind of transparency.

Meanwhile, some interviewees who emphasized their **prior experience** hoped that credibility would transfer automatically to them. One of these interviewees said that they signal credibility by *"having bylines in legitimate news outlets"* and another told us, *"I post videos on TikTok and I always remind people I'm a journalist who's been covering [this topic] for 25 years."* This strategy seems dubious given historically low U.S. trust in legacy media. In fact, many of those who rely almost exclusively on secondhand institutional credibility also have a hard time connecting with audiences.

If anything, our interviews suggest that authenticity is a must-have, while authority may be a value-add.

Indie info providers combine authentic audience engagement with authoritative rigor in communicating facts.

Unlike legacy newsrooms, where audience outreach and reporting are largely separate functions, indie info providers must handle both. In legacy newsrooms, journalists are typically asked to maintain an *"impartial"* stance in reporting, although they may use social media to attract audiences and engage with them. Typically, dedicated audience teams focus on attracting audiences, soliciting feedback and selecting stories with broad appeal. Indie info providers take on all of these roles themselves, leaving the boundary between audience engagement and reporting more porous than in legacy media.

They pay attention to audience responses to understand what resonates with them by asking for input or by following comments and interactions. One participant described attending networking events to get inspiration, observing, *"If this person who fits the demographics of my audience has this question, then probably a lot of other people do as well."* Interviewees get ideas from direct messages from readers, and several send regular surveys or polls to understand their audiences' interests and values. All of these

ways of soliciting feedback would typically be covered by an audience engagement team in a legacy newsroom, where audience work is considered less central.

In a similar vein, indie info providers are responsive. They reply to emails, comments and DMs on social media. One even gave out their phone number. They attend events, livestreams and webinars, and several have a presence in audience Discord servers. This stands in contrast to many newsrooms where, for decades, reporters were instructed to avoid often-unregulated comment sections — in fact, many news organizations shut down comment sections years ago. Just three out of 26, all former journalists, said they do not engage with their audiences at all.

These more bidirectional relationships can have a dark side.

Interviewees expressed concerns over parasocial relationships and harassment. As they put it, the flip side of putting yourself and your personality into your work is that the audience feels like they know you. They may be more likely to pay to support your work because they feel a personal connection, but those relationships can be uncomfortable, and some people cross boundaries.

Multiple interviewees have dealt with hateful comments, personal attacks, threats or borderline defamation. One person recommended that would-be indie info providers develop a thick skin because *"once you become public-facing, the amount of hate and the amount of personal and professional risk that you're putting yourself out there by entering the arena is very real."* Others have developed systems to block specific words on their social media feeds and comments.

Deeper audience engagement does not always translate to more information about their audience.

Interviewees varied widely in how well they knew their audiences. Some could provide extensive demographics — often mentioning age range, geography, interests and gender. (All of these variables are included in standard analytics apps like Google Analytics.) On the other hand, fewer could speak confidently about the professions, race and ethnicity or income level of their audiences. In general, those who have an understanding of their audience use specific technology such as audience enrichment tools, sign-up surveys and analytics data.

But not all interviewees had concrete audience data. Some of them could make guesses based on email addresses or could infer their politics based on the tone of the content. Notably, five of the indie info providers who said that their work does not support their lifestyle at all also said they struggle to articulate their niche in terms of a concrete audience and that audience's shared need. Some characterized their content as aimed at a specific age group or *"regular people who like music."*

The Legacy Journalism Connection

Credibility and audience relationships represent the area where we saw the strongest contrasts between legacy journalism institutions and indie info providers, even among those with journalism backgrounds.

For the most part, indie info providers rely on a personal tone that emphasizes shared experiences such as ethnicity, parenthood or community engagement — in addition to rigorous and transparent processes. In contrast, legacy journalism outlets tend to prefer a "neutral" voice that foregrounds the institution and leaves individuals in the background.

Most interviewees also engage closely with their audiences, bridging reporting and engagement. In legacy journalism, these tasks are often split between firewalled teams, with reporters discouraged from taking on direct audience work.

Distribution Platforms

Indie info providers are offsetting risk with a multiplatform distribution strategy. Similar to many other kinds of information providers, they feel pressure to be everywhere at once online.

Like many other information providers, including legacy journalism, indie info providers depend on a wide range of distribution platforms to make their content visible to potential and current audiences. They also face similar challenges deciding where to be when. These platforms — social media sites, newsletter aggregators, private chat portals and more — make it possible for an individual to attain broad reach. But these platforms also mediate between indie info providers and their audiences in two ways: they control access to information about the audiences, and they control what content those audiences see. These platforms can — and do — unilaterally change their features, including how they surface and prioritize content, and even which content they allow at all. This creates uncertainty that indie info providers have to navigate. These concerns are not unique to indie info providers, but they may be especially vulnerable to platform risk because of their small size.

Selecting platforms requires balancing format affordances, audience preferences and perceived revenue potential.

Interviewees cited a range of factors when they talked about which platforms they use.

- **Format affordances**: Some platforms primarily encourage users to post text, while others are image- or video-first. Many indie info providers gravitate more to one format or another rather than spending additional time adapting a story into multiple formats.
- **Audience preferences**: The demographics of the user base on each platform varies at any given point in time. For example, as of early 2026, older adults (55+) were overrepresented on Facebook, while 12- to 34-year-olds were overrepresented on TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram.
- **Revenue potential**: Many platforms offer native monetization opportunities as well as indirect ones like sponsorships. Many of these opportunities depend on reach, which in turn depends on algorithms that prioritize some content over others.

All of these factors change over time, so which platforms an indie info provider focuses on is a decision that needs to be revisited regularly.

Moreover, these factors are not independent of one another. One interviewee took a step back to explain how they are closely intertwined: *“I don't think it makes as much sense for me to be as focused on TikTok where the audience is much younger, because while I could reach a larger scale that way, I don't think that's where my paying customers are,*

necessarily. I don't care about reaching 200,000 people in a short form video if nobody buys anything, or I'm not in a position to monetize that. Since the dominant social platforms for my peers and for our audience tend to be text-driven places, [those were] an easy place to start."

Many interviewees are frustrated with the need to stay present on so many platforms, but it can be a way to offset risk.

Most of our interviewees were on at least three platforms such as newsletters, their own websites and a range of social media. Maintaining a presence in so many places at once is time-consuming and frustrating, but feels necessary to combat limited visibility and manage the risk of platforms changing how they prioritize content performance.

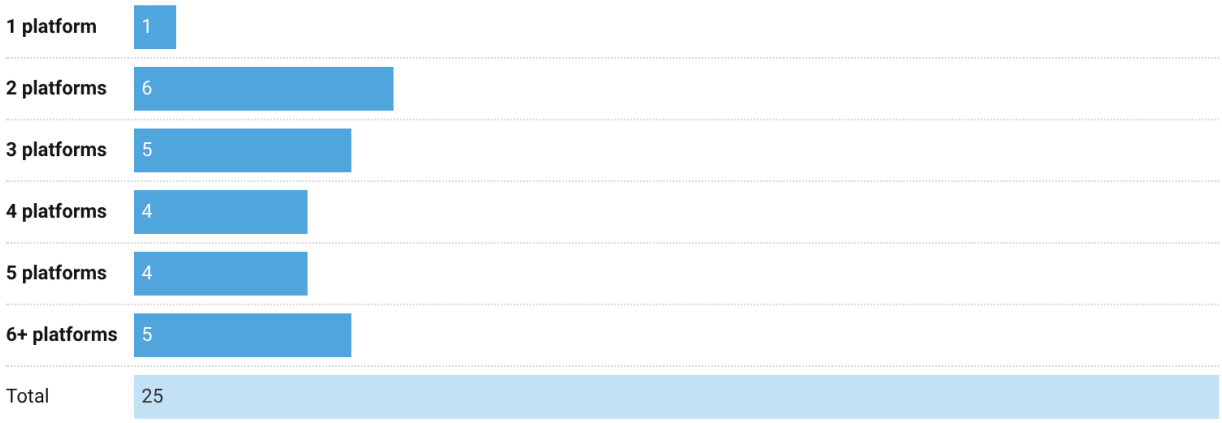
One major reason interviewees cited for using multiple platforms is a lack of transparency about performance. Those who consistently see better performance on one platform typically attributed it to audience habits. For example, indie info providers reaching a professional audience largely find more traction on LinkedIn than elsewhere. Engagement also varies across platforms and even from one post to the next. Some actively try to tailor content for different platforms, but many simply cross-post, especially those who see social media platforms primarily as sources of more direct forms of traffic.

In addition to challenges around transparency, interviewees also highlighted the financial risks of platform dependence. Many of the indie info providers have had bad experiences with specific platforms that leave them wary of putting all their eggs in one basket. After one platform *"nuked the reach of links,"* an interviewee found that they needed to spend more time to achieve the same reach. Another person observed, *"Seeing what happened to Twitter, it was very clear to me that any tech company could implode that quickly."* After a bad experience with Twitter, this person preemptively moved away from Substack when they saw warning signs that the platform was compromising creator revenue and access to audience data.

Interviewees also raised concerns about content deletion and demotion on social media platforms. Platforms don't provide transparent information about whether content is affected or how. That leaves indie info providers guessing, choosing to self-censor or abandon platforms where they have seen their reach shrink dramatically.

Most interviewees are pursuing a multiple platform strategy — half of them use four or more.

Question: What platforms are you sharing your content on? Select all that apply.



Notes. These numbers reflect interviewees' responses to the pre-interview survey. (In some cases, interviewees mentioned additional platforms during the interview.) One interviewee did not complete the survey.

Chart: Center for News, Technology & Innovation • Source: US Indie Info Providers • Created with Datawrapper

Indie info providers say making money means prioritizing platforms that offer more control over audience experience and data, such as websites and newsletters.

Interviewees see email newsletters and websites as the most predictably monetizable platforms: in their current form, they seem to provide direct audience access. In turn, that means that advertising revenue is direct and indie info providers have more control over subscriptions and paywalls. Their reasons for choosing between different tools in this space tend to be feature-driven, since they would ideally use a single tool to manage everything. In fact, all interviewees use just one newsletter platform (Ghost, Beehiiv, Substack or Mailchimp), although there is variation between using separate platforms for their websites and using integrated functions within newsletter platforms.

While our interviewees largely saw newsletters as a safer financial bet, there are indie info providers finding financial success on YouTube between Google AdSense and sponsorship deals. Among them: Cleo Abram (Huge if True), Joss Fong (Howtown) and Johnny Harris. Vertical video, on the other hand, has been harder for many indie providers to monetize directly.

The deep dive: newsletter & website platforms

For newsletter and website platforms, this group of indie info providers use WordPress, Ghost, Beehiiv, Webflow and/or Substack. Because of the way questions were framed, we have likely undercounted the use of website tools such as WordPress (which powers more than 40% of the internet).

Beehiiv users cited its “creator-first” model, including customizability, accessibility for those with less coding knowledge and the ability to export audience data and content if they choose to leave. One person who participated in Beehiiv’s creator program also noted that the platform offers a health insurance stipend, a lawyer for pre-publication review and a designated support person for participants. (Project C, CNTI’s recruitment partner, has a relationship with Beehiiv, which is reflected in its preeminence as a newsletter platform among interviewees. The relative frequency of Ghost, Substack, Beehiiv and WordPress among our interviewees is almost certainly not reflective of the broader population of indie info providers.)

Ghost users said they value that it is open source. Users also like that they own their data and are not concerned about the cost going up.

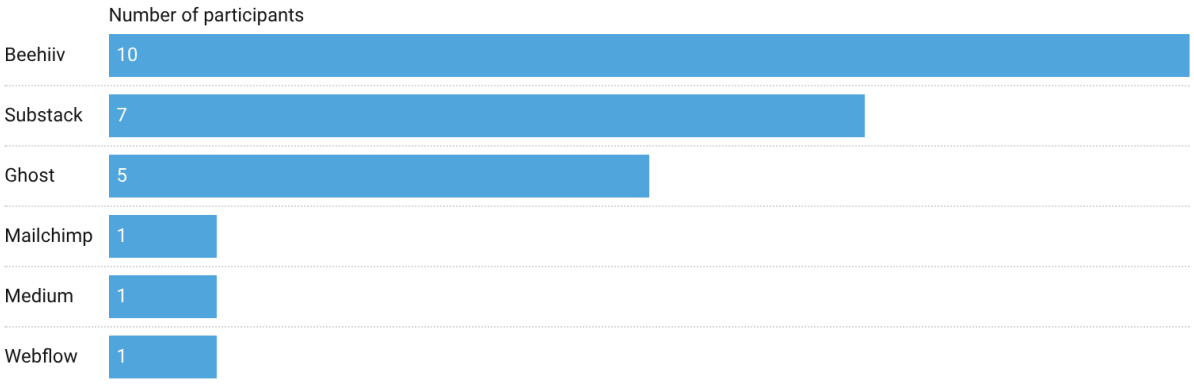
Substack users cited prior familiarity with the platform, brand recognition and awareness of other creators using it as their primary reasons for choosing it. Substack also provides an example of the instability of platform features over time: several interviewees had moved away from it because they saw Substack’s branding competing with their own or because Substack had begun reducing access to subscribers and control over user data.

What stands out is what went unsaid: Both Ghost and WordPress offer paid hosting and other support services. However, the underlying software is open-source, which means that users can deploy them locally and do not need to rely on the companies for hosting. It also means there is built-in portability that proprietary tools lack. Ghost, in particular, is non-profit, which means that the paid services are offered to support a mission rather than to increase shareholder profit.

Casey Newton of Platformer has written at length about choosing distribution platforms as an indie info provider, offering an example of an approach that takes advantage of platform’s strengths while retaining as much independence as possible. That includes constantly revisiting their options rather than assuming what a platform offers will remain consistent.

For newsletter and website hosting, interviewees found themselves on different platforms due to customizability, ease of use and prior knowledge.

Question: What platforms are you sharing your content on? Select all that apply .



Notes. These numbers reflect interviewees' responses to the pre-interview survey. (Due to question wording, some numbers may be undercounts. Interviewees mentioned additional platforms, especially WordPress, in interviews.) One interviewee did not complete the survey.

Chart: Center for News, Technology & Innovation • Source: US Indie Info Providers • Created with Datawrapper

Indie info providers use social media to expand reach, despite not necessarily being able to monetize it.

On social media, indie info providers are trying to meet audiences where (they think) they are. (As several acknowledged, their understanding of who uses which platform is constrained by the data that the platforms themself provide. If a platform doesn't measure a particular group, it is hard to be certain.)

Many said using social media aligns with their mission of informing the public. It can also help drive audiences to platforms where they can earn more money. For social media, their rationale for choosing particular platforms is audience-centered and format-centered. After all, using any particular social media platform does not preclude them from using others, although there can be trade-offs in terms of time.

The deep dive: social media platforms

Among our interviewees...

Instagram users typically had an established presence there before beginning their indie info provider venture, making it a natural starting point.

TikTok users see it as necessary for audience growth and many crosspost content from Instagram reels and YouTube shorts.

Facebook users value the existing interest-based communities related to their topic area. It is also a legacy platform, and some continue to post simply because they have not left.

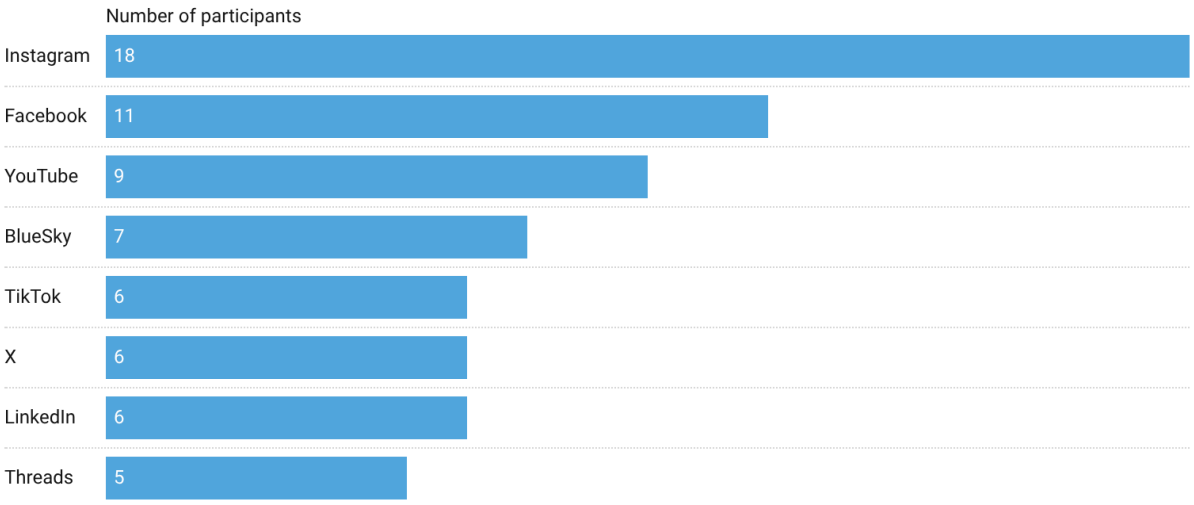
Bluesky users prefer it to X (Twitter) because it does not deprioritize links, making it better suited for driving traffic to sites they own. Many made the comparison explicit, noting *"the presence that we had on X was sizable enough, but not worth the headache [for the ROI]"* or *"X is like an 'I hate journalism' machine ... whereas Bluesky loves links and loves journalism and sends all of the traffic to you."*

LinkedIn users typically serve B2B audiences. They value the ability to target particular professional communities.

YouTube users described it as the *"gold standard"* for content creators in terms of profitability and durability.

Interviewees chose their platforms based on practical factors, such as prior familiarity and their target audience.

Question: What platforms are you sharing your content on? Select all that apply .



Notes. These numbers reflect interviewees' responses to the pre-interview survey. (No participants mentioned Telegram, Twitch, WeChat or WhatsApp. Some people mentioned additional platforms in interviews.) One interviewee did not complete the survey.

Chart: Center for News, Technology & Innovation • Source: US Indie Info Providers • Created with Datawrapper

Interviewees try to avoid platforms that aren't values-aligned, but they say that's not always possible.

Some interviewees raised concerns about value misalignment with particular platforms. Substack and X (Twitter) stand out in this regard, with the most common concern being these platforms' willingness to *"actively host Nazi-affiliated content."* They also identified lock-in as a challenge: both platforms make it difficult to migrate content and followers elsewhere. Many interviewees have left these platforms for alternatives or, if they

maintain an X account, use it primarily for *"broadcasting"* but not to engage bidirectionally.

In other cases, value misalignment means that platforms were a poor match for interviewees' business goals. For example, several said that certain platforms have deprioritized posts containing links, so they are no longer a valuable traffic source. They perceive some platforms as increasingly *"pay to play"* or have concerns about platforms' brands competing with their work rather than supporting it.

While not mentioned as much as other examples of value misalignment, interviewees also brought up value misalignment around labor issues. The specific issues they raised were about platforms exploiting and extracting value from their labor, and platforms using their content to train AI models without consent or remuneration.

Some interviewees use LLMs for content production tasks, but none talked about them as distribution platforms or competitors.

Publishers — including both legacy journalism outlets and indie info providers — have been concerned for years about declining traffic from search engines as LLM-generated overviews have become more common. Audiences are certainly turning to these tools to access information.

No interviewee described using AI tools like LLMs as a distribution platform, although several raised concerns about audience use, given documented concerns about LLM accuracy and attribution. However, many of them use LLMs for limited tasks within their production workflow (see "going solo").

The legacy journalism connection

Most of the platform pressures identified in this section apply equally to legacy journalism as to indie info providers. The conflict between platforms' goals to maximize engagement and info providers' goals to inform is not unique to indie info providers, nor is frustration with platforms' power to unilaterally change their terms and what they prioritize. Like indie info providers, legacy journalism has responded by maintaining a presence on multiple platforms and trying to drive traffic to platforms where the audience relationship is less mediated.

Where they differ may largely be a matter of size. In practical terms, organizations large enough to have a dedicated technology team have more capacity to use tools that require more technical expertise, including local instances of open-source software. Solo or small providers may face pressure to rely more heavily on the tools with the best customer service or those that bundle services that meet multiple needs at once.

Making money

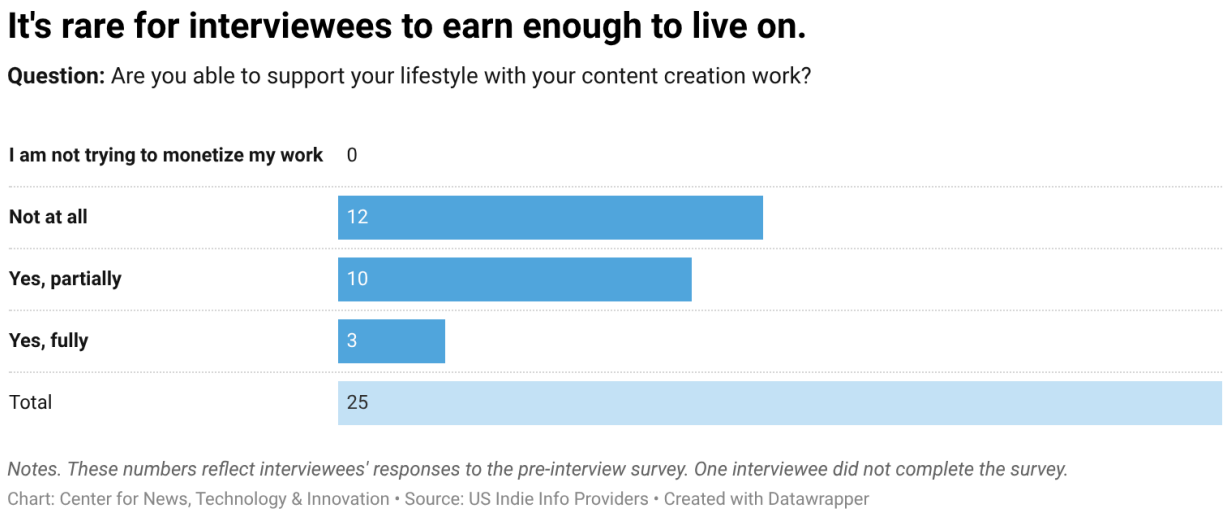
Indie info providers are struggling to build sustainable revenue. Interviewees have similar financial challenges to both legacy journalism and other new small businesses.

Financial sustainability is a challenge for journalism as a whole, not just for indie info providers. Beyond the organizational level, individual journalists in legacy newsrooms are also struggling financially. And starting a small business in any arena isn't easy: half of all small businesses fail within five years. In that context, it is particularly important to understand whether, and how, indie info providers are making money.

Almost nobody we interviewed is making all of their money as indie info providers. Only about half are making significant money.

Just three interviewees said that they could fully fund their lifestyle with the content they create while 10 said they could partially fund their lifestyle and 12 said they could not do so at all. The results were similar among the total pool of survey respondents: 23 out of 43 said they can't fund their lifestyle at all as an indie info provider.

> It is worth noting that there are many personality-driven former journalists doing quite well financially, such as Don Lemon, Joy Reid and Chris Cillizza. These three also had long and high-visibility careers in legacy media, so they're far from typical.
>
> It's important to recognize that financial success is much more difficult and much less common than the best-known names make it look.



Like a large — and growing — number of U.S. adults, these indie info providers worry about their finances. About half of the interviewees worry about meeting their expenses, describing cash flow and finances in general as one of their greatest challenges. (Financial struggles are also a growing reality for journalists in legacy newsrooms.)

For many we spoke with, providing information to others is primarily a passion project, at least for now. These interviewees are relying on a partner's income, a *"day job,"* or personal savings as a backstop. Some of them would be happy for it to remain a part-time project, but most either *"hoped"* or were taking active steps to create a financially viable business out of this work.

Freelancing and consulting are the most common sources of outside income. Most see this work as separate from their indie info provider business rather than part of it. In some cases, their freelance work is in a separate but related field, like PR or marketing; in others, they provide consulting to help clients make decisions related to their beat.

Many of the interviewees are just starting to see themselves as small business owners.

More than half of the interviewees spontaneously described themselves as *"entrepreneurs"* or *"small business owners"* during the course of our conversations.

For most, the realization that they are small business owners was a watershed moment that changed their self-understanding. As one person put it, *"I had no idea I was going to be running a business"* when they started creating content.

Seeing themselves as small business owners helps them think about their work in terms of brand, product and the needs they are meeting. It takes a *"mindset shift"* from *"just knowing you get paid every two weeks to now being like, 'Oh, no. I need to actually tell people, y'all need to pay for this.'"* For many of them, that mindset shift feels like work in progress. Those who had management experience or had worked in fields outside journalism found this way of thinking less jarring.

The competitive pressure of building a distinct, viable brand converges with difficulty self-assessing value, discomfort with self-promotion and imposter syndrome.

Articulating the economic value of journalism is a long-standing challenge: CNTI's 2024 survey found that almost half of participating journalists think the industry is failing to communicate its value to the public. Less than one in ten U.S. adults thinks they have a responsibility to pay for news, and they believe that the industry is in much better financial shape than it is.

For many interviewees, especially former journalists, those challenges are compounded by a lack of skill or experience in pricing and marketing their value. In other words, they have a hard time asking for money. Sometimes that's made worse by *"imposter syndrome,"* which four interviewees called out by name. They know there's a lot of

content out there, and while they want to be paid, they can't shake the idea that other content is better or more deserving. Some of them are waiting to build a more consistent posting schedule or a heftier archive before they ask for money.

For interviewees, monetizing this work can feel fundamentally at odds with the desire to share information, even when financial viability depends on it. Many wonder how they can put a price on something that feels like a public service, even when payment is optional.

For most of the interviewees, success is about the mission, not just the money. Only five people defined success in primarily financial terms — *"being self-sufficient"* or *"having enough money to do what you want to do."*

The rest emphasized their mission-related goals, like *"creating something meaningful that people are talking about"* or *"helping a community see themselves represented."* Most of the mission-related responses explicitly defined success in terms of both financial and mission goals. As one interviewee said, *"If I can figure out how to build a sustainable positive business covering [beat], if I can figure out what the trick is, I can help somebody who wants to cover K-12 education or foreign policy or trans health issues."*

For many, especially former journalists, asking for payment sometimes feels at odds with their overall goals. They want to see a broad and diverse set of content, but they also *"don't think consumers can support everybody having their own little independent thing."* This framing implies that a paywall is the primary business model — but in truth, that isn't the only option. One interviewee described their own business as *"a NPR model where most people pay because they believe in the mission rather than specific content or what's behind the paywall."* This person has a robust subscription business that employs multiple people, even though the only paywalled subscriber benefit is behind-the-scenes content.

Asking for money, even on an opt-in basis, can also feel uncomfortable when money is tight for their audiences, a problem they share with legacy publishers. Two indie info providers in particular — one who provides actionable insights for job seekers and another who reports for an ethnic diaspora — reflected that their audiences don't have much disposable income, which made it difficult to rely on paywalled subscriptions, mission-based donations or advertising dollars. As a third indie info provider observed, *"Writing for a wealthy group of people is the only way at this point, as far as I can tell, to run a media business. ... 90% of media businesses just write for upper-middle-class people if not just upper-class people."* This person, one of the most financially successful interviewees, had worked in management roles in legacy media before launching their current venture; their underlying model relies more heavily on making B2B connections than on a paywall or direct reader revenue.

Less than one in three interviewees has a formal or developed business strategy. Right now, successful revenue models depend largely on the type of audience they're reaching.

All interviewees have at least some awareness about potential sources of revenue, but there is tremendous variation in the sophistication of interviewees' business strategies. A plurality (12 people) expressed only vague goals such as *"getting sponsorships"* or *"I'm just going to see how far I can take this and what's supported by the market."* This group included several people who were not actively trying to do creator work full-time. A second group (seven people) described measurable goals they could use to assess their success and revisit their plans, such as reaching a certain number of subscribers or a certain level of revenue, but they lack either concrete plans or a sense of trade-offs between different sources of revenue.

Another set of seven people laid out a more fully developed revenue strategy, or at least had revenue front and center, such as one who explained that *"with almost any decision that we make, I want to understand how this leads to revenue."* Within this group, some shared pretty complex strategies, including multiple tiers of access or detailed explanations of their customer funnel. Notably, every single person in this group had held jobs beyond reporting. Even so, two of this group of seven still said they were making very little money. One of them was relatively new to this work and was still building out a plan, while the other was evaluating how to ensure a longer-term passion project could bring in more financial value.

The deep dive: revenue and audience

Speaking broadly, interviewees aim to reach four largely distinct types of audience which impact revenue strategy:

B2B: These indie info providers meet a clear need for a defined group of professionals. Those who serve a niche group can charge high fees for both subscriptions and premium advertising. Those who serve a broader set of professionals set subscription fees lower, but a high proportion of their audience is willing to pay.

Geographical: These indie info providers offer hyper-local news or meet a clear regional niche. Those who are doing best financially combine local advertising and event-listing revenue with subscriptions or memberships. They spend a lot of time networking with other local small businesses, which pays off in the form of advertising dollars.

Interest-based: These indie info providers report on a relatively narrow interest or hobby, with clear guardrails around what content is on- or off-topic. Sponsorships are effective for some of them, and at least one is looking into affiliate marketing, but most expressed concern about articulating clear ethical guardrails for these forms of revenue.

Identity-based: These indie info providers report for communities defined by identity traits, such as sexuality or ethnicity. They have a more difficult time monetizing their work than others.

The deep dive: making money

Advertising works well for niche professional audiences and local news.

Six interviewees said they make a fair bit of income from advertising and sponsorships, using a variety of business models. Two creators have audiences that are valuable to luxury advertisers either because of their wealth or because of their niche profession, three creators who work in local news have a regular rotation of ads from local businesses, and one person whose beat includes consumer goods makes money on sponsored content. In all of these cases, indie info providers deal directly with advertisers rather than using intermediaries like Google or Meta, which handle the lion's share of digital advertising.

Another 14 interviewees described challenges making money through advertising and sponsorship. Four were unhappy with platform-associated services that were supposed to provide ads: the ads offered were not a good fit for the audience, or there weren't enough options. One of them went so far as to say those ads would end up losing money by chasing subscribers away. Four indie info providers expressed discomfort with asking for money or said that it wasn't effective for them; three more said they are actively trying to grow their advertisers. Two raised ethical concerns with whole categories of advertisers, which limited their opportunities, particularly through intermediaries.

Subscriptions can work for a wide range of indie info providers — but they're most lucrative for professional audiences.

Out of 26 interviewees, 15 said that at least some of their subscribers pay a monthly or annual subscription fee. Most of those who shared pricing with us said that a monthly subscription costs between $5 and $20, typically with a discount for annual subscribers. Several indie info providers who offer a niche product for a professional audience offer a four- or five-digit subscription tier for access to specific content. Only two interviewees said they had a hard paywall for all or nearly all their content; others typically paywall older content, if any content at all. Four interviewees expressed tension between their mission and a paywall: these indie info providers offer behind-the-scenes or older content to subscribers but feel that it is important to offer informational or educational content to everyone. As one of them noted, *"News is so important it should not be gated … [but] news is not free to produce."*

It's challenging to find the "third pillar" of funding.

Only a small number of interviewees have found a stable source of revenue outside of advertising and reader revenue that is still related to their content creation. A few consult on projects directly related to this work, four receive speaker fees regularly and

two run events or festivals. Two others stand out: one sells software related to their reporting and uses some paywalled games to drive subscriptions, and the other serves as a broker for market research, connecting their professional audience to paid opportunities for a finder's fee.

Solving the business problem isn't just a matter of training; there are also opportunities for collaborations.

These interviews clearly reflect a need for skill-building around business strategy and revenue generation. In addition to skill-building, there's also an opportunity for forms of support that didn't even come up in these conversations — perhaps because it does not yet exist at scale. Specifically, collaborations and collectives could help indie info providers build leverage to negotiate with sponsors, distribution platforms and others. Rather than limiting themselves to pre-existing options that could change at any time and have an outsized impact on their ability to monetize, indie info providers could use collaboratives and collectives to improve the overall ecosystem and make it more entrepreneur-friendly. The overall ecosystem would also benefit from more widespread options that rely on open-source and open-protocol software, such as Ghost or BlueSky.

The Legacy Journalism Connection: Interviewees would love to build strong financial partnerships with legacy media, but most don't see how.

A small number of indie info providers have regular contributor roles as a columnist or a creator-in-residence. While many others love the idea, they do not see it as feasible for them. In their experience, newsrooms are possessive and see them as competitors. They also worry about having ideas stolen after a pitch, giving up their hard-won creative control, or being asked to collaborate for exposure rather than cash. As one person wryly observed, *"I'm friends with your sports writer, I'm not friends with your publisher. If you want me to do things for you, you need to pay me."*

A handful of interviewees, mostly former journalists, freelance for other outfits or want to pitch those outlets, but they see those relationships as freelance work-for-hire rather than true collaborations.

Going solo

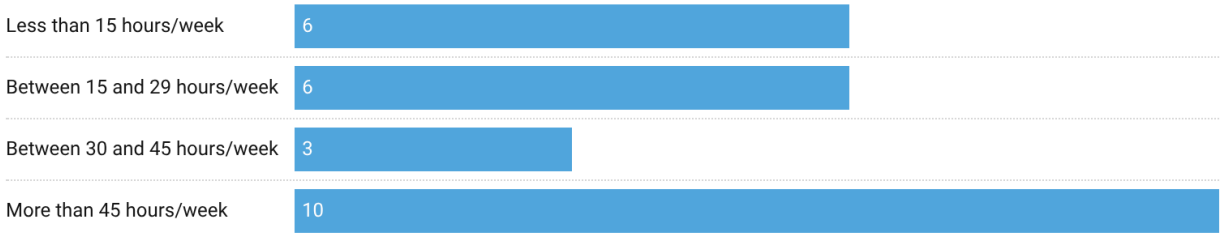
Indie info providers are finding this work fulfilling but difficult. Like other early entrepreneurs, interviewees tend to work alone, and a lot – as one described it, *"every waking hour"* – with time divided between the content and the business.

Starting a new project can be a long slog, with "startup mode" famously requiring high levels of uncertainty and intense hours. People who go into solo projects knowing that they're building a business might expect the intensity. But many of our interviewees didn't realize that was what they were doing until they had already started.

Most interviewees are going it alone, with too many roles and too few hours.

Our interviewees tend to work alone — and a lot. Some described their work as consuming *"every waking thought"* or *"like, 100 hours"* a week, while others manage to contain work to closer to 40 hours. Those who spend less time on their indie info provider projects are often juggling multiple jobs, with a total workload far in excess of a 40-hour week. Interviewees started their indie info provider endeavors as early as 2003 and as late as mid-2025; while early entrepreneurship is intense, it has stayed intense even for those who have been doing it longest.

The amount of time interviewees spend on their indie projects varies widely.



Notes. These figures include time spent only on interviewees' indie projects. Many interviewees were also working full- or part-time jobs, for totals far above 40 hours across the board.

Chart: Center for News, Technology & Innovation • Source: US Indie Info Providers • Created with Datawrapper

No matter how many hours a week they work, interviewees reported splitting their time roughly equally between content work (research, interviewing, writing and creating videos), business development (marketing, revenue strategy and audience engagement) and administrative tasks (budgeting, scheduling, taxes and responding to emails). Those who are attempting to scale beyond a solo venture spend somewhat less time on content work than others. On the other hand, indie info providers with a strong reporting focus spend somewhat less time on business development, although they feel guilty about this

choice. That said, there is no typical week in this business: interviewees' focus varies based on immediate needs and news events.

A few interviewees have been able to expand their operation to include a small full-time team, but most have not. Even when indie info providers are able to hire some support, these supporting roles typically cover small and concrete areas of work, such as social media, ad sales or short-term help during much-needed time off.

Indie info providers are exhausted, and the unsustainable physical and mental toll impacts what they can produce and when.

Many of the interviewees feel exhausted and isolated. They're acutely aware that they care more about their projects than anybody else, and it takes a toll. This also occurs with early entrepreneurs in other industries.

> *"I burned out like every other month being a one-woman show, so I think it's just capacity to keep going [that] continues to be a big challenge."*

> *"This lives in my head. I am the only person on some level that cares about it, you know, and that is a weird experience."*

The physical and mental toll impacts their decision-making. Many reported making content choices on the basis of their publishing schedule rather than news value, and turning down other opportunities due to low bandwidth.

Despite the difficulties, interviewees find their work fulfilling and appreciate the editorial and managerial independence.

Every single person we spoke with finds their indie info provider work fulfilling. But are they happy? Just over half said yes, while most of the others highlighted the tension between the fulfilling nature of the work and limited time and financial resources. A few took the question philosophically. *"I don't answer questions like 'am I happy?' because I'm not a happy person,"* one said. *"I'm a bottomless pit of need,"* another quipped, while a third mused, *"What does 'happy' mean? I will be discussing this with my therapist later."*

Almost everyone would choose this path again, given the choice. By far the most common thing interviewees would do differently is think about business earlier: they wish they had *"known it was a business," "charged more," "thought of it as a career"* or *"gone in with a business plan."* That is almost certainly specific to former journalists, and much less common among indie info providers from other backgrounds.

Several interviewees would like emotional support and help troubleshooting, and professional relationships with peers fulfill that for some. Interviewees who aren't former journalists feel less supported.

To address the numerous challenges they face, many interviewees turn to peers who understand these stresses. They have a *"group text,"* a *"sounding board"* or even a standing coworking date with other indie info providers. These relationships are valuable for *"brainstorming"* and *"spitballing"* even if they are unlikely to lead to formal collaborations. Interviewees also benefit from feedback and skill-sharing within this type of relationship.

Co-production with other creators, even when it is informal, is a strategy to save time. This can look like swapping guest posts, creating something together or interviewing one another reciprocally. Indie info providers enjoy this type of collaboration and said it could be valuable to grow their audience and reach, but they also observed that it has to be genuine. *"That's so important for this ecosystem, for people to cross-promote to support each other when it's genuinely of interest, not fake, you know, paid cross promotions. Your audience is too small and sensitive and they can tell when you're doing that,"* one person said. Several indie info providers said explicitly that they think about cross-promotion strategically, whether seeking opportunities with larger outlets (or to support smaller ones), reaching out to people on complementary platforms or finding intersections with audiences they want to reach but have not yet.

A few interviewees who are not former journalists find it challenging to develop stronger relationships with other indie info providers. Either they aren't aware of people working on similar beats, or they do not see a way to collaborate that makes sense for their finances or their schedules. Another interviewee — who said that *"being alone"* is the hardest part of the job — also finds it difficult to relate to other indie info providers because of extensive experience on the business side of media organizations.

> *"There's a phrase, 'to run a business means to touch reality.' I think there are a lot of people that work in the media who never touched reality. And touching reality, by the way, sucks."*

Similarly, many former journalists miss the day-to-day support they found working in larger organizations, but realize these jobs may no longer exist.

Former journalists who transitioned from legacy media find themselves missing many functions of a larger newsroom they once took for granted. They no longer have access to editorial oversight or legal review they might have once had, and all decision-making lies with them. When the same person writes, edits and publishes the content, they worry about an accountability gap.

The tasks they handle go far beyond accountability: they have to coordinate their own health insurance, backstop their own time off, sell their own ads and figure out their own legal status as a business. They struggle to juggle — or do without — these tasks, and balance their life with priorities outside of work, like simultaneously holding full- or part-time jobs, raising families or completing a doctoral degree. However, several former journalists noted that the journalism jobs with larger organizations may no longer exist, citing massive layoffs in the industry.

Advanced technology makes it possible to work alone, but most interviewees wish their tools were better integrated into their workflows.

Beyond standard office software like email, word processing and presentation tools, indie info providers rely on a wide range of software tools for managing workflow, research, content production, content distribution, managing finances and automating across these functions.

For technology to save time and effort, the indie info providers need integration between tools and functions. Yet only a few who are particularly tech-savvy described their technology as a "stack" or otherwise said they have achieved this integration. Instead, technology is a broad challenge for many. Knowing programming and coding basics, being able to work with different kinds of products and knowing how to troubleshoot are essential.

Tools mentioned		
Area of work	**Specific task**	**Tools**
Managing workflow	Task & project management	Asana, Airtable, Sunsama, Trello
Research	Managing sources & story fodder	Feedly, Newspapers.com, Notion, Obsidian, Zotero
	Automating records requests	MuckRock, proprietary tools
	Brainstorming story ideas	LLMs
Production	Dictation or transcription	Descript, Dictate, Gemini, Grain, Notta, Otter, Rev, Riverside
	Graphic design & image/audio/video editing	Adobe suite, Canva, CapCut, DaVinci, Figma, InShot, Lightroom

	Text editing	Grammarly, Wordtune, off-the-shelf LLMs, custom GPTs
	Programming	LLMs
	Sourcing images	Free image libraries (Unsplash, Wikimedia Commons, Flickr, Pexels)
Distribution	Web hosting, newsletter service & CMS	Wordpress, Substack, Ghost, Beehiiv
	Social media syncing & management	Publer, Zapier, RSS tools, N8N, Restream.io
Finances	Subscription management	Built into web or newsletter hosting for some; Campaign Monitor, Memberful, Stripe
	Accounting	Quickbooks
Integration & automation	Integration & automation	Zapier, N8N

While many use AI tools like LLMs for some tasks, they are not a primary resource.

While most of the interviewees use LLM tools at some stage of their process, almost none use them to produce content directly, with many gravitating towards specialized tools instead (see table above). At least eight indie info providers are actively opposed to the use of LLMs for content creation, and some of them avoid LLMs entirely. As one told us bluntly, *"I think that people should use their big brains, and you can put that in there."*

The Legacy Journalism Connection

One of the sharpest contrasts between legacy journalism and our interviewees is the absence of institutional support. Those who came from large newsrooms acutely feel the lack of editorial oversight and legal resources. Running a one-person operation makes it difficult to take time off or balance work with other priorities. Yet for some, going independent is less of a choice than a necessity as the U.S. journalism job market continues to contract and newsrooms — small and large — shutter or cut staff. That is, some indie info providers have found themselves on their own, whether they intended to be or not.

About this study

Why we did this

As of fall 2024, about one in five people in the United States get news from individuals rather than organizations. This trend is even more common among young people. It's one of the indicators that indie info providers — people who are working to provide verified factual information with a personality- or voice-driven brand that leverages the creator economy — are on the rise. This is partly due to the increasing use of platforms and technological tools that also make it easier to run a solo or small indie info provider business.

Featuring individual voices over institutional brands has been paying dividends in terms of both audience trust and the flexibility to try out different formats, tools and platforms. Legacy media is paying attention to this trend and newsrooms like The Washington Post and ESPN are now partnering with indie info providers.

Existing research on this trend is sparse and has largely focused on the broader landscape of content creators, including entertainers, politicians and other creators who do not necessarily focus on informing their audiences. Most research to date has focused on content sourcing and linking strategies. To enable a future for a plurality of fact-based sources that readers and viewers find relevant, our project sheds light on who indie info providers are, and how they approach their role in the broader news landscape.

How we collected our data

In partnership with Project C, CNTI recruited 43 adults in the U.S. to take a screening survey and chose 25 for a 60- to 90-minute virtual interview. (Project C is one of many U.S. networks supporting indie info providers. They have a large mailing list beyond their core network, which primarily serves former journalists building independent ventures. Other organizations in the space include the Tiny News Collective, News Creator Corps and the Evidence Collective.) CNTI selected interviewees to represent a range of professional backgrounds. This report is based primarily on insights from the interviews, with data from the survey as a secondary source. One additional interviewee was invited to participate later to provide a perspective that was missing among the original 25 people.

In keeping with Project C's focus, most interviewees are former journalists — but we prioritized interviewing people from non-journalism backgrounds, and we were able to interview science communicators, subject-matter experts and civic-minded community members without journalism experience. Throughout this report we call out contrasting examples that suggest larger differences between former journalists and indie info providers from other backgrounds. We also spotlight examples from indie info providers

outside our sample, where relevant to point to the broader diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

In interviews, we asked participants about their backgrounds and motivations, audience engagement, their relationships with other indie info providers and legacy news outlets, platforms and algorithms, revenue and business strategies, and their view of success and satisfaction with their own work.

We developed codes using a bottom-up and iterative approach as themes emerged through the analysis. Code categories largely reflected the range of interview topics as well as the addition of two broader themes: "freedom" and "small business owner." These methods provide richness and depth; however, it's not possible to generalize about the frequency of behaviors from these interactions, so we limit our use of quantitative terms to our interviewees throughout this report.

CNTI research and professional staff prepared this report. This project was made possible by the financial support of the Lenfest Institute and a second anonymous donor.

Recruitment

Using Project C's public mailing list, CNTI invited indie info providers to participate in a survey focusing on baseline information, such as background, audience size, revenue and platform choice. We used this information to determine eligibility for the interview.

Beyond ensuring that interviewees were focused on providing information (by reviewing their work), we took a maximum variation approach to several variables. We prioritized including those who do not identify as journalists and did not have a journalism background. We also attempted to capture perspectives across a broad range of audience size and revenue amount.

The full recruitment questionnaire and topline demographics of our interviewees are available here.

Interview protocol

Our research protocol included six semi-structured modules:

- Background and motivations for their indie info provider project, including prior professional experience and time spent on content creation.
- Audience engagement, including relationships with the audience and audience characteristics.
- Relationships with journalism producers, including newsrooms and other indie info providers.
- Platforms and algorithms, such as which platforms they use and why, content tailoring and performance, and issues with deletion and shadowbanning.

- Revenue and business strategies, including business plans and revenue streams.
- Success and happiness, including overall satisfaction with their indie info provider journey and project.

Researcher positionality

The researchers who designed the protocols, collected the data and analyzed the data are based in the United States. In addition to a relatively high educational attainment, our team as a whole has a strong affinity for and knowledge of journalism. These attitudes may have colored our interactions with the interviewees. All questionnaires and protocols for additional countries were reviewed and adapted with the support of local partners.

Transcription process

Interviews were conducted with Google Meet, and Google Gemini produced a first transcript. Researchers reviewed each transcript for major errors before coding, and all quotations that appear in this report were reviewed by a researcher before publication. Each transcript was anonymized before it was imported into Dedoose qualitative analysis software.

Coding and follow-up analysis

The codes were developed with a bottom-up approach as themes emerged in the data. The CNTI team's coding schema focused on the following nine categories:

Background: In this category, codes cover how creator journalists prepared for and entered the work, including the skills they needed, their professional backgrounds and how they set themselves up to succeed. We coded for their reasons for starting, whether they identify as journalists, how prior jobs shaped their readiness and how they acquired the skills they lacked.

Audience: Codes in this section examine the indie info providers' relationships with their audience. We coded for how they think about trust and credibility, how well they can describe who their audience is, how they interact with them and how the broader information environment shapes their content and engagement choices.

Challenges: Codes in this category cover challenges the indie info providers face throughout their projects, including financial pressures, time constraints and mental health struggles.

Technology tools: The codes in this category cover what technology tools indie info providers use to make their work easier.

Professional relationships: Codes that fall under this category cover what relationships the indie info provider had with others in this space and with legacy media. This included employees or contributors they work with on their project.

Platforms: This category examines the relationship between indie info providers and the platforms they use. Codes covered audience data ownership, content tailoring across platforms, variations in content engagement and experiences with content deletion or shadowbanning.

Revenue and business strategies: In this category, codes cover the business elements of the indie info provider's project. This includes their business plans, their revenue streams and if they were funded through other means, such as an unrelated job, savings or spousal income.

Success and happiness: Codes in this category focus on the creator's reflections on the project, such as their level of happiness, how they define success, and changes or different strategies they would use if they were to start the project over again.

Bottom-up themes: After the initial analysis, we added two categories. We were struck by how frequently participating indie info providers used the language of "freedom" and working as a "small business owner."

After all documents were coded, we reviewed all excerpts with the same code to inductively identify further themes and patterns within each larger category.

How we protected the research data

All identifying information (including consent forms and video recordings of interviews) were saved on a password-protected, encrypted cloud drive that is only authorized to the core research team at CNTI. All interviews were conducted using our team's video conferencing software. Google Gemini was used to create first-draft transcripts; our team uses a workspace account that does not share data or use it for training purposes. Interviewees could opt out of automated transcription, although none did.

Moreover, transcripts and screenshots were anonymized to the extent possible before export for analysis in Dedoose. Information like names and specific locations were redacted, as were photos of individual faces. We present demographic information only in the aggregate (see topline) to prevent anyone from identifying individuals who requested their participation in this project remain anonymous. All individuals acknowledged in this report gave express consent to be acknowledged.

Ethical review

Research plans were reviewed and approved by TERC Institutional Review Board.

Topline Data

Using Project C's membership mailing list, Project C and CNTI invited indie info providers to participate in a screening survey covering basic background information, audience size, revenue and platform choice. This survey also helped determine eligibility for follow up-interviews. In total, 61 adults took the survey, 43 of whom met the eligibility criteria. (Most who did not meet the criteria were neither U.S. based nor working for a primarily U.S. audience; one was a duplicate response.) Although this report draws primarily on insights from the interviews, the topline survey data is included below as a secondary source. Note that the total interviewed is 25 because one of the 26 interviewees did not take the survey.

Do you consider yourself a journalist? - Selected Choice

	Interviewed	Total surveyed
Yes	20	35
No	1	1
It's complicated	4	8
Total	25	43

When did you launch your content creation venture?

	Interviewed	Total surveyed
Before 2020	3	5
2020	2	4
2021	2	3
2022	2	4
2023	4	5
2024	5	9
January to June 2025	4	7
Since July 2025	3	6
Total	25	43

Approximately how many total followers do you have across platforms?

	Interviewed	Total surveyed
Less than 25k	18	28
25k-100k	2	8
100k-500k	4	4
500k-1 million	1	1
Over 1 million	0	1
Total	25	43

Are you able to support your lifestyle with your content creation work?

	Interviewed	Total
I am not trying to monetize my work	0	0
Not at all	12	23
Yes, partially	10	15
Yes, fully	3	5
Total	25	43

What is your gender? - Selected Choice

	Interviewed	Total surveyed
Woman	11	22
Man	13	20
Non-binary or gender-queer	1	1
Total	25	43

Participating Creators

In total, 43 U.S. indie info providers took our survey, and 26 of them participated in long-form interviews with CNTI. We offered the option of being named or remaining anonymous. Among the people who were interviewed, surveyed or both, 35 opted to be named and are listed below. We thank them and everyone we contacted for their involvement. This list also includes several additional indie info providers who filmed videos associated with this report.

Name	Publication	Topics (from the Independent Journalism Atlas)
Barbara "Bob" Allen	The College Journalism Newsletter	Politics, Government Accountability
Colin Alsheimer	Kineticist	Games/Gaming
Kaitlyn Arford	Kaitlyn Arford	N/A
Becky Beamer	Becky Beamer	General news, Weather
Ryan Teague Beckwith	Your First Byline	N/A
Matt Brown	Extra Points	Sports
Andrew Burmon	Upper Middle	N/A
Rachel Collier Carr	Good News with Rachel Collier	Local, Positive news
Yashica Dutt	YASHICA DUTT	N/A
Rivan Dwiastono	Rivan Dwiastono	N/A
Joseph Ferguson	Joseph Ferguson	General news, Internet culture
Andrew Gill	Rock that Doesn't Roll	History, Music, Faith/Religion, Culture
Terrill Haigler	Ya Fav Trashman	N/A
Kevin Hendricks	Kevin D. Hendricks	N/A

Chas Hundley	News in the Grove	Local news
Adam Hurly	Blue Print by Adam Hurly	N/A
Christopher Hutton	TTRPG Insider	Games/Gaming
Katelyn Jetelina	Your Local Epidemiologist	Health/Wellness
Rey Katz	Amplify Respect	LGBTQIA
Maureen Kelleher	Board Rule	Local, Government Accountability, Politics
Sam Kraft	Tri-Cities Central	Local News
Ulrike Langer	News Machines	Tech, Media/Power
Jo Ann Livingston	Waxahachie Sun	N/A
Taylor Lorenz	User Mag	Internet Culture
Lillian Enid Agosto Maldonado	Mundos Paralelos	N/A
Bruce Maples	Forward Kentucky	Politics, Local News
Elisabeth Marnik	The Evidence Collective	N/a
Joe Posner	Fire-Works Films	N/A
Emilie Raguso	The Berkeley Scanner	Crime, Local News
Hanna Raskin	The Food Section	Food, Local News
Huma Razvi	The Fifth	Media/Power, Politics, Government Accountability
Bryan Schott	Utah Political Watch	Politics, Local News
Joey Scott	Joey Scott	Investigative
Amber Sherman	The Law According To Amber	Identity/Belonging, Government Accountability, Explanatory
Drew Smith	DrewSmith Multimedia	N/A
Sam Spencer	Soccer Sheet	N/A

Kat Tenbarge	**Spitfire News**	Internet Culture
Michael Thrasher	**Modus News**	N/A