

TELLING OUR STORIES: LEVERAGING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL PRESS

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I. INTRODUCTION



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HOW IS LOCAL PRESS DIFFERENT?



- Let's start with a basic understanding of how local press differs from larger outlets:
 - **Community ties** – actual presence in your town, county or region
 - **Trust** – individuals and organizations you are more likely to trust
 - **Accessibility** – ease with which you can get an email response or get a local reporter on the phone

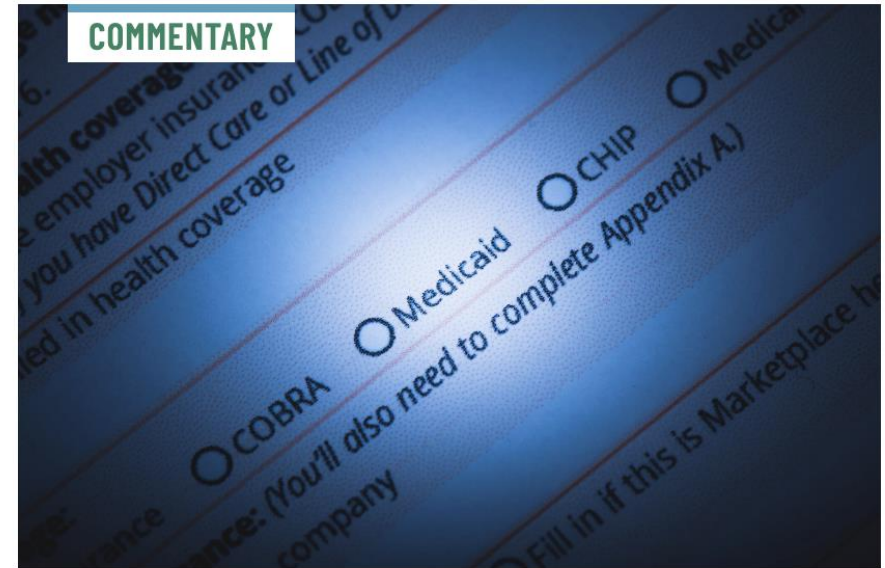
Americans Most Trusted Media

Transparency, unbiased reporting and ethical standards are the dominant drivers of trust in media

	<u>Most Trusted</u>
Local newspapers	51%
Local TV stations	51%
Local radio stations	49%
Network TV news	43%
National newspapers	36%
Cable news networks	36%
Social media	20%

II. THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

- Why does storytelling matter in advocacy and Independent Living (IL)?
- What are the key elements of a strong story?



Medicaid cuts threaten Idaho's seniors, people with disabilities, and families

BY: JEREMY MAXAND - February 26, 2025

Congressional leadership recently released a budget blueprint that includes massive cuts to Medicaid – some calling for as much as \$2 trillion – all to fund tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy and big corporations. For years, Congress has targeted key health programs like Medicaid for drastic budget reductions, and now they have the power to [...]

WHY STORIES MATTER IN ADVOCACY & INDEPENDENT LIVING

- Personal stories are the most persuasive advocacy tool we have in IL.
- Each of our own experiences with disability holds power in shaping public awareness and policy. This is why telling our stories effectively is critical.
- Without our stories, we are merely statistics for policymakers.



The latest Big Lie: waste, fraud and abuse in Medicaid, health care programs

BY: TARA ROWE - July 8, 2025

We find ourselves in an environment where The Big Lie has become a phrase applied to voter fraud, the 2020 presidential election and numerous other real and perceived political lies and disinformation. It is ubiquitous in modern American politics. As we watched the One Big, Beautiful Bill Act (H.R.1) move back and forth between the [...]

KEY ELEMENTS OF A STRONG STORY



- People-first language
- Focus on independence, dignity and solutions (not pity or inspiration porn).
- Connecting local impact to broader issues.



ACTIVITY: WHY INDEPENDENT LIVING MATTERS TO YOU AND IN YOUR COMMUNITY



- **Localize national issues.** Connect disability topics to what people in your area care about: schools, healthcare access, jobs or veterans.
- **Highlight solutions.** Rural media is often wary of stories that feel “negative.” Pair problems with practical solutions or successes. Avoid inspirational storylines.
- **Use people-first stories.** A local rancher, student or senior navigating accessibility challenges makes the issue tangible. Disability can happen to anyone at any time.
- **Emphasize shared values.** Independence, fairness, family, faith and community are often strong frames in rural journalism. What are the values of your community?

Turn to the person next to you and tell them in 3 minutes why independent living matters to you in your community.

III. UNDERSTANDING YOUR LOCAL PRESS



- Identifying press organizations in your local area.
- How the local press operates in rural areas.
- News deserts
- What reporters need.

What interactions have you had with your local press?



HOW THE LOCAL PRESS OPERATES IN RURAL AREAS



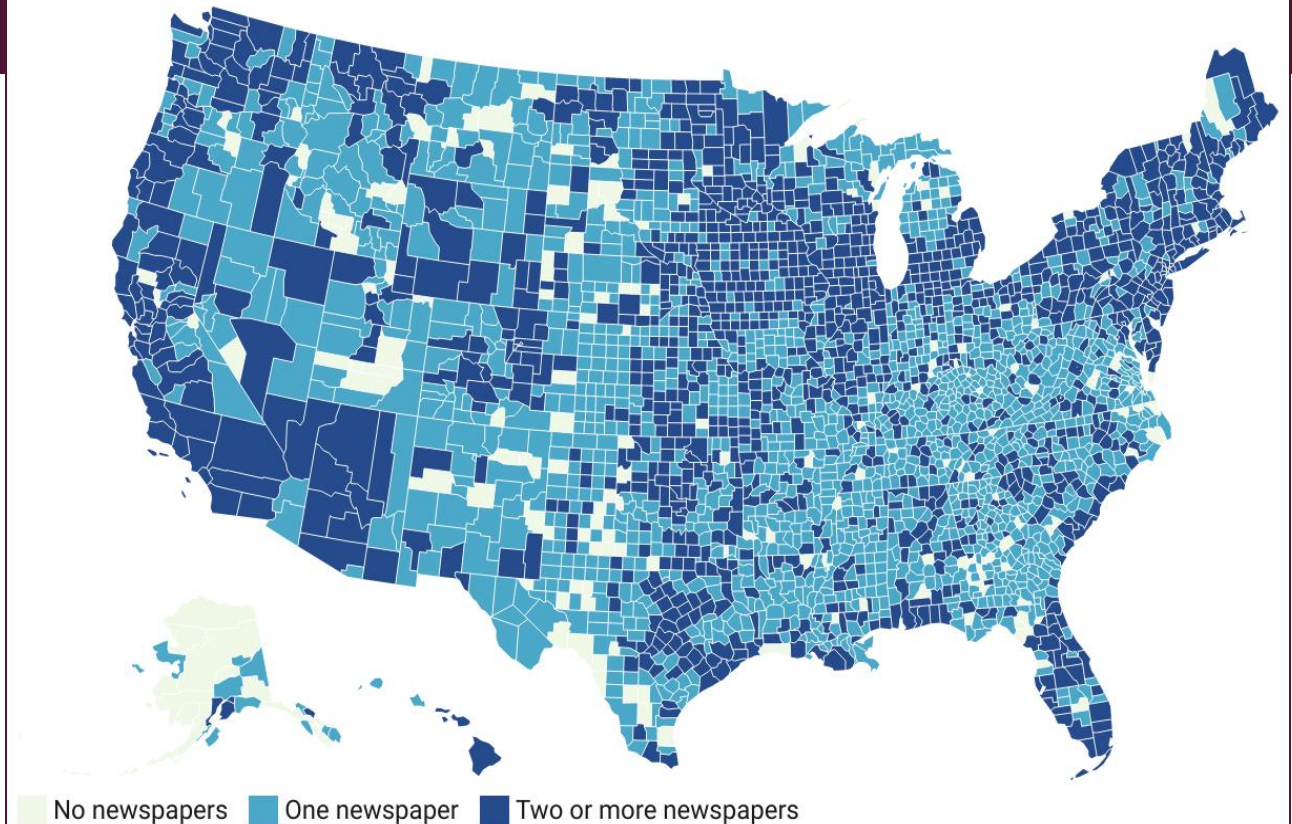
- Smaller staff, multiple roles—reporters rarely cover a single beat.
- Diverse formats.
- Community-focused: Relationships are long-term.
- Fewer outlets have a natural bias. How are your local press framing disability issues?
- Follow an outlet's reporting to determine any relevant bias.

NEWS DESERTS

- Rural areas are more likely to be news deserts.
- News deserts are typically areas that are without a daily newspaper.
- They can also be areas where over-the-air television and radio are scarce or non-existent

Do you have areas in your state that are news deserts?

How many newspapers are near you?



Mouseover or tap on the map to see how many newspapers are in each county. Zoom in and out with the +/- controls, or, on a touch screen, use two fingers to pinch or stretch.

Map: Medill Local News Initiative • Source: Local News Initiative Database • Created with Datawrapper

WHAT REPORTERS NEED



- Clear, concise pitches.
- Press releases.
- Accurate information.
- Awareness of deadlines.
- Human stories with local relevance.
- Education on people-first language.
- Offering to provide education to reporters in a format where they can ask questions that might be uncomfortable.



ACTIVITY: WHAT INTERACTIONS HAVE YOU HAD WITH YOUR LOCAL PRESS?

- **Model inclusion.** Provide alt text for photos you submit, captions for videos and use plain language.
- **Educate when needed.** Rural outlets may be less familiar with disability etiquette. If they slip up, politely guide them toward people-first and respectful language.
- **Be a consumer of news in your community.** What are reporters near you focusing on? Who are the reporters for your local outlets?

Take 15 minutes to research the outlets in your communities. Which of the outlets did you know about? Not know about? What has been your experience with the press in your community?

IV. BUILDING & SUSTAINING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS



Start before the crisis. Get to know local editors, reporters and radio hosts *before* you need coverage. Send a short intro email or drop by to introduce yourself and your work.

Think long-term. In rural areas, relationships matter more than one-time transactions.

Consistency and trust will get your stories told.

Personal connection. Emphasize local ties: “I live here,” “this affects our neighbors,” or “this is happening in the next county over.” Reporters in small towns want stories grounded in community.

BEST PRACTICES



- **Be concise.** Small outlets have limited space. Prepare a 2–3 sentence summary of your story.
- **Offer clear contacts.** Provide a single spokesperson and reliable phone/email. Return calls fast—deadlines are tight.
- **Write ready-to-use material.** Draft press releases in plain language, with short quotes reporters can lift directly.
- **Provide visuals.** Photos or short video clips are gold for rural papers and radio/TV.
- **Utilize all available tools.** Practice using a chatbot.

How do you write a press release?

Parts of a Press Release

Headline

Intro/Lead

Source

Essentials

Quotes

Anything else?

Contact Information

PRACTICAL TIPS

- **Know the outlet.** Press release for newspaper or short radio interview?
- **Be respectful of bandwidth.** Make your pitch easy to understand and quick to process.
- **Follow up gently.** A polite reminder if you don't hear back is fine, but don't overwhelm them.
- **Say thank you.** Publicly thank outlets that run your pitches or stories of interest to you. Letters to the editor or social media shoutouts strengthen relationships.
- **Think multiple formats.** Submit an op-ed, offer to do a radio call-in or pitch a human-interest profile.



ACTIVITY: DESIGN A PITCH FOR A STORY



- **Introduction**
 - Who are you and why should they care?
- **Explanation**
 - What is your role in the issue?
- **Unique Value**
 - What is unique about your story or perspective?
- **Call to Action**
 - What do you want to come out of you telling your story? **Remember advocacy means letting go of your story.**

PRACTICE: FROM STORY TO MEDIA HOOK



**How does your story become a pitch?
How do you turn a pitch into a media hook?**

VI. KEY TAKEAWAYS



- **Stories are power in advocacy.** Effective advocacy in Independent Living depends on telling authentic, well-framed personal stories and cultivating strong, trust-based relationships with local press outlets.
- **Frame for community values.** Local press outlets are not like state or national news outlets. They want to know how your story is important to the community in which you live.
- **Remember that advocacy means letting go of your story.** When you choose to tell your story, it is out of your hands once told to a member of the press.
- **Relationships are key.** Develop relationships with the local press before the crisis.
- **Reporters need usable content.** If you can summarize your story for the press, it will have a better chance of receiving attention.

Questions?