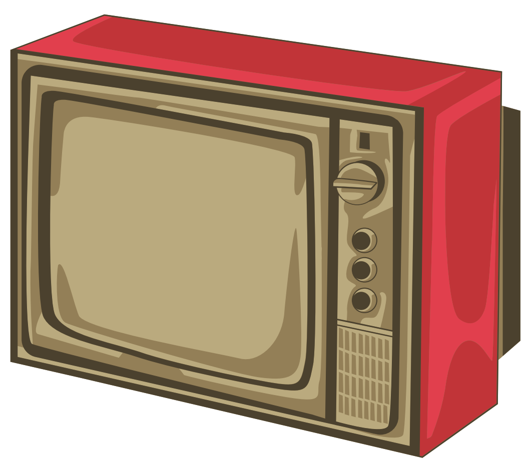
Leaving legacy behind

Employment trends in the media industry



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Employment trends in the media industry

In 2022, only 43% of news analysts, reporters and journalists were employed by a newspaper, TV station or radio station. The number is expected to fall to 39% over the next 10 years, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the news analysts, reporters and journalists occupation as to "narrate or write news stories, reviews, or commentary for print, broadcast, or other communications media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, or television." Fewer than half of workers in the occupation are employed by a legacy industry: newspapers, TV and radio.

In some ways, the figure isn't surprising — analysis from the Pew Research Center found circulation of weekday newspapers has dropped from 55 million in 2002 to 20 million in 2022. Additional Pew Research analysis shows a drop in revenue for news radio stations and declining viewership for local television news programs.

43% **Percentage of news analysts, reporters and journalists working for newspapers, radio or television in 2022.**

Consumers have been shifting their news consumption habits for years, but now journalists are following suit by shifting where and how they report. Three core legacy media industries: newspaper, television and radio, have long dominated the news market. But in the digital age, that's changing. Many reporters are leaving legacy media behind to become self-employed or work for a digital-first or nonprofit media company.

Disruption for legacy media

All industries face disruption, but change in the media industry has reached a fever pitch. The advent of the internet, mobile technology and social media has transformed the way people consume the news, and economic challenges, like decline in advertising revenue, have altered the ways newsrooms operate.

Rick Edmonds, the media business analyst at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and has studied the news business for 20 years. He said while change is a part of all industry development, we're reaching "peak disruption" for the media industry.

"The troubles for legacy media have mounted," Edmonds said, citing the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing number of subscription options for entertainment.

COVID-19 and the economic uncertainty that came with it exacerbated problems for the media industry. In 2020, The New York Times reported that an estimated 37,000 newsroom employees in the United States were laid off, furloughed or took pay cuts as a result of the pandemic.

The pandemic also impacted the way people consume their news. With less disposable income, some consumers stopped paying for news subscriptions. A 2021 survey from Nieman Lab found that about 31% of news consumers canceled a subscription because of costs. But saving money wasn't the only driving force — about 30% of respondents said they canceled a subscription due to "ideology or politics."

With legacy media outlets facing economic uncertainty, employment is falling. The newspaper publishing industry is expected to lose 19% of its workforce by 2032, according to BLS data. Radio is expected to lose nearly 18%.

Projected change in workforce size, 2022-2032

The total employment of newspaper publishers, television broadcasters and radio broadcasters is expected to decrease over the next 10 years. The media streaming industry's workforce is projected to grow.

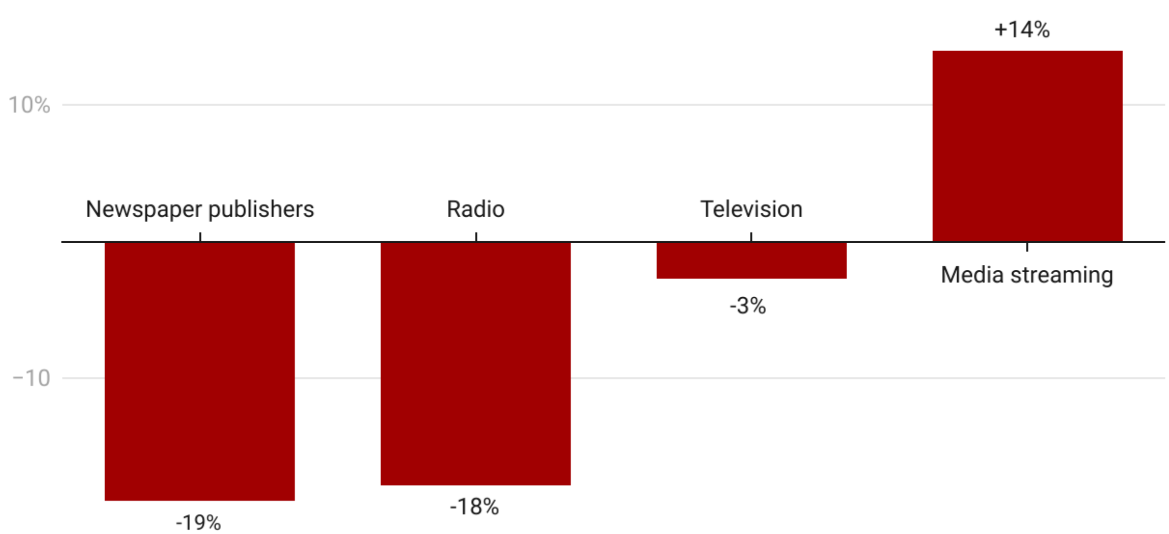


Chart: Erin Kenney • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

Television is the most steady of the three legacy industries — it's only projected to lose 3% of its workforce over the next 10 years. Edmonds said local television stations have been kept afloat by payments from cable systems to carry networks like CBS, NBC and ABC. Political advertising has also been a vital source of funding for local television. A [September 2023 article from Bloomberg] reported that $10.2 billion will be spent on advertising in the 2024 election cycle, with half of that sum going to local television stations.

As the TV industry remains steady, it's projected to hire more employees in several occupations, according to BLS data. Over the next 10 years, television stations are projected to take on 22% more data scientists, 12% more software developers, and 7% more camera operators and video editors.

Although the newspaper industry is projected to lose a bigger percentage of its workforce, it is also projected to hire more data scientists — 3% more by 2032. Overall, however, jobs for news analysts, reporters and journalists are projected to decrease in all three legacy industries over the next 10 years. Some journalists are leaving traditional jobs altogether, opting for self-employment instead.

Going freelance

Almost 25% of news analysts, reporters, and journalists are self-employed, according to the BLS. Stacie Overton Johnson, chair for the Society of Professional Journalists Freelance Community, said the number of journalists doing freelance work is probably much higher.

"I actually am surprised that (the number of self-employed journalists) is that low," she said. "It is surely going to skyrocket in the next couple of years."

The number of self-employed workers in the journalism industry could be much higher. The 25% of self-employed news analysts, reporters, and journalists doesn't include photographers, writers and editors who work in the journalism industry. Those statistics would be captured in their respective occupation categories — 68% of photographers are self-employed, for example, but it's impossible to know what percentage are photojournalists compared to wedding photographers.

Overton Johnson, who also works as a freelance television producer, said the pandemic transformed the way many journalists view freelance work.

"Newsrooms around the world realized, we do not need you in the office every day, we do not need you to come in here every day and show up," she said. "So that means you can live in Orlando, Florida, and write for a magazine that's out of Indiana."

As much as the internet and social media changed legacy media, they also changed the freelance landscape, she said. Although many freelance journalists work for legacy outlets, Overton Johnson said a large number also find work with smaller, niche publications.

Many online-only publications have small staffs and source a majority of work with freelancers. Social media has transformed the way writers are able to connect with and pitch to editors, as well as with one another. Editors can post calls for pitches directly on social media platforms like X and receive engagement from hundreds of writers. Groups like the SPJ Freelance Community also provide resources and support to freelancers through email newsletters, video calls and social media groups.

25% **Percentage of self-employed journalists in 2022.**

In addition to taking work at established publications, many self-employed journalists also produce journalism independently in the form of newsletters, podcasts and YouTube channels. Overton Johnson, who's been freelancing since 2005, said that although she doesn't self-publish any of her work, she knows journalists who do.

"There's a lot of people who do that, and they do that sometimes just to get their stories out there, their name out there … just to kind of hone their craft," she said.

The overall increase in journalists taking on freelance work also increases competition in the space, Overton Johnson said. She said the biggest challenge for freelancers will probably always be pitching stories and finding work.

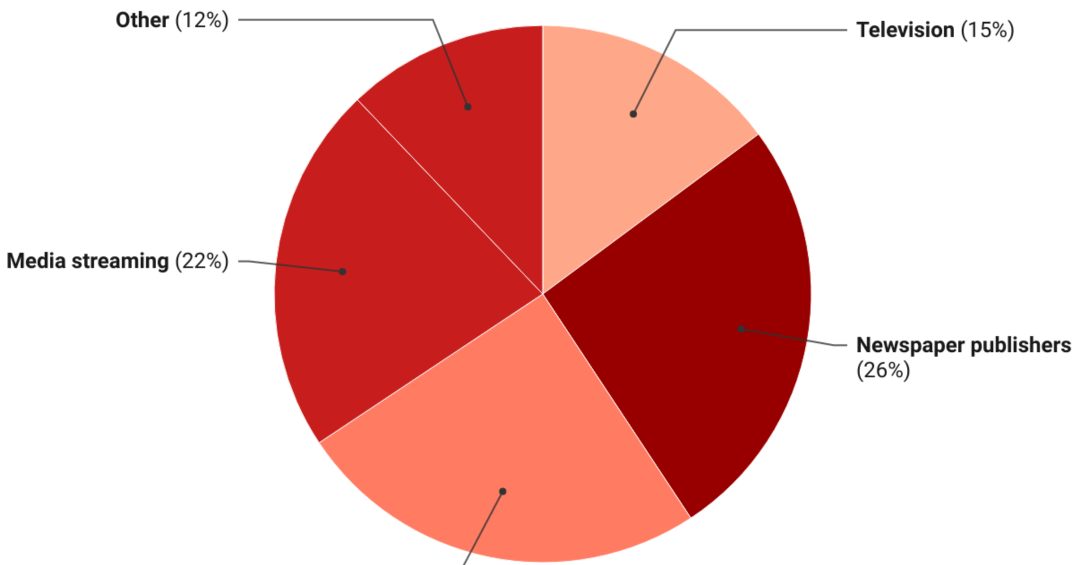
"I think people might look at that as a negative. You're kind of always chasing work," she said. "There's a thrill in that too. And I think that there's a little bit of an adventurous spirit you have to have as a freelancer."

Digital first and nonprofit news

Outside of legacy industries and self-employment, journalists are finding work in industries ranging from higher education to spectator sports. But one industry employing a significant chunk of the occupation is what the BLS calls "Media streaming distribution services, social networks, and other media networks and content providers." This industry employs 22% of the news analysts, reporters, and journalists occupation — more than television and radio broadcasting combined.

Employment of news analysts, reporters and journalists across media industry

Television broadcasters, radio broadcasters and newspaper publishers employ 43% of news analysts, reporters and journalists, according to the BLS. Around 25% of the occupation is self-employed, 22% work in digital media and the remainder are spread across other industries.



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This category is a catch-all for digital media, and can include platforms like internet blogs, newspaper feature syndicates and some TV and radio networks, according to highergov.com. Some of the biggest companies in this category include Netflix, Warner Media, and NBC Universal, according to the NAICS Association, which analyzes data based on NAICS (North American Industry Classification) codes.

In addition to more journalists finding employment in new media industries, many are also finding roles in nonprofit newsrooms. The nonprofit media sector has exploded over the last 10 years, in large part due to the support of foundations and individual donors. While some large foundations, like the Knight Foundation, have always been journalism-oriented, Edmonds said there's been a big shift with smaller foundations and individual donors giving to media outlets.

"Even individual family foundation donors have become much more willing to put local media on their radar than they used to be," Edmonds said. "It wasn't taboo or anything, that just wasn't where the interests of the family foundations were. They were mainly healthcare, welfare causes, education, etc."

The Institute for Nonprofit News is a network of over 425 nonprofit news outlets which produces an annual report, the INN Index, to track changes in revenue, staffing and diversity of its member organizations.

In 2022, donations from foundations and individual donors accounted for over 70% of revenue for local INN outlets. The figure is even higher for regional and national outlets, according to the 2023 INN Index. Revenue for nonprofit news is increasing. The median revenue for INN newsrooms was about $475,000, up from $370,000 the previous year.

The revenue growth for nonprofits also gives the sector the ability to employ more journalists. The INN Index for 2023 found an estimated 15% growth in employment for its nonprofit news members (this figure is for total employment, including non-editorial staff). The institute said the number "is generally in line with the rate of growth in field-wide revenue as well as the number of new entrants into the INN fold."

The growth in the nonprofit news sector is a good sign for the industry, Edmonds said, and it's not the only one. Even though employment across varying media industries seems dire, the news analysts, reporters and journalists occupation is only projected to decrease by 3% over the next 10 years. Employment for writers and editors (though not explicitly working in journalism) is also expected to hold steady, increasing by 1% between now and 2032. The media streaming industry as a whole is expected to grow by 14%. For Edmonds, the most hopeful sign of all is the number of people who still value good journalism.

"There are an awful lot of people still coming to work and doing their job and doing good journalism," Edmonds said. "They're still out there doing quite a lot of good work."