

NEACE NORTHEAST MEDIA CONFERENCE · APRIL 27, 2026

BUILDING FOR 2030

How regional news survives the next inflection point

Matt Karolian · VP of Platforms & AI, Boston Globe Media

CONTEXT

Matt Karolian

VP of Platforms, R&D · Boston Globe Media · 2017 Nieman Fellow, Harvard

2016 + 2017

Predicted AI would transform how journalism is made and distributed. Went to Harvard as a Nieman Fellow specifically to study it. ChatGPT launched in 2022. Tragically early.

2021

Predicted the news creator economy was about to arrive. In 2025, Dave Jorgenson left the Washington Post and views on WaPo's channel collapsed 85%. Tragically early.

2019

Applied the AI insight to a harder question: what should journalism actually look like if it's not paper? Ted Nelson asked the same thing about computers in 1974. We still haven't answered it.

I'm not telling you this to brag. All three of those threads are colliding right now. That's what this talk is about.

THE PROBLEM

Every major channel that sent audiences to news organizations is in structural decline.

38%

Drop in Google Search referrals
to US publishers
Nov 2024 to Nov 2025

Chartbeat / Reuters Institute

43%

Drop in Facebook referrals
to news sites
over three years

Reuters Institute, Jan 2026

46%

Drop in X / Twitter referrals
to news sites
over three years

Reuters Institute, Jan 2026

This is not an algorithm hiccup. It is the structural collapse of the referral economy regional news was built on.

Three forces — all structural, all measurable

01

Search is becoming the answer

Only 360 of every 1,000 U.S. Google searches reach the open web. When AI Overviews appear, click-through rates drop 34.5%. One publisher held a page-one ranking while CTR fell from 5.1% to 0.6%. Rankings no longer equal traffic.

02

Your size determines how hard this hits

Small publishers lost 60% of search referrals over two years. Mid-sized: 47%. Large: 22%. The collapse is fastest for exactly the publishers who can least afford it.

03

AI chatbots are not filling the gap

ChatGPT referrals grew 200% in 2025 and still account for less than 1% of all publisher pageviews. It is nowhere close to replacing what search lost.

EXAMPLE: AI Overview eating a local news search result

[Side-by-side: BEFORE = blue links to publisher sites / AFTER = AI Overview with answer, publisher names reduced to footnote, zero clicks]

The reader got exactly what they needed. Your reporter wrote the story. You got zero traffic.

THE FORECAST

Publishers expect
search to fall
another 43%
by 2029.

1 in 5 expects losses above 75%.

Reuters Institute survey of 280 media executives across 51 countries, January 2026

THE COLLISION

But AI is only half the story.

AI is eating the top of the funnel.

The best talent is walking out the bottom.

And the two forces are connected.

The more noise AI floods into the system, the more audiences migrate toward specific trusted voices. That dynamic does not favor institutions. It favors individuals with credibility and a direct relationship with their audience.

In 2016 I predicted AI would disrupt the discovery layer. In 2021 I predicted talent would disrupt the loyalty layer. Both arrived in 2026. Same underlying force. Different surfaces.

The 2021 prediction is playing out exactly as described.

THE DAVE JORGENSEN CASE

WaPo ran two YouTube channels simultaneously. Dave's team generated 75.5x more engagement per video than the WaPo flagship — while the flagship was producing 6x more content. When Dave left in August 2025, channel views collapsed from 54 million a month to 8.2 million by September.

An 85% collapse. The audience didn't stay with the institution. It left with the person.

5M+

Paid subscriptions on Substack

Larger than WSJ or WaPo subscription brands

50K

Journalists now on Substack

Including Acosta, Joy Reid, Dan Rather

100

Average paid subscribers

Power law. Most don't make it.

But the creator economy follows a power law. Most journalists who go independent lack legal protection, healthcare, and the resources for sustained investigative work. That's where institutions still have something no solo creator can replicate. The question is whether you know how to use it.

WHY INSTITUTIONS STILL MATTER

In a world flooded with AI-generated content, trust is the scarce resource. Regional publishers have more of it than they realize.

30%

of Americans trust
news in general

Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025

vs.

55%

of Americans trust regional
& local newspapers specifically

Mizzou School of Journalism / Reuters Institute 2025

Trust in local news is nearly double the industry average. That asymmetry is your answer to both sides of the squeeze.

THE REAL PROBLEM UNDERNEATH ALL OF THIS

The industry has been building the wrong thing for 30 years.

TED NELSON · COMPUTER LIB · 1974

"People sit at computer screens and think they're working with paper. This paper paradigm permeates today's computer world. The notion of paper is one of the things most holding back human progress."

JOURNALISM'S PAPER PROBLEM · 2019

"We still think about news the way we did in 1989. We write, we publish, and people read. This isn't a digital revolution. It is simply printing to pixels instead of paper."

Matt Karolian, Boston Globe, 2019

THE DISTINCTION THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

The article is not the journalism. The reporting is.

WHAT AI DISRUPTS

The container.

The 800-word inverted pyramid. The homepage. The section front. The "digital first" strategy that was really just printing to pixels. Commodity aggregation. Rewrites. Service journalism that any AI can produce for free.

None of that was ever really journalism. It was the wrapper journalism came in. And the wrapper is gone.

WHAT AI CANNOT TOUCH

The signal.

Original reporting. Physical presence. A reporter who's covered the statehouse for 20 years and whose sources call her first. Investigative courage — the willingness to publish what powerful people don't want published. Editorial accountability. A distinctive voice that readers subscribe to specifically.

The signal is what has always mattered. It just became more valuable when AI flooded the zone with noise.

HERE'S WHAT I MEAN

EXAMPLE: Same journalism. Two containers.

[Left: Traditional article — "City Council Approves 40-Unit Development in Jamaica Plain" / Right: Push notification — "Your neighbourhood: 2 blocks away. Your councilmember voted YES. Construction starts Q3."]

The reader has to find the article. The experience finds the reader.

THE ANSWER

*Everyone else is using AI
to produce content.*

**We are using AI
to deliver the signal.
That is the difference.**

Readers

→ **Users**

You don't just read a map. You use it. News should work the same way for hard information that touches people's lives.

Articles

→ **Experiences**

Personalized briefings. Adaptive story tracking. Conversational Q&A. Hyperlocal alerts. Audio for the commute. The signal, in the format the reader actually asked for.

Traffic

→ **Relationships**

"AI should garden relationships, not frack them."
The signal builds trust. Trust builds loyalty. Loyalty builds a business.

THIS ISN'T THEORETICAL

EXAMPLE: Small newsrooms doing this now

[ARLNow — daily newsletter they couldn't staff / The Current — hours of SEO work gone / Toronto outlet — \$80K in grants, 4 hours instead of 40]

None of these required a large engineering team. All of them were built by publishers who decided to stop waiting.

AI doesn't replace reporters. It scales what reporters can do.

"The reporting is the spark and the fuel. AI is the engine that moves the signal further and faster than any previous distribution technology."

CAPACITY

One reporter, one records request, one day → **One reporter, AI-assisted research, five investigations**

The investigative instinct is still human. The volume of ground that instinct covers is multiplied.

REACH

One statehouse reporter, one beat → **One reporter, AI monitoring every school board in the region**

The reporter still makes the judgment call. AI watches more feeds, flags more anomalies, surfaces what matters.

SIGNAL

One story, one format, one audience → **One story, every format, every reader's context**

The reporter breaks the MBTA story. AI delivers it as audio for the commuter, surfaces the local angle for the Dorchester resident.

SO WHAT DO YOU DO?

The Globe has been working through this in real time. Here's what we've learned.

We have more resources than most of this room.

The gap is closing faster than you think.

Agentic coding tools now let a small team with product instincts build what used to require a full engineering org. 25% of Y Combinator's 2025 batch had codebases that were 95% AI-generated. The resource advantage large publishers had in product development is being equalized. What can't be equalized is your community relationships, your source trust, your 40 years of institutional credibility. That's the signal. And now anyone can build the delivery mechanisms around it.

Four principles — all flowing from the same idea

01

Organize around what only humans can do

Trust. Editorial judgment. Source relationships. Investigative courage. AI handles production, research, and delivery. This is not a cost-cutting strategy. It is a clarity strategy about where the signal actually comes from.

02

Build direct paths between signal and reader

Newsletter, app, Apple News+, audio. Every decision evaluated against one question: does this deepen a relationship we own, or one a platform owns? If you can't reach your readers without Google, you don't have readers.

03

Use AI to amplify the signal, not simulate it

67% of publishers cut no jobs from AI. 9% added jobs. We use AI for metadata, transcription, summarization, and delivery — freeing journalists to produce the signal that builds the trust the data shows you already have.

04

Stop building containers. Build experiences.

Not every story needs to be an article. A briefing. A conversation. A push alert. An audio stream. The signal delivered in the format the reader actually asked for. That's the 2019 question finally being answered.

Four decisions. All of them flow from the same idea.

01

Know your signal

What does your organization produce that AI cannot? What local knowledge, source trust, community presence is yours alone? If you don't know the answer, finding it is your most important project right now.

02

Stop protecting the container

Lifestyle content, service journalism, aggregation. AI produces those. Let them go. Redirect every resource toward the reporting, relationships, and accountability work that only humans can do.

03

Build direct paths to your audience

What percentage of your readers can you reach without a platform? Email, app, SMS, audio. If it's low, that's your entire strategy. The signal needs a path to the reader that you own.

04

Ship one thing built for the reader, not the container

Pick one experience — a briefing, a Q&A tool, a neighborhood alert system. Get it into production. Learn from it. The window where this still matters is finite.

*The reporting is irreplaceable.
The container was never the point.*

**The future of regional journalism
isn't determined by traffic.**

It's determined by trust.

*You have the signal. You have the trust. You have the community relationships no AI can replicate.
Now stop printing to pixels. Build around what actually matters.*

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Q&A

Questions worth being ready for:

- How do you talk to editorial skeptics about AI?
- What is the actual ROI?
- Are jobs at risk?
- How does a small regional paper do this without Globe resources?
- Should we be working with independent creators rather than competing with them?

SOURCES & REFERENCES

Click any link to open the primary source

[Reuters Institute — Trends & Predictions 2026 \(main page\)](#)

Google -38%, Facebook -43%, X -46%, 43% forecast, 67% no jobs cut

[Reuters Institute 2026 — Full PDF](#)

Complete Chartbeat charts and publisher survey breakdowns

[Pew Research — AI Overviews CTR Study](#)

8% CTR with AI Overviews vs 15% without — 68,879 real searches, March 2025

[Axios / Chartbeat — Small Publishers Hit Hardest \(March 2026\)](#)

Small -60%, mid-sized -47%, large -22% over two years

[TechCrunch — YC Startups and AI-Generated Codebases](#)

25% of Y Combinator W25 batch had codebases 95%+ AI-generated

[Mkarolian.substack.com — Can WaPo Make It Without Dave?](#)

75.5x engagement per video; source data for WaPo Universe analysis

[Mkarolian.substack.com — WaPo Without Dave: The Data Is In](#)

85% collapse in views: 54M/month to 8.2M after Jorgenson left

[INMA — Substack and the Journalist Creator Economy](#)

5M+ paid subscriptions, 50K journalists, average 100 paid subscribers

[Reuters Institute — Digital News Report 2025](#)

30% general trust vs 55% local/regional; 62% comfortable with human+AI

[Nieman Lab — Media 3.0: The News Creator Economy Arrives \(2021\)](#)

Matt's 2022 prediction: audiences of journalists = biggest unrealized value online

[Nieman Lab — AI Improves Publishing \(2016\)](#)

Matt's 2016 prediction on AI's impact — published 6 years before ChatGPT