



The Next Generation of Local News

2025
Impact Report

Cover Philadelphia-based independent news creator Mejire Arijaje sets up his camera to film content for Lenfest's Every Voice, Every Vote civic news coalition. Photo by Hannah Yoon.



1. Lenfest AI Fellows at a convening at Microsoft's headquarters in Seattle. Photo courtesy of Microsoft. 2. Attendees at the Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit. Photo by Derrick Dow. 3. Monique Curry-Mims of Generocity speaks at the Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange graduation. Photo by Zamani Feelings. 4. Leaders from across the news industry at the Local News Summit in New Orleans.

Dear Friends,

When I first met the late H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, a pragmatic but visionary cable TV entrepreneur, I had to remind myself that this soft-spoken 85-year-old had helped usher in two of the great disruptions in the history of news and media: the advent of multi-channel television and ubiquitous broadband access to American homes.

The Lenfest Institute for Journalism was founded a decade ago to raise and deploy capital and advice to help local journalism survive and thrive. Gerry's original name for his Institute was prescient: The Institute for Journalism in New Media. Back in 2016, I and others felt that was too much of a mouthful. I explained to Gerry that the phrase "new media" was old-fashioned, a creature of the 1990s and no longer new. I was wrong.

The concept was — and remains — that journalism must always be new, and that independent local news should be positioned to thrive however technology and consumer habits evolve. Gerry believed that the future of our business must be enabled, rather than hobbled, by new media. That notion will be profoundly tested in 2026 and beyond.

This 2025 Impact Report details how the Institute is working to catalyze experimentation and invest in the next generation of local news. The report includes updates on our work in the use of AI to help local news organizations, our investments in a new generation of news creators reaching new audiences, and our enduring commitment to support the digital transformation of America's best-established local newspapers, like The Philadelphia Inquirer, and the democracy they serve.

The Institute has become a national leader in innovation, working at scale in artificial intelligence through the Lenfest AI Collaborative and Fellowship Program. Created in partnership with OpenAI and Microsoft, this \$10 million program empowers local news organizations to use AI to drive business sustainability and innovation.

Through in-person conferences, training and advisory services, professional communities of practice, and self-service learning tools, the Institute facilitated thousands of connections between news professionals to share best practices on our core focus areas: news revenue generation, audience development, and product development. I am proud to report that The Lenfest Institute is now America's largest provider of pro-bono advisory services to the local news industry, working with hundreds of news organizations and thousands of news professionals nationwide.

And as we look ahead to 2026 — the Institute's 10th anniversary — we plan to deepen our commitment to advancing innovation in local news and to working at greater scale and impact, building on the progress we've made together over the past decade.

Thanks for your continued support of The Lenfest Institute.

Best,

Jim Friedlich
Executive Director & CEO
The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

“We must meet our readers where they are — and where they are going in the future.”

— H.F. "GERRY" LENFEST

2025



This impact report details how your support made our work possible. We're grateful for your partnership, and we look forward to our continued work together in 2026 and beyond.



Artificial Intelligence and New Technology

In 2025, The Lenfest Institute expanded the Lenfest AI Collaborative and Fellowship Program in partnership with OpenAI and Microsoft. The initiative helps local news publishers invent new ways for artificial intelligence to drive business sustainability and innovation. The Lenfest AI Collaborative is now the largest AI fellowship in American journalism.



Participating publishers include:

- The Baltimore Banner
- Boston Globe Media
- Chicago Public Media
- The Dallas Morning News
- The Minnesota Star Tribune
- Newsday (Long Island)
- NEWSWELL at Arizona State University
- The Philadelphia Inquirer
- ProPublica
- The Seattle Times

Each publisher received a grant to hire a two-year AI engineering fellow to pursue projects that focus largely on improving business sustainability and implementing AI technologies within their organizations. The fellowship also provides OpenAI and Microsoft software and cloud storage credits to help the publications experiment and develop tools to advance their business goals.

As part of the program, the news organizations work collaboratively with each other and the broader news industry to share leanings, software code, product developments, case studies, and technical information needed to help replicate their work in other newsrooms. The Lenfest AI Collaborative hosted four in-person convenings in 2025 for its members and presented at several conferences across the country, including the Online News Association Conference, the News Product Alliance Summit, and the Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit.

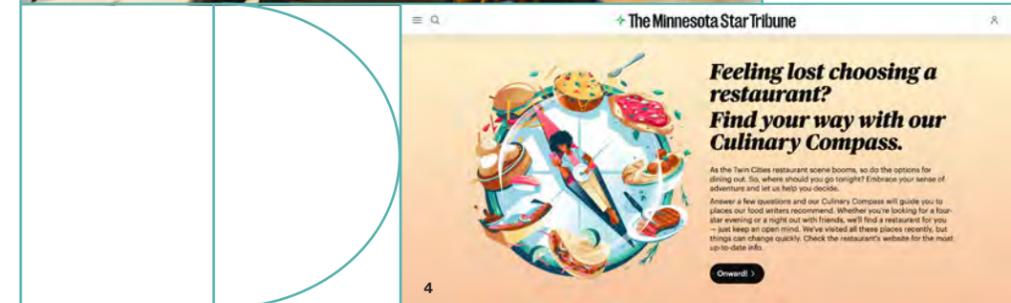
In addition to publishing recommendations on AI policy and hiring practices that other news organizations can learn from, the fellows have begun sharing the results from several of their experiments along with open-source code that other newsrooms can adopt.

Here are some of the tools and experiments participating publishers have created to apply AI technology to newsroom and business functions:

The Philadelphia Inquirer – Archive research assistant

Long-established news organizations often have decades, or even centuries, of news archives, but often in different, disconnected digital and physical formats or locations. To streamline the background research process for its reporters, The Philadelphia Inquirer collaborated with Microsoft in a two-week hackathon to develop

1. The team from The Seattle Times gives a presentation to Lenfest AI Fellows. Photo courtesy of Microsoft. 2. Lenfest AI Fellows work alongside Microsoft developers at the company's headquarters in Seattle. Photo courtesy of Microsoft. 3. The Lenfest AI Fellows speak on a panel. Photo courtesy of Microsoft. 4. The Minnesota Star Tribune launches its AI-powered "Culinary Compass" to deepen reader engagement. Courtesy of the Star Tribune.



an AI-driven "research assistant" that can pore through thousands of articles in its news archives in seconds. The goal was not to replace reporters' judgment in conducting research for their stories, but to free them from hours of tedious searching, allowing them to spend more time in the field and crafting their stories. The new research product, code named "Dewey," is in active use today at The Inquirer, and its software architecture will be shared widely for other news organizations to use.

The Seattle Times – Ad sales prospect research tool

Local advertising sales teams face a common challenge: limited capacity to identify and qualify new sales prospects. With sales teams having to split their time between prospect research and making connections in the field, high-value opportunities often remain untapped.

The Seattle Times developed a generative AI "prospecting agent" that automates prospecting tasks by researching potential advertisers, categorizing leads, and preparing background intelligence for sales reps. The tool

has reduced prospecting time from hours to minutes and is already yielding results: Soon after rollout, a Seattle Times sales rep used the tool to spot a nontraditional prospect, leading to a direct sale.

The Minnesota Star-Tribune – AI-powered restaurant guide

Restaurant reviews drive a significant amount of digital audience for The Minnesota Star Tribune, but readers were looking for a more efficient way of navigating the region's food scene across dozens of neighborhoods, cuisines, and preferences that aren't captured in traditional reviews. The newsroom created Culinary Compass, a long-term, interactive restaurant guide that could make food and culture coverage more searchable and evergreen. Through AI, The Star-Tribune moved beyond static restaurant lists toward an interactive quiz format and an attribute-driven database. After its initial success rolling out the tool to its audience, the team is exploring how a similar tool could extend to other lifestyle topics beyond food including high-school sports, live events, and breaking news.

Collaboration and Connection



At the Lenfest Institute, we're firm believers in the power of collaboration and connection. In addition to free webinars hosted every month by the Lenfest Communities of Practice, the Institute hosted and participated in convenings across the country to share lessons and best practices.

“We didn’t just attend a Summit – we experienced a moment of clarity.”

Monica Pirela, Founder and CEO, NotiVisión Georgia

1. WURD Radio President and CEO Sara Lomax joins The Lenfest Institute for a fireside chat at the Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit. Photo by Derrick Dow. 2. Andrew Fitzgerald of Hearst Media speaks to Local News Summit attendees in New Orleans. 3. Journalism fundraisers from across the country meet for the first time at the Lenfest News Philanthropy Summit. Photo by Hannah Yoon. 4. Members of the Lenfest Audience Community at the Online News Association Conference. Photo courtesy of Meena Thiruvengadam.



The Local News Summit

In partnership with The Aspen Institute, The Lenfest Institute brought together 100 local news leaders in New Orleans in January for the fourth annual Local News Summit. Summit participants — from large urban news enterprises and small rural outlets; for-profit, nonprofit, and public media; academia; and technology — discussed a broad array of strategies for protecting and advancing fact-based news.

The Local News Summit, now established as the leading national event of its kind in American local journalism, covered three overlapping topics: the revitalization of news through platforms reaching larger, younger audiences; the urgent legal, regulatory, and systemic threats to the business and practice of independent journalism; and the challenges to American consumer trust in news media.

For the first time, The Lenfest and Aspen Institutes welcomed more than a dozen independent young news creators and entrepreneurs to the Summit.

These individuals brought a fresh perspective to the news leaders in the Summit, as their work reaches vast audiences on TikTok, YouTube, Substack, and other platforms where the public increasingly seeks and finds news.

The Lenfest News Philanthropy Summit

News philanthropy — with more than \$1 billion now invested in the field — has become an important force in the world of journalism thanks in part to The Lenfest Institute.

As we continue to build the field of news philanthropy, The Lenfest Institute partnered with the leading local news coalition, Press Forward, to convene more than 350 news fundraisers from across the country for the 2025 Lenfest News Philanthropy Summit in Philadelphia. The event, hosted in-person for the first time in May, is the first and largest convening dedicated solely to providing

learning opportunities for journalism fundraising and development professionals.

The convening is part of the Lenfest News Philanthropy Network, a community of practice for news fundraisers with 4,000 members worldwide.

The two days of hands-on workshops and inspirational keynote speakers were designed to help fundraisers craft meaningful value propositions, build relationships with donors, leverage newsroom staff and events for fundraising, and more. The lessons from the event had immediate, tangible impacts: At the closing session of the event, one attendee shared that the lessons she learned over the course of the Summit helped her secure a major gift from a donor earlier that day.

The Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit

Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing news media industry and growing threats to the independent press, local news trailblazers, innovators, and researchers came together at the fourth Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit in June to discuss strategies for building organizations that can serve communities for years to come.

Philadelphia's vibrant news ecosystem is a workshop for local news trends that can be implemented across the country. At this year's Summit, The Lenfest Institute brought together 150 journalists, publishers, leaders, and funders from Philadelphia and beyond to discuss solutions for news enterprises to enhance their digital transformation, meet audiences across new platforms, and empower the next generation of journalists.

“The research, panel discussions, and lightning talks collectively highlight the fact that journalism in Philadelphia and across the country is in a perpetual state of reimagining and evolution,” said Shawn Mooring, The Lenfest Institute's head of Philadelphia programs.



Local Independent News Coalition

The Lenfest Institute hosted an in-person convening for the Local Independent News Coalition, a community of major metro newspapers, including The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Boston Globe, Chicago Public Media, Newsday (Long Island), The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Seattle Times, The Minnesota Star Tribune, and The Tampa Bay Times.

The LINC organizations came together in October 2025 to share confidential data and address the topics of changing consumer habits and the impact of AI — the most urgent issues in digital publishing.

By bringing together publishers of similar sizes, the coalition spurred new ideas for action at each of the newspapers including opportunities to reach younger audiences, grow subscriptions, and experiment with new uses of technology.

News convenings nationwide

The Lenfest Institute shared its expertise at several national journalism conferences throughout 2025.

- In April, The Lenfest Institute attended the **News Industry Mega Conference**, which brings together news industry executives from newspapers across the country, to present print reduction tools from the **Lenfest Beyond Print Program**.
- At the **Collaborative Journalism Summit** in May, The Lenfest Institute's **Statewide News Collective** presented its community impact research project and offered tools for other publishers to conduct research to measure the resonance of their journalism.
- Fellows from the **Lenfest AI Collaborative and Fellowship Program** presented on the progress of their experiments at two major national journalism conferences: **The Online News Association Conference** in September and the **News Product Alliance Summit** in October. **The Lenfest Audience Community** also hosted an official networking session at ONA for audience development professionals.

News Creators

“News creators” are typically independent journalists publishing directly to consumers on an array of media platforms such as TikTok, Substack, YouTube, or Instagram. News creators are redefining what it means to be a journalist and evolving the relationship between news producers and consumers.



“The experience overall helped me reframe my mindset to thinking of myself as a ‘newsroom of one.’”

- A news creator supported by The Lenfest Institute

1-6. The Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange class of 2025 presenting on how their businesses have evolved over the course of the program. Photos by Zamani Feelings.

7. The first Project C Creator Cohort at the Online News Association Conference. Photo courtesy of Liz Kelly Nelson.

According to data from Pew Research Center, more than one third of U.S. adults under 30 regularly get their news from individual news creators whom they often consider more authentic and more credible than traditional news media.

The Lenfest Institute has embraced this growing new media market and is investing time and money to help build its potential impact for local news.



Project C Creator Cohort

The Lenfest Institute partnered with Project C, a community for journalists navigating the independent news creator economy, and the Online News Association to launch the first-ever Project C Creator Cohort at the ONA Conference in September. The program supported 10 independent journalists as they attended the conference and learned from experts across the media industry, made valuable connections, and represented the growing field of creator journalism.

Each member of the cohort delivers original news content through email newsletters, YouTube, social media, podcasts, and other platforms. Several participants already came from a traditional journalism background but are finding deeper success and engagement through non-traditional independent media. After participating in the cohort, one news creator said: “The experience overall helped me reframe my mindset to thinking of myself as a ‘newsroom of one.’”



A \$1 million investment in news creator partnerships

In November 2025, The Lenfest Institute announced \$1 million in new investments to support partnerships between established local news organizations and news creators.

The Institute is launching two programs to unite the rigor and infrastructure of established newsrooms with the innovation, growth, and cultural relevance of creators.

The two new efforts are:

- The Lenfest News Creator Collaborative which will award up to \$400,000 in grants and offer free training programs for news creators and major established publishers.

The program is designed to build productive partnerships to reach younger audiences and is open to both for-profit and nonprofit news organizations from across the United States. It is supported by the Esther A. & Joseph Klingenstein Fund.

- The Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange incubator for Philadelphia-based news media founders and content creators. Participating teams of news organizations and creators will receive up to \$200,000 in direct funding, along with mentorship, learning sessions, and access to the Institute’s expert network of media advisors. The Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange News Creators Network is supported by the Institute and Comcast NBCUniversal.

The Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange

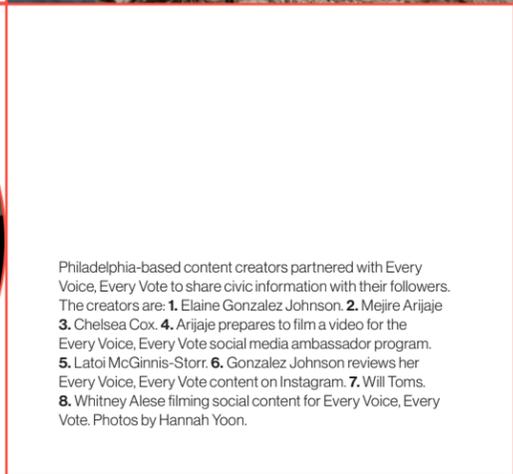
The Lenfest Institute has already been working with non-traditional, community-oriented media through the Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange, a business accelerator program launched in 2022 to support media entrepreneurs of color through training, one-on-one coaching, and grantmaking.

In 2025, the Founders Exchange welcomed its first advanced cohort, consisting of eight program alumni whose businesses are poised for the next stage of growth. Each of these participants publish through a variety of media, including digital, radio, podcasts, social media, and more, and have become trusted sources of information in their communities. To help these founders move beyond the startup phase and toward sustainability, the 2025 curriculum focused on strategic planning, operational efficiency, and revenue generation.



Creators at work

Every Voice, Every Vote



“You realize that your audience is telling you what they like, and they do that by likes and commenting on what it is.”

Elaine Gonzalez Johnson, an influencer who participated in the Every Voice, Every Vote program

The Lenfest Institute began working with local social media ambassadors to distribute civic information as part of Every Voice, Every Vote, a coalition of media and community organizations focused on advancing civic information and engagement in Philadelphia. In 2025, the coalition engaged in paid partnerships with more than a dozen social media ambassadors to serve as trusted messengers for nonpartisan messaging campaigns, including voter registration reminders or public opinion polls.

The participating creators say the key to success for creator partnerships is the existing relationship they have with their audiences. These media makers know what topics their audiences are interested in, whether it's fashion, lifestyle, fitness, or beyond, and find creative ways to integrate civic information into their posts. Lead support for Every Voice, Every Vote is provided by the William Penn Foundation.

Consulting and Tools

In 2025, The Lenfest Institute formally launched the Lenfest Expert Network, a pro-bono local news consulting practice to share its expertise with news businesses nationwide.



Leveraging the Institute’s network of news publishers, editors, funders, and other business leaders, the Lenfest Expert Network consults with clients on business growth and sustainability, including legal and ownership structure, digital transformation, long-term financial planning, product strategy, organizational design, and more. It also provides free-to-use, self-service toolkits and resources that help news organizations achieve growth and resiliency.

1. The team from Ark Republic with Lenfest Institute Head of Advisory Programs Cheryl Thompson-Morton at the first Live LENs event in Philadelphia. Photo by Drew Dow. 2. Head of National Programs Tristan Loper presents on the Beyond Print program at the News Industry Mega Conference. Photo courtesy of America’s Newspapers. 3. Philadelphia journalist Jesenia De Moya Correa attends the Live LENs event. Photo by Drew Dow. 4. The Lenfest Institute distributed newspapers at conferences promoting free Beyond Print resources for publishers. Photo by Hayley Slusser. 5. Rubina Madan Fillion of The New York Times and Irene McKisson of Arizona Luminaria present on AI tools for journalists at the first Live LENs event. Photo by Drew Dow.

Lenfest Expert Network

One of the first participants was Philadelphia-based Generocity, which covers the city’s social impact sector. Publisher Monique Curry-Mims worked with a consultant to develop a revenue roadmap. She called the engagement “transformative” as it gave her a clear path to sustainability heading into 2026.

As part of the network, the Institute launched Live LENs, a quarterly series of in-person gatherings designed to help strengthen local news organizations by offering practical advice on audience growth, revenue diversification, and operational efficiency. The first gathering, *A Journalist’s Guide to AI*, took place in November and brought together newsroom leaders from across the Philadelphia region for hands-on learning and meaningful connection — because when local media is stronger, communities are better informed.



The Lenfest Expert Network’s advising was “transformative”

– Monique Curry-Mims, Generocity Publisher

Knight Communities Network

The Lenfest Institute for Journalism and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation created the Knight Communities Network, a community of practice to support local journalism funders.

The Knight Communities Network connects local funders working to reinvigorate local journalism as part of Press Forward, a national coalition of funders supporting local news ecosystems. The Network launched in February 2025 in eight cities, each home to former Knight newspapers and Knight Foundation community support: Lexington, Ky.; State College, Pa.; Tallahassee, Fl.; Charlotte, N.C.; Gary, Ind.; Miami, Fl.; Wichita, Kan.; and Philadelphia.

The goal of the Knight Communities Network is to help create sustainable, scalable models for funding local journalism. The Lenfest Institute has pioneered fundraising, grantmaking, and learning efforts in Philadelphia, and the Knight Communities network builds upon the Institute’s experience supporting a broad array of local news and information providers.

Over the past year, the Knight Communities Network has convened its members both online and in-person at various conferences, including the Lenfest News Philanthropy Summit. It also launched *Building a Thriving News Ecosystem*, a series of case studies with tips for news ecosystem funders on how to conduct community listening, host events, launch donor giving programs, fund non-traditional media, and more.

Beyond Print

Since its launch in 2022, Beyond Print has helped hundreds of local newspapers in their transition from print-centric business models to a sustainable, digital-first future through grants, convenings, and the Beyond Print Toolkit, which provides comprehensive on-demand guidance on transitioning from print to digital revenue and cost structure.

In October 2025, The Lenfest Institute expanded Beyond Print with \$400,000 in new funding to support independent local newspapers in reducing reliance on print, accelerating digital sustainability, embracing new distribution platforms, and reaching new and younger audiences. Beyond Print is supported by the The Andrew & Julie Klingenstein Family Fund.

The grant funding will be enhanced by the addition of a new Beyond Print Community of Practice — a free peer-to-peer learning cohort — and complimentary advisory services. The grantees will be announced in 2026, and the lessons from their experiments will be shared through case studies for the Beyond Print Toolkit.

To help publishers access more tailored guidance to their unique needs, the Institute launched the Beyond Print Diagnostic, a free online tool designed to help local newspapers find clarity and strategic direction as they navigate print transitions. After answering a few short questions about their businesses, the diagnostic will direct news organizations to the most relevant sections of the Beyond Print Toolkit.



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2025 By the Numbers

\$8.7 million philanthropic contributions — a **22% increase** in the amount raised in 2024.

Grantmaking Totals

The Philadelphia Inquirer **\$7.46 million**
Philadelphia **\$1.9 million***
National **\$3.8 million**
Spotlight PA **\$500,000**
Fiscal Sponsorship **\$1.24 million**

Total grants committed in 2025 in support of the Institute's mission to reinvent local news.
..... **\$13.6 million**

*The Institute granted a total of \$1.9 million to more than 60 Philadelphia organizations in 2025, including payments on multi-year grants that were recognized in 2024.



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