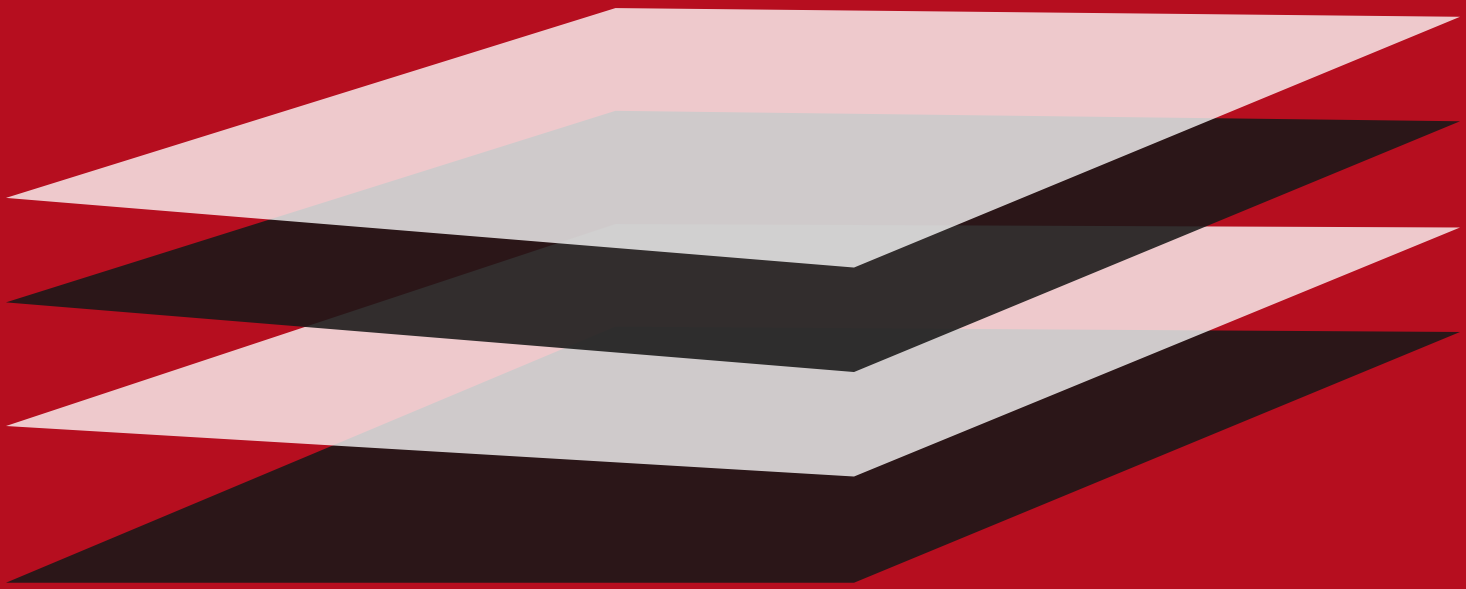
sāwol
COMMUNICATIONS

RESEARCH REPORT · OCTOBER 2026

Who Counts as the Media Now?

Newsrooms, Platforms, Creators and AI
How Americans Get News in 2026
and How PR Should Respond



sawolglobal.com

Communication That Moves Decisions

Contents

Key takeaways 2

About this report 3

Part 1. Who is the media today: four layers instead of one 4

Part 2. The shift: 2016-2026 6

- The audience has moved to digital channels 6
- There are fewer newsrooms 7
- Trust is low and attention is falling 8
- Independent creators hold a visible place in the news environment 10
- AI has become an intermediary 11
- Newsrooms remain the foundation 12

Part 3. How PR should respond 14

Conclusion 16

About Sāwol Communications 16

Sources 17

How to read this report

This report is an analytical review of published research on the US news environment. It works at three levels: findings from external studies, each with a numbered source; the interpretation of those findings by Sāwol Communications, including the four-layer model and the paragraphs titled “What this means for PR”; and practical recommendations, which need to be tested in a specific campaign.

The numbers in square brackets, such as [1], refer to the list of sources at the end of the report. Every figure in the text carries one. Where a figure is our own calculation from published data, the text says so.

We describe the news environment as four layers: newsrooms, platforms, independent creators and AI. The layers overlap, and the same person can belong to all four. This is a working framework for planning communications, not a classification of the market.

Sāwol Communications · Washington, D.C. · Dubai · Baku · October 2026 · www.sawolglobal.com

How to cite: Sāwol Communications. Who Counts as the Media Now? Newsrooms, Platforms, Creators and AI. How Americans Get News in 2026 and How PR Should Respond. 2026.

The report may be quoted with attribution to Sāwol Communications.

Who Counts as the Media Now? Newsrooms, Platforms, Creators and AI

How Americans Get News in 2026 and How PR Should Respond

Sāwol Communications

This report asks two questions: who brings news to Americans today, and what should PR professionals do about it?

Key takeaways

1. **News has moved to digital channels.** 88% of US adults get news on digital devices at least sometimes[1]. Television is losing ground: 31% often get news from it, compared with 57% in 2016[2][1]. The questions differ between those years, so the decline in Pew's comparable series is smaller: from 40% in 2020 to 31%[1]. 28% prefer television, down from 34% a year earlier[1].
2. **There are far fewer newsrooms.** The authors of the Local Journalist Index estimate that the US has 7.8 Local Journalist Equivalents per 100,000 residents, compared with about 40 in 2002. The historical baseline is not fully disclosed, so the comparison is approximate[3]. About 5,400 newspapers remain, 40% fewer than in 2004[4].
3. **Trust is low, and among young adults, social media has nearly caught up with national news organizations.** 33% of Americans trust the mass media[5]. Among adults ages 18 to 29, 50% have a lot of or some trust in information from social media sites, compared with 51% for national news organizations[6].
4. **Independent creators hold a visible place in the news environment.** 21% of adults and 38% of those ages 18 to 29 regularly get news from news influencers[7]. Of the 500 popular news influencers Pew studied, 77% have never been affiliated with a news organization[8].
5. **AI is changing the route to news before it changes audience habits.** 15% of Americans get news from AI chatbots at least sometimes, up from 9% a year earlier[1][9]. But when an AI summary appears in Google results, clicks on traditional search result links are almost half as common: 8% of the time versus 15% (an observation for March 2025; the study does not establish how much of the difference is caused by the summary itself)[10].
6. **Newsrooms remain the foundation.** A preferred news outlet is the most common first stop for breaking news, cited by 36% of Americans, compared with 1% for an AI chatbot[11]. Only 3% get news exclusively from news creators[12].
7. **What this means for PR.** We describe the news environment as four layers: newsrooms, platforms, independent creators and AI. When planning, assess how relevant each layer is to your task and target audience. Each has its own rules and measures.

Four numbers: 88% get news on digital devices at least sometimes[1]; 7.8 Local Journalist Equivalents per 100,000 residents[3]; 33% trust the mass media[5]; 8% versus 15% click on traditional search result links with and without an AI summary[10].

About this report

This report draws on publicly available data. We compared findings from studies of the US news environment.

This report is an analytical review of published research, and it works at three levels:

First, findings from external studies.

Second, Sāwol's interpretation of those findings: the four-layer model and the paragraphs titled "What this means for PR."

Third, practical recommendations.

The studies cited describe the news environment. They do not establish the best way for a particular company to allocate its communications resources.

- **Sources.** Pew Research Center, Reuters Institute, Gallup, Medill Local News Initiative (Northwestern University), Muck Rack, Rebuild Local News, Cision, Edison Research, EBU and BBC, the FTC, and Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Each figure in the text has a linked source number.
- **Our contribution.** The four-layer model of the news environment, our working framework; the implications for PR at the end of Part 1 and each section of Part 2; and the six actions in Part 3. The recommendations also draw on published work by Sāwol's founder, Ali Hajizade (published in academic journals as Ali Hajizada Nizami), on crisis communications and PR measurement in the age of AI. These are conceptual models, not empirical studies.
- **Period.** The main series covers 2016-2026. Email newsletters and AI chatbots have only recently been included in these surveys, so their series are shorter.
- **Limitations.** Surveys ask different questions, so figures from different sources cannot be added together. Pew's questions about news platforms were worded differently in 2016 and 2026; comparing them shows the direction of change, not its exact size. Muck Rack's journalist surveys (mainly in the US, but also in the UK, Canada and India) and Cision's survey (19 markets) do not provide separate US figures for the measures we cite. The EBU and BBC study of AI assistants is international. Data were verified on October 14, 2026 and again on October 23, 2026.

Part 1. Who is the media today: four layers instead of one

In this report, "media" includes everyone involved in producing, distributing and interpreting news, though their professional status and responsibilities differ. We describe this environment as four layers, with newsrooms as just the first. This is Sāwol's working framework for communications planning, rather than a uniform classification of the market: newsrooms and creators primarily produce content, platforms distribute it, and AI is used by producers, platforms and readers alike. Ten years ago, media relations primarily meant working with newsrooms: television, print, radio and their websites. Platforms were already an important channel then. By 2026, independent creators hold a visible place, many having published for years, and AI has emerged as a new intermediary.

Layer	Who it includes	Key figure
1. Newsrooms	Television, radio, newspapers, digital publications and nonprofit newsrooms	63% of adults get news from television at least sometimes[1]
2. Platforms	Social media, video services and search	59% get news from social media at least sometimes[13]
3. Independent creators	Journalists with their own publications, independent email newsletters and podcasts, and news influencers	21% regularly get news from news influencers[7]
4. AI	AI chatbots and AI summaries in search	15% get news from AI chatbots at least sometimes[1]

Infographic 1. Four layers of the US news environment. Sources: Pew Research Center [1] [13] [7]. Illustrative figures from different questions; not comparable shares.

The figures come from different questions and surveys: "at least sometimes" and "regularly" are different thresholds, while television and social media represent only part of their respective layers. They do not measure the shares of four mutually exclusive segments and are not meant to compare the size of the layers.

The layers overlap rather than replace one another, and the same person can belong to all four groups. One possible route for a story is that a newsroom publishes it, a platform brings it to an audience, an influencer explains it and AI summarizes it. The order can vary, and facts need checking at every step. A single media list no longer describes the whole environment.

Audiences also see blurred boundaries around the profession. 46% of Americans consider a news podcast host a journalist, and 40% say the same about someone who publishes their own news newsletter[14].

Type of person	Considered a journalist
Someone who writes for a newspaper or news website	79%
Television reporter	65%
Radio reporter	59%
News podcast host	46%
Someone who publishes their own news newsletter	40%
Someone who posts about news on social media through posts or videos	26%

Infographic 2. Who counts as a journalist, according to Americans. Source: Pew Research Center [14]. Public perception, not professional status.

What this means for PR. Data: people get news from all four layers and draw no clear boundary around who counts as a journalist. Sāwol's interpretation: each layer calls for a different conversation. With newsrooms, it is about facts and access; with platforms, format; with creators, relationships and their audience's trust; with AI, the accuracy of publicly available information. Recommendation: assess which layers matter to the task and audience when planning. A single media list and a press release sent to everyone cover only the first layer.

Part 2. The shift: 2016-2026

Three things have changed over the past decade: where people get news, how many people produce it and how much it is trusted. Two intermediaries have grown in importance: independent creators and AI.

The audience has moved to digital channels

Digital devices have become the main route to news. In 2026, 88% of US adults got news on them at least sometimes, compared with 63% for television[1].

- **Television.** In 2016, 57% often got news from television, whether local, network or cable[2]. In 2026, a different question put the figure at 31%[1]. In Pew's comparable series, it fell from 40% in 2020 to 31% in 2022 and has stayed between 31% and 33% since then[1].
- **Print.** In 2016, 20% often read news in printed newspapers[2]. In 2026, 6% often got news from printed newspapers or magazines[1].
- **Social media.** 59% of adults get news from social media at least sometimes, a little more than in previous years: the figure was 53% in 2025[13][1]. In 2016, a similar question put it at 44%[15]. Among adults ages 18 to 29, the share is 75%[1].
- **Which platforms.** 40% of adults regularly get news on Facebook, 34% on YouTube, 23% on Instagram, 20% on TikTok and 10% on X[13].
- **Preferences.** Television remains the most popular single platform, but 28% now prefer it, down from 34% a year earlier. Social media is preferred by 19%, up from 14%[1]. Digital channels together account for about 60% (Sāwol's calculation from Pew data)[1]. Among adults ages 18 to 29, 38% prefer social media and 8% prefer television[1]. Platform preference and how often people get news from a platform are different measures.

Platform	2020	2026	For context: 2016, different questions
Television	40%	31%	57%
Digital devices (2020 and 2026), internet (2016)	60%	59%	38%
Radio	16%	12%	25%
Print publications (2020), printed newspapers and magazines (2026), printed newspapers (2016)	10%	6%	20%

Infographic 3. Where Americans often get news, 2020 and 2026, with 2016 as a separate point. Sources: Pew Research Center [1] [2]. The print item wording changed in 2025; 2016 figures come from different questions, so only the direction is comparable.

The 2020-2026 series uses the same core question, with a change to the print item wording in 2025. The 2016 figures combined measures from several questions, while the 2026 question used a different structure. The exact change between 2016 and 2026 therefore cannot be determined; the figures show its direction.

Platform	2025	2026
Television	34%	28%
News websites and apps	21%	21%
Social media	14%	19%
Search	10%	12%
Podcasts	6%	5%
Radio	5%	5%
Printed newspapers and magazines	5%	4%
Email newsletters	3%	2%
AI chatbots	Less than 1%	1%

Infographic 4. Preferred news platform, 2025 and 2026. Source: Pew Research Center [1]. Preference, not use.

What this means for PR. Data: news appears on the same screen as social feeds and search results. Television still reaches a majority, but 28% prefer it and 4% prefer print. Among adults ages 18 to 29, 75% get news from social media at least sometimes and 38% prefer it[1]. Sāwol's interpretation: the same story needs several forms: text for a news website, a short video or visual card for social media, and clear wording that helps people find it through search. Recommendation: for younger audiences, make the material easy to find through search and social platforms. The data cited do not measure how much the source's brand matters within those channels; that needs to be assessed separately.

There are fewer newsrooms

The Local Journalist Index 2026 puts the US at 7.8 Local Journalist Equivalents per 100,000 residents. Its authors compare this with an approximate historical estimate of about 40 in 2002 and report an 81% decline. Differences in methodology and limited transparency about the historical baseline constrain the precision of that comparison[3].

- **Newspapers.** About 5,400 newspapers remain in the US, 40% fewer than in 2004, when there were nearly 9,000. In the past year alone, 170 newspapers closed or merged, an average of about three a week[4].
- **Jobs.** The newspaper industry has lost nearly 80% of its jobs across all occupations since 2005, based on an estimate through 2025, including more than 8% in 2024-2025 alone[4]. It employed 365,460 people in 2005 and 91,550 in 2024[16]. Within those totals, the newsroom category in Medill's chart accounted for 75,000 jobs in 2005 and 30,160 in 2024, a decline of about 60% (Sāwol's calculation from the Medill chart, p. 34)[16]. The US had about 42,000 journalists in 2024, and only 29% worked at newspapers, compared with 71% in 2005[16].
- **Access to local news.** 238 counties have no professional local news source based within the county. This is how Medill defines a news desert; coverage from a neighboring county or a regional

television station does not count. The number rose by 26 in a year, the largest increase in the five years Medill has tracked it. Nearly 1,500 more counties have just one source. In all, 47 million Americans live with limited or no access to local news[4].

- **Television.** Three-quarters of the 678 local commercial TV newsrooms belong to the ten largest broadcast groups[4].
- **Cuts continue.** News organizations announced 1,901 job cuts from January through September 2026, 9% more than in the same period of 2025 (1,738)[17]. According to the Reuters Institute in June 2026, The Washington Post announced plans to cut a third of its newsroom[18].
- **What is growing.** 75 local news startups launched in the past year, most of them digital, and nearly 300 launched over the past five years[4]. The INN network of nonprofit newsrooms has grown from 150 to more than 500 members over a decade[18].

Measure	Earlier	Latest
Local Journalist Equivalents per 100,000 residents	About 40 (2002)	7.8 (2026)
Newspapers	Nearly 9,000 (2004)	About 5,400 (2026)
Newspaper industry jobs, all occupations	365,460 (2005)	91,550 (2024)
Share of reporters employed by newspapers	71% (2005)	29% (2024)
Counties with no local news source based within them	About 150 (20 years ago)	238 (2026)

Infographic 5. What is left of local journalism. Sources: Muck Rack and Rebuild Local News [3], Medill [4] [16]. Modeled estimate, newspaper counts and all newspaper jobs shown separately.

A Local Journalist Equivalent is a modeled measure that accounts for publishing frequency and employment. The index's authors cite the 2002 figure of about 40 journalists per 100,000 residents without identifying its source or calculation method, so the comparison with 2026 is approximate.

What this means for PR. Data: there are fewer newsrooms and journalists. 238 counties have no professional local news source based within them, and nearly 1,500 more have just one[4]. Three-quarters of local TV newsrooms belong to ten broadcast groups[4]. Sāwol's interpretation: a pitch should reduce the time a journalist spends finding and checking information. It should include primary data, a clear methodology, documents and an available expert. Information that is ready to verify matters more than copy that is ready to publish. Recommendation: in counties without a local newsroom, first find out who covers the area, including regional publications and stations in neighboring counties. Then assess the availability and audience of email newsletters, local creators and platforms. When working with local television, check ownership and editorial authority: decisions may be made at station or group level.

Trust is low and attention is falling

Only a third of Americans trust the mass media: 33% in September 2026. Gallup measures whether people trust the mass media "a great deal" or "a fair amount" to report the news fully, accurately and

fairly[5]. The figure was 32% in 2016[19] and reached a record low of 28% in 2025, so it has risen slightly over the past year[5]. In the 1970s, it stood at 68-72%[5].

- **Reuters Institute.** In 2026, 25% of Americans trust news overall, agreeing that they can trust most news most of the time. This is the lowest US figure since measurement began in 2015[18].
- **Local and national news organizations.** In September 2025, 70% of adults had a lot of or some trust in information from local news organizations, compared with 56% for national news organizations and 37% for social media sites. Since 2016, trust in national news organizations has fallen by 20 percentage points, while trust in local news organizations has fallen from 82% to 70% [20].
- **Young adults.** Among adults ages 18 to 29, 50% have a lot of or some trust in information from social media sites, compared with 51% for national news organizations. These are similar responses to the same question; they do not show that the channels are equally accurate or valuable[6].
- **Journalists.** 57% of Americans have little or no confidence that journalists act in the public's best interests, according to a December 2025 survey[21].
- **Attention.** In August 2025, 36% of adults followed the news all or most of the time, down from 51% in 2016. Pew notes that this does not necessarily mean people are getting less news: 54% of adults say they get political news because they happen to come across it[22]. In the Reuters Institute's 2026 data, 45% sometimes or often avoid the news[18].

Information source	All adults	Ages 18-29
Local news organizations	70%	65%
National news organizations	56%	51%
Social media	37%	50%

Infographic 6. Whose information Americans trust, 2025. Sources: Pew Research Center [20] [6]. A lot of or some trust.

Gallup, the Reuters Institute and Pew ask different questions: trust in the mass media's news coverage; trust in most news most of the time; and trust in information from particular types of sources. The trust levels therefore differ and do not form a single series. Survey dates: Gallup, September 2026; Reuters Institute, early 2026; Pew, September 2025.

What this means for PR. Data: trust in national news organizations has fallen by 20 percentage points since 2016, while 70% trust local news organizations[20]. 36% follow the news all or most of the time[22]. Among adults ages 18 to 29, trust in social media and national news organizations is almost equal[6]. Sāwol's interpretation: publication in a national outlet is not enough, by itself, to show that a story will persuade the target audience. Trust in a message may be supported by several independent sources: a local publication, an industry expert, an independent creator and the company's own publicly available data. Reprints of the same story do not count as independent confirmation. Recommendation: plan repetition across layers according to the task, actual reach and audience response. Assess whether the message persuades by measuring understanding, attitudes and behavior after people encounter the material.

Independent creators hold a visible place in the news environment

One in five US adults (21%) regularly gets news from news influencers, which Pew defines as people with large social media followings who regularly post about news. Among adults ages 18 to 29, the share is 38%[7]. This section brings together studies of different groups: Pew's news influencers, the Reuters Institute's news creators and Muck Rack's journalists who publish independently. Definitions and sampling differ, so the figures cannot be added together. Podcasts and email newsletters are formats used by both newsrooms and independent creators.

- **Who they are.** Of the 500 popular news influencers Pew studied, 77% have never been affiliated with a news organization[8].
- **Format: podcasts.** 32% of adults get news from podcasts at least sometimes, up from 22% in 2020[1][23]. In the fourth quarter of 2025, podcasts overtook AM/FM radio for the first time in their share of spoken word audio listening among Americans ages 13 and older: 40% versus 39%. In 2015, the figures were 10% versus 75%[24]. This is a share of listening time, not a share of the population, and it covers more than news.
- **Format: email newsletters.** 34% of adults get news from email newsletters at least sometimes, compared with 30% in 2025[1][25]. In the 2025 data, among those who get news from newsletters at least rarely, 24% say most of their newsletters are independent of news organizations, while 25% say most are affiliated with them. 62% usually don't end up reading most of the newsletters they receive[25].
- **Journalists.** In 2025, 34% of journalists published independently under their own name, outside a traditional newsroom. Of those, 78% had fewer than 10,000 followers[26]. Half had been publishing independently for more than five years[26]. In Muck Rack's early 2026 survey, 37% of journalists published independently. These are two different surveys with different participants, so the exact size of the change cannot be estimated[27].

Measure	Value
Adults who regularly get news from news influencers (Pew, 2025)	21%
Adults ages 18-29 who regularly get news from news influencers (Pew, 2025)	38%
Popular news influencers with no news organization affiliation (Pew, 500 creators, 2024)	77%
Journalists who publish independently (Muck Rack, 2025 and 2026 surveys)	34% and 37%
Formats: get news from podcasts at least sometimes, 2020 and 2026 (Pew)	22% and 32%
Formats: get news from email newsletters at least sometimes, 2025 and 2026 (Pew)	30% and 34%

Infographic 7. Independent creators and formats in numbers. Sources: Pew Research Center [7] [8] [1] [23] [25], Muck Rack [26] [27]. Different surveys and definitions.

The three groups of measures come from different samples and use different definitions of creators. The 2025 and 2026 figures for journalists come from two Muck Rack surveys; Muck Rack itself presents the comparison.

What this means for PR. Data: 38% of adults ages 18 to 29 regularly get news from news influencers[7]. 77% of popular news influencers have never been affiliated with a news organization[8]. 78% of journalists who publish independently have fewer than 10,000 followers, and 29% usually or always respond to pitches, compared with 17% of other journalists[26]. 62% of news newsletter recipients usually don't read most of the newsletters they receive[25]. Sāwol's interpretation: independent creators offer a way to reach people who get news from individual creators, including young adults. Incremental reach beyond newsroom channels and audience overlap need to be assessed separately. This is a different kind of partner, and editorial procedures may vary. Recommendation: before working with a creator, check how they handle primary sources, corrections, conflicts of interest and payment disclosures. Other partners need these checks too. Choose creators for their subject matter and audience, rather than reach, and build the relationship as you would with an expert, not an advertising outlet. Podcasts and email newsletters offer access to audiences interested in particular subjects and allow different depths of coverage. Judge their value by who the audience is, how much it actually consumes and how it responds, rather than by subscriber counts.

AI has become an intermediary

Direct use is growing but remains limited: in August 2026, 15% of US adults got news from AI chatbots at least sometimes, up from 9% a year earlier[1][9]. 3% do so often[1]. Adults ages 30 to 49 are the most likely to get news from AI chatbots (20%), compared with 17% of those ages 18 to 29[1]. In February 2026, 49% of adults used AI chatbots: 42% used them to find information, and just 13% used them to get news[28].

So far, the most visible changes are in search.

- **Fewer clicks.** In March 2025, when an AI summary appeared in Google results, users clicked on a traditional search result link 8% of the time, compared with 15% when no summary appeared. They clicked on a link within the summary itself 1% of the time. This is an observational finding, not an experiment: the behavior of 900 panel participants was measured in March, while Pew collected results for the same searches on April 7-17. The whole difference therefore cannot be attributed to the summary[10].
- **Less traffic.** Google search traffic to US news websites fell by 38% over a year (November 2025 versus November 2024, Chartbeat data for 797 sites). How much of the decline is linked to AI summaries is unknown[29].
- **Accuracy.** In an international study by EBU and BBC, 45% of AI assistants' answers to news questions had at least one significant issue, and 20% had major accuracy issues. The study examined 2,709 answers from four assistants in late May and early June 2025. A "significant issue" is a broader category than a factual error[30].
- **AI's sources.** AI answers draw on other people's publications. According to Muck Rack, about 27% of citations in answers from ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini point to journalism, while companies' owned and paid content together account for about 16%. These figures describe the citations in the answers collected. They do not show journalism's share of model training data or the probability that a particular publication will be cited[31].
- **Journalists.** 82% of journalists used at least one AI tool in their work over the past year[27].

Measure	Value
Get news from AI chatbots at least sometimes, August 2025 and August 2026	9% and 15%
Use AI chatbots to find information, February 2026	42%
Google searches that produced an AI summary, March 2025	18%
Clicks on traditional search result links with and without an AI summary, March 2025	8% and 15%
Decline in Google search traffic to US news websites, November 2025 versus November 2024	38%
AI assistants' news answers with a significant issue, international study, 2025	45%
Citations in AI answers that point to journalism	About 27%

Infographic 8. AI and the path to news. Sources: Pew Research Center [9] [1] [28] [10], Reuters Institute [29], EBU and BBC [30], Muck Rack [31]. Separate studies, not one series.

The August 2026 and February 2026 figures come from different questions and do not form a series. 8% and 15% are an observed association, not a measured effect of the summary.

What this means for PR. Data: in Pew's observational study, clicks on traditional search result links were almost half as common when an AI summary appeared in Google results[10]. Google search traffic to the 797 US news sites in Chartbeat's sample fell by 38% over a year; AI's contribution to the decline is unknown[29]. 45% of assistants' news answers in the international study contained at least one significant issue[30]. About 27% of citations in the AI answers studied point to journalism[31]. Sāwol's interpretation: there is a growing risk that some people get information about a company from an AI summary without opening the original publication. The studies cited do not establish the size of that risk for a particular company. Recommendation: keep company facts in public sources accurate and consistent. Run separate, regular checks of what AI assistants say about the company, how accurate it is and which sources they cite. The process is described in Part 3, action 4. Measure coverage alongside the company's presence and the accuracy of information about it in AI answers.

Newsrooms remain the foundation

A preferred news outlet remains the most common single first stop for breaking news. 36% of Americans first turn to the outlet they prefer for details, 28% to search, 19% to social media and just 1% to an AI chatbot. These figures show where people turn first, not the share of newsroom journalism in news consumption: search and social media can also lead to a newsroom's reporting. In a similar question in 2018, 54% named a news outlet, but the response options were different, so the comparison is approximate[11].

- **News creators supplement rather than replace other sources.** 15% of Americans say news creators meet all or most of their news needs. Only 3% get news exclusively from them[12].
- **Local news organizations are trusted more than national news organizations or social media.** 70% of adults trust their information[20].

- **Journalists need PR.** 66% of the journalists surveyed name PR content among their top sources of story ideas. It is the most common response in Cision's survey across 19 markets[32]. In Muck Rack's survey, 86% of journalists say at least some of their stories start with a pitch, although 51% say this is true of only 1% to 10% of their stories[27]. Both surveys describe their respondents, not all US journalists.
- **Young adults take a different route.** For breaking news, 41% of adults ages 18 to 29 turn first to search, 31% to social media and 14% to a news outlet[11].

First stop	All adults	Ages 18-29
The news outlet they prefer	36%	14%
Search	28%	41%
Social media	19%	31%
Friends, family or acquaintances	5%	6%
AI chatbot	1%	2%

Infographic 9. Where Americans turn first for breaking news. Source: Pew Research Center [11]. First source; remaining respondents named another source or do not look for details.

What this means for PR. Data: a preferred news outlet is the most common first stop for breaking news among adults overall, while adults ages 18 to 29 are more likely to turn first to search and social media[11]. 66% of journalists surveyed name PR content among their top sources of story ideas[32], and 88% immediately delete a pitch outside their coverage area[27]. Sāwol's interpretation: working with newsrooms remains the foundation, including in a crisis. This is our practical judgment; the survey did not measure why people choose a source. A foundation, however, is not the only channel. Recommendation: help younger audiences find newsroom coverage through search and the platforms they use, and assess the channel mix and incremental reach for the specific task. Tailor each pitch to the journalist's beat, with data and an available expert.

Part 3. How PR should respond

The six actions below are Sāwol's recommendations. They draw on the data in the first two parts, surveys of journalists and work by Sāwol's founder. How much effort to put into each layer depends on the task, target groups, industry, geography, resources and the information habits of the people you need to reach, rather than national averages. Age is useful, but it is not enough on its own.

1. **Rebuild the media list around the four layers.** Include newsrooms, platforms, independent creators and AI. Choose creators for their relevance to the subject and audience, rather than reach: 78% of journalists who publish independently have fewer than 10,000 followers. A separate observation: these journalists respond to pitches more often. 29% usually or always respond, compared with 17% of other journalists[26]. Responsiveness does not follow from audience size, and a reply does not guarantee a story or a result. For every partner, check how they handle primary sources, corrections and conflicts of interest. If their editorial procedures are not publicly available, ask for them. Endorsements must clearly disclose a material connection with a brand, including payment or a free product, when the connection is not obvious to the audience and could affect how it evaluates the message. Under the FTC Endorsement Guides, the requirements that apply and each party's responsibility depend on the circumstances; the creator, brand and agency may all be liable[33].
2. **Pitch less and more precisely.** 72% of journalists surveyed say that no more than a quarter of the pitches they receive are relevant[32]. 88% immediately ignore or delete a pitch outside their coverage area[27]. Journalists want PR professionals to provide more data and research (47%), embargoed or early access content (45%) and access to experts (42%)[32]. In Muck Rack's summary of eight years of surveys, 69% prefer pitches under 200 words[27]. A pitch should reduce the time a journalist spends finding and checking information: provide primary data, a clear methodology, documents and an available expert.
3. **Prepare material for different age groups.** For adults overall, the first stop for breaking news is a news outlet (36%). For adults ages 18 to 29, it is search (41%) and social media (31%)[11]. Prepare the same story in two forms: one for newsrooms and one for platforms.
4. **Treat AI as a reader.** AI summarizes what it finds in newsroom publications, on platforms and on your website. Keep company facts public, dated and consistent. Regularly check what AI assistants say about you and which sources they cite. The message needs to work even without a click: in Pew's observational study, clicks on traditional search result links were almost half as common when an AI summary appeared[10]. Journalism is among the sources cited by the systems studied, accounting for about 27% of citations in AI answers[31]. Media coverage and accurate information on your own channels may make information easier to find, but they do not guarantee its inclusion in an answer. Make your checks reproducible: use a fixed set of queries; record the language and geography, date and available information about the system version, and whether search is enabled; repeat queries several times; list the facts to check; classify errors; and save the answers and links. Assess the company's presence, accuracy, completeness and sources separately. A mention does not mean a positive outcome, and absence from one answer does not establish a pattern of omission. This is our working recommendation, not a finding of the studies cited.
5. **In a crisis, put verification before speed.** A story may start in an email newsletter, a podcast or a fabricated recording, rather than a newsroom. In his article on cognitive warfare, Sāwol's founder Ali Hajizade concludes that when evidence can be fabricated, a fast response without verification becomes a risk in itself[34]. That does not mean staying silent: say immediately what is known, what is being checked and when the next update will come. The proposed sequence is to record the first

signal, establish what has been verified, assess the source and motive, send targeted messages through verified channels and review the results[34]. In another article, he proposes a conceptual model with four functions: early detection of signals, authentication, rules for human and AI collaboration, and rebuilding trust after a rebuttal. Work under this model starts before a crisis and continues after the rebuttal. This is the author's model; its effectiveness in practice has yet to be tested[35]. A rebuttal does not always settle the matter. His review of deepfakes[36] cites an experiment with a German sample of 951 participants, in which the perceived credibility of material fell across all three formats studied (audio, video and 360-degree video) after participants were told about the fake[38]. After a rebuttal, check for residual effects on trust rather than assuming they are inevitable.

6. **Assess reach and communication outcomes.** Coverage volume and potential reach show how widely a message has spread, but do not by themselves establish changes in audience understanding, attitudes or behavior. Ali Hajizade's work on PR measurement[37] proposes a model that moves from outputs, such as coverage and mentions, to changes in audience perceptions and then to business measures. This is a conceptual model; the article does not test its effectiveness in campaigns. The same logic underpins AMEC's Barcelona Principles 4.0: measure outputs as well as outcomes for audiences and impact on the organization, and do not use advertising value equivalents[39]. In practice, there are four levels: outputs (coverage in target outlets, replies and mentions); message reception and understanding (recognition of a fact and correct understanding of a position); attitudes and behavior (trust, intent, inquiries and participation); and organizational impact (a measure linked to the campaign's objective). Set the baseline, audience, timeframe and measurement method for each level in advance. A rise in sales that coincides with coverage does not by itself establish causation. The central question shifts from "How many people could have seen this?" to "Who in the audiences that matter to us saw it, and how did they respond?" The same article notes that AI-based analytics platforms help distinguish creators who are relevant to a subject from those who are simply visible. AI alone does not guarantee this; a method and quality checks are needed[37].

Layer	PR task	Output metric	Outcome metric
Newsrooms	A focused pitch with data and an expert	Coverage in target outlets; share of pitches receiving a reply	Target audience recognition and understanding of the message
Platforms	A format suited to each platform and age group	Response from target groups, rather than total reach	Changes in target groups' attitudes and actions
Independent creators	Creator relationships, verification and payment disclosure	Mentions by creators relevant to the subject	Trust and actions among the creator's audience
AI	Public, consistent facts and reproducible checks of answers	Presence, accuracy and sources in AI answers	Inquiries and decisions after exposure to an AI answer

Infographic 10. Four layers: the PR task, the output metric and the outcome metric. Source: Sāwol Communications, AMEC [39].

The measurement levels follow AMEC's Barcelona Principles 4.0. Define each outcome metric with a baseline, audience, timeframe and measurement method.

Conclusion

We describe the US media in 2026 as four overlapping layers, rather than a list of outlets. Newsrooms still establish the facts and remain the most common first stop for breaking news[11], but there are fewer of them, and only a third of Americans trust the mass media[5]. Platforms bring news to a majority of people, and among young adults, trust in them is almost on a par with national news organizations[6]. Independent creators offer a way to reach people who get news from individual creators, including young adults, but working with them calls for verification and disclosure. Their audience overlap with newsrooms needs to be assessed separately. AI summarizes all of this. When an AI summary appeared in search results, clicks on traditional search result links were less common, although the study did not measure how much of the difference was due to the summary itself[10]. For PR, the implication is to assess each layer's relevance to the task and target audience, recognize that each has its own rules and measures, and measure target audience reach, message understanding and results linked to the company's objective. The six actions in Part 3 are our recommendation for this work; whether they apply depends on the task and the resources.

About Sāwol Communications

Sāwol Communications is an international group of companies specializing in PR and strategic communications, with roots dating back to 2012. The group helps clients build visibility, manage the narrative, protect their reputation and handle difficult situations.

Offices: Washington, Dubai, Baku. Contact: letstalk@sawolglobal.com, www.sawolglobal.com.

How to cite: Sāwol Communications. Who Counts as the Media Now? Newsrooms, Platforms, Creators and AI. How Americans Get News in 2026 and How PR Should Respond. 2026.

Sources

[1] Pew Research Center. News Platform Fact Sheet. October 19, 2026. Survey of August 24-30, 2026, with 5,166 respondents. The same page includes series from 2020, including the 2025 figures (survey of August 18-24, 2025). https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/

[2] Pew Research Center. The Modern News Consumer: Pathways to News. July 7, 2016. Survey of January 12-February 8, 2016, with 4,654 respondents. The radio figure (25%) comes from the topline results (https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2016/07/PJ_2016.07.07_Modern-News-Consumer_TOPLINE.pdf). https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/

[3] Muck Rack and Rebuild Local News. Local Journalist Index 2026. June 16, 2026. Measurement period: January 1-March 31, 2026. https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/new-local-journalist-index-reveals-2026-data-on-local-news-crisis/

[4] Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University. The State of Local News 2026. October 13, 2026. Figures are drawn from the report's introduction, Medill's release announcement (https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2026/local-news-deserts-skyrocket-as-newspaper-closures-escalate-even-as-startups-emerge-medill-study-shows.html) and a Medill article (https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/posts/2026/10/13/illinois-news-deserts/index.html) dated October 13, 2026. Full report (https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2026/report/). https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2026/index.html

[5] Gallup. U.S. Media Trust: Edges Up From Record Low. September 29, 2026. Survey of September 1-17, 2026, with 1,000 respondents. https://news.gallup.com/poll/714938/trust-news-media-edges-slightly-higher.aspx

[6] Pew Research Center. Young Adults and the Future of News. December 3, 2025. 2025 surveys: August 18-24 (news sources) and September 8-14 (trust). https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2025/12/03/young-adults-and-the-future-of-news/

[7] Pew Research Center. News Influencers Fact Sheet. November 4, 2025. Survey of August 18-24, 2025, with 5,153 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-influencers-fact-sheet/

[8] Pew Research Center. America's News Influencers. November 18, 2024. Sample: 500 news influencers with at least 100,000 followers. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/americas-news-influencers/

[9] Pew Research Center. Relatively few Americans are getting news from AI chatbots like ChatGPT. October 1, 2025. Survey of August 18-24, 2025, with 5,153 respondents. The 9% figure combines "often" (2%) and "sometimes" (7%). https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/01/relatively-few-americans-are-getting-news-from-ai-chatbots-like-chatgpt/

[10] Pew Research Center. Google users are less likely to click on links when an AI summary appears in the results. July 22, 2025. Browser activity data from 900 US adults for March 1-31, 2025; search results for the same queries were collected on April 7-17, 2025. An observational study, with no random assignment of queries. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/22/google-users-are-less-likely-to-click-on-links-when-an-ai-summary-appears-in-the-results/

[11] Pew Research Center. Where do Americans turn first for information about breaking news? March 24, 2026. Survey of December 8-14, 2025, with 3,560 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/03/24/where-do-americans-turn-first-for-information-about-breaking-news/

[12] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Digital News Report 2026: How news creators are impacting politics and media around the world. June 16, 2026. Online YouGov survey, January-February 2026. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/how-news-creators-are-impacting-politics-and-media-around-world

[13] Pew Research Center. Social Media and News Fact Sheet. October 19, 2026. Survey of August 24-30, 2026, with 5,166 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/

[14] Pew Research Center. How Americans View Journalists in the Digital Age. August 20, 2025. Survey of April 14-20, 2025, with 9,397 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2025/08/20/how-americans-view-journalists-in-the-digital-age/

[15] Pew Research Center. News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016. May 26, 2016. Survey of January 12-February 8, 2016, with 4,654 respondents. The 44% figure combines "often" (18%) and "sometimes" (26%) from the topline results (https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2016/05/PJ_2016.05.26_social-media-and-news_TOPLINE.pdf). https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/

[16] Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University. The State of Local News 2025. October 20, 2025. Used for employment figures for 2005-2024; the chart showing employment by category is on p. 34 of the report PDF. https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/assets/slnp/the_state_of_local_news_2025.pdf

[17] Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Job Cuts Fall in September; Hiring Plans Up 3% Over 2025 On Weak Early Seasonal Hiring. October 1, 2026. September 2026 job cuts report. The News category covers digital, broadcast and print news organizations. https://www.challengergray.com/blog/job-cuts-fall-in-september-hiring-plans-up-3-over-2025-on-weak-early-seasonal-hiring/

[18] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Digital News Report 2026: United States. June 16, 2026. Online YouGov survey, January-February 2026. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/united-states

[19] Gallup. Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low. September 14, 2016. Survey of September 7-11, 2016, with 1,020 respondents. https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx

[20] Pew Research Center. How Americans' trust in information from news organizations and social media sites has changed over time. October 29, 2025. Survey of September 8-14, 2025, with 5,195 respondents. The 37% figure for social media combines "a lot" (5%) and "some" (32%) from the topline results (https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/10/SR_25.10.29_trust-in-info_topline.pdf). https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/29/how-americans-trust-in-information-from-news-organizations-and-social-media-sites-has-changed-over-time/

[21] Pew Research Center. Majority of Americans express low confidence in journalists to act in public's best interests. February 11, 2026. Survey of December 8-14, 2025, with 3,560 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/02/11/majority-of-americans-express-low-confidence-in-journalists-to-act-in-publics-best-interests/

[22] Pew Research Center. Americans are following the news less closely than they used to. December 3, 2025. Most recent survey: August 18-24, 2025, with 5,153 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/12/03/americans-are-following-the-news-less-closely-than-they-used-to/

[23] Pew Research Center. Podcasts and News Fact Sheet. September 25, 2025. Survey of August 18-24, 2025, with 5,153 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/podcasts-and-news-fact-sheet/

[24] Edison Research (SSRS). Podcasts Lead AM/FM in Spoken-Word Listening, Marking a First. February 24, 2026. Share of Ear study, fourth quarter of 2025, Americans ages 13 and older. https://ssrs.com/insights/podcasts-lead-am-fm-in-spoken-word-listening-marking-a-first/

[25] Pew Research Center. Email Newsletters as a Source of News. February 19, 2026. Survey of August 18-24, 2025, with 5,153 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2026/02/19/email-newsletters-as-a-source-of-news/

[26] Muck Rack. The State of Creator Journalism 2025. October 28, 2025. Survey of April 4-30, 2025, with 1,515 journalists, including 522 who publish independently; mainly in the US, but also in the UK, Canada and India. https://media.muckrack.com/documents/10.22.2025_v3_The_State_Of__Creator_Journalism_2025.pdf

[27] Muck Rack. The State of Journalism 2026. March 19, 2026. Survey of January 30-March 2, 2026, with 1,044 responses. The analysis includes 897 journalists, mainly from the US, but also from the UK, Canada and India. https://media.muckrack.com/documents/State_of_Journalism_2026_1.pdf

[28] Pew Research Center. Americans and AI 2026: Chatbots, Smart Devices and Views on Impact. June 17, 2026. Survey of February 17-23, 2026, with 5,119 respondents. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2026/06/17/americans-and-ai-2026-chatbots-smart-devices-and-views-on-impact/

[29] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2026. January 12, 2026. Chartbeat data for 2,576 news websites, including 797 in the US: November 2025 versus November 2024. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2026

[30] European Broadcasting Union and BBC. News Integrity in AI Assistants. EBU announcement dated October 22, 2025. More than 3,000 answers from ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini and Perplexity to news questions, assessed by journalists from 22 public service broadcasters in 18 countries. The 45% and 20% figures are based on 2,709 answers to core questions, collected in late May and early June 2025. Report page (https://www.ebu.ch/research/open/report/news-integrity-in-ai-assistants). https://www.ebu.ch/news/2025/10/ai-s-systemic-distortion-of-news-is-consistent-across-languages-and-territories-international-study-by-public-service-broadcaste

[31] Muck Rack (Generative Pulse). What is AI Reading? May 7, 2026. More than 25 million citations in answers from ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini across 17 industries; the number of queries and collection dates are not disclosed. https://media.muckrack.com/documents/What_Is_AI_Reading__May_2026.pdf

[32] Cision. 2026 State of the Media Report. May 13, 2026. Survey conducted in January-February 2026, with 1,899 journalists across 19 markets; no separate US figures are available. https://www.prnewswire.com/content/dam/prnewswire/resources/white-papers/Cision_2026_State_of_the_Media_Report.pdf

[33] Federal Trade Commission. FTC's Endorsement Guides: What People Are Asking. June 2023 revision. Based on 16 CFR Part 255. https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/ftcs-endorsement-guides-what-people-are-asking

[34] Ali Hajizada Nizami. Cognitive Warfare and the Limits of Classical Crisis Communication Models in an Environment of Manipulable Facts. Canadian Journal of Business and Information Studies. 2026. Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 702-710. DOI: 10.34104/cjbis.026.07020710. https://www.universepg.com/cjbis/cognitive-warfare-and-the-limits-of-classical-crisis-communication-models-in-an-environment-of-manipulable-facts

[35] Ali Hajizada Nizami. The Evolution of the Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Communication from the Pre-Internet Era to the Age of Generative Artificial Intelligence. Frontiers in Business Innovations and Management. 2026. Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 1-10. DOI: 10.64917/fbim/Volume03Issue06-01. https://irjernet.com/index.php/fbim/article/view/454

[36] Ali Hajizada Nizami. Anti-Crisis Communication Strategies in the Era of Deepfakes: Protecting Reputation and Restoring Trust. The American Journal of Management and Economics Innovations. 2025. Vol. 7, No. 11, pp. 26-33. DOI: 10.37547/tajmei/Volume07Issue11-04. https://theamericanjournals.com/index.php/tajmei/article/view/6846

[37] Ali Hajizada Nizami. Data and Measurement in PR in the Age of AI. Professional Bulletin: Economy and Management. 2026. No. 1, pp. 73-80. The points used in the report are on p. 76. The full text was obtained on October 14, 2026. On October 23-24, the PDF address was outside the allowed domain list of Sāwol's automated checking tool; an independent check on October 24 opened the file. https://f2818d16-3d25-413f-b707-632ed3ce68ca.filesusr.com/ugd/5c8252_a58f070ba67b47c0854a7b4181dd820b.pdf

[38] Teresa Weikmann, Hannah Greber, Alina Nikolaou. After Deception: How Falling for a Deepfake Affects the Way We See, Hear, and Experience Media. International Journal of Press/Politics. 2025. Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 187-210; first published online on March 13, 2024. Experiment in Germany with 951 participants; formats: audio, video and 360-degree video. DOI: 10.1177/19401612241233539. University of Vienna repository record (https://ucrisportal.univie.ac.at/en/publications/after-deception-how-falling-for-a-deepfake-affects-the-way-we-see/). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19401612241233539

[39] AMEC (International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication). Barcelona Principles V4.0. June 2025. Seven principles for communication measurement and evaluation. Principle 6: report on outputs, outcomes and impact for the organization and audiences. Principle 5: do not use advertising value equivalents. https://amecorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Barcelona-Principles-V4.0-%E2%80%93-FINAL30.6-compressed.pdf