

# The AI Traffic Crisis

WHAT PUBLISHERS NEED TO KNOW  
AS SEARCH EVOLVES AND  
THE CLICK DISAPPEARS

*Research, Trends, Questions,  
and Opportunities for  
Independent Publishers*



THE MEETING



THE REPORTING



THE STORY



THE READER



THE REPORTING STILL HAPPENS.  
THE CONNECTION DOESN'T.

Isaac Cubillos

JUNE 2026

# THE AI TRAFFIC CRISIS

## What Every Independent Publisher Needs to Know About AI Search, Zero-Click Traffic, and the Future of Digital News

Publisher Brief  
June 2026  
by Isaac Cubillos

### Purpose

This brief is written for owners, publishers, editors, and advertising managers of independent and hyperlocal news organizations. It answers these practical questions: What happened to my search traffic and what should I do about it? The paper emphasizes actionable guidance over theory.

### Target Reader

- Independent digital publisher
- Community news website owner
- Hyperlocal editor
- Regional online publication
- Advertising director
- Publisher association executive

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## About the Author

**Isaac Cubillos** is a journalist, editor, publisher, and digital media strategist with more than 35 years of experience covering government, the military, technology, and public policy.

He began his journalism career in traditional newspapers before helping lead the industry's transition into digital publishing. In 1998, he launched the first daily online news sites serving a Hispanic audience in the United States, giving him a front-row seat to the rapid evolution of internet publishing, search engines, audience development, and digital advertising.

Throughout his career, Cubillos has worked as a reporter, copy editor, photographer, web developer, and publisher. His experience spans both editorial and technical disciplines, allowing him to understand not only how journalism is produced but also how websites are built, maintained, discovered, and monetized.

His reporting has covered military affairs, public policy, local government, and technology. He has written for newspapers, magazines, and online publications, and has worked extensively with independent publishers, non-profit organizations, and digital newsrooms adapting to changing business models.

Cubillos also brings a technical perspective to journalism. Before artificial intelligence became part of everyday publishing, he spent years designing websites, managing servers, implementing search engine optimization strategies, and studying how readers discover content online. Those experiences have shaped his interest in how emerging technologies influence the economics of independent journalism.

This Publisher Brief grew out of a simple observation.

After reading research suggesting that blogs, technology publications, and other informational websites were experiencing significant changes in search traffic, Cubillos began asking a question that surprisingly few researchers appeared to be studying:

### What does this mean for independent publishers?

Rather than relying on headlines or speculation, he examined research from management consultants, search analytics companies, journalism organizations, and independent researchers to better understand what is known, what remains uncertain, and what questions publishers should begin asking.

The goal of this report is not to argue for or against artificial intelligence.

Its purpose is to provide independent publishers with a research-based overview of how AI-powered search may be changing audience behavior—and what those changes could mean for the future of local journalism.

# Executive Summary

Independent publishers have spent the past three decades adapting to one disruption after another. The internet changed how news was published. Search engines changed how readers discovered news. Social media changed how audiences consumed it.

Artificial intelligence is changing discovery again.

Unlike previous technological shifts, AI-powered search can increasingly answer readers' questions before they ever visit the websites that produced the original reporting. AI Overviews, conversational search, and large language models are reshaping how information is found, summarized, and consumed. For publishers whose businesses depend on website traffic, advertising impressions, memberships, or subscriptions, that raises an important question:

## What happens when readers get the answer without clicking the story?

This Publisher Brief examines that question through the lens of independent, hyperlocal, nonprofit, and regional digital publishers.

It does **not** argue that artificial intelligence is inherently harmful to journalism.

AI already provides significant benefits to publishers. Newsrooms use AI to transcribe interviews, analyze public records, translate stories, organize archives, summarize meetings, and improve workflows. Readers benefit from faster answers, better accessibility, and more natural ways to search for information.

Those benefits are real.

The purpose of this brief is to examine whether AI-powered search also creates new economic challenges for organizations that invest in original reporting.

## What the Research Suggests

Although researchers use different methodologies and measure different aspects of search behavior, a growing body of evidence points toward the same broad trend.

Studies from independent researchers, search analytics firms, management consulting companies, and journalism organizations report:

- AI-generated search results are becoming more common.
- Zero-click searches—where users obtain answers without visiting another website—continue to increase.
- Many informational searches now end without a visit to the original publisher.
- Referral traffic from traditional search has declined for many publishers and content creators.
- Publishers are increasingly shifting attention toward newsletters, memberships, direct audiences, and first-party relationships.

No single study answers every question, and not every publisher is experiencing the same results. National publishers, bloggers, nonprofit organizations, and hyperlocal news sites operate under different business models and serve different audiences.

Nevertheless, the available research suggests that AI-powered search is changing the economics of digital discovery in ways that deserve careful attention.

## Why This Matters to Independent Publishers

For many independent publishers, search traffic is more than a vanity metric.

It influences:

- advertising impressions,
- audience growth,
- newsletter signups,
- membership conversions,
- sponsorship opportunities,
- subscription sales,
- and conversations with local advertisers.

Consider a typical community newsroom.

A reporter spends the evening covering a school board meeting. They attend the meeting, interview officials, verify the vote, and publish a story before midnight.

The next morning, a resident searches:

**“Who won the school board vote?”**

Instead of clicking the publisher’s story, the resident may receive an AI-generated summary that accurately reports the outcome.

The reporter still attended the meeting.

The publisher still paid for the reporting.

But the website visit—and the opportunity to introduce the reader to additional journalism—may never occur.

This example illustrates what has become known as **zero-click search**.

The journalism continues to create value.

The question is whether publishers continue to capture enough of that value to sustain future reporting.

## The Purpose of This Brief

This publication is intended to help publishers understand what is happening, what current research says, what remains uncertain, and what practical steps may help organizations adapt.

It is written specifically for:

- independent digital publishers,
- hyperlocal news organizations,
- nonprofit newsrooms,
- regional publishers,
- advertising directors,
- publisher associations,

- and newsroom leaders responsible for digital strategy.

It is not a technical report on artificial intelligence.

It is not an SEO guide.

It is not a prediction about the future.

It is an evidence-based examination of one practical question facing publishers today:

## How does AI-powered search affect the business model that supports original journalism?

### What You'll Learn

This Publisher Brief explains:

- what zero-click search is and why it matters,
- how AI search differs from traditional search,
- what current research says about changing audience behavior,
- why local publishers may experience these changes differently than national organizations,
- how AI can benefit newsrooms,
- what publishers can do today to strengthen direct relationships with readers,
- and where additional industry research is urgently needed.

### A Final Thought

Every major technological change has required publishers to adapt.

Artificial intelligence will be no different.

The organizations most likely to succeed will not be those that simply chase search rankings or resist new technology. They will be those that understand how audience behavior is changing, build stronger direct relationships with readers, and continue producing the original journalism that artificial intelligence itself depends upon.

Regardless of how sophisticated AI becomes, someone still has to attend the school board meeting.

The challenge for publishers is ensuring that the organizations investing in that reporting remain economically sustainable in an era when readers increasingly receive information before they ever reach the publisher's website.

That is the conversation this Publisher Brief hopes to begin.

## 1. Where Did My Clicks Go?

For many independent publishers, the question didn't begin with artificial intelligence.

It began with Google Analytics.

Nothing in the newsroom seemed different. Reporters were still attending city council meetings. The school board still met on Tuesday nights. Friday night football still filled the sports section, and local businesses were still buying advertising because readers trusted the publication's coverage of their community.

Yet the numbers on the analytics dashboard were beginning to tell a different story.

Search referrals were slipping. Individual stories that once attracted steady traffic no longer performed as expected. In some newsrooms the decline was gradual, unfolding over months rather than days. In others, it seemed to follow one of Google's periodic search updates. Either way, many publishers found themselves asking the same question: *What changed?*

The first instinct was to look inward.

Perhaps the website had developed a technical problem. Maybe page speed had slowed. Perhaps search engine optimization needed attention. Some publishers blamed Facebook for sending less traffic than it once had. Others wondered whether readers had simply become less interested in local news.

Those explanations made sense because they had happened before. Digital publishing has always required adaptation. Publishers learned search engine optimization when Google became the dominant gateway to information. They adjusted when Facebook changed its News Feed. They built newsletters as social media referrals became less reliable. Each shift required new strategies, but the underlying relationship between publisher and reader remained largely intact.

Readers searched for information.

Search engines pointed them toward publishers.

Readers clicked.

Publishers welcomed them to their websites.

That click was never simply a number on a dashboard.

It represented an opportunity.

Once a reader arrived, they might continue reading another story, sign up for a newsletter, become a member, click on an advertiser, or simply return the next day. The click was the beginning of a relationship between the publication and the community it served.

Today, that relationship is changing.

Increasingly, readers are finding answers before they ever reach a publisher's website. Search results are no longer limited to lists of blue links inviting users to explore multiple sources. Artificial intelligence is introducing a different experience—one in which the answer itself often appears first.

For publishers, that distinction matters.

The issue is not whether a story appears in search results. Many stories still do. The issue is whether readers feel they need to click the story once an AI-generated summary has already answered their question.

Consider a common example.

A reporter spends three hours covering a school board meeting. She interviews board members after the vote, ver-

ifies the details, edits photographs, and publishes the story before midnight. The next morning a parent searches Google to find out whether the board approved a new attendance policy.

A few years ago, that search almost certainly led the parent to one or more news stories. The publisher received a pageview. The reader learned what happened. Perhaps they stayed to read another story or subscribed to the newsletter before leaving.

Today, the same search may produce an AI-generated summary describing the board's decision before the reader ever reaches the list of links. If the summary answers the question, the search ends there.

The journalism still created the value.

The reporter still attended the meeting.

The publisher still paid for the reporting.

The difference is that the publisher may never receive the visit.

That distinction lies at the heart of this Publisher Brief.

For years, publishers measured success by a familiar set of indicators: pageviews, unique visitors, search referrals, engagement time, newsletter growth, and advertising impressions. Those metrics remain important, but some of them are becoming more difficult to interpret as search itself evolves.

A decline in search traffic does not automatically mean a decline in journalistic value. Nor does it necessarily mean readers have stopped relying on your reporting. In some cases, readers may still be consuming information derived from your journalism—they are simply doing so through a different pathway.

That is an important difference.

It also explains why many publishers have the uneasy feeling that they are producing the same quality journalism, investing the same resources, and serving the same communities, yet receiving fewer opportunities to build direct relationships with readers.

This brief does not argue that artificial intelligence is responsible for every decline in website traffic. Search behavior has been changing for years, influenced by mobile devices, social media, changing reader habits, algorithm updates, and competition from countless digital platforms.

Artificial intelligence is one more factor in that evolution.

What makes it different is that it changes the role of the click itself.

For decades, publishers competed to earn the click.

Now they must also ask whether the click is still the primary measure of audience engagement.

To answer that question, publishers first need to understand a concept that has become common among search professionals but remains unfamiliar to many newsroom leaders: **zero-click search**.

Understanding zero-click search is the foundation for understanding why so many publishers are asking, "Where did my clicks go?"

## 2. What Is Zero-Click Search?

The term **zero-click search** sounds technical, but the idea is surprisingly simple.

A person asks a question.

They receive an answer.

The search ends.

No website is visited.

No story is opened.

No publisher receives a pageview.

The click never happens.

For years, search engines acted primarily as guides. A reader typed a question into Google, received a list of links, and chose which website to visit. Publishers competed for those clicks because each visit represented an opportunity to build a relationship with a reader.

That model is changing.

Today, many searches begin with an AI-generated summary that attempts to answer the user's question before they ever reach the list of links. If the answer satisfies the reader, the search is over.

From the reader's perspective, the experience is fast and convenient.

From the publisher's perspective, something important has disappeared.

The visit.

### Yesterday's Search

Imagine a parent searching for information after a school board meeting.

They type:

**Did the school board approve the new attendance policy?**

A traditional Google search might have looked something like this:

#### Google Results

1. *School Board Approves New Attendance Policy* — Your Community News
2. School District Press Release
3. Local Television Station
4. Another News Website

The parent clicks your story.

Your website loads.

They read the article.

While they're there, they notice another story about next year's school budget. They sign up for your newsletter

before leaving.

From the publisher's perspective, that single search created several opportunities.

One pageview.

One advertising impression.

One potential newsletter subscriber.

Perhaps a future member.

The click wasn't simply traffic.

It was the beginning of a relationship.

## Today's Search

Now imagine that same search today.

The parent types the same question.

Instead of beginning with a list of links, Google displays an AI-generated summary.

*The school board voted 4-1 Tuesday evening to approve the new attendance policy, which will take effect at the beginning of the next school year...*

The parent has the answer they wanted.

They close the browser.

The search ends.

They never visit your website.

Nothing about your journalism changed.

The reporting still required a reporter to attend the meeting, verify the facts, interview officials, and write the story.

The only thing that changed was the path between the reader and the publisher.

## The Reader Didn't Do Anything Wrong

It is important to understand that zero-click search is not the result of readers making poor decisions.

Readers naturally choose the fastest path to information.

If someone asks for tomorrow's weather, the current stock price, the score of last night's baseball game, or the result of a city council vote, and the answer appears immediately, many people will consider their search complete.

From the reader's perspective, the technology is doing exactly what it was designed to do.

That is one reason AI-powered search has been adopted so quickly.

It saves time.

It reduces effort.

It allows people to ask questions in ordinary language instead of learning search operators or browsing through multiple websites.

Those are genuine benefits.

## Why Publishers Care

The challenge for publishers is not that readers receive answers.

Journalism exists to inform the public.

The challenge is that original reporting costs money to produce.

Reporters attend meetings.

Editors review stories.

Photographers cover events.

Publishers pay for websites, insurance, legal advice, public-records requests, content management systems, hosting, and payroll.

Historically, website visits helped support those investments through advertising, subscriptions, memberships, sponsorships, and reader donations.

When fewer readers reach the publisher's website, fewer opportunities exist to generate that revenue.

The reporting still creates value.

The question becomes:

## Who captures it?

### **Zero-Click Is Bigger Than AI**

Although artificial intelligence has accelerated the trend, zero-click search did not begin with AI.

Google has been answering some questions directly for years.

Search for the weather in your town, and Google displays the forecast.

Search for the current time in London, and the answer appears immediately.

Search for the score of last night's game, a stock price, a flight status, or the definition of a word, and you often receive the answer without leaving Google.

These features accustomed users to receiving information immediately.

AI Overviews extend that idea to much more complex questions.

Instead of displaying a single fact, AI can summarize multiple sources, explain concepts, compare products, or describe the outcome of a public meeting.

The result is that more searches can now end without a click.

### **Not Every Search Is Zero-Click**

It is equally important not to overstate the issue.

Many searches still send readers to publisher websites.

Investigative reporting, feature stories, opinion columns, in-depth local coverage, and enterprise journalism often encourage readers to continue reading because the value lies in the reporting itself rather than a single fact.

Likewise, readers looking for detailed information, original documents, photographs, videos, or ongoing coverage

frequently click through to the source.

The impact of zero-click search varies depending on the type of content, the audience, and the question being asked.

This is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon.

It is a shift in how some readers discover information.

### **The New Question**

For decades, publishers asked a familiar question:

#### **How do we earn the click?**

Artificial intelligence introduces a different one.

#### **How do we continue building relationships with readers when some searches no longer require a click at all?**

That question is shaping digital publishing today, and it explains why researchers, analytics companies, and publishers have begun paying such close attention to changing patterns in search behavior.

The next section examines what those researchers are actually finding—and what the available evidence suggests about the future of search traffic.

### 3. Why Is This Happening?

The short answer is that search is changing because readers are changing.

For nearly three decades, search engines operated as directories. A user entered a question, and the search engine responded with a ranked list of websites that might contain the answer. The search engine's job was to help people find information, not necessarily provide the information itself.

That model proved remarkably successful. Google built one of the world's most valuable companies by helping users navigate the growing web. Publishers benefited because search engines directed readers to their websites, where journalism, advertising, subscriptions, and community engagement could take place.

Today, however, users increasingly expect something different.

They want answers, not just links.

That expectation did not begin with artificial intelligence. Smartphones accustomed people to receiving information immediately. Voice assistants encouraged conversational questions. Navigation apps eliminated the need to read maps. Streaming services recommended what to watch next. Consumers gradually became accustomed to technology that reduced the number of decisions they needed to make.

Search is following the same path.

Rather than asking users to compare ten different websites, AI attempts to synthesize information into a single response that addresses the question directly.

From a consumer perspective, the appeal is obvious. Asking, "*Who won the school board vote?*" is easier than opening several websites, comparing articles, and deciding which one is most complete. AI promises to reduce that effort.

That change is reshaping search.

#### Search Has Become a Conversation

Traditional search relied on keywords.

A publisher might optimize a headline around phrases like *school board vote*, *city council meeting*, or *property tax increase*. Search engine optimization became an important skill because publishers understood how search engines evaluated relevance.

Artificial intelligence changes that interaction.

Instead of typing keywords, users increasingly ask complete questions.

*"Why did the school board reject the budget?"*

*"How will the new zoning ordinance affect my neighborhood?"*

*"Explain the county commission's vote in plain English."*

These are not keyword searches. They are conversations.

Large language models are designed to respond conversationally, which makes AI search feel more like asking a knowledgeable colleague than searching an index.

For users, that often feels more natural.

## Competition Is Driving Change

Artificial intelligence is not emerging in a vacuum.

Google is responding to competition from AI-powered services such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, Microsoft Copilot, Claude, and other conversational search tools. Those platforms have introduced millions of people to a different way of finding information.

If Google continued offering only traditional search while competitors offered direct answers, users might gradually shift their habits elsewhere.

AI Overviews are, in part, Google's response to that competitive landscape.

Whether users ultimately prefer AI summaries, traditional links, or some combination of both remains an open question. What is clear is that search companies are competing to provide faster, more useful answers.

## Why Publishers Are Feeling the Impact

For publishers, the issue is not simply that AI exists.

The issue is where the reader's journey ends.

Historically, search engines acted as intermediaries. Their purpose was to connect readers with publishers.

Artificial intelligence changes that relationship by attempting to satisfy more searches before the reader reaches another website.

That shift has different consequences depending on the type of search.

If someone searches for today's weather, a stock price, or the score of last night's baseball game, receiving the answer immediately is unlikely to concern most publishers.

But journalism often works differently.

A city council vote is rarely just a vote.

The story may include debate, background, community reaction, previous reporting, links to public documents, photographs, and analysis explaining why the decision matters. A summary can communicate the outcome, but it may not convey the reporting that gives the outcome meaning.

That distinction is important.

Publishers do more than provide answers.

They provide context.

## The Economics Have Changed

One of the defining characteristics of digital publishing has been the exchange between discovery and engagement.

Publishers invested in reporting.

Search engines helped readers discover that reporting.

Readers visited publisher websites.

Publishers monetized those visits through advertising, memberships, subscriptions, events, sponsorships, or donations.

Artificial intelligence does not eliminate that model, but it changes its economics.

If readers increasingly receive satisfactory answers without visiting the publisher, the relationship between reporting and revenue becomes less direct.

The journalism still exists.

The costs of producing it remain.

What changes is how often readers arrive at the publisher's front door.

## **This Is Not Just Google's Story**

Although Google receives much of the attention, the broader trend extends beyond a single company.

AI assistants, chatbots, search engines, browsers, and even social media platforms are moving toward more conversational ways of delivering information. The underlying goal is the same: reduce the effort required for users to find what they need.

Publishers therefore face an industry-wide transition rather than a single platform issue.

That distinction matters because it suggests this is not a temporary algorithm update that can be solved through better search engine optimization alone. It is a broader shift in how people interact with information.

## **The Opportunity Hidden Inside the Challenge**

Despite these concerns, AI also presents opportunities.

Publishers are using AI to accelerate research, transcribe interviews, organize archives, analyze public records, translate content, and improve accessibility. Those efficiencies can be particularly valuable for smaller newsrooms operating with limited resources.

The challenge is not whether publishers should use AI.

Most already do.

The challenge is understanding how AI changes the relationship between journalism and audience development.

That is why the next question becomes so important.

If search itself is changing, what does the evidence actually show?

Researchers, analytics firms, consulting companies, and journalism organizations have begun measuring these changes from different perspectives. Although their methodologies vary, their findings provide the first clues about how AI may be reshaping traffic across the web.

The next section examines those findings—and what they mean for independent publishers.

## 4. What the Research Says

One of the challenges in understanding artificial intelligence and search is that no single study tells the whole story.

Some researchers measure clicks.

Others measure website traffic.

Others analyze consumer behavior.

Still others examine how search results themselves are changing.

Viewed individually, each study answers only part of the question.

Viewed together, they suggest that digital publishing may be entering another period of structural change.

### Bain & Company: Search Is Becoming an Answer Engine

Perhaps the broadest perspective comes from Bain & Company.

Unlike search engine optimization firms or web analytics companies, Bain advises large organizations on business strategy. Its research examines how consumers discover information and how companies should respond as artificial intelligence becomes part of everyday search.

Bain argues that search is evolving from a system designed to help users **find information** into one increasingly designed to **deliver information**.

That distinction is important.

For nearly three decades, search engines acted primarily as guides. Users entered a question, reviewed a list of websites, and selected the source they believed would provide the best answer. Publishers competed for visibility because visibility led to website visits.

Artificial intelligence changes that experience.

Instead of directing users to multiple websites, AI increasingly attempts to answer the question immediately. From the consumer's perspective, this reduces time and effort. From the publisher's perspective, it changes the economics of discovery.

Bain's conclusion is not that publishers are disappearing.

Its conclusion is that consumer expectations are changing.

People increasingly expect answers instead of links.

That observation provides an important framework for understanding the other research discussed in this report.

### Ahrefs: The Click Is Becoming Less Certain

If Bain explains why consumer behavior is changing, Ahrefs helps explain what that change means for publishers.

Its research examined Google's AI Overviews and found that when an AI-generated summary appears, the top organic search result receives substantially fewer clicks than it did previously.

For years, publishers invested considerable effort in earning the first position in search results because higher rankings generally produced more visitors.

Ahrefs suggests that relationship is changing.

Even when publishers achieve top rankings, AI-generated summaries may satisfy some readers before they ever reach the list of links.

For publishers, that means success in search may no longer produce the same level of audience growth it once did.

### **SparkToro: Fewer Searches Reach the Open Web**

SparkToro approached the issue from the perspective of user behavior.

Its analysis found that fewer than one-third of Google searches now result in a click to the open web. Most searches conclude without users visiting another website.

Artificial intelligence is only one reason for that trend. Google has long displayed weather forecasts, maps, sports scores, dictionaries, and business information directly within search results.

AI expands that capability.

Instead of answering simple factual questions, it increasingly summarizes more complex topics.

For publishers, the result is the same.

More searches can end before readers ever reach the websites that created the underlying content.

### **Semrush: Zero-Click Search Is Becoming More Common**

Research from Semrush reaches similar conclusions.

The company reports that zero-click searches now represent the majority of Google searches and that AI-generated answers appear most frequently for informational queries.

That observation is particularly relevant for publishers because informational journalism has traditionally performed well in search.

Explanations of local elections, school board decisions, zoning proposals, tax changes, public health issues, and community events all fall into categories where readers often begin by asking questions.

If those questions are increasingly answered before readers reach publisher websites, audience behavior may continue to evolve.

### **Daniel Stanica: Blogs Offer an Early Warning**

Independent researcher Daniel Stanica examined one hundred successful blogs over a four-year period.

His study reported dramatic declines in Google search traffic across much of that sample, with a median reduction of approximately 85 percent.

Blogs are not newspapers.

Many operate under different editorial models and business strategies.

Nevertheless, Stanica's work raises an important question.

If AI-powered search is changing how readers discover informational content, could publishers eventually experience similar pressures?

At present, no comparable long-term study exists for independent news organizations.

## Growtika: Technology Publishers Feel the Pressure

A separate analysis by Growtika examined estimated Google search traffic for several of the internet's largest technology publications, including *Wired*, *CNET*, *The Verge*, *Mashable*, *TechRadar*, and *Digital Trends*.

Comparing traffic estimates between 2024 and early 2026, the report found substantial declines across the group.

The authors did not attribute those changes solely to AI Overviews.

Instead, they identified several overlapping factors, including AI-generated search results, increased visibility for Reddit within Google Search, and the growing popularity of AI assistants such as ChatGPT and Perplexity.

*Nieman Lab* later reviewed the report, noting that while the traffic estimates relied on third-party data rather than publisher analytics and therefore had limitations, the findings aligned with broader industry concerns about changing search behavior.

The significance of the study lies less in the exact percentages than in the larger question it raises.

If nationally recognized technology publications are experiencing measurable changes in search traffic, should community publishers begin measuring whether similar trends are emerging in local news?

## What We Know

Although these studies measure different aspects of search, several themes appear repeatedly.

Consumers increasingly expect direct answers.

AI-generated search results are becoming more common.

Zero-click searches continue to expand.

Publishers are receiving fewer visits from some categories of informational searches.

Those findings do not prove that every publisher will lose traffic, nor do they demonstrate that artificial intelligence alone explains every decline in analytics.

Search has always evolved.

Artificial intelligence is entering an ecosystem already influenced by mobile devices, social media, algorithm changes, and shifting consumer habits.

What the available evidence does suggest is that discovery itself is changing.

## What We Still Don't Know

One of the most striking findings is not what researchers have measured, but what they have not.

There is currently no comprehensive longitudinal study examining the effects of AI-powered search on independent, hyperlocal, and nonprofit news publishers.

That gap matters.

Community journalism depends on business models that differ substantially from those of blogs, technology publications, and national media organizations.

Until that research exists, publishers should approach both optimism and pessimism with caution.

The available evidence is sufficient to justify attention.

It is not yet sufficient to answer every question.

That is precisely why this conversation is so important.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Primary Finding</b>	<b>Publisher Takeaway</b>
<b>Growtika</b>	Major tech publications experienced sharp declines in estimated Google traffic.	Even established digital brands are seeing search disruption.
<b>Daniel Stanica</b>	Many successful blogs lost significant organic search traffic over four years.	Informational content appears increasingly vulnerable to AI-driven search changes.
<b>Ahrefs</b>	AI Overviews substantially reduce clicks to the top organic result.	Ranking first may no longer generate the traffic it once did.
<b>SparkToro</b>	Most Google searches now end without a click to the open web.	Website visits are becoming less automatic.
<b>Semrush</b>	Zero-click searches and AI-generated answers continue to expand.	Publishers should monitor changing search behavior rather than rankings alone.
<b>Bain &amp; Company</b>	Search is evolving into an answer engine driven by changing consumer expectations.	This is likely a long-term behavioral shift, not simply another algorithm update.

## 5. Why This Matters for Publishers

Every publisher understands that audience habits change.

Most independent news organizations have already survived several waves of disruption. They adapted when classified advertising migrated online. They learned search engine optimization when Google became the dominant gateway to information. They embraced social media, then newsletters, then mobile publishing. Many are now experimenting with podcasts, text alerts, memberships, and artificial intelligence in their own newsrooms.

Adaptation is not new.

What makes the current transition different is that it affects the relationship between the publisher and the reader before the reader ever reaches the publisher's website.

That distinction has significant business implications.

### Traffic Has Never Been the Goal

Publishers often talk about traffic because it is easy to measure.

Pageviews.

Unique visitors.

Referral sources.

Session duration.

Those numbers appear prominently in every analytics dashboard.

But traffic itself has never been the business.

Traffic has always been a means to something more valuable.

A reader who visits your website may view additional stories, subscribe to your newsletter, become a member, donate to your nonprofit newsroom, purchase a subscription, attend one of your events, or click on an advertiser supporting your publication.

Every visit creates possibilities.

When visits decline, so do those opportunities.

That is why changes in search behavior matter even if your newsroom continues producing the same quality journalism.

### The Local Advertising Equation

For many independent publishers, the immediate concern is not subscriptions.

It is advertising.

Unlike national media companies that may rely on multiple revenue streams, community publishers often depend on local businesses that advertise because they want to reach local readers.

A restaurant does not buy an advertisement because it supports journalism as an abstract principle.

It buys advertising because journalism attracts customers.

The same is true for real estate agents, attorneys, hardware stores, car dealerships, insurance agencies, medical practices, and dozens of other local businesses that help finance community news.

Those advertisers typically ask straightforward questions.

*“How many people visit your website?”*

*“How many impressions will my advertisement receive?”*

*“Can you show me your traffic?”*

Those conversations become more complicated if readers increasingly receive information before they ever visit the publisher’s website.

The journalism still has value.

The advertiser may simply see fewer measurable visits.

### **The Hidden Cost of the Missing Click**

The missing click represents more than a lost advertising impression.

It may also represent a lost relationship.

Consider a resident who searches for information about a proposed housing development.

If they visit your website, they may also discover related stories about zoning, transportation, environmental concerns, or previous public meetings. They may realize your publication consistently covers issues affecting their neighborhood.

If the search ends with an AI-generated summary, that discovery never occurs.

The reader receives an answer.

The publisher loses an opportunity to demonstrate the depth and consistency of its reporting.

For smaller news organizations, those opportunities are difficult to replace.

### **Community Journalism Is Different**

Most existing research focuses on blogs, technology publications, e-commerce websites, or national media organizations.

Community publishers operate under different conditions.

Their reporting is often unavailable anywhere else.

Only one reporter may attend the county commission meeting.

Only one photographer may cover the local high school football game.

Only one publication may consistently report on water management, zoning decisions, neighborhood development, school policies, or municipal budgets.

Artificial intelligence cannot summarize reporting that does not exist.

It depends on someone first gathering the facts.

That reality makes local journalism both uniquely valuable and uniquely vulnerable.

If fewer readers reach the organizations producing original community reporting, sustaining that reporting becomes more difficult over time.

## **Memberships and Newsletters Become More Important**

One lesson emerging from publishers across the industry is the growing importance of first-party relationships.

A newsletter subscriber has chosen to hear directly from your publication.

A member has demonstrated loyalty beyond a single story.

A subscriber returns because they value your journalism, not because an algorithm recommended one article.

Those relationships become increasingly valuable when search referrals fluctuate.

They are audiences the publisher owns rather than borrows.

That does not mean search becomes unimportant.

Search will remain a critical way for new readers to discover local journalism.

But publishers may increasingly judge success by the strength of their direct audience rather than by search traffic alone.

## **Publishers May Need New Metrics**

For years, pageviews served as one of digital publishing's primary currencies.

Advertisers understood them.

Publishers tracked them.

Newsrooms celebrated them.

Artificial intelligence raises the possibility that those measurements no longer tell the complete story.

A publisher may still produce journalism that informs thousands of people, yet receive fewer visits because some readers obtain the basic facts through AI-generated summaries.

That does not mean pageviews should be ignored.

It does mean publishers may need broader measures of success.

Newsletter growth.

Returning visitors.

Member retention.

Time spent with in-depth reporting.

Reader trust.

Community engagement.

These metrics may become increasingly important as publishers demonstrate value to advertisers, donors, foundations, and readers.

## A Strategic Shift, Not a Tactical One

It is tempting to view AI search as another search engine optimization problem.

Publish better headlines.

Improve metadata.

Adjust keywords.

Those tactics remain useful, but they may not address the larger issue.

If search itself is changing, publishers may need to think beyond search.

That means investing in direct relationships with readers, strengthening local brands, expanding newsletters, developing membership programs, hosting community events, and creating journalism that readers actively seek rather than simply discover.

In other words, the goal becomes building an audience that comes to your publication because it trusts your reporting—not merely because a search engine happened to rank one story highly.

## A Moment of Opportunity

It is easy to view this discussion only through the lens of declining traffic.

That would be a mistake.

Independent publishers have always succeeded by doing something technology cannot.

They know their communities.

They attend meetings.

They ask difficult questions.

They understand local history.

They earn trust over years, sometimes decades.

Artificial intelligence can summarize information.

It cannot replace the relationship between a newsroom and the community it serves.

The challenge for publishers is ensuring that relationship remains economically sustainable as the ways people discover information continue to evolve.

That brings us to the final question.

If AI is changing audience behavior, how can publishers use the technology to strengthen—not weaken—their own newsrooms?

## 6. What AI Does Well

If this Publisher Brief stopped with concerns about search traffic, it would tell only half the story.

Artificial intelligence is not simply changing how readers discover information. It is also changing how publishers produce it.

For many independent news organizations, AI has become another newsroom tool—one that can help small staffs accomplish work that once required considerably more time and resources.

That distinction is important.

The challenge facing publishers is not whether they should use AI.

Most already do.

The challenge is learning where AI creates value, where it saves time, and where human judgment remains indispensable.

### AI Is a Tool, Not a Newsroom

Artificial intelligence does not replace journalism.

It does not attend city council meetings, interview reluctant sources, file public records requests, or recognize when an official is avoiding a question.

Those responsibilities remain uniquely human.

What AI can do is reduce the amount of time journalists spend on repetitive tasks so they can spend more time reporting.

For small newsrooms, that difference can be significant.

### Transcribing Interviews

One of AI's most immediate benefits is transcription.

Instead of spending hours replaying recorded interviews, reporters can generate accurate transcripts in minutes. They can search conversations by keyword, verify quotations more quickly, and spend less time typing and more time reporting.

Many journalists who were initially skeptical of AI now consider transcription one of its most valuable newsroom applications.

### Making Sense of Documents

Local journalism increasingly involves large collections of digital documents.

Budgets.

Contracts.

Inspection reports.

Meeting agendas.

Court filings.

Public records requests.

Artificial intelligence can summarize lengthy documents, identify recurring themes, highlight names, and point reporters toward sections that deserve closer examination.

It does not eliminate the need to read the documents.

It simply helps reporters find important information more efficiently.

## Searching Archives

Most publishers possess years of institutional knowledge buried in their archives.

Artificial intelligence can help locate previous stories, identify related reporting, and connect events that occurred years apart.

For example, a reporter covering a new housing development may quickly locate every previous story about the same project, the developers involved, past zoning disputes, and earlier promises made during public meetings.

That capability strengthens reporting rather than replacing it.

## Improving Accessibility

Artificial intelligence also helps publishers reach broader audiences.

Stories can be translated into multiple languages more quickly than ever before.

Long investigations can be summarized for readers seeking a quick overview before reading the complete article.

Audio versions of stories can be generated for readers with visual impairments or those who prefer listening during a commute.

These capabilities make journalism more accessible without changing the underlying reporting.

## Assisting Research

Reporters spend considerable time gathering background information before writing a story.

Artificial intelligence can help explain unfamiliar topics, summarize legislation, identify relevant court decisions, locate historical context, and suggest additional questions worth pursuing.

Like any source, however, AI requires verification.

Experienced journalists understand that AI should never be treated as an authoritative source in itself.

It is a research assistant, not a fact-checker.

Every factual assertion should still be confirmed through primary sources whenever possible.

## Supporting Small Newsrooms

Large metropolitan newspapers often employ specialists.

Copy editors.

Data journalists.

Graphics departments.

Research librarians.

Audience engagement teams.

Many community publishers do not have that luxury.

A newsroom of three or four people may perform every one of those functions.

Artificial intelligence can help level the playing field by automating routine tasks that previously consumed hours each week.

For independent publishers operating with limited budgets, that may be one of AI's greatest strengths.

## **Improving Reader Experience**

Artificial intelligence can also improve the publisher's own website.

Readers increasingly expect to ask questions naturally rather than search through dozens of articles.

An AI-powered site search can help visitors locate previous reporting more quickly, recommend related stories, and guide them toward archives they might never have discovered otherwise.

Ironically, some of the same technology changing search engines may also help publishers keep readers engaged once they arrive.

## **Where AI Falls Short**

Recognizing AI's strengths also requires recognizing its limitations.

Artificial intelligence has no firsthand knowledge.

It cannot attend a public meeting.

It cannot recognize tension in a room.

It cannot observe body language.

It cannot cultivate confidential sources.

It cannot ask a follow-up question when an official's answer sounds incomplete.

Perhaps most importantly, it cannot exercise editorial judgment.

Editors decide which stories deserve attention, what information belongs in the lead, when additional reporting is required, and whether a source is credible.

Those decisions depend on experience, ethics, skepticism, and knowledge of the community.

They cannot be automated.

## **The Competitive Advantage of Independent Publishers**

This may seem like an odd conclusion in a report about artificial intelligence, but it is worth emphasizing.

The most valuable asset an independent publisher possesses is not its website.

It is not its content management system.

It is not even its archives.

It is the trust it has earned within its community.

Artificial intelligence can make that newsroom more efficient.

It can help reporters work faster.

It can improve research and accessibility.

But trust is still built person by person, story by story, meeting by meeting.

The publishers most likely to thrive in an AI-driven world will not be those who reject artificial intelligence.

Nor will they be those who depend on it to produce journalism.

They will be the organizations that use AI to become better at the work only journalists can do: gathering original information, holding institutions accountable, and telling the stories no one else is covering.

That distinction leads naturally to the final section of this Publisher Brief.

If publishers understand both the opportunities and the challenges of AI, what practical steps should they take next?

## 7. What Publishers Can Do Now

If you've read this far, you're probably hoping this section contains a simple answer.

It doesn't.

There isn't a new SEO technique that restores yesterday's traffic. There isn't a WordPress plugin that brings back every click. And there isn't a single business strategy that guarantees success in an era of AI-powered search.

The changes affecting publishers are larger than any one company, any one algorithm, or any one technology.

That may sound discouraging.

It shouldn't.

Independent publishers have been here before.

Every major shift in digital publishing has forced news organizations to rethink how they reach readers. Classified advertising disappeared. Social media became a dominant traffic source and then became less reliable. Mobile devices changed reading habits. Publishers adapted each time because adaptation has always been part of independent journalism.

Artificial intelligence is simply the next transition.

The difference is that this one asks publishers to think less about attracting clicks and more about building relationships.

### Stop Chasing Algorithms

For years, publishers were taught that success depended on understanding Google.

Attend the SEO conference.

Rewrite the headlines.

Improve the metadata.

Add structured markup.

Increase page speed.

Earn more backlinks.

Much of that advice was—and still is—good advice.

A fast website is a better website. Clear headlines help readers. Strong technical SEO makes it easier for search engines to understand your reporting.

But no amount of optimization changes a larger reality.

If search itself is evolving from a list of links into a system that increasingly answers questions, publishers cannot build their entire business around winning a race whose finish line keeps moving.

Search should remain part of your strategy.

It simply should not be your entire strategy.

## Invest in the Audience You Own

Every publisher borrows audiences.

Google sends readers.

Facebook recommends stories.

LinkedIn highlights articles.

Those audiences are valuable, but they belong to someone else's platform.

The audiences that matter most are the ones you own.

A newsletter subscriber chooses to hear from you.

A member supports your work directly.

A reader who bookmarks your homepage or types your publication's name into a browser has made a conscious decision to return.

Those relationships are remarkably resilient because they do not depend on the latest algorithm update.

Many publishers already understand this intuitively. Newsletters have become one of the most successful products in digital publishing, not simply because they deliver stories, but because they create a direct connection between the newsroom and the reader.

That connection becomes even more valuable if search traffic becomes less predictable.

## Become Essential to Your Community

Artificial intelligence can summarize a school board vote.

It cannot become part of your community.

That distinction may be the greatest competitive advantage independent publishers possess.

Readers return to local news organizations because they understand the community in ways national platforms cannot. They recognize the names in the stories. They remember previous controversies. They understand why a proposed apartment complex matters, why a road project has been delayed for years, or why a seemingly routine zoning change has generated neighborhood opposition.

That knowledge is accumulated over time.

It cannot be generated from a prompt.

Publishers should continue investing in the journalism that distinguishes them from every other source of information.

Original reporting.

Exclusive interviews.

Investigative projects.

Election coverage.

Local sports.

Community history.

Public records.

Those are not simply stories.

They are assets that strengthen the publication's identity.

## Rethink What Success Looks Like

For years, pageviews became the default measure of digital success.

They were easy to count and easy to compare.

Advertisers understood them.

Newsrooms celebrated them.

Artificial intelligence does not make pageviews irrelevant.

It simply means they no longer tell the entire story.

Suppose your newsletter readership grows by twenty percent while search traffic declines by fifteen percent. Has your audience become weaker—or stronger?

Suppose members renew at record rates even though Google referrals decrease. Is the publication becoming less valuable?

Perhaps not.

Publishers may need to broaden the way they measure success.

Returning visitors.

Newsletter subscribers.

Member retention.

Time spent reading investigative projects.

Community event attendance.

Direct traffic.

These metrics often reveal relationships that a pageview alone cannot measure.

## Prepare Advertisers for the Conversation

Local advertisers are hearing many of the same headlines publishers are hearing.

Artificial intelligence.

Declining search traffic.

Changing consumer behavior.

Some may eventually ask whether website traffic still tells the whole story.

Publishers should be ready for that conversation.

The answer is not to dismiss AI or pretend nothing has changed.

The answer is to explain what has changed—and what has not.

People still need local journalism.

Businesses still need to reach local customers.

Readers still trust publications that consistently report on their communities.

The methods of discovery are evolving.

The value of trusted journalism is not.

Helping advertisers understand that distinction may become one of the publisher's most important responsibilities over the next several years.

## Use AI to Strengthen the Newsroom

One of the ironies of this discussion is that the same technology changing search can also help publishers become more efficient.

Artificial intelligence can transcribe interviews in minutes, summarize lengthy public documents, search archives, organize research, translate stories, improve accessibility, and assist with routine production tasks.

Used thoughtfully, those tools allow reporters to spend less time behind a keyboard and more time reporting in the community.

That is where journalism creates its greatest value.

AI should handle repetitive work.

Journalists should handle reporting.

The two are not competitors.

They are partners.

## Work Together

Perhaps the most surprising discovery while researching this Publisher Brief was not what we found.

It was what we didn't.

Despite dozens of studies examining search behavior, very little research focuses specifically on independent publishers.

We know a great deal about blogs.

We know a great deal about e-commerce.

We know a great deal about digital marketing.

We know surprisingly little about how AI-powered search is affecting the economics of community journalism.

That should change.

Publisher associations, nonprofit organizations, journalism schools, advertising technology companies, and independent publishers all have an opportunity to contribute data that helps the industry understand what is happening.

The stronger that research becomes, the better prepared publishers will be to make informed decisions.

## The Road Ahead

Artificial intelligence is changing the way people discover information.

That much seems increasingly clear.

What remains uncertain is how quickly those changes will reshape the economics of local publishing.

Independent publishers have always adapted because they understand something technology alone cannot.

Communities are built on relationships.

So is journalism.

Readers may find answers through artificial intelligence.

They will continue returning to publishers they trust.

The organizations that thrive in the years ahead are likely to be those that treat AI not as a replacement for journalism, but as another tool while continuing to invest in the one resource no technology can replicate: the trust they have earned within their communities.

That trust has always been the foundation of independent publishing.

It remains the foundation today.

## 8. Questions That Still Need Answers

One of the most surprising findings while researching this Publisher Brief was not what we discovered.

It was what we could not find.

The internet contains no shortage of studies about artificial intelligence, search engine optimization, digital marketing, or consumer behavior. There are reports measuring click-through rates, analyses of search traffic, surveys of AI adoption, and countless articles predicting the future of journalism.

What is largely missing is research focused specifically on independent publishers.

Community news organizations operate differently from national media companies, technology websites, blogs, and e-commerce businesses. Their audiences are different. Their revenue models are different. Their missions are different.

Yet much of the current discussion assumes they are all experiencing the same changes.

That assumption may prove correct.

It may also prove wrong.

The industry needs better answers.

### Are Local Publishers Experiencing the Same Trends?

Much of the research discussed in this brief examines blogs, national technology publications, or the broader web.

Very little focuses on community journalism.

Are independent publishers seeing the same declines in search traffic reported elsewhere?

If so, are those declines occurring at the same rate?

Do weekly community newspapers experience different patterns than digital-only news organizations?

Do nonprofit newsrooms perform differently than commercial publishers?

At present, there are few comprehensive studies capable of answering those questions.

### Which Types of Journalism Are Most Affected?

Not every story serves the same purpose.

Breaking news.

Investigative reporting.

Election coverage.

Feature stories.

High school sports.

Opinion columns.

Restaurant reviews.

Public notices.

Some of these may continue attracting readers regardless of how search evolves.

Others may increasingly be summarized before readers reach the publisher's website.

Understanding which types of journalism remain most resilient could help publishers make more informed editorial and business decisions.

### **What Happens to Local Advertising?**

Much of the conversation surrounding artificial intelligence focuses on traffic.

Publishers, however, sell more than pageviews.

They sell access to trusted local audiences.

How will local advertisers respond if website traffic changes while reader trust remains strong?

Will advertisers place greater value on newsletters?

Will sponsorships become more important than display advertising?

Will community events become a larger source of revenue?

The answers will likely differ from one market to another.

Understanding those differences should become a priority for publisher associations and advertising technology companies.

### **How Should Publishers Measure Success?**

For more than two decades, pageviews became one of digital publishing's standard measures of success.

Artificial intelligence may be forcing the industry to rethink that assumption.

If readers increasingly receive answers before visiting publisher websites, what metrics become more meaningful?

Returning visitors?

Newsletter subscribers?

Membership renewals?

Reader donations?

Time spent reading enterprise stories?

Brand recognition?

No consensus yet exists.

Developing better measurements may become one of the most important challenges facing digital publishing during the next decade.

### **Can Publishers Measure AI Referrals?**

Publishers have become accustomed to tracking search traffic from Google, Bing, Facebook, and other referral sources.

Artificial intelligence introduces a new question.

Can publishers determine how often readers discover their journalism through AI-generated summaries or conversational search platforms?

Today's analytics tools provide only limited visibility into those pathways.

As AI becomes more integrated into search, publishers will need better ways to understand where audiences originate and how they arrive.

Without reliable measurement, strategic planning becomes considerably more difficult.

## What Happens to Original Reporting?

Perhaps the most important unanswered question concerns the economics of original journalism.

Every AI-generated summary ultimately depends upon someone gathering the information in the first place.

A reporter attends the school board meeting.

A photographer documents the event.

An editor verifies the facts.

A publisher pays for the newsroom that makes the reporting possible.

If fewer readers reach the organizations performing that work, how does the industry ensure those organizations remain financially sustainable?

This question extends well beyond technology.

It goes to the future of accountability journalism itself.

## What Role Should Technology Companies Play?

Technology companies have acknowledged the importance of quality journalism.

Many have entered licensing agreements with national publishers, while others continue exploring partnerships with news organizations.

Whether similar opportunities will emerge for independent publishers remains uncertain.

Should local publishers be included in future licensing discussions?

Should AI companies develop programs specifically supporting community journalism?

Could new attribution standards help readers better understand where AI-generated information originated?

These questions deserve thoughtful discussion before business models become firmly established.

## The Need for Better Industry Research

Independent publishers should not wait for others to answer these questions.

Publisher associations, nonprofit organizations, universities, advertising technology companies, foundations, and journalism schools all have opportunities to contribute meaningful research.

Imagine an annual survey of several hundred independent publishers measuring:

- Changes in search traffic.

- Newsletter growth.
- Membership trends.
- Advertising revenue.
- AI adoption inside newsrooms.
- Audience engagement.
- Reader trust.
- Business performance.

Within only a few years, the industry would possess a far clearer understanding of what is actually happening than it does today.

Good decisions depend on good data.

At present, much of that data simply does not exist.

## A Final Question

Every generation of publishers has faced uncertainty.

Radio.

Television.

The internet.

Social media.

Mobile devices.

Artificial intelligence is the latest chapter in that history.

The question is no longer whether AI will influence journalism.

It already does.

The question is whether independent publishers will have the information they need to adapt successfully.

That may be the most important question of all.

This Publisher Brief does not claim to provide every answer.

Its purpose is more modest—and perhaps more useful.

To identify the questions the industry should begin answering together.

## Resources for Publishers

Artificial intelligence, search, and digital publishing are evolving rapidly. New research is appearing almost monthly, and no single report captures every aspect of the changes affecting independent publishers.

The organizations and publications listed below provide useful starting points for publishers who want to continue following these developments. Some focus on journalism, others on search behavior, marketing, audience analytics, or artificial intelligence. Together, they offer a broad view of an industry in transition.

### Publisher Organizations

Independent publishers should look first to organizations serving local and digital news organizations. These groups provide research, training, conferences, networking opportunities, and practical guidance tailored to community journalism.

#### Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)

The Institute for Nonprofit News supports nonprofit journalism organizations throughout North America.

Its research frequently addresses:

- Sustainability
- Membership
- Fundraising
- Audience engagement
- Local journalism

#### Editor & Publisher

For more than a century, *Editor & Publisher* has covered the newspaper and digital publishing industries.

Its reporting increasingly includes:

- Artificial intelligence
- Digital advertising
- Audience analytics
- Industry case studies
- Publisher interviews

### Research Organizations

Several organizations continue producing important research on search behavior and artificial intelligence.

#### Bain & Company

Bain examines how artificial intelligence is changing consumer behavior, digital discovery, and marketing strategy.

## Recommended reading:

["Goodbye Clicks, Hello AI: Zero-Click Search Redefines Marketing."](#)

### **[SparkToro](#)**

SparkToro regularly publishes research examining search behavior, referral traffic, audience discovery, and zero-click searches.

Its work is particularly useful for understanding how audiences reach websites.

### **[Ahrefs](#)**

Ahrefs studies search engine optimization, Google's AI Overviews, click-through rates, and search visibility.

Publishers should pay particular attention to its research on how AI-generated summaries affect organic search traffic.

### **[Semrush](#)**

Semrush analyzes search trends, digital marketing, and user behavior.

Its reports frequently examine:

- Zero-click searches
- AI search
- Organic traffic
- Search visibility

## **Journalism Research**

Several organizations are documenting how artificial intelligence is affecting journalism itself.

### **[Nieman Lab](#)**

Nieman Lab, based at Harvard University, covers innovation in journalism and frequently reports on AI, search, audience behavior, and newsroom experimentation.

### **[Press Gazette](#)**

Press Gazette provides international coverage of publishing, newsroom strategy, digital audience trends, and AI.

Its reporting often includes traffic analyses of major publishers and interviews with newsroom leaders.

## **Questions to Ask Your Own Analytics**

Publishers do not need to wait for the next industry study to begin understanding their own audience.

Start with your own data.

Ask:

- How has search traffic changed over the past three years?
- Which stories continue attracting readers through search?
- Which stories are increasingly discovered through newsletters?
- Is direct traffic increasing or decreasing?

- Are readers returning more frequently?
- How many newsletter subscribers become members?
- Which advertisers value engagement rather than impressions?
- Are there changes in reader behavior that deserve closer analysis?

These questions may ultimately prove more valuable than comparing your publication with national averages.

## **This Publisher Brief Is Only the Beginning**

Artificial intelligence is evolving rapidly.

Search behavior will continue changing.

Publisher strategies will continue changing with it.

This brief represents a snapshot of the industry in mid-2026.

Future editions will incorporate new research, additional publisher interviews, updated analytics, and emerging best practices as the industry gains a clearer understanding of how AI is reshaping digital publishing.

No publisher has every answer.

But every publisher benefits when knowledge is shared.

That may prove to be the most valuable resource of all.

## **Author's Note**

This report was prepared independently and was not commissioned or sponsored by any search engine, artificial intelligence company, publisher association, advertising technology company, or nonprofit organization. Any errors are solely the responsibility of the author.

If you have comments about this, you can reach Cubillos at [isaac@cubillos.com](mailto:isaac@cubillos.com).