



2026 UF COLLIER PRIZE: STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

Capacity and Commitment:
Trends in State Government Coverage

SUMMARY

Public oversight is only possible when state actions are visible. When agencies prioritize secrecy over transparency, they attempt to insulate themselves from the very people they are meant to serve.

Accountability journalism seeks to dismantle these barriers by examining the effectiveness of government institutions and public officials, keeping citizens informed of the impact of decisions made in their name.

Last year, we headlined our report [**“Access Denied: Barriers to Information in Accountability Journalism”**](#) to highlight the challenges facing the industry. The findings from this year’s survey reveal that while the industry is still grappling with access to people and records, resource shortages, and hostility to the press, journalists remain dedicated to their cause and are finding new ways to combat these challenges, including using AI to conduct research, data analysis, and organize information.

What this year’s respondents said:

- Lack of access is the greatest challenge to accountability journalism (67%)
- Delays, denials, or excessive costs are common (44%)
- Traditional accountability journalism remains essential and is adapting to new formats (33%)
- AI is embraced as a useful tool that also comes with substantial risks (56%)

When asked about the most important factor in deciding to pursue an investigative story, almost 60% of respondents chose societal or political impact. We also saw an increase (44% to 53%) in the number of journalists who felt that news organizations remain committed to accountability work despite challenges, which includes an increase in disinformation.

The respondents to our 2026 survey consisted exclusively of investigative journalists who regularly report on government accountability. They include reporters, editors, and newsroom leaders from across the country. This year, the makeup of respondents reflects the changing nature of news organizations; a larger percentage work at small local or state-focused newsrooms and nonprofits. Many have no dedicated investigative team, although they are focused on accountability journalism.

The Collier Prize for State Government Accountability exists to promote the important and often invisible work that journalists do. The prize recognizes reporting that uncovers wrongdoing, informs the public, and seeks answers from those in charge. It also shows what’s at stake when journalists can’t access the information they need.

Investigative reporting is foundational to an informed citizenry and thus of democracy. Shining a bright light into dark corners is the noble duty of a free press.

Investigative reporting requires significant time and institutional support to be effective. I endowed this prize to provide a meaningful incentive for newsrooms to prioritize and invest in high-stakes reporting that might otherwise go unpursued.

Nathan S. Collier

Gainesville businessman, philanthropist, and benefactor of the Collier Prize for State Government Accountability

Journalism as a Public Safeguard

Accountability reporting is about more than telling compelling news stories. It's about protecting the public from the bureaucratic overreach and systemic failures that often go unnoticed, as William Skipworth and the New Hampshire Bulletin uncovered in its investigation of the systemic abuse and neglect in New Hampshire's intellectual and developmental disability care system. Winner of the **January 2026 Collier Spotlight** quarterly award, the project uncovered hundreds of credible reports against the state's system between 2023-2025 and more than 100 deaths that occurred during that period.

Journalism remains an industry under pressure. Our findings reflect the broader global trend of growing hostility to those attempting to hold power in check. The New York Times' editorial board has **highlighted efforts across the world** to silence accountability reporters, including efforts in our own backyard from President Donald Trump's administration and other government leaders at the state level. In the **2025 World Press Freedom Index**, compiled by Reporters Without Borders, the U.S. fell two points from the previous year, coming in at 57th out of 180.

These examples demonstrate not only the importance of encouraging accountability journalism but also just how vital the free press is to a healthy democracy.

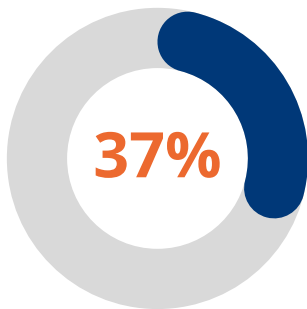


THE STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

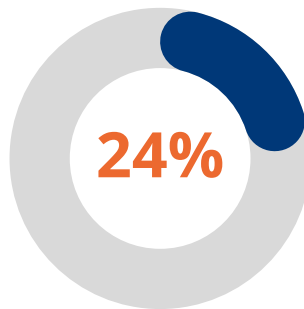
Our 2025 report revealed an industry landscape where resources are strained and public records and interviews with officials are often difficult to access. This poses a significant challenge to journalists striving to keep the public informed.

For example, the 2025 Collier Prize-winning [Prison to Plate investigation](#) by the Associated Press encountered resistance at every turn while reporting on prison labor. The reporters filed public records requests in every state that were mostly denied or ignored.

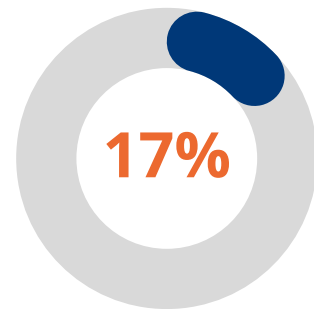
To better understand how things have changed, we reached out to hundreds of journalists focused on government accountability in March 2026. Most of the 80 respondents regularly work on accountability stories and are employed at one of three types of news organizations:



Large state or regional newsrooms with dedicated investigative teams



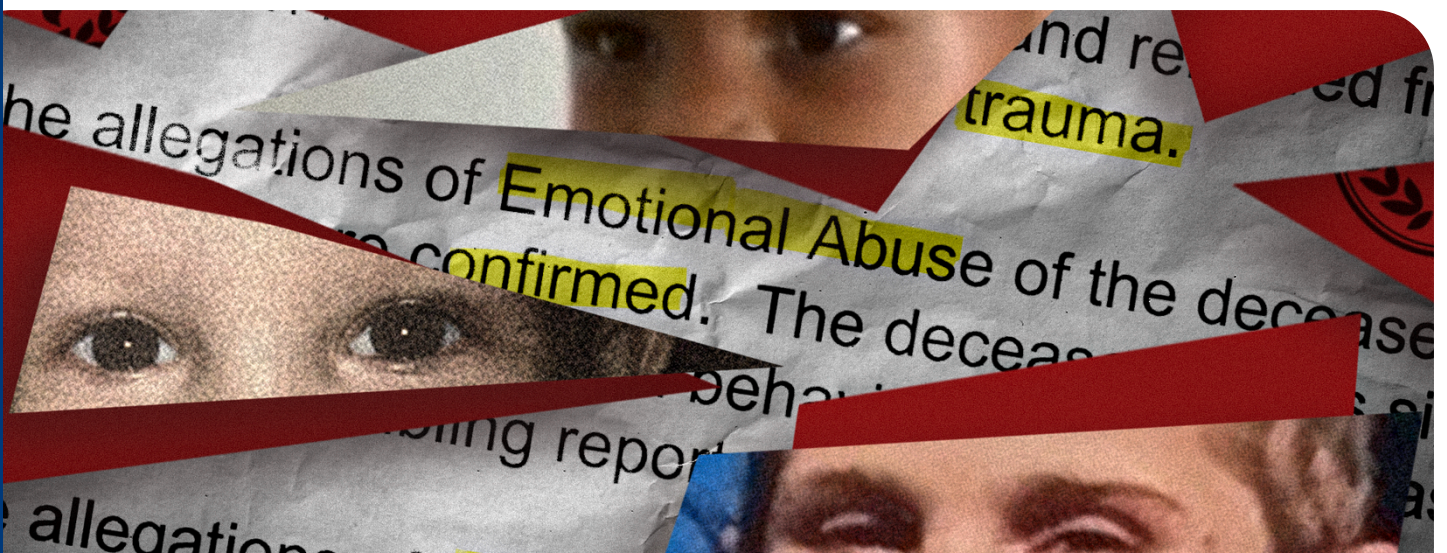
Small local or state newsrooms with no dedicated investigative team



Nonprofits focused on accountability journalism

They include reporters, editors, and newsroom leaders who routinely investigate public institutions and request records and interviews from government officials.

Photo via Texas Public Radio - October 2025 Collier Spotlight Winner

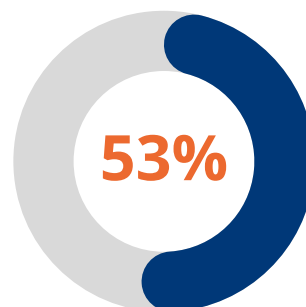


The UF Collier Prize: State of Accountability Journalism findings show that access to records and people continues to undermine journalistic efforts to hold governments accountable. This year, more than half of respondents also cited disinformation and spin among the greatest challenges to accountability, followed by public indifference and threats or intimidation:

**Disinformation and spin makes sharing facts difficult.
Still, many journalists remain committed.**



56% said that disinformation makes accountability journalism more difficult.



53% said they remain committed despite challenges.

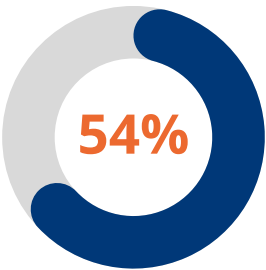


Unsurprisingly, newsrooms are also lacking in resources to tackle deep accountability reporting. Almost three quarters of journalists, the same percentage as last year, said they felt limited by tighter budgets. Only 30% reported newsroom growth in their organization during the last year. The majority said that grant funding would significantly make a difference in their ability to pursue accountability work.

Our results follow a pattern seen elsewhere. Early this year, Steve Waldman, president of Rebuild Local News, **testified before Congress** about the effect AI and tech changes are having on local news coverage and stated that the number of reporters per 100,000 people has plummeted from 40 in 2002 to just 8.2 today. This steep decline in staffing makes it mathematically challenging to hold sprawling and often secretive state government agencies accountable.

COMMITMENT TO GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

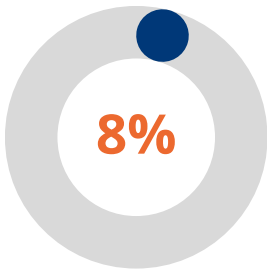
Most news organizations value accountability reporting, but our survey reveals how that varies in practice in newsrooms across the nation:



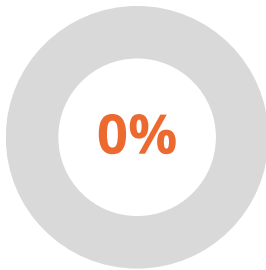
Government accountability is a core focus of their newsrooms' work.



Organization somewhat prioritizes accountability, but it often takes a back seat to other priorities.



Investigative work isn't prioritized enough.



Newsroom places almost no emphasis on accountability.

Given that time, funding, and staff numbers across the industry are limited, choosing which stories to pursue is critical. For more than half of journalists, public interest is still the key driving factor.



59% - Societal or political impact



19% - Editorial interest or leadership priorities



19% - Potential for audience engagement



3% - Competitive advantage over other outlets

The survey asked journalists to rank the most important factors behind those decisions. (Based on percentages of respondents who ranked each factor as No. 1)

AI AND TECHNOLOGY IN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTING

The media and technology landscapes continue to evolve, putting more pressure on journalists to rapidly adjust to emerging technologies and incorporate new tools into their workflows. The rise of new media channels (Substack, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) present opportunities to reach audiences in new ways, while also adding to the existing challenge of managing multiple platforms. As Steven Waldman shared in his Congressional testimony, AI threatens the visibility of local and regional news and disrupts digital traffic, a metric often used to determine readership volume.

This year, however, sentiment regarding changes in the media landscape swung in a slightly more optimistic direction. Compared to 27% last year, 33% of respondents said that accountability journalism remains essential and is adapting to new formats; only 29% felt that the industry is struggling to reach broader audiences in the digital age compared to 33% in 2025.



This represents a subtle reversal from last year and may point to growing confidence in handling these new platforms and tools. Already, 13% of journalists said that their newsroom coverage decisions are being shaped significantly by new media voices while 33% reported a more moderate influence.

On the topic of AI in journalism, an overwhelming majority of journalists believe that AI is a technology with both risks and benefits, helpful for conducting research, or a valuable productivity tool. The most popular platforms are ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and custom in-house tools, while the top uses include research, data analysis, and organization of notes and documents.

These results show that most accountability journalists are already using AI and that relatively few (17%) consider it purely a threat to journalistic credibility and trust.

ACCESS TO PEOPLE AND RECORDS

Journalists continue to have difficulty meeting with key government officials and getting access to records, citing it as the greatest challenge (67%) to holding those in power accountable. Denials, delays, and excessive costs are a common experience, and about 33% have been excluded from a media availability or briefing by an administration or political leader at least once.

Case in Point: Unprepared



Photo via PBS, ProPublica, and the Texas Tribune - 2024 Collier Prize first place winners

The team of reporters behind “Unprepared,” the 2024 Collier Prize First Place winning entry, experienced numerous difficulties in reporting on the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, where they uncovered that states require more active shooter training for students and teachers than they do for law enforcement officers.

Because the government was refusing to release public records related to the event, a collaboration led by Lomi Kriel, Lexi Churchill, and Zach Despart took a two-pronged approach: they would sue the state to have the records released while they worked to uncover what had happened using other investigative methods.

At every turn, officers who had been present at the scene refused to speak on record. In fact, the city of Uvalde issued a gag order to the officers not to comment due to an ongoing internal investigation. The Texas Department of Public Safety and the Uvalde County Sheriff’s Office did not respond to questions about training protocols, and neither would federal law enforcement agencies confirm just how much active shooter training their agents on the scene had received.

But that didn't stop the investigative team. To understand exactly what had happened that tragic day, they reviewed hundreds of hours of body cam audio and video from the officers present, as well as a "trove" of recorded state investigative interviews. They read official training records for at least 116 state and local officers and spoke with experts from training centers to understand what officers should have done according to national standards. By syncing 911 call logs and transcripts with body cam footage, they documented that officers were standing nearby while children were actively pleading for help on the phone.

Their hard work made an impact. Not only did their suit to release public records eventually succeed, but the Texas Legislature passed two bills requiring officers to receive active shooter training and improve multi-agency coordination during emergencies. At the national level, the Department of Justice issued a formal recommendation that officers nationwide receive at least eight hours of active shooter training annually, and multiple key figures involved in the shooting response were removed or resigned.

For more reporting recognized by the Collier Prize and to follow ongoing work in state accountability journalism, visit the Collier Prize site. The winners of the Collier Prize for State Government Accountability are awarded each year at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner.

[Subscribe to the Collier Prize newsletter](#) for information about the [Collier Spotlight](#) quarterly journalism prize and our annual [State of the Journalism Industry](#) survey.

