

How NJ news influencers fit into the local news ecosystem

A mixed-methods look at the people filling local information gaps — and what it means for journalism in New Jersey.

Carrie Brown · Joe Amditis · Tara George

Center for Cooperative Media · Montclair State University

Why look at this now?

News influencers and content creators keep showing up in industry conversation. Search traffic from Google has plunged thanks to AI. We wanted to know what was happening at the **state level** in New Jersey – and where the collaboration opportunities are.

1 in 5

Americans regularly get news from social-media influencers (Pew, 2024)

37%

share among adults under 30

~25%

of Americans now name social media as their preferred source for local news (up from 15% in 2018)

DEFINITION

How we defined "news influencer"

OUR ADAPTATION

Individuals or small groups who regularly post about current events and civic issues in New Jersey on social media.

We interpreted this **broadly**: news-adjacent creators who post about local NJ arts, food, travel, attractions and similar topics also count, as long as the content was often state- or locally-focused. Local newsrooms have long covered these beats.

SCOPE

- Platforms: Instagram, YouTube, TikTok (rising short-form video)
- Floor: 1,000+ followers to capture niche
- Deeper dive on creators with 10,000+ followers

Methods, briefly

manual + automated

content analysis across our influencer set

8

in-depth interviews with creators



Identification methodology lives in the paper – happy to dig in during Q&A.

Eight categories – with real fluidity between them

Lifestyle

Most common. Mostly female. Restaurants, events, attractions, shops, fashion, parenthood – often NJ-rooted.

"Weird" New Jersey

News aggregators on attention-grabbing stories – crime, accidents, local in-jokes (pork roll vs taylor ham). Police-blotter-meets-gossip vibe.

Journalism

Surprisingly small. Few NJ journalists using short-form video for their work. We focused on individuals, not institutional accounts.

Political commentary

Partisan takes on the news. Few focus on NJ politics specifically – most are national, even if the creator lives here.

Specific topics

Small but distinct – e.g. teachers commenting on local education policy, candidates, school board issues.

Sports

NJ sports across all levels – high school to pro. Some cover athletes who don't get traditional press.

Entertainment / comedy

NJ-based but post broadly. Occasional state or local jokes – comedians especially.

Community alerts

Live scanner reports, severe weather, real-time local information.

What the numbers show

3,650

posts analyzed across TikTok,
Instagram, YouTube

16.7%

news, opinion, or educational content

43.1%

informative rhetorical mode

49.0%

high NJ relevance (≥ 0.7)

41 influencers, 8 qualitative interviews. Figures based on current sample; numbers may shift as data collection continues.

What drives them

- Sharing political views – making sure their values and opinions get represented online
- Issue passion – a topic they care deeply about or have personal/professional experience with (teachers are a recurring example)
- Community-building – answering questions, reacting to local events, being a known face online

ANECDOTE

Christina Perez (@christineelliza) posted about a Jersey bakery she liked. The post drove so much new traffic that the bakery hired a new pastry chef – and then turned around and signed Perez to a paid partnership. That's the loop: audience trust → real-world business outcome → revenue.

Most don't identify as journalists

- Mostly **opinion and commentary** – react to and contextualize existing news, rather than break stories
- Some do journalism-adjacent work – fact-checking, meeting reports, original reporting on niche topics
- Attribution to original sources is **inconsistent**
- Few self-identify as journalists – **S.P. Sullivan** is one of the rare exceptions

“*I'm something of a pitch man for good journalism, and I accept that. I'm always looking for how to do the smart-guy version of the dumb shit that people are talking about – chasing traffic while keeping a little journalistic integrity in my heart.*”

– *S.P. Sullivan, NJ.com*

Monetization is **wildly varied** and unpredictable

No two creators we talked to were monetizing the same way – and almost none could forecast their income reliably from one month to the next.

Full-time + brand deals

Perez (Pepsi), Tripucka (5 FTEs + benefits).
Pay-per-post, sometimes exclusivity. The largest dollar amounts in the sample.

Subscriber-supported

Carducci's Substack has 100k+ followers, under 3k paid – but enough to support her family as a single mom.

Side income + day job

Clarke earned \$13k from content in 2024 and \$25k in 2025, but kept her restaurant shifts. Most teacher-creators look like this.

Passion project, no revenue

Devarona (BobbyzWorld) makes nothing from his NJ-politics explainers. Earned ~\$1,000 once for a DNC video. Doesn't try to scale it.

Trust gets built fast – and costs creators something

- Creators build **trust quickly** – much faster than legacy outlets typically can
- They're **attuned to their audiences** – admit uncertainty, correct mistakes, answer good-faith comments and questions
- The flip side:** trolls and negative comments are damaging to mental health. Almost everyone we interviewed said they have to step back at times to protect themselves.

christineelliza

CATEGORY

Lifestyle / community. 26, ex-NJ.com social staffer turned full-time creator.

WHY SHE STANDS OUT

- Quit her corporate job — matched her old salary year one, doubled it year two.
- Vetted by Pepsi as “brand safe.” Local-business partnerships drive measurable foot traffic.
- Organizes real-life meetups; her audience expects DM access to her.

“I started this as a weekend hobby — sharing my adventures very authentically. It kind of gained some traction, and now I do it full-time.”

S.P. Sullivan

CATEGORY

Legacy journalist. NJ.com senior investigative reporter, embedded in the social/video team since summer 2024.

WHY HE STANDS OUT

- One of the only NJ journalists posting original reporting natively to short-form social – not just promoting articles.
- Won a Poynter award for a TikTok investigation into when the American Dream Mall would open.
- Two tracks: stories he reports straight to social, and adaptations of colleagues' work for audiences who'd never see it otherwise.

“Instagram is like the mall, YouTube is like Times Square, and TikTok is like the Port Authority bus terminal at 2 a.m.”

two NJ teachers

HANDLES

Kristen Clarke @TeacherPayWithK (left-leaning, Long Branch math teacher and union organizer) · Rhiannon Mindas @TeacherInNJ (right-leaning, elementary school teacher).

WHY THEY MATTER

- Subject-matter expertise built audiences without either of them claiming the “journalist” label.
- Clarke earned \$13k from content in 2024, \$25k in 2025 – still keeps her restaurant shifts.
- Both cite primary sources on camera; Clarke uses district pay-scale screenshots as her green screen.

“Thank you for this information. You keep me up to date on things that I otherwise wouldn’t have known about.” – DM to Mindas

Biggest takeaways

FINDING 01

In NJ, **not many creators** are well-suited for newsroom partnership or playing a meaningful role in meeting state and local information needs. *NJ may be unusual in this.* Some, just not a lot.

FINDING 02

There's **real opportunity** for people who want to do this kind of work – students, recent graduates, more journalists. The space isn't full.

FINDING 03

Newsrooms have **a lot to learn from creators** – and creators are already contributing to the local information landscape, whether legacy newsrooms recognize them or not.

DISCUSSION

OVER TO YOU

Questions & conversation

Read the full paper at jamditis.com/jawnpaper/njinfluencers

Carrie Brown · Joe Amditis · Tara George