

**Institute for
Nonprofit News**

From Rust to Resilience: Accomplishments, impact and areas for improvement

Summary

Our INN-led member collaboration, "[From Rust to Resilience: What climate change means for Great Lakes Cities](#)," produced 12 stories and reached about 103,272 unique visitors across six outlets participating in the partnership. With the help of the Patch distribution partnership INN previously established, the stories in this series reached more than 30,000 additional unique visitors across the Midwest. We also participated in a special week of collaborative coverage organized by Covering Climate Now, a global journalism partnership that included more than 400 newsrooms.

This series was published April 20 - May 1, right at the start of the major COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, it didn't get as much play as we would have hoped. However, our members have reported that these stories were well received and established a baseline of information for reporters to continue pursuing these issues moving forward.

"From Rust to Resilience" was a collaborative reporting project that included six members of the Institute for Nonprofit News (Belt Magazine, The Conversation, Ensia, Great Lakes Now at Detroit Public Television, MinnPost and Side Effects Public Media) as well as WUWM Milwaukee. The Water Main was an engagement partner and Indiana Public Broadcasting collaborated with Side Effects Public Media, a collaborative outlet in itself. Additional grant funding was provided by the Connected Coastlines initiative of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Introduction

Climate change affects every person on this planet. In the Midwest and beyond, our members provide strong environmental coverage. Based on a conversation with the editor of a member newsroom about potential collaborations, we decided to pursue a project about the Great Lakes.

As with any collaboration, we wanted to help facilitate reporting that told a broader story than any individual outlet could provide.

How did we find this data?

For content distribution, we searched Meltwater, a media monitoring service, for mentions of the Institute for Nonprofit News. We also did searches for “rust to resilience” and “great lakes” to round out our results.

For social distribution, we searched each story on the inn.org/rust-to-resilience landing site and on each outlet’s website. Using the CrowdTangle browser extension, we were able to see where this story appeared on social media sites, checking two weeks after each story was published.

For collaborators’ feedback, we sent out a Google Form and requested specific data from a participant at each organization. Most of the partners filled out the form. We did not receive a response from INN member MinnPost or non-member WUWM.

Why did we do this collaboration?

We believe that collaboration can help lead to greater attention, reach and impact. And by bringing journalists together, we help create a bigger pot of resources to tell complex stories in a detailed and responsible way. We also want people to have access to information that is critical to their lives. And we want nonprofit newsrooms to have as few barriers to entry as possible for editorial collaborations, so we’re here to help. For more, read [our blog post here](#).

How did we do this collaboration?

This project launched with an in-person meeting in Detroit at the end of September 2019 and was refined over the next several months.

The project was published during two weeks, starting April 20, 2020 and ending May 1, 2020.

The phases of the project:

- Identify and reach out to potential members
- Arrange regular Zoom meetings with partners
- Agree on communication protocol and tools
- Prepare, reach agreement and sign MOU outlining terms of partnership
- Reach consensus on title and logo
- Draft editorial calendar
- Create distribution plan
- Build landing page on INN website
- Create social media and promotion plan

- Share content with distribution partners
- Publish

How was this collaboration funded?

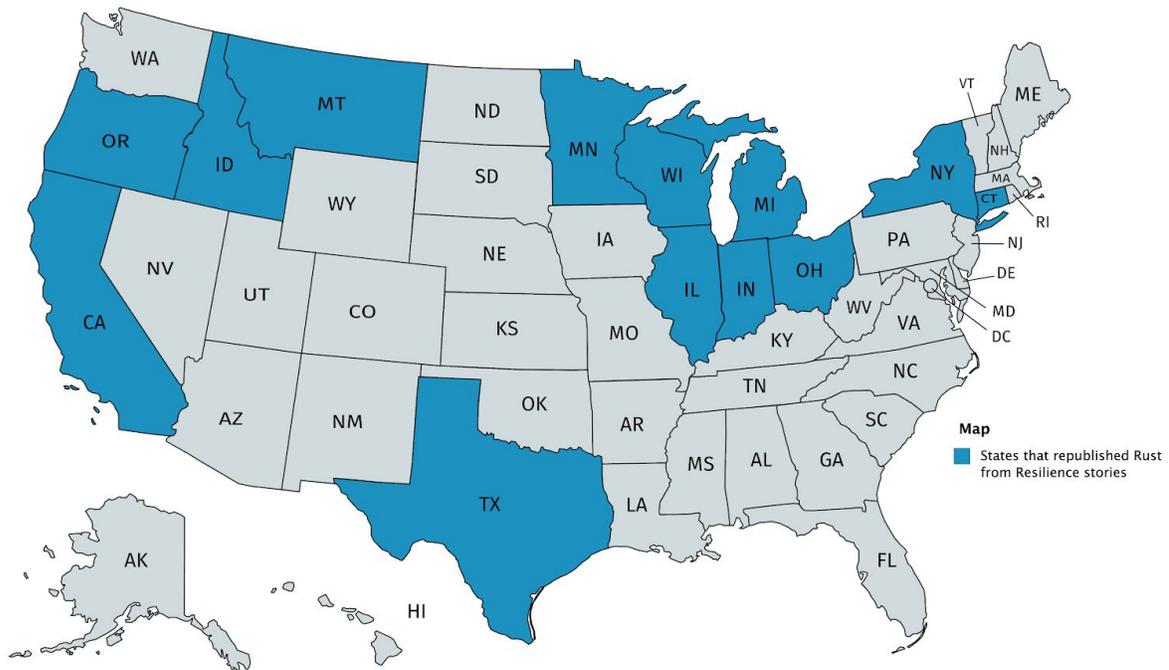
The reporting project was funded by the participating newsrooms, with support from INN's Amplify News Project and additional funding from the Connected Coastlines initiative of INN member the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded by INN's general support funders, as well as project-specific grants from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Joyce Foundation.

Distribution

The 12 stories that were published as part of this series were republished 93 times. Of those republications, slightly less than half were on Patch sites. Further information about our partnership with Patch is provided below.

Great Lakes Now, one of the project partners, republished all 11 text-based stories. MPR News, a sister organization of project partner The Water Main, republished five stories; seven other outlets republished two stories.

Stories were republished across 13 states and in four national outlets: Coastal News Today, project funder the Pulitzer Center, The National Interest and Yahoo! News all republished stories. INN member Science Friday produced a radio story based on one of the partner's published stories.



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Six INN members republished at least one story from this series: Great Lakes Now, MinnPost, Pulitzer Center, WFYI and Wausau Pilot and Review. Partners also promoted this series heavily on social media (see below).

Since this series focused on the Great Lakes, it is not surprising that recirculation was overwhelmingly Midwestern: 72% of all recirculation was in the Midwest. Excluding Patch, Midwestern outlets made up 54% of republication.

Most republication was from local outlets: 44% of non-Patch republications were from local outlets; 18% of non-Patch republications were from public radio outlets.

One of the 12 stories is a TV program, which has different metrics than digital or print stories. Stations in three states (New York, Michigan, Indiana) have shown the program so far. The stations that ran the program: WNED-TV in Buffalo, New York; WDCQ-TV in Flint-Saginaw, Michigan; WDCQ-TV in Flint-Saginaw, Michigan; WDCQDT2 in Flint-Saginaw, Michigan; WCNV in Syracuse, New York; WNIT-DT2 in South Bend - Elkhart, Indiana; WPBS in Watertown, New York.

There were 103,272 unique visitors to the websites of the six participating news organizations for which we have data:

The Conversation US: 25,190 unique visitors (two stories)

Ensia: 56,250 unique visitors (two stories)

Great Lakes Now/DPT: 9,200 unique visitors (on the web-based story)

Indiana Public Broadcasting (for Side Effects Public Media): 360 unique visitors (one story)

Belt Media: 500 unique visitors (two stories)

MinnPost: 11,775 unique visitors (two stories)

Using Meltwater, we can estimate the number of unique visitors to a website per month. The sites that recirculated content from the partnership have a total monthly audience of about 126 million unique visitors. While it's certain that nowhere near that many people saw these stories, even 1% of that audience would mean over one million people could have seen a story from this collaboration.

Additional outlets, for which we don't have data, also republished the work. For example, Ensia noted, "We're also publishing to Apple News and other news aggregation apps (as I'm assuming others are, too)." Great Lakes Now reported that Signal Magazine — a magazine that goes to some 54,000 PBS members — recently promoted the series.

Distribution by story ([view full breakdown](#)):

Story	Outlet	# of unique outlets that recirculated	# of unique states where the story was recirculated
A future with less coal	MinnPost	6	5
After the flood	Belt	6	5
Climate change comes to Duluth	Ensia	1	1
From Rust to Resilience	Ensia	10	6
Green and growing	WUWM	5	4
Minnesota Power	MinnPost	6	5

Shelter against extremes	The Conversation	22	12
Single Systems	Great Lakes Now	6	5
Sustainable Power	Belt	5	4
Third Coast' at risk	IPR for Side Effects	6	3
Threats to water quality	The Conversation	16	10

Patch distribution

Through a distribution arrangement established in 2019, INN was able to help our members share their work with Patch's local news sites. The stories ran on every Patch outlet in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, 170 sites in total.

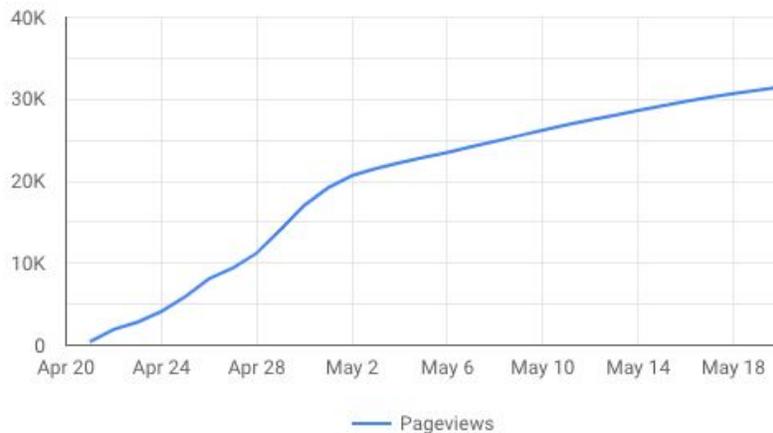
Overall, stories from the INN series gained 30,423 unique pageviews from 27,857 users on Patch sites. Three stories were also featured in the national Across America Patch channel.

The top three performing stories on Patch sites were:

- "Climate Change Threatens Drinking Water Across Great Lakes" from The Conversation with around 6,000 unique page views;
- "In 'Climate Refuge' City Of Duluth, Fight Brews Over Utility" from MinnPost with around 4,300 unique page views;
- "Climate Change Threatens Great Lakes Shoreline With Erosion" from Side Effects with around 3,500 unique page views.

Story views have increased steadily in the month since the stories were published, showing that interest continues to build in the series. We expect the stories, because they have a shelf-life, will continue to accumulate audience in the months to come:

Cumulative Pageviews



Patch was able to fill information gaps in local communities that wouldn't have otherwise been able to cover this story; almost every story in this series ran in Wisconsin, Ohio, Illinois and Michigan Patch local sites, totaling 44 republications.

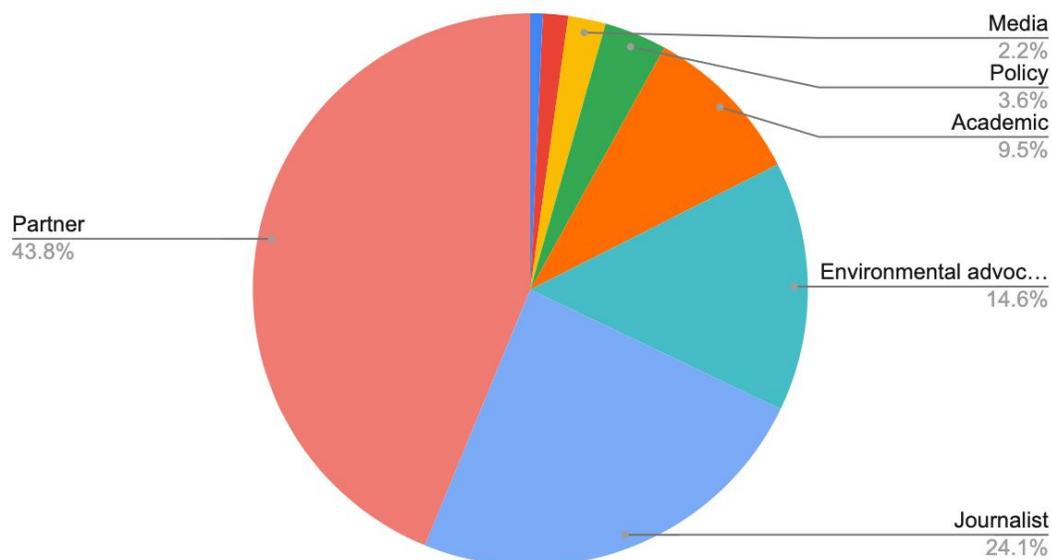
Social

Of the 137 tweets using the [#RusttoResilience](#) hashtag, 91 — or 66% — were from members of the project (either the outlet itself or the journalists who produced these stories). Both Ensia and Belt Magazine shared multiple stories from this series.

The reach of the [#RusttoResilience](#) hashtag was over 1.5 million, according to Meltwater social search. While most of the posts were from the U.S., tweets about this project were posted in Canada, France, Germany and Mexico.

The partners in this series — all publishing partners and their journalists as well as production partners INN and the Pulitzer Center — comprised most of the social sharing with the hashtag. External journalists, environmental advocates and academics also contributed to making this story visible.

Breakdown of #RusttoResilience social sharing



Using Crowdtangle, we tracked the social sharing of individual stories. Some standouts to highlight:

- Both of The Conversation's stories appeared on Reddit's r/Environment channel, which has 667,904 followers.
- MinnPost's climate refuge story had a lot of engagement from Minnesota environmental organizations, primarily on Facebook (MN350: Building a Climate Movement in Minnesota, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, We Support Minnesota Mining, Water Warriors - Twin Cities). It also appeared on Reddit's r/Duluth, which has 6,918 followers, and r/Minnesota United States, which has 88,958 followers.
- Arnolt Center for Investigative Journalism shared Great Lakes Now's sewer water infrastructure story.

Feedback

Because of COVID-19, we didn't generate as much reach as we originally expected. However, the work that we did was substantial, and readers took notice. Some listeners and readers thanked us for bringing awareness to the issue. There was also a lot of discussion from our audience about how they think state and local governments should address the problem.

Some feedback our participants gave us:

- "So much of the climate change story focuses on sea level rise and impacts on coastal communities. Thank you for shining a light on the impacts our changing climate is having on inland communities surrounding the Great Lakes. I especially appreciated the focus on what cities are doing to adapt."
- "Positive. Especially our Chicago segment. The HABS segment was circulated widely in the scientific community"

Participating news organizations rated the following on a 1 - 5 scale:

Overall success of this collaboration for your newsroom: 4.33

Quality of journalism overall: 4.5

Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom: 4.5

Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.): 4.17

Ability to get questions answered: 4.33

Ability to get concerns resolved: 4.67

Distribution process: 4.3

Pickup by news organizations outside the collaboration: 3.17

Likelihood that you will follow up on this story: 4.17

Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future: 4.7

Observations for the future

Publication of the content from this collaboration was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, on April 22, 2020. By that time, the world was in the midst of a pandemic, and news coverage was understandably dominated with coverage of COVID-19. Nevertheless, we were surprised that the larger INN network wasn't more interested in the stories about climate change in Great Lakes cities. We believe that this is a critical, ongoing story and that our work on the subject will be referenced by reporters and others in the years ahead.

Collaborations such as this help develop trusting relationships among nonprofit newsrooms that can lead to future projects, with or without INN's involvement. This, in turn, strengthens nonprofit news.

This project also shows that INN's work with third-party distribution partners not only helps our members grow their organic audience — it also helps expand the reach of a specific collaboration.

During outreach for this project, we heard back from more members and non-members than in the past, even if they didn't recirculate the content. Publishers and newsrooms seem to be starting to recognize INN-member collaborations and are interested in hearing more.