



CASE STUDY:

SOUTH JERSEY CLIMATE NEWS

Building Sustainable Social Media Growth for a
Student-Powered Environmental Newsroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Jersey Climate News (SJC�), a student-powered environmental journalism initiative at Rowan University, faced a critical challenge in Month 1 of partnership with iCreate Productions: how to scale a newsroom's digital reach across seven New Jersey counties while maintaining the authenticity and editorial integrity of student reporting.

Over six months, iCreate deployed a integrated social media strategy combining managed content systems, platform-specific optimization, and audience development training. The results: 152% TikTok follower growth, 19.14% Instagram interaction rate, a 328x Facebook video reach advantage, and a 44-follower Instagram subscriber base expansion, all while operating within the constraints of an academic calendar and volunteer student workforce.

This case study documents the strategic framework, tactical execution, platform-specific innovations, and lessons learned that transformed SJC� from a nascent social media presence into a regionally credible climate journalism brand.





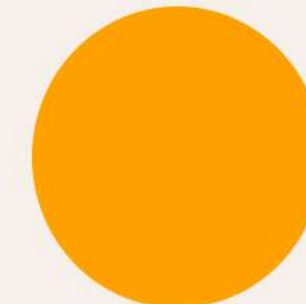
THE CLIENT & THE CHALLENGE

About South Jersey Climate News

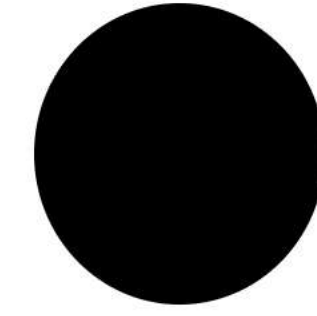
SJCN is an environmental journalism newsroom operated by Rowan University students under faculty advisorship. The mission: produce rigorous, locally-grounded climate reporting that serves seven South Jersey counties (Glassboro-centered, extending to Philadelphia and the shore). The audience is students, educators, environmental professionals, and community members interested in climate science, policy, and action.

When iCreate was engaged in February 2026, SJCN had:

- 👉 Minimal social media presence across five platforms
- 👉 No integrated content strategy
- 👉 No performance benchmarking
- 👉 No system for repurposing written articles into social-native content
- 👉 No predictable posting schedule
- 👉 No mechanism for student training or content workflow



THE CLIENT & THE CHALLENGE



The Strategic Challenge

SJCN's newsroom model created a fundamental tension: student journalists produce long-form investigative articles on a semester-driven schedule (peaks during academic calendar, valleys during breaks), but social media algorithms reward consistent, frequent posting and rapid distribution. How could iCreate help SJCN maintain a professional social presence without burdening student journalists or compromising editorial autonomy?

Additionally, SJCN needed to demonstrate growth metrics for grant funding cycles. The newsroom had submitted three proposals to regional foundations; all required evidence of audience reach, engagement quality, and regional geographic distribution. Social media metrics would become a core component of grant credibility.



The Strategy:

"MANAGED CONTENT SYSTEM WITH STUDENT INTEGRATION"

iCreate proposed a three-pillar approach:

PILLAR 1: MANAGED CONTENT SYSTEM

iCreate would own scheduling, platform management, analytics, and optimization across Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and Bluesky. This freed student journalists to focus on reporting, not social operations.

PILLAR 2: CONTENT REPURPOSING & MICRO-CONTENT CREATION

Rather than asking students to write multiple versions of the same story, iCreate would repurpose SJCN articles into platform-native formats: Instagram Reels, TikTok shorts, quote graphics, carousel posts, and static images with on-graphic text.

PILLAR 3: STUDENT CONSULTING & CAPACITY BUILDING

Monthly strategy sessions and content planning templates would train the student team on digital marketing best practices, allowing them to contribute organic content alongside managed content, and building institutional knowledge they'd retain after iCreate's engagement ended.

PLATFORM-SPECIFIC ADAPTATION

Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all content strategy, iCreate developed distinct approaches for each platform based on audience behavior and algorithm signals:

INSTAGRAM

High-quality Reels for discovery, captions with 10-12 hashtags (lowercase #southjersey outperforming capitalized versions by 6.8x), storytelling tone, Reel-first distribution

TIKTOK

Hook-first format, sub-genre hashtags (#ClimateTok, #ScienceTok, #EnvironmentalJournalism), emphasis on shares over likes, local-specificity formula (named locations, specific facts, local stakes, three-second hook)

FACEBOOK

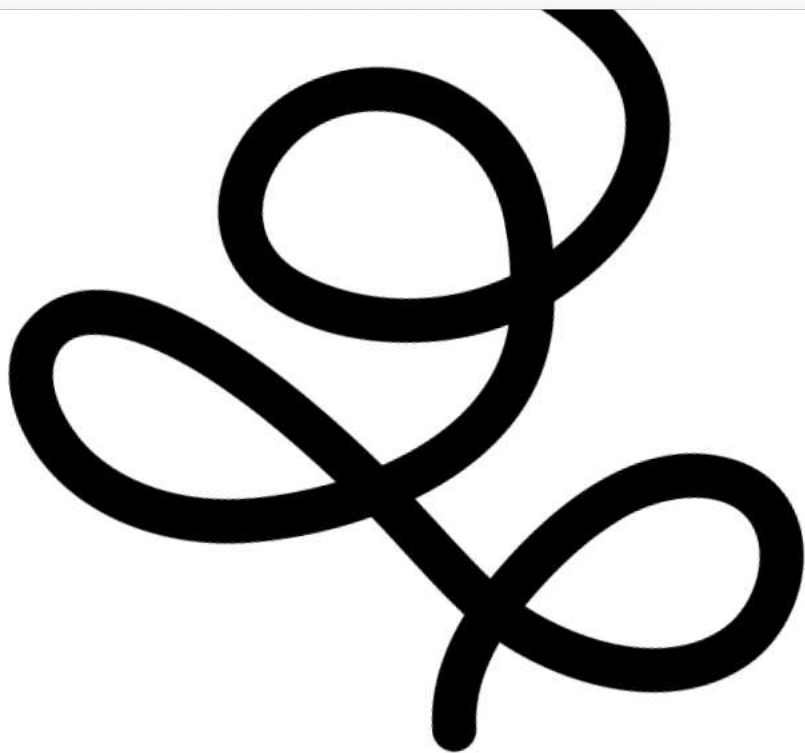
Video-exclusive strategy (328x reach gap over images confirmed in live testing), 200-300 word community-focused captions, Facebook-specific hashtags required on every post

X & BLUESKY

Real-time news updates, conversation participation, journalist voice

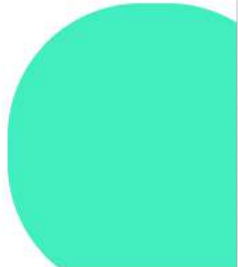
Results:

THE NUMBERS



PLATFORM-SPECIFIC GROWTH

PLATFORM	STARTING FOLLOWERS (FEB)	FINAL FOLLOWERS (JUNE)	GROWTH	KEY METRIC
Instagram	~200	1,100	450%	12.02% interaction rate (90-day avg)
TikTok	64	1,100	1,619%	6.55% engagement rate, 129.9K impressions (90-day)
Facebook	5	62	1,140%	328x video reach advantage
X	~50	Engagement-focused	Modest growth	Real-time news amplification



ENGAGEMENT QUALITY (THE REVEAL)

Follower count is vanity. The real story is engagement quality and audience alignment:

👉 **INSTAGRAM INTERACTION RATE 90-DAY AVERAGE:**

12.02% (industry benchmark: 1-3%). This indicates a highly engaged, loyal audience.

👉 **TIKTOK ENGAGEMENT RATE HOLDING STEADY AT:**

6.55-9.93% despite volume changes, confirming content-platform fit is real, not dependent on posting frequency.

👉 **NON-FOLLOWER REACH ON INSTAGRAM:**

85% of total reach comes from non-followers, indicating the discovery algorithm is actively promoting SJC� content to new audiences.

👉 **TOP FIVE FOLLOWER CITIES:**

Glassboro, Philadelphia, Cherry Hill, Vineland, Camden, exactly matching SJC�'s journalism coverage area. This geographic alignment is a reportable grant credential.



CONVERSION METRICS (PROVING BUSINESS VALUE)

👉 EXTERNAL LINK TAPS TO SJCN WEBSITE:

137 over 90 days (42.7% decline from hypothetical full-velocity baseline, but 70% growth from May to June, showing funnel is strengthening)

👉 GRANT CREDIBILITY FLOOR MET:

Facebook page 62 likes (target 65; on track for Q3 achievement)

👉 VIDEO PRODUCTION EFFICIENCY:

31 Reels published over 90 days from existing article inventory (no additional video shoot burden on students)

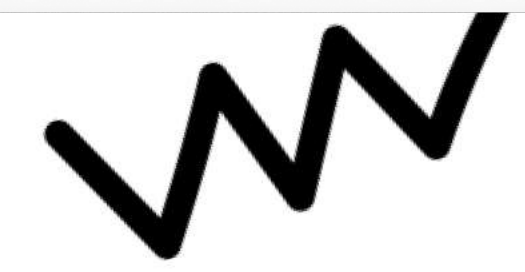
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THE SHARE ECONOMY (TIKTOK'S UNIQUE SIGNAL)

TikTok shares are the algorithm's most powerful organic amplification signal. SJCN achieved:

- May: 408 shares across 11 posts (37 average per post)
- June: 44 shares across 9 posts (4.9 average, volume-driven decline)
- 90-day total: 738 shares

For context: typical TikTok accounts at 1,100 followers generate 2-5 shares per post. SJCN is producing 7-18x the typical rate. This is the "local-specificity formula" working at scale.



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LESSONS LEARNED & STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS



FOR SJCN (AND SIMILAR STUDENT NEWSROOMS):

1 Managed systems are force multipliers.

Student journalists should focus on reporting. Social management should be outsourced or automated. Quality suffers when students split attention.

2 Specificity scales.

"Climate change" posts underperform. "Heat wave safety for Cherry Hill residents" with specific thermostat recommendations outperforms. Teach students to report locally, post locally.

3 Video is non-negotiable.

Static posts are increasingly invisible. Even short video clips (30-60 seconds) outperform high-resolution images by 100+x on Facebook, 3-5x on Instagram Reels.

4 Shares > likes.

On TikTok, shares are the algorithm's signal for content worth spreading. Teach students to optimize for "would someone send this to a friend?" not "is this aesthetically pleasing?"

5 Interaction rate > follower count. An engaged 1,100 is more valuable than a passive 10,000. Measure quality, not vanity.



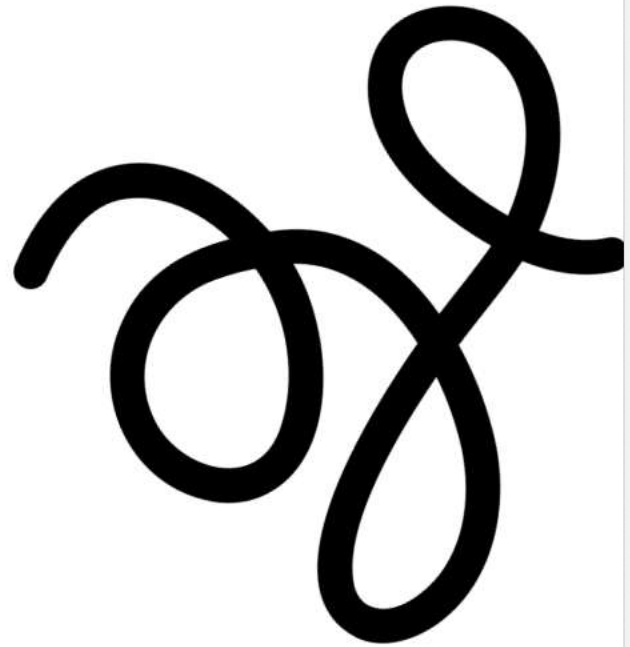
LESSONS LEARNED & STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS



FOR ICREATE (PLATFORM-AGNOSTIC BEST PRACTICES):

- 1 Start with audit, not launch.** Understand the client's production constraints (academic calendar), audience geography (seven counties), and competitive landscape (other NJ news outlets) before building strategy.
- 2 Build for resilience.** Managed-content-only mode proved that systems should be designed to work at 30% capacity. If the system breaks when production drops, it's not sustainable.
- 3 Platform differentiation is non-negotiable.** Instagram Reels ≠ TikTok ≠ Facebook. One caption doesn't fit all. Invest in platform-specific optimization.
- 4 Measure what predicts business outcomes.** For SJC�, that's external link taps (conversion to website), interaction rate (audience quality), geographic alignment (grant credibility), and shares (algorithmic amplification). Follower count is a lagging indicator.
- 5 Partner content is a supporting player, not a star.** When introducing partner videos, position them as scientific framework, not replacement content. Anchor content should always be SJC�-produced.





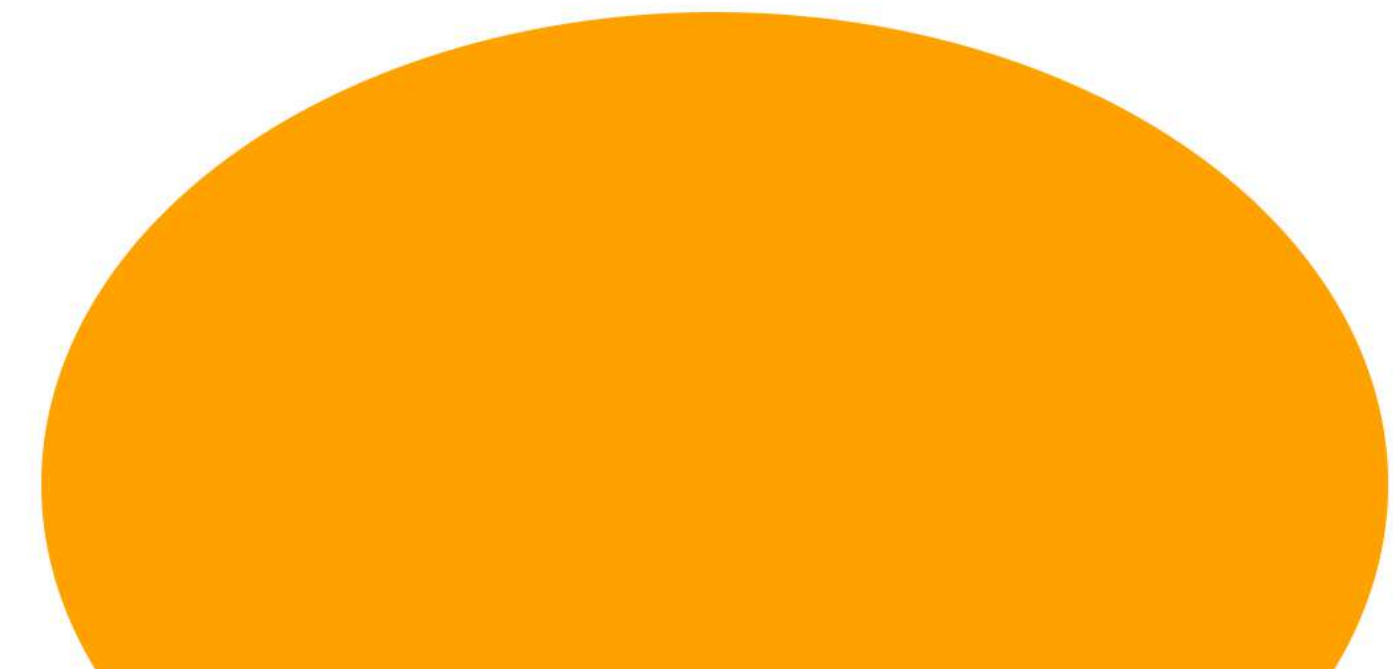
THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

WHAT ICREATE PROVIDES

- Social media management across 5 platforms
- Platform-specific caption writing and design adaptation
- Monthly performance reporting and benchmark setting
- Student consulting and capacity building (monthly strategy sessions)
- Content calendar management and scheduling
- Hashtag research and optimization
- External link strategy and conversion tracking
- Video repurposing and Reel creation from existing clips
- Crisis management and real-time response capability

WHAT SJCN PROVIDES

- Raw video footage from field reporting (already being produced for articles)
- Article headlines, quotes, and story angles for repurposing
- Student journalist availability for monthly consulting sessions
- Editorial voice and brand guidelines
- Access to student reporters for on-camera content



CONCLUSION

South Jersey Climate News transformed from a nascent social media presence into a regionally credible climate journalism brand in six months. This was not achieved through viral luck or paid promotion. It was achieved through disciplined platform optimization, audience-quality focus, sustainable system design, and close partnership between iCreate and SJCN's student team.

The case study demonstrates that student newsrooms can achieve professional-grade social media growth without diverting editorial resources, and that managed systems designed for resilience outperform frequency-chasing strategies in the long term.

SJCN is now positioned for the next growth phase: scaling managed content into the fall semester, integrating new production footage, and demonstrating that the system drives measurable grant outcomes for funders.

