
The Death and Rebirth of Local News - Day 2



Mark Silverman

About Me

Top editor at newspapers in Detroit, Nashville, Louisville and Gannett News Service, corporate news executive for nation's largest newspaper chain.



Sources:

- Poynter Institute for Media Studies
- Medill University
- Nieman Media Lab & Neiman Reports
- Pew Research Center
- Price Waterhouse
- Pre-publication review of *Hedged* by Margot Susca
- Interviews with editors, publishers, academics, and local politicians and business leaders



Week 1

- **Day One: The Business of Publishing**

Week 2

- **Day Two: Journalism and Communities**

Week 3

- **Day Three: A Hopeful Future**

Today: Community Impact

- **Diminished Newspapers**
- **Ghost Newspapers**
- **News Deserts**

And some rays of **hope**...

The Issues:

- Diminished newspapers – fewer resources, less coverage
- Ghost newspapers – Newspapers without their own staff, little coverage
- News Deserts – Areas with no local news outlets
- We'll look about why we should care.

—
“I had to knock on my neighbor’s
door to see if he won an election last night.”

-- Ellen Clegg

Retired opinion page editor

The Boston Globe

DIMINISHED NEWSPAPERS





The Providence Journal

Case Study:

Providence Journal-Bulletin

- Rhode Island 39 cities and towns
- Handful of bedroom communities in SE Massachusetts
- Population just over 1 million

The Providence Journal

- It's a parochial place
- 32 community school districts & four regional districts
- State police, individual police departments, fire departments.
- Plus much more to cover



The Providence Journal

- Newport – tourism, yachting
- Post-industrial decay in Blackstone Valley
- Providence
 - Called the “Most Corrupt City in America” by the New York Times &
 - “The Model for Urban Renewal” by the Wall Street Journal
- Mafia – The headquarters of the New England Mafia – the Patricia family with ties to the Genovese and Colombo families in New York.



The Providence Journal

2000:

- Almost 300 news staffers
- Six local bureaus with 6-7 reporters and an editor in each
- Daily page of news for each bureau's coverage area
- Every government meeting and most community meetings covered
- Plus daily pages of locally produced state news



The Providence Journal

- Four state government reporters
- Two Washington reporters
- Investigative team
- General assignment reporters
- Beat coverage: Local school reporters, higher education reporter, health, religion, science, transportation, environment and more



The Providence Journal,

- High School and recreation league games, plus colleges and Boston pro teams
- Large entertainment and features staff
- Large local business staff
- Separate opinion staff

The newspaper made an impact



The Providence Journal

Examples of investigations

- Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court resigns amid ethics issues uncovered by the newspaper
- Ten years later, another chief justice indicted following newspaper reporting.



More Examples ...

- Nightclub fire, deaths, and investigation into lax codes
- Codes and laws changed
- Public authority corruption – housing funds
- Abuses in the jewelry industry – laws changed, lives protected
- Pioneer in database reporting

2023:

The Providence Journal

- 25 newsroom employees, no bureaus, few editors
- 3 p.m. deadlines – no late news or sports in print, little online
- A local school superintendent is fired and It's not in the newspaper or Web site for two days
- Local crime often goes unreported, or summarized regionally days later
- Death notices are late. Traditions like publishing births and real estate transactions are no more.



The Providence Journal

- **2000 Circulation**
 - 163,000 daily
 - 180,000 Sunday
- **2022 Circulation:**
 - 27,000 daily
 - 33,000 Sunday
- Less print content and less website content
- Web traffic peaked during COVID; now flat or down





“If something happened in your town, or elsewhere in the state that was important, it was in the Journal the next day.”

- **Vincent A. “Buddy” Cianci**

One just-retired editor:

“People complain because every school board, every zoning decision, every baby born in the state ... it was all there to see in the past. Not anymore.”

“And they miss the big stories, the stories that changed things.”

“I’ll say to somebody, what do you think of that bond issue? Or What do you think of that new legislation? And I get a **blank look.**”

- **Neil Steinberg**, president of the Rhode Island Foundation

- 3 TV newsrooms
- 1 for-profit Web site (GoLocal/Providence), several special-interest sites, talk radio
- NPR local news
- Boston Globe now provides some Rhode Island coverage
- Missing: Daily coverage of local governments, hospitals, schools, businesses, etc., in-depth, investigative reports





Case Study: Daily Advertiser Lafayette, LA

- Third-largest MSA in Louisiana
- Population: 478,000

daily advertiser

- “Best Food City in America” – home of creole and cajun cooking
- Anchors an economic corridor between New Orleans and Houston
- Hub for oil and gas industry jobs.



daily advertiser

- Regional health care center
- Aerospace engineering center
- The University of Louisiana at Lafayette: a major source of pride – and an economic engine for the region.



daily advertiser

- People care about their communities, their neighbors.
- There are dozens of small communities, each with their own recreation and cultural activities.
- There are public schools and private schools and churches upon churches. There's hunting and fishing and chess clubs and debate societies



2000s

daily advertiser

- Approximately 17 news staff – small even back then
- Reporters covered local government, schools, churches
- Births, deaths, weddings ... social life
- Features and Food coverage
- Aggressive college and local sports coverage
- State government coverage



2023

- “Handful” of regional news staffers -- shared with other newspapers
- No reporters specifically assigned to Lafayette
- Regional reporters track multiple communities – rarely cover daily events
- No investigations, in-depth reports on Lafayette.
- Regional reporters don't know local newsmakers, issues, or residents' interests

daily advertiser



2023

daily advertiser

- Little or no follow-up on issues or events
- Many days: ZERO local stories.
- News space filled with national or regional stories from company's other newspapers plus press releases.



2023

daily advertiser

- 85 percent print circulation decline since 2015
- Digital subscribers: 1,421 in 2015; 468 in 2023



Homeowner Jack Lewis

“They don’t cover the news. My taxes went up a lot and I didn’t know anything about it until I got a bill. No warning. **No information about why or for what.**”

Resident **Becky Adams**

“They closed the clinic near me on some weekends. We **didn't know where to go** when my father hit his head.”

Joshua Benton, director of Nieman Lab and Lafayette native:

“When the local paper stops reporting, there’s often no one else to take its place. Everyone gets a little less informed about the world around them.”

“The local TV stations, while nothing special, keep up with the usual TV basics. A local nonprofit outlet ... the Current does good work but its small size means it only picks its spots.”

2023

daily advertiser

The Baton Rouge Advocate, an hour away, launched a Lafayette edition that contains a smattering of Lafayette stories. It outsells the Advertiser in Lafayette.

Benton: **“Speaking as a reader, (The Advertiser) is an abomination.”**

Arizona Daily Star

- Tuscon, AZ
- Population: 543,000 in city, 1.1 million in metro
- Second largest city in Arizona
- University of Arizona
- Milder climate than Phoenix, less expensive
- 2nd highest crime rate in West



Arizona Daily Star

- 50-50 partnership between Lee Enterprises and Gannett
- Previously: Joint operating agreement. Tucson citizen closed in 2009
- Circulation 38,000 daily, 40,000 Sunday
- News staff 15 years ago: 120
- News staff today: About 30
- “Cannabis writer/podcast host”



Arizona Daily Star

2022:

- \$47 million in revenue
- \$9 million in profit



Consolidation, regionalization diminishes content

Gannett/Gatehouse owns eight newspapers in Tennessee:

Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, Oak Ridge, Murfreesboro, Clarksville, Jackson, Gallatin

Range from the south's fastest growing city in Nashville to the small town of Gallatin

Gannett/Gatehouse Merger:

Eliminated half its newsroom jobs in the past FOUR years

- 2004: Nashville newsroom 200, Memphis newsroom 190 (?), Knoxville 140, Murfreesboro 12, Jackson 20, others had very small staffs.
- Now: Just over 110 in the state
- 60 in Nashville -- half work on regional coverage planning, Web production, other non-local functions
- "Newsletter strategist," "audience engagement" teams replace jobs held by reporters, editors

- Memphis about 35 staffers; Jackson 2
- Some \$35,000/year new hires replace \$80,000-\$120,000/year veterans
- Layers of editors eliminated; less planning, vetting of stories
- Off-site copy editing/design
- All state websites managed from Nashville
- Printing centralized in Knoxville and Jackson – early deadlines

Impact:

- More regional content than local content in each newspaper / Website
- More USA TODAY content
- Some investigative work at larger newspapers
- Smaller newspapers benefit only from regional in-depth; USA TODAY network takes priority
- Taylor Swift reporter and national entertainment vertical

Impact: Methodology of daily reporting and project reporting disrupted


Tennessee State
University example:
Team reporting,
consultive editing,
visuals and web
involvement: Impact

A group of people in silhouette are looking out a window at a cityscape. The most prominent building in the background is a large, domed structure, likely a state capitol building. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the window, which creates a strong contrast between the dark silhouettes and the lighter city view.

New ownership blocks initiatives

Beaver County (PA) Times

Kristen Doerschner, assistant managing editor: “We were **on the upswing**, proud of the work we were doing. That stopped.”



“When you are about to lay off all the photographers and videographers, **you don't need stand-alone video.**”

“You just can't blame **Craigslist and advertising.**”

GHOST NEWSPAPERS

THE SALINAS *Californian*

Salinas, California

- Population: 163,000
- Heart of agricultural area
- 1999: 35 journalists
- Today: Ghost newspaper

THE SALINAS *Californian*



- Investigations into abuses of migrant farm workers
- Stories that prompted improvements in regional schools
- Coverage that helped people find medical care
- Celebrations of family and community events
- Local religion coverage – churches are community centers

THE SALINAS *Californian*



- Today: No staff, but it still publishes
- Editor in charge based 300 miles away at another newspaper.
- Its lone reporter left in late 2022.
- Current local content: Only paid obituaries, a few press releases

THE SALINAS *Californian*



- Gannett/GateHouse staffing consolidation strategy: “USA TODAY Network”
- Larger newspapers fair better with staffs
- Smaller newspapers: regional copy, produced by reporters at other newspapers.
- Regional editors supervise multiple newspapers

THE SALINAS *Californian*



Missed Stories in Salinas:

- Salinas River overflowed, flooding farmlands and throwing hundreds of people out of work, triggering health issues, schools closed
- Police staffing shortage. Chief: Can't respond to all reports of crime
- No coverage of mayoral election



Monterey County Supervisor Luis Alejo:

“As a subscriber, it seems like they (reporters) are all gone and all local news has vanished from its pages... giving up on serving our community”



Trish Sullivan, local store owner:

“Without a local paper in our city, we’ve lost the power to tell the stories of the people in our city and of the city itself. We’re lost.”



Dan Kennedy, former editor, now professor at Northeastern University:

“The beauty of having more reporters is that they showed up at meetings. If there was a bond issue, they reported what it was going to cost. What happens now is **people are paying more in taxes and don't know why**. There's more corruption and nobody's minding the store.”

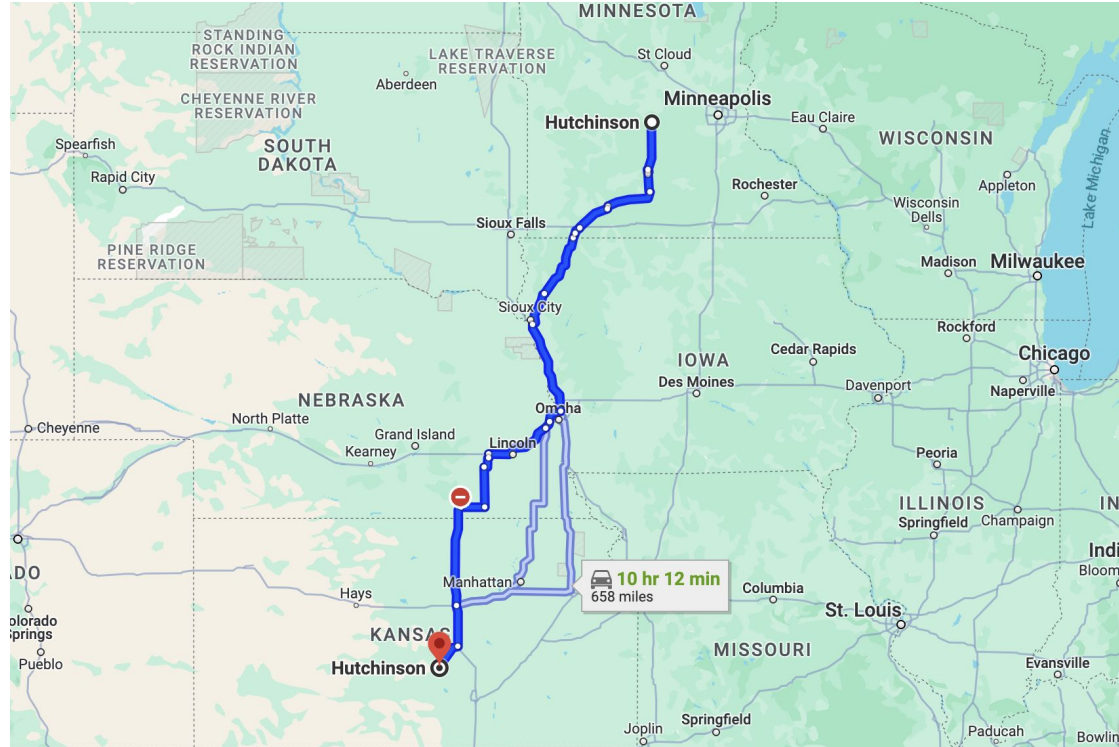
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Which Hutchinson is it?

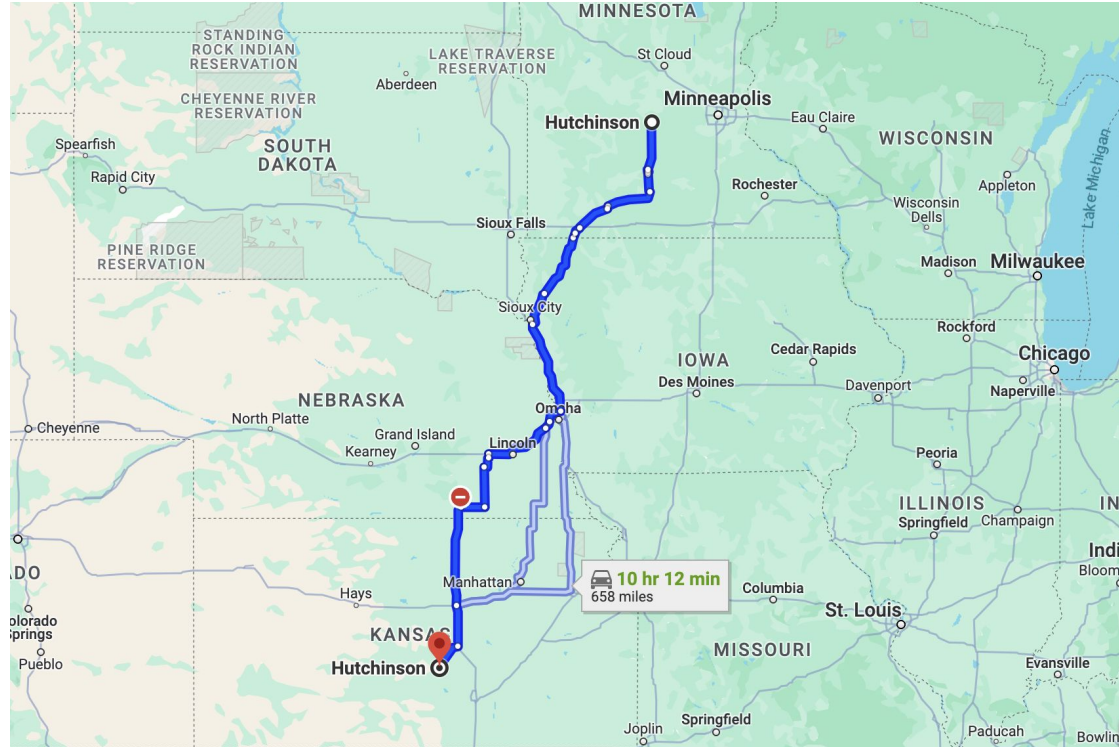


Hutchinson, Kansas, is
628 miles from
Hutchinson, Minn

Hutchinson (Kansas) News:
Large Page One photo of
senior citizens center in the
other Hutchinson



- Gannett PR Department: “An unfortunate oversight.”
- No staff listed on website.
- Editor based in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, 500 miles away



Hutchinson, Kansas

- City of 40,000
- One hour NW of Wichita
- Home of Hutchinson Community College
- Salt mining hub
- Home of the Cosmosphere International Space Museum
- 2 Hospitals
- County Seat for Reno County
- Six-time state champion high school football team



COSMOSPHERE

INTERNATIONAL SciEd CENTER
& SPACE MUSEUM



Hutchinson, Kansas

Web content:

- No local stories
- Outlaw plastic bag bans in state—no local angle
- 1 story on state school finance changes; no local impact angle
- Paid obituaries

Hutchinson, Kansas

Competition:

- Michael Glenn, a 16- year-old high school student, and a city librarian launch “Hutchinson Tribune” on Substack
- Publishes five times as many local news articles a month as the Hutchinson News. Started selling ads.



EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts



Michael Glenn
Publisher
Hutchinson (KS) Tribune



Mike Binder
Publisher
E&P Magazine

E&P

NEWSPAPER | BROADCAST | DIGITAL

Episode Sponsor



NEWS

DESERTS



Welch News | Welch, W.Va.

- Population 17,000
- County seat of McDowell County
- 100-year-old weekly closed in 2023



Past Coverage:

- Water and sewer systems and falling apart – stories prompted efforts to get more funds
- High dropout rate in schools
- Exposed lies about election tampering



Howard Wade, long-time resident and retired teacher:

“(The newspaper) was like a heartbeat that ran through the community. It connected us. Now it’s silent.”



So government meetings go **uncovered**, as does news about churches and community fairs and jobs – coming and going.

Virginia Dickerson, deputy court clerk:

“Now when people die, people don’t even know they’re dead. Losing the paper is like **losing a family member.**”



Daily Times - Pryor Creek, OK

- 40,000 residents, most live in poverty



Daily Times

Permanently closed

Address: 105 S Adair St, Sportsmen Acres, OK 74361

2010: 3,000 readers

2017: Newspaper closed

“It’s been a drastic blow to our community. How do we get information out?”

-Mayor Jimmy Tramel



—

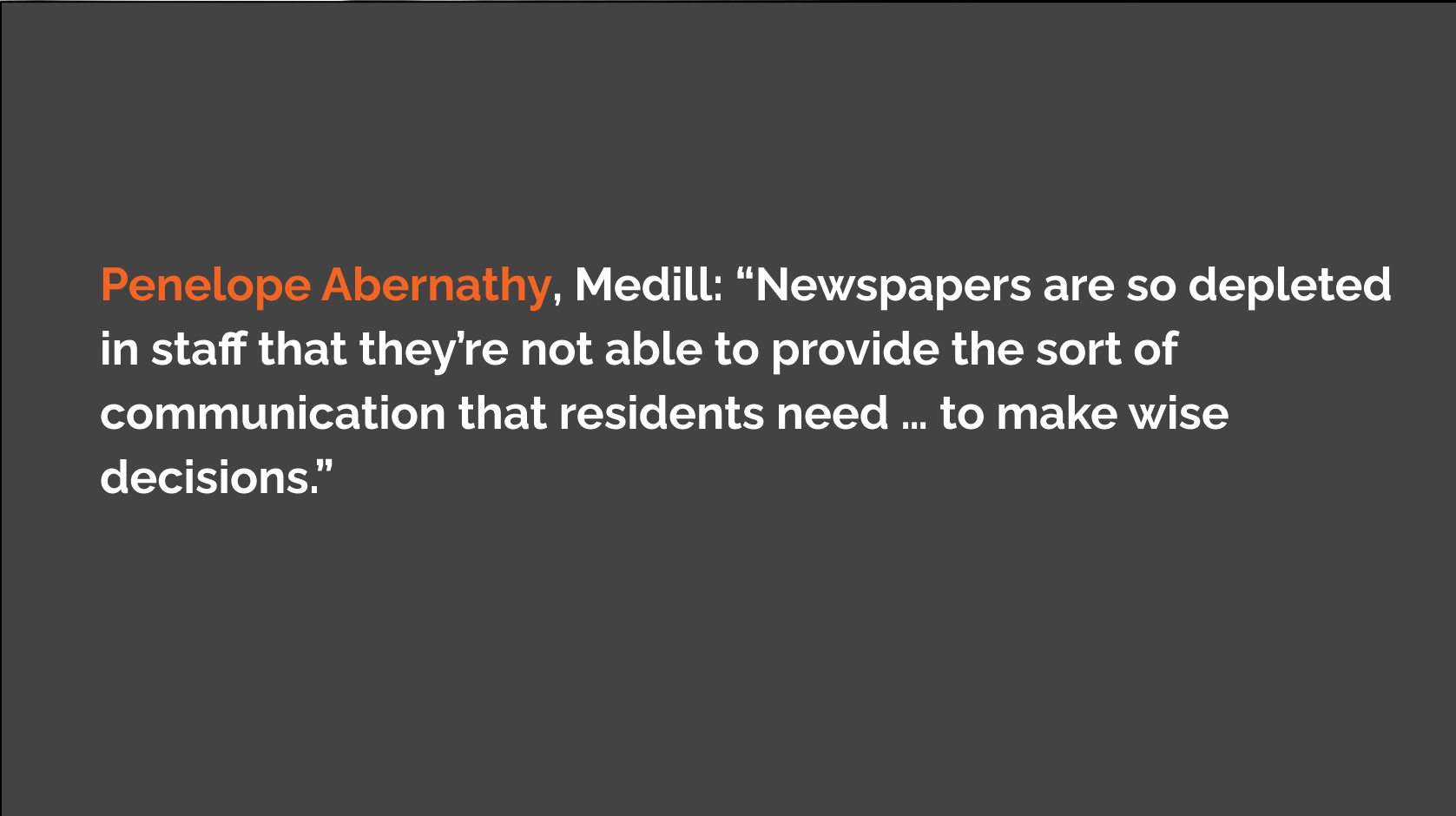
Impact of industry decline:

People are less informed
and democracy suffers



- Two newspapers close every week.
- One-fifth of all U.S. counties are news deserts
- Most residents of news deserts are older, poorer, less educated than average Americans

A word cloud displayed on a tablet screen, tilted at an angle. The most prominent words are 'correspondent' (in large red font), 'reports' (in large orange font), and 'news' (in large red font). Other visible words include 'foreign', 'journalist', 'stationed', 'largest', 'capitol', 'remote', 'filing', 'practice', 'agent', 'type', 'headquarters', 'government', 'on-the-scene', 'often', 'individual', 'newspaper', 'stories', 'via', 'contributes', 'reporter', 'UK', 'covers', 'BBC', 'belong', 'another', 'correspondents', 'primarily', 'ARD', 'original', 'Germany', 'magazines', 'postal', 'location', 'war', 'distant', 'letter', 'television', 'first-hand', 'commentator', 'term', 'refers', 'radios', 'speaking', 'generally', 'company', 'zone', 'networks', 'type', 'agent', 'practice', 'filing', 'remote', 'largest', 'capitol', 'stationed', 'journalist', 'often', 'individual', 'newspaper', 'stories', 'via', 'contributes', 'reporter', 'UK', 'covers', 'BBC', 'belong', 'another', 'correspondents', 'primarily', 'ARD', 'original', 'Germany', 'magazines', 'postal', 'location', 'war', 'distant', 'letter', 'television', 'first-hand', 'commentator', 'term', 'refers', 'radios', 'speaking', 'generally', 'company', 'zone', 'networks'.



Penelope Abernathy, Medill: “Newspapers are so depleted in staff that they’re not able to provide the sort of communication that residents need ... to make wise decisions.”



Peter Bhatia, former editor of the Detroit Free-Press and leader of a Houston digital startup: “Who’s holding people accountable?”

Rumors and disinformation go unchecked.
Residents are **less empowered** to participate in
democracy.

Local TV news and websites suffer without larger newspaper newsrooms with broader coverage that set local coverage agenda.

One-topic advocacy sites often deliver content with a **point of view that goes unchallenged**; rumors, misinformation can spread

RAYS OF HOPE



Exceptions...

The Press Democrat

Santa Rosa, CA Sonoma County

65 miles north of Golden Gate Bridge



The Press Democrat

- 25,000 print daily, 18,000 digital only
- Won 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Coverage of wildfires
- 2021-2023: Won multiple awards for investigative and explanatory work
- Local investors bought a failing newspaper, 2 weeklies, a lifestyle magazine, weekly business journal and a Spanish-language publication
- Hired editor one of Gannett's best editors, Rick Green



The Press Democrat

- Realigned staff, focused on community interests
- Basic government coverage, schools, city services, neighborhoods
- “What’s happening” information
- One “sink-your-teeth-into it” story most days
- Public service, analysis



The Press Democrat

- Partner with NPR station
- Instead of “digital first” – content first, then put it on appropriate platform
- Goal: Cover expenses, profits will come
- Owners: Community asset; not just a business





Other Success Stories

Berkshire (MA) Eagle

The Pilot, Southern Pines N.C.

Lifeline for Maine newspapers



The Pilot, Southern Pines N.C.

- Twice-weekly and Web site launched by community members
- 14,000 copies
- Low subscription rate -- \$69/year
- High volume of low-cost local advertising
- Goal: Serve the community, break even

A stack of newspapers is shown in a black and white photograph. A white rectangular box with an orange border is overlaid on the top newspaper. Inside the box, the text 'Lifeline for Maine Newspapers' is written in orange. The newspapers in the background have various headlines visible, such as 'PHIPSON On 23rd July', 'ROWE On 2nd Al', and 'The Penguin Ink series'.

Lifeline for Maine Newspapers

In July 2023, non-profit National Trust for Local News buys failing Masthead Maine, owner of 5 dailies, 17 weeklies

- Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Kennebec, Waterville dailies
- Hybrid approach: Non-profit trust owns for-profit newspapers
- Trust founded in 2021, purchased 24 Colorado newspapers

A stack of newspapers is shown in a black and white photograph. A white rectangular box with an orange border is overlaid on the newspapers, containing the title 'Lifeline for Maine Newspapers' in orange text. The newspapers in the background have various headlines visible, such as 'PHIPSON On 23rd July', 'ROWE On 2nd', 'SALANDES-12', 'The Penguin Ink series', 'six limited-edition classic novels with covers by leading tattoo artists, is out now', and 'COOLEST hotspots, James Ellis'.

Lifeline for Maine Newspapers

- Non-profit trust can accept philanthropic backing while still generating revenue
- Complex tax structure
- Alternative: Sale to a company controlled by a venture capital fund
- News Guild of Maine: “Grateful (Masthead Maine) pursued a non-profit model rather than sell...to the bad actors who have decimated news organizations across the country.”

—

Reviving Ghost Newspapers & News Deserts



Jeremy Gulban's Cherry Road Media

- Glen Rose Reporter in Texas: Town of 900; 320 print subscribers, 108 digital subscribers
- Two dedicated freelancers, a manager editor, a commission-only ad rep



Small Sites, Big Stories

- **Spotlight Schools:** Increase in hate incidents in Orange County CA schools; reasons, impact, lack of response
- **CT Mirror:** Connecticut faces an elder care crisis; how it evolved; possible solutions



Small Sites, Big Stories

- **Documented:** New York State horse racing industry shortchanges workers more than \$4.4 billion
- **City Bureau:** Chicago police mishandle, ignore missing persons cases
- **Verite News:** Baton Rouge police denied, dismissed complaints without telling citizens who made them





**Local Sense
of Place,
Good News**

Saco Bay News: Old Orchard Beach Lawn Mower Drill Team marches in last parade in nostalgic goodbye

Lansing Journal: Lansing Christian students visit Tri-State Village to provide tech support, friendly conversation

Ashland News: Heather's Homecoming: homeless student has a roof over her head thanks to anonymous donor

Future hope:

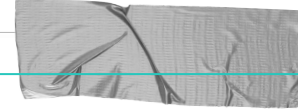
- Local ownership
- Focus on local coverage
- Cover expenses; profit secondary





- The Digital Future
- Hopeful possibilities
- Investments in quality content

**Next
Week**



Class Discussion and Questions

—

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