
Libraries and Local News

*Expanding
Journalism,
Another User
Service Grounded
in Reference*

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Always on the prowl for new user services, I was intrigued by a program held at my local public library in 2009 called “Democracy and Decline in Local Reporting.” The topic has stuck with me ever since. At the time, our city’s newspaper was experiencing severe financial challenges, which residents found alarming. With newspapers across the country in similar straits, the library assembled a panel to discuss alternatives for gathering and distributing local news to communities. Nearly ten years later, the situation has not improved much for local community news coverage. Thinking back to that library panel, I’ve decided to further investigate the impacts of, and possible solutions for, this problem. This piece attempts to reinvigorate a news initiative and promote a user service that has foundations in traditional reference. It is a service that offers opportunities for both public and academic libraries. The initiative is a community-centric public service centered on news.

Suffering a double hit from social media and a major recession, journalism’s business model has been disrupted severely. City residents have watched their local newspapers shrivel to no more than a few pages or even disappear. Over the years, the blog *Newspaper Death Watch* has tracked newspapers that have reduced pages, consolidated sections, decreased coverage, cut back on frequency, and laid off employees. Even the industry giant Reuters laid off two thousand workers, and the *Wall Street Journal* was forced to consolidate sections.¹

Yet news consumption in general is rising. As Mathew Ingram suggests, we can probably thank President Trump for pushing audience levels to new heights.² Overall, consumers prefer viewing news on television, with the online platform a close second.³ And interestingly, according to the Pew Research Center, local TV still has a wider reach overall for news viewership than network and cable.⁴ People are highly interested in events and issues in their local communities. But what are the residents really getting from local news? Most local television news stations cover crime, weather, traffic, and consumer information—government and public policy generally get scant coverage.

Although consumption may be rising for national news, there are fewer journalists covering local news in any format—print or new media. Derek Thompson observes:

Since the end of the recession, newspapers and magazines have shed about 113,000 jobs, while Internet

publishing companies have added about 114,000. That makes it sound as if the jobs are merely shifting from pulp to pixels, but the jobs aren't the same: There is a parallel shift from local news reporting to national news, a result of these sites needing to maximize readership. The share of reporting jobs in national news hubs like Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C., increased by 60 percent between 2004 and 2014.⁵

Benjamin Toff from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism draws a gloomy picture of state and local coverage of public affairs:

While a select number of national newspapers and a handful of nonprofits (ProPublica plans to open their first regional operation in Illinois this year) still fund rigorous newsgathering operations, state and local public affairs coverage generally remains a shadow of its former self. The future of news in the US may ultimately depend on whether the post-election surge in willingness to pay proves fleeting or a harbinger of a broad-based cultural change in public support for quality journalism.⁶

IMPACT

A critical question is whether the loss of a community paper has an impact on the community's citizens. More broadly, what is the impact on a local community of the loss of local news coverage of any sort?

One commenter responded to a blog post about the possible loss of the *Alaska Dispatch News* by asking, "Since when is a local newspaper with a circulation of less than 25 thousand 'vital to all Alaska'? Newspapers are failing all over America and their communities are doing ok without them. The internet has changed the way people get their news."⁷ Yes, the web has changed our news-gathering habits, but primarily for national news, and what we don't know on the local level can come back to bite us.

Research on newspapers and news organizations proliferates, but research on the impact of the decline of meaningful local and state news coverage is lacking. Several studies have been conducted, however. A study by Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless focusing on US House campaigns between 2010 and 2014 found that the evidence showed "declining local political news coverage is reducing citizen engagement."⁸

A study by Lee Shaker examined "year-over-year change in civic engagement in 18 of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States." This study looked closely at Seattle and Denver because Seattle moved its news dissemination entirely online while Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* ceased operation. The study states that "at the national and local level

there is a positive relationship between newspaper readership and civic engagement as measured by contacting or visiting a public official, buying or boycotting certain products or services because of political or social values, and participation in local groups or civic organization such as the PTA or neighborhood watch." Shaker continues by saying, "Ultimately, if we desire healthy and productive democratic communities, then the provisioning of local news—which helps tie citizens to each other and their communities—must continue."⁹

SOLUTIONS

Fostering this kind of democratic-minded community is a noble goal, but one that is becoming harder and harder to sustain in reality. Local news seems to be less and less financially viable. The library panel I attended in 2009 presented several intriguing solutions to this problem. One alternative to the current model of funding local news is a system where newspapers build large endowments to pay for their operations. News organizations could convert from for-profit to nonprofit status.¹⁰ The big question with endowments is how they are funded and who controls them. Of course, this question differs little from current news organization ownership.

Another alternative is to create a form of tax support for newspapers (or local news coverage). Suzanne Kirchoff and Nikki Usher discuss taxpayer-supported funding resembling the support US citizens already give to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), limited as it may currently be.¹¹ Taxpayers already are asked to support the construction of sports stadiums and other local endeavors, so why not local newspapers as well? The United Kingdom is already responding in such a way by deploying the government-funded BBC. According to Nic Newman, "to address concerns of a democratic deficit, the BBC has been encouraged by the government to fund 150 local reporters, which other local newspaper groups can use."¹²

But with the mood in Washington leaning strongly toward cutting support for CPB and similar organizations, this idea does not inspire much hope and may not receive widespread support. This is too bad: as Howard Husock admitted in an editorial *criticizing* taxpayer support for public broadcasting, "One area where public media does, increasingly, provide something the market doesn't is local news and public affairs programming."¹³

A third alternative presented at the panel was to rely on amateur bloggers—"media citizens"—to cover local news. The pros and cons were tossed around by panelists and audience members. As the phenomenon of "citizen journalist" has emerged since 2009, there has been sufficient time to study how well bloggers fill in for journalists. While many find that this new corps of engaged citizen can complement the work of professional reporters, it is no replacement for full-time, trained journalists devoted to covering any and all news.¹⁴

A ROLE FOR LIBRARIES

While I have been pondering that 2009 panel discussion at my local library, I have tried to find a role for libraries in this age of new media and the decline of local news coverage. Can libraries be part of the solution? And if so, how exactly?

It turns out that others have been thinking about this as well: libraries already have begun to get involved. It's old news, but not widely amplified that librarians and journalists are talking and learning from each other. Back in 2011, journalists and librarians convened at the "Beyond Books: News, Literacy, Democracy, and America's Libraries" conference. A panel at ALA on civic engagement was the outgrowth of the "Beyond Books" conference, and it was covered in an *American Libraries* article by Barbara Jones titled "Is the Line between Librarianship and Journalism Blurring?"¹⁵

Mahanoy City Public Library in Pennsylvania is the home base for one exciting new program. The library, the Community Reporting Alliance, and community members and foundations formed a partnership to launch *Coal Cracker*, a local newspaper written by elementary and high school students. The young participants study journalism, learn to take an interest in their communities, and foster some hometown pride on the side. Students research stories with the help of librarians, and they have lots of guidance and access to information.¹⁶

When a town in New Hampshire lost its local paper, the monthly coffee club at its library called for a suitable replacement. Michael Sullivan, director of Weare Public Library, stepped up to develop a newsletter with the help of students, staff, and some adults.¹⁷ "Since March 2017, Sullivan's weekly paper has boosted attendance at town events and promoted student accomplishments," not to mention what the students have learned from the activity.¹⁸ In Dallas, San Antonio, and Boston, libraries are making news by covering news.¹⁹

Clearly, there can be a role for libraries in local news. What else can libraries do? How can libraries be more proactive in searching out local issues of interest and concern, and offering explanations and opposing viewpoints with commentary for the local community? Libraries already have embarked on publishing ventures. Covering public affairs is an extension of the move to library publishing.

While public libraries may seem like the more natural choice for covering local news, academic libraries could be contenders too. They have access to experts and scholars in a variety of fields like political science, public administration, economics, sociology, criminology, and education. In addition to scholarly research that may never touch local citizens, could scholars, researchers, and their students devote time to providing informed commentary on local and state issues? This work seems well suited to library student engagement activity or library-initiated student service learning. Service learning and faculty-directed undergraduate research are both growing trends.

Library-led news initiatives would not have trouble finding things to write about, as there is no dearth of local and

state issues. These issues might include land development, bond issues, tax policy, minimum wage in local communities, the introduction of more charter schools, the adoption of green technologies, or economic impact studies.

Rather than simply maintaining information in the depths of a database, making it available for those who specifically seek it out, could we spare a little web real estate to present information of interest to the community? There are a number of ways for libraries to do this. We could invite guest commenters to provide alternative voices, balanced opinion pieces, and opposing viewpoints. We could give web space to community questions about local and state public affairs. Librarians are, after all, uniquely qualified to research and provide answers in a public forum for a wide audience.

It is well within our abilities to provide researched and objectively presented information for the public. Can libraries go where local coverage ends or where there is no coverage at all? While so many websites distract with dizzying popup ads, can libraries provide unobstructed views on crucial issues? In a world increasingly losing access to local information that affects our quality of life and our wallets, can libraries produce the missing link? Libraries pride themselves on being trusted institutions, and faith in librarians as trusted sources is confirmed in surveys. According to a Pew Research survey, "Many Americans are interested in libraries offering a range of services—including those that help people improve their digital skills and learn how to determine what information is trustworthy."²⁰

Furthermore, Abigail Geiger discovered,

A large majority of Millennials (87%) say the library helps them find information that is trustworthy and reliable, compared with 74% of Baby Boomers (ages 52 to 70) who say the same. More than eight-in-ten Millennials (85%) credit libraries with helping them learn new things, compared with 72% of Boomers.²¹

At a time when libraries need to assert relevance, this seems like one ideal way to do that. Libraries should capitalize on this feeling of trust and use librarians' research skills and collaborative abilities to develop this niche area of service with widespread benefits for communities.

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