

**Bringing journalism back:
Reviving a community newspaper
in an age of retreat**

**Presented at the 15th annual Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium,
Co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media
at Kansas State University and the National Newspaper Association Foundation
at the NNA's 123rd annual convention and trade show
Mobile, AL, Sept. 24-27, 2009**

**Timothy Boudreau
Associate professor of journalism
Department of Journalism
Moore Hall 454
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859
Email: boudr1t@cmich.edu
Phone: 989-774-2354**

Bringing journalism back:

Reviving a community newspaper in an age of retreat

Newspapers across the nation are in retreat. Pundits routinely predict the demise of print journalism, and in fact, papers large and small are cutting staff, offering buyouts, reducing the size of their news holes, struggling to make a profit and, increasingly, closing altogether. But a group of investors in Simsbury, Conn., has bucked that trend. Two former employees of the Journal Register chain and one of the employee's father have teamed up to launch their own free weekly after the chain closed the papers that served their homes in the Farmington Valley of central Connecticut.

This paper will examine the factors that influenced the decision to launch The Valley Press, whose first issue went out in February. The paper will consider the effort to revive the journalistic voice of four communities. What are the unique challenges of launching a newspaper in an era of global recession and journalistic retreat? How have readers, local leaders and advertisers responded to the new publication? What does the paper mean to the area's sense of community? These are among the questions this paper will consider. It will also look at the revival of a community newspaper within a larger context. How have other communities fared after their main journalistic voice went silent? How can we expect the recent spate of closures to affect their senses of community? What sort of journalistic presence if any, is likely to arise in the wake of those closures? Focusing on a weekly that hopes to prevail against the conventional wisdom, this study will highlight the importance of local journalism to a community and the challenges facing smaller papers today.

Bringing journalism back

The decision to revive the local paper by starting *The Valley Press* came shortly after the Journal Register's Imprint Newspapers division announced plans to close the *Avon Post*, *Farmington Post*, *Simsbury Post* and *Tri-Town Post*.

That's when Melissa Marinan, a long-time sales rep with the Journal Register papers, her father, Stephen Friedman, and Ed Gunderson, who worked with a nearby Journal Register paper, decided to launch the *Press*, a free weekly mailed to single-family homes in Simsbury and four nearby communities.

Even in an era of journalistic retrenchment, the decision to resurrect a weekly newspaper was less daunting than some might expect, said Gunderson, who is now publisher of *The Valley Press*. While he conceded the economic recession threatens the overall newspaper industry, he remains bullish on community newspapers because "news in those papers isn't readily available anywhere else," he said. They have a niche. Larger dailies face the greatest financial turmoil today, in part because the national and international news they report is available in many other places (E. Gunderson, personal communication, June 9, 2009).

Smaller papers struggling today are often owned by large chains. The Journal Register papers being replaced by the *Press*, for example, reported local news but lost touch with their readers.

"Readers didn't feel the tie," Gunderson said, in part because the papers were published elsewhere and were owned by a company in Pennsylvania. He predicts the *Press* will be more visible in the local communities and more successful.

Gunderson called the closing of the Journal Register papers a “wake-up call” for readers. “Until they closed, people didn’t realize what a void it would leave ... Many thought those (Journal Register) papers were poor, but at least we had one.”

The nearby metro daily, the *Hartford Courant*, had closed its suburban office and largely ignored the areas served by *The Valley Press*, he said. “The community was going to take a double-hit. The daily abandoned them, and the weekly went away.”

That left an opening for the new publication. “I saw an opportunity and took it.” Gunderson said. “On the passion side, I get to do something I like. I was very fortunate to be at the right place at the right time.”

In an era of unusual turmoil for newspapers, *The Valley Press* faces the usual challenges for publications large and small: adequately covering its communities and trying to find “the right balance” between the business and editorial sides, he said. “I hate to say it, but the editorial staff is almost a necessary evil,” and some cuts at the *Press* have taken place there. “All good newspapers want unlimited editorial staff, but with our model of free mailed distribution, our costs are high, and we have to watch that particular expense line carefully.”

Community response

After losing their journalistic voice with the closing of the Journal Register papers, local readers and advertisers welcomed the new publication, which now reaches about 30,000 homes. “We get calls every week saying ‘thank you for being here,’ Gunderson said. “It’s amazing. The passion (for a local newspaper) has been a lot greater than expected.”

The *Press* started publishing 28 pages, but strong advertising demand had pushed the page count to 48 by late June (E. Gunderson, personal communication, July 2, 2009). The paper

has been “bombaraded” with press releases from local schools, charities and local town halls eager to communicate with the public.

Michael Clark, town council chairman in Farmington, a community served by the *Press*, said, “The most difficult part of the job is getting accurate information out to the taxpayer, and the best vehicle for that is the newspaper. Any newspaper now that will cover local matters and can get the information out to the public is really welcome,” he told the *Hartford Courant* (The Laurel, 2009).

Gunderson said the *Press* is also considering adding staff to bolster its watchdog role and increasing its online presence, although the focus – and its main revenue source – will remain its print product.

The *Press* is relying on traditional methods to attract local readers by focusing on area sports, school events, local government and activities involving children. And while the industry is struggling to attract younger readers, the *Press* is focusing specifically on younger families. “They spend the money, and they’re important to the community,” he said. The paper runs writing contests and lots of photographs that appeal to that demographic.

The weekly has also distinguished itself by running more news – its ad content is about 30 percent – and more color than many papers its size.

Local leaders and readers say the newspaper is serving a public good, Gunderson said. “On the other hand, it’s been an educational process when I meet with public groups. I have to remind them we’re not a public service; we’re a business.” While many journalists are passionate about their work and want to serve the public good, their newspapers also must make a profit.

Newspaper closings and their effects

Other communities have been less fortunate than those served by *The Valley Press*: When their local newspapers closed, no other media stepped in to fill the journalistic void, and some researchers suggest that void can hurt civic engagement. In one of the few studies of the effects of a newspaper's closing on its community, Princeton University researchers reported disheartening findings.

In northern Kentucky towns once covered by the *Cincinnati Post*, voter turnout dropped, fewer people ran for public office and more incumbents were re-elected after the paper closed at the end of 2007 (Luscombe, 2009). While the researchers cautioned against drawing definitive conclusions from their small-scale study and noted that the effects were less pronounced in smaller communities, it seems to support predictions by many that a community's loss of a journalistic watchdog and venue for public debate discourages civic activity. "To the extent that we can extrapolate, we can say that local coverage is something the newspapers uniquely provide," researcher Sam Schulhofer-Wohl told *Time* magazine. "When people don't have (local newspapers), they are much less engaged."

Those smaller towns sometimes draw a sense of pride and purpose from their local papers. In a 2005 Humboldt, Kan., study by faculty at Kansas State University, almost half (47.2 percent) of respondents said the loss of the *Humboldt Union* newspaper was a sign their community was dying (Smethers, Bressers, Harvey, Willard, & Freeland, 2007). Even more respondents said the town "should have a newspaper of its own" and that the presence of one gave them a sense of pride in their community (Smethers, et al., 2007). Overwhelmingly they

said they missed following local government news – which leads to more civic involvement -- after their paper closed.

The lack of civic engagement brought on by a newspaper's closing might stem from the unique role print media play in many communities. "More than any other medium, newspapers have been our eyes on the state, our check on private abuses, our civic alarm systems," Paul Starr argued in a 2009 article in *The New Republic*.

Newspapers provide the bulk of original reporting and coverage of public affairs, and Starr (2009) said their demise could lead to an increase in public corruption, greater disparities in knowledge between news junkies and news dropouts, and more ideological polarization as readers seek exclusively information from sources tailored to their beliefs and preconceptions instead of newspapers aimed at general audiences.

Even if broadcast outlets or locally based Web sites try to pick up the slack left by a departed newspaper, the community loses an important – often the primary – source of information in the journalistic ecosystem. Newspapers routinely set the agenda for broadcast media in many communities and provide a starting point for debate and analysis on blogs and other Web sites. General-interest newspapers are also credited for incidental learning among readers who ordinarily would ignore civic issues but catch a glimpse of a headline on their way to another story or feature in the paper (Starr, 2009).

The loss of newspapers in communities large and small poses a special risk to political transparency, some warn. "More of American life would occur in the shadows," said Tom Rosenstiel of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. "We won't know what we won't know" (Starr, 2009).

Others suggest we must find ways to keep journalism alive and that the newspaper ranks with other important social institutions. “We need to view journalism in the same way that we view libraries and public schools – as absolutely essential to any prospering community,” Theodore Glasser, professor of communications at Stanford University, told *USA Today* (Lieberman, 2009).

Americans in general are less certain about the effect of a newspaper’s closing on their communities. In a March 2009 Pew Research Center study, fewer than half (43%) said that losing their local newspaper would hurt civic life in their community “a lot.” Only 33 percent said they would personally miss reading the local newspaper a lot if it were no longer available. Read more positively, however, almost three in four (74 percent) said the closing would hurt civic life *a lot or some* and more than half (57 percent) said they would miss reading their paper *a lot or some* if it closed. And those who read newspapers more often – generally better educated and more politically active than non-newspaper readers – were far more likely to say they would miss their newspaper and that its closing would hurt civic life.

Some observers are sanguine about the impact of the Web – which is often blamed for the demise of traditional newspapers — on journalism. Johnson (2009) argues in *Prospect* that online journalism is maturing into a “vast new forest of news, data, opinion, satire—and perhaps most importantly, direct experience.” Newspapers will remain part of the media landscape, but they will lose their dominant position. Citizens as well as media professionals will share in identifying, creating and discussing news, and an era of hyper-localism, more diversity and greater government transparency is likely to follow, he said.

Responses to newspaper closings

The question of whether and how a newspaper's closing would affect a community is no longer mere speculation. In cities across the country, dailies have been closing or cutting back operations and laying off staffers at an alarming rate. In Michigan alone in recent months, the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* cut home delivery to three days a week. The *Ann Arbor News* announced plans to close, making it the first city in America to lose its only daily newspaper. Other newspapers in the Booth chain, part of Newhouse's Advance Publications, announced plans to cut back on their print editions and to consolidate their operations.

Elsewhere, the *Rocky Mountain News* closed completely in February, leaving Denver a one-daily newspaper city, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* closed its print operations in March after nearly 150 years in business. The Tribune Company and the Journal Register have filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

The 45,000-circulation *Ann Arbor News* has largely been replaced by AnnArbor.com, which now employs just a handful of former journalists from the its print operation and is run by a "content director." Although AnnArbor.com will publish a print edition twice weekly, some local officials fear the impact of losing the traditional paper (Murray, 2009). "My biggest worry is there going to be an adequate amount of news that will get out to the community," Ann Arbor City Council Stephen Rapundalo told the *News*. "It is a serious concern of mine."

Joan Lowenstein, a former City Council member with ties to the business community, told the *News*: "Citizens find out about government from reading the newspaper, but government officials also find out what is happening with the citizens by reading the newspaper. You lose

that kind of mirror as a government official. Citizens will lose the ability to follow all kinds of information" (Murray, 2009).

That sense of loss is typical for many journalists and some readers. In response, former staffers at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which went online only in March, launched a competing local news Web site and others were planning to start one focused on investigative and narrative journalism. After the closure of the *Rocky Mountain News*, former writers and editors tried unsuccessfully to attract 50,000 subscribers for access to premium content on their InDenverTimes Web site (Lieberman, 2009). They drew only 3,000, but they still hope to develop a successful business model. Similar Web sites have tried a combination of reader subscriptions and donations, funding by philanthropic organizations and ad sales, although none has yet found the ideal model.

Sites such as VoiceofSanDiego.org, an independent non-profit, have tried to fill the traditional watchdog role by uncovering conflicts of interest at city hall and doing original reporting on local politics, schools and the environment (Perez-Pena, 2008). In many ways the San Diego site resembles a traditional daily. A recent edition featured a hard-news story about sheriff deputies raiding a political fundraiser and feature-oriented fare such as architectural critiques of the new library or suggestions for summer beach reading. Similar sites such as MinnPost.com and the St. Louis Beacon draw thousands of readers a day, but those pale in comparison to readership numbers at traditional newspaper websites.

While cuts at traditional newspapers have given these Web sites an opening, "Even the most well-funded of these sites are a far cry in resources from a traditional newspaper," Robert

Giles, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, told the *New York Times* (Perez-Pena, 2008).

Stanford's Theodore Glasser doubts the Web can ever replace traditional newspapers. "I've seen nothing in the blogosphere that provides the sustained, systematic coverage that a good newsroom provides. Not even close."

Some communities recognize the value of good journalism and have rallied to save their local newspaper. After Gannett announced plans to close the Birmingham *Eccentric*, which serves five wealthy Detroit suburbs, local leaders and citizens came together to rescue it. They hope to raise 3,000 new subscriptions, although they are still short of that goal. In a cost-cutting move, the paper has stopped free deliveries and plans to limit its free web content (Dellamere, 2009).

Still, the *Eccentric* may be an aberration. It serves an older, affluent, highly educated readership with an allegiance to print. It remains to be seen whether this rescue attempt will work and, if it does, whether it can be duplicated in other places.

In her discussion of the *Eccentric*, Diana Dellamere draws several lessons:

- Stress the paper's value to the community; don't let readers take it for granted.

Eccentric readers quickly recognized they would lose a valuable resource if the paper folded.

- Get in touch with readers and find out what they want. *Eccentric* readers demanded more local news, unavailable elsewhere, but less national and state news, which was available.

- Build on a sense of community. The *Eccentric* hired more local columnists, some of them local high-school students, to give its readers something unique.

In Humboldt, Kan., the gap left by the closing of the *Union* was partially filled by coverage in nearby newspapers, a Chamber of Commerce newsletter, and by family and friends (Smethers et al., 2009). But residents surveyed said they still preferred their own newspaper. Eventually a nearby editor re-established the *Union*, later reselling it. The newspaper was still in operation as of late August.

“The town found out ... just how much they missed their own newspaper, said Steve Smethers, one of the study’s authors (personal communication, August 24, 2009). Whether real or perceived, “losing the newspaper became symbolic of the town dying.”

Reason for optimism?

Despite the widely publicized troubles of some newspapers in 2009, some observers say journalists are their own worst enemies (Lieberman, 2009). “They are running around arguing the sky is falling. And they’re making the situation appear far worse than it is,”” said Robert Picard, a media economist.

These observers say the optimism displayed at *The Valley Press* and some community newspapers around the nation is warranted. While profits have dropped significantly in recent years, the average newspaper still generates about a 10 percent profit margin, and the outlook, at least for many smaller papers, continues to be good.

Papers with less than 15,000 circulation saw classified ad revenues increase an average of 23 percent in the five years ending in 2008, the Inland Press Association found in a recent study

of 125 newspapers. Overall ad revenue also grew slightly for those papers but decreased about 25 percent for dailies of more than 80,000 circulation (Liedtke, 2009).

Many larger papers have seen drastic cuts in their news staff in recent years, while papers under 50,000 circulation were also spending more on their newsrooms in 2008 than in 2004, the study found.

Smaller publications tend to have a lock on local news, and they provide information unavailable elsewhere. Further, online sites such as Craigslist are yet to reach many smaller communities (Liedtke, 2009).

“Advertisers in big cities have plenty of options to reach consumers,” said Randy Bennett, senior vice president of business development at the Newspaper Association of America (Lieberman, 2009). “Advertisers outside of big cities have far fewer alternatives ... Smaller markets are in better financial shape.”

Gunderson of The Valley Press agreed. “Many smaller (papers) are growing,” he said. “You can’t get that news anywhere else. That’s the heart of it. “

References

Dellamere, D. (2009, August 19). Lessons from the Birmingham *Eccentric*: How one community is saving its newspaper. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved August 23, 2009. http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/lessons_from_the_birmingham_ec.php?page=all.

Johnson, S. (May 2009). Are we on track for a golden age of serious journalism? *Prospect*, 158.

Lieberman, D. (2009, March 17). Newspaper closings raise fear about industry. *USA Today*.

Liedtke, M. (2009, August 9). Small is beautiful (and successful). Retrieved August 23, 2009. http://tech.yahoo.com/news/ap/20090809/ap_on_hi_te/us_small_newspapers

Lubscombe, B. (2009, March 22). What happens when a town loses its newspaper? *Time*.

Murray, S. (2009, March 23). *Ann Arbor News* to close in July. *Ann Arbor News*.

Perez-Pena, R. (2008, November 18). Web sites that dig for news rise as watchdogs. *The New York Times*.

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2009, March 12). Many would shrug if their newspaper closed. Retrieved June 20, 2009, at <http://people-press.org/report/497/many-would-shrug-if-local-newspaper-closed>.

Smethers, J. S., B. Bressers, L. Harvey, A Willard, and G. Freeland. (2007). "No Union in Humboldt, Kansas: Readers' Perception of Loss When a Community Loses Its Newspaper." *Newspaper Research Journal*, 28 (4), 6-21.

Starr, P. (2009, March 4). Goodbye to the age of newspapers (Hello to a new era of corruption). *The New Republic*.

The Laurel. (2009, January 30). The Valley Press is born. Retrieved June 30, 2009, at <http://thelaurel.wordpress.com/2009/01/30/the-valley-press-is-born/>

Tartakoff, J. (2009, April 15). Former Seattle P-I staffers launch non-profit news site. [paidContent.org](http://paidcontent.org). Retrieved July 5, 2009, at <http://paidcontent.org/article/419-new-seattle-news-website/>.