

Students and the local library partner to revive local news

By Meg McGuire

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Founded three years ago by two women with deep backgrounds in local news, the Community Reporting Alliance seeks to preserve, support and advance local news reporting to promote strong communities, informed discourse and vibrant democracies.

We've developed a local news model that is replicable and sustainable. In these models we are re-imagining the organizational architecture that supports re-invented local news: community buy-in, corporate support and foundation grants. Our major effort — The Media Restoration Project — is focused on addressing the people and places that have been hardest hit by the onslaught of closures and media constriction that has occurred, with remarkable speed, in the last few years. The Community Reporting Alliance believes the greatest positive impact will be achieved by restoring news coverage to places where community news providers have disappeared.

In the evolution of the news ecosystem, all models need support since we have likely seen the last of the one-size-fits-all daily paper of 20 years ago. While there are plenty of places where it seems new local/hyper-local news projects are sprouting up, that's not the whole story. Plenty of places are starved of the news they need. Often, these places are rural, and often economically disadvantaged.

These under-served news communities have come to be called news deserts, and the Community Reporting Alliance is hyper-focused on finding those communities and also finding the best way to get the news supply back up and running.

Our special targets are communities that have seen a closure of a local news source whether it's a weekly newspaper or an on-line service. We also want to include places where there has been never been sufficient ad support for any news organization to take root and prosper. Our most important tools are community engagement and collaboration among various stakeholders.

Manor Ink

One of our prototypes is *Manor Ink*, a library-based, youth-led monthly newspaper and website that's based in a tiny town called Livingston Manor in the heart of the Catskills in New York. Livingston Manor is not on the radar for many of the mojo entrepreneurs who are looking to make a living giving their community the news and networking that communities thrive on.

With a population of 1,200, and only a few stores, there's little to attract those hardy e-journalists. But Livingston Manor once had its own weekly newspaper, and the high school also had a paper. Both of them are gone, and the nearest daily has experienced all-too-typical cutbacks, so there's really nowhere to find local news.

In 2011, at a library board meeting, a resident asked if there was a way the library could help the town's young people find something worthwhile to do.

The librarian, Peggy Johansen, eager to serve her community, reached out to a journalist who taught at the local community college and between them they started hatching a practical plan for a news project that would be led by the local students, aged 8 to 18. They would learn practical interviewing, writing and photo skills. They would also learn what makes a community

tick. The community would finally have a way to learn more about itself, and be able to read about what's going on in a way that would lead to greater involvement.

Then the CRA got involved to do what we do: provide advice and support, and find funding. We did get funding. Our projects are rarely big-ticket, with annual budgets usually below \$10,000. Even so, they produce big results. *Manor Ink* now regularly publishes a monthly newspaper with the support of the library and community.

The biggest donation to date was \$5,000 from the Nicholas B Ottaway Fund, and there's a local group (the Lazare Kaplan Foundation) that has kicked in money when needed, \$1,000 at a time.

But what is most telling are other donations: from lots of quarters in the single-copy donation cans (for a free newspaper) to several personal checks ranging from \$50 to \$100. And the advertising response is growing, too.

This is how a community responds to the news it needs.

And how do we spend the money we get?

The young journalists are members of The Deadline Club, and receive a small cash payment when a story or a photo appears. And here's a funny thing —*Manor Ink* started as a website, but it was the students who wanted, as they said, "something real" to show for their efforts. So now *Manor Ink* is a monthly newspaper.

Print runs are a significant cost, but the instincts of the young journalists are right on the money, since the presence of the physical newspaper in the community has increased awareness of —and support for —the project.

There is one part-time paid coordinator. Both the CRA and the library share a goal of sustainability and *Manor Ink* is depending less and less on grant money. Realistically, though,

we are aware of the possibility that this project might need a small amount of on-going funding from outside enthusiasts. Especially as the journalistic ambition of the project grows, it may be that having a journalist on hand to do some investigative reporting —while teaching the students how it's done —would be a worthwhile effort. He or she would, of course, have to be paid.

Right now, students supply the stories and photos; students provide the circulation —the newspaper is distributed at local stores and of course at the library. They also sell the ads.

Manor Ink meets and works in a crowded room upstairs at the library. They borrow the space and some of the tools that they need - like laptops - from the library.

All this is possible because the librarian and her board work to support the work of the young journalists. Members of the library board —and others —work as community mentors for the young journalists, guiding them through the reporting and writing process. After all, these are young people who may never have written a news story before!

The library board now has a dedicated seat for a young person on its board. A local classical music festival, the Shandalee Music Festival, also has a seat on its board for a young person. And both of those seats, which only came into being recently, are held by members of the *Manor Ink* staff.

Thanks to their efforts, Livingston Manor can now hear itself think.

Coal Cracker

Good ideas are contagious: in the economically depressed anthracite coal region in central Pennsylvania, another youth-led news project meets in the local library. It's called *Coal Cracker*. Its first issue came out in February of this year, and it's meeting its goal this year of printing one issue every other month.

The driving force behind *Coal Cracker* is Krista Gromalski. She is a journalist who was born and raised in Mahanoy City, where the newspaper is based. Mahanoy City is a town of about 4,500, which has never rebounded from the depression that hit when the coal industry contracted. She hopes *Coal Cracker* can help alter the beaten-down mindset of the town, as well as train young people to be journalists and good citizens. She enters the news project arena with very specific community-oriented goals, outlined at the project's inception. Her community is different from *Manor Ink's* so her approach will reflect what her community needs. Her approach reflects both her passion for community news, and also her academic experience studying community engagement.

Coal Cracker uses tools such as engagement journalism, arts-based research, critical literacy and storytelling to practice place-based analysis and self-expression geared toward solutions-oriented civic dialogue. This experience can empower young people to recognize new perspectives about the place where they live as well as about themselves and their capacity to create a future of their choosing.

Engagement journalism—formerly referred to as civic journalism—mobilizes people to address local issues in a way that makes sense to them and produces easily identifiable results. The strategy is to train *Coal Cracker* participants in the practice of engagement journalism as a means to make sense of their collective experiences, express common values and discover new approaches to community challenges.

The objective of *Coal Cracker* is to develop young Coal Region journalists who are capable of:

- Thinking and writing critically about the place where they live,
- Initiating and furthering a public dialogue in print or online about important local issues, and

- Planning and implementing community events aimed at achieving positive change.

The project's goals are to:

- Develop a sustainable model for training young journalists who can use their skills to advance educationally and professionally while making a positive contribution to their communities,

- Create supportive community infrastructure for this process, and

- Create an economically sustainable vehicle to publish the work of young journalists, which can be replicated in communities beyond the Coal Region.

Each community deserves its news

At the Community Reporting Alliance, we feel strongly that each community deserves its news. And each community, with a little help, can find a way to develop a news project that will answer that need. We also believe that cooperation among news projects will strengthen each project. So we are pleased indeed that *Manor Ink* provided support for *Coal Cracker* and that both staffs came together to visit Bethel Woods Performing Arts Center to learn about each other —and the '60s —at the Bethel Woods Museum in Sullivan County (at the site of the 1969 Woodstock Festival.)

And in March of this year, we held the first Community News Summit where people from all of our projects were able to interact and swap ideas. It's the first of many.

Far away from the spotlight of whatever dire predictions about journalism are trending on Twitter or making a fuss on Facebook, communities are re-building the news ecosystem in their own way. We celebrate and support that work.