



UNIVERSITY OF
OREGON

School of Journalism and Communication
Agora Journalism Center

AGORA
REPORT

LOCAL JOURNALISM IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Why It Matters,
How It's Evolving,
and Who Pays for It

Damian Radcliffe
September 2017

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Any errors, or omissions from this study, are my responsibility alone.



Damian Radcliffe
University of Oregon
September 2017

Foreword

The University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication established the Agora Journalism Center in 2014 to drive transformational advancements in journalism and communication to enhance public knowledge, and to enrich civic life for all community members. Put more simply, we care about the future of journalism, because it is linked to the future of healthy democratic communities.

To that end, we support a variety of projects to advance these goals: conferences and workshops focused on evolving practices of engagement, training in the use of new storytelling tools such as drones and virtual reality, and an Agora Faculty Fellowship program. Agora Faculty Fellows undertake a range of important projects that help point the way forward in research, teaching, and practice connecting journalism and civic engagement.

In this report, our colleague Damian Radcliffe explores how local newsrooms around the Pacific Northwest are grappling with the new opportunities and imperatives of engaging with audiences. Beyond new technological ways to tell compelling stories, his report finds journalists learning to listen more deeply to their communities.

We welcome your thoughts on the future of news and the developments outlined in this first full Agora research report.

Regina G. Lawrence
Executive Director

Andrew DeVigal
Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement

Introduction

The way we consume, create, and distribute media has changed dramatically in the past decade. This has had a profound impact on the business models of many media companies and the skillsets they need to prosper in the digital age.

Addressing this challenge is a source of continued debate, experimentation, and innovation as publishers attempt to navigate these uncharted waters.

In embracing this digital storm, news organizations must contend with a myriad of separate—and interlinked—considerations, including declining circulations and revenues, competition from new entrants, fewer journalists and smaller newsrooms, waning availability of audience time due to the proliferation of other media choices, and challenges of cultural change and the level of digital skills in newsrooms. There are also grappling with fundamental questions about how to harness (and monetize) social, video, mobile, and other notable emerging trends in media consumption.

The ongoing efforts of major media players in this arena, such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and others, continues to be well told. However, the experience of smaller local publishers receives much less attention from scholars, journalists, and industry.

Yet these local outlets are facing many of the same challenge as their larger counterparts. This paper, kindly supported by the [Agora Journalism Center](#), seeks to address this imbalance by putting the perspectives of local journalists in the region front and center.

It does so by exploring the experience of 10 local media outlets in the Pacific Northwest, using their story—ascertained through 12 expert interviews—to serve as a microcosm of how digital disruption is impacting local journalism more widely across the United States.

As several interviewees pointed out, their experiences are often unique. Subsequently, remedies to the strategic challenges the sector faces vary outlet by outlet. Nevertheless, interviewees recognized the value of case studies, acknowledging that hearing from others in the same field can help editors and publishers by informing, shaping, and perhaps reinforcing many of the strategic decisions they are already making.

Combining desk analysis with new qualitative work, this report aims to support this goal by sharing experiences from the Pacific Northwest related to business models, the evolving practices of local journalism, use of digital tools and platforms, as well as real life engagement with audiences and communities.

These experiences—and the ideas and solutions therein—have the potential to inform and support the efforts of local media practitioners across the United States and beyond. I hope you find them useful.

Damian Radcliffe
Carolyn S. Chambers Professor In Journalism
September 2017

Executive Summary

Based on detailed, in-depth interviews with 12 editors, reporters, and a leading communications scholar based in the region, this paper shines a spotlight on the practice of local journalism in the Pacific Northwest.

Local journalism—like the wider news media—has been massively disrupted by the advent of new digital technologies and behaviors. This has unlocked a wider range of information and entertainment sources for audiences, created new spaces and opportunities for advertisers, and resulted in layoffs and the shuttering of titles in many communities across the United States.

However, this upheaval, which shows no signs of abating, has also produced new possibilities for journalists and storytellers. Digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for speedy distribution of content, a means to enjoy genuine two-way interaction with audiences, and new ways to tell stories.

These creative possibilities, coupled with a challenging economic backdrop, are also encouraging some journalists to re-evaluate their craft and profession. This is leading to discussions about new forms of journalism and the need to revitalize the profession for the digital age.

The interviews that underpin this paper highlight these developments and discussions. They demonstrate the reinvigoration of local journalism and its continued importance to communities, and they pinpoint a number of outstanding issues the sector must address.

Here are nine key ideas that emerge from this research:

1. Local journalism remains important.

Journalists interviewed for this research reminded us that local journalism remains incredibly important to communities due to its civic, democratic, and journalistic value.

Local media produces a range of content—from watchdog reporting to coverage of local sports, arts, human interest stories, and listings—that supports the varied information needs of communities. Much of that content cannot be found elsewhere.

2. The practice of local journalism is evolving.

This evolution includes elements of engaged journalism, with a particular focus on listening to communities, as well as harnessing digital platforms to tell

“This upheaval, which shows no signs of abating, has also produced new possibilities for journalists and storytellers.”

stories. Video and social media are already well-established means to engage audiences and share “the news.”

Local journalists are also increasingly keen to explore different approaches to their work. This includes solutions journalism ¹ and a recognition that you can maintain your journalistic independence and integrity while still being active—and visible—in the community.

“The answer is not to isolate yourself in the community,” says Lou Brancaccio,² emeritus editor of the [Vancouver Columbian](#) (Washington). “The answer is to put yourself into the community but let people understand, and know, that if things go south for them you’re gonna write about it.”

3. Local news providers will not look like they did in the past.

Despite the best efforts of local news providers, much of the income—and many of the jobs—that have disappeared from local journalism will not return.

In part, that’s due to the impossibility of turning back the clock to the age of information and advertising scarcity, when audiences and businesses *had* to come to you.

“Whatever local journalism is in the future, it won’t be what it was,” Dr. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen director of research, [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#), has said. “It’s going to be something different.” ³

4. Newsrooms will be smaller and increasingly visually oriented.

The local newsrooms of the future, much like the newsroom of today, will need to do more with less. Smaller staffing levels may require fresh approaches to aggregation and greater use of wire services, as well as dropping certain beats or doing them differently.

We can expect to see a greater emphasis on the role of analytics to shape content and inform the beats that newsrooms focus on, as well as an increased importance attached to journalists with data and visual—particularly video—skills.

As Logan Molen, publisher/CEO of RG Media Company and the [Eugene Register-Guard](#) (Oregon), suggests: “Video’s an opportunity for newspapers to come back and tackle, in a low-fi way, the content that it’s too expensive for the TV stations to go after.”

“The local newsrooms of the future, much like the newsroom of today, will need to do more with less.”

5. Doubling down on unique local content may be essential for survival.

When considering the future prospects for the sector, scarcity matters. Because audiences have access to more information than ever, local media outlets need to offer something different in terms of content, perspective, and applied journalistic values.

Their contribution includes adding value through additional context, perspectives and analysis, which ensures that we avoid a [churnalism](#) culture; a world where independent reporting—and the values and attributes associated with that—is replaced by a media ecosystem of press released and content produced solely by PR professionals.

As John Costa, president and publisher of the [Bend Bulletin](#) (Oregon) observes:

If you can go beyond the obvious in those areas that are the most important to your reader, I think you're going to have a sustainable business.

If you don't, you've got a big problem. Because it doesn't make any difference how you distribute it, if you're not telling people something that they either need to know and can't get somewhere else.

6. Outlets are experimenting with multiple ways to increase revenue.

Given the continued challenge of securing sufficient revenues to sustain (and ideally grow) their business, local media providers are exploring a number of ways to expand their revenue base.

These include paywalls, subscriptions (including special offers and sales through third parties, such as Groupon), events, income from foundations, sponsorship, and membership models.

Typically, a combination of these methods is required for success.

7. Engagement, both online and in real life, is an emerging priority.

Definitions of engagement vary but are applicable to both digital and offline relationships with audiences. Local news outlets are increasingly placing an emphasis on “engagement,” recognizing this can both impact their bottom line and improve their storytelling/reporting.



Independence Day 2017 subscription offer from the Salem Statesman Journal (Oregon)

Outlets measure engagement with their content—which in turn can help to define their digital advertising rates—based on pageviews, unique visitors, time on site, and other metrics. Offline engagement may include events, opening up editorial meetings and other opportunities for direct dialogue, as well as the emergence of “engaged journalism.”

As Jake Batsell, associate professor, Southern Methodist University, wrote in 2015: “An engaged journalist’s role in the 21st century is not only to inform but to bring readers directly into the conversation.”⁴

8. Local media needs to be more diverse in staffing and content.

Alongside this, as many newsrooms are already acknowledging, the skills and make-up of their teams will also need to change. Cities in the Pacific Northwest such as Seattle, Portland⁵, and Bend are growing fast.⁶ In some cases, their demographic make-up is shifting, and newsrooms will have to reflect this.

Morgan Holm, senior vice president and chief content officer at Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) in Portland, acknowledged this when he observed changing demographics in his city. “A lot of the hiring here took place 15, 20 years ago,” he says, “when this was a fairly white—it still is a pretty white—community. Pretty middle class.”

“There’s a lot of homogeneity in the staff here,” he admits, “and that takes nothing away from their skill set. They are very good at what they do.⁷ But to reach a broader audience in the future, we’re gonna have to hire some people who look more like that audience.”

9. Local journalism is the vanguard for the wider profession.

Local newsrooms, just like their larger counterparts, would benefit from being more diverse, so that they better reflect the communities that they serve.⁸

At a time when trust in the media is at a low ebb and the sector is attacked on a daily basis by politicians, local journalists can play a vital role in ensuring that grassroots concerns are escalated to elected officials and the mainstream media.⁹

Local journalists, who are often the only journalists most people will ever meet, also have an ambassadorial role for the wider profession—one they should not take lightly.

“I think local media has an important role to play in building the overall reputation of, and belief in, journalism,” explains Caitlyn May, editor of the *Cottage Grove Sentinel* (Oregon).

“Local journalists, who are often the only journalists most people will ever meet, also have an ambassadorial role for the wider profession—one they should not take lightly.”

“Engagement plays a part in this, in that it gives people a one-on-one relationship with journalism,” May says. “They begin to understand how it works, what’s legal to print and what’s not, what news tenets are, and why some stories are irresponsible and others are worth their time.”

“To do this, it’s essential that journalists leave the office and go out into the community,” she adds, a sentiment echoed repeatedly by interviewees as essential for establishing the ongoing relevance and vibrancy of local journalism in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

A word from the Editor



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By: Caitlyn May - Updated: 1 month ago

We are your hometown newspaper. What we say matters and how we say it counts. We want you to trust that what you hear from us is true. When we make an allegation, we have several qualified sources to back it up. We don't engage in gossip, even if it means we don't have the viral story this week. We'll have the true and accurate one next week.

No public official in Cottage Grove gets a free pass from us. We don't play favorites and we don't hold grudges. But the facts have to be there and when they're not, we'll wait.

We'll dig deeper and ask more questions because we will never give you half an answer or ask you to draw a conclusion without presenting you the facts in their entirety. We'll always give you all of the facts and when there's one to be had, an answer as well. If that means other publications are the first to have a Cottage Grove headline on their front page, that's ok by us.

We'll wait to get it right.

And we hope you'll wait with us because we don't care if we publish or post first. We care that what we publish and post is correct, sourced, fair, honest and carries the weight of facts. Not sensationalism.

It's called journalism. And we hope you continue to subscribe to it.

As always, I'm happy to explain our decisions, hear your concerns and tell your stories. Stop by, call or email through any of the contacts listed below. It is a privilege to serve this community and we will continue to do so by upholding the standards and policies of journalism.

Editorial from Caitlyn May outlining her paper's approach to local reporting.¹⁰

1. Why Local Journalism Still Matters

“You know, our weekly newspaper ... has the same ability to deliver news and information that is on such a small scale that no major entity is going to come in and replicate our ability to gather that information.”

—Les Zaitz, Editor and Publisher,
Malheur Enterprise (Vale, Oregon)

Introduction

Local journalism remains important. “Local news is the lifeblood of all newspapers,” says Lou Brancaccio, emeritus editor at the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington), “particularly smaller newspapers.” Small-market newspapers (under 50,000 circulation), which tend to primarily focus on local issues, represent the majority of daily and weekly printed newspapers in the United States (6,851 out of 7,071).¹¹

Meanwhile, although the audiences for local TV news affiliates have declined in the past decade, they still reach 11.9 million people most mornings and 22.9 million in the evenings.¹² And, lest we forget, both local and national radio continues to reach 91 percent of all Americans age 12 or older every week.¹³ Nielsen notes that national and local “radio reaches more Americans each week than any other platform.”¹⁴

Toxic Armories

Every time a soldier pulled the trigger inside a National Guard gun range, a bullet cast off bits of lead. The Guard’s neglect allowed the toxic dust to spread outside the range, endangering families who attended weddings, school sleepovers and Cub Scout meetings in America’s armories.

[READ THE SERIES](#)

A key reason for the continued popularity of local journalism is the role local media can play in delivering original—and well packaged—news and information to communities that is not necessarily found elsewhere. Offering unique, valuable, unreplicated, local reporting may be at the heart of creating a sustainable business model for local news operators.

Despite facing a number of demographic (notably, aging audiences) and financial challenges (including reduced ad revenues and the difficulty in getting audiences to pay

for content), local media continue to deliver a number of important journalistic functions.

We can see the positive impact local journalism can make on communities and the wider news/information ecosystem on a daily basis. It supports community, democratic, and civic needs and remains valuable to audiences and communities alike.

However, as Lou Brancaccio cautions, “being optimistic about local news is a completely different dynamic than how optimistic one might be about the future of local newspapers.”

We touch on issues related to business and revenue models in Chapter 4 of this report.

Journalists interviewed for this report consistently articulated that, despite the pressures and uncertainties their sector faces, core journalistic values and purposes still matter and positively influence the work they do.

Interviewees identified three key reasons local journalism remains important in the Pacific Northwest and beyond:

1. Holding Authority to Account

Accountability remains at the heart of the journalistic mission. This is just as true at the local level as it is for regional, national, and international journalists. For Mark Zusman, editor and publisher of *Willamette Week* (Portland, Oregon), changes across the media landscape—including the reduced number of journalists and the shuttering of titles—mean that this essential function of the Fourth Estate is potentially at risk.¹⁵ As he explains:

The declining enrolment of journalists who are on a payroll in this country ... creates an environment that is just a breeding ground for the kinds of corruption, bad deeds that are desperately in need of the kind of watchdog journalism which is in decline.

Zusman’s focus is perhaps not surprising. His paper was the first weekly to win a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting,¹⁶ and it was also the first newspaper to win a Pulitzer for a story first published online, Nigel Jaquiss’ investigation revealing how a former Oregon governor had concealed sexual misconduct with a 14-year-old girl over a 30-year period.¹⁷

The need for watchdog reporting, Zusman argues, has never been greater.

It’s very clear to me that the trend lines, both in terms of employment and the strength of local journalism institutions, is such that I think we’re creating an environment in which the potential for corruption and misdeeds has never been greater because of the lack of watchdogs on a local level, not on a national or a federal level.

Despite a challenging economic backdrop—in 2015, advertising revenues at seven publicly traded newspaper companies in the United States [fell by 7.8 percent](#), the largest annual decline since the Great Recession¹⁸—journalists across the Pacific Northwest continue to deliver hard-hitting, impactful journalism on a regular basis.

“Accountability remains at the heart of the journalistic mission. This is just as true at a local level as it is for regional, national and international journalists.”

In March 2017, Rob Davis of [the Oregonian](#) (Portland, Oregon) won a Scripps Howard Foundation award for his work on [“Toxic Armories,”](#) a two-part series that took 18 months to produce.

The *Oregonian* notes:

...Davis filed more than 100 records requests in all 50 states and amassed more than 23,000 pages of records, that led to the creation of a one-of-a-kind [national database](#) of contaminated armories... Some of the worst lead problems in the nation [were detected in Oregon.](#) ¹⁹

In the same month, the Northwest News Network—a collaboration of public radio stations broadcasting in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho ²⁰—produced the powerful four-part audio series “Suicide Behind Bars,” which explored the surge in inmate suicides found across Washington’s prison system in 2014—2015. ²¹

“During those two years,” reporter Austin Jones noted, “11 inmate deaths were ruled suicides, giving Washington one of the highest prison suicide rates in the country.” ²²

These in-depth investigative pieces sit alongside the more day-to-day watchdog and accountability work that journalists across the region continue to produce every day.

2. Meeting Public Information Needs

A key challenge for all news outlets—local, regional, and national—is grabbing and retaining the attention of their audience.

That’s not necessarily easy. ²³ Consumers have access to more information and entertainment sources than ever before, but their information needs are not necessarily met by the expanding range of sources that many communities now have access to.

One obvious way to address this, argues John Costa, president and publisher of the [Bend Bulletin](#) (Oregon) is to “understand who your audience is, what their wants and needs are, and make sure that you deliver them in ways that are more responsive and more informative than anybody else in the area.”

“I know that it sounds like a truism,” he added, but “I suspect that a lot of papers don’t think about that often enough. I worked at other big papers before I came here, and I’ve always been surprised at how infrequently they think about the evolving needs of readers.”

News providers are using a variety of means to determine these evolving needs, from digital analytics to focus groups and opportunities for face-to-face engagement. But, underpinning all of this, news providers need to recognize they are in the relationship business.

“News providers need to recognize they are in the relationship business.”

“It’s a relationship you can have in a print product or a broadcast or an app or whatever,” suggests Morgan Holm, senior vice president and chief content officer of Oregon Public Broadcasting (Portland, Oregon). “But it is a relationship where you’re meeting somebody’s needs.”

He continues:

“And if you’re able to convey to people that you understand that, you continue to have value in this explosion of an information environment that we live in. But if you treat people like customers who are just on the receiving end of the production pipeline, they have options at this point that they didn’t used to have. So the loyalty has drained away in so many cases.”

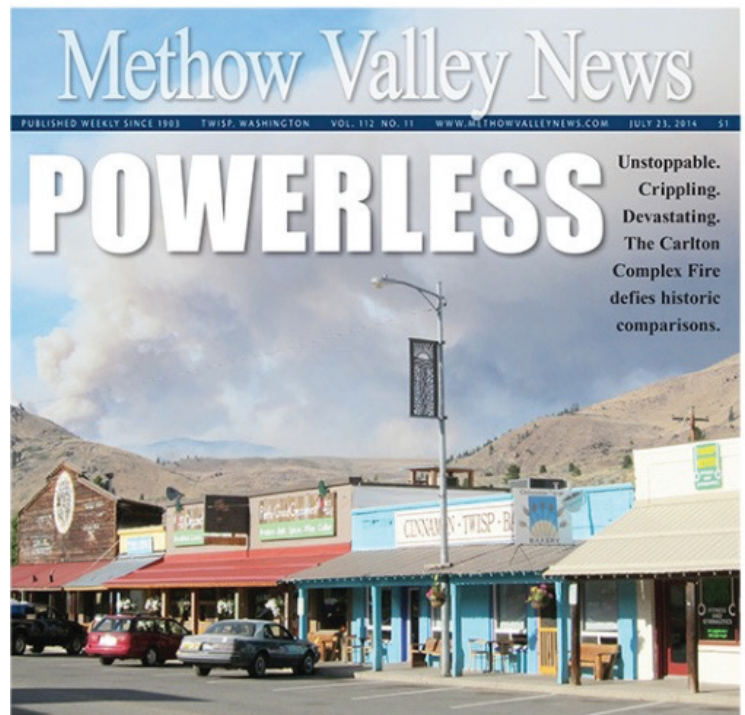
The information needs of communities vary, and so do the editorial approaches local media organizations employ to meet this challenge.

Some local news providers continue to take a “general store” approach: offering a little bit of everything. Others specialize based on a specific hyperlocal geographic area (like [West Seattle Blog](#)) or particular audience characteristics. Examples in the latter category include [The Evergrey](#), “the daily Seattle newsletter for people who want to make the most of their city”²⁴ and the Seattle-based [Crosscut](#), which “strives to provide readers with the facts and analysis they need to intelligently participate in civic discourse, and to create a more just, equitable and sustainable society.”²⁵

Alongside targeted geographic reporting and material aimed at audiences with particular interests, many local media outlets continue to undertake traditional shoe-leather reporting, covering topics that audiences don’t necessarily know about until it they are brought to their attention.

Reporting by the [Eugene Register-Guard](#) (Oregon) on the sale²⁶—and performance²⁷—of Lane County’s for-profit coordinated care organization Trillium Community Health Plan is just one example of journalism that might fit this category.

In addition to meeting the information needs of communities through traditional public affairs and watchdog reporting, local news outlets continue to play an integral role in sharing important local information, including softer stories that are no less valuable to communities.



Top of the front cover for the Methow Valley News, July 23, 2014.²⁹

As Les Zaitz, editor and publisher at the [Malheur Enterprise](#) (Vale, Oregon), has observed:

“There is no other entity that can replicate our ability to cover the gristle of daily life in a small town. You know, the high school’s football scores, what did the city council do. You know, who won an award or a scholarship from the local rotary club, the obituaries for the local families.”

Much of this local content—both hard and soft news—is not necessarily found elsewhere. Subsequently, there remains a role for media providers who can present news and information in a dynamic, contextualized, and useful manner.

By curating, analyzing, and building on the information provided across a given locale, news media can continue to offer a service that communities value, need, and may potentially (financially) support. Identifying opportunities to deliver unique content may lie at the heart of a successful economic future for local news providers.

3. Building and Supporting Community

In addition to sharing useful information and providing accountability and watchdog reporting, local media also helps empower communities by reflecting their experience and encouraging participation in local and civic life.

Research from [Poindexter et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Heider et al. \(2005\)](#) found that readers were keen for local media to act as a “good neighbor” even more so than being a “watchdog,” although both types of activities remain important.

This can be particularly true in a crisis, when local media continues to often be the leading—and sometimes sole—reliable information source for a community.

In the Pacific Northwest, one high-profile example of this type of coverage came from the [Methow Valley News](#) (Twisp, Washington) in 2014, when the biggest wildfire in Washington state history shut down the power in the town of Twisp, where the paper is based.

This meant no internet. No cell phone coverage. And a paucity of reliable information.

“I realized with surreal clarity that if I wanted to do my job, I’d have to get out of the valley. And no journalist wants to leave the scene of the story,” publisher Don Nelson recalled.²⁸

After initially decamping to Seattle, Nelson and the paper’s designer, Darla Hussey, began using Facebook to capture—and share—the latest news.

They later returned to the town with a borrowed generator to focus on putting out the paper. Sharing files on flash drives, as their network was down, the team produced copy that a sales associate drove 100 miles through the fire zone to print.

“Our attitude,” publisher Don Nelson later recounted, “from the moment the power faded, was not whether we would make a newspaper, but how.”³⁰

“Nelson saw their duty as two-fold,” Mike Wallberg wrote on the [IVOH](#) (Images & Voice of Hope) website: “To relay important safety and other fire-related news to affected residents, and to provide an uninterrupted presence to folks who have come to see the paper as an integral element of the community.”³¹

These sentiments continue to drive activity at local media outlets across the United States, and not just in times of crisis.

One clear way local media helps to build and support a sense of community is through day-to-day reporting and campaigning on issues that matter.

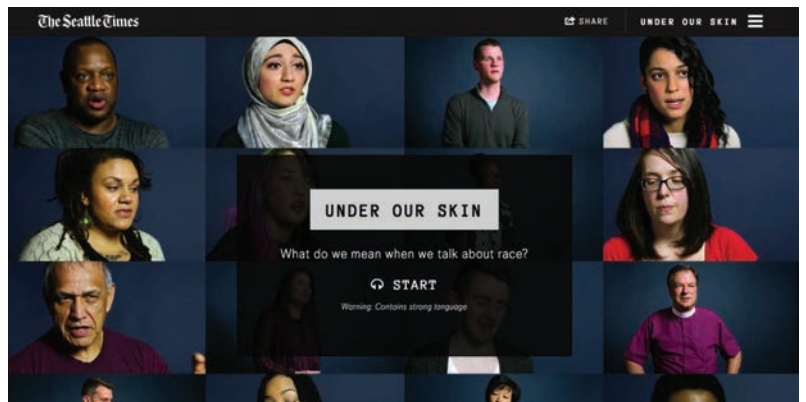
The *Eugene Register-Guard* (Oregon), which this year celebrates its 150th anniversary, is currently embarking on a yearlong project tackling homelessness. As in many cities across the region, this is an important issue. Around 3,000 people,³² including large numbers of students and young people,³³ are homeless in Eugene at any given time.

Further north, in Washington State, the *Seattle Times* launched “[Under Our Skin](#)” in June 2016 “as part of an effort to deepen public discussion and understanding of race.”³⁴

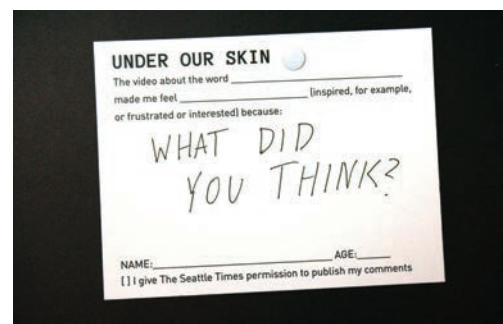
The initiative featured [18 videos](#), [guest essays](#), and opportunities—online and offline—for readers and members of the community to offer their reflections on race, policing, and equality. The *Seattle Times* shared some of these reflections³⁶, while the series also provoked discussions in other spaces about the issues raised.

The University of Washington’s football coach, Chris Petersen, invited one contributor to the series, Bishop Greg Rickel, to talk to his team about race and racism. As [Adam Jude](#), a *Seattle Times* staff reporter, [noted](#), this conversation wasn’t always comfortable, not least because “Rickel grew up as a white Southerner and describes himself as a ‘recovering racist.’”

“It definitely made us uncomfortable—it’s an uncomfortable topic for everyone,” Jude quotes Greg Gaines, a sophomore defensive tackle. “But I liked it. He forced us to think like real men.”



Screenshot from the *Seattle Times*’ “*Under Our Skin*” project.³⁵



Comments card from the interactive booth set up by the *Seattle Times* at BAAMFest 2016, a free event hosted by the Rainier Beach Merchants Association “celebrating the culture, diversity, energy, and talent in the thriving Rainier Beach community!”³⁷

Talking about the series, the *Seattle Times*' managing editor at the time, Jim Simon, indicated that the initiative was “a powerful thing” that played an important role in building relationships with new audiences and finding a fresh way to build community engagement.

“All the data we had showed that it gets audiences that we don't normally hit,” he said. “It didn't do so great among our typical audience, but it hit a lot of other audiences.”

Recap and Reflections

Although audiences, in many cases, are declining, local news remains important—especially for older demographics.

Local television news continues to make a difference to the communities it serves. According to data compiled by the Pew Research Center, “57% of U.S. adults often get TV based news, either from local TV (46%), cable (31%), network (30%) or some combination of the three.”³⁸

Newspapers, radio, and online channels also remain important news and information sources. Collectively, they help to hold authority to account, share valuable public information, and shine a spotlight on communities and local issues.

As we shall see, local outlets are responding to the challenges in front of them in a number of ways as they seek to reinvent themselves for the digital age. This includes using new platforms for storytelling and distribution, exploring new revenue models, and re-examining the type of journalism they produce.

2. The Evolution of Local Journalism

A newspaper is like a buffet. You go to a buffet, [and] there are dozens and dozens of items [to] choose to eat. But you may find something you don't like at all.

You may find some items that you like very much... You might put some of these items in a newspaper—like the kinds of foods that you think a patron might enjoy eating—closer to the front where they will see them first...

That evolution is happening today. We're more cognizant of the idea that you've got to have a good mix of stories so that people will find something they like and then continue to read the paper because of that.

—Lou Brancaccio, Emeritus Editor,
Vancouver Columbian (Washington)

Introduction

Local journalism, like the wider media landscape, has been disrupted by the emergence of new platforms and technologies.³⁹ This creates both challenges and opportunities for local news providers.

As Dr. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of research at the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) at Oxford University, told a panel⁴⁰ at the [2017 International Journalism Festival](#): “Distribution is no longer confined by transmitter range or how far it’s practical and economical to drive your physical print copies and sell them or where your advertisers want to sell their products.”⁴¹

The impact of this, Nielsen says, is that “the media economy is no longer tied to space the way it was in the past. Google and Facebook have far greater penetration in almost every local market than any local media organization has, probably greater than they ever had.”

This reality, coupled with “the fact that there’s going to be less money than there was in the past,” is leading some organizations to reconsider their approach to newsgathering, storytelling, and content distribution.

That has meant embracing new approaches to journalism, such as those advocated by organizations like [Hearken](#) and the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), as well as experimenting with opportunities for storytelling and engagement through platforms like Snapchat and [Facebook Live](#), and the means to tell stories using [virtual reality](#) (VR) and [augmented reality](#) (AR).

A number of content producers—in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere—are also doubling down on more traditional outputs, such as [podcasts](#), newsletters, and events, and placing a greater emphasis on these activities.

Establishing and renewing relevance with audiences will be fundamental to the creation of a successful and viable future for local news providers.

[Sharon Chan](#), vice president of innovation, product, and development for the *Seattle Times*, noted that for her organization, this means focusing on “building that deeper relationship with people and showing that there’s value to having a newspaper, a legacy newspaper.”

It’s a sentiment that’s applicable to digital-only and other legacy providers as well.

As Morgan Holm, senior vice president and chief content officer at OPB (Portland, Oregon)—which reaches “more than 1.5 million people across the Northwest each week through television, radio, online, and via mobile and social platforms”—observes:

You know, Google and Facebook are doing a darn fine job of squeezing out a whole bunch of people already. So we’ve already got a fight on our hands, but there’s still a chance to, you know, get an audience to be aware of your existence there and to see you as a trusted source.

Given (and perhaps because of) this backdrop of continued financial challenges, and unprecedented levels ⁴² of political antagonism toward the media, here are three thematic areas where local journalism in the Pacific Northwest is continuing to evolve.

Multimedia Journalism Is Standard

The digital revolution has created new opportunities by allowing media outlets to branch out to other platforms.

As *Willamette Week’s* Mark Zusman comments, “We can compete with TV and video. We can compete with radio on podcasts. We’re not limited to one platform.”

Papers like the [Medford Mail Tribune](#) (Medford, Oregon) now have [verticals for local video](#) content as standard, the [Daily Astorian](#) (Astoria, Oregon) and others [have their own YouTube channels](#), and photo galleries, maps, graphics, and data visualizations are increasingly part of the portfolio of content offered by local media outlets.

“Establishing and renewing relevance with audiences will be fundamental to the creation of a successful and viable future for local news providers.”

Canyon Creek fire destroys 26 homes in its path



Image: Map of active wildfires in Oregon published by the East Oregonian in summer 2015 ⁴³



[Clark Talks](#), the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington) newspaper's weekly podcast, offers an insight into news and topics from across Clark County.

It is hosted by reporters Dameon Pesanti and Katie Gillespie with appearances from their *Columbian* colleagues. Recent episodes have explored the Affordable Care Act, school

funding, the centennial of the Interstate Bridge, and some of the town's newest breweries.

[GeekWire](#), which offers "tech news, commentary, and other nerdiness covering Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Apple, Internet, startups, mobile, geek culture, [and] more,"⁴⁵ is another local provider with an audio outlet. The [weekly GeekWire Podcast](#) airs at 8 p.m. Saturdays and 1 p.m. Sundays on KIRO Radio (97.3 FM) in the Seattle region and reaches a potentially global audience as a podcast distributed via [iTunes](#), [SoundCloud](#), and [Stitcher](#).

Meanwhile, on a smaller scale, the [Cottage Grove Sentinel](#) (Oregon) partners with local radio station KNND 1400 AM to air a once-a-month talk show.

Editor Caitlyn May explains:

For one hour on the second Tuesday of the month, we chat about the news in the community, and community members can call in with questions. The radio station doesn't quite reach Eugene [the nearest city 22.5 miles away], but it's a must-listen for the older demographic in town.

For those who are already plugged into social media and may be a bit younger, we've begun streaming these shows on Facebook Live.

In this regard, although they have fewer resources than their larger counterparts, local media outlets are embracing some of the opportunities for multimedia journalism, going beyond their traditional platforms to find new ways to engage with audiences and distribute content.

Experimentation with New and Revitalized Formats

As multimedia journalism is now successful embedded in local newsrooms as well as their larger counterparts, it's interesting to see how outlets in the Pacific Northwest are also innovating with new, established, and emerging storytelling formats.

Two of the oldest digital delivery channels are newsletters and podcasts. Neither are new, but both are enjoying a resurgence.



Image: Photo gallery and story in the *Oregonian* covering fires in Eastern Oregon ⁴⁴

Newsletters

“Newsletter editors are the new important person in newsrooms,” *Digiday* argued in 2016. ⁴⁶ “You can’t kill email, it’s the cockroach of communication,” concurred Logan Molen, publisher/CEO of RG Media Company and the *Eugene Register-Guard* (Oregon).

The *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), just one Pacific Northwest outlet with a healthy range of newsletters, has a mixture of 15 daily and weekly email publications covering everything from sports to opinion, watchdog reporting, and a monthly newsletter, “The Real Dope,” featuring the best of the paper’s marijuana coverage. ⁴⁷ (Audiences must confirm they are over 21 to subscribe to the monthly marijuana newsletter.)

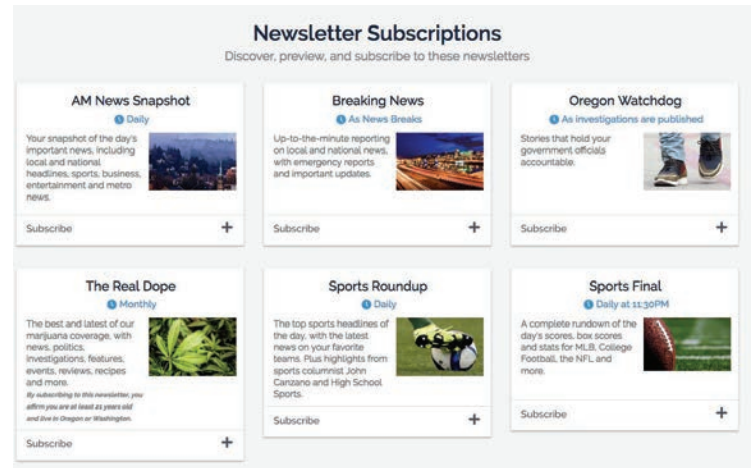


Image: Selection of newsletters offered by the Oregonian

Podcasts

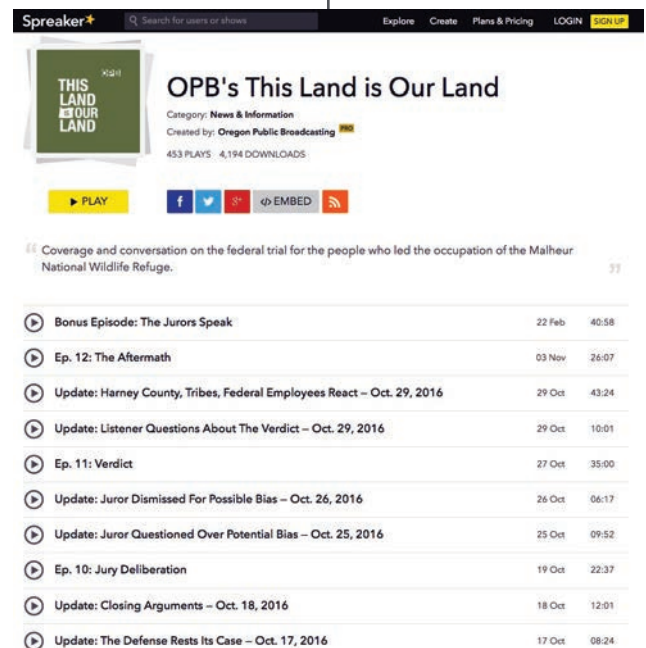
Podcasting, another old product, ⁴⁸ is also reaching new audiences, ⁴⁹ buoyed by “the Serial effect” ⁵⁰ and the increasing ease with which audiences can listen to this content.

The podcasting format allows for flexibility, in terms of duration and frequency, that a standard radio show does not. Many newsrooms and media outlets are embracing this creative and journalistic freedom.

OPB, for example, launched a weekly podcast in 2016, “*This Land is Our Land*,” to cover the federal trial following the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

As OPB’s website notes: “The podcast provided trial recaps, in-depth analysis, and insight into the high-stakes proceedings, as well as the larger political and cultural issues at play.” ⁵¹

With 12 primary episodes and a number of shorter updates, their podcast ⁵² is an example of how this storytelling platform can be used for deep dives into important topics with a specific shelf life, as well as long-running and ongoing series.



360 Video

Along with augmented and virtual reality, 360 video is one of a series of emerging visual formats that journalists and newsrooms are experimenting ⁵³ with around the globe. ⁵⁴

The [Klamath Falls Herald and News](#) (Oregon) is just one outlet that has been experimenting with both AR and 360 video content.

Using 360 video, the paper has recently covered sports, [the 30th Annual Restoration Celebration in Chilloquin](#), and a show [featuring 14 exotic parrots](#) at the 2017 Winter Wings Festival. Several of these efforts were produced by the Digital Media Design students of Klamath Community College, then published by the *Herald and News*.

Talking about their early experiences with the format, Managing Editor Gerry O'Brien says, "It's been fun. It's a learning experience, a learning curve, and it's a little clunky at first. But once you kind of get it down, it gets easier as we go on."

Interestingly, given the relatively nascent nature of 360 imagery on social media, each piece comes with instructions for the audience explaining how to access the material. For example, the videos for the "Oregon Bird Man" (published in February 2017), which are embedded in the left sidebar of the paper's website, contain clear directions for use.

Meanwhile, a [story](#) celebrating the 30th anniversary of [Klamath Restoration Act](#) by Congress in 1986—a move "which restored the tribes' condition as a sovereign nation"—contains links to a 360 video show by Klamath Community College students at an event in Chilloquin.

Providing this type of guidance is important, recommends Caitlyn May, editor of the *Cottage Grove Sentinel*, as "digital advances are cool but are ineffective if your audience doesn't know how to log on to Facebook [or other tools]."

"Likewise, if there's a growing desire from your audience to 'learn' social media, help them," she suggests. "Add content to the web in easy-to-use formats. Reader-friendly [as a concept] should expand beyond the newspaper page and onto every platform we use to distribute these stories."

In addition to these efforts with 360 video, the paper—which is published six days a week and has a circulation of more than 12,000⁵⁸—has partnered with Klamath Community College to produce regular augmented reality content. This work is explored in Chapter 3.



Image: Karl Anderson with a green winged macaw at the 2017 Winter Wings Festival. Owner: H&N photo by Kevin N. Hume⁵⁵



Klamath Community College Digital Media Design class — in cooperation with Oregon Tech and the Herald and News — filmed Saturday's Winter Wings presentation of exotic parrots in a 360-degree presentation.

Karl Anderson, known as the Oregon Bird Man, featured 14 large and small parrots, some extremely rare, to a standing-room-only crowd.



The videos were put together by OIT student Bryan Wada and KCC students Danny Ortiz and Alexander Kat, under the direction of professor Doug Kirby.

Click on the video links to view the videos. You can manipulate the view by moving the cursor or direction finder on the screen, so one can see the entire room.

Screengrab: "Check out the Winter Wings parrot show in 360 video"⁵⁶

Visit the story's [YouTube video](#) on a cell phone and move the phone to see 360 effect.⁵⁷ (You can also search for "kcc dmd" on YouTube to find the paper's channel, then click on "Klamath County Pow Wow 360 Video.")

Fresh Approaches to the Role of Journalism

Along with embracing new formats for journalism and storytelling, local journalists in the Pacific Northwest—and elsewhere—are re-examining some of their approaches to and philosophies about the practice of journalism.

Notably, we are witnessing discussions around topics such as advocacy/politics and the end of objectivity, and engagement with new styles of storytelling such as solutions journalism. This section—which is by no means exhaustive—provides a snapshot of some of the discussions I had with interviewees about emerging issues related to the exercise of their craft.

Objectivity/Distance

The idea that journalists need to be detached from their community—lest it influence their reporting—is beginning to change.

One journalist who discussed his evolving stance on this issue is Lou Brancaccio, editor emeritus of the Vancouver Columbian. *Vancouver Columbian*. He explains, “I used to believe that people in the newsroom should keep their distance from the community.”

Brancaccio’s rationale, which was by no means unique,⁵⁹ stemmed from a recognition that it might be difficult (or perceived to be difficult) to criticize people and organizations you are close to. Similarly, journalists may also be open to criticism that positive coverage and analysis is the product of close personal and professional relationships, rather than journalistic objectivity.⁶⁰ He says:

I gradually figured out that I had a life to live as well and that I just had to make sure that I uphold my principles and that my credibility was still the most important thing to me. And, you know, Mayor Leavitt of Vancouver is a friend of mine, but I’ve beaten him up plenty of times when I thought he’d done stupid stuff. It’s just the way it is.

Some other journalists and outlets have, historically, been more relaxed about these types of relationships. John Costa, president and publisher of the *Bend Bulletin* (Oregon) noted how “the founder of this paper, near the end of his life, gave the stock to his children, but he gave the rest of his estate to the Oregon Community Foundation in his name.”

This act imbued the spirit of the paper, whereby many people—on both the editorial and business side of the newspaper—are actively involved in their local community.

“The numbers of people in this building who are out doing something that is without any compensation, that is aimed at making it a better society, is staggering,” Costa says.

According to Costa, staff at the *Bulletin* are involved in everything from health programs for unwed mothers to court assistance initiatives, fundraising for good causes, and organizations like Rotary, the Bend Chamber of Commerce, and Little

League teams.

“I spent an awful lot of time and energy on the original committee that started the construction [and] that brought OSU Cascades [Oregon State University’s Bend campus] here.... My wife was on symphony boards.... We’re all part of organizations that really get out there and try and do things,” Costa says.

Solutions Journalism

Shifts in journalistic thinking and practice can also be seen in the emergence of solutions journalism.

In a 2013 blog post, [Courtney Martin](#), co-founder of the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), “an independent, non-profit organization working to legitimize and spread the practice of solutions journalism,”⁶¹ addressed the question: “What is Solutions Journalism?”

*Solutions journalism is rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems. It investigates and explains, in a critical and clear-eyed way, examples of people working toward solutions. It focuses not just on what may be working, but how and why it appears to be working, or alternatively, why it may be stumbling.*⁶²

“It’s not about making people feel good or advocating for a certain policy or balancing out the ‘doom-and-gloom,’” she wrote. “Instead, solutions journalism is about what journalism has always been about: informing and empowering people.”

What’s different, she suggests, is that “we’re just asking journalists to do that in a more complete way, by investigating what has worked just as rigorously and relentlessly as what hasn’t.”

One major proponent of solutions journalism in the Pacific Northwest is the *Seattle Times*, which works with the Solutions Journalism Network on its [Education Lab](#) project. Education Lab reporter [Claudia Rowe](#) has argued that with solutions journalism, “the idea is not to change minds; it’s to show possibilities.”⁶³

Sharon Chan, vice president of innovation, product, and development at the *Seattle Times*, identifies one example of how this approach was brought to a story about “school discipline that doesn’t deprive students of their education.”

As she admits, “the more traditional way to write it now would have been to write about these formal racial disparities in the way discipline is applied.” Instead the paper took a different approach. Chan explains:

We went out and covered promising approaches, and then we had two events: One was a solutions workshop with 40 stakeholders, and then we had a [town hall](#) with about 200 people. Both of those [events] heavily featured the voices of educators themselves, students themselves, principals themselves, as opposed to us getting up on stage and talking.

The impact of this work “resulted in two major pieces of legislative action at the

state level,” Chan says.

The Solutions Journalism Network provides a “[story tracker](#)” database that offers searchable examples of this type of journalism being produced around the world.

Examples of other solutions-led reporting from the Pacific Northwest region, captured by the tracker, include a feature on “[Why Seattle Cops and Social Workers Walk the Beat Together](#)” from KUOW (a public radio station in Puget Sound, Washington, and Southern British Columbia), a story by Seattle-based tech website GeekWire on “[Finding affordable, innovative ways to harness technology to combat homelessness](#),” and an OPB feature on how “[The Answer to Oregon’s \\$8 Billion Health Problem Lies in 1970s Maine](#).”

Meanwhile, the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism was one of the first J-schools in the United States to teach solutions journalism,⁶⁵ and in summer 2017 it launched the [Catalyst Journalism Project](#) to “teach students how to combine the traditional methods of investigative journalism with the innovative practice of solutions journalism.”⁶⁶

What the Analytics Tell Us

The rise of sophisticated data analytics tools, such as those offered by [Google](#), [Chartbeat](#), [NewsWhip](#), [Parse.ly](#), and others, provide newsrooms with phenomenal amounts of data related to their online audience and users.

As a result, argues Elinor Shields, head of audience engagement for BBC News, “there’s no shortage of data and insight. If anything, there’s almost too much.”⁶⁷

Making sense of this data is a priority for newsrooms. A December 2015 [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism survey](#) of 130 leading editors, CEOs, and digital leaders from 25 countries revealed: “54% said deepening online engagement was a top priority ... and 76% said it was extremely important to improve the use of data in newsrooms.”

[Levi Pulkkinen](#), senior editor of the [Seattle PI](#), argues that a lot of this data is telling newsrooms that their approaches to some types of traditional reporting needs to change. And not’s not an easy message to hear.

“I think there’s a hesitancy in the newspaper industry among reporters to not recognize that what the metrics are telling us is that we need to change the content,” Pulkkinen says.

One clear example of this, he argues, can be seen in standard public affairs journalism. “What we’re finding is that readers have very little taste for incremental coverage, and that’s kind of the bread and butter of local newspaper,” he says. He

Mr. Howard states
the plain truth that
the system is broken.
But the system includes
the unfunded test mandates,
The growing and
outrageous class
sizes. The lack of social support
for children living in poverty.
And the most regressive tax
structure in the U.S. Connect the dots!
Sands Hunt, Parent & Teacher SB

Image: Response from attendee at the Seattle Times’ 2015 event, “Discipline That Works for All”⁶⁴

continues:

There's kind of a traditional newspaper idea that you do cover the incremental stuff because people are sitting there waiting to know what happened at X meeting, or when whatever committee has advanced a bill, and all that stuff. And I just don't think there's an audience for it.

Responding to these cues from the audience won't necessarily be easy, given how engrained this type of journalism is at many outlets.

Yet it's not that audiences aren't interested in this type of story, Pulkkinen suggests. It's that local journalists need to position their content in new ways. "I think we lose people that could be engaged when we make the news too boring for them to come get it," he contends.

The challenge for local journalists, Pulkkinen argues, is "to make that adjustment to telling stories that are going to resonate a bit more than this kind of government-heavy, grinding away covering the same story as it moves slowly through."

Instead, the data seems to imply preferences for a fresh approach. "They like when we can tell them a whole story, or tell them an important story," he says, "but they don't need us to just act as a kind of stenographer of government."

Pulkkinen's observations hint at some of the wider challenges faced by both local and larger news organizations. New platforms and shifts in media consumption habits mean that the way stories are reported may need to change and evolve.

As a result, there's a balancing act between preserving core journalistic values and finding new ways to reinvigorate and refresh them for the digital age. Addressing that is a complex matter that's as applicable to a given news beat (such as public affairs) as it is to the wider, overarching strategy of any news provider.

As Jim Simon explains from the *Seattle Times*' perspective, an organization that is espousing new forms of journalism, such as solutions journalism, as well as experimenting on new and emerging digital platforms (see the upcoming Chapter 3):

We still feel what we have to sell is very unique content, and that includes ambitious public service journalism, whether it's watchdog or high-end explanatory storytelling. The challenge for us—and I think so far we've been pretty good at that—is how you do this rapid digital transformation, search for new audiences while maintaining your ability to

“New platforms and shifts in media consumption habits mean that the way stories are reported may need to change and evolve.”

“There’s a balancing act between preserving core journalistic values and finding new ways to reinvigorate and refresh them for the digital age.”

Recap and Reflections

Despite (and perhaps because of) continued financial challenges and unprecedented levels⁶⁸ of political antagonism toward the media, traditional journalistic values and mission remain fundamentally important to many working journalists.

However, the practice of journalism does not stand still. Journalists need to continue to be alert to the opportunities that new technologies and platforms offer them, as well as other opportunities to refine and revisit the shape of their craft in the digital age.

As a result, we can continue to expect further experimentation with storytelling formats and forms, as well as debates about what journalism should look like—particularly around issues such as advocacy, access to public record/officials, and journalism in the age of Trump—in 2017 and beyond.

do that sort of ambitious public service journalism.

3. The Rise of Engagement: Online and in Real Life

“An effective journalist has always been on a first-name basis with the movers and shakers of a town. With the coffee shop owner, the lunch spot waitress, the city manager, the mailman, and both the official and self-appointed ‘mayors’ in the neighborhood.”

—Caitlyn May, Editor, [Cottage Grove Sentinel](#) (Oregon)

Introduction

Engagement was arguably the media buzzword of 2016.⁶⁹ But definitions of this term vary. Most interviewees for this project agreed that engagement was important, but they were still endeavoring to define what it meant, how to prioritize it, and where their focus should be.

“We’re still trying to figure that out,” admits Mark Zusman, editor and publisher of *Willamette Week* (Portland, Oregon). “I mean, clearly on one level, if you’re talking about your website, it means having an increasing number of readers who are spending an increasing amount of time. And that’s sort of the base level of engagement.”

Of course, as Zusman and others outline, engagement can go beyond measurable outputs such as subscribers, website visitors, time on site, number of social shares, and other metrics. It is a label that can also be used to describe the emerging “engaged journalism” movement, which at its core envisions a changed relationship between journalists and communities, with journalists actively engaging in conversation with their communities.

Although their motivations may be different, both approaches to engagement are rooted in creating a deeper relationship with audiences, and we are seeing an increasing level of discussion and activity designed to place engagement at the heart of what many news organizations do.⁷⁰

These discussions are happening in organizations large and small, across multiple media platforms. Their impact can be seen in changing content styles, digital experimentation, and growth in efforts focused on real-world engagement. This includes physical events and forums, as well as other attempts at more community-

focused journalism.⁷¹

1. Five Strategic Drivers for Engagement

As briefly discussed, although engagement is informing journalistic output, there is also an underlying economic imperative. Local news providers are exploring new ways to engage audiences in order to create community impact and help secure their financial future.

Here are some of the key drivers for engagement amongst news organizations in the Pacific Northwest and beyond:

1. Double-down on relationships with existing audiences.

In particular, this includes looking to reduce fly-bys, developing brand loyalty in an increasingly media-brand-agnostic age, and seeking to maximize revenue from (more) faithful audiences.

2. Data-driven audience insights can shape new creative possibilities, including content rationalization, formatting, and expansion into new areas.

At the top end of the spectrum, this approach is driving creativity (and revenues), such as those manifest in Netflix's successful move⁷² into original programing.⁷³

For news organizations, including local newsrooms such as the *Klamath Falls Herald and News* (Oregon), programs like the American Press Institute's "Metrics for News" program⁷⁴ are helping "to create data-driven content strategies."⁷⁵

This program can help local publishers determine the passions of their audiences,⁷⁶ so they can use these insights to manage finite resources and focus their coverage accordingly. At a time when many newsrooms

are shrinking, this can help managers determine where they should place their bets in beats, content framing, and prioritization of distribution platforms.

3. Create opportunities to unlock content and contributions from what NYU Professor Jay Rosen calls "the people formerly known as the audience."⁷⁸

Publishers across the region are using guest contributors to fill content gaps (sometimes as a result of layoffs) and to broaden the plurality of voices they offer.

Be indispensable.

Rethink your content strategy with API's custom tools

-  Better measure your content
-  Deeply understand your community's passions
-  Align your journalism with what you've learned
-  Identify coverage areas where you should excel

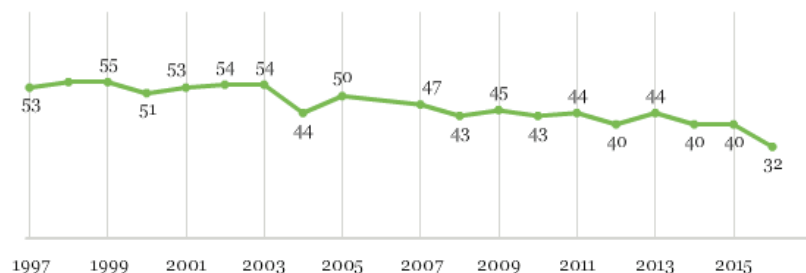
Then we'll help you create an empirical, modern news strategy that resonates with your audience.

Image: Promotional benefits of the American Press Institute's "Metrics for News" program⁷⁷

Americans' Trust in the Mass Media

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

■ % Great deal/Fair amount



GALLUP

Image: Gallup chart showing Americans' trust in mass media⁸¹

Sharon Chan, vice president of innovation, product and development for the *Seattle Times* (Washington) notes that “guest columns are really powerful, and we want to do more of them.”

However, she also reminds publishers that this approach is seldom a shortcut for securing great content. “Unfortunately, people always think we’re going to collect these great essays and just, like, publish them,” she says. “The reality is everyone needs editing. Especially people who don’t write for a living.”

4. Restore trust among disenfranchised news audiences.

In the current political climate, this driver is highly pertinent.⁷⁹

Economics aside, journalism is also contending with a challenging political climate and a large constituency that distrusts the media.

Research from Gallup in late 2016 reported that trust in the media at a record low, particularly among Republicans and younger and older Americans.⁸⁰

5. Find opportunities to secure—and grow—sources of revenue

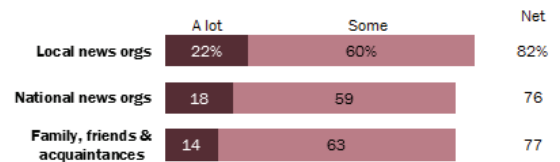
This backdrop of declining trust and increased political opposition creates further challenges for a sector that has already been dramatically affected by the digital disruption of the wider media ecosystem.

As Les Zaitz, editor and publisher of the *Malheur Enterprise* (Vale, Oregon) argues, one implication of this trend is that, unless trust is restored, it will be difficult for many media companies to be viable businesses.

“If the significant majority of Americans—what, 80 percent or more—don’t trust us, then there is no way in my judgment that you will ever answer the question of how do you build a sustainable economic model so you can serve communities until you confront that,”

Few have a lot of confidence in information from professional news outlets or friends and family, though majorities show at least some trust in both

% of U.S. adults who trust the information they get from ...



But social media garners less trust than either

% of web-using U.S. adults who trust the information they get from ...



Source: Survey conducted Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016.
“The Modern News Consumer”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Image: Pew Research Center chart showing trust in news and information sources⁸⁴

Zaitz says.

Although [2016 data from Pew](#) indicates that local media is more trusted than other sources, a potential impact of weakened trust levels—across the media spectrum—could be reduced engagement with news media at all levels, in terms of consumption and purchasing of content.

Naturally, the reverse is also true, with some news providers ⁸² seeing a “Trump bump.” However, the sustainability of this remains uncertain. ⁸³

2. Traditional Measures of Engagement

Issues of trust, and the role they play in supporting fundamental financial needs, are clearly key drivers for engagement. Yet engagement goes beyond mere metrics and financial viability, as it can also impact on wider journalistic practice.

For news organizations, this can mean a changing relationship between journalists and the audiences they serve. Increasingly, concepts of engagement impact the way stories are told and created as well.

Building on the experience of 10 outlets in the Pacific Northwest, the remainder of this chapter offers a smorgasbord of how news organizations in the region are making sense of “engagement” both online and offline. Few outlets are embracing all of these opportunities, but many are implementing some of them (often as resources allow) and considering the potential of others.

Measuring Impact (Reach and Circulation)

Many local news organizations still place considerable importance on traditional engagement mechanisms, such as comments, Letters to the Editor, subscriptions, and online page views.

Logan Molen, publisher/CEO RG Media Company and the *Eugene Register-Guard* (Oregon) noted, for example, the volume—and quality—of the letters his paper still receives from readers:

I tweeted out late last year—it was right before the election—I think we got like 260 letters to the editor. And I tweeted it out, and the vice president at GateHouse Newspaper said, ‘Holy cow. That’s impressive.’ And then I thought, OK, well it’s just the election, it’ll die down. Well, in February we had 200 and some odd letters in a week, and that’s a lot of engagement, and it’s ... really thoughtful engagement on issues that are of local and national importance.

Molen sees engagement as something that “goes beyond just liking a story or reading a story.” He’s keen to inspire an emotional reaction—good or bad—in

“Engagement goes beyond mere metrics and financial viability, as it can also impact on wider journalistic practice.”

his readers.

If somebody picks up our paper, visits our website, fires up the app, and then they're done, and you haven't triggered an emotional reaction in them ... you've lost 'em. You just wasted their time. Every single touchpoint we have [is] a battle that we got to win, even if it's bad.

Accountability Post-Publication

For Jim Simon, the *Seattle Times*' former managing editor, "There's this other part of engaging with the community, which is building trust." One clear way to do this, he suggests, is that "you need to be more transparent with communities about what we're doing, which is sometimes no more than explaining what we do. I think that's important."

In a bid to be more answerable to his audience, the *Eugene Register-Guard*'s Logan Molen produces a semi-regular column called "[Give and Take](#)," where "I'll respond to their compliments or their concerns or their complaints. And so it gets posted online, and then I will engage with people with comment [there too]."

"I do that now because I think it's important and fun," he says, "but it's sending a message that this is part of our job."

This approach is part of a wider recognition that, whereas in a lot of journalism of the past, a journalist's role often ceased when a story was written, that is no longer the case.

"For a long time, journalists had the luxury of just getting published and then running away and letting their stories go out into the wild and fend for themselves," explains the *Seattle Times*' Chan. "In old models of journalism, it was very much a one-way medium. Journalists gave their stories to the public."

Creating a Feedback Loop Between Journalists and Audiences

This one-way relationship is beginning to change. Social media and online comments create spaces for post-publication feedback and discussion—environments many journalists inhabit and engage in.

Meanwhile, organizations like [The Coral Project](#) have created new tools to encourage listening and improved audience comments. News providers are adopting these applications and opportunities for engagement, factoring them into journalist workflows.

"What we've been trying to create at the *Seattle Times*, starting with the education area, is a loop," says Chan. She outlines how this works:

“Through social media, events, and traditional (paper and email) correspondence, journalists have more opportunities than ever to engage with the public around their work.”

Journalists are talking to readers through the journalism, readers are talking to [each] other—that journalism is inspiring other conversation between readers—and readers are also connecting back to the journalists themselves. And that conversation is actually shaping the journalism that comes forward. So it’s a loop in which the readers and the journalists have an exchange, and they build on one another.

Through this, Chan argues, “your journalism can actually have a much broader and deeper impact.”

Other traditional engagement models that are being deployed across the region—including listener panels, focus groups, and community advisory boards—are all working toward similar goals: garnering feedback and input from voices outside of the newsroom, promoting transparency and accessibility, and making journalists more accountable to their audience. Their role and importance seems set to grow as engagement becomes increasingly important.

3. Engagement in Storytelling and Storygathering

Through social media, events, and traditional (paper and email) correspondence, journalists have more opportunities than ever to engage with the public around their work.

This accessibility is influencing not only how audiences interact with content, but also the creation of new types of journalistic output.

Participation in the Story Process

“We did a project called [The Recession Generation](#),” recalls Jim Simon, former managing editor of the *Seattle Times*, “about people who graduated from college in 2009, in the teeth of the recession. [We] used graduates of three high schools to really get the stories from them from the bottom up.”

[Sona Patel](#), who runs the *New York Times*’ efforts around crowdsourcing and reader-sourced reporting, and co-leads the Gray Lady’s team of social media editors, led the initiative while she was still at the *Seattle Times*. As she explained to *Adweek* in 2012, this project is one of the first to have social media at its heart.

“It was the driving force of the project, because it was how we found a lot of people that we ended up featuring,” she says.⁸⁵

Patel’s team created private Facebook groups for each of the three high schools, with *Adweek* noting how “they cultivated the three groups by posting links to articles, engaging with members, and ultimately asking the members



Image: From the series, *The Recession Generation*.⁸⁶
Photo by Erika Schultz/Seattle Times.

to take a survey on what life during the recession has been like. The paper was very clear and transparent that the stories might be used in a package for the paper.”

It was “an interesting experiment,” Jim Simon recalls, stressing the value that can be derived from engaging directly with communities on social media.

Putting the Audience in the Driver’s Seat

Simon also highlights the work done by [Hearken](#) in getting to getting readers to ask questions, and journalists and media outlets answer them. The company’s approach, as they pithily describe in their [Twitter bio](#), is clear: “Listen to your audiences first, not last. Makes for better everything.”⁸⁷

[Ellen Mayer](#), an engagement consultant at Hearken, describes the fourfold process behind their [Public-Powered Journalism](#):

1. Audience members submit questions they’d like the newsroom to investigate.
2. Journalists select a handful of those questions and put them up for a vote.
3. Audience members vote for the question they’re most curious about.
4. Newsroom answers the winning question



Image: KUOW’s online and on air investigation

Benefits: Public

 Media attention without having done something amazing or terrible	 Social capital via being chosen by an important institution	 Thrill of getting to meet reporters, participate in reporting, shape stories
 Access to people, places they can't otherwise access	 Opportunity to directly influence the news and impact their community	 Better understanding and appreciation for of the craft of journalism

Benefits: Reporters






 Continuous, fresh story idea stream fills the pitch pipeline	 Widens editorial filters for what is considered a story	 Ready-made, compelling sources + characters for stories
 More casual, authentic interactions with guarded interviewees	 Deeper understanding of audience; fulfillment by working directly with them	 Higher-performing stories that start from proven audience desires

Image: Benefits for Reporters and Audiences of the Hearken Model (Source: Hearken)⁸⁹

(sometimes with the help and participation of the audience).

One example of a recent story from the Pacific Northwest that used this approach is from [KUOW Public Radio](#) in Puget Sound, Washington. They addressed a specific [question](#) from a younger listener: “Is there really a giant octopus under the Tacoma Narrows Bridge?”⁸⁸

Further south, several San Francisco news providers answered [listeners’ questions about homelessness](#) at Bay Area radio station KQED (whose popular series [Bay Curious](#) runs entirely off audience questions) as part of a wider [week of coordinated coverage](#) on this topic.

Mayer outlined in a [recent Medium post](#) the potential benefits for both journalists and audiences of Hearken’s approach:

Leveraging Digital-First to Improve Output on Analogue Media

In the digital age, few daily newspapers hold back their reporting—except perhaps a major scoop—for their print editions. As Lou Brancaccio, editor emeritus of the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington) explains, news providers can no longer afford to be second:

The worst thing that can happen to a newspaper is that somebody reads some news from their Facebook friend, they go to the Columbian website to see if we have it, and we don't have it.

Now we have it, but we have it in a reporter's head, and he is waiting to finish his story completely before he puts it up online. And that's too late.

It's a losing battle to think that you are the only one with news. That's old-school thinking. That's thinking from 30 years ago that we're the only ones with this news, because the odds are somebody else has it, and if you don't get it up first somebody else will.

As a result, Brancaccio and many other editors are urging reporters to publish the bare bones of the story online and then flesh it out as they go.

In addition to avoiding the appearance of being late to a story, there’s a further journalistic benefit to harnessing this tactic. Brancaccio notes how “people will comment on that story [online] before it ever gets into our print edition the next morning, and we will sometimes use those comments in our print story for the next morning.”

This approach not only shows audiences that their comments are valued and an important part of the engagement/feedback loop, but it also enables the print publication to benefit from additional insights and opinions provided by their online audience.

4. Face-to-Face Engagement

The impacts that journalists and news outlets can see from digital and traditional forms of engagement can include deepening relationships, generating leads, and helping to promote news literacy. These goals are, arguably, even more likely if that engagement includes opportunities for face-to-face engagement.

Interaction That Can Help Promote Media Literacy

Caitlyn May, editor of the *Cottage Grove Sentinel* (Oregon), hosts a weekly open table at the local bakery dubbed “Coffee with the Editor.”

“Members of the community are invited to come chat about anything and everything on their minds,” May says, “whether they have questions or complaints about a story, tips for a new one, or just want to ask me about myself: my political leanings, personal beliefs, or how I came to be in their community.”

She continues:

In some instances, folks who have routinely attended Coffee with the Editor will venture a question about a national issue or story they read in a legacy publication, and we get to discuss why that story was or (in some cases) was not accurate.

Organizations like Hearken have also advocated for approaches that can achieve similar end goals. For example, they have suggested having a member of the community “buddy up” with a reporter on a story, from inception to publication. This approach can help achieve wider media literacy goals while supporting efforts to reach and engage with underserved communities.

Facilitating Engagement by Stealth

At the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington), Brancaccio took a slightly different approach. In 2013, the *Columbian* introduced a limited run of first-edition “Don’t Do Stupid Stuff” coffee cups— a phrase that [peppers](#) Brancaccio’s [Press Talk](#) column. They sold out in just over four hours.⁹⁰

Jump forward four years, and the *Columbian* is still selling the mugs, with a steep discount if you pop by the paper to purchase them (\$10 as opposed to \$18 if you order online).

As Brancaccio admits, the mugs created a novel means for direct interaction with readers. They were a source of discussion with, and visits from, people he otherwise might not have had the opportunity to talk to.

The Power of Events



Image: “Don’t Do Stupid Stuff” mugs produced by the Vancouver Columbian⁹¹

“Events are a great example of journalists getting out of the newsroom to directly engage with audiences and communities.”

As we will see in the next section, events are, in some cases, part of the revenue strategy for many news organizations.⁹² But their usefulness goes beyond this.

As Josh Stearns at the [Democracy Fund](#) has demonstrated, news events can “foster engagement and expand revenue.”⁹³

To fully maximize this potential, outlets need to consider the benefits of partnering with other organizations, suggests Sharon Chan of the *Seattle Times*. Nongovernmental organizations and other trusted community partners can play an integral role in broadening the scope of attendees, so that participation goes beyond most outlets’ core audiences.

Reflecting on events hosted by Education Lab, Chan says, “We could run ads, giant full-page ads, all day long in the *Seattle Times* newspaper. There’s no guarantee that we actually get the people we want from the education community at an event.”

Events are a great example of journalists getting out of the newsroom to directly engage with audiences and communities. The event itself can be a story, and it can also be a great source for many other leads.

Moreover, events can also help build—and change—brand perception while creating an opportunity to discover new stories and leads and providing a means for members of the public to talk directly to journalists about their work and the decisions behind it.

Willamette Week is a local outlet that has identified (intentionally or otherwise) another potential benefit from public events. The Portland-based alt-weekly hosts public affairs events, such as “[Candidates Gone Wild](#),” which their editor, Mark Zusman, describes as “not your father’s political debate.”⁹⁴

“We do it in a club, and we serve beer, and the candidates stand up on stage,” he says. “Among other things, they have to show a talent. And we charge money for that.”

Events such as this can change perceptions of local politicians and journalists alike.

5. Engagement and Innovation on Emerging Platforms

News providers are also using digital tools as a means to try to strengthen relationships with audiences. Technology allows for both deeper engagement



Image: Screenshot of Google Hangout from the *Seattle Times*, streamed live on November 4, 2013, and moderated by *Seattle Times* journalist Thanh Tan⁹⁹

with content and new opportunities for direct engagement with local journalists.

Examples of innovations being explored in this space across the region include live video, augmented reality, and interactive content.

Early engagement experiments in this space include use of Google Hangouts by the *Seattle Times*⁹⁵ and Reddit AMAs (Ask Me Anything) by Pacific Northwest outlets such as the *Oregonian*.

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The Mainstreaming of Live Video

Launched initially for celebrities in August 2015⁹⁷ and then opened to everyone in April 2016,⁹⁸ Facebook Live—as well as other live video streaming platforms—is just one way that local media outlets are trying to encourage new forms of engagement.

“Hangouts were never like a huge hit,” reflects the *Seattle Times*’ Sharon Chan.

On average, around 100 people would participate in these conversations. Part of the challenge with this platform, Chan suggests, is that “hangout technology was just not that popular with the general public.”

In contrast, she notes, “When we did live chats, like text live chats, we’d get hundreds or, depending on the topic, up to 1,000 people.”

This suggests the importance of using mainstream platforms that your audience uses, not just those popular with journalists.

This principle may be one reason why Facebook Live has enjoyed some success for local media outlets. Users are more comfortable using Facebook than Google Hangouts, and take-up of Facebook Live may also have been aided by the wider usage of smartphones—and the continued popularity of Facebook—at the time the technology was released.

As Levi Pulkkinen, senior editor at *Seattle P-I* (Washington), suggests, this is all part of the continued need for news providers and journalists to engage with audiences where they are.

Originally published October 7, 2014 at 4:51 PM | Page modified October 8, 2014 at 1:16 PM

Rewind: Live chat with Mariners relief pitcher Charlie Furbush

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Charlie Furbush recently completed his third full season as a reliever with the Mariners and fourth season overall in the major leagues.

Before joining the M’s in August of 2011, he made his MLB debut earlier that season with the Detroit Tigers.

In 2014, he appeared in 67 games and had a 3.61 ERA with 51 strikeouts and only 9 walks. He also recorded his first major league save on July 19 in 3-2 extra-inning, road victory against the L.A. Angels.



Furbush answered questions about his pitching career, the M’s outlook for 2015 and more in a live chat on Oct. 8.

Image: The *Seattle Times*’ live chat with Mariner’s player Charlie Furbush.¹⁰⁰

Image: Screenshot of *Seattlepi.com* using Facebook Live¹⁰¹

“We’ll go find readers wherever we can,” he says. “I mean, that’s the big change in the industry, right?”

“It used to be you just print a newspaper. And whatever you had, you just kind of force it on your customers. And now what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to hang out what you’ve got and hope that you can lure them to you.”

In terms of live video, for some smaller publishers, such as the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington), it’s too early to tell if this technology is a potential game changer. Emeritus Editor Brancaccio admits that, although the *Columbian* has used live video, “the numbers don’t look great.”

“But you know, it’s just an emerging concept,” he adds.

That’s a maxim many local publishers in the region are also using for emerging platforms such as AR as well.

Augmented Reality

Klamath Falls (population 43,000), the county seat for Klamath County (population 68,000), may not seem like an obvious place for experimentation with this emerging format. But according to Gerry O’Brien, managing editor of the *Herald and News*, “It’s a way to get people to kind of look at our paper in a different angle.”

These efforts began in 2015 when the town hosted the Babe Ruth Little League World Series, featuring baseball players aged 16–18 battling it out for the best team in that age group.¹⁰²

As O’Brien recalls, a partnership with the local college was integral to making this work.

“They came to us and said, ‘You know, we’re experimenting with this. How might it work for you guys?’ And so we jumped on board for that right away.”

The paper has followed their first AR [initiative](#), which took place a year before the technology went mainstream in the form of 2016’s [Pokémon Go craze](#), with an ongoing series of AR efforts.

“I think it’s a learning curve for the audience,” O’Brien admits. “It’s not like



Image: Logo for logo for Herald News’ AR app in Google Play¹⁰³

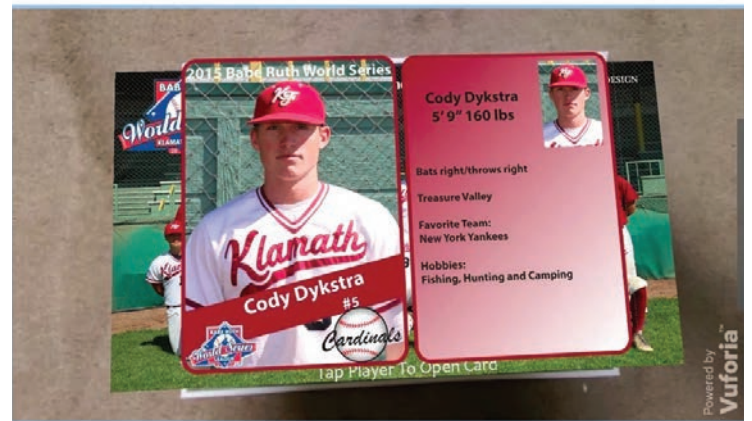


Image: Google Play promotional image for the [augmented reality app](#) produced for the 2015 Babe Ruth World Series by KCC Digital Media. The app displays virtual baseball cards, with player stats and pictures.

it gets a lot of attraction, but right now we're trying to do an AR piece once a week in the paper, so people kind of get used to seeing it and experiment with it."

Klamath Falls Herald and News Editor Gerry O'Brien explains how their first AR effort worked:

"We took photos of the teams, and the augmented reality kids took that photo, and each individual player then, it was embedded in their photo. If you touched on it, it would pop up a baseball card, so you see all the stats that they had."

Personalization and Interactive Content Focused on "The Big One"

In 2016, the *New Yorker's* Kathryn Schulz [won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for "The Really Big One,"](#) a piece exploring the impact on the Pacific Northwest when (*not if*) there's a major earthquake along the Cascadia subduction zone.

"When the next full-margin rupture happens, that region will suffer the worst natural disaster in the history of North America," she wrote.¹⁰⁵

Commenting on the win with a piece titled "The New Yorker Wins the Pulitzer for Scaring the Shit Out of Oregonians," *Willamette Week's* Lizzy Acker—who noted that the paper had [written an in-depth article on this topic in 2010](#)—wrote:

You know the story. It's the one your mom forwarded to you, the precursor to the conversation about earthquake safety kits, the catalyst that finally got you to buy an extra gallon of water, which is now collecting dust in your closet. It's the tale of what's going to happen to us when the Cascadia subduction zone finally goes berserk.

Schulz's article prompted much discussion among Pacific Northwesterners and considerable local media follow-up.

The screenshot shows the top of a web page for Herald and News. The navigation bar includes links for News, Sports, Obituaries, Forum, Limelight, Multimedia, Publications, and Classifieds. The article title is "AR content just the tip of the iceberg" by Gerry O'Brien, dated July 25, 2015. Below the title is a QR code and a large image of fireworks. A caption below the image reads: "Scan the QR code first, then the photo for AR content. KCC graphic: It's been a little while since we introduced our readers to what is called in the business, 'augmented reality.' Not to be confused with another dimension in time and space, augmented reality is a software that brings to life newspaper pages with more content than you could pack in a 24-page edition. It's the newspaper's answer to the web by linking web content to the actual news pages. When scanned with a smart phone or tablet, the content literally jumps out at you. It's ideal for giving readers more content and advertisers to pack more into their newspaper advertisement." Social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Email are visible.

Image: Editorial from Gerry O'Brien explaining their move into AR.¹⁰⁴

On the week of publication, the *Oregonian* hosted a “live chat” with [Professor Chris Goldfinger](#)—an expert on this scenario based at Oregon State University—and two of his PhD students. The session was moderated by



Image: Screenshot of the Oregonian's earthquake map.¹⁰⁷

[Richard Read](#), a senior writer for the *Oregonian*/OregonLive, who previously covered the [2004 Indian Ocean tsunami](#) in Indonesia and Sri Lanka and the [2011 Japan tsunami](#).

Such was the [level of interest](#), the paper noted, that the [forum](#) “attracted more clicks—5,000 and counting—than any live chat in OregonLive’s 18-year history.”¹⁰⁶

The discussions led the paper’s Mark Friesen to create an interactive, real-time (updated every 15 mins) [earthquake map for the region](#).

OPB (Portland, Oregon) also produced a range of content on this topic. Its [Unprepared](#) series (which continues to include the latest news on this subject) offers online audiences a range of multimedia content tagged around four key themes: [The Science](#), [The Aftermath](#), [Survival Mode](#), and [Prepare Now](#).

These online features have been accompanied by “OPB’s weekly TV news magazine exploring the ecological issues, natural wonders and outdoor recreation of the Northwest,” [radio content](#) and an [hour-long TV special](#) produced by [Oregon Field Guide](#).¹⁰⁸

The Field Guide team “spent a year-and-a-half probing into the state of Oregon’s preparedness and found that, when it comes to bridges, schools, hospitals, building codes, and energy infrastructure, Oregon lags far behind many quake-prone regions of the country.”¹⁰⁹

Alongside these efforts, OPB’s “[Aftershock](#)” initiative—which began during a

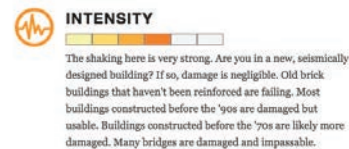


Image: Screenshot of the potential fallout from a 9.0 earthquake in the author's zip code.¹¹⁰

Recap and Reflections

Much like their counterparts at larger news and media organizations, many local news providers are trying to make sense of what engagement means in 2017.

“I struggle with this concept of engagement,” Les Zaitz, editor and publisher of the *Malheur Enterprise* (Vale, Oregon) concedes. “You know, do people want their newspaper to be their best friend?”

Zaitz’s skepticism is understandable. Some engagement activities redraw the journalist-audience dynamic, and not everyone will be comfortable (or in possession of the skills) to undertake this approach. Just as important, a lot of engagement activity can be time-consuming, with potential rewards that are hard to measure and immediately determine. This inevitably can create some tension, especially in smaller newsrooms, where resources can be particularly tight and where the demands on a small workforce can be especially acute.

However, Caitlyn May’s work at the *Cottage Grove Sentinel* shows that this approach need not be restricted to larger publications (the *Sentinel* has a reporting staff of two).

Meanwhile, the AR and 360 videos produced by the *Klamath Falls Herald and News* (Oregon) shows that content innovation can still happen in small newsrooms.

Nonetheless, smaller news outlets in particular need to strike a balance.

Engagement is increasingly important for local media—and other outlets—and there’s a myriad of ways you can embrace it (this chapter features 12 methods). But it’s not necessarily possible, or desirable, for every journalistic endeavor. Engagement opportunities will vary depending on the story, beat, or outlet.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, engagement tools and activities, when used effectively, can play a role in deepening relationships with audiences and potentially contributing to better content. In the process, they can also contribute to improving community and financial relationships. Engagement’s potential, therefore, needs to be explored.

weekend Storytelling with Data build-a-thon hosted by [Hack Oregon](#) and the [Agora Journalism Center](#) at the University of Oregon—created an interactive proposition to help audiences understand what a 9.0 earthquake from the Cascadia Subduction Zone might mean for them.

By entering their Oregon zip code, web users can read a customized report that outlines the seismic risks for that location and offers recommendations for preparing for such an eventuality.

4. The Revenue Conundrum

“Our experience is not that there’s any lack of an appetite for good quality journalism... but it’s just being able to be creative in identifying ways to finance it.”

—Mark Zusman, Editor and Publisher,
Willamette Week (Portland, Oregon)

Introduction

Local news media remains important for many news consumers,¹¹¹ but attracting advertisers and getting audiences to pay for content remains a challenge. According to Mark Zusman, editor and publisher of *Willamette Week*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning weekly serving Portland and the Willamette Valley, the key challenge local news organizations face is “sorting out the business model.” This underpins all other efforts explored in this report.

As John Costa of the *Bend Bulletin* (Oregon) reminds us: “The business model is very important. You cannot have an artistic success without a financial one, not for long... But the purpose of that business model is to make sure that you’re doing high-quality content because you have to collect readers/viewers in our business to stay vital.”

Achieving that goal, however, is not always easy. As Pew noted in its 2016 “State of the News Media” report, the trend lines for newspaper revenues and circulation are not pretty:

In 2015, the [newspaper sector](#) had perhaps the worst year since the recession and its immediate aftermath. Average weekday newspaper circulation, print and digital combined, fell another 7% in 2015, the greatest decline since 2010.

While digital circulation crept up slightly (2% for weekday), it accounts for only 22% of total circulation. And any digital subscription gains or traffic increases have still not translated into game-changing revenue solutions.

In 2015, total advertising revenue among publicly traded companies declined nearly 8%, including losses not just in print, but digital as well. ¹¹²

Those are the sobering statistics. But they're also aggregated figures, so it's worth noting that these headlines hide a myriad of experiences, including the view that many small community papers have weathered the storm better than their metropolitan counterparts.¹¹³

Nonetheless, all publications—large or small—are being shaped by a number of underlying factors that have had a profound impact on the traditional revenue streams local media has historically tapped into.

These factors include:

- 1. Publishers receive “digital dimes” for what were previously “print dollars.”**
Newspapers have typically found that in the digital arena, they cannot charge prices akin to the print monies of yesteryear. New channels for online advertising (such as Craigslist, Yelp, Google, and Facebook), coupled with new advertising practices, such as programmatic buying and targeted advertising,¹¹⁴ have changed the playing field.
- 2. Changes on Main Street have reduced the local advertising pool.**
Former Gannett Editor Kevin Anderson described this evolution in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, noting the reduced number of local traders: businesses that used to advertise in their local papers. “The shift from local businesses to national chains started long ago, and it had a profound impact on local media,”¹¹⁵ he observed, highlighting a nationwide trend.
- 3. Online channels can deliver more targeted ads.**
Digital platforms that can reach audiences searching for a specific product, experience, or passion may be a better route for some businesses than general advertising. Their potential precision—as well as a scalable cost model¹¹⁶—can also be appealing. Subsequently, the maxim (attributed to Henry Ford and others¹¹⁷) that “half my advertising is wasted; I just don't know which half,” no longer quite rings true.

What this means, as Zusman explains, is that publications need to “identify other sources of revenue that are consistent with our core competencies but will allow us to continue to finance journalism, which is basically the reason for our existence.”

The need for this is particularly acute given that nondigital sources (often print advertising) still accounted for 75 percent of newspapers' advertising revenue in 2015.¹¹⁸ The extent to which income diversification is a business imperative will vary

“The need to diversify revenue streams is fairly universal.”

across different outlets. Nonetheless, the need to diversify revenue streams is fairly universal. As a result, media providers in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere are experimenting with a range of different way to secure income.

Here are five of the most popular ways that local media organizations are seeking to do this.

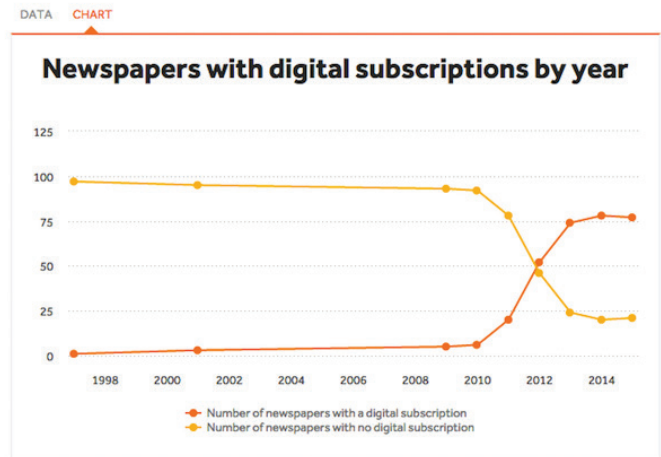
1. Paywalls and Digital Subscriptions

Research ¹¹⁹ conducted by Alex T. Williams, a 2015 Research Fellow at the American Press Institute (API) found that “of the 98 newspapers we looked at, 62 papers used meters, which is nearly three times as many as those [21 papers] not requiring a digital subscription.” ¹²⁰

Williams’ research—which covered 98 daily newspapers in the United States with a combined daily circulation (across print, digital, and branded editions) above 50,000 readers—showed how, since 2012, U.S. newspaper publishers are embracing metered paywalls (where content must be paid for after a certain number of free articles) and full digital, or combined print and digital, subscriptions are the leading mechanisms for securing online revenues.

These experiments are not unique to larger titles. Paywalls are also present at smaller entities from weeklies such as the *Cottage Grove Sentinel* (Oregon), a weekly title with a circulation of 4,200 ¹²¹, as well as newspapers like the *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington) and the *Bend Bulletin* (Oregon) (circulation: 26,986 Monday through Friday, 27,253 on Saturdays, and 27,599 on Sundays ¹²²).

As shown in this chart, the models that publishers in the Pacific Northwest use, as elsewhere, vary considerably. ¹²³



Data Source: American Press Institute independent analysis of newspapers with circulations over 50,000

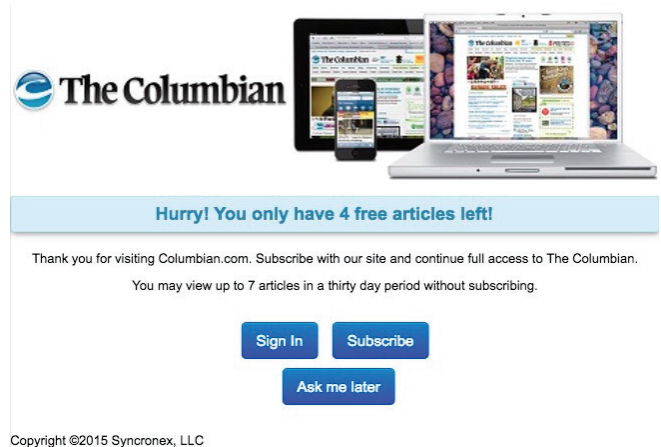


Image: Reminder from the Vancouver Columbian about their paywall limits.

Local Journalism in the Pacific Northwest

This reflects considerations such as frequency of delivery—the *Oregonian*, for example, moved to four days a week of home delivery in late 2013¹²⁴—and economies of scale for longer subscriptions.

Outlet	Subscription Models	Cost
<i>Seattle Times</i>	Unlimited digital access	\$1 for 4 weeks, then \$3.99/week
	Digital + Sunday delivery	\$1 for 5 weeks, then \$3.49/week
	Digital + 7-day delivery	\$3 for 5 weeks, then \$8.70/week
<i>Oregonian</i>	Digital access	\$48 for 8 weeks (based on Eugene ZIP code)
	Sunday and Wednesday delivery + digital	\$31.92 for 8 weeks \$63.84 for 16 weeks
	Sunday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday + digital	\$48 for 8 weeks
<i>Bend Bulletin</i>	E-edition	\$13 for 1 month, pro-rata (\$78 = 6)
	Home delivery + e-edition	\$18 for 1 month, pro-rata (\$108=6)
<i>Seattle Weekly</i>	Weekly editions, home delivery	\$49.95 for 1 year inside Washington State \$180 for 1 year outside Washington State \$89.95 for 2 years in

The *Seattle Times* has also experimented with selling subscriptions on Groupon. A recent offer included \$18.50 for a 26-week Sunday newspaper subscription (\$103.74 value) or \$27.50 for a 52-week Sunday newspaper subscription (\$207.48 value).¹²⁵ These deals are substantially discounted.

Commenting on whether the future lies in “readers paying for content or through advertising,” Jim Simon, the former managing editor of the *Seattle Times*, observes that “obviously it’s going to be a blend of those things, but there is real debate about which things you should really concentrate on or put your primary focus

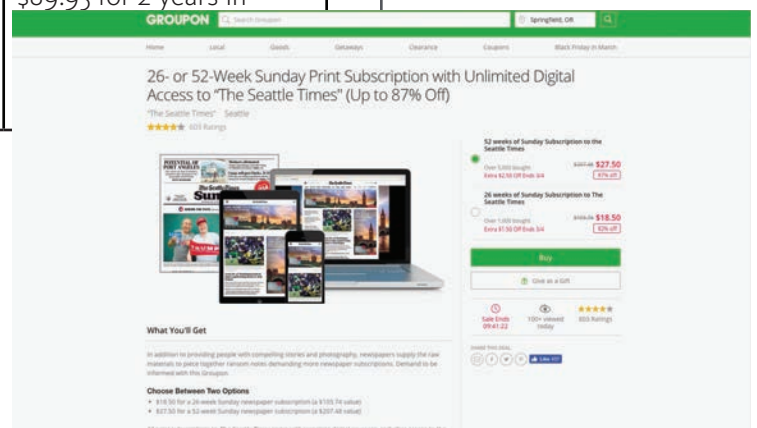


Image: Screenshot of Groupon listing for a subscription to the *Seattle Times*¹²⁶

on.”

“I think there’s a debate [to be had about] whether those new revenue sources around online really [are] the most fruitful,” he says. This important strategic question plays out against a backdrop where “like a lot of folks in the legacy business, revenue remains stubbornly coming from print [and] a diminishing print base.”

For the *Seattle Times* and others, the need to capture digital subscribers remains important, but it is just one of multiple income sources that local media providers are trying to unlock.

2. Events

Attracting revenues in the digital world, for many publishers, has simply involved migrating their traditional strategy (display advertising and subscriptions) into the online arena.

Although these efforts have not resulted in a like-for-like income stream, it arguably hasn’t inspired them to innovate much either. In contrast, the event space—an area that a number of local media outlets have been moving into over the past couple of years—has required them to think—and *do*—things differently.

For local media players, events are an opportunity to engage your community in the real world while potentially attracting significant revenue in the process.

These communities can be both geographic and communities of interest. In March 2017, Seattle-based [GeekWire](#)—a “national technology news site with strong roots in the Seattle region”—hosted its [Sixth Anniversary Bash](#).

“This is a party first and foremost,” the company’s site stated, highlighting dodgeball, ping-pong, and arcade games. It also noted, however, that you might “find your next great tech job, employee, customer, business connection, startup partner—heck, maybe even your future husband or wife.”

The site also hosts other [events](#) aimed at the local and national tech community, including summits, meetups, a gala event, awards, and a daylong entrepreneurial bootcamp called GeekWire Startup Day.

Following in these tech-led footsteps is [TechFestNW](#), a convening of entrepreneurs, investors, and startups in Portland, Oregon, founded by *Willamette Week*’s Mark Zusman in 2012. Zusman also co-founded [MusicFestNW](#), which takes place in Portland’s Tom McCall Waterfront Park.



Image: logo for GeekWire’s sixth anniversary bash

In pursuing this model, PNW media organizations like GeekWire and *Willamette Week* are not alone.

News veteran Jim Brady describes his business model for [Billy Penn](#), a mobile-first service that launched in Philadelphia in October 2014, as “events and low overhead.”¹²⁷

Emily Ramshaw, editor-in-chief of the *Texas Tribune* (Austin, Texas), also observed that “we have a really robust [events](#) business, a politics and policy events business that has been lucrative for us and allowed us to [produce] a lot of great journalism as a result.”¹²⁸

In [January 2017](#) alone, the *Texas Tribune* hosted seven events, featuring politicians and academics and covering topics such as race and public policy, ethics and open government, and mental health. It also hosted a trivia night.

Back in Philadelphia, around 80 percent of Billy Penn’s revenue in 2015 came from events. As CJR noted, these activities “can have up to a 75 percent profit margin.”

Its events program includes “everything from happy hours to celebrations of the site’s “[Who’s Next](#)” list to a [pope-themed pub night](#). Gala events, like Billy Penn’s birthday party, can be sponsored by multiple institutions, and tickets are sold at prices from \$20 to \$40. Print programs present an opportunity to sell ads.”¹²⁹

The events space, which creates opportunities to create content—as well as revenue—is an arena we can expect more publishers and local media companies to move into in the future.

3. Digital Media Services

Events, Zusman argues, build on “the core competencies of journalism companies” by applying them in different contexts. Good publishers, he suggests, have transferable skills:

Number one, you know how to create content. Number two, you know how to aggregate an audience of readers. And number three, you know how to sell that audience, in essence, to advertisers.

“Those are core competencies that any decent media company already has,” he

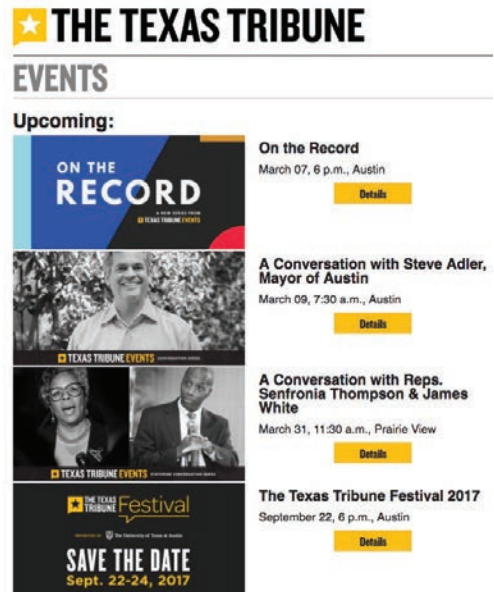


Image: Screenshot of events hosted by The Texas Tribune



Image: An example of recent work produced by RG Media

says. “The question is, can you apply those competencies in other ways to help find ways to support and broaden your journalism?”

One clear way a number of publishers are doing this is by leveraging their experience as news and information providers to support paying clients seeking digital marketing solutions.¹³⁰

The *Eugene Register-Guard* (Oregon) is one news provider doing just this, through its spin-off RG Media Company.

The company’s website and Twitter bio clearly outline how they seek to harness their primary expertise in delivering the *Register-Guard* across print, online, and mobile apps to offer services such as print and digital advertising design, website design/development, search engine marketing, video production, and content marketing.¹³¹ The *Register-Guard* also publishes¹³² the daily print edition of the Gannett-owned paper *Salem Statesman Journal*.

Other newspaper outlets pursuing similar strategies include much bigger publications, such as the *Dallas Morning News*¹³³ (average Monday through Friday print and digital replica circulation: 264,908,) ¹³⁴ and efforts led by larger media groups, such as Hearst’s offshoot [LocalEdge](#).

4. Foundations

A number of media outlets have benefited from foundation funding, with the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#) being perhaps the best known donor to U.S. journalism. Recent projects benefitting from their support include the [Baltimore Reporting Project](#), efforts to provide [legal assistance](#) to individual journalists and new organizations, the [newsroom digital transformation project](#) run by the [Institute for Journalism in New Media](#), and [a two-year, \\$200,000 grant to support Local Independent Online News Publishers](#).

In early 2017, the Knight Foundation supported 60 nonprofit news organizations, such as [Charlottesville Tomorrow](#), [IowaWatch.org](#), and [St. Louis Public Radio](#), through a \$1.5 million fund offering to match donations from individual donors of up to \$25,000 for each participating organization.¹³⁵

For transparency, it should also be noted that the Knight Foundation has also supported efforts led by the [Agora Journalism Center](#) at the University of Oregon to “support [a] digital gathering space for people passionate about journalism and civic engagement.”¹³⁶

Other bodies have often had a more specific geographic or subject focus.

This includes the Dodge Foundation’s work in New Jersey—worth more than \$3.25 million in the last five years¹³⁷—and the Public Square Program at the Democracy Fund, which supports innovations and institutions designed to help people understand and participate in the democratic process.

The Democracy Fund’s website notes that “current grantees of the Public

Square Program include the Institute for Nonprofit News, the American Press Institute, and the Engaging News Project.”¹³⁸ It has also supported the work of the Agora Journalism Center.¹³⁹

Given this, “one thing that surprised me,” admits Matthew Powers, assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington (Seattle, WA), “because we hear so much about foundations in the U.S. is, at least within Seattle, how small a role they play.”

He continues:

In fact, I had multiple people at online startups tell me basically good riddance with foundations. And their reason was pretty straightforward. The claim was—and I think it’s a reasonable one—that foundations tend to be interested in the latest ideas, and they want to fund new things that are exciting and interesting. They don’t want to fund sites that already kind of work but actually need support. And so, in a lot of ways, there’s this kind of skepticism built in because they don’t think that they can actually get resources to support the type of work that they do. And they’re right. I don’t think they’re entirely right, but I also don’t think they’re entirely wrong.

One notable exception in the Pacific Northwest is Education Lab at the *Seattle Times*. Launched in October 2013, the initiative “spotlights promising approaches to some of the most persistent challenges in public education.”¹⁴⁰

Education is an important topic, but a subject area that “wouldn’t draw huge audiences,” suggests Jim Simon, the paper’s former managing editor. He says:

Most of the stories don’t draw huge audiences. Some of them do really, really well. But we can monetize it with outside funding too. Or continue doing that kind of reporting with outside funding.

A similar foundation-supported approach enabled the paper in 2016 to travel to South Africa to produce a two-part series exploring how research led by Seattle scientists could help eradicate HIV.¹⁴¹ Reporter [Nina Shapiro](#) made the trip to South Africa on an [International Reporting Project](#) fellowship, and funding for overseas reporting by the *Seattle Times* is provided by a grant from the [Seattle International Foundation](#).

Education Lab is funded by grants worth \$530,000 from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) (\$450,000) and the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#) (\$80,000). These funds are used to “pay for the salaries of two education reporters, allowing us to expand our



Image description: “Fani, 2, looks at her mother, left, who is resting in the Nkosi’s Haven sick bay in Johannesburg. The nonprofit offers housing and care for mothers with HIV, their children and orphans, some HIV-positive. The organization last month marked the 15th anniversary of the death of Nkosi Johnson, the founder’s adopted son.” (Erika Schultz/The Seattle Times).¹⁴²

education team; an editor and photographer primarily dedicated to the project; and a newly hired community-engagement editor.” Other monies are used “for community outreach and public forums, creation of a blog and design and data work.”¹⁴³

Produced in partnership with the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), Education Lab seeks “to create a new conversation that connects teachers, parents, students, and others around innovation in schools.” Outputs include articles, events and community meetings, and a weekly newsletter.

The initiative’s website notes that “foundation funding is not new” for the paper, citing a grant from Pew back in 1994, through to more recent support, such as a grant from the [Seattle International Foundation](#) to help cover “international reporting on global poverty issues.”

The website notes: “The *Seattle Times* would neither seek nor accept a grant that did not give us full editorial control over what is published,” and that “the *Seattle Times* is pursuing foundation funding to support public-service reporting projects that are particularly costly or resource intensive.”

Although these efforts have been successful enterprises for the *Seattle Times*, these types of relationships are not without their challenges.

One key consideration is that the timelines foundations operate on are often very different from those of newsrooms. Another consideration is that success metrics may also vary.

A further issue, as previously identified by Matthew Powers, is the perception “that foundations tend to be interested in the latest ideas, and they want to fund new things that are exciting and interesting.”

That’s potentially a big issue for online start-ups. Powers estimates there are between 50 and 100 startups in Seattle, many of which potentially feel discouraged about developing relationships with foundations because of their perceived focus.



Image: Students from Rainier Beach and Foster high schools fill out placards for the photo booth at Ignite Education Lab (Bettina Hansen/The Seattle Times).¹⁴⁴

“The timelines foundations operate on are often very different from those of newsrooms.”

As a result, Powers argues that there's a strong sense among the news start-up community that foundations aren't necessarily for them, even though many of these local start-ups "already kind of work, but actually need support."

5. Membership Schemes

For some local media operators, such as NPR stations and their affiliates, memberships are a revenue model they're already very familiar with.

According to the [OPB website](#), for example, "approximately 64% of the funds we raise comes from individual membership contributions from viewers and listeners."¹⁴⁵ OPB provides content for Oregonians on TV and radio and via its website, [apps](#), and [podcasts](#).

"I think one of the main ingredients of our secret sauce, if you will, is pledge drives," indicates OPB's senior vice president and chief content officer, Morgan Holm.

He continues:

It forces you to articulate on a regular basis to your audience what you do for them and why it's of value to them. And you know pretty quickly whether that's working or not, because if people don't call and make a commitment to you, you're either not doing the work that you say you're doing or they're not getting the point of what you say.

In Eugene, Oregon, [KLCC](#)—a charter member of National Public Radio and the primary NPR member station in the Eugene/Springfield area—[lists](#) a number of [ways audiences can contribute](#) to their financial well-being, including [sustaining membership](#) (monthly ongoing donations), [stock transfers](#), [business underwriting](#), and [vehicle donation](#).

The station, which reaches over 80,000 listeners each week within a 100-mile radius of Eugene, celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2017. The milestone coincides with a temporary cut in funding that the station has asked listeners to help meet.

Elements of this membership-driven approach are being adopted more widely across the local journalism ecosystem¹⁴⁷ as part of a continued effort to find new ways to fund local reporting.¹⁴⁸

The [News Revenue Hub](#), which launched in late 2016, is working with a number of local and national news organizations to "set up comprehensive membership and crowdfunding programs so they can achieve greater sustainability."



Image and story from the KLCC website.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁹ Hub participants include state-focused outlets such as [Honolulu Civil Beat](#), [NJ Spotlight](#), [CalMatters](#), and the [Rivard Report](#), an independent outlet that [focuses](#) on San Antonio, Texas.

For those organizations, OPB's Holm offers some advice:

When it lines up and you're doing the work, and you're articulating to the audience that you're doing the work, and you're signaling to them [the audience] this

“When I started at OPB in 1990, our basic membership was \$35. It’s still \$35 today. That’s pretty remarkable.”

Recap and Reflections

Business and revenue models underpin the ecology of the local media landscape.

As in other regions, organizations are exploring a plethora of different means to generate revenue, including paywalls, events, creative media services, and support from foundations, while NPR and PBS outlets continue to place a strong emphasis on donations and membership drives.

These efforts are part of a wide move to diversify revenue and reduce reliance on print advertising and subscriptions, income sources that are typically declining. Finding the right revenue mix to support acts of journalism is therefore a strategic priority for all news providers, whatever their size or scale.

is how you recognize the value of this, and you make that a relatively easy transaction, then you start to build a viable membership model.

5. Conclusion: The Continued Importance of Local Media to the Pacific Northwest

“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.”¹⁵⁰

—Lee Shaker, Assistant Professor,
Department of Communication,
Portland State University

Local journalism is more important than ever, as the sector continues to be a vital source of original reporting that informs—and reflects—the communities they serve.

The financial optics for the sector remain challenging, but many local outlets enjoy greater trust than their peers. As Pew noted in 2016, local news organizations are trusted more than many other information sources, providing a foundation on which news providers can build. The organization asserts:

Only about two-in-ten Americans (22%) trust the information they get from local news organizations a lot, whether online or offline, and just 18% say the same of national organizations. But large majorities say they have at least some trust in both.”¹⁵¹

This is particularly important to leverage, as Lee Shaker, assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Portland State University, has acknowledged, because “our society is still geographically organized and governed.”

Because of this, local media can still remain highly relevant to many people’s lives.

Shaker says:

The advent of new communication opportunities suggests that new forms of engagement will also develop. But 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.”¹⁵²

Building on this, it’s worth reminding ourselves of three key benefits derived from local journalism in the Pacific Northwest and beyond:

1. Creating an Informed Citizenry

“There’s no mystery to it,” argues Les Zaitz, editor and publisher of the *Malheur Enterprise* (Vale, Oregon). “Community journalism is about giving people information on which they can act.”

Zaitz expanded on this further by stating that journalists need “to give a community accurate, good information [so that] people can come to an understanding of the issues in their community, of what they need to do as a citizen of that community to help make a decision about a new sewer line, a new school building, a surge in poverty.”

2. Content as a Catalyst for Continued Dialogue

“With this push towards engagement, I think journalists realize that your work has only just begun when you’ve published a story,” Mark Zusman, editor and publisher of *Willamette Week*, observes. “Because [it is] the ongoing engagement a journalist should have with readers—after they publish a story that creates some interest—Is really important to allow readers to be part of the conversation.”

3. Journalism as an Agent for Change

Echoing this, Sharon Chan, vice president of innovation, product, and development for the *Seattle Times*, notes the impact that journalism can have on policy and communities:

What we found in the work we’ve done, especially around education, is that if you take some level of responsibility for creating an engaged community ... whether it’s online mechanisms or through in-person events ... your journalism can actually have a much broader and deeper impact.

One example of this can be seen in the *Klamath Falls Herald and News* (Oregon), which has been one of the partners in [A Graduation Walk](#) for high school seniors. Hundreds of students walk down Main Street in their caps and gowns.

“The community would cheer on, and other kids would be inspired to say, you know, this can be you, if you work hard. We’ve done something like that to say, ‘It’s so important that kids graduate high school,’” says Managing Editor Gerry O’Brien.

What Happens When Local Journalism Disappears

As a counterpoint to these ideas about the positive impact of local news, it’s worth examining what happens to communities where there’s an absence of local journalism.

Dr. Michelle Ferrier at Ohio University in her work on [media](#)



Image: High School Graduation Walk, Klamath Falls

“It’s worth examining what happens to communities where there’s an absence of local journalism.”

deserts (defined as “a geographic location that lacks access to fresh, local news and information” ¹⁵³) argues that the impact on communities—typically areas “with high concentrations of people of low to lower income, who generally don’t have college educations”—is discernible:

Residents miss news and information about jobs, economic development, local government, schools, and other infrastructure that keeps local communities growing. The news gap may include environmental issues, like toxic waste, that often affect lower-income communities disproportionately. ¹⁵⁴

Even a reduction in plurality of news media sources can be detrimental for communities. In 2014, a study from Lee Shaker of Portland State University “suggest[ed] that eliminating a local newspaper from a community leads to less civic engagement in the immediate aftermath among the citizens of that community.” ¹⁵⁵

Shaker’s findings were seemingly reinforced by a Pew study in late 2016 that found a strong relationship between civic engagement and local news habits. ¹⁵⁶

Put simply, the more civically active tended to follow more local news sources ¹⁵⁷ (led by TV, radio, and then newspapers), and “just as taking part in local political and civic groups is closely associated with greater interest in and intake of local news, positive civic attitudes closely connect with positive attitudes about local news.” ¹⁵⁸

For Matthew Powers, assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington (Seattle), there’s a risk of news deserts arising in southern Seattle and other parts of the region. He says:

I can easily envision a sort of news ecology that emerges where middle class and the better off are relatively well served and where there’s reasonable coverage of city hall and state government, but there’s a lot less that actually is dedicated to some of the real issues that people living in less well-off neighborhoods would want to know.

In some parts of Oregon, and elsewhere, that’s already happening. According to Caitlyn May, editor of the *Cottage Grove Sentinel* (Oregon):

The communities in my immediate area have lost their weekly newspapers. But their kids still play high school sports, their water still costs money, their economic development is still of interest, their city council still meets, and they still have street fairs, concerts, and farmers’ markets.

No one is reporting on these things, and without recent J-school graduates hungry to tell stories and bring new ideas to the table,

“Even a reduction in plurality of news media sources can be detrimental for communities.”

“It’s in everyone’s interests to try and work together to identify solutions and best practices to ensure the continued existence—not to mention prosperity—of local journalism.”

mid-career investigators hoping to ferret out injustice, or experienced, not-quite-ready-to-retire veteran journalists willing to invest in these newsrooms, we will continue to provide a disservice to the electorate and, ultimately, the nation and ourselves.

It's in everyone's interests to try and work together to identify solutions and best practices to ensure the continued existence—not to mention prosperity—of local journalism.

Moving Forward

The 10 organizations from the Pacific Northwest that feature most heavily in this report are a microcosm of the wider local news industry in the United States.

Collectively, they represent a broad spectrum of local media outlets, encompassing many of the types of media organizations found across the U.S. local media landscape.

This includes everything from large and smaller family-owned papers (such as the *Seattle Times* and the *Eugene Register-Guard*) to papers from smaller groups (*Klamath Falls Herald and News*, *Bend Bulletin*) an alt-weekly (*Willamette Week*), a “mom and pop” weekly (*Cottage Grove Sentinel*), a digital-only news provider (*Seattle P-I*), and a statewide TV and radio provider (OPB).

Yet, despite a challenging financial and political environment, these outlets all continue to perform important acts of journalism, engaging audiences and communities on issues that matter to them.

The future for the sector may be fragile, but the region shows vibrancy in experimentation and innovation with storytelling, concepts of journalism, and various revenue models.

As *Willamette Week's* Zusman cautions, we have to “be wary of best practices, because what works in one market may in fact be the death of you in your market.”

Nonetheless, as Levi Pulkkinen, senior editor at *Seattle P-I* (Washington), argues: “We're still not talking to each other as an industry,” and we need to do a better job sharing what we do.

I hope that the ideas and case studies in this report will help in this regard by providing encouragement and inspiration for local media professionals, wherever they may be.

Although the way forward will continue to be rocky, the innovation and work being done at local media outlets in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere give cause for optimism. Local journalism is evolving and working hard to adapt and remain relevant and valued.

Given this, it is imperative that policy makers, journalism schools, communities, and local news providers work together to help secure the future for local news in the region. This may mean the creation of new partnerships, new revenues models, and new ways of working.

If we're unable to do this, the absence of strong, effective local journalism will be detrimental to the health of communities and our wider media ecology. That means each stakeholder has to play their part in helping to ensure a healthy and continued existence.

Methodology

1. Approach

This paper was inspired by a strong sense that the story of local journalism does not get the coverage it deserves. It's a sentiment that others share.

In February 2017, [Poynter announced a new weekly column](#) on the subject, recognizing that it has been under-discussed. Managing Editor Benjamin Mullin wrote:

[Vast news deserts](#) have emerged where once there was a healthy ecosystem of local and regional publications. In an election year marked by disunion between voters and the media, you don't have to look far to find the culprit: fewer journalists talking to fewer people.

Too often, this crisis gets overlooked by the press. The outlets that garner the most attention—places like the New York Times, NBC News, BuzzFeed—are the ones best-positioned to survive... Barring a catastrophic change in the media business (never say never) they'll still be around 20 years from now...

Local news is in the fight of its life, and Poynter will be there to cover that battle from the front lines every day.

Meanwhile, last summer, the [Tow Center for Digital Journalism](#) at the [Graduate School of Journalism](#) at [Columbia University](#) kindly supported a proposal from [Christopher Ali](#) and I to produce a landscape study focused on the experience of small-market newspapers. Our report, "Local News in a Digital World: Small Market Newspapers in an Era of Digital Disruption," will be published in the near future.

All of the interviews in this report are unique to this study, although the majority (8 out of 12) were captured at the same time as the research for my Tow project. This helped me to place the experience of practitioners in the Pacific Northwest in the wider context of U.S. local media.

Touching on some of the themes explored elsewhere, this paper nonetheless differs in both its geographic focus and added emphasis on civic engagement. This matters, because the Pacific Northwest is the home of the University of Oregon, and civic engagement and innovation lie at the heart of the mission of the Agora Journalism Center, which helped support this project.

Moreover, the Pacific Northwest is where many of our students come

from and the media ecosystem many of them will join when they graduate. Understanding what's happening in our own backyard should therefore inform and support our research and teaching mission.

2. New Fieldwork: 2016–17

The conclusions in this study draw on findings from qualitative and desk research, including 12 new, previously unpublished, interviews with experts from across the Pacific Northwest.

To help structure new in-depth interviews with experts in the field of local news and local newspapers, I developed a research protocol. A copy is included in the next section.

Interviews were conducted in the second half of 2016 and the first quarter of 2017.

Thomas Schmidt (my research assistant during the early phases of this project) and I conducted all 12 interviews by Skype or in person. I conducted one interview, with Caitlyn May, via email at my behest due to scheduling reasons, although we have had—and will no doubt continue to so—many fruitful conversations in person over the past two years about the future of journalism, media literacy, and the role of news media in rural communities. Cate also kindly reviewed an early version of this manuscript.

I am indebted to my interviewees, who were unfailingly generous with both their time and insights. Their experience informs the bulk of this report. Specific thanks go to:

Lou Brancaccio, Emeritus Editor, *Vancouver Columbian* (Washington)

Sharon Chan, Vice President of Innovation, Product, & Development, *Seattle Times* (Washington) ¹⁵⁹

John Costa, President and Publisher, *Bend Bulletin* (OR)

Morgan Holm, Senior Vice President and Chief Content Officer, Oregon Public Broadcasting (Portland, Oregon)

Jim Simon, Managing Editor, *Seattle Times* (Washington) ¹⁶⁰

Caitlyn May, Editor, *Cottage Grove Sentinel* (Oregon)

Logan Molen, Publisher/CEO, RG Media Company and *Eugene Register-Guard* (Oregon)

Gerry O'Brien, Editor, *Klamath Falls Herald and News* (Oregon)

Matthew Powers, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, University of Washington (Seattle, Washington)

Levi Pulkkinen, Senior Editor, *Seattle P-I* (Washington) ¹⁶¹

Les Zaitz, Editor and Publisher, *Malheur Enterprise* (Vale, Oregon)

Mark Zusman, Editor and Publisher, *Willamette Week* (Portland, Oregon)

These outlets represent a variety of ownership and business models as well as publication/output timescales. I took this approach to ensure that participants in this research project reflected some of the diversity of the U.S. local media ecosystem at both a local and national level.

Despite these variances, many outlets are contending with similar issues in terms of the battle for both revenues and attention. Similarly, they're all trying to make sense of the opportunities that digital platforms and technologies afford them, what "engagement" means to their organizations, and which engagement tools can best support their strategic goals.

Each interview typically lasted for 30–60 minutes. Although we used an interview protocol, interviews were deliberately nondirective, open, and semi-structured to allow for a more natural conversation, which gave interviewees the opportunity to introduce new topics and ideas into the interview structure.

We identified respondents using existing contacts and knowledge of the local media field. We solicited interviews until we reached the point of knowledge saturation (no new knowledge) and achieved a reasonable geographic spread across the Pacific Northwest region.

Embracing the approach of oral history research, interviews with respondents from across the region provide a cross-section of the subjectivity of local journalists as a social group. In this sense, the interviews tell us not just what local reporters and editors in the Pacific Northwest are doing, but what they want to do, what they believe they are doing, and what they think they are doing (Portelli, 1981).¹⁶²

This vantage point offers a unique insight into the evolution of local journalism in the region, a story that has not previously been told.

I had all interviews professionally transcribed before, and using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)¹⁶³ I then undertook a close reading of the transcripts and assembled key categories and themes. This culminated in the structure and findings of this report.

3. Interview Protocol

Preliminary Questions

For industry:

1. Tell us a little bit about the current status of your publication/group.

For experts:

1. Tell us a little bit about your involvement in local media, where your focus is and why.”
2. In your expert opinion, what is the state of the local newspaper industry in the United States?
3. What are the key challenges specifically facing rural, small, and medium sized newspapers in the United States?
4. What are the key opportunities for rural, small, and medium sized newspapers in the United States?

Best practice questions (order can be flipped. Prompt for examples/ specifics)

5. Do you know of any “success stories” involving small market newspapers? We are interested in both business models and great journalism.
6. What “best practices” would you recommend for small market newspapers seeking to better manage their digital – and non-digital - experiences?

Engagement

7. We hear a lot about the importance of engagement by both national and local media at present. What does engagement mean to you?
8. How can local media do this well? Do you have particular examples that you would like to share with us?

Policy/Intervention/Support

9. Assuming that local news is something we deem as necessary to survive, what interventions (policy, industry, civil society, etc...) what would you like to see done to strengthen local newspapers in the US?

If required, use this space to also recap on strengths/weaknesses of industry.

Notes

- 1 <http://journalism.uoregon.edu/news/solutions-journalism-network-launches-portland-chapter-agera-journalism-center/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 2 <http://www.columbian.com/news/2017/jan/24/lou-brancaccio-announces-retirement-from-the-columbian/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 3 <http://mediashift.org/2017/05/international-perspectives-state-local-news/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 4 <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/02/on-convening-a-community-an-excerpt-from-jake-batsells-new-book-on-engaged-journalism/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 5 http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2017/03/portland_falls_to_25th_largest.html, accessed July 3, 2017
- 6 <http://www.wweek.com/news/2017/05/25/people-just-dont-want-to-move-to-portland-like-they-used-to/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 7 As an indication of this, OPB was nominated for 32 Northwest Regional Emmy Awards from the Northwest Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (NATAS) in 2017 alone: <http://www.opb.org/pressroom/pressrelease/opb-nominated-for-32-regional-emmy-awards-including-overall-station-excellence/>. They won 13 of them: <http://www.opb.org/pressroom/pressrelease/opb-wins-13-northwest-regional-emmy-awards/>, accessed July 3, 2017
- 8 For some examples of reporting on this topic, see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/minorities-in-journalism/399461/>, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/12/failing-diversity-is-failing-journalism/> and <http://mediashift.org/2016/11/journalism-rural-diversity-challenge/>, accessed July 3, 2017
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