

Salvaging the *Local Times*

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The *Local Times* is unfortunately not the only local news publication to be hit by the wave of disengagement and declined readership in the past three decades. The traditional business model that supports local print publications like the *Local Times* is struggling to keep its head above water amid shrinking revenue simultaneously while consumers turn their heads to national online coverage and highly specialized news outlets that fit their specific news needs. Globalization is perpetuating the decreasing demand for local news, and even more so, print news. For this reason, many local news organizations are folding, falling victim to the digital age of media, and creating what a [2019 Brookings report](#) refers to as “news deserts.” Over 65 million Americans live in counties with only one local newspaper or none at all (Hendrickson, 2019). The era of local news coverage is coming to a crashing and unfortunate end, with over 1,800 local newspapers folding since 2004 due to waning print advertisement revenue, according to [Pen America](#) (Akhtar, 2019). Digital advertising only “makes up a growing share of a shrinking pie,” (Hendrickson, 2019). While print advertising sales have decreased \$6.69 billion in the four years between 2014 and 2018, only an increase of \$1.09 billion is accounted for by digital advertising sales, according to the BIA Advisory Services data (Hendrickson, 2019). This net loss in advertising sales and print subscriptions distinctly falling has created a dilemma for the local journalism industry, many having to let go of reporters, scale down coverage, reduce circulation, and effectively leave many communities without a source of local news. This is a tremendous loss in the integrity of journalism.

Without proper funding and decreased circulation, ultimately the value of the publication and its coverage diminishes. The failure in the traditional business model of the local news publications directly translates to what its coverage looks like and how it is come by. “Fewer reporters is never a good thing for the public,” Phil Luciano, a columnist at the [Journal Star](#) said.

“It’s hard, if not impossible, to be a public watchdog when your owner keeps wrenching your teeth out” (Benavidez et al, 2019). Local papers have less capacity to send reporters to statehouses and government bureaus, to cover issues of public health or education, or to investigate leads which “not only renders newspapers less valuable to news consumers, but also results in a newspaper that is less valuable to its community,” (Hendrickson, 2019). Important news that can inform community members to properly hold the institutions in power accountable is simply not possible, given the lack of funds and resources allotted to uncovering this type of information. Hendrickson refers to this as a “local news crisis” which further perpetuates a general disengagement in matters of community, especially civic debate, voting, and other local democratic life (Hendrickson, 2019). This compounds with the issues the *Local Times* has been facing with the lack of communication and trust with the local political offices. Without a solid line of communication or a working relationship with town officials, the publication’s foundation to report on the issues that have a real impact on the community and build that community’s trust is cracked. Hendrickson poses the question: do the challenges confronting local newsrooms reflect “market failure” or a “process of creative destruction”? These challenges are not mutually exclusive and *cohesively* play a large role in the decline of local, professional journalism. For publications like the *Local Times* to survive and legitimately compete with public journalism and national publications, the practices and values in the newsroom need to be reevaluated.

The first step is to reassess the business model. No matter the extent to which a traditional publication’s content and style can change, only the aging demographic of waning subscribers will receive the paper, and therefore appreciate it. I will assume the *Local Times* already has an online presence like most traditional publications do at this point to complement – or some would argue, supplement – their print issues. Revisiting digital advertising, the slight

increase in digital advertising revenue in the past decade does not result in any net growth or profits for local publications. From 2000-2018, newspaper advertisement revenue (print and digital) decreased \$56.62 billion, according to the year-end SEC filings analyzed by Pew Research Center (Hendrickson, 2019). Print or digital – advertising revenue is not a sustainable way to maintain a local publication. Local papers must look to subscriptions, or direct forms of funding, as the source of revenue in the near future. Print subscriptions, like in the case of the *Local Times*, are getting “smaller – and older – every year.” Therefore, we are forced to look to digital subscriptions to strengthen the industry. These are most popularly used in the form of paywalls that block content on a digital news site until the reader subscribes to the online news site. However, paywalls “aren't a magic bullet,” according to *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Anderson et al, 2016). Other forms of digital subscriptions include [memberships](#) that establish social contracts between the publication and the reader and [metered access](#) which charge for news “after an initial round of free articles” (Anderson et al, 2016). For example, the [Post in Courier](#) in Charleston, SC, stopped focusing on pageviews, started publishing fewer stories per day, and digital subscriptions increased by 250% from 2017-2019 (Benavidez et al, 2019). The publication worked alongside the accelerator Table Stakes to achieve the goal of becoming an audience-first newsroom through the “mini-publisher” model, meaning a singular team is not just responsible for creating content but also publishing and keeping track of revenue and engagement for their mini-team. This approach increased the digital subscription revenues and has held a strong 97% retention rate (Pugh, 2019). To recommend to the *Local Times*, create a membership subscription process that is customizable to the beats and topics that the specific consumer would want to see. The membership could include newsletters and events to put the reader in direct contact with the reporters writing their favorite stories – they could ask follow-up

questions, help source, and become more involved in the aspects of the paper that they have a genuine interest in, specializing their own subscriptions without fragmenting the industry.

While some theorists including Elizabeth Green of [Chalkbeat](#) discredit the longevity of a digital subscription business model because “digital subscriptions are working really nicely for some national publications, but they don't have local legs as a sole source of revenue,” (Benavidez et al, 2019). However in the past year (2020), large news events including the COVID-19 pandemic, the general election, and the Black Lives Matter protests have driven digital subscriptions up -- an over-all increase at about 50%, according to the [Northwestern Local News Initiative](#). This trend has positively impacted local news, and 2020 proves to not just be an “aberration” but in fact a “trend-setting year.” As long as these local publications invest resources in marketing, social media engagement, and newsletters, retention of these subscriptions is sustainable (Jacob, 2020). Reporters have to opportunity to return to the same sense of accountability and independence observed by Daniel Hallin in *The Passing of the “High Modernism” of American Journalism* though this form of direct reader-to-publication payment. This period created an atmosphere where journalists “could think of themselves more as public servants or as keepers of the sacred flame of journalism itself than as employees of a profit-making enterprise,” (Hallin, 1992). In transitioning from revenue from company and campaign advertisements to revenue from digital subscriptions, you are constantly indebted to your audience therefore you shift the purpose and focus of the coverage to them and their needs.

This change in business model does not only help publications keep their head above water, but it also allows the community and the consumers to be involved in defining the industry as it begins to drastically change. Digital subscriptions and memberships to traditional papers allow the reporters and publications to connect further with their audience, “treating

residents as active partners in the news production process” to build back trust and increase viewership in the community (Benavidez et al, 2019). John Dewey’s writings in *The Public and its Problems* assert that the public should have an authority in decision-making, rather than just making choices laid out by the “expert organization” that Walter Lippmann describes in *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1941). “The public,” Dewey wrote, “consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for,” asserting that media and news should be approached in a way that is appropriate to the consumer. (Dewey, 1927). By engaging citizens in journalism and hiring diverse reporters, consumers and community members start to experience reporting that has a stake in them. The community can see their reflection in the newsroom and feel more confident in their local news.

Citizen journalists are steadily becoming more and more involved in traditional newsrooms. Adrienne Russell defined the term of networked journalism as a “new diversity of collaborations” in the newsroom that connect citizen journalists and traditional reporters in *Networked Journalism*. Further defining the role of journalists to inform conversation in the public while also being “severely eclipsed in the era of professionalized commercial media” (Russell, 2016). This role is taken seriously by Chicago’s [City Bureau](#) -- a nonprofit civic journalism lab that convenes professional journalists, citizen journalists, and community members together to produce media to inform public conversation. They host a public newsroom where residents can gather with journalists to discuss issues and stories, as well as share resources and spark public discourse (Benavidez et al, 2019). Since its humble beginnings in 2015 as a training program for budding journalists, the Bureau has shown large growth and reach in the South Side of Chicago. The organization also is able to connect reporters that write for

them to become published in other local and national publications, demonstrating a success in integrating Dewey's and Russell's ideals of community structured theory and networked journalism. It has become a space of public discourse and career launching as well as a place that has garnered the respect of the community. As said by Jason Tuohey, Managing Editor for Digital of the Boston Globe – “We do want you to feel like you're not just getting the daily news but you're buying into something bigger.”

Another large part of connecting with your audience as a publication is determining if your editorial board and staff represents your target audience. Local, traditional publications lack the diversity in their staffs to be able to effectively cover and reach diverse communities. The U.S. population is approximately more than 37% non-white, when only 16.6% of journalists at daily papers are non-white, according to [Columbia Journalism Review](#). Much of the distrust in the media stems from and is perpetuated by the white-dominated media industry's inability to consciously cover news as it appears and affects people of color. To start to build back trust from the public, newspapers can “begin by including the voices of all Americans,” (Cobb, 2018). The whole point of maintaining objectivity in a publication is difficult to impossible to accomplish when the "objective truth [is] to be decided exclusively by white reporters" and editors, according to Wesley Lowery from the [New York Times OP/ED](#). It is a failure of the mainstream press to miscalculate and poorly cover communities of color which “is intrinsically linked with its failure to employ, retain and listen to black people,” (Lowery, 2020). Publications should make the effort to change their hiring and diversity policies from within which might take a little more effort on the front end but the effort to encourage and invest in diverse newsrooms is long overdue. Whenever there is more diversity and inclusion in positions of authority, more truth is objectively told.

The *Local Times* should clearly assess their target audience in their target distribution and offer unpaid internships for diverse reporters or budding reporters to work with your staff to report and pitch local stories and give them opportunities to publish work. This will allow you to gauge the reception of diverse staff voices in the community and hire appropriately.

It is crucial that local newspapers step up and propel themselves forward into the present political and social atmosphere to keep up with the national publications and keep as much viewership as possible. The role that local newspapers takes on is critical in informing the public and sharing stories of those who do not necessarily have a voice. The *Local Times* clearly has a lot of work to do, but as seen in Charleston, it is entirely possible in local publications to transcend the “death of print.”

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