

My Voice

This country
needs
independent
news sources

You might not have ever heard of the Independent-Enterprise, but it was once a weekly newspaper that filled a unique place in Payette County, Idaho.

The Independent-Enterprise covered Payette County since 1890. At the time, the Payette Enterprise and the Payette Independent were two separate papers that were split by the Republican and Democratic parties. They were later combined to form the Independent-Enterprise.



The small weekly newspaper — which was owned by Wick Communications, an Arizona-based newspaper company — chugged along for decades just across the Snake River from Ontario, but on June 24, the paper printed its last edition and closed its doors.

Anymore the news of a local paper shutting down isn't exceptional. In the past 15 years, 2,100 newspapers across the nation shuttered. For many years the prevailing industry party line was digital news content and platforms would save the day.

That hasn't happened. At least not in the rural heartland of the nation where, arguably, an unbiased, independent news source is probably most essential.

Large swaths of news deserts — entire geographic regions of the U.S. — now showcase no newspapers.

That means no original reporting is completed in those areas. That means no one is watching where taxpayer funds are going and why. Inside these news deserts, no independent entity is observing and holding local politicians accountable. That means the people that matter the most in a democracy — voters — are out of the loop and disengaged from their government.

Accurate information and watchdog journalism are the lubricants essential to the machine of democracy. The founders purposefully injected safeguards for an independent press into the very first amendment to the Constitution. They did not do so on a whim. Men dedicated to democracy, they understood our form of government can prosper only with a free press.

Since the fall of 2018, more than 300 newspapers in the U.S. have failed. For every failed newspaper, a gaping hole in democracy exists. Voters are cheated. People are uninformed. Those who seek to undermine democracy — either overtly or covertly — grow emboldened when a newspaper vanishes.

The COVID-19 virus may damage this industry I love in ways I cannot imagine. Newspapers close for a host of reasons, but lack of revenue — as advertising slumps because of economic downturns or natural disasters, such as the COVID-19 virus — plays a huge role in their demise.

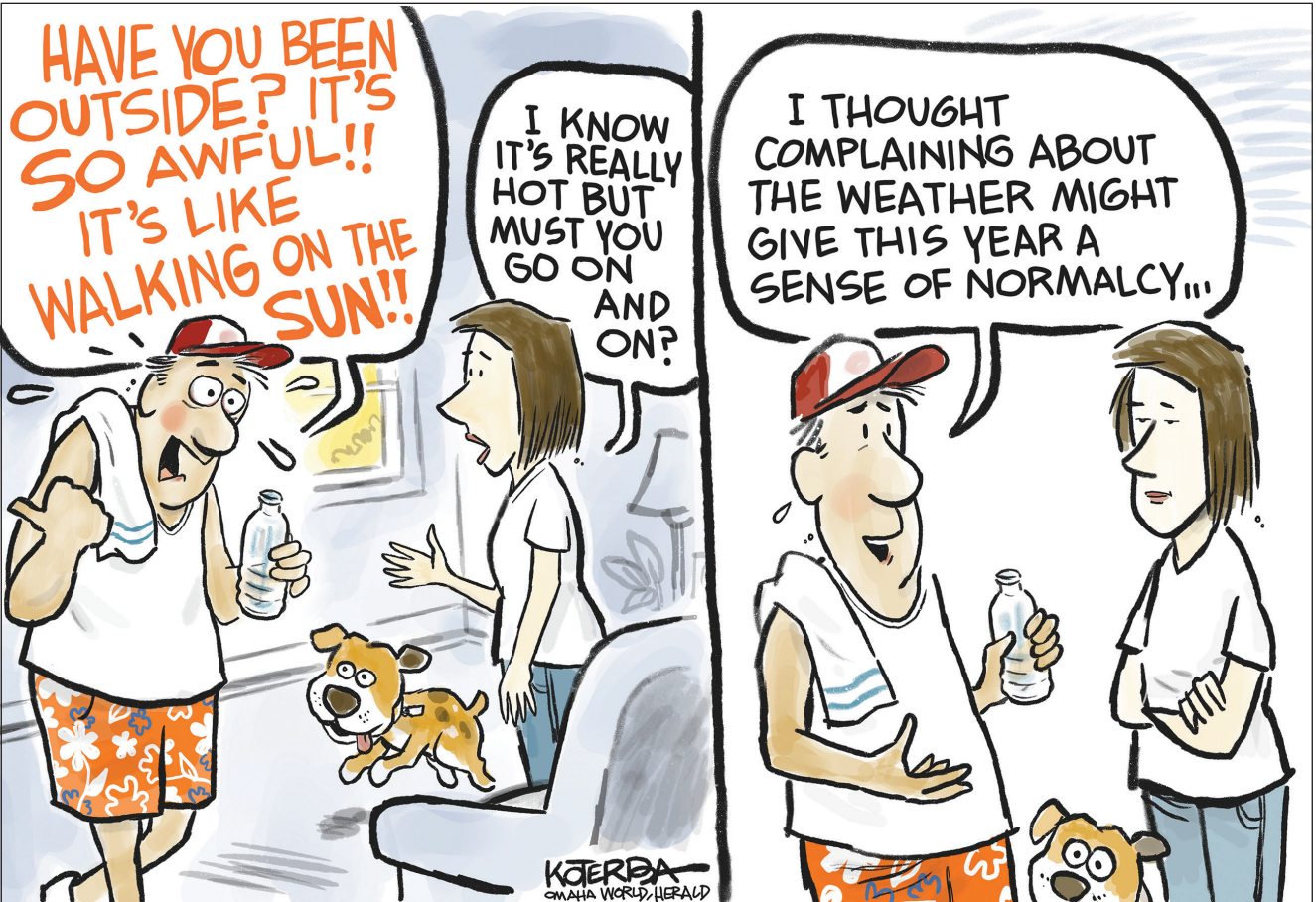
Newspapers need revenue to pay for critical reporting that keeps you, the reader, informed. As a member of a democracy, voters need as much information that is unbiased as possible. Without such information we all are forced into corners and, often, make bad choices. Candidates that have no business in politics are suddenly in office — no questions asked.

The Independent-Enterprise probably didn't draw more than 2,000 readers on its best days, but it served a very important function for a small, rural community. Now it's gone. That troubles me. As an editor, I worry about the future with fewer newspapers and less independent oversight of government. In this digital age, where social media drives all types of information across the iPhone and computer screens, I wonder, with fewer newspapers, how information will not only be disseminated but consumed.

High-minded proclamations about the dire situation in the newspaper industry are fine but, in the end, the simple truth is troubling enough. Without independent news sources in this nation, our government for and by the people will die.

And that is very, very concerning to me.

About the Author
Andrew Cutler is the regional editorial director for the EO Media Group, overseeing the La Grande Observer, East Oregonian and four more newspapers in Eastern Oregon.



Our View

Police records reform a boon

Pressure from the public and efforts of Oregon legislators pushed the state to publish an online database to track public safety officers whose certifications have been denied, suspended or revoked.

The database is online here: www.oregon.gov/dpsst/CJ/Pages/Revocations.aspx. The downside is the information only goes back to June 30, when the bill became law. The Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training also created a spreadsheet listing all officers who were the focus of a professional standards investigation prior to June. That is available on the same page.

The publication of the database

can help prevent law enforcement agencies in Oregon and elsewhere from hiring people who may not deserve to work in law enforcement again.

For too long, people who should not have a badge and gun have been able to work their way from one agency to the next with little scrutiny from the public. The authorities hiring such officers may be aware of their questionable history, but more than likely the general public was not.

The new database shows the officer's name, agency and basic facts surrounding what led the state to deny, suspend or revoke law enforcement certifications. From corrections to state police, that valuable stamp of approval

is what allows someone to be an officer in Oregon.

The database was not the only police reform Oregon needed. Still, the Legislature took action, and the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training has followed up. That's a boon.

DPSST's Director Eriks Gabliks has said there are "some bad people who do want to work in law enforcement," and the department has the responsibility of working with law enforcement agencies across Oregon and nationwide to help keep them out.

Hearing that from the person heading up such a critical component of Oregon's law enforcement infrastructure also is good.

Letters

Lighthouse Church has yet to earn forgiveness

I read the commentary from Ms. Rector (My Voice: It's time to stop blaming, The Observer's July 16 edition) about forgiving the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church for their role in the explosion of COVID-19 cases in our county and I disagree. The conditions aren't yet right for that.

If someone gives you (or your community) a black eye, it's going to be a lot easier to forgive if they apologize for it and admit that it was an unacceptable act, it was selfish, it was regrettable, and they'll never do it again. I haven't heard anything like that from the Lighthouse Church, and so they remain unforgiven.

Dan White
La Grande

Questioning president's Christian credentials

Is President Donald Trump a good Christian? Well I suppose that depends on who you ask. Equally valid to ask is if he is a real Christian? Or if it even matters if he is either of these.

To be honest I am not a Christian, so I don't think I am qualified to have an opinion about this. But there are things that are important to me, values, which are not based on faith but on my own personal experiences in life and the mistakes that I have made.

I don't know Trump, I've never met him or had a conversation with him, but based on his public statements I think he is a proficient liar; based on public records I think he is a successful cheat; based on the public persona he projects I think he is an angry bully. I could go on, but it seems to me that the only qualification he had to be president was the ability to get elected.

There is a consensus that Trump would not have won the election in 2016 without the support of Christians, and that he will not win in 2020 without their support again. He has enthusiastically supported the Christian political agenda; he has surround himself with politically active Christians; his personal spiritual advisor, Paula White, is a fiery, charismatic, Pentecostal minister; and he still enjoys overwhelming support among Christians.

So, to evaluate Trump based on his Christian credentials is, I believe, not only valid but prudent.

Stephen Wadner
Union

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