

OPINION

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Founded in 1873

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OUR VIEW

Keep small newsrooms alive

It’s been said that newspapers are the first rough draft of history. But in many cases, they are the only draft of history. Unless a professional reporter writes down what happened, much of the news simply evaporates into poorly remembered stories, and from there into rumor and forgetfulness.

What will it take to ensure local news survives, holding leaders accountable by keeping citizens informed?

If you come across a copy of a newspaper from 10 or 20 years ago, there’s a good chance the publication and the company that produced it no longer exist. A report issued last week by U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, the ranking member on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, paints a stark picture of the condition of America’s local news ecosystem:

“Over the past two decades, the local newspaper industry has lost around 70% of its total revenue. ... These losses are leading to news deserts. Already, 200 counties nationwide have no newspapers covering their communities, and half of all U.S. counties are down to just one.”

Newspapers nationwide have been forced to let go more than 40,000 newsroom employees, a full 60% of the journalistic workforce that creates unique local content.

In 2005, there were 1,587 newsroom employees in Washington state and 872 in Oregon. Fifteen years later, only 520 remain in Washington and 293 in Oregon, according to Cantwell’s report.

Excruciating cuts

Beyond layoffs, those newspapers still in business have made excruciating cuts in publication frequency, number of pages and other key measures.

Some — including the one you’re reading — aren’t in immediate danger and have somewhat adjusted to the massive shift of advertising revenue to the internet. Our industry as a whole, however, is extraordinarily vulnerable. The economic hammer blows of the coronavirus pandemic may become an extinction-level event for local news, some analysts predict.

At the same time, the coronavi-



Comstock

The newspaper industry is in financial danger.

rus crisis highlights the importance of newspapers: “local journalism occupies a unique position of public trust and is crucial to making accurate and complete information available to the public.

“Reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example of this phenomenon. Since the beginning of the health crisis, Americans have increased their reliance on local news for information about nearby outbreaks, medical resources and household support programs.

“This local reporting on issues of high concern to the public, delivered by trusted messengers, is exactly the kind of credible context and engaged audience that advertisers value most,” according to the Senate report.

We’re grateful to our advertisers and urge readers to share our good opinion of them. Subscriptions to our print and online editions are vital, both as a significant source of revenue in their own right, and as a way of proving to advertisers they are reaching an audience of potential customers.

The essential connection between local news and how it is

funded is a mystery to most people, but can’t be overstated.

When a valuable product isn’t paid for, it eventually ceases to be produced. This is the fundamental dilemma of the modern news business.

Twenty years ago, if you wanted to read the news you bought or subscribed to the newspaper, or scrounged around for one at the library, lunch counter or salon.

Today, you scroll through your news feed on Facebook or call up an aggregator site like Google News or countless others.

“Local news has been hijacked by a few large news aggregation platforms, most notably Google and Facebook, which have become the dominant players in online advertising,” the Senate report says. “These trillion-dollar companies scrape local news content and data for their own sites and leverage their market dominance to force local news to accept little to no compensation for their intellectual property.”

In this David vs. Goliath struggle to keep small newsrooms alive in a time when technology increas-

ingly harvests our products for free, there are roles to play for Congress and federal regulators, along with all our treasured allies in local communities.

A ‘fair return’

Presenting the report on Oct. 27, Cantwell, a Washington Democrat, said, “The message from today’s hearing is the free press needs to live and be supported by all of us, and we look forward to discussing how we can make sure that they get fair return on their value.”

The moment the dust settles after the election, Congress and the White House must renew the Pay-check Protection Program to continue supporting jobs at local news outlets, as well as at the host of business advertisers on which communities and newspapers depend.

When it comes to “free riders” like Google and Facebook, the report urges that “Congress should consider requiring that news aggregation platforms enter into good faith negotiations with local news organizations and pay them fair market value for their content.”

The news industry ought to be permitted to collectively bargain for reuse of their content, with strong controls in place to ensure that smaller publishers aren’t left behind.

Federal statutory solutions need to make sure internet giants play fairly. They can’t be allowed to retaliate against news providers that speak out. They must provide an equitable share of the massive advertising revenue that local news attracts to their highly profitable corporate balance sheets.

As the Senate report concludes, “Local news is often the de facto historical record of each town and, as part of its fabric, helps keep the community connected. When local newspapers and broadcasters shutter, entire cities are left wanting, and an important long-term relationship of trust and community spirit is lost. ...

“While local news outlets have taken many steps to modernize their business models for the internet age, they need help from Congress to survive the pandemic and level a playing field that is severely tilted in favor of the online platforms.”

GUEST COLUMN

Oregon an election model for other states

When the coronavirus pandemic hit and states started enforcing social distancing and other restrictions, Steve Trout’s phone began ringing off the hook.

Trout is Oregon’s elections director. His counterparts in dozens of states sought his advice on how to conduct elections by mail instead of at polling places.

“It’s been crazy. I remember when this all hit back in March, a lot of states were having their primaries before ours,” Trout



DICK HUGHES

told me last week. “We’ve really tried to coach our peers. We know that even though we’ve been doing this for 40 years in Oregon, it’s not something that we just flipped the switch and got. We continue to fine-tune things.”

Trout quickly contacted his counterpart in Washington state — which adopted statewide vote by mail in 2011 — and they began hosting weekly conference calls for their fellow state elections directors. Those calls are still happening.

“I am pleasantly surprised at the progress those states have made preparing for this,” Trout said. “It’s hard to flip a switch

and move from polling places to mail. There’s a lot of things that go into that, but many states took our advice right out of the gate.”

Trout, who oversees the Elections Division in the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office, said he shared lessons learned from Oregon’s vote-by-mail successes and scars. He urged his colleagues to examine how their state laws and regulations would interact with mail balloting, so as to have more clarity and less litigation.

During that first call back in March, Trout told his counterparts to contact their local and regional postal officials right away.

“You’re not going to succeed if they’re not a great partner. ... I think most of the states have taken that to heart and have been working closely with their local postal officials to make them part of the team,” said Trout, who has high praise for the U.S. Postal Service in Oregon.

There also were such mundane questions as who are the ballot printers? Where do states find the special paper needed for the ballots? Early on, Trout alerted Oregon counties to promptly order all the ballot envelopes they would need this year, because their printers soon would be working nonstop for other states.

President Donald Trump and some other Republicans have promoted absentee mail ballots but disparaged regular vote by mail as unsecure and fraud-ridden. However, the Republican secretaries of state in Oregon and Washington vouch for vote by mail. When Oregon Secretary of State Bev Clarno was interviewed on “60 Minutes” this summer, her advice was, “Try it, you might like it.”

Surveys consistently show Oregonians’ faith in mail voting, including a poll this month by Reed College’s Early Voting Information Center that was conducted in partnership with the Elections Division. Oregonians said they had few worries about voting in the pandemic. Many thought that other states could adopt Oregon’s methods without increasing election fraud, although responses followed partisan lines.

In any case, Oregonians are turning out in record numbers. High early turnout means more votes will be included in the initial results released Tuesday evening. Counties began verifying the ballot signatures last week, opening the envelopes and running the ballots through counting machines. They cannot legally tally ballots until 8 p.m. on Election Day.

Even then, the counting won’t be over. Registered voters, regardless of where they

live, may take their ballot to an official drop site or county elections office anywhere in Oregon. The ballots then are sent to the voters’ home counties.

Counties will notify those voters who forgot to sign their ballot or whose signature doesn’t match what is on file. Such voters will have until Nov. 17 to correct those problems. Oregon’s election results won’t become official until Dec. 3.

So far, Trout said, things are going well: “I think we’re in really good shape. I’m almost embarrassed when I get on these calls with other states. We’re really business as usual.”

Whereas his counterpart in the swing state of Wisconsin has 1,800 local jurisdictions that run elections, Trout has the 36 counties to deal with. He has been checking in on those county operations.

The other day, he arrived at the Jackson County elections office in Medford before 8 a.m. and witnessed a stream of voters depositing ballots in the drop box.

“That really lifted my spirits. That’s why we do this,” Trout said. “I had two different people in that five-minute period drive by, drop their ballot in the drop box and salute.”

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.