COMMUNICATIONS ON PRACTICE

The Vanishing Newspaper, Academic Libraries, and Our Withering Democracy

Steven Shapiro

Introduction

During the winter of 2024, the *Star-Ledger*, one of the preeminent newspapers in the state of New Jersey, announced that it would cease production of its print edition by February 2025 and henceforth publish online only. According to a news source, the *Newark Morning Ledger Co.* (owner of the *Star Ledger*) decided to close its print facility and stop production because of "rising costs, decreasing circulation, and reduced demand for print."[1] Around the same time, the *Times of Trenton* and the *South Jersey Times* also decided to transition to online only.[2] Now that New Jersey no longer requires public legal notices to be posted in newspapers, there will probably be further erosion in the number of print news publications statewide as sources of income continue to dry up.[3] Inevitably, more newspapers will either dispense with their print publication and focus solely on their online edition or disappear altogether as circulation and revenue steadily decline. Newspapers, and journalism in general, have become casualties of the internet and the proliferating web-based news outlets, where the quality of reporting runs the gamut from highly professional and factual to wholly fabricated and less than credible. The long-established tradition of reading the Sunday newspaper while sipping a cup of coffee and sitting in an easy chair seems relegated to a bygone era. What do these industry-wide changes portend for the future of newspapers, news, and our democracy, and how does this impact academic libraries and shape their response?

Where Did All the Newspapers Go?

Besides the readily discernable shift to online only, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of newspapers published in the United States. A report released by Northwestern University's State of Local News Project 2024 indicated that more than one-third of print newspapers (more than 3,200) have ceased production and shuttered their operations since 2005. On average, about two local newspapers a week are closing down and exiting the industry. Eighty percent of the remaining 5,600 newspapers publish on a weekly as opposed to a daily basis. At the same time, newspapers have shed a large number of staff, including news editors and reporters. Between 2022 and 2023, newspapers employed 7,000 fewer professionals, while newsrooms lost 2,000 positions.[4] All told, close to 73 percent of positions in the newspaper industry vanished since 2005, while more than 60 percent of journalists and editors lost employment during the same period.[5] The net result is that there is a dwindling number of people reporting the news and fewer newspapers providing a voice to large segments of the country. Consequently, there are many people and places, especially outside urban centers, that are being disenfranchised, and their voices and opinions are being ignored. In a country that values freedom of speech, this is a disaster in the making.

Steven Shapiro (shapiros@montclair.edu) is Electronic Resources Librarian, Montclair State University.

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Consolidation of the Newspaper Industry

Another concerning trend is the consolidation and merger of newspapers as growing corporate syndicates gobble up smaller local newspapers, resulting in the homogenization of news at the expense of local news coverage. By 2022, 88 percent of New Jersey's daily newspapers were operated by two corporate entities, Gannett and Advance Publications.[6] Early in its history, Advance Publications bought out *The Jersey Journal* in 1945 and then proceeded to purchase *The Bayonne Times*, *Hudson Dispatch*, and *Express-Times*. Other newspapers acquired by Advance Publications include the *South Jersey Times*, *Gloucester County Times*, *Today's Sunbeam*, and *Bridgeton Evening News*. Gannett owns notable New Jersey newspapers such as the *Bergen Record*, *Courier-News*, *Courier-Post*, *Asbury Park Press*, and *Home News Tribune*.[7] The accelerating pace of mergers and consolidation may deprive us of the diverse set of independent media voices that are reflective of a healthy and vibrant, free society.

As newspapers are absorbed by expanding media enterprises, newsrooms are eviscerated when these companies seek to cut costs by laying off staff. One of these companies, the hedge fund firm Alden Capital Group, has a history of purchasing newspapers and upending newsrooms by jettisoning experienced reporters and editors.[8] Over time, Alden acquired the *Chicago Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, *New York Daily News*, and *Denver Post*, as well as many other regional newspapers. Between 2015 and 2017, Alden's portfolio of newspapers lost 36 percent of their staff according to the NewsGuild. Not long after the *Chicago Tribune* was bought out by Alden in May of 2021, the paper shed one-quarter of its newsroom through buyouts.[9] The type of budget cuts experienced by the *Tribune* and papers like it have impaired the kind of investigative reporting needed to hold local city governments accountable. There simply are not enough journalists available in these downsized newsrooms devoted to such work.

The AI Conundrum

Newsrooms are also being battered by the growing adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) tools by the industry. The reality, of course, is that more and more routine journalistic tasks, such as "content production and editing," as well as more complex activities such as "data transcription, data analysis, content personalization, and audience analytics," can be performed by AI systems.[10] Existing technologies, however, are limited in that they merely extract information from other sources to produce content. AI cannot engage in investigative reporting or attend the scene of a developing news story. The "zero click" news phenomenon, spawned by AI, where encapsulated news items appear in internet search results without the necessity of following a link has deprived newspaper and publisher websites of visitors and revenue.[11] In response, media companies have started to take legal action against Google. The Helena World Chronicle and Emmerich Newspapers, based in Arkansas and Mississippi, respectively, filed an antitrust lawsuit against Google in the District of Columbia in 2023, claiming that the company's search engine steered traffic away from their websites while utilizing their content.[12] The suit was ultimately dismissed. At the same time, many companies are training their AI systems on newspaper content without compensating the originators of this content.[13] For example, *The New York Times* sued OpenAI and Microsoft for copyright infringement when those companies

trained their systems on millions of *New York Times* articles to deliver news and directly compete with daily newspapers.[14] This was the first suit filed by a news organization but will likely not be the last as technology companies enrich themselves at the expense of newspapers.

The Fourth Estate and Democracy

All this is bad news for democracy according to an article by McKay Coppins that appeared in the November 2021 issue of *The Atlantic*. Coppins reported that the demise of a local newspaper "tends to correspond with lower voter turnout, increased polarization, and a general erosion of civic engagement. Misinformation proliferates, city budgets balloon alongside corruption and bureaucratic dysfunction." Coppins also identified consequences for national politics: "an analysis by Politico found that Donald Trump performed best during the 2016 election in places with limited access to local news."[15] In other words, we need more media publications, not less, if we want to create a public that is better informed and ready to grapple with local issues. Democracies need ongoing tending and are only as strong as their citizens and institutions. A free press helps to educate citizens and maintain the integrity of political institutions. The French chronicler of American democracy and culture, Alexis de Tocqueville, clearly saw the connection between newspapers and what he called voluntary association or citizens banding together for social benefit. He wrote the following about the key role of newspapers in contributing to the vitality of American democracy: "We should underrate their importance if we thought they just guaranteed liberty; they maintain civilization."[16]

Fake News Fills the Void

The scarcity or absence of local newspapers in many parts of the country (more than 206 counties), especially those that are poorer, older, and more rural, leads to a neglect of local issues and an inability to develop a civic culture.[17] More than 55 million people in the United States live in news deserts where they have either few or no choices when it comes to obtaining local news.[18] This results in a situation where most of the local newspapers and news media are concentrated in urban or metropolitan areas, thus creating a deep disparity between the underserved rural communities in the heartland of America and their counterparts in the city.

This gap in local news coverage, the dwindling number of legitimate sources of news, and the decline in the availability of high-quality reporting leaves an opening for purveyors of fake and fabricated news, as well as the propagators of conspiracy theories and extremist dogma based on hearsay rather than evidence. The number of fake local news sites (1,263 as of June 2024) now exceeds the number of US daily newspapers (1,213) in figures released by NewsGuard in 2024.[19] The effect is that news from legitimate sources is being crowded out by propagators of false and misleading information. Because local news providers are more trusted sources of news than the national media according to surveyed opinion, they need to be strengthened to counter the negative and lingering effects of specious news stories emanating from fake news sites.[20]

When Journalists Are Their Own Worst Enemy

Regretfully, there are vexing problems that the news industry was responsible for inflicting upon itself. One example is a growing tendency among news outlets to politicize and editorialize news as opposed to engaging in pure reporting. Although the early history of American journalism was mired in political partisanship, throughout most of the twentieth century, there was a professional commitment to impartial and even-handed reporting that reflected the centrist sentiments of most major dailies.[21] The twentieth century also witnessed the rise of photojournalism and high-tech imaging and communication technology. Newspapers and the media leveraged these to ensure there were no gaps in news coverage and stories. Historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin described these conjured news-making events as pseudo-events. According to Boorstin, a pseudo-event "is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it."[22] Common examples of pseudo-events include interviews and news leaks (e.g., Daniel Ellsberg's famed leaks during the Vietnam War) used to generate newsworthy content. As a result of this growing phenomena, states Boorstin, "news gathering turned into news making."[23] This has unfortunately served to undermine confidence in newspapers and the news media in general.

Academic Libraries as Advocates for and Consumers of Newspapers

Changes in the news and newspaper industry directly impact academic libraries and the patrons whom we serve. The question is how do we, as librarians, counter the trends that undermine the integrity of the fourth estate and, implicitly, the health of our democracy? As newspapers scale back and pivot from print to online, the cost of doing business increases for libraries. Library subscriptions to individual and newspaper collections hosted online far exceed the cost of print subscriptions. Providing campus-wide access to local newspapers, such as the *Star Ledger*, which is no longer available in print, can be an expensive proposition if you need to rely on commercial databases. Often, libraries cannot secure online access to local newspapers because they do not offer institutional licensing or the full text is unavailable in aggregated databases. Furthermore, faculty often clamor for the digital version of national newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, which can be a major financial commitment. In order to provide access to historical content from major newspapers, libraries may be required to license or purchase the archival content separately from current content, which creates an additional financial burden.

Many academic libraries will be forced to make difficult fiscal decisions opting to offer online access to select newspapers to the exclusion of other news sources. This comes at a time when it is more important than ever to expose students to as many different opinions and voices as possible to promote critical thinking skills and respect for democratic values and diverse viewpoints. Academic libraries defend the right to express one's opinions and thoughts in books, media, and the public square while making space for individual and collective voices to be heard. It is incumbent not only for libraries to support local and regional newspapers but also to make sure that we provide access to a variety of news sources that reflect different perspectives and life experiences. My University Libraries subscribes to

local newspapers, including *The Montclair Times* and *Bloomfield Life*, in order to emphasize our ties to the communities we serve.

Although it is important to make local and regional newspaper sources available to our users, it is also critical to provide access to a range of newspaper content from across the country (both regional and local), as well as international content. Libraries usually depend on aggregated databases to furnish this content. The advantage, of course, is the enormous quantity of newspapers and newspaper content contained in these databases. This enables libraries to supply students and faculty with a wide selection of perspectives from diverse places and affiliations.

However, these databases present their own set of problems. For instance, database vendors under publisher direction may place embargoes on publications restricting online availability of more recent material. In many cases, aggregated databases do not include all sections or all editions of a newspaper. There is also no guarantee that a newspaper that appears in an aggregated database one year will be there the next year. And not all newspapers are available in aggregated databases and must be subscribed to separately. Site licenses for some of the major newspapers with national clout can be quite expensive, especially for institutions with a larger full-time equivalent (FTE) and/or multiple campuses.

Librarians Contribute to an Educated Citizenry Through Information Literacy

For academic libraries, there are numerous ways in which we can communicate the importance of journalism to education, civic responsibility, and the development of critical thinking skills. Academic libraries can take concrete steps to encourage the habit of newspaper reading and support the industry and the journalists who are essential to instilling community awareness. At Montclair State University, the librarians attended two full-day workshops in fall 2024 followed by seven weeks of two-hour web-based sessions discussing the library's information literacy program, with an emphasis on supporting the University's new general education (Social Justice & Equity, Educated Citizenry, Engagement, Diversity, Self-Discovery & Self-Care [SEEDS]) curriculum. One of the major pillars of the SEEDS curriculum is the objective to create an Educated Citizenry. The University's SEEDS webpage describes the Educated Citizenry component as a means of teaching students how to "assess, produce, and communicate knowledge as informed and responsible citizens, and learn to critically evaluate the sociopolitical structures that influence information creation."[24] This new curriculum will have a major impact on our information literacy program. In response, the Library has created a rubric that outlines how this can best be accomplished at multiple levels and has offered workshops and discussions that provide a forum for faculty and librarians to share their strategy and vision for implementing the Educated Citizenry component of the new curriculum in the classroom. Now more than ever, it is essential for any basic information literacy program committed to serving the community to familiarize students with all available library news resources so that they are exposed to a wide spectrum of opinion and thought.

These types of resources may be utilized in first-year undergraduate classes for assignments exploring controversial issues and contemporary topics from contrasting viewpoints. Through these

activities, students develop critical thinking skills by assessing bias as well as detecting the cultural and sociopolitical influences implicit in information creation. They learn to ask questions about the information they have gathered and develop a healthy dose of skepticism, two of the qualities that characterize a good reporter. Students also need to know that newspapers and news media heighten civic consciousness and strengthen democratic institutions while educating people about the local issues, such as elections, the budgets of public institutions, and property taxes, that matter to them and their neighbors. Local newspapers also serve as an antidote to the unrelenting spread of fake news that has made it more difficult to separate truth from fiction. Librarians point students to trustworthy news sources and expose them to tools that help students read sources critically. One such example is GPTZero (https://gptzero.me/), which allows users to identify news stories that contain significant amounts of AI-generated content. Other tools, such as BBC Verify (https://www.bbc.com/news/bbcverify), vet AI-generated and professionally created news and information by utilizing "open-source intelligence and satellite imagery" to determine its veracity.[25]

The Importance of Media and News Literacy

Librarians, as well as media studies and journalism faculty, agree that college students need to be exposed to broad-based media literacy instruction as part of any larger information competency requirement. The American Library Association's *Media Literacy in the Library* guide establishes some of the fundamental goals intrinsic to this type of educational enterprise based on the parameters set by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) and librarians with expertise in the field of information literacy.[26] These parameters include "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication. In its simplest terms, media literacy builds upon the foundation of traditional literacy and offers new forms of reading and writing. Media literacy empowers people to be critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens."[27]

Howard Schneider—a former reporter turned Dean of State University of New York Stony Brook's School of Journalism—took an innovative approach to news literacy, which is a subset of media literacy that teaches how to evaluate and use news sources. Dean Schneider designed a news literacy course open to all undergraduate students regardless of their major. In the course, students are assigned news articles instead of textbooks to engage their critical thinking skills and help them learn how to assess the credibility and bias implicit to news stories, as well as their own biases. The civic component of news literacy helps differentiate it from other media literacy instruction. An important feature of the program is that students are taught to think laterally as well as vertically, meaning that they use the internet to vet the news stories they retrieve from the web in the same manner as a fact checker. Lectures are frequently interspersed with examples and combined with hands-on exercises that give students a realistic understanding of how journalism is conducted. Students are expected to become proficient at discerning "the difference between journalism and other kinds of information," recognizing the distinction between news and opinion, distinguishing "between assertion and verification," assessing news stories based on the credibility of sources and the "quality of evidence," and understanding the difference between media and reader bias.[28] In addition, they are introduced to all media formats where

news can be located, including social media. This enables students to not only assess news received from traditional sources (e.g., newspapers, TV, radio, and websites) but also news shared over social media.

By 2018, more than 10,000 students at Stony Brook had completed the semester-long course. A number of studies have vouched for the effectiveness of this news literacy course in enhancing students' ability to assess the accuracy and quality of the news and information to which they are exposed. According to Dean Schneider, "Studies show that students who have taken the Stony Brook course have significantly higher levels of news media literacy, greater knowledge of current events and a higher motivation to consume news compared to students who have not taken the course, and the effects do not diminish with time."[29] A research article by Dr. Jennifer Fleming at California State University, Long Beach concluded that the Stony Brook curriculum contributed to "high levels of engagement, a greater awareness of current events, and deeper, more nuanced understandings of journalism" among students.[30] Beyond that, the class emphasizes how essential dependable news and news sources are to democracy. At least fifty universities (including international institutions), as well as public schools, have adopted a similar strategy for teaching news literacy.[31] The Stony Brook model provides an opportunity for librarians to pursue a comparable approach to honing their students' news literacy skills.

Newspaper Readership Programs

Ultimately, newspapers will not flourish unless Generation Z students (and future generations of students) become newspaper readers. In terms of personal news consumption, more students rely on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter rather than traditional news sources to obtain their information, according to a 2022 report issued by The Media Insight Project.[32] One option to address this problem is for universities to promote newspaper readership programs. Academic Libraries instinctively understand the power of words and information in influencing and shaping public discourse, making librarians obvious proponents for such initiatives. One of the earliest and most heralded newspaper readership programs was introduced by Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) starting in 1997.[33] Penn State's president at the time, Graham Spanier, initiated the program with the help of *USA Today* and continued to advocate for its expansion.[34] Students could obtain free print copies of *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Centre Daily Times* at the University Park campus.[35] The faculty/staff newsletter, the *Intercom Online*, described the program as an "overwhelming success" after a survey revealed that almost half of students responding indicated that "reading newspapers added positively to their overall education."[36] Penn State's Readership Program "served as a model for hundreds of schools from across the nation."[37] Currently, universities such as Penn State, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and the University of Kentucky offer their students free online access to major national newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* as part of their campus-wide news readership programs. Academic libraries are active participants in many of these programs. Besides the major dailies, some institutions include access to regional newspapers as well. From 2003 until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Montclair State University in conjunction with *USA Today* offered a newspaper readership program consisting of print copies of

The New York Times, *Star Ledger*, the *Bergen Record*, and *USA Today*, where distribution and delivery was managed by North Jersey Media Group (Gannett, parent company of USA Today).[38] Recently, our library added a site license to the basic news package of the digital *New York Times*, which is available online to the entire campus community.

The Next Generation of Journalists

The future of newspapers will also be shaped by the willingness of young people to pursue careers in journalism. Student newspapers in higher education play an important role in training future generations of journalists. Unfortunately, student news organizations have found it difficult to sustain themselves as interest and readership have plummeted.[39] Nonetheless, there are many ways that academic libraries can support student newspapers and their staff. One option is for the library to assist the student newspaper financially by placing announcements or ads for library programming, services, or events. At Montclair State University, the author collaborated with faculty in organizing a variety of grant-funded lecture series, where part of the budget was earmarked for marketing, including placing large advertisements in our student newspaper, the *Montclarion*. Librarians can also reach out to the newspaper staff to inform them of new library resources, services, or building facilities. Academic libraries may also find it rewarding to consider hiring journalism students as library assistants responsible for reporting news on library activities, or promoting events, new e-resources, and services. One of the most effective ways to serve library users and draw attention to the invaluable treasury of institutional information and history available in student newspapers is by digitizing archival issues of these publications.

Digitizing and Hosting Student Newspapers

In 2006, Sprague Library at Montclair State University tasked a committee to implement a detailed plan to microfilm and digitize issues of the *Montclarion*, the University's student newspaper, spanning the years 1966 to 1976 and upload these images and a collection of earlier images from 1993 to 1996 to OCLC's CONTENTdm digital asset management system. The library decided to expand the project to preserve and digitize additional archival issues of the *Montclarion* in 2015. The ambitious project enlisted the help of an outside contractor in 2016 to digitize issues from 2002 to 2015, as well as the most vulnerable and fragile materials published from 1928 to 1960. By 2017, a generous gift by the *Montclarion* office of its entire collection of back issues enabled the library to fill gaps in its holdings dating from the 1960s to 2017. Later that year, all the digitized images were moved to the new institutional repository, Digital Commons. Serendipitously, two years later in 2019, the Library discovered fifty-three volumes of the *Montclarion* hidden away in its periodicals storage space.[40] According to library archivist Paul Martinez, visitors have downloaded content from the *Montclarion* site more than 124,846 times between October 2017 and March 28, 2025, which works out to close to 16,600 downloads per year.[41] In other words, the digitization project has not only drawn a significant

amount of web traffic but also stoked interest in the student newspaper. Alumni, in particular, have responded quite positively to the online availability of archival issues of the *Montclarion*.

Library Programming and Community Engagement

Another way of communicating the importance of newspapers and news reporters in sustaining our democracy is by inviting journalists to lecture or participate in panel sessions hosted by academic libraries.[42] At Montclair State University, our library sponsored a variety of lecture programs for almost a decade where we invited scholars and authors to speak on campus. In 2014, we organized a grant-funded lecture series consisting of seventeen events with the Global Studies Department entitled "Rescue in Budapest." The series commemorated the seventieth anniversary of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg's rescue mission to Hungary, which saved the lives of close to 100,000 Jews. The keynote speaker for the program series was the British-born author and journalist Alex Kershaw.[43] As an author, he published a well-received biography of Wallenberg entitled *The Envoy*. Kershaw presented two lectures on Raoul Wallenberg. The first lecture was hosted on the Montclair State University campus, while the second talk occurred at Montclair Public Library. Following the event at Montclair Public Library, Kershaw was interviewed by a reporter from the local newspaper, *The Montclair Times*. Both events were well attended and widely publicized with ads appearing in local newspapers and the *Montclarion*. All programs were open to the public and featured question and answer sessions where lively discussions ensued with many different opinions expressed. The lecture series was a successful effort to educate the public about the Holocaust while cultivating an informed citizenry capable of countering the growing menace of Holocaust denial and the normalization of antisemitism, which have unfortunately become more commonplace.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of a free press is to make sure that all voices in a community are heard and to act as a check and balance to our elected government officials and government institutions to prevent abuse of power and corruption. In terms of collection development, academic libraries play a role in ensuring that our users, especially students, have access to a broad array of resources, including news sources representing a spectrum of opinions and ideas. This supports students' development as independent thinkers capable of analyzing and evaluating information for credibility and sound reasoning. At the same time, academic libraries can advocate for news literacy programs within the university curriculum to help students become independent thinkers. The future of our democracy depends on educated citizens who are well-informed and willing to openly discuss difficult issues. In an increasingly technology-dependent world, this demands a certain level of scientific and information literacy but also a firm grasp of local issues and needs. State and small-town newspapers and media outlets help people feel more rooted and connected to their communities. They also encourage individuals to be more actively immersed in their communities since they are better informed of what is happening on the local, state, and national level. In addition, they contribute to a society that is more tolerant and open

to a wide range of opinions and perspectives. This is critical in a country that is becoming increasingly polarized politically. Universities are uniquely empowered to advocate for free speech and foster a safe space for examining diverse ideas and perspectives. Academic libraries play an active role in providing access to news sources and a wide assortment of resources representing the variety of human thought; doing so is fundamental to a library's mission and essential for sustaining a free press and ultimately our democracy.

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