

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #137

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### *The Death of the Daily News*



*'Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?'  
— Joni Mitchell  
Big Yellow Taxi [1]*

Do you miss Larie Pinteau?

Do you miss Len Kholos?

Do you miss Ed Mead (*aka* Ed Matthews)?

I do.

I even miss Pat Howard, who, on certain issues, was the kind of prod that current Erie politics sorely misses.

Joni Mitchell, singing “Don’t it always seem to go: you don’t know what you got ’til it’s gone,” had it right – we often don’t know how good we had it until it’s gone. In this instance, the good is the community building, politics monitoring value of rock solid, professional journalism practiced by those I mentioned above and a legion of their colleagues at Erie’s newspapers.

I should quickly add that Erie has it better off than many smaller cities and communities around the country. It still has a daily newspaper, but much smaller in scope. Erie is scarcely a *news desert* – “places that face an emerging crisis as citizens struggle to find out what happens around them” because their town no longer has a full-service newspaper providing “a relatively inexpensive, easy-to-access source of local information.” [2] No, so far Erie has avoided the worst, but since the sale of the ***Erie Times-News*** in December 2015 to GateHouse Media and its eventual merger with the Gannett Company, local coverage has shriveled in comparison to its earlier scale and quality.

Although much smaller in number, the dedicated professionals at the ***Erie Times-News*** still seek to provide Erieites insights into local happenings, such as the front-page story in the eEdition of the Tuesday, March 21 issue about the ongoing controversy between county government’s administration and the funding of its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission. [3] Similarly, other outlets such as the ***Erie Reader***, a free, independent alternative newspaper, and Erie’s electronic media such as ***Erie News Now***, WJET’s ***YourErie*** , and Joel Natalie’s “Talk Erie” provide the Erie region news coverage

But, with all due respect, it’s not the same in either breadth or depth to what the independently owned ***Erie Times-News*** or its predecessors before their merger, the ***Erie Morning News*** and ***Erie Daily Times***, provided.

What did they provide that I miss now that it’s gone?

Two threads in the Erie story: in-depth, sustained coverage by professional journalists of Erie, Erie County, and Pennsylvania politics and, perhaps more importantly, equally in-depth and sustained coverage of community issues and activities. The latter, once so ubiquitous and all encompassing, Erieites, like people elsewhere, just took it for granted never quite noticing that *Erie* as a communal reality really only existed in the pages of the newspaper.

The newspaper was the town square where all of the town's many threads were woven together into the story that is Erie.



The story is not unique to Erie. Andrew Conte explores the demise of local newspapers in his ***Death of the Daily News: How Citizen Gatekeepers Can Save Local Journalism***. Conte, a former journalist who is now director of the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University, details what happens to a town when it loses its local newspaper. He tells the story of McKeesport, Pennsylvania's struggle to maintain or create a self-identity after the closing in 2015 of the McKeesport ***Daily News***, which had served the community for over a hundred and thirty

years.

What happened to the McKeesport ***Daily News***, to the original ***Erie Times-News***, and to other newspapers large and small around the country?

In a word, what happened is the ***internet***.

It's a well-known story. Briefly, from their very beginning in America as broadsheets and commercial bulletins, newspapers – think Revolutionary War era Benjamin Edes' ***Boston Gazette***, think Benjamin Franklin's ***Pennsylvania Gazette***, think Joseph Pulitzer's ***St. Louis Post-Dispatch*** and ***New York World*** – existed first as an advertising medium. Editorial copy – whether shipping news, opinion pieces, or later what we would call *news* (***what*** happened, ***who*** did it, ***where*** and ***when***, and, if possible, to determine, ***why***) – was added to draw readers to whom advertisers wanted access.

Advertising drove the business.

The internet took the advertisers from the pages to the screens.

First, Craigslist and its many state and local sites took away classified advertisers by offering classified listings free or at deeply discounted prices. [4] Readers never quite understood that classified advertising covered a

newspaper's overhead and fixed expenses. Display advertising, intermingled with the editorial copy, was where the profits were earned. Eventually, the internet took that away, too.

As the physical newspaper shrank, newspapers developed digital versions. But in the early internet there was a culture of free content. Newspapers and others struggled to retrain internet users to pay for content. The struggle continues. Only three major national papers have successfully made that transition – the ***New York Times***, the ***Washington Post***, and the ***Wall Street Journal***. Local papers struggle to educate an audience to pay for digital subscriptions. The ***Erie Times-News***' [GoErie.com](http://GoErie.com) and the ***Cleveland Plain Dealer***'s [www.cleveland.com](http://www.cleveland.com) among many others have established a digital presence, but the revenue streams are mere trickles compared to the print version's heyday.

So, what was lost?

First, professional journalism practiced at scale, i.e. with breadth comprehensively covering a community's politics and with depth going beneath the surface to see what is actually happening. In short, what is lost are journalism's editorial and watchdog functions.

Conte goes to some length explaining a newspaper's editorial function at its most basic but arguably most critical level – that of gatekeeper. An editor not only ensures that something is reasonably well-written, but that it is also factually accurate. There are numerous issues with social media, but the major issue is the lack of a gatekeeper. Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, et. al. have half-heartedly, and one might say half-assedly (is that a word? If not, it still makes the point), made stabs at exercising the gatekeeper function. The topic of social media and gatekeeping is vast and can get gnarly quickly, but the essential point is that a traditional editor, even with biases, ensured a certain level of accuracy and civility.

Journalism's watchdog function keeps a town's politicians, but also its other community leaders, honest. Does it work all the time? No, of course not, but it worked much of the time, and if a town was fortunate enough to have two papers competing, it could work quite well, for, as Eric Alterman said in ***The American Prospect***, “responsible journalism is the foundation of our collective ability to address our problems as a society: to improve ‘the common good.’” [5]

A legitimate newspaper functioning at *speed*, as it were, filters out disinformation, uncovers the underlying facts of a matter, identifies what real agendas are driving a particular issue, and empowers citizens to self-govern. When a legitimate newspaper is absent, or reduced in scale so that it cannot operate at *speed*, then citizens' ability to exercise self-government falters. As Walter Lippmann said in a 1919 ***The Atlantic*** article:

*Men who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist, can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information. But where all news comes at second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions. The environment in which they act is not the realities themselves, but the pseudo-environment of reports, rumors, and guesses. The whole reference of thought comes to be what somebody asserts, not what actually is. [6]*

Or, in short, with legitimate newspapers functioning at *speed*, as Kevin Cuneo pointed out during a presentation that he and his brother Pat delivered at the Jefferson Educational Society in February about the history of Erie's newspapers, George Santos would never get elected to Congress. You can supply your own local Erie example of choice – there are more than one.

As critical as a newspaper's gatekeeping and watchdog functions are, they might take second place to a newspaper's ability to create a sense of community. Or, as I said earlier, they might take second place to a newspaper's ability to function as the community's *town square*, to function as the community's *commons*. That common ground is the place where all of a community's members mingle, if only metaphorically, and experience a sense of belonging. The social science phrase for this phenomenon is *social capital* – “a set of shared values or resources that allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose.” [7]

And, once upon a time, it was newspapers that created social capital in America's villages, towns, cities – in the country at large. As long ago as the 1830s, Conte notes, that first and most acute observer of the American scene, Alexis de Tocqueville, said:

... hardly any democratic association can do without newspapers. There is consequently a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers: newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers. ... Thus, it is in America that we find at the same time the greatest number of associations and of newspapers. [8]

By associations, de Tocqueville meant the American genius to found clubs, groups, and citizens' committees to solve local problems, to promote local interests from little league teams to protecting the fresh water in the bay, from the banal to the profound. The medium that enabled them to do this was newspapers in their function as the *town square*, as the *town commons*.

And they did it from one location – the newspaper's single identity but available all around town. Think of the Erie papers in their heyday with *Showcase*, the

*Living* section, and the sports pages. The “paper” – I use the singular to make the point that it was a one-stop shop for community information – provided all of that and in the process created the community’s sense of its self, its self-identity.

The internet fractured that. Conte goes at some length to explain Marshall McLuhan’s notion that the “medium is the message.” We’ve discussed it in previous **Book Notes**. McLuhan meant that any given medium of communications imposes its own lens, its own way of perceiving, upon any content it transmits. A physical newspaper because of its singularity, created a communal coherence, a sense of community that the internet with its proliferation of sources fractures and fragments.

Yes, all that information once found in the newspaper on a daily basis still exists, but now one must surf through multiple sources, no one of them as comprehensive and trustworthy as the newspaper, to find the information one seeks. At a simple data level, one can find most items after a search, but what the story behind the data item might be is not to be found, or not easily found.

A comparatively trivial example: try to find a mid-week, mid-January girls high school basketball score; it may be online, but it won’t be in the next day’s “paper” because it occurred after the daily deadline. The digital version may only be a single line of type with no accompanying story about the game, its ups-and-downs, and the players who played it. For that information, one needs to search through a bewildering number of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other sources. And then, what one finds is highly slanted – no gatekeeper here – and unreliable. The result is that the community of girls high school basketball fans whose association the newspaper once facilitated has fragmented and fractured.

And the players play on in obscurity.

This is also true of other more serious community activities; for example, finding quality childcare, learning about one’s city taxes, measuring the caliber of those running for judge, or discerning the real story behind the squabble on township X’s planning committee. All of these were once covered in varying degrees of greater “depth” by professional journalists trained to sift the facts from the chaff and report back to the town commons. In their absence, there is now a free-for-all of sources telling different versions of the same story.

Who to believe?

Where is the gatekeeper?

Where once the newspaper created community and a shared destiny, the internet creates a cacophony of competing voices shrilling at one another shredding the common good. All of which leads to a subject for another **Book**



**Note** – the cacophony of competing stories threatening to shred the tapestry of stories in *The American Tapestry Project*.

What is to be done?

What can either revive or replace the newspapers' ability to build a common culture and to protect American democracy? Regarding the latter, no less a voice than Thomas Jefferson understood the critical role newspapers play in American democracy. Jefferson had, shall we say, a mixed opinion of newspapers. At times, when they challenged him, he thought of them as hot beds of calumny and sedition, a liar's temple. But in a more even-tempered moment, he said:

... the basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers & be capable of reading them.

*Extract from a letter from Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington  
Paris, January 16, 1787 [9]*

The major problem is how to monetize digital media. It is not unique to newspapers and their evolving digital descendants. No one has mastered it, except for a few national brands mentioned earlier. One of the problems with national brands mastering the new media environment is that all news has become national news as local news' inability to find a functioning economic model squeezes out or reduces local news coverage. The net effect is that all local elections and issues are not looked at locally, but as reflections of national issues, which is yet another topic for a future **Book Note**.

Regarding newspapers' gatekeeper and watchdog functions, a number of new media concepts are being explored and put into practice. Perhaps most notably the Spotlight concept, in which existing local media outlets unite in regional consortia to provide in-depth, professional coverage of local and regional news. Spotlight PA is a joint venture of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *PennLive/The Patriot-News*, and *WITF Public Media*. These are big players along Pennsylvania's southern border. [10] Spotlight PA can be found here [Spotlight PA: Pennsylvania news and investigations](#) There are different versions of the Spotlight concept in other regions, including Maine and West Virginia. More humble is *The Quoddy Tides*, which bills itself as "The Most Easterly Newspaper in the US" from Quoddy, Maine. It can be found at [Quoddy Tides](#).

Others are exploring not-for-profit newspapers modeled after the public media concept, including REVEAL, The Marshall Project, The Frontier, et. al. [11] In

fact, there is an Institute for Nonprofit News – it can be found here [Home | Institute for Nonprofit News - Institute for Nonprofit News \(inn.org\)](#) Conte doesn't talk much about this phenomena in his book or at his blog site, which can be found at [On Media columnist \(nextpittsburgh.com\)](#). I think nonprofit journalism is an interesting concept, but I also know from personal experience as a board member, donor, and participant in public media how challenging funding can be.

There are also nationwide efforts to better resource and staff newsrooms. [Report for America](#) – an analogue of sorts to Teach for America – is a service program that solicits applications from emerging journalists seeking to report and works to help place them in newsrooms in need throughout the country, covering a portion of their salary matched by the local hosting outlet.

Conte's solution is for citizens posting to Facebook, their own websites, the proliferating digital community bulletin boards like Nextdoor and other sites to learn the techniques of professional journalists and to exercise discretion in the news sites they visit. The latter strikes me as an attainable goal; the former, nice but not likely.

I don't pretend to have a solution or even an idea of where a solution might evolve, but when I talk with aspiring leaders one of my favorite quotes is from Malcolm Forbes. I lived it as a mantra during the many years I led organizations. Forbes said, "There is no such thing as a problem; there is only an opportunity in disguise." My question to myself and to those more media savvy than me, what is that opportunity?

Its outlines, I think, are for someone to create an aggregation site that mimics the town square, the village commons persona of a newspaper. Perhaps not in appearance, for yet another challenge is how to create a graphically compelling "face" for this new entity that signals "news" of all types but doesn't simply mimic an old-time newspaper's front page; but then again, why not? In any event, recognizing copyright issues, etc., my notion is an aggregator somewhat like Reddit, but more tightly focused and more overtly "editorial" in its manner (the gatekeeper and the watchdog) that gathers all the information any member of a local community might find necessary, interesting, curious, or just simply fun and packages it along with genuine reporting. I'd give it away free, but then charge advertisers for access to the eyeballs I hope to gather. Then I'd use the funds I garner to hire trained journalists to do the "watch dog" function. I know, this sounds like a newspaper. There are digital newspapers, but they have so far failed to launch at scale.

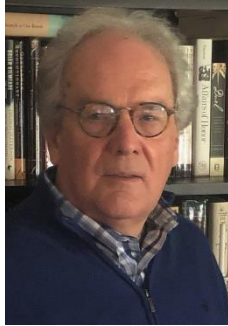
Why?

The answer to that is the opportunity.



Not a very satisfying conclusion, I grant you. But the issue is real. The future of our society, not to be too melodramatic, depends upon it. I think the solution has to be local, for any national solution will only be an expansion of what is already happening – *USA Today Lite*.

I hate committees, as a general rule, but maybe this merits a community conversation. It seems like an excellent topic for a Jefferson roundtable.



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“*Death of the Daily News cover*” from **University of Pittsburgh Press** available at [Death of the Daily News - University of Pittsburgh Press \(upittpress.org\)](#) accessed March 22, 2023.

### End Notes

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8. Quoted in Conte, **cited above**, p. 25.

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