

"DEATH OF THE DAILY NEWS"

When the presses stop: The search for a new newsroom model

By Chloe Forbes
July 2025

Editor's note: Following is the second of a three-part series based on the book "Death of the Daily News" by Andrew Conte and examines the issues incurred from the fallout of local newspapers. These pieces afford an in-depth look at topics covered in the book in a way that's applicable to all communities. Read the first installment [here](#).

Democracy doesn't work without journalism, and journalism doesn't work without a plan. With traditional newsrooms dwindling, new models are stepping in to answer the question: Who tells the story when the presses stop?

Print-based media outlets, such as the New York Times or Wall Street Journal, can use affluent influence, fun word games, podcasts, and recipes to continue to fuel their robust operations, but local newspapers don't have that luxury. From 2005 to 2024, the nation lost one-third of its local newspapers — a historic source of credible and critical news and information in many small and mid-sized communities. [1] With a pandemic, an uprising of civil unrest, and dramatic changes in the economy, more people are relying on the news to learn how major changes impact them on a local level. Simultaneously, they're turning to social media for that information — a historic source of misinformation. [2]

Areas left without news coverage are known as "news deserts." They lack access to daily or nondaily local news. In the book, "Death of the Daily News," author Andrew Conte addresses news deserts and how people are cobbling together efforts to rethink the traditional newsroom. In it, he talks about two possible paths that the news industry and news organizations could take — more on that later.

To understand the crossroads newspapers are at now, it's crucial to understand their history. Traditionally, newspapers have relied on advertising revenue and subscribers. The digital age advent changed the inner workings of newsrooms as people turned their attention to online sources and money followed. [3] After 200 years, the once exclusive sources of news floundered for the attention of

readers as the market became saturated, and advertisers had myriad new avenues to reach potential customers.

Newsrooms tried to keep pace, or catch up, launching websites to feature stories found in print. But with readers accessing content elsewhere for free, newspapers by and large struggled to have readers see the value in paying for content online given the growing number of places they could get it for free. For a growing number of consumers, the idea that someone worked hours gathering information, talking to sources, fact-checking, and compiling that information in a digestible way became an inconvenience they weren't willing to financially climb the payroll to see.

Drying up revenue streams have led to rounds of cost-cutting, leaving the remaining newsrooms shells of their former selves. In Erie, for instance, the Erie Times-News, a once locally-owned and on-site printed newspaper, is today printed in Ohio and is owned by Gannett, the American mass media holding company that publishes USA Today. The Times-News used to be a well-oiled machine with bureau offices around Erie County and nearby Meadville in Crawford County to its south. Now, it has only a handful of news reporters.

Northern University's Medill School of Journalism closely follows the industry, and its 2024 report found that more than half the nation's counties have little to no local news. As a result, 55 million people have become residents of a news desert in the past year. [4] Of the fewer than 5,600 newspapers that remain, about 80% are weeklies instead of dailies, and the number of newspaper mergers and acquisitions skyrocketed by 43%. Gannett is a leader of those mergers, owning 310 newspapers in 2024. [5] Mergers, however, can cause less concentrated local coverage and reduced media diversity.

Local journalism is essential to the well-being of a community, as written in the first installation of this series [here](#). To recap: The fall of print dominance and rise of digital fragmentation have left vast areas of the country without reliable coverage, fraying the civic fabric that binds communities together. Communities depend on trustworthy information to function: to vote, to engage, and to hold power accountable. Without it, misinformation fills the void, democratic participation erodes, and people become strangers to one another.

But the traditional news model may no longer be the antidote. In "Death of the Daily News," Conte said focusing on reviving an old model is less than transformative: "A major problem for journalists is thus that it tries to tackle the technological and social transformations of today with the logic of yesterday." [6]

Instead, he lays out two options for news organizations:

1. Focus on the needs and deficits that cause residents' reliance on other sources for news
2. Search for assets that have the potential to empower citizens to start solving their own problems [7]

Conte himself is a proponent of a collaborative model, heading the Pittsburgh Media Partnership's teaching newsroom. The newsroom works with Point Park University's Center for Media Innovation to train aspiring journalists and supply low-staffed newsrooms in southern Pennsylvania with that reporting. It is the education arm of the Pittsburgh Media Partnership, a group of 33 news outlets

that pools articles and resources to create content applicable to newspapers across 10 counties of southwestern Pennsylvania. It places news reporters and interns on under-covered beats focused on government accountability and enterprise reporting. On July 22, the Heinz Endowment awarded \$550,000 to the teaching newsroom to support the effort and train the next generation of journalists. In total, it has raised \$1.9 million since January 2024.

Another type of newsroom emerging is the nonprofit newsroom. In Pennsylvania, Spotlight PA is a prime example of a nonprofit newsroom putting dollars in to make sense of what's happening. Spotlight PA is an investigative journalism resource that was founded in response to the decline of corporate-owned, for-profit media in the state. Spotlight PA partners with local newspapers to provide investigative content that small and mid-sized newspapers no longer have the resources for. [8]

But relying on philanthropy comes with its own risks though. Critics have argued that a few wealthy donors could skew news coverage or editorial priorities, even if unintentionally. And nonprofit newsrooms can also find themselves vulnerable to sudden gaps at the end of funding cycles. So far, there seems to be no magic bullet to fill the revenue stream that advertising once created.

One initiative, known as Press Forward, provides grants specifically to support newsrooms and other organizations in their efforts to create sustainable news organizations. It provides a platform for individual funders to give directly to local news initiatives or specific issue areas such as local health reporting or climate change. It also invests in collaborations that strengthen the local news ecosystem in general. Press Forward understands key components of what a sustainable “new” newsroom must include. While looking at new models, news organizations must consider a funding model that supports news in every corner of the country, since historically, impoverished and minority communities have not always had a voice at the table. [9] For those areas like Erie or Meadville, which don't have a myriad of privately-owned news publications to share with, a universal funding model or supportive legislation would be most beneficial.

Other experiments include models like the City Bureau in Chicago, which trains citizens in the basics of reporting so they can cover public meetings. It builds what it calls participatory democracy by directly meeting people's informational needs and creating dialogue in the community. [10] In Texas, The Texas Tribune is a news site that offers in-depth explanation and coverage on issues impacting the community and hosts open-to-the-public events. The events —held at various community centers, college campuses, and event spaces — feature public officials, policy experts, and others to talk about the work they're doing and issues in the area. [11] Ethnic media outlets such as the El Timpano in Oakland or Black Voice News in California provide hyperlocal coverage for marginalized communities historically ignored by mainstream outlets. A lesser-known type of newsroom that has seen trial and error uses a public-funded model in which the community pays a tax that goes toward local reporting.

Other related options to that include tax credits, grant funding, and research allocations. In New York, beginning this year, print and broadcast newsrooms can receive a 50% refundable tax credit for the first \$50,000 of an employee's salary. [12] Other tax incentive policy proposals for strengthening local news are pending or active in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Washington. Washington, D.C., New Jersey, Illinois, and

California have introduced grant programs, while California has also introduced state funding for journalism fellowships, and Oregon is looking to enact state funding for the Agora Journalism Center. Pennsylvania does not have legislature to support local journalism, despite the fact that there are only 2.3 news outlets per 100,000 people. [13]

But, as “Death of The Daily News” states, it is a moment to mourn the loss of the old news industry, but more importantly, it’s a time to double down on building a future plan – including but not limited to philanthropy, public policy, education, and innovation. Amid the rise of mis- and disinformation, there has never been a more important time to invest in journalism, thus investing in democracy itself.

The next, and final, installation of the series will address how the public plays a part in that future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe Forbes is an award-winning local journalist with a bachelor’s degree in journalism



communications who has written for numerous newspapers and magazines in Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio. She is currently a news editor and reporter at The Meadville Tribune, a contributing writer for the Erie Reader, and a copy editor at the Jefferson Educational Society.

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