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"DEATH OF THE DAILY NEWS"

Read between the lines: How local journalism addresses loneliness and polarization

By Chloe Forbes
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Editor's note: Following is the first 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.

We work from home, we interact online as opposed to in-person, and we even relocate more. In a seemingly connected world, there seems to be little connection and stability for an increasing number of Americans. In 2023, then-U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared an epidemic of loneliness. He said about one in two adults in America report experiencing loneliness, putting them at a greater risk for various health issues as he equated the impact of social disconnection to that of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.^[i]

The idea that people make connections with each other is what author Andrew Conte notes is "social capital." Social capital is widely known as the network of relationships that people make and the value they derive from those connections. Conte asserted that the more involved people are in their social and community networks, i.e. as they build social capital, the more they feel a sense of trust and belonging.^[ii] To fight isolation and divisiveness, people must trust each other and feel they are valued and play a role in the community. Conte's book "Death of the Daily News" examines the fallout from the death of a daily local newspaper and its impacts on McKeesport, a suburb outside Pittsburgh. He found that when local newspapers die, residents lose touch with one another and become less engaged

in their communities, creating a sense of isolation. As the surge of digital media and distrust causes local newspapers to shutter their doors across the nation, residents turn their attention away from their communities and opt to watch state and federal politics and lose touch with the daily goings-on of the neighborhood.

In his book, Conte references political scientist Robert Putnam, who at the turn of the 21st century, concluded that people who read a local newspaper are more likely to be involved with their communities.^[iii] Putnam, well known for his work on social capital, found in his research that people who have trust in their fellow citizens — a reported result of reading local news — volunteer more, contribute more to charity, participate in politics and community organizations, serve more readily on juries, give blood more frequently, comply fully with their tax obligation, are more tolerant of minority views, and display other forms of civic virtue. In building that social capital, Putnam found that newspapers are crucial.

In a world plagued with polarization and loneliness, journalism may be an underutilized weapon. As the old expression says, the pen is mightier than the sword. As newspaper circulation dwindles, so does the sense of belonging and connection in small communities. The right to a free press is not only to keep those in power accountable, but to create an identity that is uniquely American. When French social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he detected an aspect of American life that separated it from European monarchies. He equated the strength of that democracy with the proliferation of newspapers.^[iv] Without widespread local newspaper coverage, that bedrock of democracy and American identity is growingly unstable, creating feelings of anxiety.

The loneliness epidemic faced a major trigger in 2024 in the presidential election as the American Psychological Association found that Americans' greatest stressor is politics.^[v] It reported more than seven in 10 adults reported the future of the nation as a significant source of stress in their lives. Topics like the spread of false news and social divisiveness were high-ranking concerns alongside housing costs and mass shootings. That lack of stability and trust is something that local journalism addresses, according to a report released in September 2024 by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security. Led by Drs. Elise Silva and Lara Putnam, the study conducted in the Pittsburgh area aimed to identify points of vulnerability and strength in the public's ability to navigate the news. Silva and Lara Putnam — daughter of Robert Putnam — found that although few people spend time daily reading print news materials, most people are likely to believe local news as opposed to social media or national TV news. The study was conducted via a survey administered by email to residents of Allegheny County and the surrounding area. Out of the 1,385 respondents, local news outlets were named as trusted sources for information on a variety of issues from health to politics, which gives journalists a unique opportunity to counteract false information and reinforce the credibility of the journalistic process.^[vi]

That credibility has subsided as consolidation continues in the news industry and small papers close, placing a broader focus on state and federal politics. A 2021 study in the Newspaper Research Journal paired election data with newspaper circulation from 8,000 local papers across the country to see how declining newspapers affect local elections. Newspapers provide information about races, and informed voters are more likely to vote. Without those local news outlets to provide in-depth local coverage, voters increasingly leave local parts of ballots blank or do not vote at all.

Immersed in cable news, people often see elections through a national lens, a highly polarized environment, which impacts their perspective of politics and drives them to focus on high-profile races like the presidency.^[vii] Between 2004 and 2019, nearly 2,100 of the country's 8,900 local newspapers closed their doors, and weekday paper circulation fell by over 54 million readers.^[viii] In places where local newspapers remain, researchers found that even as editors cut various areas of coverage, local political and governmental coverage was maintained.^[ix] This coverage remains essential despite the spread of social media.

Even though social media enables candidate to create their own content and distribute it online, giving them a chance to circulate information and possibly win, the report in the Newspaper Research Journal found that it's not what's occurring in practice. Without a local news presence, voters leave a large portion of their ballot blank, suggesting that user-generated — even candidate-generated — media are not enough to overcome informational deficits.”^[x] The report concludes by stating that concerns about robust democracy align with concerns about a declining local press and that efforts aimed at reinvigorating the local press will spill over into efforts to re-engage communities and local.^[xi]

To remedy the social divisiveness that Americans feel, much in part due to the spread of social media and the polarization of federal politics, local newspapers are a powerful yet underutilized tool. They create an identity that makes people feel a sense of belonging and purpose — local newspapers tell the stories of a municipality in a way that residents may not otherwise be able to decipher themselves. In return, those residents readily act proactively, responsibly, and democratically in addressing issues that affect society. A community of local news readers and supporters can increase a community's capacity to overcome adversity and maintain its long-term strength and integrity.

Local journalism not only informs but unites. It builds the social capital that sustains healthy, resilient communities and reinforces the democratic values that define us. As that resource dissolves, the solution lies not only with policymakers or philanthropists but with everyday citizens. We can subscribe to local newspapers, donate to nonprofit newsrooms, attend town halls, share credible reporting, and teach media literacy. Supporting local news isn't just about staying

informed — it's about strengthening the fabric of our communities. The stories of our neighborhoods matter. If we want to preserve them, we must choose to invest in the people who tell them.

This series will continue next month, addressing how newsrooms are changing to adapt to the current climate and the downfall of traditional news models.

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