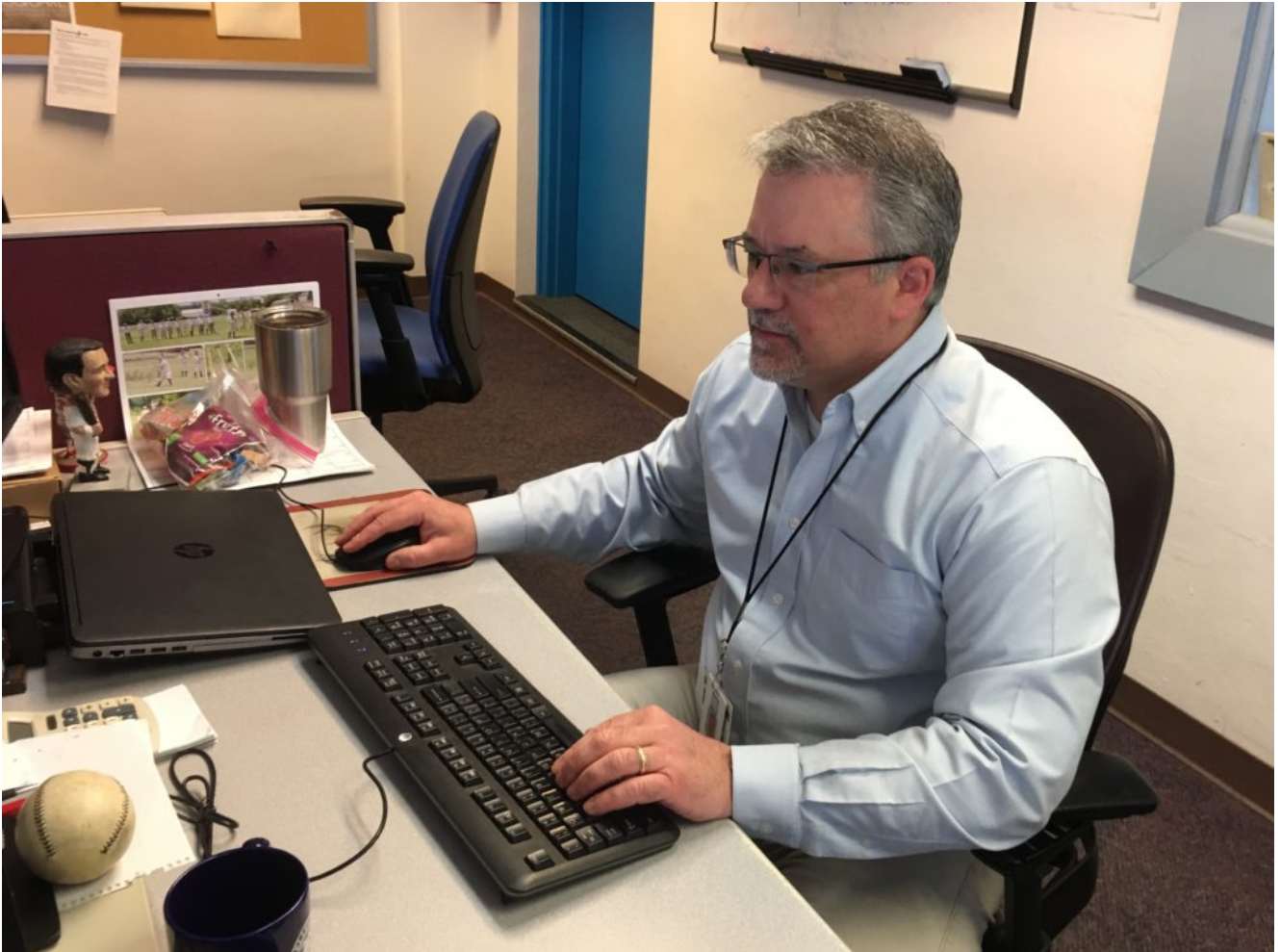


# **Death of print doesn't have to mean death of local journalism; Reflection on donuts and sports agate after Sunday Mass**

I grew up in a two-newspaper home in Belleville, Illinois, and have few fonder memories than Sunday mornings after Mass with a dozen glazed from Mallo's Bakery and multiple pages of beautiful sports agate, jam packed with box scores and standings. Those and countless other mornings at the kitchen table with ink-stained fingers inspired what is now closing in on a 30-year run in this rapidly-changing medium we used to call newspaper publishing.



Todd Eschman is an editor at the Belleville News-Democrat, where he's worked since 1998. (Photo by Jason Koch)

But the printed *Belleville News-Democrat*, which I now serve as an editor, is down to two sections and the old *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* has been closed for decades. So when I field a call from a frustrated reader, who may have a half-century of loyalty invested in the *Belleville News-Democrat*, I do my best to remember that the upheaval in our industry has upset their own morning rituals.

As a recent Associated Press report so succinctly noted, town by town, local newspapers are disappearing. Citing the Pew Research Center, the AP reported that U.S. newspaper circulation has declined every year for the entire time I've been in the business. According to Pew, the number of newsroom employees fell 45 percent between 2004 and 2017.

My own paper is still here with a streamlined crew that's

nonetheless dedicated to winning the hearts and minds of those who have resisted our digital efforts.

The AP story offers a grim picture. The caption under an accompanying video reads: “Local journalism is dying in plain sight.” The story tries to resolve whether those deaths are happening because media companies no longer want to invest in a business with slim or nonexistent profit margins or whether the readers themselves have gone away. “All newspaper owners face a brutal reality that calls into question whether it’s an economically sustainable model anymore unless, like the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post*, the boss is the world’s richest man,” the AP authors noted. “That’s especially true in smaller communities.”

From my perspective, print is simply no longer a sustainable business model, at least not for the average daily. The web stole our classifieds long ago. Real Estate and auto dealerships have discovered greater ROI in maintaining their own searchable sites. Amazon Prime has put many of our best insert customers into bankruptcy or out of business altogether. We all know the challenges.

But the great flaw in all this hand wringing – even among industry colleagues – is the idea that local journalism has to die with print. It does not. Younger journalists are still entering the profession even if their own reading habits are different from when I first started in journalism. They believe in the future. Why shouldn’t we?

Print is nothing more than a mode of delivery, and the industry has to be more aggressive in changing the mindset of its readers. There’s a misperception among many local publishers that older readers prefer print. That may not entirely be true. A [2017 Pew study](#) found that more older Americans are getting their news from social media sites than ever before. More than half (55 percent) of Americans age 50 and older reported getting their news from social media sites

in 2017, a 10 percent jump from the year before. Nearly 80 percent of younger readers reported getting their news from social media sites.

Every single day, we field reader complaints about declining coverage, then bristle at the suggestion that many of those things can be found at our website. Others grouse at the audacity of paid, web-only subscriptions, without understanding the difference between the original, local journalism organizations like ours provide and the aggregated stories peddled by our free competitors.

Why should they know the difference if we don't tell them?

Instead, those of us who have survived the deep cuts, watch as our newsrooms are reduced to comparative ghost towns of what they once were.

The bottom line here is this: Our communities need to decide what it is they really value. Is it the daily walk to the end of their driveway and ink-stained fingers on a Sunday morning? Or the information that drives democracy at all levels of government?

If they value local journalism, they'll support us by investing in a tablet (I've argued to my bosses for years that giving away a \$55 Kindle Fire away with a paid digital-only subscription would be cheaper than print and delivery), taking out a digital-only subscription, and share-share-sharing articles they find vital or entertaining with their friends on social media.

Finally, if it's the ink-stained fingers that they want, then the values they profess aren't worth the paper they used to be printed on.

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