

Nonprofit news outlets bolster statehouse coverage across the country, including in Illinois

Full time statehouse reporters are now a luxury for many news organizations.

Brenden Moore, who reports on state politics and government for Lee Enterprises, said It's impossible to talk about the decline of full time statehouse reporters without talking about the decline of the newspaper industry as a whole.

“If you're struggling to cover city council, school board, and cops in courts in your own community then the statehouse beat takes a back seat,” Moore said. “It's not even really a thought. Why would you spend resources to have somebody in Springfield, [Illinois] when you need them covering your community?”



(Photo by Randy von Liski via Flickr)

While there has been a decline in full time statehouse reporting roles, nonprofit journalism organizations have

provided a heightened amount of part time roles for the beat.

“Nonprofit organizations have come into statehouse reporting with a lot of force,” said Katerina Eva Matsa, associate director of Pew Research and co-author of a recent Pew study on statehouse reporting. “The numbers have almost quadrupled since 2014.”

Full time and part time nonprofit reporters constitute 20% of the statehouse corps. There are 353 statehouse reporters who work for nonprofits, up from 92 in 2014. This phenomenon largely has to do with the decline of the newspaper industry, which significantly spiked between 2014 and 2022. However, newspapers still account for the largest portion of statehouse reporters nationally – making up 25% of the statehouse corps.

Last month, the Pew Research Center published a [study](#) that found the total number of U.S. statehouse reporters has increased by 11% since 2014, which was [the last time the study was conducted](#).

Although, within that number, there are significantly fewer full time reporters. Pew identified 1,761 statehouse reporters in their most recent study with just under half (48%) being full time. The study defined full time reporters as those who “are assigned to the state’s capitol building to cover the news there on a full-time basis – either year-round or during the legislative session – reporting on everything from legislative activity to the governor’s office to individual state agencies.”

The study further highlights how being “fully devoted to this coverage often provides the greatest opportunity to engage with the statehouse and produce stories that go beyond the basic contours of daily news.”

Jason Piscia, the director of the Public Affairs Reporting Program at University of Illinois Springfield, gathered industry colleagues to discuss these findings in a Zoom panel

titled, *The State of Statehouse Reporting*, on May 4. Among these colleagues were Katerina Eva Matsa, associate director of Pew Research and co-author of the study, Brenden Moore, state politics and government reporter for Lee Enterprises, Jerry Nowicki, statehouse bureau chief for Capitol News Illinois and Hannah Meisel, the state government and politics editor for NPR Illinois.

“I’m always very excited and thankful when our research gets into these types of conversations,” Matsa said. “It’s important to think about Americans and how they get their news and how it affects their lives. What happens on the state and local level is important for helping Americans make decisions that actually have an effect on their daily lives. That was our goal and our purpose and we are going to continue looking at local news [through our research].”

With a limited number of full time statehouse reporters on a national scale, which has been generated by significant layoffs in the newspaper industry, there are no longer sufficient amounts of veteran journalists who young reporters can look up to for guidance when it comes to the ins and outs of the beat.

“We have lost so much institutional knowledge,” said Hannah Meisel, the state government and politics editor for NPR Illinois. “Along with institutional knowledge, we’ve also lost a lot of folks to look up to and model our journalism and our approach to statehouse reporting. If you don’t have model journalists and model editors with institutional knowledge then the guardrails are off.”

On top of this loss of institutional knowledge in statehouse reporting, there has been a loss of access to state politicians due to COVID-19. Throughout the study’s in-depth interviews with reporters and academics, Eva Matsa said COVID-19 flooded all of the conversations.

Jerry Nowicki, the statehouse bureau chief for Capitol News Illinois, said there's always something to learn being in-person on session days, a form of engagement that has been limited by COVID-19.

"In terms of the access at the Capitol, it's absolutely gotten worse since COVID-19," Nowicki said. "There's a lot of locked doors in the senate. Sometimes the elevators are off. You can't even get up to the areas where lawmakers mingle and where you might learn something that you won't print but it will help inform the type of stories that you print."

Meisel agreed and said this lack of access prevents reporters from getting to the meat of legislation in their stories and prevents them from providing substantive information.

"There's an old cliché that says Statehouses are the laboratories of democracies," Meisel said. "If we don't have adequate coverage of that then we have a government that is unaccountable."

Editor's Note: GJR has published numerous stories about statehouse reporting, along with the importance of small organizations' roles to provide coverage. In [this story](#), GJR detailed the nonprofit, Capitol News Illinois, an initiative of the Illinois Press Foundation. The organization provides free statehouse coverage to its members with full time staff members at the bureau.

Nick Karpinski is a writer and M.A. student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he studies topics surrounding media ecology and expanded media environments.