

New democracy editor position at Associated Press should be model for all newsrooms

By Jackie Spinner

The Associated Press [recently announced](#) that it was creating a new position for a “democracy editor.” It tapped a long-time AP veteran and state government editor for the position. When Tom Verdin, who is in Sacramento, steps into the new role, he will oversee coverage of stories about voting rights and election processes.

In making the decision, AP’s executive editor Julie Pace acknowledged that such topics were often covered by political and government journalists. “The challenge that a lot of news organizations are facing when it comes to covering democracy is that, yes, this is of course a national issue, a macro issue, but it’s playing out all across the country in very local ways,” Pace told CNN.

She pointed, in particular, to a standoff in a New Mexico over certifying local election results. One of the key figures in that dispute was a county commissioner who was just sentenced for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol.

AP’s move is a good one and should be replicated in every newsroom in America, including the smallest ones.

Far too many of our readers, as evidenced by the support the Jan. 6 insurrectionists still have, do not seem to understand how government works and why threats to it undermine the core of our democratic principles.

Half of Americans (49%) said it was accurate to say that arresting those who entered the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 to

disrupt the certification of the presidential election violated the Constitution because they were exercising their constitutional right to petition the government for redress of grievances. An equal number (49%) said the statement was inaccurate, and arresting those who entered the capitol did not violate the Constitution, according to [the 2021 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey](#).

It certainly doesn't help when politicians themselves spread misinformation about how government works. Or when partisanship so taints the conversation that it becomes difficult to hear each other. That misinformation then leads to distrust.

A [late 2021 poll](#) by Pew Research found that just a quarter of Americans had faith in their government, a striking and near historic low.

We need a new approach.

In addition to covering local school boards and local elections, we owe it to our readers, and to ourselves as watchdogs of our democratic institutions, to explain better how the system works. In fact, we can and should do a better job of explaining to our readers what our role is in holding these institutions and processes accountable.

This doesn't have to cost us money to add new staff to our newsrooms. We can follow the lead of the City Bureau in Chicago to deputize our readers to help us cover local government.

The Documenters Network has trained more than 1,600 people across four cities to attend and annotate government meetings. Part of the training involves teaching people how to document objectively, without a partisan agenda.

With their mobile devices, our readers can help live stream public meetings, provide multimedia reports and take notes. It

will give them a bigger stake and provide us with partners in holding government accountable.

In Detroit, a network participant reported recently from the Board of Water Commissioners on an affordability plan. Another provided coverage of a City Council meeting where a new tax abatement was debated. In Cleveland, a citizen tweeted from a school board meeting in which members unanimously approved a ban on guns in schools.

With a slight reframing of our coverage and with new involvement from our civic-minded readers, we don't have to wait for the national and bigger media outlets to find us when controversy erupts, as it did in New Mexico.

We need more "here is how it works" features, community forums, invitations to our readers, transparency.

We do not yet have the trust of the public back after the battering we took under the former president. One way we can rebuild that trust is by inviting people into the process, by taking away the mystery of how reporters do their jobs, how we cover government, how we watch.

Because the fact is that we are watching. We've always been watching.

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