

# 'We are literally all in this together'

*Gateway talked to industry professionals and press associations in eight Midwestern states, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. This story originally appeared in our spring 2021 issue. The following are some of the dispatches from these states.*

## **Missouri**

Mark Maassen takes umbrage with the University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media labeling two counties in Missouri – Schuyler County, along the northern border, and Perry County, southeast of St. Louis – as news deserts on its website titled “The Expanding News Desert.”

“It’s flat wrong,” said Maassen, the executive editor of the Missouri Press Association. “I’ve told them in your map, don’t include Missouri. I’m proud to say Missouri has 114 counties, and we have a newspaper in every one of them. Those communities are informed. That county courthouse is being covered.”

Maassen provided a comprehensive list of changes to newspapers in the “Show-Me State” in 2020. It includes seven closures and seven newspapers that have merged with others.

He’s quick to point out that three weeklies, the Maries County Advocate in Vienna, the South Cass Tribune in Harrisonville, and the Phelps County Focus in Rolla, all became MPA members and were finally able to run legals – a huge piece of newspapers’ revenue – after three years of hanging with it.

“That’s a huge devotion,” Maassen said.

It bears mentioning that their memberships were approved in

June, in the thick of the pandemic.

“Yes, we’ve lost some papers, but we’ve also seen three new papers open,” he said. “That says a lot.”

Perhaps his favorite storyline of 2020 played out at the Webster-Kirkwood Times.

“That’s a success story if there was one,” Maassen said.

On March 27, the Times shut down its print publication and went online-only. The public backlash was swift, and it was considerable.

“No matter how much we did online, it did not seem to matter,” said Jaime Mowers, who was then a reporter. “Most of it just went into the ether, and all we kept hearing was when are you coming back in print? People were just directly emailing us and sending us donations to help keep us going and bridge the gap.”

Randy Drilingas, the newspaper’s creative director, said people who stop him in public.

“If I was at Schnucks, somebody would say something,” he said. “When are you going to start printing again?”

Maassen can confirm those reports. He’s got family in the coverage area.

“They were completely taken aback when the paper stopped there,” he said. “They’d always gotten their news from The Times.”

Drilingas said in June, employees got a letter from the newspaper’s owner Dwight Bitikofer stating he was going to sell the paper.

Mowers, Drilingas, Kent Tentschert, who works in classifieds, and his brother, Eric Tentschert, immediately started

discussing buying the paper.

"It's the dream team, really, with how we complement each other," Mowers said.

Mowers and Drilingas said the discussions were often tense and full of unknowns, but they always came away optimistic that they could pull it off.

The sale was finalized Sept. 8, and printing resumed with the Sept. 25 issue. On the cover, below the all-caps headline "BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND!" are Mowers, Drilingas and Kent Tenschert, standing in the middle of the road for a reason.

"We don't want to be known as a liberal or conservative paper," Drilingas said. "We want to be about the facts."

Maassen said not only is the paper back, but it also appears to have not skipped a beat.

"It looks healthy," he said. "There's support not just from the readers, but from advertisers."

Mowers is now the paper's editor, and she remains its biggest cheerleader, having worked a couple of other gigs before achieving her goal of joining her hometown paper about 10 years ago.

"As soon as I got into journalism, and I knew this was what I wanted to do, I definitely wanted to work my way back here to the Times," she said. "I never dreamed I'd be an owner, so that's pretty awesome."

Her energy is infectious, but can be a bit intense for the subdued Drilingas.

"I'll come in Monday morning, and I'll be looking for Randy, and he's really just hiding from me," Mowers said, laughing. "Randy has like three offices now."

“Her energy and her passion for local journalism is invaluable,” said Drilingas, who joined the paper 20 years ago as a graphic designer and now serves as publisher. “It’s what every company needs. You need super-energetic people like Jaime.”

Mowers visibly bristles when she hears the phrase “print is dead.”

“Newspapers are part of the very fabric of the community,” she said. “We are literally all in this together. We can’t survive without the support of local businesses and vice versa. We’re providing a service they can’t get anywhere else. So the print is dead talk? That is not for us. We don’t believe print is dead, or we wouldn’t be doing this.”



Old newspaper boxes stand in rows in Georgetown, Illinois. (Photo by Darius Norvilas via Flickr)

## **Kansas and Wisconsin**

To hell with convention. That's the credo of two newspaper men on opposite ends of their careers.

Pat Wood owns Multi Media Channels, which features two dozen publications that include weekly newspapers, magazines and shoppers in central and northeastern Wisconsin. The company also has Nicolet Coffee in its portfolio.

And in another corner of the Midwest, Joey Young, the 35-year-old president of the Kansas Press Association, owns plucky Kansas Publishing Ventures, which is made up of four weeklies. He's made some pretty aggressive plays smack dab in the heart of conservative America.

The two have never set foot in the same room, yet upon hearing that Wood established his own online coffee company that he advertises throughout his publications, and that Multi Media Channels made a killing selling Taste of Wisconsin sausage and cheese packs over the holidays, Young laughed with both disbelief and appreciation.

"For some people, if you're working for GateHouse, the industry is dead," Young said. "You could be gone tomorrow. But there are the Pat Woods of this world, people who are trying to do things a new way and having success."

"You have no marketing costs," Wood said of the coffee and gift packs. "We're never going to go up four pages to add a Nicolet ad in the paper. But if there's extra space, we're going to add it in."

"That's absolutely genius," Young said.

Wood and his team worked to make sure they got packaging right, and that items in the packs – cheese curds, for instance – arrived as fresh as possible.

"We've tested our packaging like the Japanese," Wood said.

“We’ve buried them in our backyard.”

Following the market closely, Wood recently launched a rack-and-stack magazine, Healthy Living and Wellness.

“It’s a big market, especially in the Green Bay and Fox Valley area,” Wood said. “We’re going against the grain. Everyone else is shutting down, and we’re launching a new magazine.”

Since 2004, Wisconsin residents have lost more than one-third of their newspapers, from 274 down to fewer than 200.

In 2020 alone, at least 30 papers in the Badger State made significant changes, including 16 being either sold or merged with other papers.

Wood is well-versed in the business model that organizations clung to, having grown up around newspapers. His late father, Frank Wood, started with a weekly newspaper after serving as a war correspondent during World War II.

“When he came home, he had ink in his veins, not blood in his veins,” Wood said. “Dad was the real believer in the whole thing. He was a giant in the industry.”

So much so that, after amassing 37 publications he eventually sold to Gannett after a long battle, Richard McCord wrote a book about Frank Wood, titled “The Chain Gang.”

His boy has bounced around a bit, and established Multi Media Channels in 2012, shortly after his dad died in 2011.

Wood has learned when to not only add publications, but when to subtract them. For instance, when the Town of Merrill voted to stop putting legals and classified in Wood’s weekly newspaper, he cut and ran.

“They were shocked,” he said. “Well, if the community doesn’t want it and isn’t going to support a publication that’s keeping it vibrant, we’re not going to subsidize an

unappreciative community.”

While Wood must make sound business decisions, he doesn't want there to be a news void.

“Our company has a noble purpose to provide local news and ad content, mom and pops and such, to these small- and medium-sized communities that big media has forgotten, and that time will forget if we're not there,” he said. “It's agonizing when we look at all the numbers and see a community isn't going to support you.”

One innovation he was forced into was transitioning from traditional newspaper carriers to the United States Postal Service when the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development took up the legal fight, claiming Wood's 400 independent contractors should be regular employees. Making that transition would have increased Wood's costs by 26 percent, he said.

“I couldn't very well put that on subscribers' backs,” he said.

The state job training office eventually walked back its claim – after Wood had transitioned all his publications to USPS delivery.

“The horses were out of the barn at that point,” he said. “In one fell swoop, we shifted like \$2 million out of Wisconsinites' hands into the government's hands.”

In Kansas, the impact of 2020 was gentler compared to that in Wisconsin, with two of the state's 175 or so newspapers closing and three merging with others, according to Emily Bradbury, executive director of the Kansas Press Association. Just one county, Elk County, which is southeast of Harvey County, where Young's papers are, is a true news desert with no newspapers.

One of those consolidations? In March 2020, Young and his team merged Newton Now, the Harvest County Independent and The Hesston Record into countywide Harvey County Now.

Young said from the conventional standpoint of reporting all the news his readers need, his staff is unmatched.

“I think we’ve got the best team of reporters in the state,” he said. “Give me the Wichita Eagle. Give me any of them. I already think we’re the best at the newspaper stuff. We’re already really good at that. So now, at this point, let’s find cool, fun stuff that helps with the rest of it – stuff that solves problems.”

Many of those solutions are hatched during a weekly 3 p.m. gathering of the minds in the organizations. A sort of happy hour where employees share ideas, discuss what recent initiatives have and haven’t worked, and sample craft beer.

It only makes sense that one brainchild hatched from one of those meetings about 4 years ago was the Blues, Brews and BBQ concert which, in Newton, a town of about 15,000, drew about 3,500 attendees in 2019.

“Wichita is where you go on the weekends, and we kind of lamented the fact that we have two terrible bars,” said Young. “So we decided, for one day, let’s just make that not true. In our first year (in 2016), they got like 1,100 people to show up to a concert that didn’t exist.”

Only Kansas-brewed beer was served. In fact, Young and Bruce Behymer, the company’s marketing director, brewed their own German dunkl for the event.

Young said the event became a draw for out-of-towners, and that advertisers were overjoyed, and some began advertising in the paper.

So he made a logical conclusion.



“Newspapers should be the chambers of commerce. That would be a lot more useful for us,” he said, laughing.

When the pandemic hit and of course brought any plans of the event to a halt, Young and his team brewed up some new survival tactics.

Shortly after the first batch of stimulus checks went out, they did a mass mailing in Harvey County for 2 weeks, and sold ads for cheap.

“A bunch of people didn’t need that stimulus money,” he said. “They were supposed to use it to support local businesses. So we figured, we might as well try to get \$54 or \$25 out of that.”

Further, they did a series of stories introducing everyone who works at the paper, a sort of pulling back of the curtain that dispels any fake-news myths.

“We’re all people who live in this county with you,” he said. “We’re not fake news. We’re your neighbors.”

And he reads the paper, just like his readership.

“I sit in my recliner and read all of them every Thursday,” Young said. “I think it’s a better product. Yeah, it is cheaper to produce digital news, but is it better?”

He shudders every time he’s on a website – or his phone, for that matter – and his focus is broken up by an ad.

“When you’re on your phone, there’s alerts going off and stuff happening,” he said. “Your brain is constantly busy. The newspaper doesn’t blink at you or ding. I think the advertising is better, too. You get on the Wichita Eagle, and you’ve got dropdowns and popups, all this annoying crap. I wouldn’t want to associate myself with all this annoying crap. You’re pissing me off and making my life more difficult.”

Young knows he's shaking things up. His [blog](#) boasts the tagline "Changing the newspaper game one day at a time."

He's been relishing his role since he first walked into newspaper conventions in khaki shorts and a polo.

"You should have seen some of the looks I got," Young said. "I get it. I'm a weirdo, and I'm really young for this industry. But I know what I'm doing."

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## **Michigan**

In a year where armed protestors repeatedly swarmed the state capitol and even threatened to kidnap the governor and where civil rights unrest erupted in the streets, the Michigan Press Association took a very pragmatic, poignant focus in the way it supported its members: keep journalism alive by keeping journalists alive.

Lisa McGraw, the association's public affairs manager, said in a span of eight months, beginning with violent protests in Lansing and Grand Rapids following the murder of George Floyd, she sent out five bulletins to association members. They included basic tips on how to safely cover dangerous events, from what to bring, how to sense imminent danger, what to do and where to go when under duress.

"These were best practices on how to effectively do their jobs without, you know, getting shot at," McGraw said.

In response to reporters being threatened and attacked by extremists and protesters, being shot with rubber bullets and being zip-tied by law enforcement, she set up secure, safe zones near the dangerous sites where journalists were trying to report.

"I've never had to do this before in my life," McGraw said. "This was never anything we discussed, and now it's part of my

job description.”

She said she repeatedly got calls from journalists who not only feared for their physical safety but also were emotionally weary from having to keep up with the relentless news cycle.

“That’s what makes me want to do everything I can for them, to make their jobs easier,” McGraw said.

Making matters worse, the ranks have thinned substantially since 2004. Readers have lost nearly one-third of their Michigan newspapers since 2004, from about 300 to a shade more than 200. In 2020, 14 papers ceased publication – nine closing altogether and another five merging with others.

Peter Bhatia, editor of the Detroit Free Press, is also on the MPA board. He said whereas the Free Press and other large Gannett publications have ample safeguards in place for journalists, it’s the mid-sized and weekly newspapers that can end up unprotected in the crosshairs.

“For those of us who have greater resources or larger enterprises, we have huge volumes of resources – both guiding resources in certain situations, and physical resources,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of smaller papers in the network that aren’t going to have the access to the things that we do. It’s really important what the MPA is providing.”

The multi-Pulitzer Prize-winning editor recoiled as he watched reporter [Darcie Moran being zip-tied and flung to the ground by police](#) on June 2, during a George Floyd protest on Gratiot Avenue.

“I was watching that on the livestream when she got planted by the cop,” he said.

In the video, Moran can be seen trying to retrieve her phone and put it in her back pocket.

“My biggest thought was that I didn’t want to lose my phone,” she said. “It’s such a silly thought, but all my notes from the event were in there.”

Bhatia said communication with reporters after such events is crucial.

“It’s not as fancy as it sounds like in a military context, but we have after-action conversations,” he said. “We’re trained to run towards the fire, rather than away from it, and a lot of people still carry those instincts as part of their journalistic DNA. They are very special people and great journalists. Through all of this, whether we’re talking pandemic or protests, or election almost-violence, my very clear instructions to the staff is don’t put yourself into a place of risk. If you’re in a situation where you’re in danger, get out of it immediately.”

In that incident, Moran was taken down on the grass and suffered what she calls a “minor” ankle injury, which required physical therapy and put her in a brace.

About a month later, she was covering another protest, this time surrounded by buildings, concrete, metal fences and cars.

“That was the most scared I had been,” she said. “There was no soft landing point. The whole time I was thinking, ‘If I need to run, I won’t be able to get out of here. You think you’re fine and you’re healing well, and then you don’t know if you can sprint your way to safety.’”

“You think about that, of course, but my mind can’t be on that.”

She’d just assume not talk about her experience. She said any focus on what’s happened to her distracts from the issues she’s writing about.

“The biggest issue when we talk about journalist safety is

that we're trying to get home at the end of the day, but it's getting in the way of our reporting," she said.

Todd Heywood, a gay man living with HIV, has covered LGBTQ issues for about three decades.

In 2016, he wrote [a first-person account](#) of his closest encounter with the seething hate the gay community faces. He was a victim of a hookup crime in his own home. He was handcuffed and beaten brutally by two men, who then ransacked his home.

"I thought that was how I was going to die," Heywood said.

He survived. He acknowledges his trauma, and tries to put it to good use with empathy.

"What I experienced gave me an even deeper understanding and compassion for what survivors are going through," he said. "I carried with me that trauma. You have to find ways to acknowledge you've felt that trauma."

Heywood said he's the only person, apart from law enforcement and advocates, who's spoken with the victim in the rape case involving former Michigan State University basketball players Keith Appling and Adreian Payne.

Reporters who are able to get victims to open up to them will inevitably endure their own trauma, Heywood said.

"You are going to be traumatized by that," he said. "So how do you acknowledge that? We're not doing enough in J-school. We don't have enough conversations about this."

Heywood took a breather from reporting and chased a 9-to-5 life during a two-year stint as a spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

He missed being on the front lines and, at age 50, returned to full-time freelance reporting in November.

Heywood was getting intelligence leading up to the Jan. 17 Michigan Capitol protest that 2,000 angry protestors would show up.

“It didn’t happen, which was good,” he said.

The press association sent a bulletin leading up to the protest. Heywood was grateful to have a number he could call if things went sideways fast.

“It’s extraordinary what [the press association] has done,” Heywood said. “I don’t know how much better you could do it.”

And he’s all too well-versed in best practices. In late-January and early-February, he spent five days in the Upper Peninsula, covering extremist groups in Calumet County who were targeting mask-wearers for Michigan Advance.

At one point, while he was on the phone with Lansing Mayor Andy Schor discussing another matter, a red F-150 blocked him into a parking space. The driver got out and started taking pictures of Heywood.

“I’m the guy wearing a mask, which automatically targets me,” he said.

He asked Schor to call the police. Heywood confronted the man, who played dumb before driving off.

Heywood is accustomed to examining spaces where he’s reporting – establishing where his exits are, and what could get in the way.

“You have to be constantly aware of who’s around you, behind you and beside you,” he said.

He said he’s learned how to lose a tail, which often means a 15-minute drive takes half an hour.

While in the UP, he stayed in a Houghton County hotel, yet

another safety measure.

With all his experience, he was prepared to have a civil discussion with the driver of the truck.

“I try to see folks as human beings, to give them permission to make mistakes,” he said. “I don’t have to agree with you to see our common humanity. It makes it a little less traumatizing.”

*Christopher Heimerman is a former editor of the Daily Chronicle in DeKalb, Illinois, and freelance journalist covering media practices in the Midwest. He wrote the memoir “40,000 Steps” which details his war with alcoholism and the marathon he ran after rehab. He lives in DeKalb. Follow him on Twitter @RunTopherRun.*