

The background of the entire page is black, decorated with numerous red splatters of varying sizes, resembling blood or paint. A white arch, reminiscent of the Gateway Arch, frames the top of the page.

# Gateway Journalism R E V I E W

Founded 1970 as St. Louis Journalism Review

# HATE

Two red fists are raised in a power salute, one on the left and one on the right, framing the central text. The fists are rendered in a stylized, hand-drawn manner with black outlines and red shading.

**How Midwest  
media have  
covered  
extremism  
in their  
backyards.**

## **Inside this issue:**

**Can we save Midwestern media?**

by Christopher Heimerman

**More news outlets stop publishing mugshots in wake of George Floyd protests, national reckoning over race**

by Brianna Connock

**Film festivals adapt to pandemic with new formats that could stick around**

by Melanie La Rosa and Anna Wolfgram Evans

**Missouri Sen. Hawley may be new to the spotlight, but he's had a long, generally 'constructive' relationship with the media covering his rise**

by Jack Grone

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 4 COVERING HATE

6 'Shifting the spirit  
of the nation': How one  
humanities project  
addresses slavery and  
citizenship

10 Missouri Sen.  
Hawley may be new to  
the spotlight, but he's  
had a long, generally  
'constructive' relationship  
with the media covering  
his rise

12 Can we save  
Midwestern media?

14 'It makes it a little less  
traumatizing'

16 Alternative  
publications: Kansas,  
Wisconsin publishers  
cruising along unbeaten  
paths

17 Missouri newspaper  
leader fact-checks  
J-School: No news deserts  
here

18 The \$16K gamble:  
Midsized Iowa paper wins  
lawsuit against city during  
pandemic

20 Rockford Register  
Star executive reflects  
on 40-year career in  
journalism

22 Iowa State  
'tweetstorm' shows how  
Free Speech is stretched on  
college campuses seeking  
to allow diverse opinions

24 Local news outlets  
need to report on hate,  
racism that fueled attack  
on U.S. Capitol

25 Local news outlets  
should play larger role  
in helping community  
members find vaccines

26 Statehouse reporters  
see increased security,  
new threats after attack in  
Washington, D.C.

27 More news outlets  
stop publishing mugshots  
in wake of George  
Floyd protests, national  
reckoning over race

28 Local Chicago news  
startup turns 3, with a  
growing list of newsletter  
readers and paid  
subscribers

30 Film festivals adapt  
to pandemic with new  
formats that could stick  
around



# COVERING HATE

by Jackie Spinner

## ‘This is not a geographic problem. It’s an American problem.’

In September 2018, racist flyers from a neo-Nazi group were left on cars parked at a community college in Southern Illinois. A few local news outlets reported on the incident and the college’s subsequent denouncement that followed.

But then the story was mostly dropped until the next year when the same flyers from the same group appeared a second time. This time a suspect was found and banned from the campus. He was never named in the media, however, and no additional reporting revealed the extent to which the organization, which is on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s list of hate groups, was active in Southern Illinois.

“The incident received only cursory coverage in the local media, and I think a lot of people — perhaps both in the media and the public at large — might have been taken by surprise that such a fringe element would reveal itself so explicitly,” said Geoff Ritter, managing editor of a string of small community papers, including the Carbondale Times, Murphysboro Times and Benton News.

The lack of coverage of a known hate group, which GJR is choosing not to name to avoid giving it more attention, shows the difficulty that many news outlets face in documenting hate and extremism in their communities, especially in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. That failed insurrection, which left five people dead, including a police officer, highlighted how white supremacy and political violence has not only grown in recent years but also has been mainstreamed in many ways.

Even as it has grown, community papers have struggled to document it because of a lack of resources but also because these stories are just hard to tell, especially as distrust and attacks on the media grew under former President Donald J. Trump. A 2020 Knight/Gallup poll found that while 84% of Americans say the news media is either critical or very important for a functioning democracy, 49% of those surveyed think the media is very biased and roughly three-quarters believe the owners of media companies are influencing coverage.

In October 2020, a man was arrested and charged for allegedly threatening to blow up the Belleville News-Democrat newsroom. In a voicemail left for a reporter, he complained that the newspaper was biased against Trump and had refused to publish his letters to the editor.

Todd Eschman, the News-Democrat’s senior editor, said when he first heard the voicemail message he thought about the 2018 shootings in the Capital Gazette newsroom in Annapolis in which five staff members were killed. How was it, he wondered, “that we have arrived at such a place in our history, both as

a nation and as an industry, where journalists at a mid-sized regional outlets ... have to be equipped with protective gear and the windows at our buildings have to be reinforced with bullet-resistant film.” Others in the News-Democrat newsroom had the same concern, he added.

Since the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, which led to Trump’s second impeachment but not a conviction, the Department of Justice has pledged to renew its focus on domestic terrorism and domestic violent extremism. More than 300 people have been charged in connection with the Jan. 6 attack in one of the largest law enforcement sweeps in U.S. history.

The story is not one that emerged primarily from small and rural communities or even communities that mostly supported Trump, according to an analysis by the Daily Yonder, a Kentucky-based news outlet.

People arrested in connection with the Jan. 6 invasion are less likely than the overall population to be from rural counties, the analysis found.

About 14% of the U.S. population lives in rural, or nonmetropolitan, counties. Only 10% of the people arrested for the Capitol riot list their homes in one of these rural counties. That means rural people are underrepresented on the list of arrestees versus their share of the population, said Tim Marema, editor of the Daily Yonder, which covers rural communities and rural culture.

“It doesn’t surprise me because it’s proportional to where Americans live,” Marema said. “This is not a geographic program, it’s an American problem, and it shows up where we live.”

### Subhead

Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, ProPublica began an ambitious project called “Documenting Hate,” in which it ultimately partnered with more than 180 professional newsrooms, around 20 college papers and many journalism schools. All told, the non-profit news outlet collected more than 6,000 reporting tips and thousands of pages of police records on hate crime. It produced more than 230 stories, including a 2019 piece on the history of racism in Anna, Illinois.

The Bellingham Herald in Washington state was one of the last news organizations to partner with ProPublica before the project ended after three years. Bellingham, a community of about 200,000 just south of the U.S.-Canada border, is a mostly white community. The marches and rallies for racial justice last summer there were peaceful compared to protests in Seattle to the south.

But the town also has a history of racism in which the newspaper played a role. In 2007, it issued an apology for its role in its coverage of

a 1907 riot that resulted in the rounding up of East Indian mill workers. “It’s time to apologize for the venomous racism, for the demeaning talk, for the refusal to defend human beings against a mob because of their skin tone and ethnicity,” the paper notes to its readers. “We apologize to the East Indian people in our community today, and to any right-thinking person who is disgusted by the actions this newspaper took in one of the darkest times in our community’s history. We are disgusted too.”

The paper gave readers a way to offer confidential tips of suspected hate crimes, explaining what one was and how to report it. In February of last year, before the summer’s Black Lives Matters protests, it also explained how to fight racism.

Editor Julie Shirley said the paper also has made a commitment to diversifying its sources, making exceptions for people whose voices might not otherwise be in the paper. “During the summer rallies, I allowed reporters to quote people as ‘a speaker’ or just their first name,” she said. “Rallies aren’t organized and there’s no list of speakers. And sometimes it was unclear about who the organizers even were. But we took a leap of faith and allowed for stories we would not have gotten had we required first and last names, city of residence, before we quoted them.”

### Subhead

As news outlets report on hate in their communities, the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy has published a list of 10 tips for covering white supremacy and far-right extremism. Among them, author Denise Marie-Ordway cautions news outlets from letting white supremacists use their own terms to describe themselves or even quoting them directly. “That’s because members of these groups often use code words or numbers in their remarks to signal their ideology to other extremists,” she writes. “Reporters who don’t recognize this coded language might unknowingly include it in their coverage.”

She also warns against amplifying the message of the hate groups, something Shirley also wanted to avoid in the Bellingham Herald’s coverage.

“In the past, we would hear anecdotally about hate crimes several times a year,” she told GJR. “But they were rarely reported officially so we found them hard to report on with no official sources. And, we didn’t want to write about incidents that only bring attention to offenders when we knew there would be no consequences. We decided to turn our frustration around, doing stories that explained the law and how readers can be allies.”

Gregory Perreault, an assistant professor of multimedia journalism at Appalachian State

University, interviewed 18 journalists in 2019 as part of a research study that sought to understand how journalists conceive of their role in covering white nationalist rallies.

It found that journalists face numerous challenges in terms of not wanting to appear biased in order to gain access to sources but also not wanting to promote false equivalency as Trump did after the violent white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. A few days after the rally, Trump was asked by reporters about the protests, to which he responded that there were “very fine people on both sides.”

“I think one of the important things we know about these groups is that they desperately want the media oxygen to amplify their message,” he told GJR. “Journalists in some ways play right into this in their understandable interest in trying to provide a comprehensive picture of an event. This also explains why white supremacists are so devastatingly effective in their use of social media — leveraging algorithms, memes — to find ways to share their messaging. Their visibility in the last four years is certainly not an accident. They clearly not only gained a strong sense of how to ‘play’ the social media game, but also felt emboldened by our prior president.”



The trick then is to put white supremacy into context. “A common refrain among journalists was that covering white nationalist rallies was necessary to help people understand an evil side of their community,” according to the research findings. “Moreover, respondents expressed a desire to show members of their communities that white nationalism was more insidiously complex than conventional wisdom would suggest.”

That’s what Ritter, the managing editor of the Carbondale Times, has found.

“I think of the scene in ‘The Blues Brothers’ with the Illinois Nazis,” he said. “We always knew there were hate groups out there, and they were a little easier to identify. Now, at least to me, it seems, the internet has allowed this kind of thinking to proliferate in the obvious ways, but it’s made the hate groups a lot more difficult to identify. That’s part of what was so shocking about Jan. 6; you could see clearly how all of these fringe movements had networked and come together from the grassroots. Some of them might have looked like the ‘Illinois Nazis’ in the movie, but most did not. The profile of the woman who was shot and killed was devastatingly similar to that of a good friend of mine whose mind also seems to have been twisted by these dark corners of the internet, despite her otherwise

sound mind and reason.”

He doesn’t have the answer to how local papers like his can better report the story.

“Obviously, more resources would make it easier, but that’s sort of a stock answer to how to fix things in journalism,” he said. “The problem gets even more difficult because the very people pulled into these movements are ones now disinclined

toward trusting anything we report, so I don’t know.”

One way journalists could start trying to understand better, he said, is to explore the online reaction to

local coverage.

“Some of this ugliness is rearing its head in our own comments sections,” he said. “I see it every day on the local television station’s Facebook page.

Eschman, the senior editor in Belleville, said one of the difficulties is that “it’s not all Klan members or Proud Boys.”

Those organizations “don’t get much ink from us due to the common industry concern that coverage could legitimize their respective messages. But hate isn’t most commonly expressed in cross burnings by people in white sheets. Covering attempts to mainstream it has got to be a concern.”

As an example, he said, Mary Miller, a freshman representative from the 15th Congressional District that represents southeastern Illinois, quoted Adolph Hitler in her first public address in D.C. After the News-Democrat (and others, eventually) reported it, she apologized, saying she regretted the reference but defended the words. Her point, she said, was that movements grow best when the youth are properly engaged.

“From a reader’s standpoint, isn’t it reasonable to wonder how an elected federal lawmaker, from a sea of similar sentiments expressed by countless others, came by an obscure line from a speech given by Hitler more than 80 years ago?” Eschman said. “Was this an attempt by Miller to mainstream the author of mass genocide? And who, exactly, does she represent besides the people who elected her?”

News coverage can’t ignore those questions, he said, nor can it call comments by an elected lawmaker a “one off.”

“There is a part of me, however, that has the same worry that covering her legitimizes some potentially rogue ideals to others,” he said.

But it’s also tricky walking the line between true hate and basic fear of the unfamiliar. The News-Democrat’s efforts in that regard have been “more conservative, sensitive and — again, this is strictly my view — useful,” Eschman said.

Kelsey Landis reported on a Black Lives Matter protest in Anna for the News-Democrat last summer. “There were opposing opinions and, of course, some confrontations,” Eschman said. “Kelsey handled the tensions with a lot of care and expressed the varying views fairly and without judgement. It was textbook, street-level journalism that followed the basic rules of style and ethics.”

But there are still barriers.

When the News-Democrat covered another Black Lives Matter demonstration at the public square in Highland, Illinois, in September that drew counter-protestors, the reporter, Megan Valley tried to talk to both groups. Black Lives Matters demonstrators spoke freely on the record to Valley, who reports for the News-Democrat through a Report for America grant. “But she was rebuffed by demonstrators on the other side of the police line because they didn’t trust the ‘fake news’” Eschman said.

Miller, for that matter, also has never returned a call from the News-Democrat.





Photos by Amelia Blakely

Local historian and educator Darrel Dexter presents the emancipation story of Harry Dougherty, an enslaved African American who was freed in Union County in the Anna Arts Center during the Civil War Weekend in Anna, Ill. on March 13, 2021.

# ‘Shifting the spirit of the nation’: How one humanities project addresses slavery and citizenship

by Amelia Blakely

It is one of the more unlikely places — a rural community struggling to move on from its “sundown town” reputation — that a small, curious audience gathered recently at the Anna Arts Center to listen to Harry Dougherty’s freedom story.

It was told by local historian and educator, Darrel Dexter, who first learned of the African-American’s emancipation story 30 years ago while snooping in the Old Union County Courthouse archives.

“Harry Dougherty’s story is unique because we know it. I can tell you the story of Harry Dougherty,” Dexter told the all-white audience.

“Thousands of Africans and African-Americans were enslaved in Illinois. At least as early as 1720 and through 1865. For most of them, we don’t know their story. We don’t even know their name.”

Dexter’s research explained that despite the common belief that Illinois was a free state, it truly operated as a slave state, even in northern Illinois. Dougherty’s story demonstrates how white settlers used legal loopholes to bound kidnapped African-Americans, like himself, into servitude. Dexter’s presentation was a portion of Union County’s Civil War Weekend celebration.

Residents annually commemorate local Civil

War history with presentations, re-enactments, and historical exhibits. Usually, the focus is on President Abraham Lincoln and the war battles — rarely ever slavery.

Though, this year was different.

After concluding Dougherty’s story, Dexter introduced the “I Was Here” project. An effort to reframe the national conversation around racism and slavery.

The project synthesizes history, poetry, collage, a soundscape and augmented reality. It began as a set of archetypal Ancestor Spirit Portraits created by photographing contemporary African Americans to embody the



The Anna Arts Center on Davie St. in Anna, Ill. on March 13, 2021.

human family. The photoshoot developed into a set of 21 “Ancestor Spirit Portraits” which mark significant locations across the country creating a visual for an invisible history. The project aims to provoke an inquiry into how we see each other, who we are as a nation, and how we can heal the spiritual, economic, educational, and political chasm that enslavement created.

“I see these images being symbolic of the humanity of the world. And hopefully, they’ll shift the perspective in the long term, but I know it won’t happen in my lifetime,” said “I Was Here” Photographer Patrick Mitchell.

One of the underlying goals of “I Was Here” is to establish a connection between citizens, the past, and the present through the physical remains of a very uncomfortable part of American history, said the Community Liaison and model for “I Was Here”, Marshall Fields.

This connection is established by using art to trigger an experience that is social, political, spiritual, and historical all at once.

The project’s approach allows slavery, a historical subject typically known through academics, to be recognized as a lived experience, he said. If it’s taken as something that was and continues to be real, people might stop avoiding certain conversations about race, or even acknowledge that racism is a problem.

**Bringing forgotten history back into view to confront a never-ending problem flickr**

Avoiding conversations about race and



Barbara Bauer, Jane Bauer, and Susie Kessler stand behind a booth selling used books, shirts, and historical maps in the Anna Arts Center during the Civil War Weekend in Anna, Ill. on March 13, 2021.

unequal citizenship is standard in southern Illinois.

The subject of racism is rarely touched on by local newspapers and TV stations. Exceptions are regulated to certain events. Annual coverage includes Martin Luther King Jr. Day and anti-racism marches in the college town of Carbondale. It’s only when racist incidents are impossible to ignore, like when white supremacist groups in the region put racist propaganda on cars in

community college parking lots, a mixed-raced Murphysboro man is threatened by his neighbor, or when a local high school group is caught with naming their Facebook group chat a racist name, does discrimination in the area make a public appearance.

Information on Anna’s Civil War Weekend was only mentioned by WSIL TV and Cape Girardeau, Missouri’s newspaper the Southeast Missourian. WSIL provided preview

Continued on next page



coverage of the Civil War Weekend, briefly mentioning slavery while discussing quilts that were used as maps for the Underground Railroad. The Southeast Missourian re-published a user-generated press release.

As the discussion of race gains more momentum nationally because of hate crimes and the anti-racist response, public pressure to bring local racism to the front of the public conversation trickles into the region.

Less than two years ago, ProPublica Engagement Reporter Logan Jaffe brought the story of sundown towns and Anna’s notorious anagram into national view with her article “The Legend of A-N-N-A: Revisiting an American Town Where Black People Weren’t Welcome After Dark,” co-published with The Atlantic.

Through her reporting, Jaffee examined this question: Is Anna a racist town?

The answer is impossible to answer succinctly because it is contradictory.

To say Anna has acknowledged and moved on from its past as being a racist community does not consider the subtle sympathy still shared among some residents for the Confederacy — an attitude that dates back to the civil war.

But to claim Anna is forever bound to being racist overlooks Dexter’s work and the Black Lives Matter Protest that took place in the town over the summer.

“Darrel is a testament to the fact that there are truth-tellers and truth-seekers in communities that might not prioritize the most truthful version of their history,” Jaffe said in an interview with the GJR. “He’s read every obituary. The entire newspaper, from the beginning. He transcribes things and he gives people like me and you, and the public, access to information that he takes it upon himself to do. And I think that is radical.”

Anna and the neighboring towns of Jonesboro and Cobden are interesting because, despite the low population, there are plentiful resources and spaces for rich storytelling, Jaffe said.

“The more attention you can pay to diversify the narratives that exist within a community, it changes the way a town tells the story about itself over time,” Jaffe said.

Continuing to tell the story of the Civil War as battles with heroes and losers avoids dissecting the reason why the war happened in the first place, she said.

**Reframing the discussion on the wound of the Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade**

That reason — the mid-Atlantic slave trade and the trauma it sowed into the nation’s foundation is the focus of “I Was Here”.

“If you were to cast a shadow within the U.S. and America on every place that was impacted by slavery or all of the subsequent unequal citizenships that happened, it would be a very dark continent,” Fields said.

America’s inability to atone for the trauma of slavery is due to avoiding the discussion of the uncomfortable subject, Fields said. “I Was Here” is very susceptible to be misunderstood



Photo provided by Marjorie Guyon

An ‘Ancestor Portrait’ part of the “I Was Here” project, a public historical art project started in Lexington, Kentucky.

as “another project about slavery.”

As Community Liaison for the project, Fields’ task is to ensure “I Was Here” is perceived for what it is — a project intent on reshaping the essence of the nation.

“It has to do with shifting the spirit of the nation by talking about a lived history and the

things that stem from that.” Fields said.

This place-based approach to interacting with history through our environment earned “I Was Here” several honors including an award of excellence from the American Association for State and Local History, a 2020 CODAawards in the Public Space

Budget Category, and a grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. Installations are planned for the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum in Inwood New York, at the Octagon Museum in Washington D.C., and a template for Illinois high school history students is being created.

Through the support of the local Market Manager, Region, and Diverse Clients Segments Team, Syndy Deese of Wells Fargo was able to work with the Wells Fargo Foundation to provide a grant to kick off the project in 2018. Deese volunteers her considerable administrative skills as a volunteer for the project.

Originally, the project was intended for Lexington, Kentucky, home of Cheapside — the largest auction site for the enslaved west of the Alleghenies.

Cheapside Park is now called the Henry A. Tandy Centennial Park after it was renamed in August of 2020. Henry A. Tandy was a successful Black entrepreneur in Lexington during the Reconstruction Era, said Mary Quinn Ramer, CEO of VisitLex, Lexington’s tourism organization. Tandy’s stonemasonry business helped build the Old Fayette County Courthouse that sits next to Henry Tandy Centennial Park.

Marjorie Guyon is the collage artist who spearheaded the “I Was Here” project in 2016. Quickly, she realized the project’s central focus, to heal the wound that enslavement created, was national.

“You know, that’s just how these spirits work. They move people together,” said Jim Embry, historian for “I Was Here” referencing the Ancestor Spirit Portraits symbolic meaning. “First of all, that’s how we use the word ‘ancestral spirit’. That’s what ancestors do. They help guide and help mentor us. They help point the way.”

Once the project is requested for a historic site, an installation of Ancestor Spirit Portraits is carefully planned, Fields said.

A central element to “I Was Here” is its focus on the dignity of the enslaved and the wound that enslavement created in the American subconscious.

The subconscious is often said to be a source of implicit bias, a term used to explain how people can act with prejudice unintentionally. Biases are programmed through the culture people are raised in and consume and the beliefs they hold dear.

“Can you badger people into thinking differently? Probably not. Can you shame people into thinking differently? It probably won’t work, but can you spirit shift them? This is the question,” Guyon said.

Racism is a way of thinking that can be internalized by people and perpetuated, explicitly and subtly, by institutions and cultures. It affects everyone but in very different ways.

By default many people harbor racism simply because they were raised in a racist society and not taught how to not be racist, Fields said. To be able to free oneself from a racist default mode of navigating the world is to shift the subconscious.

“I Was Here” Installation writer Barry Burton told GJR in an interview that he

hopes “I Was Here” can be a platform that will improve Americans of all races and their interactions with each other.

“We have to fix it. Or, if America doesn’t fix it in the end, we all lose. It’s just that simple,” he said.

Although the project has received awards and a warm reception by many, racism that kept Africans and African-Americans in bondage for centuries still remains, Burton said.

“I realized America is still not ready to change. It still will not let loose of its hold on Black people,” he said. “It puzzles me. What it is that America refuses to relinquish because I don’t know what type of power they’re after or what they’re afraid of?”

**Why a subconscious shift is necessary to heal slavery’s wound and affect change**

For as long as the country has existed racist beliefs initially established by slavery have been reiterated for generations in more pervasive and elusive ways to maintain America’s stratified society, Fields said.

“When laws change, people don’t necessarily change,” Fields said.

If individuals who make up society are not persuaded to support a law, they’ll simply find loopholes around it. Harry Dougherty’s life story proves this to be true. What allowed Dougherty’s original white owner, Owen Evans, to continue enslaving him was a law created in 1805 that circumvented the Northwest Ordinance of 1787’s ban on slavery and involuntary servitude, keeping Dougherty in enslavement for 31 years of his life.

For there to be a cultural change, there must be a massive shift in the collective subconscious that draws in everyone. Education can help start it. But education alone will not sustain the change.

Fordham Law School Professor Tanya Hernández said education left to its own devices can not dismantle invisible but powerful racist systems and structures.

“People can still choose to not be aware of the knowledge if it is not paired with trying to have concrete reform on the ground,” she said in an interview with GJR. “To make an institutional change, people can be brought on board by seeing the change is actually to their benefit.”

The fight to abolish legal clauses in several state constitutions that still permit slavery as a punishment for a crime is a current example of how America is still shedding its layers of being one of the biggest actors in the mid-Atlantic slave trade.

For persuasion, people first need to be engaged, Hernández said. Art can engage people in a conducive way that creates the space in an individual’s thinking habits for change.

**A possibility of progress**

After Dexter’s presentation at the Anna Arts Center, some of the audience members said they found Dougherty’s story interesting and that they are open to learning more about slavery in the area. Some mentioned openly that their interest in this subject is partially attributed to having direct ancestors who

fought to keep slavery.

“I think it’s fascinating to learn about a slave that worked and lived where we do,” Makaya Larson told GJR. “You think Lincoln gave the emancipation proclamation and then slavery was over, but that’s not what happened. There is still so much rebuilding to happen.”

Larson is from Buncombe, Illinois, a small village very close to where Harry Dougherty lived. She is teaching her kids, who are homeschooled, about the civil war, she said. Larson said teaching local history about the region’s role in slavery and its past with racism in schools and the community is difficult, particularly in southern Illinois.

“There are still a lot of feelings on both sides in this community. I don’t know that they could teach it in an unbiased way,” Larson said. “There are people who have a family legacy connected to this, and that requires them to ask themselves tough questions about it.”

She said that self-interrogation can start with the powerful visuals presented in “I Was Here”.

Larson echoes what ProPublica reporter Logan Jaffe believes is holding towns like Anna back.

“A timeless answer, a fear of change and racism,” she said.

Dexter, an Anna-Jonesboro life-long resident himself, knows well the tradition of discrimination and disdain for change in the region.

But, he also knows through his historical research that things can change. The world that Harry Dougherty lived in is no longer today’s. However, Dougherty’s and other kidnapped African-American’s stories are testaments to the long struggle for freedom in the country that was founded in the ideals of liberty and inalienable rights.

“Harry didn’t let the circumstances that he was born into overcome him. I think that’s something that I and everybody else can learn. That whatever your circumstances at birth were, whatever family you were born into, there’s a lot more you can do with your life,” Dexter said. “You don’t have to be bound by that.”

Dougherty’s story turns toward freedom on Christmas Day in 1835.

His lawyer, John Dougherty, freed him after Dougherty was under his “ownership” for two years after Dougherty sued for his freedom. In 1837, Dougherty married in Madison County, Illinois, bought 80 acres of land and started a family. Two of his sons fought in the Civil War in the U.S. Colored Troops. Dougherty’s granddaughter Alice Dougherty was one of the founding members of the NAACP in Madison County. She marched in Selma, Alabama, and in Washington D.C. with Dr. Martin Luther King.

Dexter met Dougherty’s descendants in 2016. Some still own the land originally purchased by their ancestors.

“This wasn’t just someone I saw in a record, but somebody I can see, touch, and hear and is a direct descendant from that person — flesh and blood,” Dexter said.





DoD Photo by Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Dominique A. Pineiro

Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan, speaks April 11, 2019, with Senator Josh Hawley from Missouri, before delivering testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on the proposal to establish a United States Space Force at the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

## Missouri Sen. Hawley may be new to the spotlight, but he's had a long, generally 'constructive' relationship with the media covering his rise

by Jack Grone

It was the fist pump seen 'round the world. On Jan. 6, as he strode into the U.S. Capitol, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley raised his fist to acknowledge a crowd gathered outside the building. Francis Chung, a photojournalist for E&E News, a Washington-based group of publications covering energy and environmental issues, snapped a picture of the moment.

Chung did not know it at the time, but his photo would become one of the most memorable images of a day on which a violent mob of Donald Trump supporters would later storm the Capitol and temporarily halt Congress's certification of the electoral votes that would make Joe Biden the 46th president of the United States.

Hawley, an architect of the effort by some lawmakers to drag out the certification

process, was already a rising star inside a Republican Party that has made near-constant conflict with the press a core attribute of its national brand.

But since that day in January, and with Trump now out of the White House and booted off Twitter, Josh Hawley has become something more. Missouri's junior senator may be the best current example of an ambitious, populist politician who is successfully capturing the national spotlight while simultaneously issuing dire warnings about "cancel culture" and being "muzzled" by opponents.

To Missouri journalists who have covered Hawley's rise in five quick years from college law professor to state attorney general to U.S. senator to possible presidential contender, the glare from this spotlight is obscuring Hawley's

previous relationships with reporters and editors in Missouri. Those relationships have tended to be constructive, they said.

Jason Hancock, editor in chief of the Missouri Independent and formerly Jefferson City correspondent for the Kansas City Star, told Gateway Journalism Review he recalls first speaking to Hawley in the spring of 2016, when Hawley — then a law professor at the University of Missouri in Columbia — testified in support of a bill dealing with religious expression on college campuses.

"We did a nice long interview on that," Hancock said. "He answered the phone, and was happy to chat."

Hawley remained very accessible during his run later in 2016 for Missouri Attorney General, and after he assumed the office in early 2017, Hancock said.

"I can remember numerous conversations with him," Hancock said. "He was really accessible to Missouri reporters — at least to me, and I'm presuming other reporters. He would occasionally call, just to talk about things. You know, 'This is what's happening, this is something that should be on your radar.' It wasn't just always his staff. He was someone personally accessible."

But relations with the press got testier when Hawley challenged Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill for her Senate seat in 2018, midway through Trump's presidency.

"It did feel as though there was a lot more testiness between Senator Hawley and the media, and I don't know if that was the byproduct of a tough campaign, or if it was just catching a wave of anti-media energy coming from the president," Hancock said.

Scott Diener, news director at CBS affiliate KMOV-TV (Channel 4) in St. Louis, took issue with a guest column Hawley wrote for the New York Post in January about being "muzzled."

In that item, Hawley complained that "corporate monopolies and the left team up to shut down speech they don't like." The column came after a publishing house canceled a book deal with the senator, some corporate donors suspended their contributions, and lawmakers including Democratic Rep. Cori Bush of St. Louis called for Hawley's expulsion from Congress.

"Let the record show @KMOV has offered @HawleyMO airtime everyday on Missouri's most watched newscast for three straight weeks. He has declined. No muzzling here," Diener tweeted on Jan. 25. (The tweet went viral, racking up over 19,000 "likes.")

Diener told GJR that up until December, access to Hawley had been "pretty good." For example, after Hawley was first elected and went to Washington, KMOV reporter Chris Nagus spent a day with him on Capitol Hill.

"His office would reach out to us on a

regular basis — every other week, maybe — and say 'the senator's available.' You'd maybe get only two or three questions in, during five minutes. We'd love more time," Diener said.

"But in fairness, his office has been really good about talking with us, up until December, and then they kind of went dark on us," Diener told GJR in a phone conversation in early March. "But they're back, and we've had two interviews with him in the last two weeks."

Hawley's office did not respond to inquiries from GJR seeking comment for this story.

Even conservative commentators normally friendly to Hawley, such as KMOX-AM afternoon host Mark Reardon, have scrapped with the senator. During a Jan. 27 interview, Reardon challenged Hawley over his opposition to the certification of Pennsylvania's electoral votes for Biden. (Hawley said Pennsylvania's mail-in ballot system violated that state's constitution.)

"Senator, you more than anyone else — and this is what just personally disappoints me — you knew that there was no constitutional path for that election to be overturned once the electors were certified, and there's a fair amount of people including me that feel that you led people to believe that that option still existed," Reardon said.

"Look at my statements, Mark. I never said that the goal was to overturn the election," Hawley shot back.

Then he turned the heat up even more: "It is a lie that I was trying to overturn an election...it is a lie that I incited violence, or that having a debate on the floor of the Senate is an equivalent to violence. That is a lie. I am not going to bow to a left-wing mob that tries to run me out of town."

A Morning Consult poll taken during and after the events of Jan. 6 showed Hawley losing support among registered Missouri voters, including among Republican voters, although Hawley still retained strong approval among GOP voters overall.

One of Hawley's key early backers, former Sen. John Danforth, also withdrew his support in January, saying in an interview with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that supporting Hawley "was the worst mistake I ever made in my life."

Hawley has remained defiant, however, and there are signs his controversial stance may actually be helping him. Axios reported on March 7 that Hawley's campaign brought in more than \$1.5 million between Jan. 1 and March 5, nearly 12 times what Hawley raised during the first quarter of 2020. The website noted that Hawley has also been a fundraising boon for Republicans generally.

"It doesn't seem to have tarnished him too terribly much, at least among his base, and so the coverage still reflects that," Hancock said. "After Jan. 6, in that sort of infamous image of him, with his fist in the air, [he] got an avalanche of coverage, from international media on down."

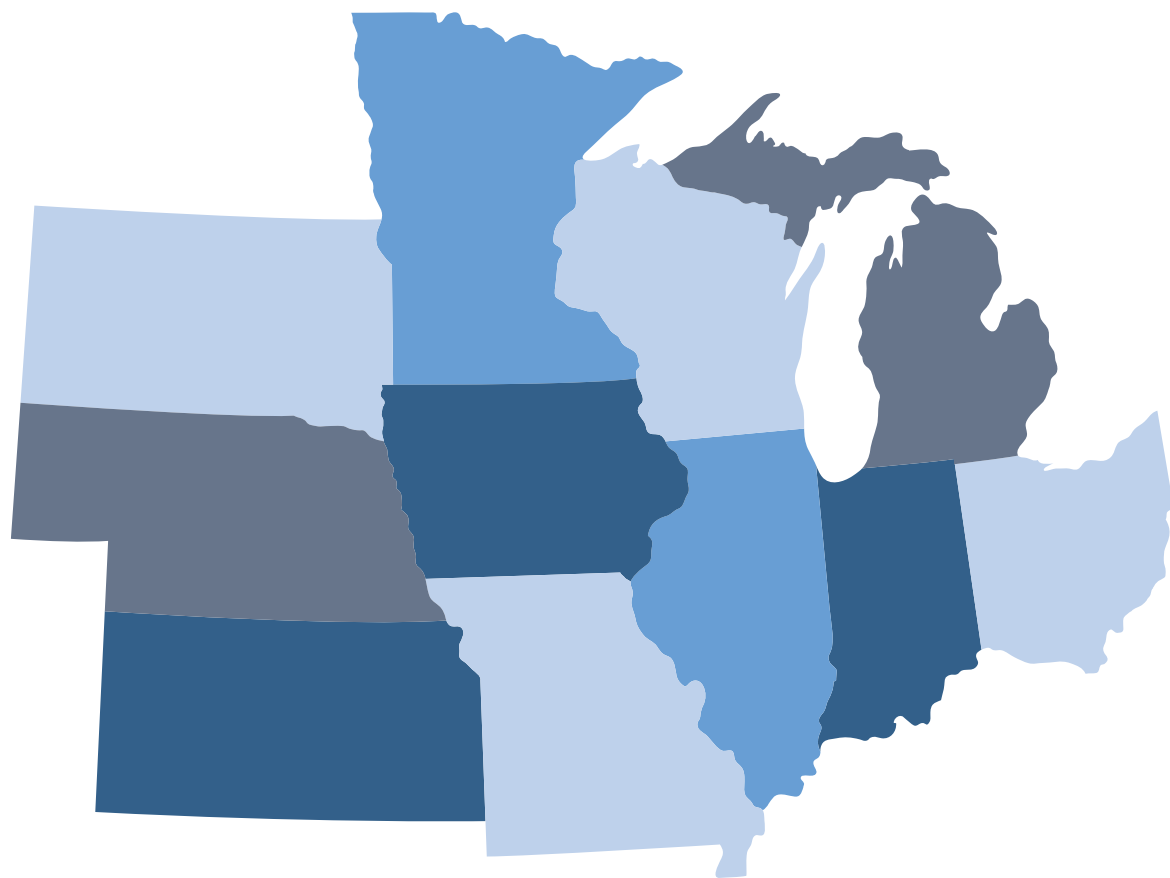
Looking ahead, much coverage of Hawley will be guided by speculation about a possible run for the White House in 2024, Hancock said.

"The issues he's been most passionate about are national issues," Hancock said, mentioning threats from China and the concentration of power at tech companies such as Google as examples. "That's where you'll see a lot of coverage focused: through the prism of, is he doing this to set the table for a future presidential run. And that's why I also think you'll see a lot more national attention paid to him — not just the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Kansas City Star — but The New York Times and Washington Post paying attention."

Hancock added: "There was a joke somebody told me: 'If Trump loses, you'll find that Josh Hawley's going to end up doing a lot of events in the Kirksville (MO) media market, because it shares a media market with Ottumwa, Iowa.' That's the kind of joke that folks are making now."







## Can we save Midwestern media?

by Christopher Heimerman

A year into the coronavirus pandemic, we have a better idea of the impact on the news media. Across the Midwest, publishers have responded by sharing resources, reducing publication days or going to digital-only formats. Some of these changes were already in the works before the pandemic hit. GJR checked in with publishers and editors in eight Midwestern states, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. Here are their stories.

It could have been worse. Much worse.

In fact, the executive director of the Missouri Press Association expected the COVID-19 pandemic to gut a local newspaper industry already reeling from more than a decade of competition from free digital content, rising newsprint costs and circulation declines.

Seven of the state's 200 or so newspapers ceased publishing in 2020, while about 10 underwent mergers with neighboring publications.

"I feared worse," said Mark Maassen, executive director of the Missouri Press Association. "I'm bullish. I feared for the worst, and it's not as bad as I thought."

The COVID-19 pandemic hurt community newspapers across the country in much the same way that it impacted other small businesses. After all, many are just that, small single-owner operations that rely on their communities for revenue.

Hundreds of newspapers in the Midwest have undergone changes in the past year,

although many of them were in the works before the pandemic. Some media outlets closed altogether, others consolidated with sister newspapers and some went to digital-only formats. Newsrooms continued to shrink to offset massive advertising revenue losses.

As governors issued stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many newspapers' owners in the Chicago area told Gateway Journalism Review that they lost as much as 90% of their revenue in that first month.

"Meijer didn't want to do inserts anymore, because they didn't know whether whatever they were advertising would be in stock," Lisa McGraw, public affairs manager for the Michigan Press Association, said during a late-January interview. "This is still an ongoing problem."

Teri Hayt, a regional manager with Report for America, which helps place reporters in newsrooms where they cover underserved communities and beats, said continuously cutting staff is not sustainable.

"What's the idea with all this cutting?" she

said. "Have you seen an organization that has cut, cut, cut and come out stronger? You can't cut your way to success. You cannot do more with less. You do less with less. It's simple logic."

She said the newspapers that are enjoying the most success are the ones that are being creative and asking for support from the readership and community foundations.

"Our reluctance to ask for money years and years ago, I bought into it all those years," Hayt said. "But things are changing and continuing to change. It's a paradigm that, when you finally get out there and work with your community foundations, they're thrilled to hear from you. When they invest in the local newspaper, they're now investing in their community."

She continues to see great work being done, even in newsrooms where executives have tried to stick to the conventional business model, and simply cut staff to offset losses.

"I think a lot of these organizations are doing great work in spite of the decisions being made," Hayt said. "With RFA, I've seen newsrooms that

are trying to make a difference and do things differently. And those reporters and those editors are still swinging for the fences every day."

GJR talked to industry professionals and press associations in eight Midwestern states, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana.

"COVID hit newspapers like it did every other business in Illinois," said Sam Fisher, president and chief executive of the Illinois Press Association. "Most changes in 2020, whether closings or mergers, were already being considered before the virus hit."

In Illinois, newspapers relied heavily on the association and each other to navigate the pandemic, he said.

"Many of over 400 members are small weeklies that are one- or two-person operations," Fisher said. "We've seen that when COVID hit a small operation and made it seemingly impossible to continue to publish that others stepped up to make sure that there wasn't an issue missed."

Maassen said the pandemic presented an opportunity, particularly for weekly papers and mid-sized companies.

This package of stories will provide a rundown the fallout of the pandemic via numbers from each state and observations by publishers and newspaper associations' leaders. It will also highlight some of the innovations those smaller players have used to not just stay afloat but, in some cases, thrive.

"In my opinion, some of the metro papers, like the KC Star and Post-Dispatch might be the ones that are most in peril, because of their reliance on large national advertisers," Maassen said. "If you're a smaller newspaper, if you're not one of the giants, there's an opportunity to adapt your business model and do well."

### Massive losses in The Prairie State

According to a Poynter Institute analysis, since 2004, more than 1,800 newspapers have closed across the country, about 1,700 of them weeklies. When the findings were originally published May 20, 2020, it stated that the pandemic helped cause the closure of more than 60 newspapers. That was two months to the day after Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker announced his stay-at-home order.

In Illinois, according to "The Expanding News Desert", a website run by the University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media, two counties near the lower tip of Illinois — Hamilton and Pulaski — have no operating newspapers.

The map, however, was last updated in 2019. The Cairo Citizen, a weekly in Alexander County, closed March 26, leaving the county without a publication.

Half of the 10 counties that border those three have just one print publication.

Even before 2020 laid waste to newspapers throughout the state, one-third of papers in the state disappeared between 2004 and 2019, according to the website.

In northern Illinois with 22nd Century Media's folding, suburban Chicago communities lost 14 relied-upon weeklies. At least 15 other

newspapers around the state shut down. At least eight papers were sold, including four Gannett properties that were sold to Paxton Media Group.

Downstate, more than a half-dozen publications merged with others to stay afloat.

Just before the pandemic hit, Shaw Media shut down two of the weeklies it acquired in recent years: the Minooka Herald Life, and Valley Life. Over the past few years, Shaw's suburban publications have gone from broadsheet to a tabloid format. In 2020, its papers in Sterling, Dixon, Ottawa and LaSalle followed suit. Each of its dailies eliminated a day of publication, and the Sauk Valley Media staff moved from its sprawling office in Sterling to an office in Dixon that just a few years ago would have only comfortably fit SVM's editorial staff. The Daily Chronicle building in DeKalb was sold, one of countless newspaper offices closed throughout the state.

At least four newspapers shut down their printing operations. Several outlets went digital-only.

Apart from the Shaw publications, about 10 papers eliminated at least one edition, at least three going all the way down to once a week.

Two of the state's largest media groups, the Sun-Times and Daily Herald, actually launched new publications amid the storm. The Chicago Sun-Times launched the website initiative La Voz Chicago in May, and the Daily Herald Media Group launched three weekly newspapers: the Glenview Herald and the Northbrook Herald on June 18, and the Shelbyville Eagle on July 2. Executives from both groups did not respond to requests for comment.

### Heads have rolled

Even before the pandemic hit, newspapers have spent the past several years cutting executives and their salaries that dwarf those of

younger talent committed enough to the craft to accept a significantly smaller salary.

In May 2019, Angela Muhs resigned from the then-GateHouse-owned State Journal-Register in Springfield. As she was escorted out of the building, her editorial colleagues left with her "as a show of respect and support," staff writer Dean Olsen told The Associated Press.

Dennis Anderson, who was named GateHouse's state editor in June 2019, resigned as executive editor of the Peoria Journal Star in May 2020. After starting and briefly running his media consulting firm DennisEdit Strategists LLC over the summer of 2020, he became Shaw Media's vice president of news and content development in September.

In September, Lee Enterprises eliminated two executive positions at The Southern Illinoisan. Tom English and Terra Kerkemeyer were let go as executive editor and publisher, respectively.

Alee Quick was promoted from news editor into the top editor role, but on March 9 she left the paper for a new job at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Lauren Cross, Midwest projects reporter for Lee Enterprises, assumed the top editor role, in an interim capacity.

English spent 18 years working at The Southern. He was hired in his early 20s as a telemarketer and climbed through the ranks. In late January, English became executive producer for the Breakfast Show at KFVS-12 in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

What's unfolding in Illinois is hardly uncommon, of course. At least 30 Wisconsin papers have made significant changes since the pandemic hit, including 16 being either sold or merged with other papers.

### Opposing viewpoints

In 2020 alone, nearly 10% of paid-subscription newspapers in Indiana shuttered their doors.

The year 2020 "will never be seen as a good year for the newspaper industry, when you look at the outright closings and the number of papers that were forced to make the decision to reduce their frequency," said Steve Key, executive director and general counsel of the Hoosier State Press Association.

Since 2004, Indiana residents have lost more than one-third of their newspapers, down from 220 to its current roster of 142.

Katrice Hardy, executive editor of the Indianapolis Star, has a unique perspective on the state, but as regional editor for USA Today in the Midwest, she also has tabs on the bigger picture.

"The biggest thing we've tried to do in Gannett is focus on the content that matters the most," Hardy said. "We don't want you doing a hundred stories, we want you doing the stories that matter most."

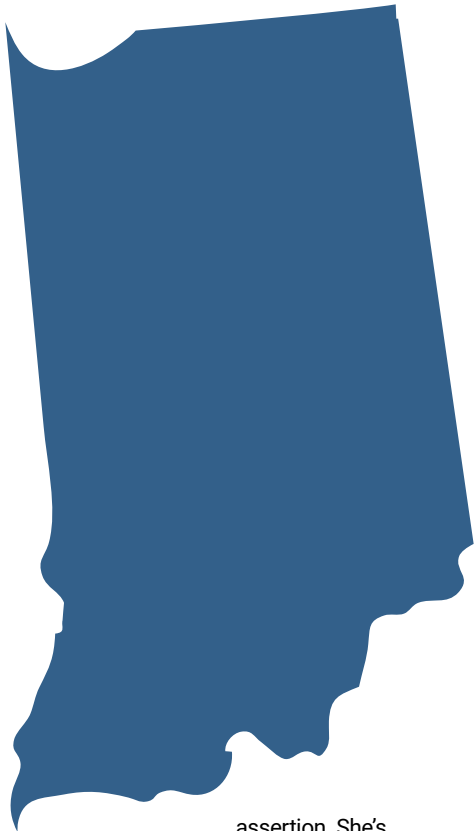
She said Gannett is hiring all the time. Hayt, the regional manager for Report for America, is skeptical.

"The pandemic is wiping out what was left of our business model," she said, "and while it might have been a good model once, it's not a good model anymore."

She has the credentials to make such an

Continued on next page





assertion. She's been in the publishing industry for 35 years, and her management gigs have run the gamut, from Sports Illustrated to powerhouse daily newspapers such as The Orlando Sentinel. She was formerly executive editor for GateHouse Media Ohio and managing editor at the Arizona Daily Star, and helped the American Society of News Editors merge with the Associated Press Media Editors in 2019 to form the News Leaders Association, for which she was interim executive director.

"We've lost a tremendous number of editors, a number of journalists, period, who have so much knowledge and understanding," Hayt said. "You don't replace a Mark Baldwin, or people on your copy desk, people who have worked for years, and how many mistakes have they caught. We've cut ourselves into this situation."

At least in Baldwin's case, when he retired at the end of 2020 as executive editor of the Rockford Register Star and the Freeport Journal-Standard, it was under his own volition.

### Adapt or die

Two Pew Research reports published in October 2020 shed light on the widespread damage to news outlets.

One found that about 40,000 employees received Paycheck Protection Program loans, and most of the loans given to nearly 2,800 newspapers were for less than \$150,000. That figure is roughly two-thirds the number of U.S. newspapers that existed in 2016.

Those papers employed about 180,000 employees, the Pew researchers found.

Maassen said one of chief roles for newspaper associations early in the pandemic was to gather and provide information on those loans.

"There was a lot of just sharing of information we got from our national partners," he said. "That was the most immediate impact our members saw: 'Wow, I can apply for something like this, and based on the rules we were seeing it might not have to be paid back?'"

About 5.2 million PPP loans were given to small businesses in 2020, according to the Pew report.

The other Pew report found that at the time of publication, newspaper advertising was down 42 percent. But to illustrate the importance of reliable local news, despite the financial woes of Average Joe, circulation was down just 8%.

Clearly, the reliance on local news is still robust. To cling to the traditional methods of delivering it would be madness, according to Ron Wallace, publisher of the Quincy Herald-Whig and vice president of newspapers for Quincy Media, which also owns the Hannibal Courier-Post.

"I'm an old guy, and it's time for the old guys to get the crap out of their heads," Wallace said. "The newspapers killed themselves. Our arrogance, we did ourselves in. We created the self-fulfilling prophecy, and it never should have been said that newspapers are dying."

In broadcasting news, Fox News Channel's revenue went up 42% in 2020, while CNN and MSNBC's dipped 14 and 27%, respectively, according to Pew's reporting, which also states nationwide network TV ad revenue went up 11%.

Wallace said the idea that TV news is not only killing it but also insulated is a fallacy.

"The broadcast division is only a few years behind," Wallace said. "They are under the same attack now that we were under 14 years ago,

whether it be from OTTV (over-the-top television) or streaming services. I believe the broadcasting division is starting to realize, and COVID has brought that into the spotlight, that they don't own the market on advertising revenue."

He has insider information. For many years, Quincy Media owned more than two dozen broadcasting outlets, including those in the Herald-Whig's market. Thanks to the built-in opportunity to collaborate, Wallace said in November that the company had virtually the same number of employees in their newsrooms as they did pre-pandemic.

It will be interesting to monitor how that situation trends going forward. In February, all of Quincy Media's properties other than the Quincy Herald-Whig and Hannibal Courier-Post were sold for nearly \$1 billion to Gray Television.

The key to survival for newspapers, Wallace said, is a paradigm shift, away from the way the game has always been played. He said collaboration and creativity will be paramount for newsrooms to stay open, not only recover.

If the Illinois Press Association's virtual annual conference in September was any indicator, newspapers have the capacity to tear down the proverbial wall between editorial and advertising departments - or at least install a swinging door.

The Chicago Independent Media Alliance banded together 43 of its then-62 member outlets for a spring 2020 fundraiser that brought in more than \$160,000.

"It's honestly way more than we could have expected," said Yong Lee, marketing manager for the Korea Times which, like the Chicago Reader, has been in business since 1971.

Yazmin Dominguez, The Reader's media partnerships coordinator in six short months, is also the project coordinator of CIMA. She said collaborations such as CIMA have been tried before in the city, so she's optimistic that the landscape has shifted toward a mindset of cooperation over competition.

During a session at the virtual conference in September, Anna DeShawn, founder of the queer radio station E3, said, "there's enough room for everybody, and the fundraiser shows that."

"I've got no competitors," she continued. "It's my own personal ethos. I just see opportunities to collaborate and grow each other's reaches."

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.

### 'It's getting in the way of our reporting'

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 as soon 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.



### 'I thought that was how I was going to die'

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 Drearian 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.

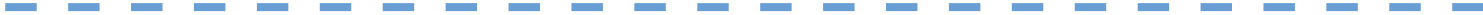
"You have to be constantly aware of who's around you, behind you and beside you," he said.

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

While in the Upper Peninsula, 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."



## 'It makes it a little less traumatizing'

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



# Alternative publications: Kansas, Wisconsin publishers cruising along unbeaten paths

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.

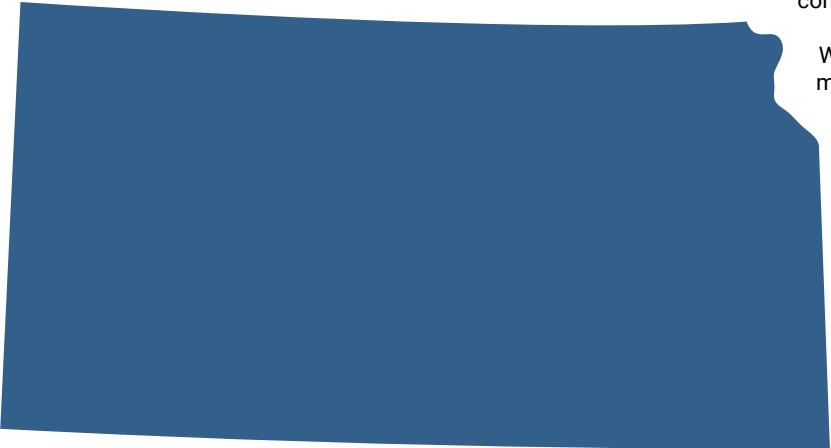
The two have never set foot in the same room, yet upon hearing that Wood established his own online coffee company that he advertises throughout his publications, and that Multi Media Channels made a killing selling Taste of Wisconsin sausage and cheese packs over the holidays, Young laughed with both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



## Growing while ‘everyone else is shutting down’

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.”

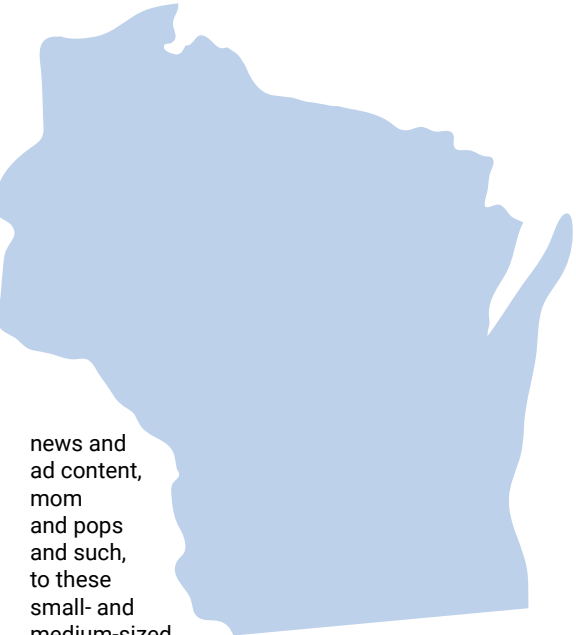
His boy has bounced around a bit, and established Multi Media Channels in 2012, shortly after his dad died in 2011.

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.”

## ‘A weirdo’ in Kansas

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.

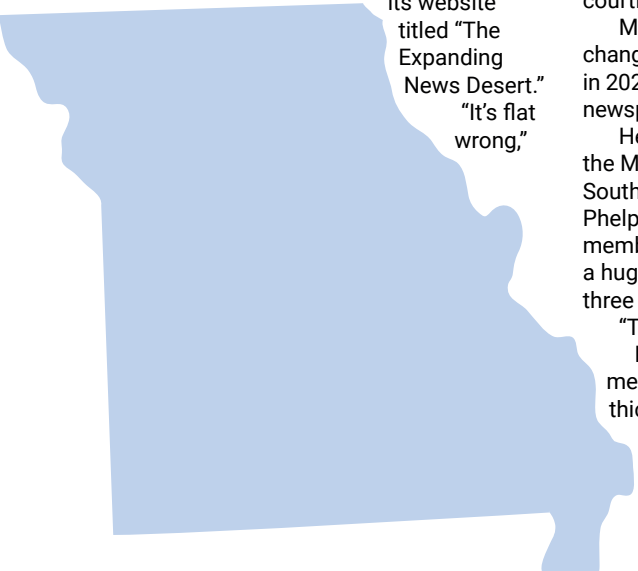
So he made a logical conclusion. “Newspapers should be the chambers of commerce. That would be a lot more useful for us,” he said, laughing.

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



# Missouri newspaper leader fact-checks J-School: No news deserts here

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

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

— Pat Wood

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.”

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 would 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, 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 Tentschert, 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.”

“ We don’t believe print is dead, or we wouldn’t be doing this.”

— Jaime Mowers

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.”



Sycamore Media also owns the Bellevue Herald-Leader and The DeWitt Observer, the latter of which, along with the Sentinel-Press, went from twice-weekly to weekly early in the pandemic.

“It’s something we probably should have done anyway,” Mayfield said, adding that the papers’ combined circulation is around 8,500.

What he’s frustrated with at this point is the lack of impact relentless coverage of the pandemic has seemingly had.

“Despite hundreds of inches of copy, we still did not feel like we had as much impact on our communities’ behavior,” he said. “We provided a lot of communication on how to stay safe, and masks, and we still had examples of city governments passing a resolution asking people to wear masks.”

Mayfield said leadership at the top, namely Gov. Kim Reynolds’ resistance to restrictions throughout the pandemic, have done businesses few favors.

“In my opinion, she was economy-first and public safety-second,” he said. “We didn’t write about it because we thought it was what people wanted to read. We viewed it as a public safety issue, and the most important public safety issue we’d cover in our careers.”

He’s still staring at the ledger and calculating, in both the short and long term. It’s a balancing act, and the answers are seldom clear.

“Ownership can be too reactionary,” Mayfield said. “And in some cases, they don’t react fast enough. Knowing which is which is hard. And I ask myself that all the time: ‘Am I overreacting or underreacting?’ I’ll have to tell you later.”

Since 2004, readers have lost about one-fifth of their newspapers in Iowa, but about 100 of those have a circulation of fewer than 1,000 subscribers. Each and every county in the state has an active newspaper.

Patterson-Plank said where mergers and closures are happening, it’s more than a reflection of the state of the industry. Newspapers’ success hinges on the health of their local economy and the plight of rural America.

“This has a lot to do with rural America and the synergies that exist between economic development and community engagement,” Patterson-Plank said, adding that things have rebounded since early last summer. “The newspaper industry in Iowa is much more optimistic today than they were in March, April, May and June. It’s not just that they are doing better. Their communities are doing better.”

Mayfield said he laid off about half of his staff of 25 early in the pandemic.

“We reacted quickly,” Mayfield said. “I just did not see how the economy could do well. We were not sure whether we could survive or not. If we had stayed in the same structure we were, we’d be in trouble.”

Only about 40% of those employees have returned. Mayfield said as employees’ unemployment benefits were about to expire, he called them and shot them straight that he wouldn’t be able to bring them back, that they should look around for other work.

“I hated it,” he said. “I didn’t enjoy that at all.”

“ Despite hundreds of inches of copy, we still did not feel like we had as much impact on our communities’ behavior.”

— Trevis Mayfield

## The \$16K gamble: Midsized Iowa paper wins lawsuit against city during pandemic

Trevis Mayfield admits he was beginning to sweat.

When the owner and chief executive of Sycamore Media looked at his ledger, he saw a 25% dropoff in ad revenue in the early stages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, staff at the Maquoketa Sentinel-Press were wringing their hands as their lawsuit against the city wended its way toward a verdict.

The company invested nearly \$16,000 in the suit, which demanded that Jackson County Assistant Attorney Amanda Lassance turn over a sheriff’s deputy’s body camera

footage from an April 2019 traffic stop that involved Lassance, a carful of beer cans and slurred words but no sobriety test.

“We felt like we had no other alternative. The only other alternative to suing them was giving up,” Mayfield said. “If we didn’t press the point, nobody else would have.”

On June 22, the judge ruled in the paper’s favor. The city of Maquoketa had to turn over the body cam footage in its entirety and pay the newspaper’s court costs.

“I’m a journalist first,” Mayfield said. “I love business, and I like managing a business and seeing the dynamic inner workings, but we have First Amendment protections, and no other businesses are specifically mentioned in the Constitution.”

To stay alive during a pandemic, newspapers need to do their jobs, he said. “One thing that may help us as a newspaper company is that sometimes, while we operate on money like everyone else does, the fundamental principles of our company are more than economic. It sounds pretty idealistic, I realize.”

While just three Iowa newspapers closed altogether in 2020, a number of mergers took place. And that’s alright for Susan Patterson Plank, executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association. The Maquoketa Sentinel-Press is a prime example of survival, she said.

“These are mergers of papers of 500 and 750 circulation,” she said, adding that the largest newspaper that closed had 501 subscribers. “We have had almost no closures, but we’ve had a lot of mergers that make a lot of business sense.”

“ I’m a journalist first. I love business, and I like managing a business and seeing the dynamic inner workings, but we have First Amendment protections, and no other businesses are specifically mentioned in the Constitution.”

— Trevis Mayfield



# Rockford Register Star executive reflects on 40-year career in journalism

by Christopher Heimerman



Photo by Scott P. Yates for the Register Star

Executive Editor Mark Baldwin listens during a Rockford Register Star editorial board meeting on June 6, 2019.

"It's very important to reach the corners of the community that oftentimes don't see upper-middle-class professionals," Baldwin said. "It was important to meet with diverse people in the community, and not necessarily people who subscribe to the newspaper. We

shape the news environment more than any other news organization."

And they do it from a literal tower, he pointed out.

"We work in a downtown tower next to the Rock River," he said. "It's kind of a fortress, and

“ He was always talking about his staff and trying to get them recognition for work they'd done. The best top leaders have that quality. Only so many ascend to the top, and they don't embody that the way Mark does.”

— Katrice Hardy

it can be intimidating. If anybody's going to get out of their comfort zone, it ought to be us. We have to wield our influence with some level of humility."

Baldwin has been outspoken on diversity, equity and inclusion. He wasted no time weighing in on a tragically common incident that unfolded in August at the city's popular downtown market.

On Aug. 21, Register Star reporter Shaquil Manigault, who is Black, was denied access to the market by a security guard, until photographer Scott Yates confirmed he was, in fact, a reporter.

Baldwin zeroed in on the security guard's language.

"I don't believe you," Baldwin's editorial response reads, using italics for emphasis.

"That comment may be the most infuriating part of the incident because of the way it denied one man the benefit of the doubt for one reason only, the color of his skin. And that's wrong," it continues. "Yet encounters like that are all-too-routine for people of color, whether they're professionals like Shaquil or students, teenagers or old folks. And it shouldn't take a white colleague, classmate or friend to make things right."

Urban planner Michael Smith and dietician Jody Perrecone are two community members who, along with Baldwin, round out Register Star's editorial board.

Smith marveled at Baldwin's rapid, thoughtful responses to what's happening in the community, with which Baldwin has established a deep connection.

"That editorial was quick," Smith said, laughing a little with appreciation. "He can turn on a dime to make sure the organization and the content therein reflect the times we're living in."

Baldwin has always insisted his team cover its community holistically — which means not just covering festivals and events centered around People of Color's traditions and history.

"There's an awful lot of coverage of communities of color that's been the bread and circuses variety," Baldwin said. "You cover

festivals, or Cinco de Mayo or Juneteenth. That's not journalism for the community. That's journalism done by nice white people."

## What lies ahead

Katrice Hardy, executive editor of the Indianapolis Star and regional editor of the Midwest, is charged with the task of finding Baldwin's replacement.

"Right up until his last week in the office, we were talking about his staff, and that's who Mark is," Hardy said. "He was always talking about his staff and trying to get them recognition for work they'd done. The best top leaders have that quality. Only so many ascend to the top, and they don't embody that the way Mark does."

She said Baldwin developed many invaluable, trustworthy sources in the city, "and that's because he cares."

During his time in Rockford Baldwin has been involved with many groups, including 815 Choose Civility, a project through which the media, public and private sectors address civility and civic dysfunction. The project was born from Transform Rockford, a nonprofit creating and executing a strategic plan addressing the city's socio-economic shortfalls.

He will have to give up at least one of his crusades in retirement, including his seat on the board for News Leaders Association, which is working to help newspapers align the diversity of their newsrooms with the communities they cover.

After a career in journalism and consulting that's taken him throughout the Midwest and New York, Baldwin and his wife Sydney dropped anchor in Rockford in 2012.

"I'm looking forward to getting reacquainted with my long-suffering wife," he said. "The only reason this has worked is because of her."

When they arrived in Rockford, the Register Star's former owner, GateHouse, was making massive cuts in reaction to financial decline.

Whereas Baldwin retired on his own terms, at least one other top editor hasn't been so fortunate. Tom English was abruptly terminated as executive editor of The Southern Illinoisan, owned by Lee Enterprises.

In May 2019, Angie Muhs resigned from the then-GateHouse-owned State Journal-Register in Springfield. As she was walked out of the building, her editorial colleagues left with her "as a show of respect and support," staff writer Dean Olsen told The Associated Press.

Dennis Anderson, who was named GateHouse's state editor in June 2019, resigned as executive editor of the Peoria Journal Star in May 2020. After starting and briefly running his media consulting firm DennisEdit Strategists LLC over the summer of 2020, he became Shaw Media's vice president of news and content development in September.

Hayt, the former ASNE director who is now the corps excellence regional manager in the West for Report for America, said the massive turnover in leadership in the industry is harrowing.

"You don't cut your way to success," she said. "We've lost a tremendous number of editors, a number of journalists, period, who have so much knowledge and understanding. You don't replace a Mark Baldwin, or people on your copy desk, people who have worked for years, and how many mistakes have they caught ... we've cut ourselves into this situation."

Nonetheless, Baldwin persevered.

"I had to deliver a lot of bad news, and he had to absorb the news and deliver the news," said Paul Gaier, then the publisher of the Register Star. "Whereas others have gotten jaded, Mark was able to sit back and say, 'OK we have to make these changes, because the business is changing, but you know what? These aren't easy decisions, but they're the right decisions.' He always does the right thing, regardless of what that means."

Baldwin said the tallest hurdles going forward aren't in the budget sheet.

"The greatest challenges aren't going to be economic. They're cultural," he said. "You've spent years now being battered by accusations of fake news. People often misunderstand our role, people whose world view is not amenable to our role. Our role is not to confirm your comfortable view of the world."

“ I'm looking forward to getting reacquainted with my long-suffering wife. The only reason this has worked is because of her.”

— Mark Baldwin

## Stepping down from the tower

About five years ago, Baldwin and now-retired Opinion Page Editor Wally Haas began taking the Editorial Board on the road, meeting with the community in various neighborhoods, at library branches and other community centers.



# Iowa State ‘tweetstorm’ shows how Free Speech is stretched on college campuses seeking to allow diverse opinions

by Kallie Cox

“ I think legally the test for incitement of violence requires an imminence and a direct intent and effect and outcome that I don’t find present here although the words clearly are meant to be inflammatory and I can see where people would fear those remarks in the very generic sense.”

— Gene Policinski

College Republicans. Two professors on the journalism faculty — Novotny Lawrence and Kelly Winfrey, one journalism graduate student, Julian Neely and Lindsey Moeller, from the Human Resources Department- wrote an open letter to the university’s administration calling for the organization to be disciplined.

Lawrence and Winfrey declined to comment. Moeller did not respond to an email, call or message.

This letter was signed by nearly 32 pages of faculty, staff, students, parents and alums of the university. It called for the university to remove its recognition of the College Republicans as an official group until the last member graduated, to amend the student code of conduct to better respond to speech by students and student organizations that “promote hate, directly or indirectly threaten the physical safety and free movement of members of the campus community, potentially incite violence, or violates the Principles of Community,” and it demands the administration review the university’s approved courses to ensure they are centered on diversity issues.

“Privileging the free speech of those causing harm over the safety of the historically marginalized members of our community furthers the damage and sends the message that the Iowa State University community does not value their presence, despite numerous condemnations in recent months of this exact kind of behavior,” the letter reads. “It is clear that the administration’s statements during a summer that served as a referendum on racism in this country, were merely symbolic and they now serve as further evidence of its history of denouncing some harmful behaviors, only to abdicate themselves of responsibility

when given the opportunity to show their commitment through action.”

Following backlash from the tweet, the university released a statement on Nov. 7 saying:

“Iowa State University is aware of a social media post by one of its student organizations, encouraging others to ‘arm up.’ Any suggestion of armed activity by an Iowa State student organization is prohibited by university policy. Any conduct that violates university policy will be addressed in an appropriate manner.”

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education then wrote a letter to the university’s administration, telling officials they had no right to punish the students and asking them to confirm that they would not. The university backed down.

The university responded to the letter written by the concerned ISU community and said they would not punish the group, would not change the student conduct code and said a working group was already focusing on diversity within the curriculum and would be giving a report to the university in December.

“As an educational institution, it is our charge and responsibility to foster and encourage the understanding of new ideas, the development of expression and thought, and the skill of interacting in a positive way with our community and our world. This responsibility is not accomplished through suppressing speech or dictating thought,” the response letter by university administration read. “Rather, it is accomplished through education, example, discussion, debate, demonstration and building relationships. We pledge to do more in the coming year to educate the campus community on the history and benefits of the

First Amendment, as well as how to exercise its freedoms responsibly, and in ways that are consistent with the Principles of Community.”

Adam Steinbaugh, director of FIRE’s Individual Rights Defense Program, said the college Republican’s statement is protected by the First Amendment because it didn’t qualify as incitement.

“It is talking about doing something in the future, but it’s not clear about when, so saying ‘you must arm up’ could be, or is likely to be perceived as saying you should buy weapons or you should acquire firearms,” Steinbaugh said. “It’s not necessarily saying you should buy firearms and use them, it’s not saying you should buy firearms and parade around with them. It’s talking about purchasing firearms sometime in the future. So even if it is encouraging illegal action and it’s not clear that it is, it’s not encouraging illegal action right now.”

Steinbaugh said because it is not likely this tweet would result in illegal action, it has an added layer of protection and still doesn’t qualify as incitement.

“I don’t think that anyone is going to read a tweet from a student organization and say ‘yes now is the moment when I am going to rise up and buy weapons and rebel against the government’ that’s pretty unlikely,” Steinbaugh said.

The co-authors of the letter from concerned ISU community members to the administration, wrote an apology to the community blaming the university for “not standing up” to the Tweet that had made students “feel unsafe and unwelcome.”

“To clarify, our letter asked the administration to explain why the Tweets made by the College Republicans constituted protected speech. The administration’s response states that speech is protected unless it creates “severe and pervasive harassment that substantially interferes with students’ education.” The administration did not explain why the College Republicans’ series of Tweets disparaging members of underrepresented groups and issuing a call to “arm up” does not meet this standard, even though they made students feel unsafe on campus,” they wrote.

Later in the evening on Nov. 7, after the College Republicans posted the “arm up” tweet and the “Stop the Steal” video, they posted a photo of their account calling themselves the “most oppressed group on campus” following backlash from the ISU community.

The group’s President, Ryan Hurley, said in an email reported by the Des Moines Register.:

“Our thought in writing the tweet was to support everyone in their right to bear arms. People have sickly twisted it. Violence is not our intent.’

Hurley said in an interview with the Register that the group received multiple death threats before and after the tweet.

“We have to walk home all of our members in groups to ensure protection,” Hurley said in the interview. “We always alert people to the rights granted to them by U.S. Constitution. This tweet is nothing to get worked up about.”

From the official email account for

“ ISU’s ‘Principles of Community’ call for respect, purpose, cooperation, richness in diversity, freedom from discrimination and the honest and respectful expression of ideas.”

the Iowa State College Republicans, an unidentified person who had access to the account declined repeated requests for comment by telephone, email or video conferencing. “Heading over to your twitter, some of the stuff posted seems to indicate you are firmly a left winger, this brings about concern as we’ve had other left wingers interview us and take our words out of context,” the person told the GJR reporter in an email. “If you would like to come to Iowa State University for an in person interview, that would be more agreeable.”

ISU’s “Principles of Community” call for respect, purpose, cooperation, richness in diversity, freedom from discrimination and the honest and respectful expression of ideas.

The College Republicans have a history of tweeting blatantly transphobic, homophobic and racist rhetoric, such as a tweet that parents should be charged with child abuse if their child identifies as genderqueer. These tweets directly violate its own constitution and rules against discriminating on the basis of race, gender identity, ethnicity, national origin, religion or sexual orientation.

More recently the group voiced its support of Kyle Rittenhouse, calling his killings “pure self defense,” and retweeted a post from Rep. Marjorie Greene, R-Ga., where she claimed Rep. Ilhan Omar “married her brother.”

On Jan. 5 the group retweeted another College Republican organization, @UW\_CR, with instructions on how to drive to D.C. and photos of a map with the caption “Just checked and it’s true. Maps app won’t give directions to D.C., but will give them to Baltimore, despite the routes being practically identical. They don’t want you in D.C. tomorrow!”

The ISU College Republicans then

posted a thread saying: “Rally in Des Moines TOMORROW @ the State Capitol 12pm. If you can’t make it to D.C., show up in Des Moines!!!” followed by a link to all “Stop the Steal” events.

This was followed by a retweet from the “Real Iowa Republicans” account saying: “ALL PATRIOTS MUST SHOW UP!!!”

Jan. 6 the group posted at 10:34 a.m.: “The brave people fighting on the front lines in D.C. (many are members of our club) are brave Patriots!”

At 11:09 a.m. they tweeted “America First!” with a photo from D.C. at Trump’s rally.

At 12:31 they tweeted “Destroy the RINOS” in response to a retweet by Henry Rodgers, a congressional correspondent, that read: “ANOTHER Hill source weighs in: “House GOP leadership is fully engaged in a knock-down-drag-out effort to keep Trump’s fighters away from the mics. They are literally aiding Dems in opposing objections.”

At 12:47 p.m. they posted: “WE ARE IN DC AND DES MOINES FIGHTING FOR AMERICA” with two photos of what appears to be a group inside of the Iowa State Capitol. The group later claimed this was a prayer circle.

Later in the day at 6:33 p.m. they retweeted a post that read: “This is not your country anymore, American patriots. This regime has nothing but hatred for you.” In response to a tweet by Darren J. Beattie that read: “As curfew passes, police go in hard on trump supporters. Of course we never saw this sort of reaction when BLM set the city on fire and looted hundreds of businesses.” The tweet also included a video of protesters clashing with police.

Policinski, of the Freedom Institute, said the tweets did not rise to the level of incitement.

“There are three elements that have to be there for direct incitement,” Policinski said. “First is the intent of the speaker, can it be demonstrated the speaker intended to cause violent impact. And then was the act, did it actually occur as a result of that intent? And the third thing was it imminent? Is it a direct causation from those first two actions? That I intended to do it, did it come about and was it directly connected.”

While the university wouldn’t have the right to punish the College Republicans, nothing is stopping them from condemning their rhetoric, Steinbaugh said.

“The First Amendment doesn’t mean that a university has to sit on its hands and it doesn’t shield someone from criticism for their speech, that’s a form of more speech,” Steinbaugh said. “That is what the First Amendment prefers instead of censorship. So the fact that speech is protected really only means that it’s protected against government action. It doesn’t save you from criticism by others and it doesn’t mean that what you say is good or wise or right, it just means that the government can’t punish you for it and a university is part of the government. Or a public university is part of the government.”

Steinbaugh said free speech is a neutral principle.

“The rules that we apply to speech that we hate winds up being the rules that we apply to the speech that we love,” Steinbaugh said.





Photo by Victoria Pickering

A TV journalist reports on the insurrection at the United States Capitol early morning on Jan. 8, 2021.

## Local news outlets need to report on hate, racism that fueled attack on U.S. Capitol

by Jackie Spinner

In the days and weeks since the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol building and its police officers, it's becoming clearer just how local this story is, even as the national media outlets have moved to the inauguration and the first days of the Joseph Biden presidency.

The people who participated in the insurrection were from our communities. The members of the branch of government they attacked come from and represent our communities. They were called to act by a president elected by large margins in our communities.

I couldn't help but think of the hand-wringing that took place after Donald Trump (surprise!) was elected in 2016. The national media and the pollsters they relied on were distraught that they missed the signs of Trump's popularity in large parts of the country. National media outlets vowed not to be caught again.

We can't be caught either.

Some of our readers, or at the very least, some of our community members participated in the rally and then charged the capitol. Some simply went to Washington, convinced that the election was stolen. Their anger and disappointment didn't abate with Biden's inauguration.

It is our responsibility to report on and to explore the distrust in government that we saw, the white supremacy that we saw, the racism that we saw, the hatred that we saw, including the hatred toward us.

It is far too easy to allow our readers to distinguish between the elite national media organizations and the journalism that we do. But, in fact, we aren't different. The vast majority of national media reporters got into the business for the same reason we did. They aren't motivated by politics or agenda either.

As the country moves to heal and reckon with the largest breach on the U.S. Capitol since 1814, we need to host the conversation that our communities need to have.

So what would that look like? It's in-depth interviews with people who feel marginalized by the media. It's talking to law enforcement officers. It's talking to the teachers in our communities. It's talking to people who have been hurt by racism. It's putting all of that together in stories that seek to understand and not expose. But we shouldn't shy away from exposing wrongdoing and hate either.

Look, I get it. This isn't going to be easy. I spent Inauguration Day with a family member whose political beliefs are different from mine, whose framing of what happened on Jan. 6

is different from mine, whose finger points in a different direction than mine. Because we love each other, because neither of us is interested in fighting about politics, we spent the day in separate corners of the house for the most part. I felt it was important for my Black children to watch the swearing in of the nation's first Black vice president who also is the first woman to hold that office. But I did that alone with my children.

I know I'm asking you to start a conversation that I didn't want to have that day, to have it with members of your community who are like family members to you, too. The transfer of power did not disburse the sentiment that led to the Jan. 6 insurrection.

We have to have these conversations if we are going to move forward as a country, and as community journalists, we have a particular responsibility to start them. Let's not hand the story over to people who don't really know our communities. Let's lead the way.

*This story first appeared in Publisher's Auxiliary, the only national publication serving America's community newspapers. It is published by the National Newspaper Association. GJR is partnering with Pub Aux to re-print Jackie Spinner's monthly "Local Matters" column.*

## Local news outlets should play larger role in helping community members find vaccines

by Jackie Spinner

My mother was frustrated. At 78, she was next in line for the COVID-19 vaccine under state guidance in Illinois, but like so many seniors, she was having difficulty navigating the various websites and phone lines to secure an appointment. When she finally got on a waiting list at the local hospital, she found out there were at least 1,000 people in front of her.

After posting about it on social media, friends responded with stories about their own struggles to help their parents get a coveted vaccination slot. High school and grade school friends from my hometown in Central Illinois reached out with tips about waiting lists and pharmacies with the vaccine. She finally got an appointment in another town about an hour away, but then that was abruptly cancelled when the pharmacy ran out of supply.

In the end, it was a phone call from my 85-year-old aunt that enabled her to find an appointment at a local pharmacy and get her first shot.

Throughout her scramble to find an appointment, which included being turned away at a county vaccination site after erroneously thinking she had made one, I kept wondering what role local news could have played in helping her and others navigate the process.

While her local newspaper and TV stations

did a good job reporting on who was eligible and also the problems with those people getting vaccinated, I couldn't find a single interactive map or tool that might have helped her see all of the places distributing vaccines. I couldn't find step-by-step video instructions for navigating the sign-up at local pharmacies or the county health department. (The CDC only last week released its updated vaccine finder tool to help.)

While I don't expect the skeleton local news outlets to produce an interactive tool like the one NPR created that helps people in every state find appointments, the pandemic provides an opportunity for us to collaborate to do more than simply report on the state of affairs.

Since 2018, more people in our communities have been getting their news from social media than from print newspapers, according to the Pew Research Center. Many people I know got vaccine appointments after following tips from neighborhood list-serves and Facebook groups. My mom's relationship with "the news" has deteriorated as it became politicized. But she still watches local TV news and expressed frustration that it wasn't more helpful.

Last year I wrote about the unique opportunity the pandemic has given local news outlets to recruit journalism students to bridge gaps in our coverage and to leverage their

unique social media and digital storytelling skills. We are more than a year into the pandemic, and many of our hometown college students are still at home and in need of professional experience and who would relish the opportunity to help a local media outlet build an interactive chart or graphic that might help their grandparents find a vaccine appointment.

We don't need web development experts on our staff to pull this off. There are free and low-cost publishing tools like ZeeMaps and StoryMap JS that we can use to produce interactives that help people find vaccine appointments. Journalism schools like mine are teaching these tools to our students. This is the kind of virtual project that publishers could do in collaboration with journalism students at a nearby institution.

The vaccine distribution, varying state guidance and eligibility requirements have created a Survivor Island scramble for shots. Local media outlets are covering that story well but need to do more. We can consolidate information in one place on our websites. We can provide maps.

We also need to help our communities tackle the problem of distributions by looking at places that have succeeded and by examining and understanding data evidence. Most of

all, we can do it void of the politicization that has gripped so much of the discourse in our country around the coronavirus and the COVID vaccine. We can give it to our readers straight.

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# Statehouse reporters see increased security, new threats after attack in Washington, D.C.

by Brianna Connock

Ever since he started covering the Ohio legislature and governor in the middle of the pandemic last summer, Josh Rultenberg, a reporter for Spectrum News 1, has tried to limit the time he spends at the state capitol building.

After the Jan. 6 insurrection in Washington, D.C., he's become especially leery.

"Truth be told, I've done my best to actually physically stay away from the statehouse," said Rultenberg, who also covers the Ohio Supreme Court for the 24-hour local broadcast network.

Security has increased around the Columbus statehouse and state government buildings since the attack on the U.S. Capitol that left five dead. But armed attacks at statehouse buildings already had been on the rise. A recent ProPublica report found that state governments around the country became flashpoints for conservative anger about the coronavirus lockdown and Donald Trump's electoral defeat. Armed right-wing activists forced their way into state capitols in Idaho, Michigan and Oregon.

Protests in Columbus started ahead of the inauguration, but security was never breached. So far there have been no major attacks on statehouse buildings since the assault on the U.S. Capitol.

"I would say they're probably having a whole lot of success right now guarding the statehouse and other government buildings in Columbus because we haven't heard anything," Rultenberg said.

Rultenberg and statehouse reporters have still been able to cover the Ohio statehouse but access to the building has been limited. Ohio National Guard troops stand guard around the perimeter.

In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker ordered local and state police as well as the Illinois National Guard to secure the capitol building in the days leading up to the inauguration.

"Staff with the Architect of the Capitol started to board up windows and entrances to the complex several days before Inauguration Day," said Mike Miletich, capitol bureau chief for Quincy Media. He reports on state politics for five of Illinois' TV stations.

The building was completely closed on Jan. 20 when President Joseph Biden was sworn in as president of the United States. "We planned in advance and took all of our equipment out of the bureau in order to safely work from home," Miletich said.

Only a handful of protesters showed up. Miletich said reporters are still on edge.

"It's hard to say when people may be violent. We have never seen guns out at the rallies or protests in Springfield, but reporters have been shoved and yelled at by participants," he said. "A protester spat on me during a large rally a few months ago. While that didn't cause me physical harm, it is a significant issue during a pandemic."

“The hardest part is documenting this horrific time in our history without risking our lives.”

— Mike Miletich

He said many reporters are having to consider personal safety and health for the first time on a local reporting beat.

"The hardest part is documenting this horrific time in our history without risking our lives," he said.

John O'Connor, a longtime reporter for the Associated Press in Illinois, recalled what it was like reporting on the state capitol after 9/11.

"When I think of it, there was a lot of amped-up security talk after 9/11, but it didn't get real until a few years later," O'Connor said. Those who frequented the statehouse were issued ID badges, and there was talk of installing metal detectors in the building.

There were some critics of the security changes, arguing that it made the capitol building less accessible to the people, including reporters, an issue that is playing out in the nation's capital right now as well.

"Looking back over 20 years, I remember at the time thinking, this is a shame, to put these machines in the entryways of a historic building erected in the 1870s. But on the other hand, I was surprised at how long it took," O'Connor said.

Although inauguration day remained relatively peaceful at the Illinois capitol, the boarded up windows were a reminder of the events that had transpired.

"It was lonely, appeared deserted and even abandoned. It was odd to be denied entry to the Capitol; I was turned away upon showing my badge," O'Connor said.

So, what comes next? The changes after 9/11 were by no means immediate. O'Connor is not so sure. "I don't anticipate a lot of changes," he said. "In terms of security, officials have done about all they can do while keeping this taxpayer-funded facility, this home of democracy in the state, accessible to its citizens."

He predicts a new focus on domestic security.

"I foresee greater scrutiny on those groups, knowing their agendas and their histories, and knowing if they really are whom they purport to be," O'Connor said.

# More news outlets stop publishing mugshots in wake of George Floyd protests, national reckoning over race

by Brianna Connock

A growing number of media outlets are banning the publication of police mugshots—and in some cases, removing them from digital archives, in the wake of a national reckoning on racial justice that followed the murder of George Floyd last summer in Minnesota.

Both the Chicago Tribune and St. Louis Post Dispatch have adopted new policies in recent months. The Tribune announced in February that it would reconsider using mugshots with news stories and remove previously published mugshots. The Post-Dispatch stopped publishing mugshot galleries last year.

The Tribune's new guidelines will "prioritize public safety, news judgment and compassionate coverage, and acknowledge inconsistencies in the criminal justice system that affect which mugshots are released and published online," said the paper's editor-in-chief, Colin McMahon.

Mugshot photos will still be published when there is a public safety concern or if they have a particularly high news value under the Tribune's new policy.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch changed its policy in late 2020.

"Last year we stopped publishing online mugshot galleries that had been compiled monthly based on stories and mugshots posted earlier for major crimes we had covered," said Gilbert Bailon, the paper's editor-in-chief.

The St. Louis Post Dispatch has since ceased using monthly mugshot galleries and has a policy for publishing mugshots based on the severity of the crime committed.

"The Post-Dispatch will publish a mugshot, if available, after a person has been charged with a major crime," Bailon said. "We don't cover or publish mugshots for minor crimes."

While the St. Louis Post Dispatch does not remove previously published content, it does update the status of crime or court stories as they unfold, which would include whether an individual's criminal charges have been reduced or dismissed.

Other news outlets already had started rethinking their mugshot policies before the protests last summer. In Ohio, Cleveland.com changed its practice in 2018, limiting the number of mugshots published, no longer naming individuals accused of minor crimes and removing the names of those previously published who had their records expunged of minor crimes. Lawmakers also are looking closely at the practice, which could limit access to the photos in the first place. In Utah, the state legislature adopted a measure that would prohibit publication of mugshots until individuals are criminally charged.

## Start writing or type / to choose a block

The Cleveland digital news website started considering changes to its mugshot policies in 2015.



"The idea was hotly contested in our newsroom, with about half the people objecting to the changing of our archives," said Editor Chris Quinn. "Because it was so sensitive, we continued to talk about it for a few years before finally making the decision to begin the policy in 2018."

Cleveland.com readers initially had some criticisms of the new policy, but they quickly diminished as positive results became apparent.

"The result of what we have been doing the past few years has been relief for a great many people who were tormented by our archived stories. Some have sent notes expressing gratitude that they can finally move on with their lives," Quinn said.

He hopes that more news outlets will follow and adopt similar policies as best practice. "With so many newsrooms now moving in this direction, I feel more confident that we will, indeed, come to a consensus on the best way to handle this issue," he said.

WRTV Indianapolis updated its mugshot policy in July of last year, following the protests concerning racial justice and police reform. The station now only uses the names and mugshots of individuals formally charged with crimes, rather than simply upon arrest.

"We really have to balance giving the public the information that they need with the potential harm that can be caused to the people impacted by our coverage," Digital Director Jen Brown told GJR.

Florence Chee, director of the Center for Digital Ethics and Policy at Loyola University Chicago, is glad to see the ethics of mugshots coming into discussion.

"Who is getting arrested and why? How does this process affect someone's reputation and life prospects, when their arrest becomes the first hit in a search for their name in the future?" Chee said. "These are examples of why it is important to consider ethics surrounding this practice."

To Chee, mugshots aren't essential to a

good news story.

"We are seeing that they are not necessary when set against the potential harm that could be caused to someone who is arrested," she said. "There are ample examples of good journalism and reporting that does not rely upon mugshots and does respect the humanity of all parties involved."

William Drummond, a professor at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, said the answer to the ethical dilemma is not easily simplified.

"Routine publication of mugshots as slideshows are gratuitous. Those slideshows feed morbid curiosity," Drummond said. "But what about the gentlemen caught in prostitution stings or child trafficking roundups? What about particularly notorious homicide or kidnapping cases when an arrest has been made? Doesn't the public need to be reassured?"

Drummond covered the assassination of former president John F. Kennedy in 1968 while in Los Angeles. He argued that publishing the assassin's mugshot was important to the story.

"Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was arrested at the scene. Under the new mugshot rule, the newspaper would not have run his picture after his arrest," Drummond said. "That would have been a big mistake."

But there are cases where mugshots are not needed in a news story and can have negative effects on not only the individuals in the photographs but on communities as a whole.

"No question the publication of jailhouse photos reinforces racial stereotypes," said Drummond, who mentored inmate journalists at San Quentin State Prison and wrote a book about advising its newspaper called "Prison Truth." "Blacks and Latinos are much more likely to be arrested for the exact same behavior, because of longstanding police bias. Decisions should be made on a case by case basis."



# Local Chicago news startup turns 3, with a growing list of newsletter readers and paid subscribers

by Marin Scott

When their billionaire owner abruptly closed Chicago's DNAInfo in 2017, three former editors decided to build a different kind of news source out of the remnants.

Block Club Chicago launched seven months later, with a mission to combine neighborhood reporting with public service journalism and to do it under a nonprofit business model.

It was an ambitious plan, but former DNAInfo editors Stephanie Lulay, Jen Sabella and Shamus Toomey knew that without a citywide, hyperlocal newspaper, underserved neighborhoods on Chicago's south and west sides would not get the kind of community coverage that was needed.

"We really heard from readers right away that they needed this coverage, and we didn't see anyone else filling that gap," said Lulay, who is the managing editor at Block Club. "So we got together and kind of hatched a plan — could we bring back this neighborhood coverage in a different form. And that's how we launched Block Club."

The result is inspiring. At almost three years old, Block Club Chicago is a leading neighborhood news source, with 140,000 newsletter readers and 15,500 paid subscribers. The scrappy newsroom with five editors and 10 reporters has proven to be a worthy competitor to "legacy" Chicago newsrooms, intimately covering everything from the restoration of a local church to how to get a COVID-19 vaccine. (The organization also has a director of development and a newsletter and hotline manager.)

In part, its success as a news organization comes from how it uses its resources and allows its reporters to direct the coverage from their neighborhoods. Block Club reporters have subsequently won over the community's trust while gaining access to stories no one else is aware of. They nurture a reader-to-reporter relationship where praises can be shared and criticisms are heard, with public service journalism such as a COVID-19 Hotline or resource fairs not only inform the public but also work to improve the city.

"I think that that's one of the solutions for the local news crisis, are these digital-only startups," said Mark Jacob, former Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times editor and current website editor for Medill's Local News Initiative at Northwestern University. "You have these legacy organizations, these just giant, old monsters like the Tribune that have all this baggage and all this infrastructure... And it's just, it's very costly to do journalism that way."

If local news startups can find a way to survive, then they will be "a big part of the solution to the problem of news deserts and the problem of people not having enough information about their own communities to

make smart decisions about who to vote for, where to go to get services," he said. "The basic things that journalism is supposed to do."

But the key to Block Club's success, according to Jacob, is its mission.

"It really understands its audience, who it's trying to serve, and it has such a positive vibe to it. They'll do hard news when they need to, but they also really understand community service. They understand that they're trying to help people learn stuff that will make their lives better."

When investigating the immense growth of Block Club Chicago, it's important to note the changing environment of the city's journalism scene as a whole. Community-based reporting efforts, like those embodied by Block Club, have gained immense popularity amongst their followers because of their dedicated and personalized coverage. Oftentimes readers feel under or misrepresented by legacy newspapers like the Tribune because they simply do not have the resources to have reporters in every neighborhood, covering every story that takes place there. Instead, they spend energy on massive investigative stories, covering state-wide politics and, at one time, relaying global news from foreign reporting bureaus — all of which is necessary.

That being said, Chicago residents also deserve their proper coverage, and the old way of sending a journalist in to do one-off coverage of a crime or protest without fully understanding the story's context is no longer accepted. Block Club's readers do not only want genuine news coverage of their neighborhoods; they want reporters they can lean on and trust.

"Chicagoans can smell bullshit from a mile away," said Sabella, who is now the director of strategy at Block Club. "So they really respond well, when they know 'okay, this person gets us. They get our neighborhood, they're part of our neighborhood, they understand how this neighborhood functions," and I think that they put a lot of trust into our reporters because they can tell that [the reporters] feel that way."

This shines a light on another issue many Chicago journalists are debating; the idea of objectivity. There's often the claim that getting too close to a given community, covering too much of one beat, will jeopardize one's reputation as an objective, non-partisan reporter. Jacob says this ideology is not without warrant — sometimes reporters do get too invested in their sources, their stories and their communities. But it's often better to have the degree of political, environmental, social and cultural understanding that comes with covering one community for a long time.

"Journalism has been stuck due to the old, white, male definition of what objectivity is and what ethical journalism is, and who's been

setting these standards for so many years? Old white men, and they've been leaving a lot of people out of these conversations of how we cover the news," Sabella said. "I think that... listening to your audience is what we're supposed to do as journalists, and I think anyone saying it's not objective to listen to your audience is delusional."

But objectivity and community-based journalism do not have to be mutually destructive ideologies. Mauricio Peña, a reporter for Block Club, knows that even though he reports closely with the residents of Chicago's Little Village, Pilsen and West Loop neighborhoods, his journalism is just as honest and hard-hitting as any others.

"I try to let the community guide me, and whether someone wants to call that not real journalism, I just think that's a cheap shot," Peña said. "At the end of the day, I'm always going to be fair, I'm always going to be honest and I'm always going to be accurate. I'm going to do my due diligence as a reporter to get the story right, but at the same time I'm going to serve the community and be a source for information."

Block Club's reporting speaks for itself. The team provides their readers with information written in an accessible way while doing the work to understand the most complex aspects of city government so those who need assistance or answers can easily get them, and they do much of this reporting without

charging their readers.

There's no disputing that community-based reporting is becoming the dominant reporting model in Chicago. Since 2018 the Chicago Tribune has had multiple rounds of layoffs, largely due to a change in the paper's ownership and money being funneled to stakeholders while leaving their reporters without much financial support. Many left the paper or were furloughed (a practice only exacerbated by the pandemic), thus inhibiting the Tribune's ability to cover the city's endless stream of news.

Those who left, such as Dawn Rhodes, a former editor and reporter at the Tribune, moved to start-up newsrooms like Block Club Chicago, where they noticed their work making a direct impact on the readers they serve. And when legacy newspapers were struggling to maintain the sheer size of their daily operations, community-focused newsrooms like Block Club Chicago, Chalkbeat Chicago, South Side Weekly

and The Triibe rose to popularity, filling in reporting gaps in minority neighborhoods and adapting to their reader's needs.

"It's not really the case that it's a bad time for media in Chicago, what it is is it's way more fractured," Jacob said, citing the rise of WBEZ, ProPublica Illinois and City Bureau as examples of multiple news outlets doing the work that was once dominated by one paper.

"What you don't have is one source, a giant newsroom that will do everything for everyone. That's what you don't have anymore. And maybe that's sad, maybe it's not."

Rhodes, who is now a senior editor at Block Club, believes there's a place in Chicago media for both legacy outlets and local news sources. In fact, she asserts that there must be room for both, seeing as Block Club doesn't have the resources to conduct state-wide investigations and legacy papers can't afford to put reporters in every neighborhood. Instead, Rhodes hopes to see

less competition between Chicago's news outlets and more journalistic collaboration in order to best serve the city.

"This is a time, not just in Chicago, but in the entire industry, this is the time to break down a little bit more of those traditional barriers and be more open to exploring partnerships, to strengthen journalism, to strengthen the kind of work that we're able to do. And I think there is more of that happening," Rhodes said.

Until then, Block Club will continue to grow with help from its readers, reporters and any other newsroom that can lend a hand.

"We're not perfect and we're always learning," Sabella said in a final thought on Block Club's place in Chicago's land of news. "We're always listening to our reporters and our readers, and I think that attitude you need to have if you're running a newsroom. But hopefully we make the city's neighborhoods feel better represented by the media."



Photo by JE Koonce





Photo by Travis Wise

## Film festivals adapt to pandemic with new formats that could stick around

by Melanie La Rosa and Anna Wolfgram Evans

Like every other major event of the past year, film festivals were forced to adapt to the pandemic. Many were forced to shut down or go online for a year. As festivals evolve in 2021 to meet the challenges of remote events, they ushered in several remote ways to engage with audiences.

These remote events, while forced by the pandemic, also created opportunities for film festivals. By moving into virtual spaces, festivals can now develop audiences outside of their geographic area. This can potentially open up opportunities for festivals in the midwest, southern and western states, rural areas, and other locations outside of the industry hubs in New York and Los Angeles.

There are 3,000 film festivals in the United States and over 10,000 festivals across the world. For many of these, the sudden switch to online programming proved a challenge too hard to overcome, and some canceled outright. Others embraced the transition when the normal world came to a halt.

"We are all adjusting, and we are all trying to figure it out as filmmakers. At any given time there is way too much to see, everyone is shifting and adjusting and trying to figure it out. This is a bad time to be passive," said Katha Cato, founder and

executive director of the Queens World Film Festival in New York. The 10-day festival was slated to launch on March 19, 2020. When New York shut down events on March 16, they rallied volunteers, interns, and the skeleton staff, contacted filmmakers around the world for permission, and reprogrammed their slate of 191 films to launch online and on time. Running through March 29, it was the first festival to go virtual due to the pandemic. With over 30,000 views of the 2020 event, the festival's effort met with a resounding embrace from audiences.

The worldwide shutdown hit the entertainment industry hard. Big awards shows, even ones as well-resourced as the Golden Globes, Film Independent Spirit Awards, and the Academy Awards, postponed their events. Major film releases were also pushed back.

Movie theatres struggled, and even in states where theaters could remain operational, they fought to keep their doors open. Although vaccines are now on the rise, there is still uncertainty about whether the public will ever again "go to the movies."

In this cultural landscape, film festivals occupy a unique place. They run once a year, and most rely on ticket sales to make their shoestring budgets. In 2020, when

the powerhouse festival SXSW was forced to cancel, it did not bode well for smaller events. Others, like Telluride, Cannes, and Edinburgh Film, followed suit: pushing back dates, recrafting programs, and canceling. It seemed daunting to attempt to connect with loyal festival audiences during the COVID era.

Many Midwestern festivals also shut their doors for 2020, like the Cleveland International Film Festival, the Traverse City Film Festival, Wisconsin Film Festival, Roger Ebert Film Festival, and many other well-established events.

In Carbondale, Illinois, the Big Muddy Film Festival, the oldest student-run festival in the US and hosted by Southern Illinois University, included smartphone entries for the first time and a virtual festival.

Sarah Lewison, Big Muddy faculty advisor and Associate Professor, said the event was always visible to filmmakers looking at online entry systems like FilmFreeway. "On the other hand, our audience has always been physically limited to the city of Carbondale and the nearby region," she said. The new virtual format was beneficial. "We definitely had a wider audience, with viewers from all over the country," Lewison said. "It was also a bigger audience than we've had with a physical fest for the last few years.

Streaming with video on demand, where people can see new films all of the time, "is changing the game for small festivals like ours," she added.

Sara Livingston, a Chicago-based writer whose film, "This Year," was just selected for screening at the Imagine Rain Independent Film Awards, an online monthly shorts competition, said new virtual formats definitely benefit festival-goers. "As a festival attendee, I remember rushing to get to the next screening and missing the talk back session," she said. "I'm hoping the virtual setting will open the door for long Zoom-enabled talk-back sessions and after-screening discussions."

Her film, "This Year," is composed mostly of the black and white photos she took this past year, with text and an improvised piano soundtrack by Moby.

"Festival screenings have not been very accessible to a general audience," she said. "If a screening were streamed to one's own living room, the films might seem more available. It would open possibilities for audience members who don't have the resources or time to get to a special venue, or to people with mobility issues or need closed captioning."

Film festivals date back to 1932, originating with the Venice International Film Festival. They have survived many cultural and economic tribulations.

Festival culture is strong, and at the beginning of the pandemic, a crowdfunding platform for filmmakers, Seed & Spark, created the "Film Festival Survival Pledge," which invited festivals and distributors to support the independent film community during the pandemic by redefining traditional rules in light of new realities. It included

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easing eligibility criteria for competition categories, upholding premiere status, providing geoblocking waivers, temporarily waiving production timeline policies for films released during the pandemic, and accepting films that screened virtually.

The Pledge had overwhelming appeal. Two weeks after lockdown swept the nation, 32 festivals had already signed on. A year later, that number has grown to 250. The world's largest film submission portal, FilmFreeway, even created a special page to search for these festivals.

How do audience members interact with filmmakers in an online festival? And could festivals reimagine their traditional audiences outside of their geographic locations?

"Cinemas are often in affluent white spaces. It isolated audiences in major ways," said Mia Bruno, a distribution and marketing strategist who released the film Coded Bias, during COVID. She reflected on the positives of distributing and marketing online: "We have seen a lot of numbers go up because [remote releases] separated distribution from the way it has been into what it could be." In this vision, festivals can leapfrog traditional boundaries of geography, culture, economics, and established attendance, and forge ties with audiences anywhere.

During the lockdown, everyone grasped for online social interactions: Facebook concerts, Instagram dance parties, Zoom birthdays. Film festivals were always a hub for interaction, networking, and hanging out with filmmakers, but going online meant finding new ways to maintain social interactions. Simply streaming films was not enough: without much-needed interactions, filmmakers and audiences remained isolated.

The Queens World Film Festival has a reputation as a "filmmakers festival," with a program designed for filmmakers to network with each other, unique in the crowded marketplace of celebrity-driven and red-carpet festivals. Their pandemic programming is evidence that audiences craved a safe way to talk to each other. One of their virtual events, "Wednesdays at 9," was a selection of short films, connected by theme, with a live Q&A with directors on Zoom. Holding 19 of these

discussions, they programmed 91 films and attracted 19,000 online views.

Cato reflected on the new opportunities. "The three essential things that have been marginalized, ignored, pushed to the side — the first thing to be cut, the first thing to be hurt — have all been deemed essential now," she said. "Those are the arts, brown people, and health. And I find that very encouraging, I find that voices are being heard for the first time, and people are being empowered to tell interesting stories."

Online has its advantages. "The press has said their ability to see so many films has been incredible," Cato said.

Other festivals found similar ways to adapt. ImageOut Film Festival, an LGBTQ+ focused film festival in Rochester, New York, which has a dedicated and large following through its focused programs, navigated a smooth transition to the new digital format. It hosted activities like live filmmaker Q&As and drive-ins. It also "windowed" films — making a film available online only for a select set of days and times — to create a sense of a special event.

The Jackson Wild Film Festival, based in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, is attended by many major international broadcasters and vital in the programming pipeline for channels like Discovery, National Geographic, and European science and nature broadcasters. Their late October event dove headfirst into the challenges of remote interactions: they created virtual spaces like "campfires" and "hotel lobby" sections, where you could click on a digital table or campfire and chat with others, as a way to replicate what you would experience in a live event.

Most important for all of these events, festival organizers created a deliberate atmosphere of openness about reaching out to other attendees and fostering conversations. This helps remote gatherings avoid feeling like work meetings, and encourages the sense of connection that film festivals traditionally provided.

Cato summed up 2020's most important lesson. "This is a bad time to put your cameras down, do not stop showing us what you see," Cato said.



