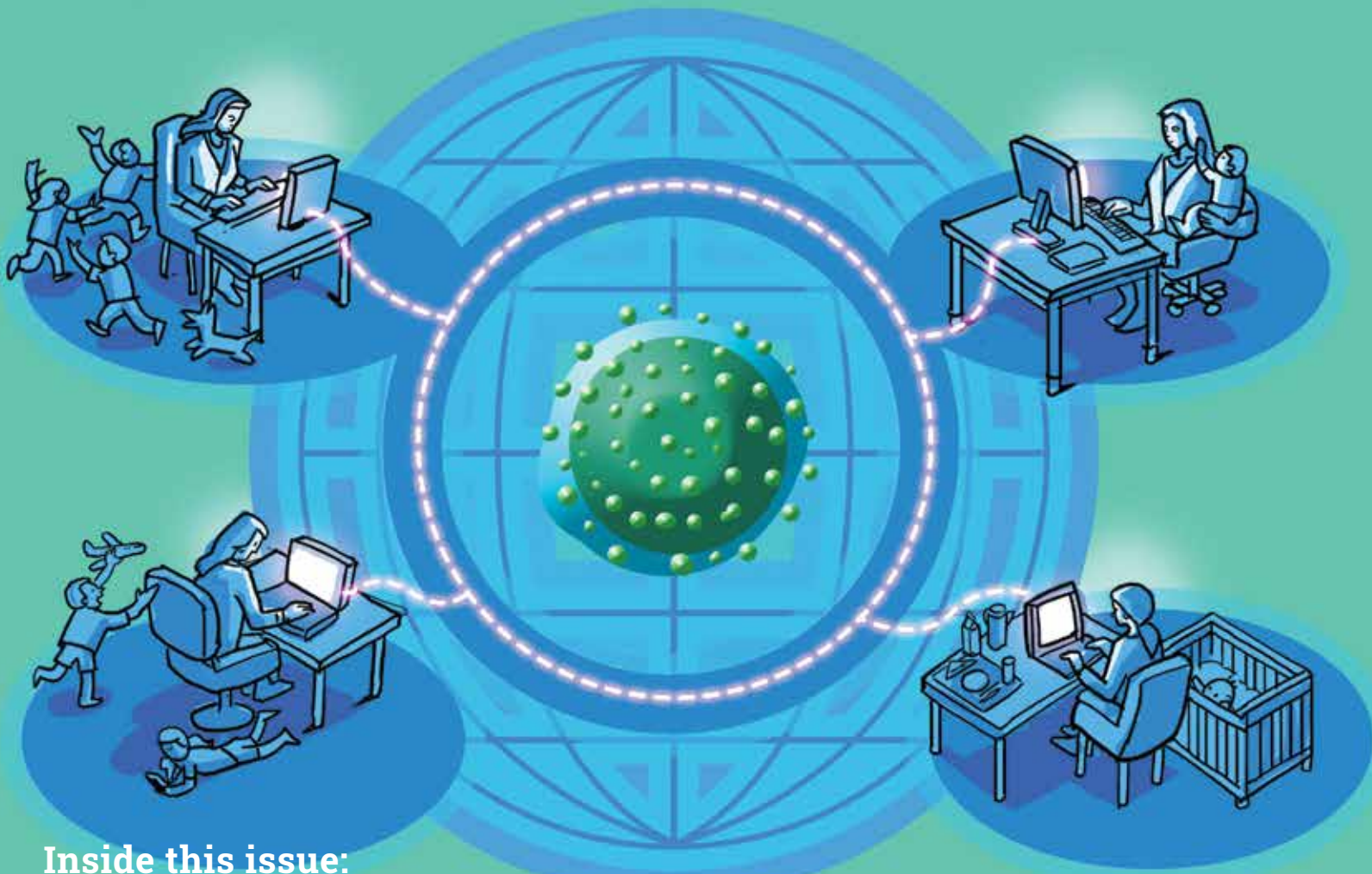


Gateway Journalism REVIEW

Founded 1970 as St. Louis Journalism Review



Inside this issue:

Media moms in the pandemic

by Jackie Spinner

**Teaching journalism in
the wake of George Floyd**

by Jenny Spinner

**Lessons learned from teaching
journalism during the pandemic**

by Teresa Puente

**Loud, shrill and unknown: The
strange case of the Gateway Pundit**

by Paul Wagman

CONTRIBUTORS

PUBLISHER WILLIAM H. FREIVOGEL

William H. Freivogel is a former editorial page deputy editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and contributes to St. Louis Public Radio. He is a member of the Missouri Bar.

EDITOR JACKIE SPINNER

Jackie Spinner is an Associate Professor at Columbia College in Chicago; freelance independent journalist specializing on the Middle East; former Baghdad Bureau Chief Washington Post.

DESIGN CHIEF ABBEY LA TOUR

Abbey La Tour is a copy editor and paginator at Paxton Media Group. La Tour is a graduate of SIUC where she studied journalism and communication design. You can find her on Twitter @LaTourAbbey.

ARTIST STEVE EDWARDS

Steve Edwards is a professional artist at Steve Edwards Studio.

GJR FOUNDER CHARLES KLOTZER

Charles Klotzer is the founder of the St. Louis Journalism Review.

STUDENT MANAGING EDITOR CLARISSA COWLEY

Clarissa Cowley is a first-year master's student at SIUC from Chicago. She is studying professional media and media management with a focus in multimedia journalism. Her research interests are environmental and racial justice.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR ENOLE DITSHEKO

Enole Ditsheko is a doctoral student at SIUC, author of "Wrestling Botswana Back from Khama", a 2019 journalistic polemic about the state of democracy in his homeland of Botswana.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OLOLADE AFOLABI

Ololade Afolabi is a PhD Candidate at SIUC where she is researching international communications in the Global South. She is the social media editor for GJR. She is from Nigeria.

COPY EDITOR PENNY FOLGER

Penny Folger is a recent Columbia College graduate and Los Angeles native. Her work has been published in the Columbia Chronicle and ChicagoTalks.

AMELIA BLAKELY

Amelia Blakely was raised in Anna-Jonesboro, Illinois. She reported from Anna and Nashville, Tennessee. She graduated from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and was a 2020-2021 Campus Consortium Fellow with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting in Washington D.C. Blakely is currently an outreach core member for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. You can find her on Twitter @AmeilaBlakely.

DON CORRIGAN

Don Corrigan is former editor-in-chief and co-publisher of the Webster-Kirkwood Times, South County Times and West End Word newspapers in St. Louis. He is a professor emeritus in the School of Communications at Webster University in St. Louis.

KALLIE COX

Kallie Cox is a senior at Southern Illinois University Carbondale studying political science and journalism and can be reached at Kcox@dailyegyptian.com or on Twitter @KallieECox.

DEBORAH DOUGLAS

Deborah Douglas is the author of "Moon U.S. Civil Rights Trail: A Traveler's Guide to the People, Places, and Events That Made the Movement" and a Eugene S. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Professor of Journalism at DePauw University. Read her latest at The Guardian.

TERESA PUENTE

Teresa Puente is an assistant professor of journalism at California State University, Long Beach.

JENNY SPINNER

Jenny Spinner is a professor of English at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia where she teaches journalism and writing and serves as a contributing faculty adviser to The Hawk student newspaper. Her latest book is Of Women and the Essay (U of Georgia P, 2018).

PAUL WAGMAN

Paul Wagman is a former Post-Dispatch reporter and FleishmanHillard executive who is now an independent writer and communications consultant.

PUBLISHED BY:

School of Journalism College of
College of Arts and Media
Olusegun A. Ojewuyi,
Interim Dean
Jan Thompson, Director

BOARD OF ADVISERS:

Jim Kirchherr, Don Corrigan,
Lisa Bedian, Tammy Merrett,
Rita Csapo-Sweet, Steve Perron,
Eileen Duggan, Michael D.
Sorkin, David P. Garino, Rick
Stoff, Ted Gest, Fred Sweet,
William Greenblatt, Lynn
Venhaus, Daniel Hellinger, Robert
A. Cohn, Michael E. Kahn, John
P. Dubinsky, Gerald Early, Paul
Schoomer, Moisy Shopper, Ray
Hartmann, Ken Solomon, Avis
Meyer, Tom Engelhardt

The Gateway Journalism Review
GJR (USPS 738-450 ISSN: 0036-
2972) is published quarterly,
by Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, School of Journalism,
College of Mass Communication
and Media Arts, a non-profit
entity. The office of publication is
SIUC School of Journalism, 1100
Lincoln Drive, Mail Code 6601,
Carbondale, IL 62901.

TO SUBSCRIBE:

618-536-3361
gatewayjr.org/about
Sign up for our weekly
newsletter at gatewayjr.org.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

\$20 — one year
\$35 — two years
\$45 — three years

Foreign subscriptions higher
depending upon country.

POSTMASTER: Please send
address changes to:
Gateway Journalism Review
Amber Easton — School of
Journalism
1100 Lincoln Drive, Mail Code
6601
Carbondale, IL 62901.

Periodical postage paid at
Carbondale, IL, and additional
mailing offices.

Copyright © 2021 by the Gateway
Journalism Review. Indexed in the
Alternative Press Index. Allow one
month for address changes.

**4 Working moms push
for flexibility to remain
when newsrooms open up
again**

**6 Teaching journalism
in the wake of George
Floyd**

**8 Lessons learned
from teaching journalism
during the pandemic**

**10 The Loud, shrill and
unknown: The strange
case of the Gateway Pundit**

**16 Media and letter
writers say Missouri
legislature ignores 'will of
the people'**

**18 Recovering history
of Illinois' free Black
settlements**

**20 OPINION: Chicago
mayor isn't wrong about
the diversity crisis in city's
newsrooms**

**22 Illinois gun media
flourish with stories
downplaying failed Jan.
6 insurrection, claiming
election fraud**

**23 OPINION: Local news
outlets need to report on
hate, racism that fueled
attack on U.S. Capitol**



Photos courtesy of Susie An

WBEZ reporter Susie An works from home with her two young sons during the pandemic.

Working moms push for flexibility to remain when newsrooms open up again

by Jackie Spinner

Like many journalists in the early months of the pandemic, Susie An was mostly working from home. Draped in a blanket, her radio equipment propped on a big box of diapers, the education reporter at WBEZ in Chicago voiced her news stories and features from a closet. With schools and daycares closed, her days were hectic working from home with her sons, ages 7 and 3. "My children are quite loud and, shall we say, creative with their play," she said. "There were times when I was on an interview and my husband was in a meeting. That's when our children broke a lot of things, made big messes or got hurt."

In Atlanta, Cynthia DuBose, the managing editor for audience engagement at McClatchy, had to jump from her own work video calls to helping her daughters log into their virtual classrooms for school. "I remember in those first weeks, waking early, working, getting the girls up and busy, working until 6, cooking dinner, spending family time, having bedtime and working

again from 8 until I fell asleep," said DuBose, whose daughters are 6 and 9.

Meanwhile, Bethany Erickson, the digital editor for People Newspapers in Dallas, found herself working later and later to account for the breaks she took during the workday to help her 10-year-old son with his fourth grade math, which, she noted, is nothing like the math she did in fourth grade.

"I'm always just at that edge of kind of tired and actually exhausted," Erickson said.

For many working moms in journalism, the past year of juggling job responsibilities and parenting — often in the same shared space — was one of their toughest; even if it produced unexpected gifts like reclaiming time from long commutes, earlier dinner times with their families and just being around more.

Erickson's son, who is autistic, started pitching stories after watching his mom work from home. "We worked in the same room a lot,

and he got to see what steps go into writing a news story," she said. "He started asking questions and has even written a story and two op-eds for our papers this year. I don't know that he would have been as interested in improving his writing if we hadn't had this time together."

Women make up nearly half of the total workforce in media and entertainment, although most of them are concentrated in entry-level positions, according to a 2020 report by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm. The pandemic disproportionately affected them, especially if they were also raising children or doing so as a single parent. After all, if you don't have child care, it's hard to drop everything to cover breaking news, and the news didn't let up last year.

"I felt caught between doing a good job and being a good parent, but failing most days at both," said An, who also fills in as a news anchor and talk show host at the public radio station. "I do credit my

editor with having understanding of the situation and trying not to assign me quick turn news items in the mornings. That was helpful."

Working dads didn't escape the additional stresses of the pandemic. More worked from home and either shared or shouldered child care or household responsibilities during the peak of the stay-at-home orders when nobody, except the most essential of essential workers, was going anywhere. There was a significant shift in parenting roles and involvement for many dads, including journalists. But the fact is that gender inequality remains, both in the workplace and in the home. Working mothers are more likely to scale back their careers or reduce their hours to care for children even outside of a pandemic. One study last year found that the gender inequity worsened, particularly for working mothers of school-age or younger children.

Across the globe, women worried about managing additional responsibilities while at home, a

lack of child care and the potential threat of losing income or jobs. And it wasn't just the pandemic, with its historic lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. It was the summer of racial reckoning and the protests that swept the world after George Floyd was murdered by a Minnesota police officer. It was the U.S. presidential election.

"I shared with a friend the other day that I am still in shock about 2020," DuBose said. "It's almost like I'm in a twilight zone. I lost family and friends, watched in disbelief as part of my beloved Atlanta burned, watched again in disbelief as a man was killed about 30 miles from our home at a Wendy's parking lot and lived through my Georgia becoming ground zero for an election like none other. And that's just news."

Mira Lowe, president of the nonprofit Journalism and Women's Symposium (JAWS, said women journalists on the frontlines covering pandemic and the social unrest of last summer had to contend with keeping themselves safe in the field while keeping and their loved ones safe once when returning home. "Self-care was also a stretch for women juggling the demands of the job and family while working remotely," she said. "Many of us worked more hours while at home."

She said one of the biggest challenges for women in journalism, particularly freelancers and entrepreneurs, was loss of income. "For many, writing assignments evaporated and contracts were put on hold," said Lowe, who is also director of the Innovation News Center at the University of Florida. "Public speaking engagements were cancelled. Book promotions ceased. In some cases, spouses and partners also lost jobs."

S. Mitra Kalita, a veteran media executive and columnist for Fortune magazine, said the fact that decent health coverage remains anchored to full-time work is a massive roadblock to balance, innovation and flexibility for working moms. "You might say you can turn to Obamacare or the exchange," she said. "Except that the process of researching, switching and advocating is a whole 'nother job."

Women also are often caring for aging parents, not just their children. When the pandemic began, Kallita moved between her parents' place in New Jersey and her family's home in Queens. "My father had a second stroke right before lockdown, and I was terrified of him being in a hospital or rehab. So we brought him home," said Kalita, whose daughters are 9 and 16.



Chicago public radio reporter Susie An sets up a makeshift studio in a closet at home.

"My parents are in the process of selling their house right now," she said. "Navigating the property tax breaks for seniors, necessary smoke alarm inspection before closing and even just asking why their latest prescriptions did not qualify for reimbursement is a massive part of my life and time. I don't need help from employers with this though. Rather, I think we need to collectively fight to make processes simpler, equitable and accessible. Think of how much invisible labor women like us pour into this."

With the Delta variant of COVID-19 circulating and children under 12 still ineligible for the vaccine, it's hard to talk about post-pandemic life in the present. It may yet be months off. But one thing is almost certain. "The pandemic has shown us we can work remotely," Lowe said. "And so, I think the remote workforce is here to stay. Companies should find ways to embrace it and adapt benefits to support it. Consider flex schedules and policies that allow for a better integration of work and life responsibilities. Continue to incorporate virtual meetings into workflows so that everyone can be included. Focus on self-care

strategies, and providing mental health and wellness resources. Invest in virtual and on-site skills-based training to help employees keep their skills sharp. Build online communities or interest groups, i.e. for working mothers, to fuel connection and support."

Kalita, who left her job as a senior vice president at CNN Digital at the end of 2020 to launch her own media business, said the media industry needs a shift in work cultures toward moms and caregivers. "We will often say someone didn't want to apply for the bigger job or stay with an organization because of their kids," said Kalita, who co-founded Epicenter-NYC, a community journalism movement, and URL Media, a network of Black and Brown news outlets. "Instead, we need to be asking how we — as organizations — can better support them to help them ascend or be retained. It puts the commitment to keeping talent on work culture versus trying to shoehorn old methods into new realities."

DuBose, who worked from home before the pandemic, said she definitely learned that she needs to prioritize self-care, which includes delegating, blocking her calendar

and taking a real lunch. "Without it, I'm not sure how I would have survived."

She also said what 2020 did for race conversations cannot be downplayed. "The events allow me to now have very real conversations with some of my white friends (allies) that I probably would not have before. I know that some events really divided our country but I also believe that for those of us who see the value in listening to gain understanding, 2020 was a game changer."

Both An, in Illinois, and Erickson, in Texas, plan to continue working remotely part of the time this fall when their children are back in school or daycare. It will be easier, of course, when they are alone at home working.

"Both of my children have been receiving virtual therapy, but will likely do in-person visits starting in the near future," An said. "I hope there will be good balance and understanding as we transition into that. Also, I hope schools will keep doing the virtual teacher parent conferences. Pre-pandemic, that was nearly 2 hours out of my day for a 15 minute meeting."

Erickson also was able to negotiate a hybrid schedule starting in August, where she will be in the office three- to four- days a week and working from home one day a week. "My husband was able to negotiate the same, which means we'll only need to nail down after school care for two to three days a week," she said.

Kristen Graham, who covers Philadelphia schools for the Inquirer, said she can't imagine going back to the newsroom full-time again; certainly not eight hours a day, five days a week like she used to. (The Inquirer newsroom is still closed, but employees may return as early as September.)

"Selfishly, I'd love to go back," she said. "I liked having eight hours where I was just working. But I can't imagine going back just because I feel that I need more flexibility in my day. I was trying to fit in too much in non-work hours."

Graham, whose sons are 8 and 5, plans to work from home several days a week. "I've found that I'm surprisingly productive when I have my kid at tennis practice, and I'm writing in the car."

Her editors are both working parents and have not pressured her about returning to the newsroom, she said. "Being a working parent is hard," Graham said. "Having some flexibility makes it easier."



Photo by Jenny Spinner

Marchers take part in a rally for social justice in 2020 in Philadelphia.

Teaching journalism in the wake of George Floyd

by Jenny Spinner

For many journalism educators and their students, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020 launched a year of reckoning, intensifying classroom discussions focused on race and the media.

Brandy Monk-Payton, an assistant professor in the department of communication and media studies at Fordham University, said when she returned to the classroom this spring to teach TV, Race and Civil Rights — which she had not taught since 2018 — she found students starting from a different point of engagement.

“The degree of the shifts of the student consciousness around these issues was like night and day,” Monk-Payton said. “I really attribute it to summer 2020, which galvanized a lot of students wanting to figure out how to be allies, how to be in the struggle.”

Monk-Payton said students drew parallels between the images she showed them of

Rodney King, an unarmed Black man who was beaten by Los Angeles police officers during an arrest in 1991, and those of Floyd’s arrest and murder.

“Some things have changed, a lot has not changed, so the history is really important for those students to know, to see the cause and effects,” Monk-Payton said.

Monk-Payton also introduced her students to the findings of the 1968 Kerner Commission report, which found white racism to be a major factor in the turmoil that embroiled the U.S. in 1967.

“That was a report that was really detailed in its recommendations about why protests were happening, and what news media, in part, could do to shine a light on the causes of particular uprisings and questions around civil rights and anti-Black violence,” Monk-Payton said. “Those recommendations were not heeded. That’s why we find ourselves in a situation we are in today. Fifteen years ago,

they were already saying we need more Black reporters. We need more people in these spaces to tell these stories.”

Discussions like the ones in Monk-Payton’s classes come at a time when state legislatures across the country are considering or have passed legislation banning critical race theory within public institutions, including schools. Critical race theory is a 40-year-old academic framework that uses the lens of race to understand U.S. history and legal systems. The Journalist’s Resource released guidelines on June 22 for journalists covering critical race theory.

Kathleen McElroy, director of the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin, said discussions about race have often been “ghettoized.”

“I don’t mean that with a lack of irony,” McElroy said. “It’s something that you don’t talk about, so people are forced to try to figure this out, especially in terms of white students who

are trying to navigate a world that should be different. Too often the word 'mainstream' and 'default' and all that was white patriarchy. So you could live in a world in which no one ever talked about whiteness. When we're talking about race, we're not just talking about quote unquote people of color, but the fact that race permeates every institution we have."

That resonates with Jessica Brown, senior professional in residence in the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago, who said she found herself stepping around conversations about race this past year.

"I'm a Black woman, and there's only two of us in my department," Brown said. "They don't teach us how to be the only person of color in our classroom."

Brown used backlash against Loyola's student newspaper, *The Phoenix*, over its coverage of student protesters who were arrested on Aug. 29, 2020, near the school's campus, to talk to her students about the responsibilities of journalists.

"We talked about controlling the narrative and not turning your back on journalists," Brown said. "We're in the age of the internet, so people can control the narrative better than they used to be able to because they have other avenues for disseminating information, but you don't want someone else to tell your version of a story because you're mad at them. You have to get beyond that and hold them accountable to how they tell your story, not to ice them out entirely, especially your student paper, who could cover things that no one else cares about."

Brown said the events of this past year seemed to add importance to the work students did.

"We did FOIA requests. We always do FOIA requests, but just understanding what they have the right to know and how to get it, it makes them more aware of their place in a democratic society," Brown said. "At least that's my hope."

At Morgan State University, a historically Black college in Baltimore, journalism faculty and students have always discussed race, out of necessity, said Jackie Jones, assistant dean for programs and chair of the department of multimedia journalism.

"A lot of what white institutions are grappling with for the first time are old hat to us," Jones said, "Like the whole conversation about having the talk. Most of our kids have had that already. How do you behave when the police approach you? What do you do or say? What don't you do or say? How do you identify yourself."

Jones remembered student coverage of Freddie Gray, a Black man from Baltimore who died in 2016 after sustaining life-threatening injuries while in police custody. During the summer and fall protests following Floyd's murder in 2020, Jones said faculty returned to protocols established during the Gray protests. Student journalists were not allowed to go out on their own. They had to be familiar with their surroundings and have a place in mind where they could escape if needed. There was always a professor, or another contact person, they could call.

But faculty also returned to reminding

"A lot of what white institutions are grappling with for the first time are old hat to us, like the whole conversation about having the talk. Most of our kids have had that they already, how do you behave when the police approach you, what do you do or say, what don't you do or say, how do you identify yourself."

— Jackie Jones

students about the importance of their work as journalists — particularly journalists of color — Jones said.

"If we don't tell those stories, who does?" Jones said.

Safety was an important issue for Regina McCombs, too. McCombs is senior fellow for visual communication/photojournalism at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where Floyd was murdered. The spring 2020 semester had already concluded at the time of Floyd's murder, but when the fall semester began, protests continued. McCombs, who teaches multimedia storytelling, visual journalism and photojournalism, hesitated about sending students out to cover the protests, partially because of COVID-19 but also for safety reasons.

"Given how destructive it got right after the death of George Floyd, I think there was always that sense it could go bad," McCombs said. "There was never any confidence that this was going to be just a peaceful march, no matter how much organizers said this was a peaceful march because it wasn't necessarily that main group of protesters that did all the damage. You just never knew if it could go so far wrong again."

McCombs said her students were particularly interested in the National Press Photographers Association Photo Bill of Rights.

"One of the things they talked about was not showing protesters' faces, and my students just bought into that," McCombs said. "We had to have a lot of discussion about how you make that decision in the field, whose face you can and cannot show, or will or won't show. I would show them some of the counter-protesters, these white men marching with Confederate flags, and I said, 'So do you apply the same standard to these guys?' We talked about how important it is to talk to people, to find out their story and not to make assumptions about them, including whether they want their face shown or not."

McCombs said she also relied on Diversity Fellows in the journalism school to help foster discussions about race in her classes.

"Most of my classes had a working journalist of color who was associated with the

class," McCombs said. "I haven't ever been in the field as a journalist of color. I can talk about it as a woman, what it's like to be out there, but all of them, at one point I asked to address that in some way or another and that was great."

Jeremy Littau, associate professor of journalism and communication at Lehigh University, said his department sent out a message to its students following Floyd's murder.

"We specifically said Black lives matter, and then we said, we want you to understand that the methods, the practice of journalism, is actually a potential solution to these problems," Littau recalled. "If you want to do something with how you're feeling and what you're thinking about right now, journalism provides a pathway to solve these problems. We can tell the stories about people who are being targeted by police, who feel oppressed by police. We can tell meaningful stories about the criminal justice system and white privilege."

McElroy sent notes to faculty and students, too, not only after Floyd's murder but also after the murders of eight people, including six women of Asian descent, during a March 16 shooting spree in the Atlanta area. She said her notes were meant to "mourn" with students, but the classroom discussions faculty and students shared were even more important.

"The classroom is a sacred place," McElroy said. "It's our space. I like to call this a conversation among cousins. You need to be as supportive for everybody in here because these are all your cousins. I like that phrase because that's not pretending we're sisters or brothers or anything like that, but cousin hits that right. We're all in this together."

Monk-Payton said the discussions in her classes show students are primed to be changemakers.

"They are now at the point where they understand the machinations of structural racism," Monk-Payton said. "I think they're really yearning to change practices and trying to figure out how to do that from where they sit. For me it's about trying to position them to find the spaces where they can collaborate and be able to talk across different kinds of constituencies and create from that space."



Journalism students are socially distanced during a class at Columbia College Chicago.

Lessons learned from teaching journalism during the pandemic

by Teresa Puente

During the pandemic New York University journalism professor Yvonne Latty had to teach some students on Zoom and others in the classroom at the same time. Her glasses fogged up while wearing a mask, so she got contacts. She also had to weigh how much she spoke, as her mouth would become dry after three hours of teaching in a mask.

"It became a piece of their mental health that I showed up in person," Latty said.

She added many of her students living alone in small dorm rooms.

"The isolation was hard for my students. My heart went out to them," said Latty, who also is director of the graduate concentration, Reporting New York and

Reporting the Nation in Multimedia, at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute.

Despite these physical and emotional challenges, Latty's students published 171 articles to multimedia stories in six weeks on their multimedia news site, pavementpieces.com.

"We turned our whole classroom into a pandemic newsroom," Latty said. "It was some of the best work I ever saw in the grad program."

Journalism professors across the country faced challenges as their students reported on the pandemic nationwide. They wanted to both cover the most impacted communities and keep their students safe

"It became a piece of their mental health that I showed up in person."

— Yvonne Latty



Photos by Elio Leturia

“ The (students) wouldn’t let up. They wanted to cover the story. The students said, professor, let’s do something.”

— Jesús Ayala Rico

at the same time.

They worked through the challenges of Zoom interviews and remote video recording and editing, and the emotional challenges of supporting students’ mental health, some of whom were also essential workers.

The pandemic taught the students and their professors the importance of journalism in times of crisis.

In March 2020, Professor Jesús Ayala Rico of California State University Fullerton, received word that the campus was closing due to the pandemic. He teaches the broadcast journalism course that produces a weekly 30-minute Spanish-language Emmy-winning newscast, *Al Día*.

His students went back home to locations across California: to San Diego, Sacramento, Half Moon Bay, Riverside and Orange County. He realized that his students could report from their own communities, so they formed a statewide team of correspondents. He assigned each student to do a story related to COVID-19.

“They were scattered through the entire state and we did a show on how COVID is

affecting everything in the state. They filed from their different locations,” he said.

The professor and the department did not require students to do in-person reporting but students who elected to do field reporting were allowed to do so long as they followed safety protocols, such as wearing masks and social distancing. Students were also allowed to do Zoom interviews.

“The (students) wouldn’t let up. They wanted to cover the story,” Ayala said. “The students said, professor, let’s do something.”

Early in the pandemic there was a lack of in-depth coverage by the Spanish-language networks Univision and Telemundo, Ayala said. So they expanded their coverage and produced a 45-minute TV news magazine style show called “Coronavirus Pandemia Mundial.”

It won the CMA best newscast for the year and ACP best COVID-19 coverage for the year.

Ayala realized the pandemic was one of the biggest stories since 9/11, and he spoke to news directors about what they

expected of young journalists in this time of crisis.

“We’re going to judge your students on how they covered COVID,” Ayala said they told him. He worked at ABC News for 17 years before he started teaching journalism in 2017.

During the pandemic Vincio Sinta worked as the broadcast practicum coordinator at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

He shared that many of his students work and go to school full-time. They worked on their broadcast stories while working at grocery stores or hotels.

“It was a big factor there because many of them are paying their way through the program,” Sinta said. “There was the added risk of many of them being essential workers.”

Many of his students also live with their parents and faced challenges when one person in the household became sick with COVID-19.

“Many live at home. They had people at home test positive for the virus and they had to skip class. It was intensely stressful,” Sinta said.

He said some new elements such as Zoom interviews, will become a mainstay of broadcast journalism.

“It’s easier for a source to agree to meet online for a few minutes without traveling there and setting up the lights. We can’t lose that if it allows us to get sources and voices,” said Sinta, who will be an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Arlington in fall 2021.

Journalism professors said the pandemic not only made both professors and students more resourceful but brought them closer together.

“I did get close to students and we did create a bond in the worst teaching situation,” Latty said. “My lesson learned is journalism is an incredibly important tool and you should never stop.”

Washington
Examiner

Daily
Caller

Breitbart

Fox
News

GATEWAY PUNDIT



Loud, shrill and unknown: The strange case of the Gateway Pundit

by Paul Wagman

He has the loudest political voice in the St. Louis area, and arguably the most influential. His website garners tens of millions of visits every month from all over the country – 5 to 10 times what The St. Louis Post-Dispatch attracts. His opinions – on the greatness of Donald Trump, the voting machine shenanigans that robbed him of a second term, the exaggerated threat from COVID, and a dozen other subjects – ricochet across the nation and the world every day, resonating in the ears of his listeners in the alt-right universe like the bell of freedom.

The sound others hear is less appealing. His work, according to a recent Harvard University study, is “in a class of its own, known for ‘publishing falsehoods and spreading hoaxes.’”

For all this, you may have never even heard of him, aside from a perhaps vaguely familiar pen name – The Gateway Pundit.

James H. (“Jim”) Hoft – the man behind the moniker – is a major celebrity in right-wing conspiracy circles and works and lives in an iconic St. Louis neighborhood. Yet he

operates largely anonymously in his adopted hometown. It is unlikely that many of his own neighbors have any idea who he is.

“I’m a pretty private person,” Hoft acknowledged in a recent hour-long telephone interview. “Pretty quiet existence, really.”

So who is this man who has achieved such prominence in the right-wing ecosphere? Where did he come from and what is his background in his chosen field? How did he gain such a large following? What are the backgrounds, personal and professional, of some of the people he employs? How does he defend his work against accusations of blatant mendacity? And how well does his business model work?

Gateway Journalism Review has found some answers.

Roots

Jim Hoft, now 59, grew up in Fort Dodge, Iowa, a small town (population 25,000) in northern Iowa whose Midwestern culture Hoft often cites as the source of his worldview. Although Hoft’s explanation for his worldview

is clearly oversimplified, Fort Dodge was indeed represented in Congress for many years by Steve King, another exponent of right-wing extremist view whose white supremacy eventually became too noisome for his own party to tolerate.

One of nine children, Hoft grew up in a family that was not especially political and where, he said, views covered “the gamut”: his mother was a Republican and his father a Democrat. Nonetheless, at least three family members, he said, now work with him in some capacity at The Gateway Pundit.

Hoft’s identical twin brother, Joe, is among them. Joe is a prolific, bylined contributor to the website, with stories such as “EXACT OPPOSITES: Democrats Illegally Blocked Republican Observers from Entering Vote Counting Areas – Republicans Allow the Whole World to View Maricopa Audit” (April 25, 2021) and “HUGE BREAKING EXCLUSIVE: Hunter Biden Has a Pornhub Account Where He Uploaded His Personal Porn – Including With Family Member” (Oct. 29, 2020).

For years while contributing these kinds of

stories, Joe lived and worked in Hong Kong for St. Louis-based Reinsurance Group of America (RGA). He also has written three books, including “In God We Trust: Not in Lying Liberal Lunatics”, self-published last year.

Prior to this, in 2017, Joe published “Loving, Blessing, and Being Aware of God’s Grace”, a memoir that offered insight into his — and Jim’s — boyhood.

Their mother, Joe writes, was “a saint.” But their father was an ill-tempered alcoholic, the owner of a “greasy, dirty place where he made a living working on semi-trucks and trailers needing repairs.” The identical twins, who “were required to work for him almost every weekend,” began drinking as well in high school, and by their senior year were kicked off the basketball team. “Shortly after that I remember the basketball team going to the state tournament, and I watched as they received all the glory that I so desperately desired.”

Today Joe no longer works for RGA. “Joe came back to work for me within the last year,” Jim said. Jim would not disclose where Joe lives currently, except to add that it’s not in Missouri.

Both Jim and Joe graduated from St. Edmond High School in Fort Dodge in 1980 and enrolled at Loras College, a small Catholic school in Dubuque, Iowa, on the Mississippi River three hours east of Fort Dodge, in the fall of 1981.

Joe describes what happened next in “Love, Blessing, and Being Aware of God’s Grace”: “... Jim and I moved on to the same college and more drinking, and in a short time my life and Jim’s life were messes.” A few years later, “my twin [Jim] went through treatment in Mankato, Minnesota.” Within that same period, their father and other siblings also went through treatment or renounced alcohol, and “In less than two years, active, evil alcoholism was virtually eliminated from our family.”

Struggles with alcohol likely explain the fact that Jim Hoft did not graduate from Loras until 1986 and his absence from college yearbooks after his freshman year.

Hoft majored in biology, writing his senior thesis about a form of algae in a Minnesota lake. The two fields in which he has made his mark were never a part of his studies, he wrote in a letter to his classmates for his 30th high school reunion in 2010. “I’ve never had any training in politics or journalism, just Sister Victoria in eighth grade,” he noted.

The political environment at Loras at the time offers no explanation for Hoft’s later career, two former professors and a former student said. They characterized the school’s student body and professors as centrist to liberal. Hoft himself told me that he was “pretty liberal in my 20s” and for some Democrats in those days.

Not long after graduating from Loras, Hoft moved to St. Louis, where he had relatives, he told me. There, he wrote his high school classmates, “I found a few different jobs. In my 20s and 30s I did some modeling and acting. I played a cop on ‘Unsolved Mysteries’ twice. I was in an NCAA basketball

“ Initially, he said, he simply reposted news stories and commented on them. His only readers, he said with what sounded like amusement, were his mother, his twin brother and one friend.”

commercial and was in a John Deere catalog. I worked out and played basketball.”

In 2001, he moved his ailing mother down from Iowa to take care of her in a large house he bought and renovated with the help of family and friends. “All nine of us Hoft kids volunteered to take her in but she chose to stay with me,” he wrote. Dorothy Hoft lived in St. Louis until her death in 2009.

In his letter to his high school classmates, Hoft made no mention of other work in this period, but he told me he had also begun working in the 1990s in human relations — in training, specifically — “for a top St. Louis manufacturer.” Hoft said the job was full-time. He wouldn’t identify the employer.

The Little Blog That Caught Fire

In a way he surely could not have anticipated, Hoft’s life began to change after the 2004 election. President George W. Bush won a second term, but not before Dan Rather and CBS’s “60 Minutes” had reported that during the Vietnam War Bush received preferential treatment while in the Texas Air National Guard. The report, which aired Sept. 8, inspired immediate skepticism from bloggers and other news organizations, and CBS itself disavowed the story just 12 days later, well before the November election. But Hoft was inspired by the role played by bloggers, and decided to start one himself.

Initially, he said, he simply reposted news stories and commented on them. His only readers, he said with what sounded like amusement, were his mother, his twin brother and one friend.

(But) “After a few years of writing I gained thousands of readers every day,” Hoft wrote his high school classmates. “Then I started getting invites and paid trips to different conservative events around the world. I went to Prague in 2007 for a conference

with international democracy activists and President Bush. I’ve met several world leaders and spoken to several senators and representatives. I’ve been a guest at the UN, went to Israel for a week with Andrew Breitbart, attended national conventions and conferences.”

Plugs from right-wing figures like Michelle Malkin, Glenn Reynolds and the Drudge Report helped along the way. So did citations of his stories on Fox News and exposure on the short-lived on-demand television network RightNetwork, which actor Kelsey Grammer operated in 2010 and 2011.

Another boost was Hoft’s contribution to the takedown of Van Jones, who in 2009 was forced to resign from a position as special adviser to President Barack Obama for “green jobs, enterprise and innovation.” Jones had already been under attack from Glenn Beck and others when Hoft reported Jones had signed a 2004 petition calling for investigations into whether the Bush administration allowed the Sept. 11 attacks as a pretext for war in the Middle East. Jones said the petition did not reflect his views, but the report proved a tipping point. Jones, who is now a commentator on CNN, resigned and Hoft won a shout-out on Fox News from Bill Kristol.

Meanwhile, Hoft was also raising his profile by appearing at Tea Party events. In 2010 he served as the emcee for a Tea Party gathering in Clayton, Mo., which also featured Dana Loesch, another St. Louis figure headed for national prominence. Another scheduled speaker, John Burns, later began practicing law in St. Louis, and now represents Hoft in defamation suits involving him as either a defendant or a plaintiff, the latter including a case filed against St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones.

By 2012, Hoft told me, “I was making more money online than at my (human relations) work so I stepped away” to focus full-time on The Gateway Pundit. The money came — and still comes — from advertising on the website. More on that later.

But in 2013, The Gateway Pundit almost came to an abrupt end. After developing a bacterial infection in his bloodstream, Hoft suffered five strokes, lost the vision in his left eye, and developed a hole the size of a dime in his heart, he told Larry Kudlow on CNBC. But doctors at Saint Louis University saved his life, he said, and Steve Bannon, then at Breitbart News, stewarded The Gateway Pundit until Hoft recuperated.

By the very next year, there was tangible evidence of Hoft’s success. The erstwhile male model and actor and training professional, whose previous addresses, according to on-line records, had been far more modest, paid \$485,000 for a four-bedroom, 1.5 story home in the upscale St. Louis suburb of Ladue.

But even greater success came two years later, when the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump electrified the Republican Party.

Continued on next page

Hitting the Bigtime

Between May 1, 2015 and Nov. 7, 2016, The Gateway Pundit was one of the most popular websites on the right, a study by Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society found. Among websites trafficked by Trump followers, the study said, The Gateway Pundit garnered the third most-shared stories on Facebook — behind Breitbart and Conservative Tribune but ahead of Fox News. On Twitter it reached fifth. In both cases Trump followers shared it far more than they did stories from mainstream news outlets.

The study identified Hoft's site as one of seven sources that receive "substantially more attention on social media than they receive inlinks from open web media," an indication of hyper-partisanship. (An inlink is a hyperlink to a webpage — in this case, thegatewaypundit.com — from an external website.) And among the seven, the study said, "Gateway Pundit is in a class of its own, known for 'publishing falsehoods and spreading hoaxes.'"

To fully appreciate the popularity of The Gateway Pundit on social media during the 2016 election, consider this: Among all media sources, not just right-wing ones, it ranked 12th in number of shares on Facebook and 18th on Twitter. On Facebook, it outranked Fox News (14), Daily Kos (16), ABC News (20) and The New Yorker (21). On Twitter, it surpassed MSNBC (19), NBC News (20), The Wall Street Journal (21), USA Today (22), and Reuters (28). These rankings come from "Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics", a book published in 2018 by Oxford University Press.

Some headlines from The Gateway Pundit in 2016 show some of the themes Hoft was driving, not to mention his talent for appealing to his readers' viscera:

- "Obama Changes Law: Allows Immigrants with Blistering STDs and Leprosy into US" — Feb. 23, 2016
- "Trump Was Right: At Least Nine American Members of ISIS Were Immigrants to US" — May 17, 2016
- "Julian Assange Suggests Seth Rich — Who Was MURDERED in DC — Was Wikileaks DC Source!" — August 9, 2016
- "Droves of African Migrants Amass at Mexican Border Waiting US Asylum Under Secret Obama Pact" — Sept. 8, 2016
- "BREAKING: 71% of Doctors Say Hillary Health Concerns Serious, Possibly Disqualifying!" — Sept. 8, 2016

According to "Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics", Hoft

played a particularly large role in the 2016 campaign with his story on Seth Rich. Rich, as some readers will remember, was an employee of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) who was murdered by an unknown assailant in 2016. The authorities suspected he had been the victim of an attempted robbery, but Hoft, Fox News and others pushed a conspiracy theory: Rich had been killed because of his alleged part in providing WikiLeaks with emails that had been stolen from the DNC and damaged the campaign of Trump's rival, Hillary Clinton. The U.S. intelligence community saw Russian hackers behind those leaks; in 2018 special counsel Robert Mueller indicted 12 Russians for them. But Hoft's stories implicating the Democrats won widespread circulation on Facebook.

Fox News later retracted its story about the Rich murder and in October 2020 reached a seven-figure settlement with the dead man's family, which had accused the network of defamation. But as recently as this past April, Joe Hoft and The Gateway Pundit were still gnawing on the Seth Rich conspiracy.

In any event, The Gateway Pundit's coverage of the 2016 campaign brought it to a new peak. Traffic boomed to 1 million page views per day, according to Politico. And Trump, who had made a practice of tweeting The Gateway Pundit during his campaign, rewarded the publication for its support with a plum that outraged many in the mainstream and even some in the conservative media. The Trump administration gave White House press credentials to The Gateway Pundit's Washington correspondent, Lucian Baxter Wintrich IV.

Then in his 20s, Wintrich had been Lucian Einhorn until he changed his name at age 18. For a White House correspondent, his credentials were decidedly unorthodox. He had no experience in journalism. He had, however, spearheaded a "Twinks4Trump" photo exhibit at the Republican National Convention. "Twink," Wikipedia reports, is "gay slang for a young man in his late teens to early twenties — whose traits may include general physical attractiveness ... and a youthful appearance that may belie an older chronological age." Wintrich himself fits that description, and his own Instagram page is packed with photos of scantily clad young men. One doesn't need to be a sleuth to find an internet photo of Wintrich himself exposing significant posterior cleavage, while adorned only in a MAGA hat.

Wintrich's career as White House correspondent, proved to be a brief one. He

parted ways with The Gateway Pundit after less than two years — shortly after he had reportedly appeared on a podcast hosted by a white supremacist who had marched in the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. Hoft said the two events were unrelated. In any case, the podcast appearance followed one by Wintrich in 2017 at the University of Connecticut, where he gave a speech entitled "It's Okay to Be White," which led to a campus disturbance. And he was also still working for The Gateway Pundit when he wrongly reported, shortly after the Parkland, Florida, school massacre, that the shooter was a registered Democrat. Wintrich retracted that assertion in an updated Gateway Pundit story a few hours later, but he went on to write stories that helped spread the debunked conspiracy theory that the protesting students had been "crisis actors." And in a tweet he called the students "little pricks."

Months before Wintrich's departure, The Gateway Pundit had hired a Washington correspondent, Cassandra Fairbanks, whose robust display of her own anatomical endowments on the internet makes Wintrich's self-exposure look modest. In Fairbanks' professional background were stories she had posted shortly before the 2016 election such as "Internet Is On Fire With Speculation that Podesta Emails Contain Code For Child Sex." "Network Propaganda" accords her an important role in seeding the theory that Hillary Clinton was involved in a satanic pedophilia ring, pizza included.

Fairbanks wrote those stories while serving as a correspondent for Sputnik News. Sputnik is a Russian state-owned news agency whose "fundamental purpose," The New York Times has written, is "disinformation."

Sputnik News and The Gateway Pundit have both been among the most popular sources for a Russian propaganda Twitter network aimed at American audiences, The German Marshall Fund of the United States found in 2017.

"Of course, we have no connection to the Russians nor have we ever had any contact with Russian officials," Hoft told USA Today in response to the 2017 report.

Nonetheless, the authors of "Network Propaganda" argue, sites like The Gateway Pundit "often serve as pathways for Russian propaganda, (and) witting, unwitting, or witless matters a great deal less than the fact of being such a conduit."

Truth, Falsehoods, and "Conspiracy Blah, Blah, Blah"

The Trump years were evidently good to Hoft, as they were to many media outlets.

“ To fully appreciate the popularity of the Gateway Pundit on social media during the 2016 election, however, consider this: Among all media sources, not just right-wing ones, it ranked 12th in number of shares on Facebook and 18th on Twitter.”

“ I strongly believe our record is much, much stronger than The New York Times and the Washington Post, and so it’s comical that they say those things about us.”

— Jim Hoft

Traffic to his website continued growing every year, he told me, as he claimed it has since he founded the site.

This growth is the best evidence one can offer, Hoft said, that he is committed to these words from the “About (Us)” section of The Gateway Pundit site:

“All our content should be true. No value is more important than this.

“This does not preclude the use of opinion — opinion is vital to political and cultural commentary. But all opinions expressed must be supported by truth.”

“I’d say the best proof I have that we’re a truthful organization ... is that our numbers increase year after year after year and exponentially,” he said. There are many “trashy, hoaxy websites out there that put up garbage,” he continued, and people catch on. They don’t like to be lied to and they don’t come back. Our strongest testament to our trustworthiness is the fact that we have an audience that — at one point this year we were one of the top 100 websites in the entire country with our traffic.”

Others, of course, would quarrel with Hoft’s explanation for his website’s growth. Among those with quarrels:

- Geary Danley, who was named in a since-deleted story by Joe Hoft in connection with the 2017 Las Vegas massacre. Jumping on baseless rumors circulating on other conspiracy sites, The Gateway Pundit posted, “Las Vegas Shooter Reportedly a Democrat Who Liked Rachel Maddow, MoveOn.org,” and “Associated with Anti-Trump Army”. Danley actually had nothing to do with the massacre.
- Jerome Vangheluwe and his son Joel, whom Jim Hoft named in a story headed “REPORT: Driver in Virginia Car Attack Was Anti-Trump Protestor — Joel Vangheluwe.” The car attack in question was the assault on a counter-demonstration against neo-Nazis in Charlottesville in which a young woman was killed. The Vangheluwes were nowhere near Charlottesville when the assault occurred, but years earlier, before he sold it, the father had been the car’s registered owner. Hoft noted that the story was “just a report” and retracted it shortly after posting, but the Vangheluwes said they received death threats and had to flee their home. Along with 19 other defendants, they sued Jim Hoft personally in Federal Court for defamation.

- Brennan Gilmore, a State Department employee who said Hoft and other right-wing outlets accused him of playing a role in the Charlottesville terror attack as part of a supposed “deep state” conspiracy. Gilmore said he too got death threats.
- Eric Coomer, security chief for Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems, who sued Hoft and others last December for defaming him with “false and baseless assertions” that he “sits at the center of a national conspiracy to fraudulently elect the President of the United States.” Coomer has said he had to go into hiding because of death threats inspired by the allegations.

Without being specific, Hoft acknowledged having settled one or more of the cases against him out of court, but he noted that defendants sometimes settle not because of guilt but to avoid costs. He remains under “tremendous legal pressure,” he told me.

Some media watchdogs also accuse The Gateway Pundit of hideously inaccurate reporting. In 2010, Media Matters for America, a left-leaning media watchdog, published “Jim Hoft: Dumbest Man on the Internet?” Despite all the “stiff competition” in the right-wing media sphere, the story said:

“Jim Hoft (aka Gateway Pundit) stands out as uniquely incompetent. Hoft runs with (or spawns) almost every inane story that bubbles up in the conservative blogosphere, has proven that he has absolutely no vetting process for the sources he cites, and apparently has a hard time with basic reading comprehension. (But even though) Hoft embarrasses himself on a near-daily basis and has shown time and again that he is either willfully dishonest or staggeringly inept, he has managed to carve out a role as one of the most-read, most respected writers in the conservative blogosphere.”

In 2017 Media Matters followed up with “20-Plus Times Jim Hoft and The Gateway Pundit Were Absurdly Wrong.” In 2020, NewsGuard, a company that rates journalistic credibility, reported that The Gateway Pundit “regularly features false reports, conspiracy theories and unfounded allegations, with no distinction made between opinions and actual news reports.” And there is more. Much more.

When I confronted Hoft with these kinds of attacks, he seemed eager to respond.

“I strongly believe our record is much,

much stronger than The New York Times and The Washington Post, and so it’s comical that they say those things about us,” he said.

As evidence, Hoft cited four stories where, he asserted, he had beaten most mainstream outlets:

- The Jussie Smollet case: In 2019, Smollet, an African-American actor, said he had been the victim of an attempted lynching by Trump supporters because of his opposition to the president. Numerous parties initially expressed sympathy — one of them being President Trump himself — although Hoft did not mention that. The Gateway Pundit, Hoft said, was skeptical of the story from the start. It later fell apart.
 - The Covington Catholic High School incident: Also in 2019, video and news coverage of a confrontation between a white high school boy wearing a MAGA hat and a Native American in Washington, D.C., initially prompted allegations of harassment by the student. Hoft said his coverage had been immediately skeptical. As more evidence emerged, it turned out that skepticism had been warranted; The Washington Post, among other outlets that had led the coverage, acknowledged this. The young man sued CNN and The Washington Post and settled out of court with both. “That was a huge story we were correct with,” Hoft said.
 - The Mueller investigation: “We reported that honestly and truthfully for three or four years,” Hoft said. “The mainstream media ran with this hoax, and I believe it was out of their liberalism, to try to ruin this president, Donald Trump.” Sample headlines from The Gateway Pundit’s Mueller coverage include:
 - “Confirmed: Mueller Committed Perjury — Lied Under Oath About Pursuing FBI Directorship in Meeting With Trump”;
 - ‘Flashback: Dirty Cop Mueller Singled Out by Mother of Sexually Abused Child for Ignoring Calls for Help’; and
 - “The Reason Democrats Are All Behind Mueller Witch Hunt Is Likely Hidden in the IG’s Clinton Email Report and It Will Make You Sick.”
 - The Matt Gaetz sexual misconduct story: “I would say we have mutual respect,” Hoft told me of Gaetz in early April. “He’s a very outspoken Republican ... I tend to side with Matt Gaetz on that one. Now, I could be wrong about that, but anyway, that’s what Matt told us, and his people.” “Conspiracy, blah, blah, blah,” Hoft added, referring to the allegations he often faces. “We can’t defend ourselves in those circles, we don’t have a way to do that, unless we go to lawsuits, which we’ve started to do, or at least go the route of ... they write anything they can ... it’s very upsetting but that’s life, that’s what it’s like for a lot of conservatives today.”
- Hoft’s mention of a more aggressive position on lawsuits is apparently a reference to two he has filed in recent months in St. Louis County Court. One is against Dean

Continued on next page

Miller, a distinguished reporter and editor who debunked a Gateway Pundit piece about Hunter Biden. Another accuses Tishaura Jones, now the Mayor of St. Louis, and activist Umar Lee of libel in connection with a rally last summer around the statue of St. Louis in Forest Park. Burns is the lawyer for Hoft in both cases. He and Randy Corporon, a Denver-based ... radio show, are representing Hoft in a third case – this one in which he is the defendant – filed last December in Denver.

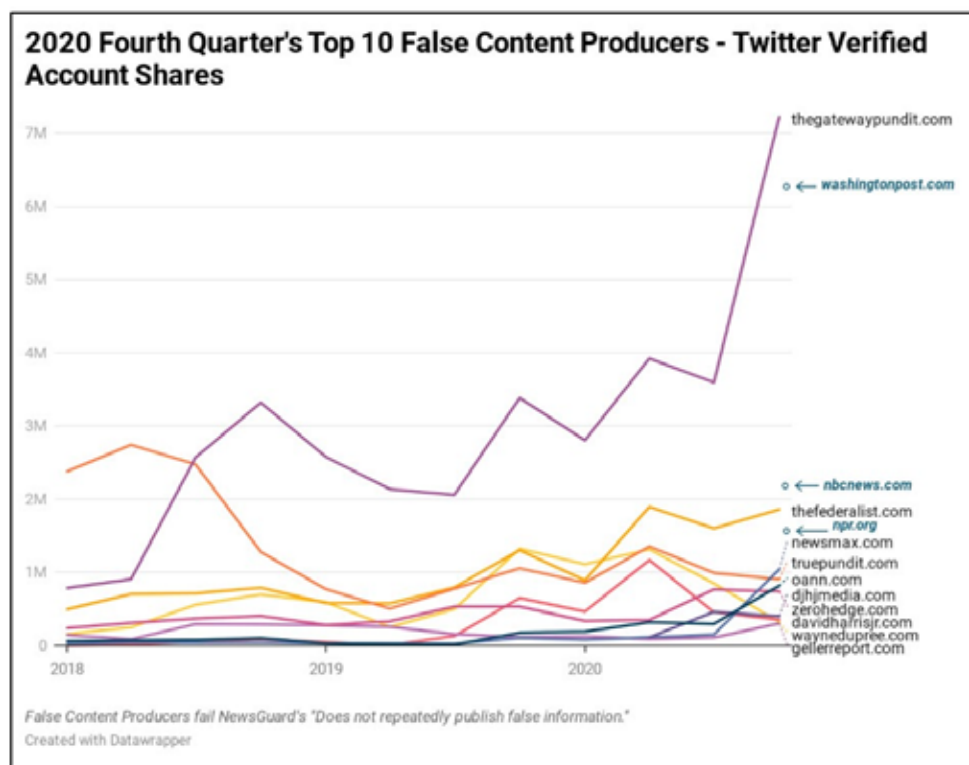
A Siege Mentality in a Shoestring Operation

The weary concern expressed in Hoft's comment about what life is "like for a lot of conservatives today" appears to be accompanied by a larger sense of embattlement. "I am a prime target of the radical left, so it always concerns me to give too much information about my private life," he told me. This is why, he explained, he would not say where he goes to church; or who the "top 25 manufacturer" was where he used to work; and why he asked that his address not be revealed.

The sense of beleaguerment is perhaps reinforced by the way Hoft operates. The publication he started by himself only about 16 years ago is still a kind of shoestring, bunker operation. Hoft, the sole owner, is the only employee in St. Louis. In addition to Fairbanks and his brother Joe, other members of the workforce include:

- Christina Laila, associate editor, who shares pre-publication story review duties with Hoft, and who describes herself, on her barely used Instagram account, as "Defender of Christendom."
 - Ben Wetmore, a former associate of James O'Keefe, a maker of secretly recorded and selectively edited videos used to misrepresent and damage organizations like Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and National Public Radio. The Gateway Pundit was promoting O'Keefe's latest efforts as recently as late fall.
 - Kristinn Taylor, who describes himself on Twitter as a "Breitbart pioneer," and whose coverage of the Jan. 6 insurrection included this story: "Trump Supporters Stop 'Antifa' from Breaking Windows at Capitol."
 - Mike LaChance, another Breitbart veteran, who is based in Boston and who recently tweeted that the climate crisis is "Complete propaganda."
 - Larry Johnson, a former CIA officer whose recent Gateway Pundit stories include "The CIA Has Become the KGB."
- Hoft said he spends 16 hours a day working with these and other contributors.

Writers compose their own headlines although Hoft and Laila "may tweak them here or there." Hoft acknowledged a degree of pride in his skill with headlines. "Yeah, I think so," he said, when asked whether he was proud of his talent in that area. "Most



Source: Report by the Digital New Deal project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

people like our headlines."

Hoft clearly has a certain flair. Headlines like "Evidence Mounts that BLM Works With Demons" (Sept. 15, 2020) are no doubt catnip to many.

In any case, judging from this part of a story from the New Yorker, fact-checking is not exactly a significant part of the process.

"Before Hoft left for the airport, I told him that he should expect to hear from a member of The New Yorker's fact-checking staff. 'Oh, yeah, just like at the Gateway Pundit,' Hoft said. 'We've got a huge department of full-time fact-checkers.' He laughed so hard that he nearly spilled his lemonade."

He works out of his house, Hoft reluctantly acknowledged – reluctantly, he said, because of his security concerns. In 2019 he sold his home in Ladue and purchased a 7,500-square-foot property at an elite city address, which the GJR agreed not to disclose. The \$1,350,000 he paid for that new house was more than twice what he had reaped from the sale of his Ladue home – another indication, perhaps, of The Gateway Pundit's success as a business.

Hoft lives in the new home, he said, with his husband, Jezreel Morano, 29, a native of the Philippines whom he met while on vacation in 2016, according to this Ladue News engagement article. Hoft first publicly came out as gay after the Orlando gay nightclub massacre of 2016, which, he argued, showed that only the Republican Party would defend gays against Muslim terrorists.

Leading the Way on the Election Fraud Narrative

In the 2020 Presidential campaign, Hoft distinguished himself even among other right-wing sites for his prolific falsehoods in support of President Trump's re-election, and

then his insistence that he had indeed won the election.

In January, 2021, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C., published a study about the ways users of social media had engaged "with deceptive sites that masquerade as journalism." The study distinguished between two kinds of deceptive sites: "manipulators" and "false content producers." "Manipulators" were defined as sites that don't "gather and present information responsibly," but also don't "repeatedly publish false content." "False content producers," which are worse, were said to "repeatedly publish(ed) content that is provably false." The study labeled Breitbart as a "manipulator," The Gateway Pundit as a "false content producer." The study measured shares on Twitter by "verified account users," which constitute a subset of Twitter users that includes many of the most-followed accounts driving Twitter conversations. Shares by verified accounts of content from deceptive sites reached "an all-time high in the fourth quarter of 2020," the study found, and "shares of content from False Content Producers" drove a disproportionate portion of the growth. The study singled out Hoft for a disproportionate share of that growth. "The Gateway Pundit was particularly dominant and has seen a ninefold increase in verified account shares of its content since the first quarter of 2019. Nine of its 10 most popular articles included disinformation about voter fraud." The graph above illustrates the point.

The graph shows that in the fourth quarter of 2020, The Gateway Pundit got 7.2 million shares on Twitter verified accounts – more than three and one-half times more than the second most-shared false content producer, thefederalist.com. And for context, it shows

that The Washington Post, NBC News and NPR — leading reputable sites with perfect NewsGuard ratings — were getting far fewer shares.

The report also noted that much of the increase in False Content Producer verified account shares “occurred after the election. False Content Producers slightly outpaced their third quarter average in the run-up to the election, but their verified account shares skyrocketed in the weeks after.”

That was certainly true for The Gateway Pundit. Hoft had championed the rigged election conspiracy theory throughout the run-up to the election — see, for example, this analysis by the Election Integrity Partnership. But after Trump lost the election, Hoft doubled down on his narrative. Some selected headlines, pointing to the wide range of accusations:

- Complete List of Suspected Fraud Issues in 2020 Election Sorted by State with Recommended Actions on How to Address — Nov. 8, 2020.
- BREAKING: Arizona’s Legislative Leaders Call For Audit of Maricopa County Dominion Election Software and Equipment — Dec. 4, 2020
- “I Saw Voter Fraud!” — Michigan Election Observer Was Witness to Fraud but Was Kicked Out of TCF When He Started Recording the Fraud (Video) — Dec. 7, 2020
- Fully Exposed—The Dominion Plot to Defraud the American Voters and President Trump — Dec. 14, 2020
- RAFFENSPERGER GETS CAUGHT: Georgia Ballots Were Printed DIFFERENTLY for GOP Areas vs. DEM Areas — Election Was Rigged! — Dec. 30, 2020
- Exclusive: The TCF Center Election Fraud — Newly Discovered Video Shows Late Night Deliveries of Tens of Thousands of Illegal Ballots 8 Hours After Deadline — Feb. 5, 2021

Given all this, it’s not surprising that Hoft was in Washington, D.C., Jan. 6, in attendance at President Trump’s speech. But he left, he said, before the insurrection at the Capitol, because it was “very, very, cold,” (temperatures were in the high 30s and low 40s, according to AccuWeather records) and because once he heard that Vice President Mike Pence wasn’t going to overturn the election results, there was no point in remaining.

The violence that followed, Hoft said, was “outrageous,” “a mistake,” and uncharacteristic — “I’ve never seen conservatives act like that in my life.” As for who committed it, “I do believe that some violence was antifa,” but “I’m not the person who is going to tell you they did all the damage there. I don’t believe that.”

Asked what he thought about Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley’s questioning of the election results, Hoft unsurprisingly said, “I think he did the right thing.” But he professed ignorance of Hawley’s fist pump to protestors shortly before the insurrection. “I don’t even know what that’s about, I’m sorry. He did a fist pump? I’m not even aware of that.”

Association is only association, but it might also be noted that Wintrich, The Gateway Pundit’s erstwhile White House correspondent, is friends with and has worked closely with Ali Alexander, who is a key figure in Stop the Steal, one of the sponsors of the Jan. 6 protest.

Hoft’s continuing promotion of stories alleging election fraud got him suspended from Twitter Feb. 6. When I asked him whether he still thinks Trump won the election, he paused a few seconds, then said, “I do think Trump won the election. ... I believe it was stolen from him when they locked the doors.”

When I asked why it was that no court had upheld any of the fraud charges, he replied, “I think that’s a great question. I think it’s a travesty.”

As he said these things, Hoft sounded sincere. Someone who has known him for many years and does not share his worldview, who asked not to be identified, told me he thinks Hoft is sincere.

Fighting Off Big Tech

In addition to legal pressures, Hoft said, he also faces “headwinds” from Big Tech.

After his tremendous success on Facebook in the run up to the 2016 election, Hoft told Congress in 2018, Facebook changed its algorithms so The Gateway Pundit and other conservative sites would receive less exposure.

Since then, things have only grown worse, Hoft told me. “We were getting hit from a lot of different directions in 2017 and 2018 and then in 2020 we started seeing our Twitter account suspended every now and then and Twitter did remove our account in early February. So we are battling with the tech giants all the time. It’s not really much of a battle. They’re winning.”

In February of this year, Hoft began fundraising off this alleged persecution. He posted:

“Behind the scenes, there’s a battle for survival of The Gateway Pundit. For 15 years, we’ve been fighting Big Tech and Leftists who want to shut us down. They’ve censored us on social media. They’ve defamed us in the media. They’ve restricted the advertising that pays our bills. And yet, we soldier on. We’re putting up more articles than ever. We’re digging deeper into corruption and fraud. We’re continuing to fight.

“Many of you have asked how to help, and we finally have a way: You can now subscribe to The Gateway Pundit. In return for a small monthly payment [\$7.99 a month], you’ll get the site ad-free* (that means Google and other Big Tech advertisers will no longer get those dollars). And if you really want to help, you can bump up your subscription [to \$15.99 a month] and get a special Gateway Pundit mug and other perks ...”

But when I talked to him, Hoft did not sound alarmed about his financial situation. He had not had to reduce his workforce, he said, and his traffic is still growing year to year.

Hoft appears to have reason to be sanguine. His site’s performance in 2020 was simply spectacular. While traffic at the top 100 U.S. news and media sites grew by 24% year-over-year in 2020, his traffic shot up 109% to 309.8 million visitors. And although his traffic since has fallen by about half since its election peak, it was still running at more than one million visits a day, according to SimilarWeb.com. That led SimilarWeb.com to rank it 52nd among all U.S. news and media sites. Chicagotribune.com ranked 69th. Stltoday.com ranked 181st. (The top five, according to SimilarWeb.com, are Yahoo.com, CNN.com, MSN.com, NYTimes.com, and Foxnews.com.)

Moreover, most of Hoft’s big audience now comes to him directly — in other words, people seek him out instead of having to be referred to him. SimilarWeb’s analysis shows that this past March, 74.3% of visits to thegatewaypundit.com came from people who went directly to the site, while only 7.8% found their way there through browser searches and 4.5% social media, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

All this means that Hoft’s site can now generate plenty of revenue from advertising without help from social media, an advertising executive said.

The executive said the advertising works as follows. Advertisers pay middlemen called “programmatic advertisers” to place their ads on digital media. Some of these advertisers may have no idea where their ads show up. In any event, the programmatic advertiser’s software — the whole process is highly automated — then determines what websites offer the best targets for which ads. It then places those ads on the appropriate sites. Hoft, whose investment in this process is zero, collects more or less revenue from the programmatic advertiser depending on the volume of traffic to his site — the overall “circulation” — and the volume of clicks on specific ads. The same factors determine how much the programmatic advertiser can collect from the advertisers. Google, whose data helps inform the programmatic advertiser’s choices, also gets a cut.

A few programmatic advertisers refused to put ads on his site, Hoft told me, but he found another that would. And on a recent April day, the site featured what the ad executive called “a ton” of advertising. “Rambo, The World’s Toughest EBike,” had a spread across the top of the landing page. A few minutes later, that spread was replaced by an ad for Chrono 24, a wristwatch marketer. Other ads, on the landing page and within articles, promoted “Ka’Chava,” a nutrition drink; Sunnyside Savings, a solar energy company; My Pillow, the company founded and run by Trump supporter Michael Lindell; Zolucky, a women’s clothing retailer; Tower Records, a music company; and many more, including one, perhaps incongruously, for the International Rescue Committee.

Life, it appears, is still good for The Gateway Pundit.

Media and letter writers say Missouri legislature ignores ‘will of the people’

by Don Corrigan

The Missouri legislature’s determination in its 2021 session to undo the “will of the people” on Medicaid Expansion, a measure passed statewide in 2020 by Missouri voters, is nothing new. Over the years, Missouri’s legislature has rejected or watered down the “will of the people” on their votes for gun restrictions, collective bargaining, renewable energy, clean elections, campaign contribution limits and more.

What’s different in 2021 is that the state legislature has not only sought to quash a voter initiative, but also this time to undo a constitutional amendment that makes health care available to tens of thousands of Missourians. In addition, legislators have proposed bills that would essentially destroy the ballot initiative process.

Missouri voters have not been totally rolled just yet by the so-called “super-majority” in the GOP-dominated legislature. A court fight has ensued on the legislature’s refusal to abide by the people’s vote on Medicaid expansion. Also, during the last two weeks of the 2021 session, activists for preserving plebiscite democracy lobbied in the statehouse and demonstrated outside with promises of much more visible resistance ahead.

Missouri news media also have well-covered the legislature’s actions, whether it involves the specific issue of Medicaid expansion or the overarching issue of whether plebiscites in the state will be effectively destroyed. The editorial voices of the Kansas City Star and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch have been strident and uncompromising, but so have other news outlets across the state.

Readers have added their voices with especially strong letters to the editor, some suggesting the legislators had violated their oath of office.

Statewide Media Reaction

Statewide media response to the legislature’s failure to act on Medicaid expansion — and its willingness to thwart the initiative process in reaction to the will of the people — has been swift and harsh. However, many letters “from the people” have been even more interesting and compelling than the finely-crafted editorials.

Letter writers have suggested that in refusing to uphold a constitutional amendment passed by the people, the lawmakers have violated their own oath of office to uphold the Missouri Constitution. There should be consequences. Fred Tilinski of St. Peters wrote in a letter published by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on June 4 that an oath

“ Today’s Republicans are not the old, establishment Republicans of yesteryear who tended to act more rationally and more in a bipartisan manner. They are bold, arrogant, and insensitive to democracy.”

— Ken Warren

violation amendment needs to be passed by the people.

Those lawmakers violating their legal duty under the oath amendment should receive “no pension or health insurance,” according to Tilinski. Past salary should be refunded to the state and “they shall be banned from any employment as a lobbyist.”

After a number of editorials defending democracy and the will of the people, the Post-Dispatch chose to write an editorial using the Pocketbook issue on May 21. The St. Louis daily cautioned that the business community cannot help but notice the recklessness of state legislators in repeatedly denying democratic norms — and the will of the people. Businesses may decide to move elsewhere.

The Post-Dispatch editorial noted the comments of Centene Chief Executive Michael Neidorff, who is clearly frustrated with the legislature’s inept response to the people’s vote on Medicaid expansion: “As the (chief executive of the) largest provider of Medicaid in the United States and a Fortune 42 company, I have to ask myself: Why am I in this state? ... This is a state that frowns on this business — what am I doing here?”

It might be expected that Missouri Republicans — whose mantra is that the business of their politics is a commitment to jobs, jobs, jobs and business — would stand up and take notice of major businesses poised to move out of the state because of their antics and undemocratic behavior. Political scientist Ken Warren of Saint Louis University is not so sure the new breed of Missouri Republican can be expected to react in favor of jobs, business and rational thinking.

“Regarding Centene, I just am not sure the Republicans care, despite the business loss to Missouri,” Warren said. “Republicans probably feel that Centene is a liberal corporation that they would just as soon see leave Missouri

anyway. Republicans today seem to not care about practical consequences.

“Republicans now seem to care only about promoting their own power or partisan advantage, although they may be miscalculating. Enough voters might care about their attacks on democracy and our democratic institutions,” added Warren. “Today’s Republicans are not the old, establishment Republicans of yesteryear who tended to act more rationally and more in a bipartisan manner. They are bold, arrogant and insensitive to democracy.”

Right-wing think tanks weigh in

Lawmakers and right-wing think tanks have been presenting policy arguments against Medicaid expansion, as if the matter had not already been decided at the ballot box. The hired hands at the Rex Sinquefeld-funded Show-Me Institute have weighed in as has the brain trust with Americans for Prosperity-Missouri and other lobbying groups. Jeremy Cady of Americans for Prosperity did the usual hit job on the measure as just some more Obamacare Affordable Care Act socialism that voters simply do not understand.

Cady declared that voters were hoodwinked by a “radical expansion” proposal that would displace billions of dollars needed to go to state priorities like education, public safety and transportation. He failed to point out that the legislature has never agonized too much about these supposed priorities that need funding. Cady also dragged out the usual cannards about fraud in government health care programs, arguments that were used a decade ago to block Missouri’s participation in the ACA for those without health insurance.

James Brasfield, an emeritus professor at Webster University with several published books on health care issues in America, said the arguments against the cost and viability of Medicaid expansion in states like Missouri ring

“ Not only do the feds pay for 90% of expansion costs, but to entice the remaining dozen holdout states to expand Medicaid, the feds will pay extra money for the entire Medicaid program for two years.”

— James Brasfield

hollow. He also said the legislature is derelict in protecting the health of state citizens and in upholding the will of the people.

“Not only do the feds pay for 90% of expansion costs, but to entice the remaining dozen holdout states to expand Medicaid, the feds will pay extra money for the entire Medicaid program for two years,” noted Brasfield. “Plus other late expansion states have found they save more than the cost to expand in other programs — such as drug treatment and mental health — than cost of expansion because clients now fully funded by the state will be paid for at 90%-plus by the feds.”

Brasfield said conservative rural legislators seem to think Medicaid is for urban residents and that it’s an urban Democrat program. However, he said it’s rural hospitals that are closing and rural residents who are suffering. He said rural politicians need to be more aware of the critical health needs in their rural counties.

“GOP legislative opposition to Medicaid expansion, despite the new constitutional amendment, is a demonstration of contempt for their own voters and constituents since a significant number of GOP voters supported Medicaid expansion,” said Brasfield. “Their own constituents will benefit. Rural hospitals and rural communities will benefit with jobs in those rural hospitals. They are often the best jobs in town. And in the next few years, enhanced federal funds will cover nearly all of the expansion costs if not more.

“For rural areas, failure to add Medicaid expansion may lead to closing of some rural hospitals as uncompensated care bills pile up,” added Brasfield. “There should be some type of backlash, but unfortunately many rural Missouri voters don’t seem to recognize their own interests on issues such as this.”

Longtime political science professor and political consultant Terry Jones of the University of Missouri-St. Louis agrees with Brasfield. When it comes to the politics of Medicaid expansion in Missouri, he said the intransigence of the state legislature will probably not exact any political costs for legislators.

“The overwhelming share of both Republican and Democratic state legislators are from safe districts,” said Jones, who remarked that partisan gerrymandering is responsible for much of that situation. “This all makes the party primaries the key elections in Missouri. For Republican legislators, well over two-thirds of GOP primary voters oppose Medicaid expansion. They are much more likely to reward — not punish — their legislators for opposing expansion.

Killing Missouri Plebiscites

Several bills were introduced in the Missouri legislature this session to effectively kill the “will of the people” voter initiatives in the state. Many GOP lawmakers have had enough of voters interfering with governance. And most Missouri lawmakers clearly view governance as all about passing bills to void federal gun restrictions, rather than passing bills to meet state health care needs.

Bills in the state designed to curtail, if not end, ballot initiatives would: shorten the time to gather signatures for these measures; require a two-thirds supermajority to pass ballot initiatives (instead of a simple majority); and, double the number of signatures required to get a proposal on the state ballot. Although the legislature did not have time to get to these bills this session, sponsors said there will be plenty of time to enact these restrictive measures in 2022. Nevertheless, GOP Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft has called for a special session to take up the initiative bills as well as voter photo ID bills.

“The use of the initiative process by progressive interests in Missouri, and other Republican-dominated states that have that option, has been a conscious strategy to get things done. This was all birthed in the mid-2010s,” said Jones. “It has been quite successful in Missouri with minimum wage, medical marijuana, Medicaid expansion ...

“It has taken a few years, but GOP forces in one-party states — those where the Republicans control both the executive and legislative branches — have now come to realize that it makes sense for them to use their powers to limit the use of ballot initiatives,” added Jones. “It is ultimately another form of voter suppression.”

The voter suppression of killing the initiative process has brought former legislators and advocacy groups to Jefferson City to oppose such bills. Among those groups are the Missouri Voter Protection Coalition, Missouri League of Women Voters, Missouri NORML, Empower Missouri, Show Me Integrity and more. Bob Johnson, who served in both House and Senate between the 1970s and early 2000s, said the initiative process allows people to use their voices in the lawmaking process, especially now when so many laws passed are not pro-people.

“I served in the legislature under Governor John Ashcroft when he vetoed attempts to limit the ballot initiative process,” said Johnson, a Republican from the Kansas City area. “Big money special interests and lobbyists have taken over our political system,

and now they want to severely limit the citizen initiative process because they know that it’s the only way for citizens to directly propose amendments that reduce their power and influence. This is a freedom issue — we must protect Missourians’ constitutional freedom to use the citizen initiative process.”

Warren, at Saint Louis University, said the legislature voiding the will of the people on Medicaid expansion is a vote against economic self-interest. He said he wonders how elected representatives in rural areas can sleep at night knowing that their vote not to fund Medicaid expansion will hurt most the people in their rural districts. He said killing the initiative process outright may be even more unconscionable.

“The voters of five other conservative states have voted for Medicaid expansion, but not one of those states has then refused to fund the program. Missouri is the only state that has refused to fund and implement Medicaid expansion, despite Missourians approving of Constitutional Amendment 2,” said Warren. “My opinion is that the courts should compel the Missouri legislature to fund the program and not reject the will of Missouri voters.

“This is the right and democratic thing to do. To reject the will of the people is to slap Missouri voters in the face, essentially saying that your vote does not count,” Warren stressed. “Missouri Republicans do not seem to care about democratic practices. Why should they? They have gotten away with this in the past and still manage to win reelection.”

The Missouri Supreme Court ruled unanimously July 22 that the Medicaid expansion was valid, requiring the state to expand the program.

Warren said the new Republican efforts to make it even harder for Missourians to approve ballot measures is inherently undemocratic as well. He said these moves show the utmost disrespect for Missouri voters. He said it will contribute to what electoral behavior scholars call “low political efficacy,” i.e., why vote because my vote does not matter.

In a column published in the Kansas City Star, St. Louis high school student and civic activist Jonah Zack called the legislature’s acts undemocratic and called on Missourians to get involved. Zack heads a group that helps voters find notaries. He wrote. “The fact is that many of the legislators and statewide officials who have been working to circumvent the will of the voters are doing things that their constituents don’t want them to. Their only protection is our ignorance. So, get to know these people.”

Recovering history of Illinois' free Black settlements

by Amelia Blakely

When Kimberly France, a descendant of free African American pioneers, first approached Toni Craig to help piece together her family's history in a southern Illinois community called Africa, Craig wasn't sure she was up for it.

Craig had already spent years assembling and telling the stories of the community of Africa, which is located 120 miles from St. Louis.

France and Craig are both descendants of Black and racially mixed pioneers who helped settle the Northwest Territory, including Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin and a portion of Minnesota. The original settlers were either born free or became emancipated.

Africa descendants like Craig kept records, artifacts and photos, telling the histories of these settlements and the people who lived there, passing it down to future generations. Their stories and impacts on American history have mainly gone unacknowledged for over a century. That history is now being preserved and curated through the work of their descendants.

Some of those records and oral histories don't tell the whole story, and the people who lived the history and know it best have long been dead. Some descendants also have been adamant about not perpetuating tales that cannot be proved or fail to tell the whole story. And some find some value in the legends.

That has made it difficult to tell the story of Africa, though Craig tried, for years, primarily through lectures at the Williamson County Historical Society.

Craig had retired mostly from her volunteer work when she ran into France at an annual family reunion in late May at Locust Grove Cemetery in rural Williamson County.

France reached out to Craig, wanting to know more about a place she knew as "up in the country" and Locust Grove Cemetery. The area, what some would call a "ghost town," was also known as "Africa," "Little Africa," "Locust Grove," "Skelontown," and "Fancy Farms," according to historical sources and local tradition.

Craig still lives there – on land that has been in her family for 250 years.

"Her little spark was enough to start my fire," Craig said of France.

According to Craig's grandmother Ary Dimple Bean's records, Locust Grove was once a self-sufficient community of about 40 families and 150 people after the Civil War. Collectively, they owned more than 500 acres.

It is now farmland scattered with homes and old cemeteries sitting among patches of trees.

The two churches and one integrated school are gone.

The women are likely distant relatives through marriages from generations ago. However, Craig and France are more connected by the place of Locust Grove than their blood relation. "She's a bridge in history for us. Renewed how I feel about it because I wasn't even going to touch it," Craig said.

Finding Africa

Historians and journalists from the 20th



Photos and artifacts courtesy of Toni Craig

Pictured are Toni Craig's ancestors and a 19th century Irish kerchief that belonged to her family.

century tell the origin of Locust Grove as a community created by the McCreery family who settled in Illinois around 1816. The brief version states that this family gave land to the people they enslaved and freed them.

In the version published by West Frankfort's newspaper, *The Daily American* published in 1971, this was a place where enslaved people could negotiate with their owners a wage that they could use to buy their freedom.

According to regional and national historians, this was not unusual. For example, this situation also occurred in the Salt Works in nearby Saline County.

A more comprehensive, in-depth historical account corroborated across multiple sources of information is Fancy Farms where slave owners brought their enslaved people to emancipate them before the Civil War. Credit goes to the McCreery family for establishing Fancy Farms, and subsequently, Locust Grove.

While the McCreery family did bring enslaved people in 1816 to Illinois, they left when the state was admitted to the union as a "free" state two years later. John McCreery, the father, took the enslaved people to Missouri.

In her book "Pioneers and Places," Barbara Hubbs writes that McCreery took most of the enslaved people to Missouri, and the ones he didn't, he freed.

According to "History of Williamson County, Illinois," by Milo Erwin, published in 1879, John's son Alexander McCreery was against slavery. He traveled to Missouri to buy Richard and Cillar Inge from his father. Then, Alexander took the Inge family back to Illinois, where he freed them.

Hubbs tells a slightly different story: John McCreery died in Missouri, and the people he

enslaved were "inherited" by his son, Alexander.

Alexander took the enslaved people back to Illinois, where he freed them. While in Missouri, he also bought an enslaved woman whose husband was one of the enslaved people John McCreery owned. That was Richard and his wife, Cillar Inge. Once freed, Inge bought 80 acres in Locust Grove.

While this oral tradition is likely true, it leaves out important information otherwise obtained by other sources.

A typed history explains Craig's ancestors' journey to Locust Grove, written by her grandmother, Ary Dimple Bean. She was born and raised at Locust Grove.

According to Bean, residents at Locust Grove were ex-revolutionary, buffalo, or Civil War soldiers who received land grants from the government. Families also descended from formerly enslaved people.

The first settler of Locust Grove was an African American man who was a runaway slave. She was told this by her mother and the other residents in that community, by Bean's account. It is unknown if he came from a plantation in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky or Tennessee. He was known as Skelton, hence Skelontown, which is in the northeast corner of Williamson County.

In the same document, Bean outlines her lineage and her ancestors' journey to Locust Grove.

Bill Martin enslaved Bean's maternal great-grandmother in Tennessee.

"He took her for his mistress after selling her husband and one of her two sons (because she at first refused him)," Bean wrote.

To Susan and Bill Martin, five children were born. After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Bean wrote that Bill gave Susan forty dollars and sent her north with their children.

Craig, Bean's granddaughter, has the pouch and glass-plated photographs sent with her ancestor on their journey to Illinois. When Susan and her children arrived at Locust Grove, she used the remaining money to buy 40 acres. One of her sons later increased their property to 200 acres.

Bean's other grandmother, Ara Ann Brooks, was born to a white woman and a Black man who lived in Meridian, Mississippi.

"Elizabeth Brooks was a widow who sympathized with the slaves and taught them secretly at night. She was also a midwife and frequently tended women during childbirth. Having given birth to a negro child, she lived in fear of having it stolen or sold down the river as a slave," Bean wrote.

Ara Ann's father was a domestic enslaved man in Elizabeth's father's household, according to Bean. Elizabeth hid in cornstalks with her daughter and other enslaved people hiding from slave traders looking for them.

Ara Ann married William Harris, a man of African and Native American ancestry. According to Bean, they married in Alabama and did not want to live in a slave state, so they migrated to Illinois.

At the Tennessee River, they were refused

passage because they were seen as runaway enslaved people. As a result, Elizabeth Brooks, Ara Ann's mother, had to pretend William and Ara Ann were her indentured servants for the remainder of the journey. When they crossed the Ohio River at Shawneetown, they learned of a little African American community a few miles west, Locust Grove.

William Harris died after fighting in the Civil War in the Union during the winter. Ara Ann Brooks then married Presley Martin.

The primary occupation at Locust Grove was farming. Tobacco and castor beans were the main crops they sold at Marion, Carbondale and Galatia.

"They always took a white man with them to market because the buyers would not give a Negro a fair price," wrote Bean, who attended Southern Illinois University when it was formerly Southern Illinois Normal University and graduated in 1924. She later taught school.

Each family raised their cotton and carded it for quilts. They grew their food, canned it, stored it, and milled their corn for feed and meal. Another of Bean's grandmothers was a widow with a family of 10. She raised sheep, and taught her daughters how to card, spin and weave with a loom.

For recreation, church festivals happened every two weeks that nearly everyone in the community attended. There were also "play parties" where people played folk music and danced Irish dances.

According to records scribed by Bean or given to her by community elders, other families recorded to have lived at Locust Grove included the Stewarts, Stewards, Whites, Fears, Skeltons, Allens, Hawsleys, Harrisons, Harrises, McCreerys, Beans, Wesleys, Clemons, Chavises, Williams, Grays, Longs, Hollands, Porters, Pattons, Youngers, Hargraves, Finches and Littlepage's.

In 1937, only seven families remained at Locust Grove.

"Most of those living there have radios, gasoline washers, and cars, and go to the nearest town two or three times per week," Bean wrote. "The old residents like to sit and talk about the modern way of doing things and wonder what the world is coming to."

'The hope of your calling'

By the time France, who grew up in Carbondale, traveled the 35 miles to Locust Grove for funerals and family reunions in the 1960s and '70s, the Locust Grove church and cemetery were all that was left.

Her grandmother, Madelene Allen, raised France, she said. Allen was the daughter of Henry Finas Allen and Matilda Stewart.

Stewart's father, Timothy Stewart, served in the Civil War in the 29th Colored Infantry, among other Black soldiers from sister communities in neighboring counties.

Henry was the grandson of John and Myra Allen, who were also free African American pioneers from North Carolina. They first settled in Lakeview, another African American settlement, and then arrived at Locust Grove around 1855.

A family legend written by Brent Hope Jennings, a descendant of the Allens, and Rebecca Jennings in "The Allen Chronicles" tells a story about forbidden love between an

Irish tobacco farmer's daughter and one of the domestic enslaved men. In the legend, they escape North Carolina to Illinois.

According to southern Illinois historian Darrel Dexter's genealogical research, John Allen was already free in North Carolina. He showed up in the 1850 census as a laborer. John and Myra had eight children — one of them, James Randall, was Henry's father. Marriage records show Myra and John Allen separated between 1850 and 1860.

James' brother, Irvin, moved back to Lakeview around 1865. It was officially established in 1838 by the Taborn family.

Both communities established churches, cemeteries, and traditions like serving in the military and annual Memorial Day celebrations. They also practiced naming children after well-revered family members, resulting in people sharing names or going by nicknames.

According to American historian Anna-Lisa Cox, author of "Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality", the Salt Works in Saline County were among the earliest industries developed by the newly formed United States Government.

Enslaved African and Indigenous people and white indentured servants worked here together.

Emancipation records and free Black registration papers show numerous enslaved men and women used the opportunity at the Saline Salt Works to negotiate a wage that they used to buy their freedom and their family members' freedom.

Cox calls them "freedom entrepreneurs."

One of those entrepreneurs was Cornelius Elliott.

Elliott was an enslaved person owned by Timothy Guard, a leaseholder of the U.S. Saline Salt Works. Elliott bought his and his family's freedom.

According to public records, he was also the first person to buy land from the federal government in 1829 in Gallatin County. He purchased 80 acres for \$1 each.

Elliott later settled the African American community called Grayson, south of Eldorado.

Although Illinois was often called "the Promise Land" by runaway enslaved people and free African Americans, the southern Illinois region geographically and culturally resembles the upland south than the prairie region to the north.

During the 19th century, Illinois passed laws banning free African American settlement, interracial marriage and the assemblage of African Americans, including for religious worship.

In addition to political discrimination, as African Americans flourished, they were targets for violence and kidnappings. According to Milo Erwin, in 1872, there were 130 members of the Ku Klux Klan in Williamson County.

Before she investigated her family history, France did not fully grasp what it took for her ancestors to create an "oasis of our own" in a state and country poisoned with prejudice, she said.

"I can put it in context with the wars and the status of Blacks in this country, and how things have changed," France said. "Because while all these things were happening in the country, these folks managed to carve out a wonderful life and establish rich traditions. And, give us a legacy and an inheritance that I just really believe is priceless."

Historical context is critical to understanding the significance of African American settlements as prosperous as they were in this region and the country.

According to Cox, after the American Revolution, some people had a common sentiment that the slave trade was opposite to the ideals laid out in the Constitution, and it could not work.

The Northwest Territory, which practically doubled the nation's size at the time, was this vast land where slavery was banned. As slave owners freed tens of thousands of enslaved people, those newly freed Americans and the free-born Black Americans traveled west to settle this new American territory.

These pioneers successfully obtained land in the 18th and 19th centuries, despite their fellow Americans stripping away their constitutional rights.

John Ellis was one of these pioneers.

Ellis was a Black Revolutionary War soldier who was a private in the 10th Regiment of the Continental Army of North Carolina. He settled in southern Illinois between 1820 and 1830. He is buried in New Dennison, another pre-Civil War African American community in Williamson County.

But that historical context was rarely mentioned by white writers in the 20th century.

The lack of documentation in the past has implications today as people like France put the puzzle pieces of their ancestry back together.

"The important thing to do is to tell these families' stories because I feel, regardless of how Africa came to be, the people that deserve the credit, the recognition and the acknowledgment are the families," France said. "What I realized about oral history and, particularly about Black folks, is the story you tell is the story you've been told. And if you've been told all your life that you're descendants of slaves, that you're not citizens and that you're less than, that's the story that you internalize. That's the story you believe about yourself."

France credits her successes to her rich family traditions established by the Allens in Lakeview, which continued in Locust Grove with the Stewarts.

Craig and France's ancestors left just enough so their descendants could know from where they came. And France believes she owes it to her ancestors to continue telling the story of these communities to the younger generations.

She strives to create a "Little Africa" foundation that can pool enough resources to rebuild the church and preserve documents and artifacts. She'd also like to see it become a heritage site. In the community of Lakeview, descendants have similar aspirations for preserving their history.

For members of these communities, their history is more than just facts.

It is an inheritance, the peace of knowing who you are.

"There's Bible scripture in Ephesians that talks about the hope of your calling and the joy of your inheritance. So Paul's saying, you know, I hope that you have that. Like, I wish that and pray that for you. And I feel like, for the first time, I understand what that is," France said. "And I feel that I have it because my ancestors gave it to me."

Chicago mayor isn't wrong about the diversity crisis in city's newsrooms

by Deborah Douglas

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot's decision to grant one-on-one interviews to journalists of color conjures my own thoughts about the unbearable whiteness of Chicago news media.

Her decision reminded me of spring 2019 when I hurriedly left a Manhattan classroom to board a plane to Chicago for the highly anticipated Chicago Headline Club's annual Lisagor Awards. The ceremony was being held at the elite Union League Club where the city's best journalists would celebrate a year of doing the transformational work that is journalism — the only profession explicitly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution.

Author Deborah Douglas stands under the sign of the newly renamed Ida B. Wells Drive in downtown Chicago. "I took it because for me, journalism is who I am and not where I work," she said of the image. "For journalists of color who thrive, we reclaim our gift of storytelling day after day — inside and outside of newsrooms."

As a former Chicago Sun-Times newsroom manager, it dawned on me that I would be seeing familiar faces for the first time in years. When I crossed the threshold, I was taken aback by the overwhelming number of white journalists in the room. Surely they couldn't be all there is when it comes to journalistic excellence, I thought.

I took a visual census of Brown and Black journalists (including those I have taught as journalism professor), as I considered years of downsizing and attrition at local outlets. I reflected on the ugly politics of credibility and representation those missing journalists of color likely navigated while still working in them. I know the stories or experienced them myself. It was like they, we, me were never there. We had been despresenced right out of Chicago's news ecosystem.

The thought of us, the hope of us, at least on that night, was never a given.

That scene all came rushing back when Lightfoot, a Black lesbian, announced her decision in celebration of her two-year anniversary as mayor. Lightfoot shouldn't have to do the work of diversifying local newsrooms. That's journalism's job. It's one that we fail to do EVERY. SINGLE. OPPORTUNITY.

Instead, the idea of leveling the playing field for a blink in time turned explosive, and it singled the mayor on a local and national scale. Fox News got ahold of the story, and Tulsi Gabbard, former Democratic presidential hopeful, went into a tizzy. It was as if centering Black and Brown journalists this one time could possibly make up for the disparate impacts of not only our



Photo courtesy of Deborah Douglas

Author Deborah Douglas stands under the sign of the newly renamed Ida B. Wells Drive in downtown Chicago. "I took it because for me, journalism is who I am and not where I work," she said of the image. "For journalists of color who thrive, we reclaim our gift of storytelling day after day — inside and outside of newsrooms."

newsrooms, but more importantly, our communities.

Lightfoot might not be the right messenger for solving the crisis that exists at Chicago news outlets, but she ain't wrong. The numbers don't lie. Newsrooms are less diverse than society at large: A 2018 Pew Research Center study shows three-quarters of U.S. newsroom employees are white, compared with two-thirds of workers: "Almost half (48%) of newsroom employees are non-Hispanic white men compared with about a third (34%) of workers overall."

At the Chicago Tribune, 20.5% of its

“ Lori Lightfoot might not be the right messenger for solving the crisis that exists at Chicago news outlets, but she ain't wrong.”

“ At an anecdotal level, Black and Brown journalists will recount all the ways they are minimized in traditional newsrooms.”

newsroom staff were journalists of color, according to a 2019 survey by the American Society of News Editors. The Chicago Sun-Times 28.5%. Comparatively, Chicago's population breaks down like so: 28.8% Latino, 29.6% Black, 6.6% Asian, 0.3% Native American, 33% white, and 2.8% two or more races. In 2020, industry analyst Richard Prince wrote about the Chicago Tribune Guild's concerns over the loss of two more journalists of color.

Nationally, a representation gap exists in electronic media, according to the Radio Television Digital News Association. People of color comprised 39.3% of the U.S. population in 2020 but only 26.6% of the TV news workforce. In 2020, the percentage of Latino and Black news directors was down in local news.

I've been following newsroom parity numbers since I was a freshman studying journalism at Northwestern University's Medill School, when I had the keys to the Evanston Review, my first news industry job. Despite the influx of Black journalists following the revelations of the 1968 Kerner Commission report, the numbers never truly reflect the communities we serve.

Despite the burgeoning Latino population, newsrooms aren't positioned to capture the nuance this diverse, multiethnic cohort deserves. These perspectives are necessary for a full, complete and true story of all of our lives, whatever our background.

Brown and Black journalists aren't missing because we don't want to tell the story that is Chicago. At an anecdotal level, Black and Brown journalists will recount all the ways they are minimized in traditional newsrooms. This includes being consigned to legwork while higher profile journalists who are white get the byline. It means lack of investment in professional development. Let's not even talk about pay inequity.

Journalists working at outlets that serve Black and Brown communities, shouldn't be marginalized or crowded out by traditional, majority-owned media, either. They are often under-resourced, and making it harder to get answers for the communities they serve perpetuates structural inequity.

When a breakout Black or Brown journalist does emerge, they are amplified and regarded as "the one" and "the only," as if there aren't scores of talented people just like them waiting in the wings.

Chicago is not an outlier.

Several newsrooms, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and The Washington Post had racial reckonings over portrayals of communities of color after George Floyd was

murdered in broad daylight by a Minneapolis cop. His death a year ago May 25, ignited what may be the largest social justice movement in U.S. history, according to The New York Times, and similar movements around the globe.

How journalists of color are regarded goes right to industry practices. Take the debate over objectivity, the idea that journalists can put their personal biases aside while covering the news. In the case of journalists of color, their awareness of the nuances of communities that include their own is often held against them as lacking objectivity.

While objective truth, such as science, is a thing, nobody can truly be objective. We can try, and we must. However, acknowledging our biases is healthier for news coverage than denying the existence of implicit and explicit biases. We can better calibrate proportional, authentic stories when we're working with the truth of ourselves.

Anyone who believes the current racial and ethnic composition of Chicago newsrooms is adequate to bear witness to all of Chicago is operating from a position of arrogance. And because our newsrooms look the way they do, newsroom leaders might as well own that fact.

Now, the outrage over Lightfoot's decision is just part of a rancid brand of false equivalency over what constitutes racism. It's like comparing an attempted coup at the nation's capital to a Black Lives Matter protest demanding the right to live, breath, drive and sleep. Those who weaponize an effort to spotlight the overwhelming homogeneity and potential lack of perspective in local media ranks are either ignorant or want everyone else to be.

Newsrooms don't look like they do because white journalists are better storytellers. Many are, indeed, exquisite storytellers, as are many other journalists of color worth watching and reading. These outlets look like this because the people who make decisions on who is hired, advanced, supported and downsized think they are better than us. Many white allies who understand the stakes of newsroom parity often believe their own personal awareness of equity is enough for the job.

Rather than gnashing teeth over the mayor's decision to do a thing, we might consider this: "If you want something to change, you've got to do something different," said in one way or the other by everybody from Barack Obama, Dr. Phil, Thomas Jefferson and my mama's voicemail message.

Whoever said it, I know one thing, I always listen to my mama, and maybe Chicago news media should, too, unless Chicago media doesn't want to change. Then that's another story.

Illinois gun media flourish with stories downplaying failed Jan. 6 insurrection, claiming election fraud

by Kallie Cox

From new chat sites, to Facebook knock-offs, to print and radio, right-wing organizers are finding new ways to spread their message after being banned from social media following the failed Jan. 6 insurrection against the U.S. government.

Common messages in the media are that Donald Trump supporters weren't responsible for the insurrection and that the presidential election was stolen from the former president, even though that is false. One magazine prints tips for armed citizens buying guns.

The Illinois Shooter and Gun News are two of the larger pro-2nd Amendment newspapers in Illinois.

The Illinois Shooter is the quarterly journal of the Illinois State Rifle Association. It contains political content and the organization has lobbyists in Springfield.

It has over 30,000 current subscribers and its winter edition's front page ran three featured stories. Its main story was "Michigan Senate's Election Fraud Hearing" Side bar: "Media Spikes Stories Helpful to Trump: Skews Election" and below the fold: "Justice Alito Warns of Threats to Our Rights."

The editor of the publication, Richard Vaughan, also runs Publishing Management Associates Inc. which specializes in Christian and conservative magazines and specialty publications. He said in an interview this past year he has seen an uptick in subscribers to the Illinois Shooter and his other publications and he attributes the increase to censorship on social media. He says there will be a print renaissance because of it.

"I think magazines are going to have a kind of a Renaissance because people realize that it's hard to cancel a publication because they are all owned by different companies and they're, you know, the post office has to send it out," Vaughan said. "So it has a bit of freedom that you don't have when you're under a platform like Facebook, Google, you know all the others that involve censorship."

The Shooter/ISRA also runs a weekly email newsletter and legislation alerts.

Gun News is another 2nd Amendment and right-wing print publication in Illinois. It is published monthly by Guns Save Life, a lobby group founded 20 years ago in the state and separate but associated with the NRA and ISRA. It is sent to each member and distributed to businesses in Springfield, Decatur, Rantoul, Bloomington, Chicago and the Pontiac/Dwight region. It is also inside the Capitol in Springfield. It has been in publication since 1999 and the editions are typically 24 pages.

Some of the stories in their recent editions included: "The Good American" a column denying the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol was a full insurrection and comparing those who called it an insurrection to Nazis and fascists from 1933 Germany. Another story ran next to it titled "Rep. Mo Brooks says 'Evidence Growing' Antifa 'orchestrated assault on Capitol.'" Another story was headlined, "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. Got shovel? Strategies to avoid the loss of your guns." It had detailed instructions on how to bury guns in safe containers made of do-it-yourself materials or piping. At the bottom of the page is a graphic with two rifles

and the caption says "when democracy turns to tyranny ... the armed citizen still gets to vote."

John Boch, executive director of Guns Save Life and editor emeritus of Gun News, said they distribute about 17,000 copies each month and the distribution network is 100% volunteer.

When asked how he finds a balance between publishing political issues and topics relating to gun interest, Boch said he tries to shy away from politics outside of gun rights and the right to self-defense.

Boch said he doesn't necessarily believe people are returning to print in general, but he thinks Gun News has a unique, niche market that is appealing to the gun owner demographic.

"Without that I think we would be like your local newspaper that's shedding readers faster than a German shepherd sheds hair. But we have had, I suppose in a sense, that upswing in political content simply because there's more going on politically," Boch said. "Back when Donald Trump was president, gun control was going nowhere. Back before last fall's election we had a narrow majority in the Illinois House and Senate that blocked gun control legislation and as such there was really nothing notable or very little newsworthy. When it came to politics there was less politics on the table."

Boch said the media is doing a "pretty good job of shooting itself in the foot."

"The media are democratic by line, democratic operatives with bylines in today's world. And as a result Americans are tuning out from media," Boch said. "In large part the collapse in readership and viewership of print and video publication, news related to the expression 'get woke go broke', there's more than a little truth to that if you watch and see what happens to the world of media out there."

Aside from traditional forms of media such as print, those on the right are also turning to alternative forms of social media in the wake of Jan. 6 where many, including Trump, were purged from mainstream networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Some of these sites include MeWe, Telegram, Gab and Parler. These are popular among the right because of the lack of censorship and the encrypted chat features they offer.

MeWe is an alternative form of social media that looks similar to Facebook and operates like a blend between Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. After the social media purges took place in January on Facebook and Twitter, many rightwing groups moved to MeWe where founder Mark Weinstein says he won't censor posts and values privacy.

Posters on MeWe spread false information and conspiracy theories. Some of these include posts saying masks don't work, others say the election was stolen and others involve hateful rhetoric towards the Black Lives Matter movement.

One of these groups where members of the right-wing and Trump supporters congregate, includes Illinois Gun Owners Together (IGOT), who moved to the platform after their Facebook pages were shut down multiple times.

Some of the posts from their group include: a photo of Kyle Rittenhouse, who is charged with

killing two protesters in Wisconsin last summer, with his gun and a depiction of Jesus over his shoulder whispering in his ear, "You see that man over there? He's a pedo. That guy over there, he beats his girl. This other kid is not a medic he's a burglar." The post was captioned by an administrator named "Panda Man" and said "Kyle is a goddamn hero."

Another post by Mary Jene Howe with a photo of a statue with a woman on her knees who appears to be having sex, with the caption, "They made a statue to honor Kamala Harris."

And another captioned, "Why does anybody need 30 rounds?" with a photo of 30 masked individuals who seem to be peaceful protesters.

Some on MeWe use the platform to buy and sell guns in much the same way as one would sell a couch on Facebook Marketplace. Southern Illinois Firearms Enthusiasts are a group with 491 members who can buy, sell or trade firearms, accessories or ammunition by making a post or using the site's chat feature. This group also occasionally post's information about gun legislation.

One of the more recent posts to the site reads "WTS-VP9 Tactical, tru dot night sites, 2 - 15 round mags, grip inserts to adjust for the perfect fit. Lightly used, safe queen since I always reach for my VP9 set up for 3 gun instead of the tactical. \$600. This one isn't optic ready. Located in Pekin/Peoria."

MeWe is one of the fastest growing social networking sites for the right and it gained 2.5 million users in the week that followed Jan. 6, according to USA Today.

Telegram is a text/chat site similar to WhatsApp. Right-wing groups praise its privacy because it lacks monitoring and it provides encrypted chat features that make it difficult to track and monitor.

Free Illinois has 512 members but more join every couple of days. Many users share alternative news and spread conspiracy theories. Every third or fourth message is a petition, or someone collecting signatures about legislation.

Right-wing social media sites show there is a return to radio, including ham radio and Radio Redoubt groups creating a safe haven.

The FCC warned in a statement following the insurrection that amateur radios may be used as an alternative to social media for organizing.

A member of Illinois Gun Owners Together - a group active on MeWe - told this reporter that they use these radios to communicate during demonstrations in the event that their cell phones don't work. The group has an IGOT Radio Operators group where they learn to use ham radios for these situations and survival situations.

Right-wing social media also contains frequent references to AmRRON, which stands for The American Redoubt Radio Operators Network. The Redoubt movement is an anti-government movement rooted in Christianity that claims Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and the eastern parts of Washington and Oregon as the "Redoubt" region. The movement was popularized and the term coined by James Wesley Rawles, a former U.S. Army intelligence officer, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. The content is encrypted.

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

by Jackie Spinner

A few weeks ago I got an anonymous letter sent to my home address objecting to the “Black Lives Matter” sign I have in my front yard. It was purportedly from a “concerned resident” who saw the sign while driving by and wanted me to know that I supported a Marxist, anti-family organization.

I felt singled out, even though many of my Chicago neighbors have similar signs. I also have since learned that at least two other neighbors received similar notes.

I have three Black sons, and my journey to putting the BLM sign in my yard was a long and fraught one, which the anonymous writer — whose objections were scrawled on an American flag notecard, would not have known.

As a longtime journalist, an old-fashioned one at that, I subscribe to the playbook that prohibits me from publicly displaying my allegiance to political candidates by way of a yard sign or a social media post. I will talk about policy but not politics, although I am not naive to their intersection. Nonetheless, I do it carefully.

I have taken pains over the years to keep my affiliations private and my opinions to myself so much so that in recent years as I’ve started to write op-eds, I report out my own thoughts. I am that uncomfortable with crossing the line between news and editorial. After so many years as a hard news reporter, I am a reluctant columnist, even here.

I’ve written about education and about autism, but I don’t cover either of those as a news beat. It feels safe.

But in the past year, as I’ve worked actively to become anti-racist, as I’ve wrestled with issues as the mother of three young Black sons, I’ve realized my own privilege in being able to distance myself from issues of race and social justice. I cannot let my colleagues of color carry the flag into battle without me behind them.

The fact is that Black lives do matter, and I’ve realized I can support the movement to dismantle systematic injustice and discrimination as a journalist and a mother without compromising either. I can support the movement while still supporting family members and friends who wear a uniform.

I do so with facts.

A recent Harvard study showed what anyone who attended a BLM protest or march last summer already knew: the vast majority were peaceful and non-violent.

The researchers examined 7,305 events in thousands of towns and cities in all 50 states and D.C., involving millions of attendees.

Here is what they found, in their own words. “The overall levels of violence and property destruction were low, and most of

the violence that did take place was, in fact, directed against the BLM protesters.”

The data suggest that 96.3% of events involved no property damage or police injuries, and in 97.7% of events, no injuries were reported among participants, bystanders or police.

“These figures should correct the narrative that the protests were overtaken by rioting and vandalism or violence,” according to the conclusion of the researchers. “Such claims are false. Incidents in which there was protester violence or property destruction should be regarded as exceptional — and not representative of the uprising as a whole.”

The fact is that we, in the media, could have and need to do a better job of dispelling the inaccurate narrative about BLM, and not so I can feel better about displaying my sign. We can do so even as we report on the organization and their finances and their leadership.

We have this innate calling, and I get it because I’ve done it for decades, to cover mayhem. But we also have a responsibility to put it into context.

Last summer, as BLM protests and rallies were in full swing, the independent U.S. Office of Special Counsel issued an opinion that the BLM movement wasn’t political or partisan. This cleared the way for federal workers to show their support, with signs or by wearing apparel.

The Hatch Act prohibits appointed federal employees from participating in certain partisan political activities.

Obviously, there is no law that governs journalists, and when we commit to the profession or are employed by a news organization, we abide by our own code of ethics or the rules of our employer.

I’m still not going to announce who I voted for in an election. I won’t display campaign signs. I’ll steer clear of writing opinions and commentary about issues I have to cover as a news reporter.

But I’m going to keep that Black Lives Matter sign in my yard. In fact, in a show of defiance against the anonymous letter-writer, I added a second one.

Why?

Because Black Lives Matter, in our newsrooms, in our communities, on our blocks.

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.

