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<https://broadandliberty.com/2020/06/18/stephen-f-gambescia-could-local-news-outlets-could-save-journalism/>

Could local news outlets save journalism?

Biased reporting by US newspaper journalists is an enduring concern for the public, political commentators, and pundits. Criticism is heaped most forcefully on national news outlets, specifically with regards to their coverage of government and politics. However, in the midst of this concern, many praise the virtues of local news reporting and suggest it as the solution to widespread, perceived bias in the media. Unfortunately, local outlets are dwindling across the country, creating concurrent problems as to who is left as the objective purveyors of the news and provide thoughtful commentary on how to preserve, as Benjamin Franklin said: *a republic, if we can keep it.*

A confluence of reasons for this bias has developed, but not all for the fault of the individual journalist. Many still view journalism as a noble profession, as Thomas Jefferson did in 1787, when he wrote, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

The individual journalists, and the profession as a whole, do need to recognize their affinity to progressive, and more so today, “left-leaning” bias. A major reason for their drop in credibility is the wearing thin of the long-standing explanation that while many journalists are supporters of the Democratic Party, they can keep at bay any bias in their news reporting. Truth be told for many writers today, the

bifurcation does not work, and the loudest voices have managed to profit by flouting the existing standards of objectivity.

The development of left-wing media bias:

The socialization for a journalist towards such partisan leanings may begin in journalism classes where, after a few lessons on the inverted pyramid and appreciating some once-useful adages (“if it bleeds it leads” or “dog bites man is not newsworthy, but “man bites dog” is news), biases are passed on. Students learn to romanticize journalism through cultural pieces such as *All the President’s Men*. The leap takes place when the meaning and value of “The Fourth Estate” in our constitutional democracy morphs to *primus inter pares.*, i.e. while professing to be one *among* and *for* the people, journalists now look down on them. Ironically, while the media have been the watchdogs of the rich, famous, and powerful, many journalists simultaneously relish their influence on government, politics, and policy at the highest levels.

From J-school to the newsroom, a hidden curriculum has taken over. Young journalists experience mission creep, shifting from “not telling readers how to think but what to think about,” to learning ways to delicately get people “to their enlightened side” of thinking about an issue. We all know which enlightened views the vast majority of these burgeoning writers, editors and producers favor.

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This approach may have metastasized with the “public journalism” movement, begun in the 1980s, whereby journalists took on advocacy style writing to push for policies and favor politicians that were all for the “public good.” Those concerned about this movement argued that there is a big difference between advocating for a “rails to trails” development in a neighborhood versus rallying to upend civic life entirely, even if it means burning down what binds us.

While owners and editors worked to find a new business model for newspapers, journalists felt the pressure to move away from “just the facts” to share space, and at times writing style, with commentary, opinion and more and more entertainment. In terms of covering government and politics at the national level, it meant making the stories bleed every day.

But there is hope for a return to normalcy in the media — or the birth of something new and better.

Certainly, national news is important for learning about how the federal government is fulfilling the social contract. However, it is the local news about our everyday events related to livable neighborhoods, clean streets, public health, good schools, safety from crime, fair and reasonable taxes, and a sundry of other public goods that are of utmost importance — not politicized national narratives.

There are different ways to make successful, trusted local media “work” in our era.

One model that large city papers can play is a *hybrid role*. In Philadelphia, the *Inquirer* (after cascading through several ownership changes and many layoffs) restructured itself as a nonprofit entity and made a major commitment to covering local news for Philadelphia and our region. The *Inquirer* outsourced much of the national, especially political, news and opinion to other news sources like the *Associated Press* and the *Washington Post*, retaining its resources for local news and investigations.

The Philadelphia Soda Tax:

In my research as a health policy professor, I followed closely the controversial sweetened beverage tax floated by incoming Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenny in March 2016. To account for any decision bias by the *Inquirer*, I reviewed all editorials or commentaries published by the paper over four years. Editorials were selected to examine for bias, because they are written and read by the “movers and shakers” in a community.

I examined the author and affiliation, reasons for or against the tax, and number of commentaries published in the *Inquirer* from the time of the mayor’s proposal to three years and eight months after the passage of the bill (four years total, from March 2016–March 2020). I found no evidence of bias in the nature or extent of commentaries published by this newspaper.

The number of commentaries, both for and against the tax, was not altogether skewed. In fact, given that the *Inquirer’s* editorial board was strongly in favor of the tax, as determined from several editorials published both during and after the passage of the tax, there is no evidence that those writing in support of the tax gained better treatment from the editorial board. Commentaries were written by a range of authors with a range of opinions either for or against the tax. My study demonstrates that, in the face of declining trust in the media, residents may feel confident that local newspapers are striving to provide balance to many key local issues during the policy-making process.

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Another sign of hope for readers of all political persuasions are the new additions of several local outlets, including *Broad + Liberty*, whose mission is to “offer diverse, innovative, even disruptive viewpoints about issues, ideas and policies that hit closest to home for our readers.” Another recent addition seeking to cover serious issues in the region is the *Delaware Valley Journal*, which aims to take a deeper look at the stories affecting our region and gets its news “right from the inside sources.”

Philadelphia and its suburbs have had a long and respectable tradition in local newspaper reporting with both dailies and weeklies. In fact, at our country’s founding, the citizenry was well read. People had an insatiable appetite for the news of the day—news that was substantive and meaningful. Civic engagement? They had it...in the street, in the pubs, and at home. The Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers were not published in national newspapers, but rather local publications that reached people in their hometowns; the result was the establishment of a new nation.

There are no signs of national or major city newspapers going back to the founding principles of journalism, and being objective purveyors of the news. Therefore, let us hope that the editors and journalists who joined this noble profession and started their own local outlets gain our support and become the sources that “nearly everyone reads.”

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