

NEXT-GENERATION Watchdogs >>>>>>>>>>

As independent journalism declines across the country, some media outlets in the Pittsburgh region and elsewhere in Pennsylvania are devising innovative approaches to news coverage to improve public accountability and transparency. By Jeffery Fraser





Nate Smallwood



iPRESENTE!

iPresente! Pittsburgh Latino Magazine explores issues such as how the Latino population continues to grow in Coraopolis, northwest of Pittsburgh. It's a community where Darlin Recinis, left, attends a soccer game at AHN Montour Junction Sports Complex in Coraopolis in July while holding Kenji Santizo, a friend's 8-month-old child.

NEWS MAKERS

PITTSBURGH MEDIA PARTNERSHIP

The Pittsburgh Media Partnership supported a collaboration between "The Allegheny Front" and Soul Pitt Media, a Pittsburgh-based urban community website and print magazine, that produced a print and audio news feature on four urban farmers in the region called "Sowing Soil with Soul." Among those interviewed was Kent Bey, right, president and CEO of Project Love Coalition, which owns Peace and Friendship Farm.



Donna Bakker Porcher/Soul Pitt Media



Kara Holsopple/The Allegheny Front



WESA FM

Among the subjects covered by "The Allegheny Front," a Western Pennsylvania public radio program about the environment that airs on WESA FM, is the work of 412 Food Rescue co-founded by Leah Lizarondo, pictured above. The organization delivers surplus food to nonprofits that serve people facing food insecurity and runs a zero-waste kitchen, the Good Food Project, which helps to turn food waste into dinners for those in need.

The health of the kind of independent journalism that forced that concession to transparency is in decline in the United States. Newspapers, in particular, are closing their doors, laying off staff and limiting coverage at a troubling rate, betrayed by traditional business models that have left them vulnerable to a sharp decline in the advertising revenue they rely on.

Spotlight PA is one of a number of emerging news organizations trying to fill the reporting gaps by rethinking how to support the work they do to hold the powerful accountable and keep the public informed. Spotlight forgoes advertising, relying instead on individual donors and foundation grants to stay in business.

The Heinz Endowments has joined other local, statewide and national philanthropies in giving Spotlight operating support. The funding is part of a series of investments the Endowments has made to help independent

journalism survive, thrive and provide the watchdog and explanatory coverage that helps bolster democracy at all levels.

This has included support for Pittsburgh-based public radio station WESA FM, and PublicSource, a regional nonprofit newsroom that focuses on in-depth reporting about people and places whose stories are not often told. Others receiving support include the Pittsburgh Media Partnership, a network of local media outlets and a source of grants and technical assistance that is overseen by Point Park University's Center for Media Innovation.

"It is no secret that the field is challenged and has been going through real shocks and changes as the traditional print media advertising model has become less viable as a funding stream," said Matthew Barron, the Endowments' senior program officer for Sustainability. "We've seen a lot of local newspapers across the country close their doors or be bought by large conglomerates.

In such an environment, you often see a lack of daily news coverage in communities. We want to avoid that.”

U.S. newspaper revenues fell from \$50 billion in 2005 to \$20 billion in 2021, a Northwestern University analysis of the state of the industry reports. Since 2005, more than one fourth, or 2,500 of the newspapers in the country have closed. Most communities that lose a newspaper don’t get a digital or print replacement. From 2006 to 2021, newspaper employment fell by 70 percent to 104,000 workers.

Local news coverage is shrinking. Northwestern researchers estimate that 70 million Americans live in places that have very limited access to local news or are on the verge of becoming one of those communities. Most of those “news deserts” are communities that tend to be poorer and older, and to lack affordable and reliable high-speed internet.

The decline comes at a time when the spread of misinformation, disinformation and political polarization is rising, which places a premium on vetting what the public consumes as news. But among the alternative news sources gaining popularity are social media platforms, which lack the editing, fact checking and other steps news outlets have adopted to guide accurate and truthful reporting. A Pew Research Center survey found that 23 percent of Americans often get their news from social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Another 30 percent “sometimes” rely on such platforms for news.

The struggle to survive is leading local news outlets to think more broadly about their operations. That includes sharing ideas and collaborating on coverage with competitors—something that does not come naturally to newsrooms in an industry known for its zeal for besting rivals in pursuit of scoops, subscribers and viewers.

But some 20 southwestern Pennsylvania media outlets are doing that under the umbrella of the Pittsburgh Media Partnership. The grant-supported nonprofit helps sustain the local media ecosystem in a number of ways. It provides paid interns, which bolster newsrooms while giving young journalists real-world experience. It awards small

grants for infrastructure improvements and collaborative reporting. It offers technical assistance, such as workshops on search engine optimization to raise awareness of the outlets’ stories on the internet, and on how best to promote stories on social media.

“There are a lot of questions, such as ‘We’re doing these stories—how can we make sure more people can see them?’” said Andrew Conte, director of the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University. “The gaps are growing between the national news outlets, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, that are able to figure that stuff out and do it well, and small news outlets that don’t have the resources to figure it out.”

Collaboration is being more readily embraced by news outlets in the Partnership network, Dr. Conte said. When the Fern Hollow Bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh earlier this year, several news outlets volunteered to share photographs, sources and quotes.

“To me, that’s the future of what we’re trying to do. When a big story breaks, you don’t need a bunch of journalists standing in the same place, asking the same questions. Especially now, when news outlets have a fraction of the resources they used to have.”

That collaboration extends to more in-depth reporting and coverage of people and places that attract little media attention. In August, the first article in a series profiling several Latinx communities in southwestern Pennsylvania was published by a team of journalists from Pittsburgh City Paper, an alternative weekly publication; Gazette 2.0, a tiny community paper based in McKees Rocks; and iPresente! Pittsburgh Latino Magazine, a bilingual publication focused on Latinx communities.

The region’s immigrant communities are largely neglected populations when it comes to local news coverage, according to a 2021 study of the Pittsburgh media landscape by the nonprofit American Journalism Project. Yet, the arrival of an increasing number of foreign-born residents is one of the few bright spots in a southwestern Pennsylvania population that struggles to add people. The number of foreign-born Allegheny County

residents rose 30 percent from 2010 to 2020, U.S. Census Bureau data suggest.

The series, which is published in English and Spanish, began as an idea Jamie Wiggan brought with him when he left Gazette 2.0 to become City Paper’s news editor. Maria Manautou-Matos, founder and CEO of Presente Pittsburgh Media, LLC, joined the project, adding her knowledge of the Hispanic community, contacts and translation abilities. A small Pittsburgh Media Partnership grant allowed them to hire a photographer.

“We probably would have done something on the Latino population, but it wouldn’t have been nearly this large,” said Lisa Cunningham, who was City Paper’s editor-in-chief at the time but has since left the paper. “We wouldn’t have had the finances to get translations. The stories wouldn’t have reached as many people. And we wouldn’t have been able to afford the photography.”

Sustaining a high level of professional news reporting is the challenge of the moment for many local news outlets, particularly for-profit operations that rely on advertising dollars. “I won’t lie. It’s stressful running a media outlet,” Ms. Cunningham said as she described how the City Paper’s newsroom had shrunk even though the staff’s drive to provide a needed voice in the community continued.

The nonprofit Spotlight PA enjoys more favorable circumstances. Its newsroom has more than doubled to 17 reporters and editors. It added a bureau in State College. It has published more than 100 investigative articles, several of which spurred changes in Harrisburg and elsewhere across the state. More donors and foundations have come forward to support its work.

And the list of partners with agreements to publish Spotlight’s reporting has grown to nearly 90 news outlets with a combined circulation of 35 million readers and viewers. That has allowed its reporting to reach hundreds of communities large and small, urban and rural, across the state.

“It’s read everywhere and lawmakers hear about it,” Mr. Baxter said. “Whatever people think of representative democracy, the reality is, lawmakers still respond when their constituents react.” **h**