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
What was readily available to flesh out how much the state’s 253 legislators spend and why amounted to a jigsaw puzzle missing most of its pieces. And it was clear to the 3-year-old nonprofit news organization that lawmakers weren’t keen on helping the journalists put it together.

Reporters asked, negotiated and dealt with government lawyers, and filed some two dozen Right-to-Know Law requests trying to pry loose records of expenses and the details justifying them. When the journalists did succeed, documents tended to be rife with redactions that made it difficult to determine the purpose of trips and meals and who lawmakers met with on the taxpayers’ dime.

“To get the legislature in Pennsylvania to respond and do anything regarding its transparency and its own use of tax dollars has historically been incredibly difficult,” said Christopher Baxter, executive director and editor-in-chief of Spotlight PA, which he founded in 2019. “We had to have a big fight over what should be basic government transparency.”

Spotlight reporters, working with colleagues at The Caucus, a small Harrisburg-focused news outlet, waged a yearlong battle with lawmakers and their lawyers until the legislature relented, turning over some 10,000 unredacted documents. The stories that followed ran from March 2021 through March of this year. Spotlight offered the articles free of charge to news outlets throughout the state, and their findings were revealing.

In all, lawmakers spent $203 million on themselves and staff over three years. Some legislators were prudent. Some were big spenders, Spotlight reported. Rep. Chris Sainato, for example, averaged $59,000 a year in expenses—an amount greater than the median household income in Lawrence County which he represents. The democrat lost his reelection bid in November.

Not long after the stories circulated throughout the Commonwealth, the state Senate for the first time began posting the expenses of its members online for all to see. And a bill was proposed in the House requiring its members to do the same.
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, according to a 2021 study of the Pittsburgh media landscape by the nonprofit American Journalism Project. “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 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 Presente! 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.”

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