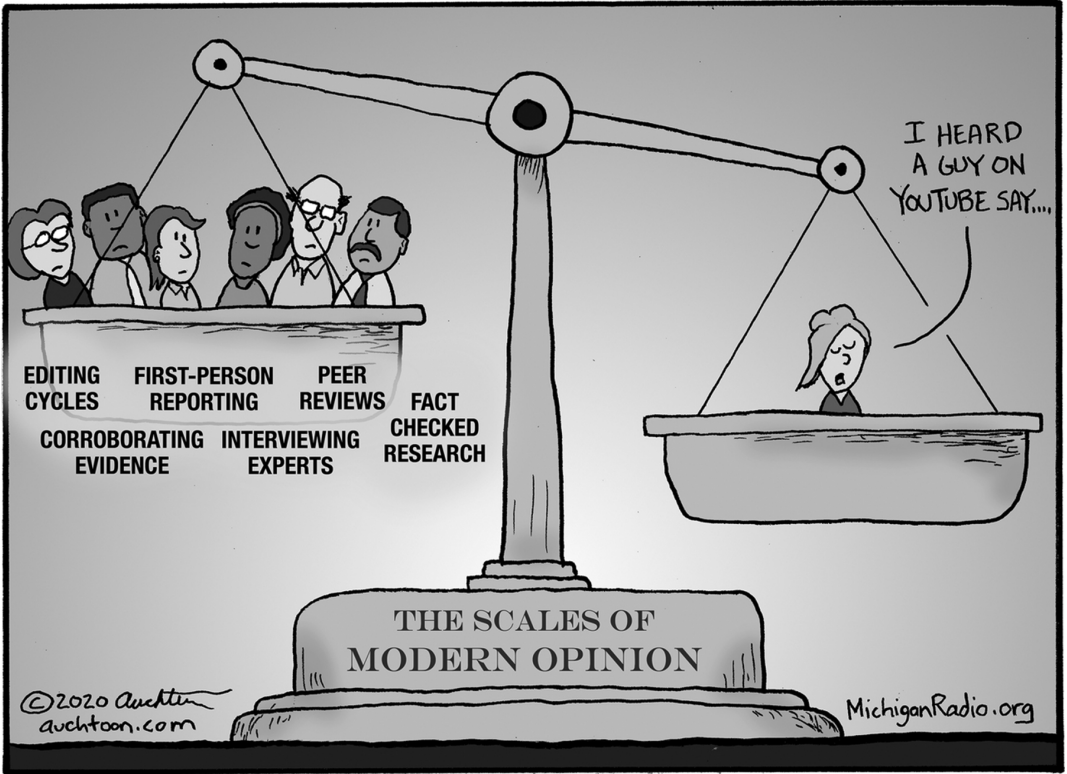




CELEBRATING NATIONAL NEWSPAPER WEEK

Do you have a good local newspaper? Take the test

By KEN PAULSON

This is National Newspaper Week, a celebration of the role that papers and their online platforms play in our society. Candidly, it’s a tough sell. There are no parades, stores don’t have big sales and no one gets a holiday off from work or school. Besides, it’s hard to generate a lot of hoopla around a product introduced to America in 1690.

But that longevity cuts both ways. Those 336 years also suggest something that has served the American people long and well. We live in cynical and divided times with endless media platforms and it’s sometimes easy to forget how important it is to have a local news source with deep roots and a true history of commitment to the community.

That said, local newspapers need to show that commitment every day. In an ever-more competitive environment, newspapers – and that includes print and online editions – cannot take your loyalty for granted.

Readers are entitled to ask, “I’ve subscribed for a long time. Is this still worth my investment?”

”As an editor of a number of newspapers, including USA Today, I daily assessed the quality of each edition, asking myself if we were still doing the job that our readers expected. I’m sure many editors today do the same. I would invite all readers to do the same exercise, particularly if they’re on the fence about subscribing.

Here are some questions you might ask:

- 1.Does my newspaper carry more news and information about my town than any other outlet? Note that the question is not, “Does it carry more than it once did?” The economics of the news business have taken a toll on every outlet. My guess is that you’ll find local television to be outstanding on crime and weather. Local radio news is very timely and covers traffic in detail. But what about the big picture? What single outlet does the best job on news, sports, the arts and events?
- 2.Does my newspaper keep an eye on government and people in power? That need for accountability is the reason the first generation of Americans insisted on a free press. Does my newspaper cover the basics of local

government? Is it telling me what my mayor and town council are up to? Does it run investigative pieces and reveal important information that otherwise would have gone unreported? Bonus points for thoughtful editorials and endorsements.

- 3.Does my newspaper tell me what I need to know? Does it sometimes surprise me? Is it giving me information I need to have? (A closed bridge, an important new school policy.) Does it sometimes tell me something that I would never have seen elsewhere? (A fun feature, a local success story.)
- 4.Is it fair? Yes, this one’s loaded, but there’s a tendency for people to see bias based on their reaction to a single story or topic. Try this experiment: Go one by one through every story written by a local reporter on a single day, either in newsprint or on a website. For each story, ask, “Do I see bias here?” You won’t see it in that article about a store opening. Or a feature story on the new school year. The truth is that most local stories don’t lend themselves to a political interpretation. It’s just that people tend to angrily recall the one that does.

Our collective polarization can

color our perspectives. I once had a tennis partner tell me he was canceling his hometown paper because it was biased and not covering unruly protesters in Seattle. That paper was in Fort Myers, Florida, 3,211 miles away from the incidents. That was not a reasonable expectation.

- 5.How professional is the newspaper? That may sound like an odd question, but staff reductions have meant compromises in reporting and editing. Are stories well-reported and well-written? Are typos and misspelled words kept to a minimum? And if the paper makes an error, does it prominently and quickly correct it?
- 6.Does the newspaper truly care about the community and residents it serves? Traditionally, good newspapers have been guardians of the towns they serve, reporting when things were going awry and often exploring solutions. You had a sense from its content, columns and editorials that it was pulling for the people. That’s difficult to define, but you know it when you see it. It’s also evident when the staff is out there participating in the community and supporting important charitable efforts.

If you find yourself on the fence after those six questions, here’s the clincher. The very fact that you’re reading these words says a great deal about your newspaper. They didn’t have to publish this, and many won’t. But good newspapers want their readers to understand what they offer and welcome constructive feedback. They have a sense of mission and public service. A bad newspaper keeps its head low. If you found that your paper largely meets these criteria, you win. Good local newspapers are irreplaceable, as too many Americans have already discovered when their own local papers closed. No one is watching local government. A spike in crime goes unnoticed. There’s no community awareness – and no heart. The best papers help build understanding, encourage common ground and raise awareness (and hell) when public officials are failing the public. Local newspapers – regardless of their format –deserve our support, subscriptions and constructive feedback. We dare not take them for granted.

Editor’s note: Ken Paulson is director of the Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University.



Paper

FROM FRONT PAGE

It writes down what happened so that a town has a record of itself, written by people who actually live there. National Newspaper Week gives us a chance to say that out loud. It is a reminder to our readers that the newspaper sitting on their porch or arriving in their inbox is not an abstraction. It comes from real people who care enough about this place to keep doing the unglamorous work of attending meetings, checking facts, and writing the first draft of local history every single week.

It is also a reminder to those of us in the business. We do not get to claim deep roots in a com-

munity while playing loose with the truth, and we do not get to claim a commitment to truth while ignoring the place we are supposed to serve. The two halves of this year’s theme depend on each other. A paper rooted in community without a commitment to truth becomes a cheerleader. A paper committed to truth without roots in community becomes just another outside voice shouting into the noise. The newspapers that will still matter ten years from now are the ones that hold both halves together. That has always been our aim, and it remains our aim this week and every week after it.

Without

FROM FRONT PAGE

When that store becomes one location in a regional or national chain, the advertising decision may be made hundreds or thousands of miles away — if there is any local advertising at all.

The store may still be here. The advertising dollars are not. At the same time, more local advertising dollars are flowing to social media and other digital platforms. Those companies can sell clicks. But they do not cover city council meetings, county budgets, school boards, youth baseball or print every kid on the honor roll.

Newspapers must modernize.

We have to make our websites better, improve our digital products, reach readers in new ways and become more efficient.

But technology alone cannot replace a strong local business base.

Philanthropy can help. Foundations can fund reporting projects, student journalism, technology and innovation. But grants are a bridge, not a permanent road for most communitynewspapers.

There is another part of the equation that deserves more attention.

Local newspapers have spent decades providing public-service information that government agencies and nonprofit organizations need communities to see — often at no cost.

There is an important difference between news and public information.

Reporters should decide what is news. Government agencies should not expect a news story to replace a communications budget.

If an agency needs the public to understand a tax program, election, health service, school initiative or government program, it should budget to communicate that information through trusted local media.

The same is true for non-profits.

A news release is not a communications plan. If telling people about available services or important community work is part of the mission, telling that story should also be part of the budget.

Some states have started to act, creating tax credits and other programs to help protect local journalism jobs.

Congress should move, too.

The Community News and Small Business Support Act would help keep or expand local coverage in rural communities while also helping small businesses advertise in their local market.

That matters because local stores are fighting their own battle.

They cannot compete online against Amazon, national chains and big-box retailers with enormous advertising budgets and sophisticated digital marketing operations.

Helping small businesses advertise locally could strengthen downtown businesses and local news coverage at the same time.

Saving local news is not

about nostalgia.

It is about whether communities can still make informed decisions, preserve their shared history and hold those in power accountable.

A community without a newspaper does not become better informed. It becomes more dependent on rumor, social media, press releases and outside narratives.

It becomes less informed, less connected and easier to mislead. Accountability weakens. Civic engagement declines. And gradually, a community loses part of its shared identity.

Newspapers are not dead. But they are fragile, and they are under pressure.

People still read newspapers. They still value public notices. They still rely on local newspapers to understand their communities.

In other words, they still matter.

Maybe now more than ever.

Editor’s note: Robb Hicks is a third-generation Wyoming newspaperman and publisher of the Buffalo Bulletin. In 2025, Hicks, his wife Jen Sieve-Hicks, and Rob and Shaylee Mortimore stepped in after eight Wyoming newspapers abruptly closed in 2025. Together, they reopened the papers, restored local news coverage and kept those communities from becoming news deserts. Today, their growing newspaper group is focused on finding sustainable ways to preserve strong, locally owned journalism in rural communities.

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