

PART ONE

the media landscape

SECTION ONE

commercial media

NEWSPAPERS

RADIO

TELEVISION

CABLE

SATELLITE

INTERNET

MOBILE

1 Newspapers

NEWSPAPERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY have experienced severe cutbacks during the past decade, which has undermined their ability to perform their role as the nation's watchdog. Ad revenue dropped nearly 48 percent between 2005 and 2010,¹ and with it the industry's annual spending on reporting and editing capacity dropped by \$1.6 billion, from 2006 to 2009, a reduction of more than 25 percent, according to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism and Rick Edmonds of the Poynter Institute.² The number of full-time journalists at daily newspapers fell from a peak of about 56,900 in 1989 to 41,600 in 2010, a level not seen since before the Watergate era.³

Early History: Cheap Paper, the Telegraph, and the Rise of the Independent Press

The Founding Fathers believed newspapers to be so important to the development of the young country that they facilitated the creation of a robust distribution network. They provided newspapers with subsidized postal rates that were far below the actual costs of fielding, feeding, and caring for that day's distribution technology: (horses).

These policies changed the economics of newspapers, reducing publication costs and enabling publishers to expand beyond the confines of their hometowns. (Typical were the *Mansfield Gazette* and *Ashtabula Sentinel* in Ohio: a study found that in the 1820s a majority of their subscribers lived outside the central circulation area.)⁴ Laws also enabled newspapers to swap copies with one another free of charge, which led to the frequent appropriation of content from other newspapers. By the 1840s the average newspaper received 4,300 exchange copies each year.⁵

In the early days of the republic, newspapers were usually aligned with a political faction. This did not just mean that newspapers had ideological proclivities; they often received money from, and coordinated with, political sponsors, usually through printing contracts or the placing of "official notices" in the papers as advertisements. In 1830 in New York State, for example, 22 editors served as postmasters.⁶ Under President Andrew Jackson, 59 journalists received government appointments.⁷ Without support from political parties, many of the partisan newspapers would not have survived. The one redeeming feature of this otherwise highly questionable system of partisan press was that both parties engaged in it, which ensured a diversity of voices.⁸

By the 1830s, technology began to change newspaper economics, which in turn profoundly affected newspaper content. As the cost of ink and paper declined,⁹ some publishers dropped the price of an issue from around six cents to one penny, allowing them to reach a wider market. With a larger readership, they could reap greater advertising revenue—and influence.¹⁰ But to hold that larger audience, they needed to be independent and avoid political affiliation. Papers in this era, according to Paul Starr, became more focused on local news and "independent newsgathering."¹¹ In the *New York Herald's* first edition in 1835, founder James Bennett wrote, "We shall support no party—be the organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for any election or any candidate from president down to constable."¹² (The partisan press called the independent papers' coverage of current events, such as crimes and trials, sensational.)

By 1844, another new technology—the telegraph—changed the business and the editorial content once again. Previously, because information tended to travel by horse or boat, up to 28 percent of newspaper items reported on events a month or more after they occurred. The telegraph allowed newspapers to be more up to date.¹³

The role of advertising increased markedly from the 1870s through 1900. Railroads made it possible for companies to create national brands. Advertisers saved time and money dealing with a few large papers instead of a bevy of small ones.¹⁴

Newspaper publishing increasingly became a big business rather than an independent trade. While a new press in the 1840s could cost from \$4,000 to \$5,000, the more sophisticated presses in the 1880s cost \$80,000 each. The barriers to entry had risen.¹⁵

The First Technological Challenges: Radio and TV

As radio grew in popularity in the 1930s, newspapers lost significant audience to the airwaves. Along with readers went advertisers. Between 1929 and 1941, newspaper ad revenue dropped 28 percent overall and national advertising fell 42 percent.¹⁶

Foreshadowing some of the concerns heard today, print journalists complained that radio stations often lifted copy directly from newspapers, aired stories that didn't go into depth, and hired inexperienced reporters. Newspaper executives tried to undermine competition from radio. The Associated Press, created by the newspaper industry, vowed in 1933 not to sell wire copy to radio stations. David Culbert, in his book *News for Everyman*, describes how the radio networks responded:

"The networks agreed to a humiliating 10-point program. News could not be sold commercially. There would be only two five-minute summaries daily, and late enough in the morning and evening so as not to interfere with newspaper sales. The [American Newspaper Publishers Association] would provide bulletins—which urged listeners to purchase a newspaper for details. Radio commentators could not present headlines. They would confine themselves to 'generalizations and background of general news situations.' In return, the newspapers promised to continue publishing daily radio schedules."¹⁷

DAILY NEWSPAPER PAID CIRCULATION (1940–2009)

Year	Total Paid Circulation
1940	41,132,000
1945	48,384,000
1950	53,829,000
1955	56,147,000
1960	58,882,000
1965	60,358,000
1970	62,108,000
1975	60,655,000
1980	62,202,000
1985	62,766,000
1990	62,328,000
1995	58,193,000
2000	55,773,000
2005	53,345,000
2009	45,653,000

Source: Newspaper Association of America and U.S. Census²⁰

These efforts merely delayed the major radio networks' use of news bulletins. Eventually, radio networks were able to buy news from the wire services, cultivate their own reporters, and have their program listings published in newspapers.

While papers tried to resist the spread of news to radio, some complained that newspapers imitated the entertainment programming offered on radio. In the 1944 book *The Disappearing Daily*, Oswald Garrison Villard saw newspapers attempting to "add to their readership by printing pages and pages of comics, hints to the lovelorn, canned advice to parents, syndicated recipes for the housewife, widely marketed cuts of coming fashions for women young and old."¹⁸

With the arrival of television, Americans further split their time among news sources. TV viewership spread rapidly, with penetration in some markets jumping from zero to 70 percent within five years of being introduced into a community.¹⁹ Although raw readership numbers continued to grow along with the population, the percentage of Americans reading newspapers gradually declined. With a smaller percentage of households subscribing to newspapers—and fewer households buying more than one paper—the number of newspapers being published also decreased.

The Rise of the Lucrative Monopoly Newspaper

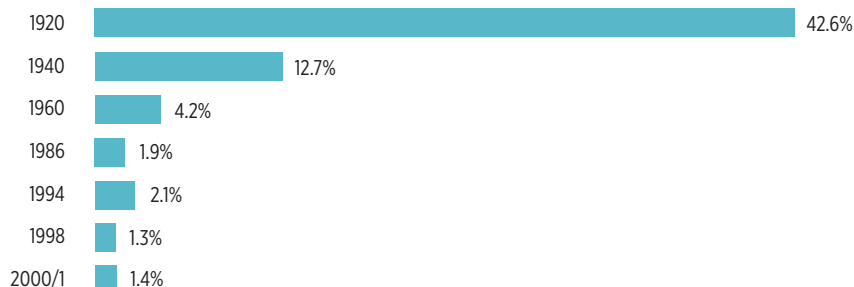
In 1920, 42.6 percent of U.S. cities had two or more newspapers competing with each other. By 2000, only 1.4 percent did, mostly because afternoon newspapers had disappeared. The increasing competition from early news on television, the shift away from a manufacturing work schedule of 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the flight of readers from the central city into the suburbs had made delivery of an afternoon paper less profitable.²

The rise of the monopoly newspaper coincided with another development: the growth of the newspaper chain. Large companies and Wall Street investors saw profits in local newspapers, profits that would grow through the efficiencies of chain management. At the same time, the federal government's imposition of inheritance taxes had prompted some families that owned local papers to sell in order to avoid having their heirs pay substantial inheritance taxes. In 1920, 92 percent of newspapers were independent. Eighty years later, 23.4 percent were.²²

For American journalism, the growth of the newspaper chain was a blessing and a curse. Chains introduced efficiencies that helped newspapers thrive despite circulation declines. For example, chain newspapers could share

CHANGES OVER TIME IN DAILY NEWSPAPER COMPETITION

Percentage of Daily Newspaper Cities with Competing Dailies



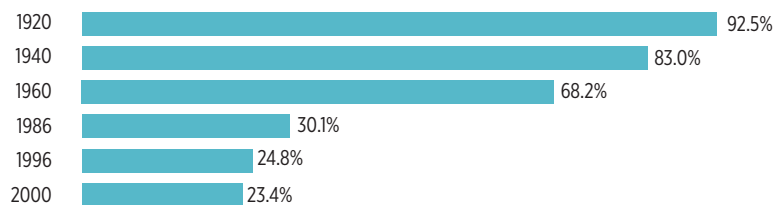
Source: Eli M. Noam, *Media Ownership and Concentration in America*, 142 (Oxford University Press, 2009).

marketing, human resource management, and distribution costs. Papers could share advertising sales and negotiate ads for multiple papers with clients hoping to reach regional or national audiences. Chain newspapers could also share content, lowering the cost of news production by using the same copy across multiple markets.

But chains also led to the corporatization of newspapers.²³ Unlike family newspaper owners, who had long histories with their papers and were rooted in the communities they served, newspaper chain executives oversaw properties in many cities and towns across the country. They often lacked a connection to their readers and to the journalists who reported the news, and they focused more on overall corporate financial performance.²⁴

PERCENT OF DAILY NEWSPAPERS INDEPENDENTLY OWNED

Percentage of Total Dailies



Source: Eli M. Noam, *Media Ownership and Concentration in America* 139 (Oxford University Press, 2009)²⁵

Newspapers managed to convert stagnant readership into increased profits—profits that far exceeded those of other industries. In the late 1990s, after years of circulation declines, the industry's average cash flow margins were 29 percent, according to newspaper industry analyst Lauren Rich Fine.²⁶ As competition disappeared, surviving newspapers raised ad rates. Between 1965 and 1975, ad rates rose 67 percent (remaining below the inflation rate); but between 1975 and 1990, as more newspapers became monopolies, rates skyrocketed 253 percent (compared with 141 percent for general consumer prices).²⁷

Newspaper consolidation in the 1990s involved the sale of many smaller newspapers, which often were rearranged into regional clusters. "Of the 564 U.S. newspapers sold from January of 1994 through July of 2000, about two-thirds had circulations of less than 13,000. One hundred and eleven of these small papers were sold two, three, or even four times during this six-and-a-half year period."²⁸

For all the controversial aspects of consolidation and profit taking, it could be argued that the high profit margins of the late 1980s led to high employment levels for journalists. In 1989, newspapers employed more editorial personnel than at any time during the previous 30 years.³⁰ However, journalism jobs began to disappear in the 1990s and early 2000s, as corporations, responding in part to Wall Street investors, squeezed higher profit margins out of newspapers. The papers themselves began to shrink in physical size (many used smaller paper and ran fewer pages) and in editorial scope.³¹

CASH FLOW MARGINS OF SELECTED NEWSPAPER COMPANIES (NEWSPAPER DIVISION ONLY) (1988–2008)

Year	AH Belo	Central Newspapers	Community Newspapers	Gannett	Journal Register	Knight Ridder	Lee Enterprises	McClatchy	Media General	New York Times	Pulitzer	EW Scripps	Times Mirror	Tribune	Wash. Post
1988	13%	16%	23%	27%	—	20%	—	20%	—	21%	14%	18%	19%	21%	23%
1990	18%	16%	19%	27%	—	20%	—	20%	—	16%	9%	18%	13%	16%	22%
1992	19%	18%	19%	26%	29%	20%	36%	22%	12%	12%	15%	16%	12%	26%	20%
1994	24%	21%	20%	28%	33%	21%	35%	24%	16%	17%	17%	26%	15%	28%	21%
1996	26%	23%	21%	27%	34%	21%	31%	22%	19%	20%	18%	26%	20%	27%	18%
1998	29%	27%	25%	31%	34%	23%	29%	28%	30%	25%	22%	30%	23%	31%	23%
2000	29%	—	31%	34%	34%	30%	31%	30%	31%	27%	26%	28%	—	28%	20%
2002	27%	—	30%	32%	28%	27%	28%	30%	29%	24%	25%	34%	—	26%	18%
2004	18%	—	30%	31%	26%	—	27%	29%	27%	20%	—	35%	—	25%	19%
2006	13%	—	24%	27%	22%	—	28%	27%	25%	15%	—	28%	—	24%	15%
2008	-1%	—	n/a	20%	n/a	—	21%	19%	14%	10%	—	14%	—	n/a	2%

Source: Lauren Rich Fine²⁹

Profit expectations became unrealistically high, leading to changes in newspapers' priorities, many experts have argued. In his 1991 book *Preserving the Press: How Daily Newspapers Mobilized to Keep Their Readers*, Leo Bogart, longtime executive vice president and general manager of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau, explained:

“During the years of the bull market on Wall Street, corporate managements were impelled to maximize current earnings as a way of boosting the price of the stock. . . . The price of the stock not only was the accepted index of management's success, but also could represent a large part of its compensation. Growth targets were set and achieved in a variety of ways: by acquiring additional properties, expanding sales, cutting costs, and raising prices. . . .

“Since public companies reported their earnings quarterly, their management focus tended to be on the here and now of the ‘bottom line.’ . . . Even in privately held companies, management bonuses were often based on quarterly earnings performance, so the short-run mentality prevailed there as well.”³²

Certainly family owners wanted to make money, too, but their timelines were different. “To preserve the institution he could afford to think long range,” Bogart writes. “Besides, an improvement in quality might provide the publisher with deeper, non-financial satisfactions: an awareness of accomplishment, the admiration of associates and of the public.”³³ In *The Vanishing Newspaper*, Philip Meyer argued that, having become fabulously wealthy already, family-owned-newspaper moguls moved on to psychic rewards:

“Jim McClatchy expressed such a personal sense of mission when he said his family's newspapers were pitted against ‘the exploiters—the financial, political, and business powers whose goal was to deny the ordinary family their dreams and needs in order to divert to themselves a disproportionate share of the productive wealth of the country.’ John S. Knight showed where his heart was by keeping the title of editor or editor emeritus to the very end of his life. ‘There is no higher or better title than editor,’ he said. . . . Katherine Graham's support of her editors and reporters who uncovered the Watergate crimes was not motivated by profit but by her sense of civic duty.”³⁴

During World War II, with paper rationing in place, *New York Times* publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger turned down advertising to maximize the news hole. That decision led to an increase in circulation and allowed the paper to thrive in the long run.³⁵

By the 1990s, as corporate profit goals rose, editors at papers across the country became increasingly frustrated that editorial decisions were being made not in order to keep the papers afloat, but to propel profit levels ever higher. The former editor of the *Des Moines Register*, Geneva Overholser, recalled:

“The budget process for that year had begun with a memo from Gary Watson, Gannett newspaper division president, saying...:

“Don’t allow yourself or your team to be lulled into some false sense of reality by thinking you can plan for 1995 as if the newsprint price increase didn’t really exist. Newsprint prices will be going up, and we still have the responsibility to produce a return for our shareholders...’

“Thus having already removed heart, soul, and giblets, we cut some more—another \$63,000 in newsroom spending. Very shortly thereafter, by January, we learned that during the months we were engaged in these hope-withering negotiations, Gannett earnings were up 22 percent over the previous year’s fourth quarter.

“The *Register’s* plan for 1995, the year newsprint prices were soaring, was for a 23.4 percent profit margin before taxes—compared to the previous year’s 21-plus percent with low newsprint prices.”³⁶

John Carroll, who served as editor of the *Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, became convinced that owners were sacrificing the long-term financial health of their newspapers for short-term gain:

“I first heard the phrase ‘harvest strategy’ in the nineties, when it was briefly mentioned in a board meeting at the *Baltimore Sun*. I was the *Sun’s* editor then, and merely hearing those two words gave me the willies.

“I sensed what they meant. They meant milking a declining business for all the cash it can produce until it dies... .

“For the record, I am unaware of any formal decision to harvest the *Sun* or any other paper... . And yet, symptoms of harvest are staring us in the face. They include a low rate of investment, fewer employees, fewer readers, falling stock prices and, most especially, high profit margins.

“In 2005, our troubled industry reported operating margins averaging 19.3 percent. That’s double the average among Fortune 500 companies. These high profits were achieved by relentless cost-cutting, which is rendering newspapers less valuable to their readers each year, and less able to compete.”³⁷

Later, it also became clear that many buyers were financing consolidation and growth by taking on huge amounts of debt. That made newspapers extraordinarily vulnerable during the economic downturn—particularly to competition from the Internet and emerging technologies. Mark Contreras, senior vice president of newspapers for the E. W. Scripps Company, estimated that by 2010, 14.9 percent of daily newspapers were owned by lenders or private equity firms, and those papers accounted for 20.4 percent of daily newspaper revenue.³⁸ (Predictions are that by mid-2011, seven of the 25 largest papers will be owned by private equity firms.) The 2011 Pew State of the Media report declared: “As a result of bankruptcies, private equity funds now own and operate a substantial portion of the industry. The era of newspapers being dominated by expanding publicly traded corporations is now winding down.” The impact of private equity ownership is not black-and-white, with some predicting further staff cuts and others holding out hope that the new owners can help newspapers reinvent themselves for the digital era. Pew concludes:

“The firms have not made radical changes in the content or format of papers once they take over. Some cuts have followed, but not necessarily deeper ones than those by established companies like Gannett and McClatchy.

While the private equity owners are undoubtedly in the newspaper business motivated by a chance to make money rather than for public service, they appear to be betting that these distressed properties will bounce back after several years. There is no market right now to strip the organizations down and sell the pieces... .

All this leaves the funds an important player in the industry’s future, but still a wild card in where they will take the newspaper organizations they own.”³⁹

About as many Americans subscribe to newspapers today as did in 1945, even though the number of households is three times larger.

DAILY NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY FIGURES—BY OWNERSHIP TYPE

Category	Percentage of Daily Newspaper Revenue	Percentage of Daily Newspapers Owned
Public	44.2%	24.8%
Lender-Owned	18.1%	11.2%
Corporate-Group	18.0%	21.1%
Family-Owned Group	7.5%	21.4%
Independent	6.5%	13.8%
Private Equity	2.3%	3.7%
Corporate—Single Paper	1.8%	0.4%
Nonprofit	1.1%	0.4%
Entrepreneur	0.5%	3.3%

Source: Mark Contreras, Scripps⁴⁰

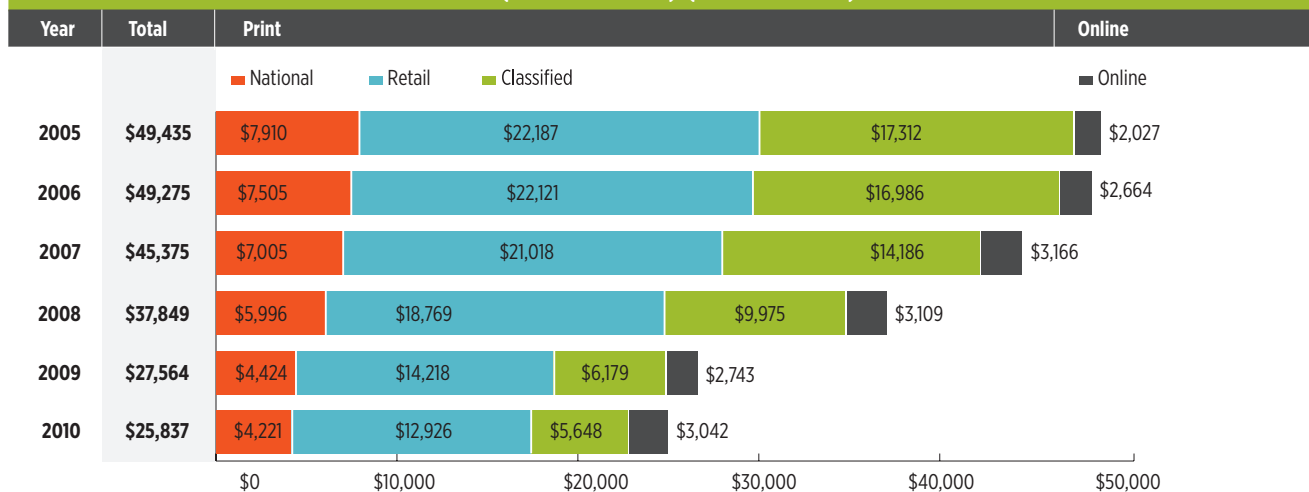
The Next Technological Challenge: The Internet

By 2005, the Internet had begun seriously undercutting newspaper revenue. In 2000, total newspaper print advertising amounted to almost \$48.7 billion. Ten years later, it had plummeted to \$22.8 billion, a loss of more than 50 percent.⁴¹

Although newspapers gained audience—and a flood of new ad dollars—on the Internet, they were unable to make up for the loss in profits from their print products. Online traffic at newspaper websites did, indeed, skyrocket between January 2005 and April 2010—from 43.3 million unique viewers a month to 69.1 million, from 1.6 billion page views to 2.9 billion.⁴² Online ad revenue for the entire newspaper industry grew by a billion between 2005 and 2010. But print advertising lost \$24.6 billion. This led to the saying in the newspaper world that “print dollars were being replaced by digital dimes.” That turns out to be a rather cheerful way of phrasing it. More accurately: each print dollar was being replaced by four digital pennies.

Faced with economics like this, newspapers were reluctant to shift resources from their print editions to their web operations. As a purely practical matter, it made great short-term sense to buck up the traditional business.

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING REVENUE (IN MILLIONS) (2005–2010)



Source: Newspaper Association of America⁴⁹

Classified advertising was hit the hardest, as consumers and advertisers found themselves with an array of much cheaper, faster, and more efficient alternatives. In 2000, revenue from ads for employment, real estate, vehicles, and the sale of smaller items and services accounted for 40 percent of newspaper’s print advertising revenue, but

by 2010 it had fallen 71 percent, from \$19.6 billion to \$5.6 billion, amounting to just 25 percent of total print ad revenue.⁴⁴ As the Internet grew, some of that money went to Google, where small businesses could advertise easily and efficiently. Some went to specialty sites for jobs (including Monster.com and CareerBuilder.com),⁴⁵ cars (AutoTrader.com and Cars.com),⁴⁶ and real estate (Realtor.com, Yahoo Real Estate, and Zillow.com),⁴⁷ and some went to Craigslist, which runs ads in all those categories and more. Consider how the economics of classified advertising has changed the market for ads in a city served by Craigslist, such as Kansas City: the price for a garage sale ad in the *Kansas City Star* is \$22.95, an employment-listing package starts at \$419, and an apartment rental ad package starts at \$79.⁴⁸ The cost to place those same ads on Craigslist is zero. Craigslist charges for only a few categories of ads, including brokered apartment rental listings in New York City and job postings in fewer than 20 U.S. metro areas. More than 47 million people in the U.S. visit Craigslist each month.⁴⁹

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING (IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS) BY TYPE

Year	Real Estate	Automotive	Employment	Other	Total
2000	\$3,117	\$5,026	\$8,713	\$2,703	\$19,609
2010	\$1,239	\$1,106	\$756	\$2,550	\$5,648

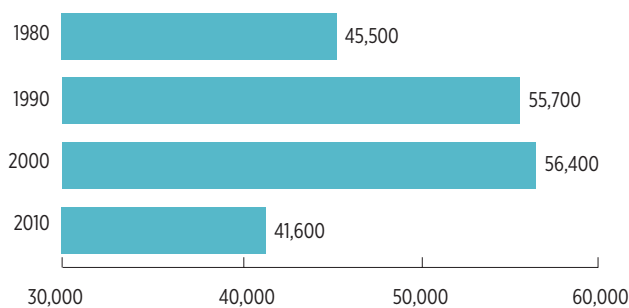
Source: Newspaper Association of America⁵⁰

Declines in national and retail advertising compounded problems. National advertising expenditures in newspapers reached a high of \$8 billion in 2004, while local advertising peaked at \$22 billion in 2005. Both declined in 2006 and 2007 and then plummeted during the recession the following two years. By 2010, national advertising expenditures in newspapers were only \$4.2 billion, and retail advertising had dropped to \$12.9 billion.⁵¹ It was a double whammy: just as classified advertisers migrated to the Internet, national advertisers cut spending and shifted some resources to other media, including cable television, niche publications, and the Internet.⁵²

The sharp drop in ad revenue meant that some newspapers could not pay back their loans. In some cases, they defaulted even though they were making money, because their profits were not substantial enough to cover the debt service. This led to an unusual corporate development, as *profitable* newspapers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* declared bankruptcy.⁵³ Some newspapers managed to survive by declaring bankruptcy and reorganizing, but many just disappeared. The table below shows the newspapers, large and small, that stopped publishing print editions from 2007 to 2010. Those marked with an asterisk switched to online-only editions. The vast majority of them have ceased to exist in any form.⁵⁴

The loss of revenue precipitated a more than 25 percent reduction in newsroom staffs, affecting reporters, editors, online producers, photographers, artists, and videographers.⁵⁵ The drop between 2006 and 2010 is particularly striking: in just four years, newspaper employment fell from 55,000 to roughly 41,600—about where it was before Watergate.⁵⁶

TOTAL U.S. DAILY NEWSPAPER NEWSROOM WORKFORCE (1980–2010)



Source: Pew State of the Media 2011; American Society of Newspaper Editors, Newsroom Employment Census, 2010⁵⁷

Cuts at many newspapers far exceeded the national average. After seven rounds of layoffs in four years, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* newsroom staff in 2010 was half what it had been in 2006. In 2008, the paper closed its Washington Bureau—just two years after its reporters had won a Pulitzer Prize for stories that put a member of Congress behind bars.⁵⁸ More than half of Seattle’s newspaper reporters lost their jobs.⁵⁹

In October 2008, the *Newark (NJ) Star-Ledger* announced a staff reduction of about 45 percent through voluntary buyouts. This came after the paper had generated losses for at least three years in a row.⁶⁰ In April 2009, the *Chicago Tribune* announced the departure of 53 editorial

NEWSPAPERS THAT HAVE CLOSED OR ELIMINATED A NEWSPRINT EDITION (2007–2010)

The Adit	Carson Times	Grapevine Sun	Nichi Bei Times
The Advance Leader, Penn Hills Progress and Woodland Progress	Chicago Free Press	Hamden Chronicle	Noblesville Daily Times
Albuquerque Tribune	Christian Science Monitor*	Hanson Town Crier	North Haven Post
Algonquin Countryside, Cary-Grove Countryside and Wauconda Courier	Cincinnati Post and Kentucky Post*	Hardee Sun	North Side News
American Fork Citizen, Lehi Free Press, Lone Peak Press, Orem Times and Pleasant Grove Review	The City Star	Harlem Valley Times, Millbrook Round Table, Voice Ledger	Northern Star
Americké Listy	The Clarke Courier	Henderson Home News	Oak Cliff Tribune
Ann Arbor News*	The Clinton News	The Hershey Chronicle	Orfordville Journal & Footville News
The Argus Champion	Coatesville Ledger	Heyworth Star and LeRoy Journal	Oxford Tribune, Parkesburg Post Ledger and Solanco Sun Ledger
Arlington Heights Post, Elk Grove Times, Hoffman Estates Review, Palatine Countryside, Rolling Meadows Review, Schaumburg Review and Wheeling Countryside	Connecticut Valley Spectator	Hill Country View	Pawling News Chronicle
Art Review & Preview	Coral Gables Gazette*	Homer Sun, Lincoln-Way Sun, Plainfield Sun	Peoria Times-Observer
AsianWeek*	Coraopolis-Moon Record	Hopi Tutuveni	Petoskey Citizen-Journal
Baltimore Examiner	The Daily Reporter	Hoy	The Phoenicia Times and The Olive Press
Batavia Sun, Bolingbrook Sun, Downers Grove Sun, Geneva Sun, Glen Ellyn Sun, Lisle Sun, St. Charles Sun, Wheaton Sun	Dakota Journal	Hyde Park Townsman	Pinellas News
Bay State Banner	Danville Weekly*	The Independent	Placer Sentinel
Bedford Sun, Euclid Sun Journal, Garfield-Maple Sun, Nardonia Hills Sun, Sun-Press and Twinsburg Sun	Delaware Valley News	Iraan News	Plymouth Bulletin
Bellevue Business Journal	The Democrat	Island Breeze*	Pocono Business Journal
Berkeley Daily Planet*	Denmark Press	Jeanerette Enterprise	The Post-Crescent
The Bethel Beacon, The Brookfield Journal, The Kent Good Times Dispatch and The Litchfield Enquirer	Dennis Pennysaver and Yarmouth Pennysaver	The Journal-Messenger	Putnam County Courier
Big Sky Sun	Des Plaines Times and Mount Prospect Times	Kansas City Kansan*	Quakertown Free Press
The Birmingham Eccentric, West Bloomfield Eccentric, Troy Eccentric, Rochester Eccentric, and Southfield Eccentric	Detroit Daily Press	Kitsap Free Daily	Register Herald
Bloomfield Free Press*	El Dia	LA City Beat	Rhinoceros Times*
Bloomfield Journal, Windsor Journal, Windsor Locks Journal	The District Weekly	La Palma	Rocky Mountain News
Boca Raton News*	Door Reminder	La Tribuna	Rumbo de San Antonio
Boulder City News	Donegal Ledger	Lake Elmo Leader	Rumbo del Valle
Branford Review, Clinton Recorder, East Haven Advertiser, Pictorial Gazette, Shelton Weekly, Shore Line Times, Stratford Bard and Wallingford Voice	Douglas Times	Lake Highlands People, Lakewood People and West Plano People	San Juan Star
Brick Township Bulletin, Woodbridge Sentinel	Downingtown Ledger	Lake Norman Times	Seattle Post-Intelligencer*
The Bridge*	Doylestown Patriot	Lakota Journal	Selah Independent
Bridgeville Area News	Eagle-Times	The Leader	The Sentinel
The Bulletin	East Bridgewater Star, West Bridgewater Times and Whitman Times	Leadville Chronicle	Stillwater Courier
Business Journal of Corpus Christi	East Hartford Gazette	The Lemoore Advance	South Florida Blade
Business Times of the Rio Grande Valley	East Iowa Herald	Lincoln County Journal	Southern Idaho Press
California Real Estate Journal	East Side Herald	Los Gatos Weekender and West San Jose Resident	Southern Voice
The Capital Times*	El Nuevo Dia Orlando	Loudon Easterner	Spotlight
	Elizabethtown Chronicle	Main Street News	Suffolk Life
	Encino Sun, Sherman Oaks Sun and Studio City Sun	Maricopa Tribune	The Sun
	Eureka Reporter	McCamey News	Sun Post
	Fallon Star Press	McKnight Journal and North Journal	Sun Tribune
	Farmer City Journal	The Message for the Week	Thomasville Times
	Fitchburg Star*	The Milford Observer	Today Newspapers
	Fort Collins Now	Ming Pao New York	The Town Meeting
	The Franklin Chronicle	Ming Pao San Francisco	Tucson Citizen*
	La Frontera	Minidoka County News	Ulster County Townsman
	Gazette Advertiser	The Monitor-Herald	Vail Sun
	Germantown Courier and Mount Airy Times Express	NASCAR Scene*	Vail Trail
	Greenville Press	New Hope Gazette	Valley Journal
	Greenwood Lake and West Milford News	New York Blade	Washington Blade
	Gooding County Leader	The New York Sun	The Weekly Almanac
		News Gleaner, Northeast Breeze and Olney Times	The Western Tribune
		The Newton Record	Whitehorse Community News
			Wood River Journal
			Wrightstown Post-Gazette

Source: Erica Smith, Paper Cuts (March 3, 2011)

*Switched to online edition only

employees, a move that left a newsgathering team of about 430 at a paper whose newsroom had numbered about 670 just four years earlier.⁶¹

In 2009 alone, the website Paper Cuts counted 34 papers that had laid off more than 100 employees each.⁶² Meanwhile, journalists across the country who managed to hang onto their jobs often were forced to accept unpaid furloughs, pay cuts, or both.⁶³

Was the decline of newspapers inevitable?

On one hand, the dominance of newspapers has been diminishing for a long time. From 1940 to 2010, the number of daily newspaper subscriptions in America rose by 2 million—but the number of households increased by 83 million.

From 2005 to 2010 online ad revenues for the newspaper industry grew more than \$1 billion—but print advertising declined \$24.6 billion.

Here is another way of looking at it: about as many Americans subscribe to newspapers today as did in the early 1940s, even though the number of households is more than three times larger.⁶⁴

While large metro dailies have struggled, smaller papers have not faced the same level of financial assault. Community newspapers, often defined as weekly or daily newspapers with circulations of 15,000 or less, account for about 80 percent of the newspapers in the U.S.⁶⁵ Among the approximately 8,000 community newspapers operating, about 7,000 do not publish daily.⁶⁶

The Inland Press Association reports that from 2004 to 2008 the smallest daily newspapers suffered less significant financial losses than larger papers.⁶⁷

In a 2007 piece entitled “News Flash: Small-Market Papers Prosper,” for the *fedgazette*, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Joe Mahon noted that many smaller newspapers were doing very well due to their unique market position:

“While this drama was playing out, Lee Enterprises was quietly going about its business of making money from newspapers. The Iowa-based holding company specializes in mid-size and small-market papers, including the *Billings Gazette*, *Bismarck Tribune* and nine others in the district. In the third quarter of 2006, when most companies were reporting slumping circulation and revenue, Lee saw circulation increase at 37 of its 51 dailies. Lee’s revenue grew about 38 percent in the last year, helping the company post a 20 percent average operating profit (more than 5 percentage points higher than the industry average) over the past five years....

“The chief basis for the success of small-town newspapers is simple: market penetration. Less competition in smaller communities for readers and advertising dollars means that newspapers still dominate their markets to a degree that metro dailies cannot. The technologies that have plagued the big-city papers, primarily cable television and Web news, might eventually have dire consequences for their small-town cousins, but so far they have been sheltered.”⁶⁸

Future trends that might reduce the advertising advantages of community newspapers include the expansion of hyperlocal websites, the development of mobile advertising that targets phones based on geography, the extension of websites such as Craigslist into smaller cities and towns, and the advancement of strategies by search engines to capture local advertisers. The timing and impact of these trends on community newspapers, however, remain very open questions.

In one sense, the response of large newspaper owners to the drop in revenue has proved successful: cost cutting has largely stemmed financial losses. Writing for the Nieman Journalism Lab, analyst Ken Doctor wrote:

“Across the board, the reporting of public news companies reflects a new, if unsteady reality. In short, that reality is one of profit. Not the big profit of 20-percent-plus profit margins—the envy of many other industries—that were a truism as recently as five years ago. Now, the profit’s more tepid, mostly in single digits: the *New York Times*, 8 percent; Gannett, 8 percent, McClatchy, 1.5 percent. Expectations run that news companies will show a five to 10 percent profit for the year, absent unforeseen calamity.”⁶⁹

In the fourth quarter of 2010, newspaper stocks led all media with an increase of 22 percent (though many remained down for the year as a whole).⁷⁰ Media analyst Douglas Arthur of Evercore Partners attributed the fourth-quarter rebound to signs that print advertising was bottoming out, setting the stage for positive growth in 2011. Arthur said he not only expected growth in traditional newspaper advertising, but that he was optimistic about the impact of the iPad.⁷¹ On the other hand, the cost of newsprint is rising, insert advertising is declining, and many companies still spend significant sums on servicing their debt.⁷² Doctor concluded that the profits were fragile and unlikely to result in much greater investment in “product.”

The Price of Newspaper Cuts

When they were faced with shrinking budgets, newspaper editors had some tightening they could do without hurting critical functions. Many editors consider their local beat reporters indispensable: those who cover schools and city councils, police and courts, suburban developments and urban neighborhoods, local elections and statehouses, for instance, are thought to provide information that is crucial to the functioning of the community—and even democracy itself.⁷³ On the other hand, reporters who provide the kind of coverage that can be found elsewhere are considered less essential. When layoffs began, arts reporters, for instance, were among the first let go. Undoubtedly, some talented local voices lost their platform, but the truth is, readers can find national arts news and reviews on a number of websites; the aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes, to name but one, links to more than 200,000 movie reviews.⁷⁴

But cutting “nonessential” beats alone did not save enough money. In paper after paper, local accountability journalism is down, according to several studies. Developments at newspapers in three cities illustrate the trend:

Baltimore: In January 2010, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism released a study of journalism in Baltimore. It concluded that although newspapers in the area still provided the bulk of news content, coverage had diminished considerably. During 2009, the study reported, the city’s dominant paper, the *Baltimore Sun*, produced 23,668 stories, down 32 percent from the 34,852 stories it published in 1999—and down 73 percent from 1991, when competing staffs generated morning and evening newspapers, and ran a total of 86,667 stories.⁷⁵

Significantly, with fewer reporters on the job, governmental institutions drove much of the coverage. “As news is posted faster, often with little enterprise reporting added, the official version of events is becoming more important,” the PEJ study said. “We found official press releases often appear word for word in first accounts of events, though often not noted as such.... Government, at least in this study, initiates most of the news. In the detailed examination of six major storylines, 63 percent of the stories were initiated by government officials, led by the police. Another 14 percent came from the press. Interest group figures made up most of the rest.”⁷⁶

Philadelphia: In the 1970s, while the *Washington Post* rode the Watergate wave to worldwide notoriety, a large group of regional and big-city newspapers around the country was beginning to produce some of the best journalism in American history. One of the most respected of these regional powerhouses was the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which won 17 Pulitzer Prizes from 1975 through 1990.⁷⁷ In addition to operating bureaus in six foreign countries, the paper managed to cover Philadelphia as it had never been covered before. Along with its prize-winning work on poor conditions at a local mental hospital and corruption in Philadelphia courts, the paper covered the many ethnic parades held in the city, from Polish to Irish, Italian to Puerto Rican. This was a newspaper deeply engaged with its city and with the world.⁷⁸

But as Knight Ridder, like other newspaper chains, began to push for higher profit margins, cost-cutting pressures rose in the *Inquirer* newsroom. Foreign and domestic bureaus closed, and staff was reduced through a series of layoffs and buyouts. A newsroom staff that once numbered 680 was down to 280 by 2010, and according to the *American Journalism Review*, shrinkage reflected in the coverage.⁷⁹ In 2006, Knight Ridder was purchased by the McClatchy Company, which sold the *Inquirer* to Philadelphia Media Holdings LLC, a local business consortium.⁸⁰ In 2009, almost \$400 million in debt, the paper’s owners declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy.⁸¹ In April 2010, the *Inquirer* was sold to a group of creditors in a bankruptcy auction.⁸²

“Official press releases often appear word for word in first accounts of events, though often not noted as such.... Government, at least in this study, initiates most of the news,” reported a Pew study about Baltimore.

J-Lab: the Institute for Interactive Journalism, a center that funds journalism innovation, studied the Philadelphia news “ecosystem” during sample weeks in 2006 and 2009. In a report on its findings, author Jan Shaffer, formerly an editor at the *Inquirer*, concluded that “available news about Philadelphia public affairs issues has dramatically diminished over the last three years by many measures: news hole, air time, story count, key word measurements.”⁸³ She summarized interviews she did with civic leaders: “People in Philadelphia want more public affairs news than they are now able to get. They don’t think their daily newspapers are as good as the newspapers used to be. They want news that is more connected to their city.”⁸⁴

Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina: When Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert Kaiser published the *News about the News* in 2002, they lavished special praise on the *Raleigh (NC) News & Observer*:

“The *News & Observer* stands out from most American newspapers because of its ambition and its execution. . . . Raleigh, its region and the state of North Carolina are all better communities because the *News & Observer* is their paper. The paper challenges resident officials to confront serious issues. It creates a sense of shared experience that strengthens the connections among individuals and institutions in its area. Not incidentally, it enables readers to know what’s happening that could affect their lives.”⁸⁵

But the *News & Observer* is no longer the same paper. Professor James Hamilton of Duke University (a consultant to the Future of Media project) studied changes at the *News & Observer* and found that its newsroom of 250 employees in 2004 had been reduced to 132 in 2009.⁸⁶ By February 2011, the newsroom headcount was down to 103.⁸⁷ Among the beats the paper stopped covering full time: Durham courts, Durham schools, legal affairs, agriculture, science, environment, and statewide public education. And among the losses in staff were a “workplace reporter” who once produced stories on illegal immigrants in North Carolina, visa violations, and companies that evaded unemployment tax payments; a full-time banking reporter who had written about predatory lending in the state and about Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac’s mortgage ties in the Research Triangle Park, a well-known high-tech research and development center; a full-time tech reporter who had covered the many high-tech companies in the Research Triangle Park; and a pharmaceutical reporter who covered local drug and health companies. “With all those full-time reporters gone, the odds of similar series and stories being written have declined,” Hamilton concluded.⁸⁸

While legacy newspapers used to lag in innovation, some have become quite creative in their use of social media, database journalism, and community engagement.

Repercussions like those Hamilton observed in North Carolina are evident at newspapers throughout the country: Many staff cutbacks have occurred on beats that had enormous civic impact but lacked sexy, marketable stories. As editors prune beats to leave only those that generate buzz—or, in the case of websites, traffic—they are tempted to serve fewer portions of “broccoli journalism,” i.e. stories that might be both unpopular but good for you.

“What you tend to cut is the day in, day out, beat reporting—or the city council meeting, or doing three days of reporting on the immigration bill instead of one,” says Mark Silverman, editor of the (*Nashville*) *Tennessean*. “There’s less time to invest in in-depth coverage.”⁸⁹

The cutbacks have touched many areas of coverage but experts have raised particular concerns about a few crucial areas:

State Government: States spent more than \$1.2 trillion in fiscal year 2008, compared with \$977 billion in 2003—and yet the number of reporters covering statehouses has fallen sharply.⁹⁰ A comprehensive survey by the *American Journalism Review* found that the number of statehouse reporters has dropped by one-third—from 524 in 2003 to 355 in 2009.⁹¹

The story is the same in state after state.

During a time when New Jersey government has been beset by scandals, the number of journalists covering the capitol has fallen from 39 in 2003 to 15 in 2009.⁹²

In California, which is battling one of the nation’s worst budget crises, 29 newspaper reporters covered the statehouse in 2009, down from 40 six years earlier.⁹³

Georgia had 14 full-time statehouse newspaper reporters in 2003; in 2009 it had five.⁹⁴

In 1989, 83 people covered the state legislature, governor, or executive agencies in Texas. In 2009, 53 did, according to the *Houston Chronicle*.⁹⁵

In 2001, Albany, New York, had 51 journalists and 29 news organizations covering the statehouse. By 2008, the numbers had fallen to 42 journalists and 27 news organizations.⁹⁶ The *Staten Island Advance*, the *Schenectady Daily Gazette*, the *Troy Record*, the *Jamestown Post Journal*, and the Ottaway News Service are among those that have eliminated their statehouse bureaus entirely.

In Pennsylvania, Jeanette Krebs, editorial page editor for the *Harrisburg Patriot News*, remembers more than 40 correspondents crowding the Capitol's pressroom in 1987 when she was an intern. In 1994, when she was president of the Pennsylvania State Legislative Correspondents Association, there were 35. Now, 19 reporters cover the statehouse, including some who come only when the legislature is in session.⁹⁷ "Our state Capitol used to be bustling with the media," said Matthew Brouillette, president of the Harrisburg-based Commonwealth Foundation. "Now, you can swing a dead cat and not hit anybody in the state Capitol newsroom."⁹⁸

Nine journalists—print and TV—covered the Nevada legislature in 2010. In better times, according to Ed Vogel of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, more than 20 would have been there. As the coverage has shrunk by half, the state has more than tripled in size.⁹⁹ "If you're not there, it changes how legislators look at it," says Vogel, the lone remaining reporter from his newspaper. "The oversight, the watchdogs won't be there. It's a benefit to society that won't exist anymore."¹⁰⁰

In many cases, smaller newspapers have abandoned statehouses altogether. For years, the *Champaign (IL) News-Gazette* had a reporter in the Capitol, in Springfield, to cover topics of particular importance to Champaign-Urbana—home to the University of Illinois' largest campus—such as higher education bills and state pension issues. In 2010, legislative coverage was done from the Champaign newsroom. "We miss the in-depth coverage and the perspective and nuance that having a reporter there every day provides," editor John Beck says. "What we're missing more is the enterprise coverage... the investigative coverage. As newsrooms have lost staff members, which we have like all other newsrooms, it makes it harder to do these kinds of stories."¹⁰¹

For nearly five years, Aaron Chambers was the statehouse bureau chief for the *Rockford (IL) Register Star*. At one point, he broke the story that the executive branch was improperly managing government contracts, potentially risking millions of taxpayer dollars. In 2008, his paper eliminated its statehouse bureau; Chambers went into public relations.¹⁰²

In all, a survey by the *American Journalism Review* published in the spring of 2009 found that more than 50 newspapers and news companies nationwide had at that point stopped covering their statehouses entirely since 2003. They include the *Anniston (AL) Star*, the *East Valley (AZ) Tribune*, the *Stockton (CA) Record*, the *Bakersfield Californian*, Copley News Service (CA), Lehman Newspapers (CO), the *Daily Camera (CO)*, the *New Haven (CT) Register*, the *Pocatello Idaho State Journal*, the *Nampa Idaho Press-Tribune*, the *Rockford (IL) Register*, the *Bloomington (IL) Pantagraph*, the *Champaign (IL) News-Gazette*, Gannett Company Inc. (IN), the *Covington Kentucky Post*, Community Newspaper Company (MA), the *Lawrence (MA) Eagle Tribune*, the *Pontiac (MI) Oakland Press*, the *Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, the *St. Cloud (MN) Times*, the *Mankato (MN) Free Press*, the *Cape Girardeau Southeast Missourian*, *Foster's Daily Democrat (NH)*, the *Trenton (NJ) Times*, the *Trentonian (NJ)*, the *Staten Island (NY) Advance*, the *Schenectady (NY) Daily Gazette*, Ottaway News Service (NY), the *Troy (NY) Record*, the *Jamestown (NY) Post Journal*, the *Durham (NC) Herald-Sun*, *Wilmington (NC) Star News*, *Grand Forks (ND) Herald*, the *Minot (ND) Daily News*, Gannett Company Inc. (OH), GateHouse Media (OH), Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. (OK), the *York (PA) Daily Record*, Ottaway News Service (PA), Calkins Media (PA), the *Wilkes-Barre (PA) Times Leader*, the *Myrtle Beach (SC) Sun News*, McClatchy Newspapers (SC), the *Charlotte (NC) Observer*, the *Argus (SD) Leader*, the *Rapid City (SD) Journal*, Scripps Newspapers (TX), Valley Freedom Newspapers (TX), the *Danville (VA) Register Bee*, the *Morgantown (WV) Dominion Post*, and Lee Enterprises Inc. (WI).¹⁰³

A reader recently complained about the arbitrary way concealed weapons permits are handled, possibly denying gun permits to those who deserve them. Great idea, Hamlin thought—but he no longer has time to pursue it.

Recent efforts to fill these gaps have come largely from the nonprofit sector. For example, the web-based Texas Tribune, California Watch, and NJ Spotlight, which are financed largely by foundations, provide substantial coverage of their respective statehouses.¹⁰⁴ The Associated Press has made a commitment to keep at least one reporter in each statehouse.¹⁰⁵

Municipal Government: In doing triage, many big-city newspapers have held on to their primary city hall reporters and cut back on coverage of neighboring towns and cities, according to Rick Edmonds, of the Poynter Institute.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the most infamous and instructive case is in Bell, California. For years, residents of Bell, population 37,000, wondered how their town officials managed to live like the rich and famous. Bell is a working-class, largely immigrant suburb of Los Angeles with a median household income of around \$30,000. But the town manager, Robert Rizzo, owned a mansion by the beach and a 10-acre horse ranch outside Seattle.¹⁰⁷

“For a long time there’s been evidence that they were paying themselves big salaries,” says Christina Garcia, a community activist and teacher, “but no one knew how much.”¹⁰⁸ In July 2010, *Los Angeles Times* reporters gave Garcia and the rest of the country a shocking answer: Rizzo was earning \$787,637 a year. The police chief, Randy Adams, was earning \$457,000—about 50 percent more than the Los Angeles police chief or county sheriff, and more than the president of the United States.¹⁰⁹

In 1993, when council members hired Rizzo to be interim chief administrative officer, his starting salary was \$72,000.¹¹⁰ By September 2004, he was drawing down \$300,000 annually.¹¹¹ Ten months later, his salary jumped an additional 47 percent to \$442,000.¹¹² Rizzo’s large and regular raises continued until the *L.A. Times* wrote about Bell, at which point the city council ordered a staff report on city salaries.¹¹³ In September 2010, the Los Angeles County district attorney filed charges against eight Bell officials, alleging that they stole \$5.5 million in public funds. Rizzo was charged with 53 felony counts, 44 of which pertain to misappropriation of Bell’s municipal coffers.¹¹⁴

“What you tend to cut is the day in, day out, beat reporting—or the city council meeting, or doing three days of reporting on the immigration bill instead of one,” says Mark Silverman, editor of the (Nashville) Tennessean. “There’s less time to invest in in-depth coverage.”

Why did it take so long for the financial scandal to be exposed? “A lot of residents tried to get the media’s attention, but it was impossible,” Garcia says. “The city of Bell doesn’t even have a local paper; no local media of any sort.”¹¹⁵

The closest television stations are in L.A., but they rarely cover Bell. There are six newspapers operating within a 10-mile radius of Bell (the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Los Angeles Downtown News*, the *Torrance Breeze*, the *Whittier Daily News*, and the *South Pasadena News*); and 19 within 20 miles (including the *Long Beach Press Telegram*, the *Orange County Register*, and papers in Burbank and Pasadena). But the *Bell, Maywood, Cudahy Community News*, which used to be the local watchdog, was sold in 1998, just five years after Rizzo was hired, and it eventually went out of business.¹¹⁶

The demise of smaller papers in the region has left the *Los Angeles Times* pretty much on its own to cover 88 municipalities and 10 million citizens.¹¹⁷ Metro editor David Lauter laments that his staff is “spread thinner and there are fewer people on any given area. . . . We’re not there every day, or even every week or every month. Unfortunately, nobody else is either.”¹¹⁸

While the *Times* has a policy against disclosing specifics, Lauter wrote in an email that “the metro staff is just slightly less than half the size it was in September 2000 and about 30 percent smaller than in January 2008. . . . largely as a result of eliminating separate staffs in our far-flung suburban regions.”¹¹⁹ *Times* reporters Jeff Gottlieb, Ruben Vives, and Catherine Salliant learned about the unusually high salaries of Bell officials while investigating possible wrongdoing in the nearby community of Maywood.¹²⁰ Gottlieb says Bell residents have been effusive in their thanks. “They come to newspapers to have their wrongs overturned.”¹²¹

Without adequate media coverage, citizens have a tough time taking on city hall. Filing documents for public access is expensive. Bell’s demographics added another layer of complication. Many of its residents are legal immigrants, not citizens. Others are undocumented immigrants. Most do not have the language, skills, education, cash, or, frankly, the time to fight the system.

Terry Francke, Voice of OC's (Orange County) open government consultant and general counsel for Californians Aware, summed up the problem this way:

"In short, the Bell spectacle is what happens to communities without their own old-fashioned diligent news coverage by veteran newspaper reporters, or at least smart reporters led by veteran newspaper editors. The result need not be on paper, but it must be done with the community memory and professional savvy almost unique to newspaper-trained journalists with experience watching small-town politics."¹²²

The shrinking coverage of municipal government around the country raises the risk of corruption and wasted taxpayer dollars. And local officials know it. Garcia, the Bell activist, says, "The city has done everything they can to suppress communication. They did the minimum they could by law."¹²³ They held meetings in the middle of the workday, sometimes adjourning after one minute.

In more rural areas, the coverage is likely to be even thinner, with citizens more dependent on government itself to provide accurate and honest information. Jerry Black, a Republican state senator in Montana, told the Knight Commission:

"Local news coverage is mainly up to city and county governments, civic groups, and local organizations to contact the local papers and radio station with information and news they need and what those providing the information want released. This has an upside and a downside. Some city and county governments are better than others in providing information and unless they have someone in the media asking 'hard questions' or probing for more information, the public may never know what they really should or need to know."¹²⁴

Longtime investigative reporter Mark Thompson, now of *Time* magazine, summarized: "Government responds to pressure, whether it be two or three reporters at the local city hall demanding a filing or reporters at the local cop shop demanding police reports." But someone has to be there to ask, he says.¹²⁵

Crime and Criminal Justice: Given that local TV news tends to focus on the latest murder or fire, it is tempting to think that we will never have a shortage of crime coverage. And on a superficial level that is true. But cutbacks at newspapers have meant that coverage of underlying issues—how well the criminal or civil justice systems work—has suffered. In most cases, newspapers have not entirely eliminated their coverage of courts, but instead send so few reporters to do so much that reporting has become more reactive and shallow, and less enterprising.

Consider Vacaville, a small northern California town between mountains and farmland, 55 miles inland from San Francisco and 33 miles southwest of Sacramento. Ten years ago, the *Vacaville Reporter* had 27 staffers; now it has fewer than 14.¹²⁶ Five news reporters cover the roughly 900 square miles and 400,000 people of Solano County, as well as some neighboring counties. Brian Hamlin, who covered courts in Solano and parts of two other counties for the *Reporter* and its sister paper, the *Vallejo Times*,¹²⁷ said he had time for little besides spot news. For instance, a reader recently complained about the arbitrary way concealed weapons permits are handled, possibly denying permits to those who deserve them, because the local police chief has wide discretion (more than in other states). The reader suggested investigating the process. Great idea, Hamlin said. "Firearms and weapons permits always are a hot-button issue and are frequently misunderstood and/or misapplied." But he could not work on it, as he was frantically busy keeping up on coverage of ongoing trials in the various courts.

The previous time Hamlin was able to tackle an enterprise story was about two years ago, when he investigated the problems faced by mentally incompetent criminal defendants. California had built just one new mental health prison facility in the 1980s and 1990s, and it did not have enough space to house this growing population. As a result, many inmates languished in county jails for weeks, and because they were not receiving state mental-health care, their competency to stand trial could not be evaluated. "We'd like to be able to devote more time to longer, more in-depth pieces as we once did on a regular basis," Hamlin said. "But we have neither the time nor the staff to do so."¹²⁸

The problem is not limited to small suburban papers. "Trial coverage by newspapers has all but vanished," reports Bill Girdner, owner and editor of Courthouse News Service, a California-based wire service that publishes le-

“Our state Capitol used to be bustling with the media,” said Matthew Brouillette of the Pennsylvania-based Commonwealth Foundation. “Now, you can swing a dead cat and not hit anybody in the state Capitol newsroom.”

gal stories and distributes them to newspapers. At a recent Los Angeles trial in which police officers were accused of beating journalists covering a public protest, Girdner saw no reporters from major newspapers. “They’ve abandoned the pressroom. They rely on the local wire service.”¹²⁹

Ironically, while the Internet has made many reporting tasks easier, it also at times has added to the bureaucracy that can make information difficult to access. In most courthouses, for instance, reporters of years past could find out about pending cases by rifling through boxes or baskets of paperwork and transcripts that were made available. Girdner says that courts have tightened access to information, citing digital technology as an excuse. In the Riverside County courthouse, he explained, the old wooden box is gone, ostensibly replaced by online postings—which often take days to process: “You would think information would flow faster, but it’s quite the opposite.”¹³⁰

This has, in effect, led to a power shift from the public to government bureaucracies, according to Girdner: With fewer, and less experienced, reporters in the courts, “the court bureaucracy has gotten stronger and stronger. . . . And they do what bureaucracies do: they control the process of access more and more, and they push reporters back in time.” If it takes two to three days to access court documents, “the press just walks away. They just give up.”¹³¹

“When journalists don’t have presence,” Girdner says, “others control the information process.”

Several court experts say the mere presence of reporters would change the behavior of judges and other court personnel. Assistant prosecuting attorney Steven Kaplan in Macomb County, Michigan, northwest of Detroit, says that because the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* have one reporter each covering the entire court system, they cannot keep tabs on incompetent judges: “Maybe you have a judge who is chronically tardy or absent, someone who says at 11:30, ‘All right, everyone be back at 1:30,’ and he doesn’t come back until 3 p.m. Maybe he would be more on time if he thought a reporter would write about it.” Kaplan equates the watchdog effect of journalists to the presence of patrol cars on highways: people might perform at a higher level in order to avoid embarrassment: “A reporter is a conscience of the community; he or she holds up a periscope for the public to see.”¹³²

Who suffers from the lack of court coverage? Often, those who most need someone to look out for them. Consider child welfare cases. In the 1990s and 2000s, the *Detroit Free Press* had a full-time beat reporter, Jack Kresnack, covering family courts. His pieces about the child abuse death of a boy at the hands of his parents led to changes in guardianship laws; his series about the murder of a child by his foster parents led to criminal charges. But Kresnack left in 2007 and has not been replaced.¹³³ In Michigan, coverage of juvenile and family courts has become “smaller and smaller over the years,” according to Vivek Sankaran, director of the new Detroit Center for Family Advocacy.¹³⁴ Without scrutiny, he says, mistakes are made that have a life-changing impact: “Parents whose rights are terminated who shouldn’t be terminated,” he says. “It’s that type of story. It just takes somebody to go down there to get the story, but nobody is ever down there.”¹³⁵

Advocates are particularly concerned that papers are paying less attention to wrongfully convicted prisoners, some of whom are on death row. “Over the years, the work of investigative journalists has been extremely helpful in . . . helping to prove that people have been wrongfully convicted,” says Paul Cates, communications director of the Innocence Project in New York, an organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted prisoners.¹³⁶ He pointed, for instance, to a 14-part series in the *Columbus Dispatch* that uncovered flaws in Ohio’s DNA testing system. Seth Miller of the Innocence Project of Florida says, “Stories that were getting written three, four years ago that supplemented the legal work the [I]nnocence [P]rojects were working on, are just not happening.”¹³⁷

In a 2009 opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, David Simon, a former police reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* (who later became a screenwriter), gave this particularly vivid account of the need for journalistic persistence on criminal justice beats:

“[Baltimore] was a wonderland of chaos, dirt and miscalculation, and loyal adversaries were many. Among them, I could count police commanders who felt it was their duty to demonstrate that crime never occurred in their precincts, desk sergeants

who believed that they had a right to arrest and detain citizens without reporting it and, of course, homicide detectives and patrolmen who, when it suited them, argued convincingly that to provide the basic details of any incident might lead to the escape of some heinous felon. Everyone had very good reasons for why nearly every fact about a crime should go unreported.

“In response to such flummery, I had in my wallet, next to my *Baltimore Sun* press pass, a business card for Chief Judge Robert F. Sweeney of the Maryland District Court, with his home phone number on the back. When confronted with a desk sergeant or police spokesman convinced that the public had no right to know who had shot whom in the 1400 block of North Bentalou Street, I would dial the judge.

“And then I would stand, secretly delighted, as yet another police officer learned not only the fundamentals of Maryland’s public information law, but the fact that as custodian of public records, he needed to kick out the face sheet of any incident report and open his arrest log to immediate inspection. There are civil penalties for refusing to do so, the judge would assure him. And as chief judge of the District Court, he would declare, I may well invoke said penalties if you go further down this path.

“Delays of even 24 hours? Nope, not acceptable. Requiring written notification from the newspaper? No, the judge would explain. Even ordinary citizens have a right to those reports. And woe to any fool who tried to suggest to His Honor that he would need a 30-day state Public Information Act request for something as basic as a face sheet or an arrest log.

“‘What do you need the thirty days for?’ the judge once asked a police spokesman on speakerphone.

“‘We may need to redact sensitive information,’ the spokesman offered.

“‘You can’t redact anything. Do you hear me? Everything in an initial incident report is public. If the report has been filed by the officer, then give it to the reporter tonight or face contempt charges tomorrow.’”¹³⁸

In the piece, entitled “In Baltimore, No One Left to Press the Police,” Simon went on to say that his appeals eventually became less successful, in part because the *Sun* and other papers had fewer reporters pressing for public documents.

Health: A March 2009 report, entitled *The State of Health Journalism in the U.S.*, produced for the Kaiser Family Foundation, found that the number of health reporters has declined even though reader interest in the topic remains strong. Fewer reporters are doing more work, resulting in “a loss of in-depth, enterprise and policy-related stories.”¹³⁹ The report, by Gary Schwitzer, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Minnesota, concluded:

“Interest in health news is as high as it’s ever been, but because the staff and resources available to cover this news have been slashed, the workload on remaining reporters has gone up. Many journalists are writing for multiple platforms, adding multimedia tasks to their workload, having to cover more beats, file more stories, and do it all quicker, in less space, and with fewer resources for training or travel. Demand for ‘quick hit’ stories has gone up, along with ‘news you can use’ and ‘hyper-local’ stories.

“As a result, many in the industry are worried about a loss of in-depth, enterprise and policy-related stories. And newsrooms with reduced staff who are facing pressure to produce are more vulnerable to public relations and advertising pressures. Health news may be particularly challenged by the issues of sponsored segments, purchased stories, and [video news releases] VNRs.”¹⁴⁰

While specific figures are not available to track newspapers’ reduction in health reporters, the Kaiser report said that, in a survey of members of the Association of Health Care Journalists, 94 percent of respondents said that “bottom-line pressure in news organizations is seriously hurting the quality of health news.”¹⁴¹ Further, 40 percent of journalists surveyed said that the number of health reporters at their outlets had gone down during their tenure there, and only 16 percent said the number had increased.¹⁴² In addition, “39 percent said it was at least somewhat likely that their own position would be eliminated in the next few years.”¹⁴³

Losing journalists who cover such a specialized beat as health is significant. Reporters often spend years building up an expertise in the intricacies of medicine. They must learn how to decipher, explain, and put in context complex, confusing, and often controversial developments in treatment and cures, breakthroughs and disappoint-

ments. They need to translate medical speak into plain English. They need to be on top of developments in such areas as pharmaceuticals, clinical testing, hospital care, infectious diseases, and genetics. Theirs are not the kinds of stories that other reporters can easily produce.

In 2009, Ferrel Guillory, director of the University of North Carolina's Program on Public Life, explained in a *North Carolina Medical Journal* article how the latest staff reductions had impacted health reporting at one paper. "Only a few years ago," he wrote, "the *News & Observer* in Raleigh had as many as four reporters assigned to various health-related beats. They covered the big pharmaceutical industry in Research Triangle Park, Chapel Hill-based Blue Cross Blue Shield, the medical schools of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University, and local hospitals. As of August 2009, the *N&O* has only one reporter with a primary focus on health."¹⁴⁴ Guillory concluded that, although the appetite among the public for health stories remained high, "dependable, continuous" health coverage had diminished.¹⁴⁵ Further, he wrote, journalists (in particular, those on television), focus more on emergencies, public health "scares," and the announcements of new "cures" and technologies than on important policy matters and major trends in health and health care.¹⁴⁶

Mark Silverman, editor of the (*Nashville*) *Tennessean* recalls the day he stood with a staff researcher in front of a blackboard listing major stories he had hoped the paper would produce in the coming months. One line listed a story about how the state medical board was allowing incompetent doctors to mistreat patients, be disciplined by local hospitals, and then continue practicing medicine at other locations. But that story idea had an "X" next to it, meaning it would not get done, because the paper now had one health reporter instead of two.¹⁴⁷

While doing research for a book, Maryn McKenna, a former health writer for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, made an astonishing discovery: The "flesh-eating disease"—MRSA, or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*—

27 states have no Washington reporters, reports Pew. The number of Washington reporters working for regional papers dropped from 200 in the mid-1990s to 73 at the end of 2008.

was rampant at Folsom Prison in California.¹⁴⁸ In an average year, the highly contagious skin infection kills 19,000 Americans, puts 370,000 in hospitals, and sends an estimated seven million to doctors or emergency rooms. "Some guards are getting infected, seriously infected," McKenna says. "When prison guards go home, they take MRSA with them."¹⁴⁹ Now, families and friends, wives and children, the convenience-store clerk who hands over change or a lottery ticket are susceptible to the infection, which easily spreads outside the prison into the general and unwitting population. At the time, MRSA had been described in the national and specialty press, but no one had written about the situation at Folsom. "I just kept thinking, 'I can't believe nobody's written about this,'" McKenna says. "Why hasn't it been in the L.A. papers, in the San Francisco papers? It's not like those are lazy institutions." She then realized that, as at many newspapers large and small, deep staff cuts had left them unable to cover the story. The crisis went unnoticed until McKenna wrote about it.

Even when they are able to cover a medical story, time-strapped reporters often miss significant pieces of information. In the Kaiser study, more than 75 percent of the 500 stories reviewed concerning treatments, tests, products, or procedures failed to adequately discuss cost.¹⁵⁰ And more than 65 percent failed to quantify the potential benefits and dangers, according to HealthNewsReview.org, a website created by Schwitzer, the author of the Kaiser study.¹⁵¹

In the report and on HealthNewsReview.org, complaints abound from seasoned reporters who lament the growth of "press release reporting" and the lack of time they have to check out the veracity of information contained in a press release.¹⁵² Twenty eight percent of health reporters said that they personally get story ideas from public relations firms or marketing outreach somewhat or very often.¹⁵³ Among those who work on at least some web content, half said that having to work across different media has resulted in less time and attention for each story, and 59 percent said it meant that they work longer hours.¹⁵⁴

In an attempt to replace some of the health coverage that disappeared from newspapers, the Kaiser Family Foundation in late 2008 created a nonprofit news service that would produce in-depth coverage of the policy and politics of health care.¹⁵⁵ Kaiser Health News (KHN) hires seasoned journalists to produce stories for its website, KaiserHealthNews.org, and for mainstream news organizations.¹⁵⁶ Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Founda-

tion, explained to the *New York Times* why Kaiser Health News was a top priority: “I just never felt there was a bigger need for great, in-depth journalism on health policy and to be a counterweight to all the spin and misinformation and vested interests that dominate the health care system,” he said. “News organizations are every year becoming less capable of producing coverage of these complex issues as their budgets are being slashed.”¹⁵⁷ In addition to KHN, a number of smaller nonprofits have emerged to provide health care reporting in various states.¹⁵⁸

Education: Coverage of schools long has been crucial to most American communities. That is why many papers, in the past, assigned several reporters to the task. That has changed. Few newspapers have eliminated education coverage entirely, but many have assigned larger swaths of the beat to fewer people. The Brookings Institution, which has produced three recent papers on the quality of education reporting, concluded:

“The most basic problem is a broad decline in the number of education beat reporters. As news organizations have cut budgets, news rooms have seen their beat reporters’ responsibilities stretched to general assignment reporting, and their general assignment reporters covering stories that once constituted a beat.”¹⁵⁹

The *News Tribune* in Tacoma, Washington, is typical. “Where we once had two full-time K–12 reporters, a half-time higher ed reporter and another handful of reporters (maybe three) who covered education in the small cities they also covered, we now have—me,” reporter Debbie Cafazzo wrote.¹⁶⁰ Cafazzo is responsible for covering 15 school districts, two private liberal arts colleges, a public university, and four community colleges. Private schools are last on her

In Michigan, coverage of juvenile and family courts has become “smaller and smaller over the years,” one expert says. “Parents whose rights are terminated who shouldn’t be terminated.... It just takes somebody to go down there to get the story, but nobody is ever down there.”

list of priorities. “I spend a lot of time putting out fires, lurching from crisis to crisis, with little time left for deeper level reporting on broad education issues or the humanizing features on great teachers or great kids that I used to do more of in the past,” Cafazzo said in her email. “I have a strong personal philosophy that we have an obligation not just to report on the problems in public education (and they are legion), but on the solutions. It’s mighty hard, most weeks, to get to the latter.”

Ironically, Cafazzo and every other education reporter and editor interviewed for this report said their editors-in-chief considered education coverage to be central to their paper’s mission. They simply do not have the staff to do the job the way they used to. Richard Colvin, former director of the Hechinger Institute, put it this way: “Local coverage has likely not dropped in volume. But it has certainly dropped in ambition.... The beats are not being eliminated and in many places there may be more people writing about schools. But those who do may not do so full time and don’t have the leeway to write much of substance. They also

have very little capacity to think about broader issues.”¹⁶¹

The number of education editors at newspapers appears to have declined too, Colvin said. “We used to do a seminar every year and have 30 or 40 education editors come. We abandoned that two years ago because there aren’t enough people whose job is education editor anymore. They can’t assign more sophisticated stories because they themselves don’t understand [educational trends].”¹⁶²

Education reporters interviewed by *Education Next*, a nonpartisan journal of opinion and research on education policy and school reform, described a loss of accountability:

“They are pushed to write shorter articles, leaving little space for in-depth reporting.... What is lost is that the superintendent will bring in a new program, and nobody will be there to explain to the community whether similar programs have worked or failed in other places.” (Richard Whitmire, past president of EWA)

“We hear from superintendents that the coverage is worse than ever.’ All the reporters seem to want is a ‘couple of quotes’ for a ‘sensationalist’ story.” (Richard Colvin)

“Those with a vested interest—the teachers unions, realtors—will continue to get their message out. But there will be no one to counter these self-serving opinions.” (Jim Bencivenga, former education editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*.)

“An ill-informed public will benefit people who can push an agenda without accountability and public scrutiny.” (*Education Week* publisher Virginia Edwards)¹⁶³

On the other hand, some of the changes hitting newsrooms may have improved coverage. Although the *Washington Post* has fewer education reporters, long-time journalist Jay Matthews says that by blogging he has gotten closer to real-world classroom issues: “I think that on balance—and this is a very contrarian view—our education coverage is better in the new era than in the old, because we have more contact with readers. Blogs allow us to be in contact with readers—it creates a debate and a back and forth.” He mentions a local story he covered about teachers who no longer return graded exams to students. Parents were upset because they could not help their children learn from their mistakes. Matthews said the blog version of his story received about 50 comments from readers all over the country. “Clearly this is something teachers are doing everywhere,” he says.¹⁶⁴

As in other areas, the cutbacks in education reporting have spurred the establishment of a number of non-profits that hire seasoned journalists to cover stories that newspapers miss. Dale Mezzacappa reported on education for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for 20 years before going to work for the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, where she is a contributing editor. Launched as a quarterly in 1994 to cover “underserved” communities in Philadelphia, the *Notebook* is now available on the web. It cannot begin to replace large daily newspapers, Mezzacappa says, but it can fill in some of the gaps.¹⁶⁵ Alan Gottlieb, a former reporter for the *Denver Post*, launched Education News Colorado in January 2008.¹⁶⁶ The website, financed by local foundations, started by focusing on school-related legislation in the state capitol, “because nobody does that anymore,” Gottlieb says.¹⁶⁷

Nonetheless, another Brookings survey reported that Americans still rely heavily on newspapers for school coverage. It concluded:

“Americans want more media coverage of their local schools. In particular, they want more information than they now receive about teacher performance, student academic achievement, crime, and violence in their schools—and more as well about curricula, finances and reform efforts. While there is a great interest in receiving this information through new technological sources more so than ever before Americans however, continue to rely on traditional media, particularly newspapers, for information on their schools.”¹⁶⁸

Local Investigative: Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), a national nonprofit aimed at improving the quality of investigative journalism, had 4,000 members in 2010. In 2003, it had 5,391. “There is certainly less investigative reporting and watchdogging occurring than there was a few years ago,” says executive director Mark Horvit.¹⁶⁹ Longtime journalist Mary Walton recently assessed the state of investigative journalism for the *American Journalism Review*. While citing several national newspapers that have retained, or even increased, their commitment to investigative journalism, she concluded that the norm was a decline in investigative reporting. “Kicked out, bought out or barely hanging on, investigative reporters are a vanishing species...” Walton wrote. “Assigned to cover multiple beats, multitasking backpacking reporters no longer have time to sniff out hidden stories, much less write them.”¹⁷⁰

One measure of the decline cited by Walton is the drop in submissions for investigative journalism awards. Between 1984 and 2010, submissions to the Pulitzer Prize investigative category fell 21 percent; in the “public service” category, entries dropped 43 percent.¹⁷¹ IRE contest entries dropped from 563 in 2004 to 455 in 2009, and submissions to the Selden Ring Award, presented by the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, fell from 88 in 2005 to 64 in 2010.

Gauging the level of investigative reporting can be difficult. Some papers have dedicated “investigative units,” while others rely more heavily on stories that develop during the course of normal beat reporting. In 2006, Arizona State University students surveyed the 100 largest newspapers in the country and concluded that 37 percent had no full-time investigative or projects reporter, the majority had two or fewer, and only 10 newspapers had four or more investigative or projects reporters. Of the newspapers participating in the survey, sixty-two percent did not have a single editor specifically designated to work on investigations.¹⁷²

Walton’s reporting for *AJR* suggested that a handful of papers and one chain have retained strong investigative teams: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Philadelphia*

“Religion news at the local level is nearly gone,” reports Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association.

Inquirer, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the *Oregonian*, the *Seattle Times*, and Gannett. What is more, it is clear that computer-assisted reporting techniques, combined with increased availability of government data, has enabled the smaller cadre of investigative reporters to do valuable work (See Chapter 16, Government Transparency.)

But the norm among local newspapers has been to cut their investigative teams, Walton concluded. She assembled a depressing litany of what has been lost:

“At the *Palm Beach Post*, an era of fat budgets was dissolving like lard in a hot frying pan. In a single month in 2008, the staff of roughly 300 was reduced to 170, greased by a buyout offer that included health benefits for life. [Tom] Dubocq’s prize-winning probes of local corruption had put three county commissioners and assorted others in jail. He had his eye on a fourth commissioner, but instead signed up for the buyout. He was, he says, making too much money. ‘I knew ultimately I would get laid off. It was time to make the move.’

“What happens, I ask Dubocq, when people like him vanish from the newsrooms of America?

“‘The bad guys get away with stuff.’”¹⁷³

In truth, there is some debate within the profession about whether it is better to assign reporters to investigative units or to beats where they can gather tips as part of a daily routine. When Janet Coats became editor of the *Tampa Tribune* in 2005, she disbanded the investigative team. As Walton reported in *AJR*:

“Coats’ solution was to pair former I-Team members with reporters who could profit from their expertise, but her plan backfired when the Florida housing bubble broke, the economy skidded downward and the *Tribune* newsroom staff shrank from 300 to 180. ‘From a practical standpoint,’ Coats says, ‘someone would get sick, we didn’t have enough bodies, so those people got pulled into the breaking news.’”¹⁷⁴

The dearth of investigative journalism at newspapers has spurred some foundations to finance nonprofits intended to hold feet to the fire. In late 2006, Herb and Marion Sandler made a commitment to donate \$10 million a year to fund ProPublica, a nonprofit newsroom pursuing investigative reporting.¹⁷⁵ Led by former *Wall Street Journal* managing editor Paul Steiger, the New York–based outfit has a staff of 32 journalists who produce investigative, public interest stories. In 2010, one of its stories, which was published in the *New York Times Magazine*, won a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting.¹⁷⁶ “Investigative journalism is at risk,” ProPublica’s website declares. “Many news organizations have increasingly come to see it as a luxury.” Moreover:

“Profit-margin expectations and short-term stock market concerns, in particular, are making it increasingly difficult for the public companies that control nearly all of our nation’s news organizations to afford—or at least to think they can afford—the sort of intensive, extensive and uncertain efforts that produce great investigative journalism.

“More than any other journalistic form, investigative journalism can require a great deal of time and labor to do well—and because the ‘prospecting’ necessary for such stories inevitably yields a substantial number of ‘dry holes,’ i.e. stories that seem promising at first, but ultimately prove either less interesting or important than first thought, or even simply untrue and thus unpublishable.

“Given these realities, many news organizations have increasingly come to see investigative journalism as a luxury that can be put aside in tough economic times.”¹⁷⁷

In Chicago, James O’Shea, former managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and former editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, created the Chicago News Cooperative. His reasons were similar to Steiger’s.¹⁷⁸ At an FCC hearing, O’Shea reflected on the importance of being able to pursue public service journalism over an extended period of time:

“In a series of projects that lasted for more than five years, [*Chicago Tribune* reporters] documented numerous cases of misconduct by prosecutors, torture-induced confessions, violence in the Cook County Jail, defense lawyers who slept through court hearings and judges who were oblivious to the wobbly scales of injustice in their own courtrooms. Thanks in no small part to their work, state officials eventually found that 17 people on death row had been wrongly convicted. After reading the coverage, a Republican Illinois governor slapped a moratorium on capital punishment in Illinois.

“I saw public service journalism in Los Angeles, too, when three reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* documented scandalous conduct in a public hospital just south of Watts. They showed that instead of caring [for] and curing the poor and the sick, the hospital had a long history of killing or harming those it was meant to serve. Their stories chronicled how nurses neglected dying patients; how hospital staffers withheld crucial drugs for patients or administered toxic ones by mistake; and how guards used Taser stun guns on psychiatric patients.”¹⁷⁹

These are not the only beats or functions being harmed. Many kinds of specialty beats have suffered:

- Although there are still dozens of reporters covering the big stories about Congress, there are far fewer covering Congressional delegations—especially their work on local issues. Twenty-seven states have no Washington reporters, according to a study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The number of papers with bureaus in the capital has dropped by about half since the mid-1980s; the number of reporters working for regional papers dropped from 200 in the mid-1990s to 73 at the end of 2008.¹⁸⁰ The Down East website in Maine, which has no Washington reporters, described well the implications: “In place of having someone on the scene, Maine news organizations rely on interviews with delegation members to determine what they’re up to. This method has several obvious drawbacks, the most glaring being that our elected officials in the nation’s capital aren’t likely to tell us anything they don’t want us to know. Maine voters are dependent on the delegation’s assessment of itself.”¹⁸¹
- “Religion news at the local level is nearly gone,” reports Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association. Although religion has taken root in a few national online venues—the Washington Post, USA Today, CNN, and the Huffington Post—newspapers have mostly dropped local religion coverage. “At smaller papers—100,000 circulation or less—the religion beat, even as a half-time beat, is nearly extinct,” she says. Larger papers that used to have multiperson reporting teams are mostly down to one. Mason believes that nonprofits will need to step in to help provide local religion coverage.¹⁸²
- Local business reporting has often suffered despite its importance to the local economy. “It’s not a market that’s well served,” says Andrew Lack, CEO of Bloomberg Multimedia.¹⁸³ What is more, Lack says, the drops in statehouse reporting hinder the ability of private businesses to get a rich feel for economic trends and conditions: “There isn’t anyone covering the bond issue that’s destroying the state economy.” Not surprisingly, a study by Michigan State University found more coverage in newspapers of crime and disasters than local business.¹⁸⁴
- Coverage of border crime and immigration has suffered at a time when concern about both topics has risen. At one time, the *Dallas Morning News* had 13 reporters in its Mexico City bureau; now it has one. When Michel Marizco began covering border issues for the *Arizona Daily Star* in 2003, he says, there were nine border reporters at six newspapers in Arizona. Now there is one.¹⁸⁵
- The Society of Environmental Journalists had 430 newspaper reporters as members in 2004. Six years later, there were 256.¹⁸⁶ “In a topic like environment, people spend a lot of years building up a knowledge base, and when you lose that, you have to rebuild it over a long time,” says Beth Parke, executive director of the Society

“I think that on balance—and this is a very contrarian view—our education coverage is better in the new era than in the old because we have more contact with readers,” says Jay Mathews of *The Washington Post*.

of Environmental Journalists.”¹⁸⁷ Tim Wheeler, who reports on the environment for the *Baltimore Sun*, says, “The work cycle here has changed.... We’re much more like wire service reporters than we were before. My job is to feed the beast.”¹⁸⁸

Finally, there is an intangible factor: when a town ends up with only one reporter covering a particular beat, the reporter no longer has the fear of being scooped by the competition. It is impossible to quantify the impact, but there is no doubt that for some reporters competition spurs greater quality.

Hamsterization

As newsrooms have shrunk, the job of the remaining reporters has changed. They typically face rolling deadlines as they post to their newspaper’s website before, and after, writing print stories. Some are required to blog and tweet as well, some to produce videos. The good news is, they can write shorter, more focused stories for the print edition of the paper and provide longer, more detailed versions online that can be enhanced and updated as events progress. However, these additional responsibilities—and having to learn the new technologies to execute them—are time-consuming, and come at a cost. In many newsrooms, old-fashioned, shoe-leather reporting—the kind where a reporter goes into the streets and talks to people or probes a government official—has been sometimes replaced by Internet searches.

Newspapers have tried to become more like the new medium—emphasizing speed and dissemination through multiple platforms. But that drive can take a toll on quality. In an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in the fall of 2010, Dean Starkman likened newspaper reporters to hamsters on a wheel:

“The Hamster Wheel isn’t speed; it’s motion for motion’s sake. The Hamster Wheel is volume without thought. It is news panic, a lack of discipline, an inability to say no.... But it’s more than just mindless volume. It’s a recalibration of the news calculus. Of the factors that affect the reporting of news, an under-appreciated one is the risk/reward calculation that all professional reporters make when confronted with a story idea: How much time versus how much impact?

“This informal vetting system is surprisingly ruthless and ultimately efficient for one and all. The more time invested, the bigger the risk, but also the greater potential glory for the reporter, and the greater value to the public (can’t forget them!). Do you fly to Chicago to talk to that guy about that thing? Do you read that bankruptcy examiner’s report? Or do you do three things that are easier?

“Journalists will tell you that where once newsroom incentives rewarded more deeply reported stories, now incentives skew toward work that can be turned around quickly and generate a bump in Web traffic....

“None of this is written down anywhere, but it’s real. The Hamster Wheel, then, is investigations you will never see, good work left undone, public service not performed.”¹⁸⁹

Going Forward

Though we have spoken of “newspapers” and “the Internet” as two separate things, the distinction is becoming less meaningful. When experts talk about the decline of “newspapers,” they really mean the decline of paper-based newspapers and the traditional business models that enabled them to hire large staffs. In fact, from a traffic perspective, newspapers have come to dominate the Internet on the local level. An analysis conducted in early 2010 by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Internet & American Life Project concluded that the websites of “legacy” news organizations—mainly major newspapers and cable television stations—dominate online news space in both traffic and loyalty. “Of the top 199 sites in our analysis, 67 percent are from legacy media, and they account for 66 percent of the traffic. In all, 48 percent are from newspapers, and 19 percent from all other legacy media,” the study reported.¹⁹⁰ The Future of Media project’s analysis of online local news sources in three cities—Toledo, Richmond, and Seattle—came to the same conclusion. In each city, the number one online source for news was the website of the city’s long-standing newspaper.

The Internet has clearly increased the reach of some newspapers. In May 2010, NYTimes.com had 32 million unique visitors, equivalent to nearly one-quarter of the 123 million individuals who visited all newspaper websites. By contrast, daily circulation of the *New York Times* print edition was 876,638 in September 2010.¹⁹¹

What is less clear is whether newspapers will be able to carry their online advantage in brand and reach into business models that can sustain substantial newsrooms. In the Internet section, (see Chapter 4, Internet) we explain why ad-only models have not gotten them there. As a result, a number of newspapers have spent much of the past decade experimenting with other revenue models.¹⁹² In 2010, Gannett implemented pay walls at the websites of three papers and announced plans for the creation of page design hubs for its community newspapers in five cities.¹⁹³ The *New York Times* website, generally considered the most innovative newspaper site, erected a metered pay wall in 2011.¹⁹⁴ (See Chapter 5, Mobile and Chapter 25, How Big is the Gap?) The *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have introduced beefed up local editions, raising the possibility that some of the local reporting gap will be filled by national newspapers attempting to increase their circulations in certain cities. Some papers, such as the *Tampa Tribune*, are trying to recoup classified ad money by creating coupon businesses through mobile platforms.¹⁹⁵ Many newspapers are offering iPad and phone apps, and News Corp. has launched TheDaily, an iPad-only newspaper.¹⁹⁶ It is too early to say whether these experiments will pay off, but it is worth noting that most of the newspaper apps offered for the iPad are free. (See Chapter 5, Mobile.)

What is more, while legacy newspapers used to lag in innovation, some have become quite creative in their use of social media, database journalism, and community engagement. For instance, the Journal Register Company had its papers create new web operations using free, publically available tools, enlisting community members in the news creation process.¹⁹⁷ Many have made great strides in using web tools and reader contributions to beef up “hyperlocal” coverage of neighborhoods. “There is a new formula typically relying on some professional news staff, editing and coordinating, but with most of the content coming from volunteer or semi-professional writers based in the communities they cover,” Pew’s *State of the News Media 2011* reported.¹⁹⁸ Blogs, crime maps, user generated video and photos, social networking, photo galleries—many of them innovations pioneered by independent websites—can now be found on most newspaper sites.

Bankrupt newspapers are expected to re-emerge soon, with less debt. Others are expected to stabilize or, at the very least, shrink at a slower pace. As the nation climbs out of the recession, most newspapers that have survived will continue to do so, at least for the time being. The real question is how much in-depth local reporting will they be able to sustain.

Conclusions

Throughout the history of this nation, newspapers have provided the bulk of the civically important functions that democracy requires. Good TV, radio, and web operations do this, too, but traditionally, and currently, broadcast and Internet media rely heavily on newspapers to provide original reporting on topics that matter.

In this section, we reviewed the evolution of newspapers and the causes of the newspaper collapse. We noted a peculiar phenomenon: despite the financial collapse, many newspapers in the past decade still managed to break even or make profits. This raises a provocative thought: Perhaps we have not gone from an era when newspapers could be profitable to one in which they cannot, but rather from an era when newspapers could be wildly profitable to one in which they can be merely moderately profitable or break even. It is an important distinction, because it means that certain public policy remedies—for instance, making it easier for newspapers to reestablish themselves as non-profit entities—might be more fruitful than in the past. Or it may mean that wealthy individuals—entrepreneurs and philanthropists—will view newspaper ownership in a different light than most corporate leaders have: not as a profit-making venture, but as a way to provide an important civic benefit that will help to sustain democracy.

In the second part of this section, we attempted to answer the question, “So what?”

Compared with job-loss rates in other industries, the number of out-of-work journalists does not in itself constitute a national crisis. The real question is, what damage is their absence from newsrooms doing to communities and citizens? Surely, there was a great deal of duplication at these fat-and-happy newspapers. And surely some editors, when instructed to cut, tried to preserve their papers’ most important functions. In addition, we make no claims that all stories of importance were covered during the “golden age” of journalism; there always were holes in coverage,

important matters neglected in favor of sexier stories. But just because a system has serious problems does not mean it cannot get worse—and that is exactly what happened.

Proving a negative (i.e. what is *not* being covered now) is hard, but we believe that the material presented above—based on a wide range of independent studies, journalistic accounts, and interviews by researchers for this report—gives a glimpse of the severity of the problem. Although in most cases newspapers have not gone from massive coverage of a topic to no coverage of it all, now stretched reporters and editors not only have to do more with less, they have to do it *faster*, with fewer checks and balances. The combination of time pressures and the influence of the web has led a stunning 62 percent of newspaper editors to say that “the Internet” has caused “loosening standards” for journalism.¹⁹⁹

Experts tell us that these days, much of reporters’ time is taken up on reactive stories, describing what happened on a more superficial level, rather than digging deep into the causes and implications of a development. They have less time to investigate, to question, to take a story to the next level. Fewer newsrooms than ever can afford to deploy reporters to work on labor-intensive stories. That means not only fewer investigative stories, but, more commonly, less daily beat reporting about municipal government, schools, the environment, local businesses, and other topics that impact Americans’ future, their safety, their livelihood, and their everyday life.

In very real ways, the dramatic newspaper-industry cutbacks appear to have caused genuine harm to American citizens and local communities.