**Decline In Readers, Ads Leads Hundreds Of Newspapers To Fold**

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by David Bauder and David A. Lieb March 11, 2019 6:04 EDT

WAYNESVILLE, Mo. (AP) — Five minutes late, Darrell Todd Maurina sweeps into a meeting room and plugs in his laptop computer. He places a Wi-Fi hotspot on the table and turns on a digital recorder. The earplug in his left ear is attached to a police scanner in his pants pocket.

He wears a tie; Maurina insists upon professionalism.

He is the press — in its entirety.

Maurina, who posts his work to Facebook, is the only person who has come to the Pulaski County courthouse to tell residents what their commissioners are up to, the only one who will report on their deliberations — specifically, their discussions about how to satisfy the Federal Emergency Management Agency so it will pay to repair a road inundated during a 2013 flood.

Last September, Waynesville became a statistic. With the shutdown of its newspaper, the Daily Guide, this town of 5,200 people in central Missouri’s Ozark hills joined more than 1,400 other cities and towns across the U.S. to lose a newspaper over the past 15 years, according to an Associated Press analysis of data compiled by the University of North Carolina.

Blame revenue siphoned by online competition, cost-cutting ownership, a death spiral in quality, sheer disinterest among readers or reasons peculiar to given locales for that development. While national outlets worry about a president who calls the press an enemy of the people, many Americans no longer have someone watching the city council for them, chronicling the soccer exploits of their children or reporting on the kindly neighbor who died of cancer.

Local journalism is dying in plain sight.

A rock outcropping painted by a local tattoo artist to resemble a frog greets visitors who follow the old Route 66 into Waynesville. Along with its sister city St. Robert, the military towns are dominated by the nearby Fort Leonard Wood, which has kept the county’s population steadily around 50,000 for the past decade.

Five of Waynesville’s eight city council members are former military, and Mayor Luge Hardman says the meetings run efficiently as a result.

“This is a small town where you can be from somewhere else and not feel like an outsider,” said Kevin Hillman, Pulaski County prosecuting attorney.

The Daily Guide, which traces to 1962, was a family owned paper into the 1980s before it was sold to a series of corporate owners that culminated with GateHouse Media Inc., the nation’s largest newspaper company. Five of the 10 largest newspaper companies are owned by hedge funds or other investors with several unrelated holdings, and GateHouse is among them, said Penelope Muse Abernathy, a University of North Carolina professor who studies news industry trends.

Critics have said GateHouse and some other newspaper companies follow a strategy of aggressive cost-cutting without making significant investments in newsrooms. GateHouse rejects the notion that their motivations are strictly financial, pointing to measures taken in Waynesville and elsewhere to keep news flowing, said Bernie Szachara, the company’s president of U.S. newspaper operations.

All newspaper owners face a brutal reality that calls into question whether it’s an economically sustainable model anymore unless, like the Jeff Bezos-owned Washington Post, the boss is the world’s richest man.

That’s especially true in smaller communities.

“They’re getting eaten away at every level,” said Ken Doctor, a news industry analyst at Harvard’s Nieman Lab.

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In the mid-1990s, when former Daily Guide publisher Tim Berrier was replaced, the newspaper had a news editor, sports editor, photographer and two reporters on staff. Along with traditional community news, the Daily Guide covered the Army’s decision to move its chemical warfare training facility to Fort Leonard Wood in the 1990s, and a flood that swept a mother and son to their deaths in 2013.

As recently as 2010, the Daily Guide had four full-time news people, along with a page designer and three ad salespeople.

But people left and weren’t replaced. Last spring, the Daily Guide was cut from five to three days a week. In June, the last newsroom staffer, editor Natalie Sanders, quit — she was burned out, she said. She made a bet with the only other full-time employee, ad sales person Tiffany Baker, over when the newspaper would close. Sanders said three years; Baker said one.

The last edition was published three months later, on Sept. 7.

“It felt like an old friend died,” Sanders said. “I sat and I cried, I really did. Because being the editor of the Daily Guide was all I wanted for a really long time.”

The death of the Daily Guide raises questions not easily answered, the same ones asked at newspapers big and small across the country.

Did GateHouse stop investing because people were less interested in reading the paper? Berrier said about 3,600 copies of the Daily Guide were printed in the mid-1990s. At the end, GateHouse was printing 675 copies a day.

Or did people lose interest because the lack of investment made it a less satisfying read?

“As the paper declined and got smaller and smaller, I felt that there wasn’t as much information that really made it worthwhile, so I did eventually stop” subscribing, said Keith Carnahan, senior pastor at Maranatha Baptist Church in St. Robert.

Berrier blames GateHouse, who he said “set the Daily Guide up to fail.” Others are less sure. Sanders, the former editor, and Joel Goodridge, another former publisher, blame both GateHouse and the community for not supporting the paper.

Goodridge said some businesses found they could advertise much more cheaply in free circulars dumped at local stores. He now works at a college in the nearby town of Rolla. His job at the Daily Guide was eliminated during the relentless downturn.

“When I first got into the newspaper business, it was intriguing, rewarding and I felt like I was doing something more than generating profits,” Goodridge said. “I felt like I was doing something for the community. As the years went by, it changed.”

GateHouse said the Daily Guide, like many smaller newspapers across the country, was hurt by a dwindling advertising market among national retailers. The paper supplemented its income through outside printing jobs, but those dried up, too, said Szachara, the GateHouse newspaper operations president.

Given an unforgiving marketplace, there’s no guarantee additional investment in the paper would have paid off, he said. Szachara said the decision was made to include some news about Waynesville in a weekly advertising circular distributed around Pulaski County.

“We were trying not to create a ghost town,” he said.

Residents of Waynesville are coming to grips with what is missing in their lives.

“Losing a newspaper,” said Keith Pritchard, 63, chairman of the board at the Security Bank of Pulaski County and a lifelong resident, “is like losing the heartbeat of a town.”

Pritchard has scrapbooks of news clippings about his three daughters; Katie was a basketball player of some renown at Drury University. He wonders: How will young families collect such memories?

The local state representative, Steve Lynch, would routinely cut out a story about people recognized in the paper, add a personal note, laminate it and send it to them — a savvy goodwill exercise.

Historians worry about what is lost to future generations. Many of the displays in a small museum of local history in St. Robert are stories retrieved from newspapers.

Residents talk with dismay about church picnics or school plays they might have attended but only learn of through Facebook postings after the fact.

“I miss the newspaper, the chance to sit down over a cup of coffee and a bagel or a doughnut … and find out what’s going on in the community,” said Bill Slabaugh, a retiree. Now he talks to friends and “candidly, for the most part, I’m ignorant.”

Slabaugh acknowledges some complicity in the Daily Guide’s demise. He said he angrily stopped buying the paper when it wrote about a drag show at a local community center.

Beyond the emotions are practical concerns about the loss of an information source. The bank routinely checked the Daily Guide’s obituaries to protect against fraud; Pritchard said you’d be surprised by family members who try to clean out the accounts of a recently-deceased relative.

At a time when journalists and police are often at odds, it’s somewhat startling to hear local law enforcement unanimously express dismay at the loss of a newspaper.

Like many communities, Waynesville is struggling with a drug problem. The nearby interstate is an easy supply line for opioids and meth, police say. The four murders in Waynesville last year were the most in memory, and all were drug-related.

For painful, personal reasons, Pulaski County Sheriff Jimmy Bench wishes the Daily Guide was there to report on the December death of his 31-year-old son, Ryan, due to a heroin overdose. It would have been better than dealing with whispers and Twitter.

“Social media is so cruel sometimes,” Bench said.

Without a newspaper’s reporting, Police Chief Dan Cordova said many in the community are unaware of the extent of the problem. Useful information, like a spate of robberies in one section of town, goes unreported. Social media is a resource, but Cordova is concerned about not reaching everyone.

Local authorities still write news releases and, in the final days of the Daily Guide, the overworked staff often printed them verbatim — even giving front-page bylines to the marketing director for the Waynesville School District.

“I thought it was great,” said Waynesville School Superintendent Brian Henry, later adding: “Nobody’s really stepped in and filled exactly what we had with our newspaper.”

Posting press releases to official Facebook pages isn’t quite the same. County coroner Nick Pappas said readers are more suspicious of news releases than they would be of a fully reported news story.

“I’m not going to put out anything critical of myself out there,” said Hillman, the prosecuting attorney who just started his third term in the elective office. “I mean, that’s the truth. What politician is?”

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This isn’t a hopeless story.

Dotted across the country are exceptions to the brutal new rule, newspapers that are surviving with creative business plans. In North Carolina’s Moore County, owners support the 100-year-old Pilot with revenue raised by side businesses — lifestyle magazines, electronic newsletters, telephone directories, a video production company and a bookstore.

Philanthropy is supporting other efforts to fill gaps created by journalism’s business struggles. Report for America, which sees itself as a Peace Corps for journalists, has sent young reporters into communities in Mississippi, Texas and elsewhere. It has relationships with newsrooms across the country, including The Associated Press. The American Journalism Project is raising money to fund local news, and recently announced $42 million in pledges.

What this effort means for Waynesville, and many small towns like it, remains to be seen.

It briefly had an alternative after the Daily Guide folded. A local businessman, Louie Keen, bankrolled a newspaper, the Uranus Examiner, that was delivered for free. The paper had some journalistic spunk, revealing that the Waynesville mayor had blocked some residents from seeing her postings on the city’s Facebook site. Mayor Hardman said it was inadvertent and quickly corrected.

The paper lasted five issues. Named for the tourist complex Keen owns, he said the Uranus Examiner was shunned by local advertisers because he used to own a strip club and uses sophomoric jokes to promote his businesses.

So Waynesville and St. Robert are left with Darrell Todd Maurina’s Facebook site, which he calls the Pulaski County Daily News.

A former Army civilian public affairs officer who worked at the Daily Guide in the 2000s, Maurina posts live from community meetings, reports on accidents on the nearby interstate and publishes obituaries. It’s meat-and-potatoes local news.

When he’s not at meetings, he works from a windowless office in the basement of his home. Court documents and papers are piled on the floor and coffee table near a police radio scanner, fax machine and television. On his desk are a well-worn Bible, small American flag and a signed photograph of President Gerald Ford thanking Maurina’s father for his support.

Maurina typically is awake before 5 a.m. to check the local radio station, if the scanner hasn’t roused him earlier.

“I really believe that as large newspaper chains cut staff of small newspapers, and small newspapers wither and die, that’s going to cause major problems in communities,” he said. “Somebody needs to pick up the slack and, at least in this community, I’m able to do that.”

Maurina’s efforts have some support, even from the city councilman who said he once threatened to throw Maurina out a window over a disagreement about a story.

“He’s an equal opportunity agitator,” said Ed Conley, another council member. “He tries to be fair, and to be honest about it, he does a good job, but he’s just one person and he’s limited by social media.”

Maurina declines to share many details about the finances for his online site. He also acknowledges some holes in his coverage, especially of sports.

For local athletics, some people turn instead to a Facebook site run by Allen Hilliard, a former Daily Guide stringer and school bus driver who has been posting photos, videos and newsletters about local youth and high school teams. Hilliard isn’t making much money from his time-consuming hobby, but like Maurina, he takes pride in providing a community service.

“If I quit doing it, then essentially there would be no (sports) coverage of anyone,” he said.

Maurina says he knows journalists need to go back to the basics to survive —or revive — in small-town America.

 “We need to go back to what was done in the late 1800s — being everywhere at every event, telling everyone what the sirens were about last night,” he said.

Good idea. Who’s going to pay for it?

Associated Press Business writer Alexandra Olson in New York and video journalist Peter Banda, from Waynesville, contributed to this report.