

# Local News Matters

The Future of Strong Local Reporting in Maryland and Beyond

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## The Future of Strong Local Reporting in Maryland and Beyond

### Executive Summary

Journalists and news media outlets are working through market disruptions and covering their communities in an increasingly fractured media environment. The traditional revenue model of newspapers is changing, and media outlets are rising to meet the challenge. Although this is not a situation unique to news publications, they bear an added responsibility of watchdog and community connector.

The weekly local Gazette papers in Montgomery and Prince George's counties closed in early August, 2015. What does that mean for the local community? Will other news outlets provide coverage of these heavily populated counties? Will government business be transparent to the public? This closure has sparked a discussion of the status of local news in Maryland and throughout the U.S.

The industry is evolving as the business model changes and readers change their habits and interests. Journalism is changing with the times, but maintains its core focus: "to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough."<sup>1</sup> In our increasingly information-saturated world, community journalism provides objective, unbiased information to citizens to help them make better decisions

This report summarizes the Local News Matters panel discussion, held from 3-5 pm Tuesday, August 25<sup>th</sup> at Knight Hall, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park. We asked them about their experiences in community journalism and how they (and their news outlets) are meeting the challenges posed by market forces and the internet.

Each of the panelists are innovating and rising to meet the challenges ahead. The rapidly changing environment for news and business has freed many in the industry to try new things, while continuing to focus their efforts on strong reporting and local coverage. In this rich environment of ideas and innovation, there are many approaches and hope for the future of community journalism.

### Local News Matters

The last edition of the weekly Montgomery and Prince George's local Gazette papers was published in June 2015, having been in circulation since 1959. This closure of local papers may have been a shock but its ending was long in the making. Over the past few years, local editions of the Gazette papers closed, consolidating coverage and readers to just a few key editions. Due to financial struggles, most significantly lack of advertising, the small papers finally folded. This is not a unique situation, as the newspaper industry across the United States has been struggling with its business model due to market pressures and the disruption- and opportunity – of the internet. Local news publications in Montgomery and Prince George's

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

counties, like many areas bordered by large metropolitan areas, have to compete for attention with many news sources, including tv, radio, internet as well as the large metro papers such as the Baltimore Sun and the Washington Post. Due to these pressures, in many places it is hard to access community print news sources, according to Davis Kennedy, publisher of the Current Newspapers.

With the closure of the Gazette comes the loss of jobs and the loss of local print publications in the small communities in both counties. “There has never been a greater need for local news,” according to Brian Karem, of The Sentinel. Local news creates connections within the community, sharing common points of interest and concern. Lucy Dalglish, dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism says “local journalism is the glue that holds communities together.” Local news outlets are focused on a specific geographic area and report on the stories that other news outlets may consider inconsequential. As a recent article on Poynter.org notes, “national won’t hold your city councilmembers accountable.”<sup>2</sup> Local news is critical to ensure transparency in government. Sheilah Kast, host of WYPR’s Maryland Morning notes that all news outlets “are hurt when there are less reporters on the scene.” The closing of local news outlets could potentially lead to less scrutiny placed on state governments, especially on the implementation of laws, because many larger newspapers are slanted toward a national perspective. Less competition on the local level might mean that important community stories are reported late, less thoroughly, or even completely missed. The loss of the Gazette and its reporters does not just affect those who read those papers and live in those communities, but all Marylanders who require thorough and timely news.

Conversely, local news needs active local citizens who are invested in their own communities. Geordie Wilson, publisher of the Frederick News-Post, has found that in the larger suburban metro areas, the self-identification of residents does not necessarily focus on geographic location. If people in the community are living the area based on convenience and commute to larger cities, they often lose interest in the goings-on in the county.

Understanding that local news is critical to strengthen communities is one thing; how to create an environment where local news can flourish is another. Our panelists shared their thoughts and experience with facets of this issue.

## What gets covered?

Community journalists look deeply to their local communities for stories and coverage. For some panelists, that means covering what larger publications cannot. Fern Shen, publisher of the Baltimore Brew focuses on “old-school, follow the money stories” that fill in the gaps left by other publications. These gaps allow for The Brew to provide the “meat and potatoes” reporting that affects the daily lives of Baltimore residents, specifically local news controversies. It is this crusading spirit that Shen sees driving the readership rates upwards; reporting that is widely regarded as cutting through mainstream spin and exposing the ways in which government and business obscure the truth.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/352419/why-does-local-matter-lets-ask-our-audience/>

Objective journalism also drives Karem. He considers The Sentinel Montgomery and Prince George's Counties' local online news channel, and remains a third party online, sharing only vetted facts in an objective and unbiased manner.

For Kennedy, of the Current Newspapers, local coverage is centered on DC community issues, through reporting on advisory neighborhood commissions. In these commissions, advisory members influence multitudes of community issues, serve as an outlet for complaints and suggestions, and grant licenses. Covering these "ultra-local" meetings allows the Current to provide the neighborhood information that actually impacts the daily lives of readers.

The Frederick News-Post has developed both a core online site with general news and more specialized niche sites to complement the coverage of its core print publication. The niche audiences could focus on interests such as local sports or dining. These niche audiences can also receive newsletters, furthering the News-Post's ability to provide information that readers want.

## The role of social media

Panelists used social media in various ways – or not at all. For The Sentinel's Brian Karem, social media is used to drive traffic to the website so as to engage the community with its video feeds. Karem cites a continued rise in subscriptions and circulation to the paper's innovative use of video on its website.

Shen notes that "different platforms have different politics," explaining that many times a Brew article might get only two or three comments on the webpage causes extensive discussion on Facebook or large amounts of 'retweets' (sharing) on Twitter. Shen believes a good portion of The Brew's readers likely came to the news website initially after seeing friends sharing links on social media.

The Frederick News-Post is expanding and reaching more people than ever in rapidly-growing Frederick County. This is partly to do with the online websites and newsletters and partly to do with the Post's use of social media. Wilson described social media as a "double edged sword." Websites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn allow for increased engagement with the community and readers. These sites humanize reporters, allow for easily shared information, and give the News-Post staff insight into what readers want from their paper. However, these websites do not bring in any money and do not drive a large amount of new readers to the core website. In this "quick hit universe," the benefits of social media engagement for the Post are elusive, used for branding and engagement but a potential drain on resources with little financial incentive.

Uniquely among the panelists, Kennedy uses no social media engagement and his publication is a print-only platform; its online presence consists of PDF versions of the weekly papers and staff contact information.

## The business model

As Shen notes, "the old model has been blown up everywhere." In some ways, the internet has increased readership and access, but hobbled the advertising revenues that formed the backbone of the news media business model. The Baltimore Brew's website mentions how they get most of their funding: a membership program, a Kickstarter campaign, and individual and foundational support.

The Sentinel takes a different approach that focuses on the local events community. The publication often visits local venues to live-stream the entertainment, showcasing what is happening in the community and also demonstrating to those in attendance that what they are doing matters. Video production, along with more traditional advertising and subscription programs of the weekly publication helps to support community journalism.

Kennedy's "ultra-local" print news publications reach approximately 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of residents in DC. The Current Newspapers have perhaps the most traditional funding source of all of the panelists – print advertising. This profitable advertising stream does not seem to be slowing, but Kennedy did note that if the Current begins to lose advertising to the internet the paper would begin to feel pressure to set up a bigger online presence.

According to Sheilah Kast, the majority of Maryland Morning's funding comes from underwriting, a version of commercials that do not directly urge the listeners to take action. Other funding comes from membership programs and donations. While these sources are able to keep WYPR running, they do not allow for enough reporters to be on the scene for breaking news.

Geordie Wilson, the publisher of the Frederick News Post, strongly believes that "no one has the model figured out" when it comes to traditional local papers. The Frederick News Post has been attempting to adapt their business model to the changing times, though. There was a core strategy shift in this model recently, where the News-Post adopted a membership program rather than their traditional subscription method. Further, the News-Post's community model involves increasing relationships with local businesses. This mutually beneficial relationship involves aspects like advertisements, sponsorship of local events, and "best-of" contests. The Post is constantly seeing different ways to use its power as a convener of community information to increase revenue and engagement with local businesses.

## Strengthening community journalism

The trust built with readers through the Brew's quest to bring balance to their reporting through specialized reporting. The need to give voice to those in the local community has wedded the Baltimore Brew with accuracy and fairness. As to policy concerns, Shen mentioned the need for local news platforms to be recognized by governments and lobbyists so that they can have equal access to documents and interviews as well as being given the same credibility as the bigger news media.

Kennedy believes that attention to neighborhood news creates engagement with the community and stronger advertising relationships. As he sees it, local news is imperative for the newspaper business.

Maryland Morning's broad focus forces them to evaluate "why would anyone listen to this" on an ongoing basis. Kast described this necessity as an opportunity, and one that all news platforms should embrace. Kast believes that competition is critical and would help ensure all news media would feel the pressure to continue to focus on local news.

Wilson notes that while local news outlets must bring community interests to the forefront, it is also necessary for community members to support their local papers.

## Conclusion

There are a multitude of ways local news is adapting and thriving in Maryland. This discussion provides snapshots into the operations of five thriving news sources. There are many other outlets that present local news, from non-profit associations to social media-only platforms to increasing coverage from news outlets like the University of Maryland's Capital News Service.

The current environment prompts creative and innovative ways to cover communities. For example, hyperlocal community news centers, known as Community Media Centers, are becoming more popular. This digital-only platform acts as an online cable access channel with citizen-driven programming. Montgomery Community Media Center ([www.mymcmmedia.org](http://www.mymcmmedia.org)) is a strong local example. Another example of adapting outlets for local news is the Damascus, MD Facebook page, with over 3000 members sharing articles and information in real time. While platforms such as this Facebook page and similar blogs pose new questions for journalism and the spread of reliable news, there is no doubt that community members are seeking information on their neighborhoods.

More traditional journalism forums are finding expanded audiences. The Capital News Service of the University of Maryland is now carried in many news media outlets and provides coverage on a wide variety of topics. Non-profit cooperative publishing associations, like the Greenbelt News Review (established in 1937) are expanding delivery to more residents and taking a more active role in the community.

Local news is continues to be critically important and as information becomes more accessible and instantaneous, local news platforms have the ability and opportunity to adapt, thrive, and engage.

## Thanks to our panelists

**Lucy Dalglish**, dean, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland. Before becoming Dean on August 1, 2012, Dalglish served as executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press for 12 years. The Reporters Committee is a voluntary, unincorporated association of reporters and news editors dedicated to protecting the First Amendment interests of the news media. Based in Arlington, Va., the Reporters Committee has provided research, guidance and representation in major press cases in state and federal courts since 1970. Prior to assuming the Reporters Committee position, Dalglish was a media lawyer, reporter and editor.

**Brian Karem**, executive editor of the Sentinel Newspapers (<http://www.thesentinel.com/>) The Sentinel Papers has existed for 160 years and is still thriving, though the model through which its news is presented has evolved since the nineteenth century. The editor, Brian Karem, describes his news outlet as “an online content provider with a weekly print snapshot.” This online/print news source focuses exclusively on Montgomery and Prince George’s counties and has begun its expansion plan to increase circulation, especially now that the Gazette papers are no longer in circulation.

**Sheilah Kast**, host of WYPR’s Maryland Morning (<http://wypr.org/programs/maryland-morning-sheilah-kast>) WYPR’s Maryland Morning has been on the air three days a week for nine years. In this hour-long program host Sheilah Kast discusses “anything to do with Maryland,” be that politics, scientific research, history, the arts, and any other interesting Maryland-specific topics. Despite this broad mandate and very little time, Maryland’s Morning has produced DuPont award-winning segments such as “The Lines Between Us,” which discussed the history and sources of inequality in Baltimore. Maryland Morning does not focus exclusively on Baltimore, though, as it reaches as far as Frederick, Ocean City, and some DC suburbs.

**Davis Kennedy**, publisher and editor of The Current Newspapers (<http://www.currentnewspapers.com/>) The Current Papers cover large portions of DC, including Georgetown and Dupont Circle. Covering these “ultra-local” meetings allows the Current to provide the neighborhood information that actually impacts the daily lives of readers.

**Fern Shen**, founder, editor, and publisher of the Baltimore Brew online news source (<https://www.baltimorebrew.com/>) According to the Baltimore Brew’s website, the Brew is about “Baltimore’s neighborhoods, housing, politics, environment, real estate, downtown development, schools, transportation, crime, justice, media, and whatever else seems worth covering.” The Baltimore Brew seems to have found what is worth covering, as its readership has grown from 10,000 to approximately 100,000 over the past few years. According to Fern Shen, the founder, publisher, and editor, this growth in the face of a nation-wide downturn of local news is due to how and what The Brew reports.

**Geordie Wilson**, publisher of the Frederick News-Post (<http://www.fredericknewspost.com/>) Frederick News-Post, owned by the Randall Family, LLC, is a leading news and commercial printing company in Frederick, MD. Their core purpose is to be the authoritative resource in the Frederick area for quality news, information and entertainment through our flagship product, The Frederick News-Post. They have been in operation since 1880 and are committed to being an involved community partner, rooted in both Frederick's past and future.

Special thanks to Nikki Hurley, Common Cause Maryland intern and proud 2015 graduate of Denison College.