



Coming to the ‘Table’ to bolster local journalism

By Casey Eldred
Franklin Pierce University

In a world in which news cycles stream constantly, small news outlets often struggle to survive, but local news provided by these operations are essential for rural communities to stay connected and informed, said a panel of journalists on Thursday.

“Journalism is worth paying for, local trusted journalism you can’t get anywhere else,” said Liz White, publisher of Record-Journal Media Group in Meriden, Conn. White was part of a panel at the community journalism track of Radically Rural-Remote on Thursday; the group focused

on ways to demonstrate the value of local news so that more people will pay for it.

Amy Kovac-Ashley, vice president and senior director at the American Press Institute (API) led a discussion with White and two other panelists about strategies for strengthening community journalism. Kovac-Ashley works on a program called Table Stakes through API. Table Stakes teaches skills to newsrooms to ensure continued success.

The panel of newspaper professionals from around the country spoke on their experiences with Table Stakes and the value of quality, community journalism.

Autumn Phillips, managing editor of The Post

and Courier in Charleston, S.C., spoke about utilizing analytics and emphasizing stories that the audience is engaging with the most.

She explained that The Post and Courier once published many stories on local crime because those resulted in a large number of “clicks” on their website. She felt this practice was creating the image that Charleston was a dangerous city, and, she said, the stories didn’t result in any meaningful reader engagement.

“Reporting on car accidents and robberies filled our site with crime headlines... it made the community seem like such a negative place to be, and although we were getting people to click, they weren’t sticking around,” Phillips explained.

Les High, publisher of the News Reporter of Whitesville, N.C., talked about his paper’s success in growing circulation – using Table Stakes methods – and by paying attention to what readers want.

The group discussed that they often cover events or produce stories because they feel like they are obligated to do so; that there is some expectation on the part of the public that that coverage be provided. This feeling of obligation leads to mundane stories that do not produce any engagement, they said.

The panel gave the example of covering legal proceedings. Instead of publishing an article about each and every day in court, gathering information throughout the whole process and reporting on the entire story and outcome makes for better journalism.

Listening to your audience and adapting is the key to successful and valuable community journalism. This creates news that the audience cannot obtain anywhere else, they said. ●

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LIZ WHITE, PUBLISHER,
RECORD-JOURNAL MEDIA GROUP,
MERIDEN, CONN.





New models for news break out across the country

By Paul Lambert
Franklin Pierce University

With the world of journalism in constant change, newspapers must continue to find new ways to attract readers, agreed a panel at yesterday's Radically Rural-Remote event.

That was the focus of the second discussion in the Community Journalism track titled "Transformation." Leading the discussion was Kristen Hare, reporter for the Poynter Institute. Joining Hare were Les Zaitz of the Malheur En-

terprise in Oregon, Larry Ryckman of The Colorado Sun, Jim Iovino, assistant professor of media innovation at West Virginia University and Tamika Moore, managing producer of Red Clay Media in Alabama.

As papers continue to see cuts to both their budgets and staff, using resources more efficiently has become key for outlets to stay in the game, especially rural papers.

One way Zaitz did that at the Malheur Enterprise was by creating a website for an outlet that lacked one.

"In our industry, we had to migrate,

as a profession, online, where the readers were going," he said. "We want to make every hour valuable to advancing the community's knowledge of what's going on."

So frustrating were staffing cuts at the Denver Post, where Ryckman once worked, he decided to leave his paper and help create The Colorado Sun, a digital news operation.

"As much as I loved the Post, it was easy making the leap into the unknown," Ryckman said.

The most liberating aspect of running The Colorado Sun for Ryckman has been the ability to try new things. Just recently, the paper launched podcasts to relatively successful results.

"Our whole appeal to sponsors as well as readers is... we're not in the page view business," Ryckman said. "It's not about clicks."

The fact that local populations need local news is still an opportunity for small news operations in rural locales.

"One of the biggest strengths local newsrooms have is we live here, and we understand all of those small nuances (of the community)," Hare said.

Moore, once a photojournalist, produces videos for Red Clay Media, which, among its titles, is "It's a Southern Thing." The website celebrates Alabama with strong story-telling that captures the essence – and humor – of its people.

In an era when "fake news" allegations have hurt media credibility, local news operations can still earn and



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LES ZAITZ, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER, MALHEUR ENTERPRISE, OREGON

maintain trust.

"People are really hungry for a credible local source of news," Zaitz said.

Iovino also reasoned that perhaps marketing that credibility and importance to the community would generate more good exposure.

"It's okay sometimes to say 'we did a good job,'" he said. ●





Innovation stressed as a means to build readership, trust and revenue

Building a stronger foundation for journalism was the theme of the Community Journalism Track of Radically Rural, and this was amplified as 50 ideas were presented on how to help news organizations build audience, revenue and trust.

Led by The Keene Sentinel's President Terrence Williams and Linda Conway, executive director for the New England Newspaper and Press Association, the 90-minute presentation covered ideas generated at small news organizations or those that could be scaled to rural operations. Williams called the presentation "Crazy Good."

The session featured true crime podcasts, a look at an Alaskan paper's collaboration to expose sexual assaults and a lack of policing in rural Alaska, even how a South Carolina newspaper recorded local videos of



Much of the discussion focused on building trust with readers, which newspapers are working hard to improve by being more transparent with readers about the stories they cover and how they do the work.

performing artists and shared those with the public.

Williams stressed that the ideas presented were not his, but those developed by "smart and savvy organizations doing the best they can to connect with their readership."

Strong weekly newspapers in Taos, N.M., Burlington, Vt. and Kalispel, Montana were showcased as well as the work of other papers in Meriden, Ct., Whiteville, N.C., Middlebury, Vt.

Much of the discussion focused on building trust with readers, which newspapers are working hard to improve by being more transparent with readers about the stories they cover and how they do the work, Williams said.

The University of Texas at Austin was cited for lessons learned in journalism in 2019. "When writing an article, tell readers why you did a certain story, and

state where the resources came from." With reporters and editors telling their readers where they got their information and how they did a story, it enables trust and allows readers to back check information.

Several news organizations have responded to the pandemic, which has hurt local advertising revenue, a main way newspapers derive income. Williams told attendees how The Sentinel turned to the community to ask for support through a crowdfunding effort. He said The Sentinel was "pleased with how the community backed us during the pandemic."

Other innovative measures were cited included the use of Facebook Live for events, unique coverage of county fairs and high school football and celebrations of teachers who find themselves now on the front lines of the threat from coronavirus. ●