

The Cost of Truth: How Journalism Can Overcome Its Greatest Modern Challenge

For 150 years, *The Vindicator* stood as a beacon of investigative journalism in Youngstown, Ohio. In the 1920s, unlike many of its contemporaries, the newspaper went after KKK-affiliated officials and never shied away from reporting on scandals that implicated its advertisers. However, its closure in 2019 was not the result of any slowing in this output of impactful reporting, but rather the overwhelming economic pressures threatening modern journalism. This growing crisis is not unique – since 2005, more than a third of the nation’s print media has gone out of business, leaving over 55 million Americans without reliable access to local news.¹

One of the reasons for these financial struggles is the decline in advertising revenue. Advertisers, once the lifeblood of newspapers, have shifted their spending to online spaces under the increasing prominence of such platforms in our daily lives. This migration has occurred extremely successfully: in Australia, 80% of the total advertising revenue generated came purely from the sale of advertisement slots in Google Search results.² This leaves traditional publishers struggling to sustain themselves through traditional revenue streams, and as a result, many newspapers, particularly local outlets, have been forced to cut staff, reduce investigative reporting, or shut down entirely.

Even digital news organizations are not immune to the financial pressures of the modern age. Online news sites must now operate at unprecedented rates to attract sufficient readership, which has resulted in a prioritization of the speed of information delivery over its accuracy and depth. This shift incentivizes a compromising of journalistic integrity, leaving the public vulnerable to misinformation and sensationalism.

¹ Metzger, Zach. "The State of Local News." Local News Initiative, Medill School of Journalism, 23 Oct. 2024, localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2024/report/.

² Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. "Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report". Australian Government, 26 Jul. 2019, www.accc.gov.au/about-us/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report.

³ Canadian Heritage. "Local Journalism Initiative." Government of Canada, 18 Nov. 2024, www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/local-journalism-initiative.html.

With both print and digital outlets struggling to sustain quality reporting, proactive solutions are essential. One crucial step, though seemingly at odds with preserving journalistic independence, is government intervention. Canada's Local Journalism Initiative strikes this delicate balance to great effect by funding news organizations and freelance journalists through government grants while simultaneously maintaining the independence of the press by outsourcing the distribution of funds to select non-profit groups. To ensure the longevity of an unbiased press, U.S. lawmakers must act swiftly in a similar vein to support local media and guarantee its integrity.

Collaboration between news organizations is similarly essential. A simple case study of the value this approach may hold is the Panama Papers investigation, which involved extensive resource-sharing among journalists from countless organizations worldwide to expose the backdoor dealings of the elite. Although not founded on financial need, the success of the unified effort speaks to the viability of such an approach. Independent outlets must work to develop similar alliances as a method of divvying up the financial load of effective journalism if they wish to sustain it for the long term. After all, distancing journalism from immediate economic pressures in this way will not only secure the continued existence of the press in the short term but will also serve as a safeguard against potentially damaging financial influences in the future, strengthening the legitimacy of journalism and restoring the public's trust in the discipline.

Works Cited

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