

Local journalism in Canada needs a boost

Bob Cox

Local media are the active watchdogs that democratic communities need to stay healthy.

It's 9:30 in the morning, and Mike McIntyre is going full speed. The voluble *Winnipeg Free Press* reporter is scanning dockets, talking to lawyers, police and court clerks, dashing between courtrooms and generally getting immersed in what is happening at the Law Courts complex in Winnipeg.

By 10 a.m. he's tweeting out testimony from a murder trial. By 11 a.m. he has filed a story for the *Free Press* website. Then he takes advantage of a break to listen to an audiotape of a sentencing in a sexual assault case that was happening at the same time as the murder trial.

Quick Tweet. Quick web story. Back to the murder trial. At noon he catches a relative of the murder victim outside court and uses his smartphone to stream a video via Periscope.

By the end of the day he will have written multiple versions of up to eight stories for the *Free Press*, posted to various digital and print platforms. No one else covers 75% of the stories he does. TV and radio reporters show up only after they learn Mike is covering a juicy case.

Mike is the eyes and ears of Winnipeggers on the justice system, almost single-handedly providing experienced and knowledgeable coverage of what happens in the courts, informing the community about matters of great importance. Take away Mike, and there is massive hole in what Winnipeg knows about crime and punishment.

There are two more things you need to know. The first is that Mike is enormously successful. He has written six books, he has 10,000 Twitter followers, he appears on radio shows across Canada

and for 11 years he has hosted his own national radio show. He does regular talks for school tours at the Law Courts and often visits classes in high schools, the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg and Red River College.

The second is that everything he does flows from his work for the *Free Press*. Despite all his other success, without the newspaper he would not be providing the coverage he does. No one would. That pretty much sums up the role traditional local news media, especially local newspapers, play in their communities.

You can find a flood of information online at any given moment about crime and punishment, but if you want to find out about the woman who was stabbed in a parking lot in your neighbourhood, you are going to have to turn to local news media.

Newspapers like the *Free Press*, founded 144 years ago, have become so much a part of the fabric of their communities that they are taken for granted by many of the people who depend on them. The head of a local arts group recently phoned the *Free Press* editor to complain about fewer reviews of some classical music performances and to stress how important these write-ups are in the development of young musicians. "Are you complaining to any other media?" the editor asked. "No," came the reply. "But we expect the *Free Press* to do reviews."

People expect local coverage

People simply expect local coverage. They do not put that much thought into how it comes to them. And, while drowning in media generally, people do not realize traditional local news media are rapidly disappearing.

I was a court reporter in the 1980s, one of two assigned full time to the Law Courts by the *Free Press*. We also regularly assigned other *Free Press* reporters to supplement coverage. There was a full-time reporter from another newspaper and regular reporting from radio and TV outlets. On many days in 2016, there is just Mike.

What happened is quite simple. Local people used to spend money on advertising that supported local journalism. For newspapers that



Newspapers continue to provide continuous coverage of key institutions such as provincial legislatures. Here, Winnipeg Free Press staff look over budget documents at the Manitoba Legislature. From left, multimedia producer Kristin Annable, web editor Graeme Bruce, legislative reporter Larry Kusch and Associate Editor Scott Gibbons, seated. (Photo: Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press).

meant pages of classified ads from local readers, more pages of display ads from local merchants, all supplemented by major national ad campaigns by the major brands that local people bought at the big chain stores.

But this has all changed. Classifieds have all but disappeared. People go online to post free items about the used bicycle they want to sell or an apartment to rent. Local merchants spend on Google or Facebook, sending money to the coffers of large American firms rather than keeping it in their own communities. Local journalism is left to fend for itself.

There is no shortage of information about local happenings. The explosion of social media means you can find out all sorts of things about what is going on in your community. If a bad car accident occurs in rush hour, there are likely to be photos on Twitter before police arrive. The Winnipeg Jets are more than happy to send out video

of scoring plays from games and team updates.

But a community is not well informed by getting sporadic, random reports about things that happen, or by getting the “official” version of events supplied by a sports team or a government or a corporation.

After tweeting a photo, another motorist simply continues on to work. Only a journalist follows up to look at how the accident happened, how safe the intersection is or whether that particular model of vehicle has faulty brakes. An NHL team does not send out news on a spat between the head coach and a star player. That is uncovered by a regular hockey beat reporter.

Early in the digital revolution, many believed the new world in which everyone is a publisher would mean there would be an avalanche of citizen journalism – ordinary folks telling others about what is going on in their communities.

To an extent, this has happened, fuelled by

ubiquitous social media. But what quickly became apparent is that this sort of information is not like continuing coverage from a media outlet. The person who posts photos from all the high school football games this season is not around next season because his son has graduated. The person who Tweets about a bad experience at a restaurant is likely to be the person who had the experience, and is unlikely to tell the restaurant owner's side of the story.

And this unpaid army is not easily held accountable, unlike paid journalists working for a media outlet. Organized journalism is required for a community to be fully informed with balanced, responsible and continuing coverage.

Accountability at stake

So how does local journalism survive in the digital age? There is a widely held misconception that advertising alone can continue to pay for "free" online news sites. But I know of no independent

local news site that is generating its own content, and generating complete community coverage, based only on advertising.

There are sites supported only by advertising, but that is pretty much all they do – advertise. A typical local site like this has no regular reporting staff. Many just post press releases from the police, governments and local businesses. Some are merely community billboards. None are the active watchdogs that democratic communities need to stay healthy.

Big players like BuzzFeed generate revenues with hundreds of millions of users, making tiny amounts on each of billions of page views. That's a worldwide audience. It's not an audience in a typical Canadian city or town for a provider of local journalism.

Instead of advertising-only models, what has emerged in the digital age is a wide array of experiments. Many, like *Winnipeg Free Press* digital platforms, are extensions of traditional media.

Newspapers focus on local teams and keep their profile high in their communities, which they depend on for support. Here Sam Katz, owner of the Winnipeg Goldeyes baseball team, is interviewed by Winnipeg Free Press sports writer Melissa Martin at Shaw Park in Winnipeg. (Photo: Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press).



The “old” medium remains the base and major revenue generator, while the digital platforms engage new audiences.

The main characteristic of these efforts is that they are not self-sufficient. They depend on legacy media for content, sales and other support. They are just as much at risk when the legacy media behind them weaken, as is the case with newspapers, where revenues have been falling, or local TV stations, which lose money in most Canadian markets.

Among the experiments are many that do not depend on legacy media. They have come up with an array of ways of paying the bills, from soliciting donations, to focusing on niche areas with specialized information so that they can sell subscriptions. From this seeming chaos are emerging some models that have the promise of providing quality local journalism on a continuous basis.

The daily *La Presse* newspaper in Montreal has adopted a tablet-based method of sending out its content each day. The service is free and the tablet edition has been so successful at attracting readers and advertisers that *La Presse* has discontinued printing a daily newspaper from Monday to Friday. The *Toronto Star* has introduced the same system and is betting it can have a free digital service that attracts sufficient advertising.

Many newspapers, such as *The Globe and Mail* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, are focused on building up digital subscription bases of readers who pay monthly to access content online and who may or may not also take the printed paper. There are also some robust local digital news services based on subscriptions. A service in Halifax, allnovascotia.com, has attracted thousands of paying subscribers to an electronic package of news from the region with a strong focus on business and politics.

There should be even more experimentation so that a variety of new digital models can emerge to provide local journalism. There are certainly enough unemployed journalists around to put their minds to this.

However, one problem in many Canadian markets is the large presence of the CBC, which is increasingly seeing its future in the provision of

digital news in local markets. Every Canadian has an opinion on the mandate of the CBC so I will leave that debate aside. But what is undeniable is that the presence of a large, taxpayer-subsidized player in digital news and information has an impact on what else develops in that environment.

Every day I receive criticism of the fact that the *Winnipeg Free Press* website is now closed down to casual readers. Subscribers get full access, and you can buy single articles for 27 cents each. But you cannot use the site regularly unless you are registered, logged in and paying. The common refrain among critics is: “I can get all this stuff for free from other sites.”

I can easily make the argument that this is not true because of the breadth and depth of *Free Press* coverage compared with what “free” sites produce. However, it is hard even for me, the publisher of a large Canadian newspaper, to make this argument against what the CBC produces and posts without charge. The CBC is not free, of course, but it is a cost hidden in our taxes so most people are unaware of what they are paying.

Think about how hard it would be for a digital start-up to start a subscription service in the face of what the CBC does. Of course, you could ask: “Why does it matter if the CBC does the job and provides local coverage?”

The answer is that local journalism cannot survive and thrive with only a single provider. Multiple, healthy outlets are needed to provide a variety of versions of events, views and even alternate methods of coverage. For communities to thrive, you need an unruly rabble of news media outlets poking and prodding, asking the mayor questions about public tendering policies or unearthing expense accounts that show a college president billed taxpayers for her golf shoes.

Carrying on the good work

It is hard to raise an alarm about declining local journalism for two reasons.

The first is that it is a slow process and media outlets try to cover it up. They do not want to admit they are doing less. They do not announce when they stop covering the courts or staffing question period at the Legislature. A local radio station in Winnipeg still publicly bills itself

as “Winnipeg’s News and Information Leader” despite having virtually no reporting staff.

The second is that people do not notice what is not there. They do not notice missing symphony reviews – but eventually forget there is a symphony at all. They do not notice when a police investigation is botched – and never hear about the criminal who walks free as a result.

But there should be alarm bells ringing. For all the good work people like Mike McIntyre do, its future viability is increasingly in jeopardy. We need to support existing models of local journalism and help develop new ones to ensure communities stay informed and healthy as a result. ■

Bob Cox is publisher of the Winnipeg Free Press and chair of the Canadian Newspaper Association.

Recent Issues of *Media Development*

2/2016 Islamophobia and the Media

1/2016 Communication Rights...
joining up the dots

4/2015 Invisible Walls and Barriers

3/2015 Enabling People’s Voices to be
Heard

2/2015 Building a Better World Post-2015

1/2015 Burma/Myanmar and South-east
Asian Countries in Transition

Media Development is provided free to
WACC Individual and Corporate Members
and is also available by subscription.

For more information visit:

<http://waccglobal.org/>