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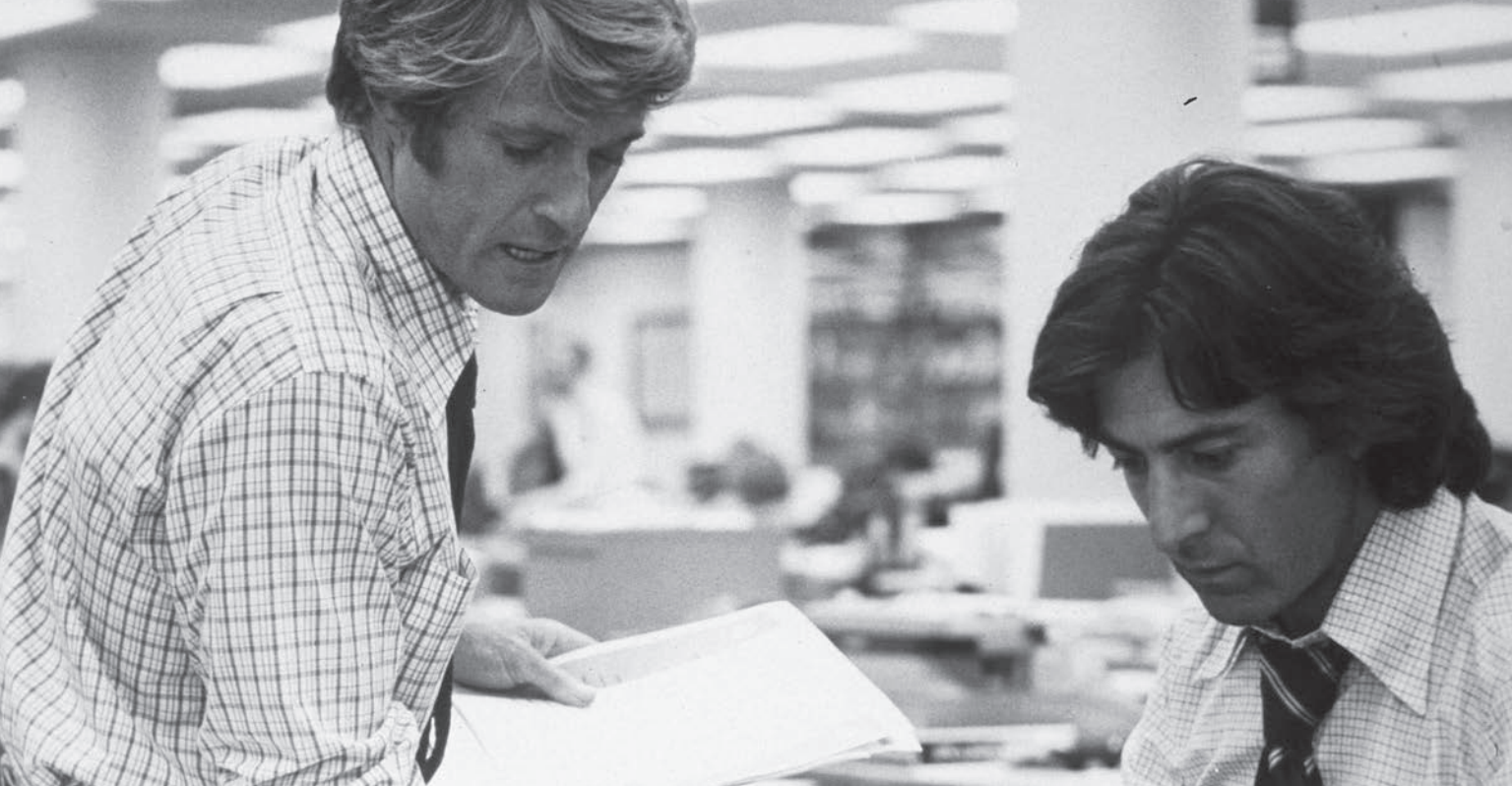
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NEWS TAKES A STAND

How editors and publishers are trying to save local news coverage – and maybe democracy.

BY DOUG STRUCK



WARNER BROS./NEWCOM/FILE

Robert Redford (left) and Dustin Hoffman star in "All the President's Men," a 1976 film about the Watergate scandal.

FROM THE EDITOR

Why local news is necessary

At one time, everyone wanted to be a journalist. Well, not everyone, but a large number of students entering college did. It was the late 1970s. An investigation led by two Washington Post reporters had resulted in President Richard Nixon's resignation on Aug. 9, 1974. The movie version of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's exploits, starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, had arrived two years later. "All the President's Men" won four Oscars. Who *wouldn't* want to be a journalist? Those guys had just helped save American democracy!

It didn't last, though, and today journalism is in trouble. Craigslist wiped out classified ads, and Google has taken care of the rest, pretty much. It appears that many people get their news from a big-tech aggregator on their smartphones. (One could note with irony that Apple News is strangely dependent on the very news originators it is arguably undermining by drawing away subscribers.)

Small local newspapers have been hit especially hard with rising costs, falling revenues, and even targeting by hedge

funds that essentially loot and then discard them. The effect of these and other pressures has been the rise of vast, local news "deserts" across the United States.

But remember the dogged, wisecracking reporters of yore? The hard-boiled editors with hearts of gold? As in "The Front Page," "Good Night, and Good Luck," the aforementioned "All the President's Men"? Or the dear-to-print-journalists but underseen "The Paper" with Michael Keaton? That spirit is still alive and out there.



BY OWEN THOMAS
WEEKLY EDITOR

In this week's cover story, Monitor correspondent Doug Struck set out to see how local newsgathering operations are trying to save themselves through radical reinvention.

An online startup in Mansfield, Ohio, hosts monthly concerts in its shared-space newsroom. In Saline, Michigan, the community wouldn't let a local publication fold after its editor reluctantly decided that he had to quit. In Weare, New Hampshire, the local library stepped up to fill a news void. Philanthropists are bankrolling some publications. Other news entrepreneurs are simply starting up and hoping the money will follow.

At its best, a local news source, which can take many forms, helps knit a community together and strengthens its identity by helping citizens respond to local needs. It's also a guardian, the eyes and ears of the public in town meetings and councils.

Good government flourishes in the sunshine, and our nation's founders knew that. "A press that is free to investigate and criticize the government," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "is absolutely essential in a nation that practices self-government and is therefore dependent on an educated and enlightened citizenry." But the provision for a free press to enlighten the citizenry is a hollow promise if there's no publication to practice it.

So who needs local news? Jefferson would say "everyone." But in case you're not convinced, look at it this way: When five burglars broke into an office at the Watergate Hotel in Washington on June 17, 1972, it was a local story. Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein were unknowns; The Washington Post had virtually no national profile.

And Nixon was president.

■ Email me at editor@csmonitor.com.



THE NEWSROOM OF TOMORROW

BY DOUG STRUCK / CORRESPONDENT



RICHLAND SOURCE

OOOM
OW?

From live concerts to crowdfunding campaigns, publishers are trying bold gambits to save local news.

MANSFIELD, OHIO

Noah Jones is working. The young reporter for the Richland Source, a local news startup in the heart of Ohio’s Rust Belt, listens to the jazz quartet warm up and eyes the crowd. Then he takes the mic.

“Thank you for coming out tonight,” Mr. Jones intones, in his best master-of-ceremonies voice. “Now let’s welcome the Mansfield Jazz Orchestra quartet!”

The small concert, with free beer and food for the public, is in the middle of the shared-space newsroom of the Richland Source, an online site started by a businessman who thought his city needed more news.

The monthly Newsroom After Hours concert – from jazz to pop to hip-hop – is just one of the unfamiliar roles for some journalists and publishers trying bold experiments to buck the wholesale die-off of local news sources around the country. Like mad inventors, they are furiously writing and rewriting plans to find what works, often in small-scale, community efforts.

“This is how we make connections between people. This is how we roll,” says Carl Ferynyak, founder of the Richland Source, lounging in bluejeans against a newsroom desk. Jazz singer Kelly Knowlton, with new-age orange hair and an old-age lusty voice, wraps up with “Take the ‘A’ Train.”

For much local news, the train is at the end of the line. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill last year found that in the past 14 years, 1,800 newspapers have closed – 1 in every 5 across the country – creating a U.S. map spotted with “news deserts.” A Pew Research Center analysis in July showed newspaper circulation since 1990 dropping by half, to 31 million last year. Pew noted jobs in all newsrooms plunged by one-quarter in the past decade. A Wall Street Journal study published in May said Google and Facebook have sucked up 77% of digital advertising revenues from local markets.

And of the 400 to 500 online news startups that were supposed to replace newspapers? A 2016 analysis sponsored by the Knight Foundation found only 1 in 5 startups had the visitors and funders to be self-sufficient.

“Local news looks pretty grim,” says Dan Kennedy, who has written two books on media models and teaches journalism at Northeastern University in Boston.

For years, observers have warned of the effects of this loss of news coverage: paralyzing partisanship, lower voting rates, government corruption, little accountability among public officials, less civic engagement. But the bulk of the industry has not been able to stop the diversion of advertising to Craigslist, Google, and Facebook, or slow the flight of readers to social media and free online news feeds. Equity firms have bought up many local news outlets at fire-sale prices, often slashing staffs and coverage to drain the last bit of profits, with what Mr. Kennedy calls “the dead hand of corporate ownership.”

The Richland Source, an online news startup in Mansfield, Ohio, holds free Newsroom After Hours concerts that feature local bands and are open to the public.

“THIS IS HOW WE MAKE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE. THIS IS HOW WE ROLL.”

– **Carl Fernyak**, founder of the Richland Source in Mansfield, Ohio, on Newsroom After Hours concerts



RICHLAND SOURCE



DOUG STRUCK

“WE ALL WANT TO DO POSITIVE STORIES AND HAVE AN IMPACT. THAT’S JOURNALISM. BUT THERE’S MORE TO THE WORLD THAN SUNSHINE AND RAINBOWS.”

– **David Yonke**, editor of the News Journal, also in Mansfield, on the Richland Source’s upbeat approach to covering the news

Dotting this bleak landscape, though, are stubborn reporters and creative entrepreneurs. Some use guilt and civic spirit to garner support for news outlets. Some have found deep pockets in local owners. Some get help from foundations or philanthropists. Some just start reporting and hope to find the money. “There are reasons to be optimistic,” Mr. Kennedy says.

Many, like Mr. Fernyak, acknowledge they are figuring it out as they go. He says he knew “zero, nothing” about news publishing when he began the Richland Source six years ago, but predicts the organization is now within 18 months of breaking even.

Five reporters cover surrounding communities and Mansfield, a town of 47,000 reeling from shuttered industries. The town’s daily newspaper, the Mansfield News Journal, with roots 134 years deep, has shriveled in circulation and staff, and – in the eyes of Mr. Fernyak – does not offer much to the community.

In 2013, Mr. Fernyak joined a Chamber of Commerce study of the sagging Rust Belt town. “Without fail, each one of the businesses said we have an image problem, a self-esteem problem,” he says. “Ninety-five percent of the coverage was crime.”

Mr. Fernyak was in the office equipment business, but within six months he had hired a president, a veteran managing editor, and a few journalists, and started the Richland Source. “I decided it was time to make an impact on the community, by talking about what was right, what was working, and talking about our successes.”

The site, which Mr. Fernyak adamantly keeps free to readers, offers up a smorgasbord of hard news and homespun stories. A recent front page included a shooting-suicide next to news that Barb Weaver had once again won the county fair’s lemon-meringue pie contest. The site has local sports, summer parades, short features on business owners, and occasionally a deep dive into a social problem.

To support this, and to bond with readers, the Richland Source and its owner do some decidedly untraditional things. There are the newsroom concerts, trivia nights at a local brewery, movie nights, and roundtable discussions with high school students – all staffed in part by Richland Source employees.

The Source has a marketing arm that crafts social media strategies and ads for businesses, the editors are trying to sell an artificial intelligence program they use to generate short stories on high school games, and the staff solicited \$70,000 from businesses and community groups to pay for two extensive reporting projects. Reporters are expected to make an “ask,” through email

and social media appeals, for readers to sign up for memberships at \$5 to \$20 a month.

“We try not to talk about it like ‘the business side’ and ‘the news side.’ We try to think of ourselves as one team that’s pulling together,” says Jay Allred, hired by Mr. Fernyak as president.

All of this is being done under the banner of saving not just the news operation, but Mansfield. “Our role is to show Mansfield and our audience the way forward. Not the way, but ways forward,” says Mr. Allred.

That goal is ambitious. Vacant and broken-window buildings still glower darkly over Mansfield streets, but more than 800 empty structures have been torn down, the city’s mayor says. Yes, big industry is long gone, but the toxic empty lots it left behind are being cleaned up and made into green spaces. Sure, one can walk the length of Main Street on a warm summer night and

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Local news is considered essential to the smooth functioning of democracy, keeping people engaged and public officials accountable. Amid an onslaught of newspaper closings, editors are finding innovative ways to survive.

pass no one else, but you should see the crowd at the “Last Friday” monthly music jam downtown, they say.

“Look at this,” says Mr. Fernyak, leaping to open his laptop. He shows pictures of Mansfield decades ago, scenes of decrepit, foreboding buildings, many now brightly refurbished, like the 102-year-old space that houses the Richland Source. His father dreamed up the idea of putting a colorful carousel in the middle of town, displacing massage parlors and seedy bars. Now the pump of organ music and whirl of hand-carved horses rule the square.

“This city was dead,” says Mr. Allred. “DOA. Nothing. No hope. And with no help, and by ourselves, the citizens of this community and other communities in Ohio have just sort of collectively said, ‘We are not going to die.’”

And that, say the folks at the Richland Source, is why the local news site is needed, and why it is unapologetically promotional. People in Mansfield seem approving.

“I like it,” says Cheryl Moore, a clerk at the 111-year-old Hursh Pharmacy. “It’s current, it’s true, and it’s factual.”

The mayor of the town concurs. “They’ve been a breath of fresh air,” says Timothy Theaker, who was first elected in 2011. “If the news is always negative, it starts tearing down the community.”



RICHLAND SOURCE



DOUG STRUCK

The Richland Source asked 15 local artists to create pieces inspired by two solutions journalism projects it produced and then invited the community in to see them (photo top). Dubbed “reimagined,” the project was intended to engage readers with the news site’s work in a different medium. Mansfield, Ohio, is a Rust Belt town deserted by big industry (photo above). A businessman founded the Richland Source to give the community another news voice.

About 100 steps from the Richland Source, in an imposing two-story brick building that takes up most of the block, the News Journal remains, largely inaccessible to its readers. All the doors are locked, there's no doorbell, and calls to its posted number enter an endless automated vortex. In one of the grimy windows, someone has posted a puckish fake headline: "Man Indicted for Everything."

But inside, editor David Yonke bristles at the "if-it-bleeds-it-leads" image of the newspaper's coverage. Finally reached by email, he unlocks the door and escorts a visitor to the second floor, past dark and empty rooms. His staff has shrunk to nine, and daily circulation has plunged to 15,000, he says. He doesn't know how high either was; he was just named editor in January by the owner, the Gannett chain now being merged with GateHouse Media, another chain known for its brutal staff cuts. Mr. Yonke commutes two hours each way from Toledo.

"We do a lot of other stuff besides crime," says Mr. Yonke, who spent a career at the daily Toledo Blade. He digs into a pile of newspapers in his office. "Here. We covered the county fair. We covered the blood drive and shortage of blood. We covered the county commissioners cutting back. Here's a story on a big meteor shower. And this week we'll have 'The Shawshank Redemption' anniversary" – the movie was shot at a reformatory here 25 years ago and is a big tourist draw.

"They say they want to do positive journalism and have an impact on the community," Mr. Yonke says of the Richland Source. "I think it's all marketing. We all want to do positive stories and have an impact. That's journalism. But there's more to the world than sunshine and rainbows."

On a recent day when the News Journal led with a follow-up story to a domestic shooting (the couple had "relationship issues," the story said), the Richland Source had stories on a legendary area footballer and the city council's capital budget. But in the Richland Source newsroom, a screen flickered with readership updates from the site, and engagement editor Brittany Schock ruefully acknowledged that the most-read

story of the moment was the monthly list of criminal indictments. "We'd even decided not to feature the list," she says, "but people find it."

The journalists at the Richland Source squirm a bit over whether the publication is serving the adversarial role that has long been journalism's check on public officials. Mr. Allred says that initially promising "positive" news was a mistake. "In my opinion, that was the wrong tack to take."

But he and the news staff say there are more ways to serve the community than "scanner chasing" – listening to the police radio to rush out to crimes and accidents. When Ms. Schock came to the Richland Source in 2014 from a small-town Ohio paper, she told Mr. Allred, "I don't want to be someplace that does just PR. I want to do

distribute baby "sleeping boxes," a bed for infants developed in Finland.

"That was something at the time that was just completely novel to me," Ms. Schock says of the newsroom event. "Now, it's something I think of all the time."

"We are simply presenting another narrative, another part of the story, which is the solution," she adds. "Instead of just ending the narrative at the problem, which just makes people feel bad about themselves, it's much more hopeful to know that there are people out there working on solutions."

Tran Longmoore pulls up on his bicycle with his heavy Canon Mark IV camera slung over his shoulder. It's his usual way of covering his beat – Saline, Michigan – in the summer. He unlocks a dark office owned by a community group, mostly empty. He's got a desk in the back, largely unused. That's fine with him; Mr. Longmoore works from his home, from coffee shops, from the field on his mobile phone.

He is a mostly one-man source of local news here. He is, along with a few freelancers, the Saline Post, online and free. He epitomizes the ear-to-the-ground approach that can win the heart of a community.

"I go to a soccer game – he's there. I go to my daughter's T-ball game, he's there. I go to lunch, and he's outside taking pictures," chuckles Rick Richter, manager of a mortgage company in Saline. "That guy never sleeps."

"He's the proverbial Energizer Bunny," agrees the mayor of the town, Brian Marl.

Saline (named after salt springs, but pronounced like the singer, Celine Dion) is a

community of 9,000 just 10 miles south of Ann Arbor. It used to be mostly farmland, but the biggest crop now is suburban developments, whose residents stream into large tech and auto component plants nearby.

After a career in small newspapers, Mr. Longmoore started his website in 2012. Saline was ripe for news. The local weekly newspaper was swallowed by a larger paper, gutted and closed. The Ann Arbor News peeked in only occasionally to cover Saline.

Mr. Longmoore began filling his site.

"YOU KNOW, I LIKE TO DO WHAT I DO ... EVEN IF I'M JUST KIND OF SCRAPING BY. BUT ON ANOTHER LEVEL, I THINK THE SALINE POST IS PROVIDING A SERVICE THE COMMUNITY REALLY NEEDS."

– **Tran Longmoore**, founder of an online news site in Saline, Michigan



DOUG STRUCK

real journalism." He assured her she would.

She did what became a six-part series on the high infant mortality rate in the county. The series explained the problem in Richland County, but she also talked to people in California and Cleveland and she traveled to Massachusetts to look at why other places have low baby death rates. Then the Richland Source held a baby shower in the newsroom for 500 people – many new or expectant mothers – to connect them with pediatricians and community services, and

Maybe not Pulitzer Prize stuff, he admits – “I’m not a great writer. I’m OK.” But he was at every town function, every fire, almost every high school game, and he delivered straight reporting and photos.

“Saline has news,” he says now of his site. “It has somebody watching local government. Has somebody covering their schools and their sports. ... I think there’s still a need for this stuff.”

But it takes its toll. Mr. Longmoore hasn’t had a vacation in a decade. He says some days are “groundhogish,” and he admits the financial demands bore him: “I’ve got to do better” at selling ads, but he would much rather cover a breaking story.

Two years ago, he concluded he needed a job to pay his bills. He and his wife talked about it on a walk with their pet beagle, and then he posted a short “thanks and goodbye” note on the website announcing its closure. The reaction was instant. “I got a bunch of texts that day from people in town who said, ‘Are you serious about this? Well, don’t. Don’t quit just yet.’” Suddenly readers began “joining” the free site for \$5 a month, local advertisers stepped up, and Mr.

Longmoore figured he had enough support to keep going. He’s still doing it.

He is modest about his achievements, though Stephanie Cole, who used to work as an emergency dispatcher, credits his coverage with saving the jobs of Saline’s locally hired dispatchers. Mr. Longmoore has a newsman’s sense of outrage: He gives the city council grief for closed sessions, stays to the end of six-hour government meetings, and reports on every agenda item and even on sniping among its members (“Mrs. McClelland,” he quoted one councilor as saying, “would you stop rolling your eyes at me?”)

“You know, I like to do what I do, so I’m happy about that, even if I’m just kind of scraping by,” he says. He pays dearly for his own health insurance and has no retirement plan. “But on another level, I think the Saline Post is providing a service the community really needs.”



As the losses of local news have deepened, a flurry of philanthropic efforts has



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– Jay Allred, president of the Richland Source



DOUG STRUCK

The Mansfield Jazz Orchestra quartet and vocalist Kelly Knowlton perform for the public in the newsroom of the Richland Source. It is one of many unusual moves by the online news organization to connect with the community.

blossomed. Craigslist, eBay, Google, and Facebook, all of which played leading roles in the decline of local news, have offered up slivers of their multibillion-dollar profits to journalistic causes. Other foundations, such as Knight, have contributed, and a crop of nonprofit journalism sites – at least 196, according to the Institute for Nonprofit News – has sprouted with that help.

But foundation support is typically short-lived; only organizations that find their own financial legs will last. The Wall Street Journal noted “online ads fetch a mere fraction of the price of print ads,” and, with the exception of a few national news sources such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal, readers are reluctant to pay for news through subscriptions or pay walls.

That reality, though, has prompted experiments with new models of supporting news. In Weare, New Hampshire, Michael Sullivan, director of the public library, began printing Weare in the World – a newsletter with local announcements and events, complete with a crossword puzzle – when someone asked what the library could do about the dearth of local news. Several news sites like Madison365 in Wisconsin began with crowdfunding campaigns. In Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a retired district court judge took on the task of saving a fabled local newspaper, the Berkshire Eagle, by marshaling a group of investors to buy the publication. In small Harvard, Massachusetts, 35 miles west of Boston, staffers at the Harvard Press depend on “Dinner at Deadline” donations from local restaurants to feed them on Wednesday production nights.

Thirty miles south of San Francisco, the owners of the Half Moon Bay Review, a local weekly newspaper serving the town of 13,000, announced they were selling the paper in 2017, and began courting the usual liquidation prospects: private equity owners who bleed local papers for revenue while curtailing coverage. Alarmed, five local investors teamed up to buy the newspaper, take over the mortgage on the charming yellow-trimmed news building, and keep its 15 staffers.

They formed a “community benefit corporation,” a for-profit entity pledged to use profits for public good, not just as dividends to owners. A year into the experiment, says editor Clay Lambert, it is working.

“The community is supportive of local ownership and they like a local newspaper,” he says by phone. “Not a day goes by that I don’t hear that. On Saturday, I was invited to throw the first horseshoe out in a horseshoe contest. The fact that they considered the editor of the local newspaper to be a sort

of dignitary is kind of telling.”

What’s clear is no single answer exists to saving local newspapers. In fact, the founder of one of the older online news startups is critical of the sudden interest by the likes of Facebook and Google in saving local news.

“They are trying to mimic the corporate journalism models that failed,” says Paul Bass, who started the New Haven Independent 14 years ago. “What’s really been lost is the local reporter who covers a local beat. The real lesson is to get out there and do reporting again.”

Mr. Bass does that with six full-time staffers who cover the Connecticut city, focusing heavily on crime, courts, cops, and politics. The \$660,000 nonprofit is funded largely by foundations, many of them local. Mr. Bass has added a daily news talk show



DOUG STRUCK

“INSTEAD OF JUST ENDING THE NARRATIVE AT THE PROBLEM, WHICH JUST MAKES PEOPLE FEEL BAD ABOUT THEMSELVES, IT’S MUCH MORE HOPEFUL TO KNOW THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE OUT THERE WORKING ON SOLUTIONS.”

– **Brittany Schock**, an editor of the Richland Source, showing a “baby box” bassinet that the organization gave out at a newsroom event after her series on infant mortality

on low-power FM radio and regular Facebook Live videos. (“It gives us a C-SPAN element.”) He partners with a Spanish language outlet.

“We’re just scrappy, engaged. We live here and we care,” he says. “While we are figuring out the business model, I think we are in the golden age of journalism.”

Few of his contemporaries in local news would embrace that rosy view. But back in Mansfield, Mr. Fernyak thinks newsrooms and owners are figuring out models that will work. “We’ve had a crazy amount of support from our community for this,” he says. “I had people saying, ‘It’s about time.’”

■ *This story was supported by a grant from the Solutions Journalism Network. SJN has also funded Richland Source projects.*