

Local newspapers are facing their own coronavirus crisis

Associated Press
Just when Americans need it most, a U.S. newspaper industry already under stress is facing an unprecedented new challenge.

Readers desperate for information are more reliant than ever on local media as the coronavirus spreads across the U.S. They want to know about cases in their area, where testing centers are, what the economic impact is. Papers say online traffic and subscriptions have risen -- the latter even when they've lowered paywalls for pandemic-related stories.

But newspapers and other publications are under pressure as advertising craters. They are cutting jobs, staff hours and pay, dropping print editions -- and in some cases shutting down entirely.

Circulation and web traffic are up at the Sun Chronicle, a daily in Attleboro, Massachusetts, as it scrambles to cover the coronavirus pandemic. It's "all we do," said Craig Borges, executive editor and general manager. But with many local restaurants, gyms, colleges and other businesses closed, the paper has laid off a handful of sales and mailroom employees and a political reporter. It has about a dozen newsroom employees left.

"Hopefully we can work this out and make it through," Borges said.

Researchers have long worried that the next recession -- which economists say is already upon us -- "could be an extinction-level event for newspapers," said Penelope Abernathy, a University of North Carolina professor who studies the news industry.

More than 2,100 cities and towns have lost a paper in the past 15 years, mostly weeklies, and newsroom employment has shrunk by half since 2004. Many publications struggled as consumers turned to the internet for

news, battered by the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and the rise of giants like Google and Facebook that dominated the market for digital ads.

More recently, big national newspapers like The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal have diversified revenue by adding millions of digital subscribers. Many others, however, remain heavily dependent on advertising.

Twenty global news publishers recently surveyed by the International News Media Association expect a median 23% decline in 2020 ad sales. In the U.S., newspaper ad revenues have dropped 20% to 30% in the last few weeks compared with a year ago, FTI Consulting's Ken Harding wrote in another INMA report.

On Monday, the largest U.S. newspaper chain, Gannett, announced 15-day furloughs and pay cuts for many employees. On Tuesday, another major chain, Lee Enterprises, also announced salary reductions and furloughs. The Tampa Bay Times, owned by the non-profit Poynter Institute, cut five days of its print edition and announced furloughs for non-newsroom staff.

Further down the food chain, many smaller publishers -- particularly local alt-weeklies with a heavy focus on dining, arts and entertainment -- are making even harder decisions.

In rural Nevada, Battle Born Media is scaling back or ceasing publication of six rural weekly newspapers. The Reno News & Review, an alternative weekly, suspended operations and laid off all staffers. C&G Newspapers, which publishes 19 weekly newspapers near Detroit, suspended print publication. Alternative paper Pittsburgh Current went online-only.

Report for America, which

subsidizes journalists in local newsrooms and at The Associated Press, says some of its local-media partners report such deteriorating finances that they may not be able to pay their half of these reporters' salaries.

In suburban St. Louis last week, businesses were calling and cancelling ads as fast as editor Don Corrigan and his staff could write articles to fill the empty space left behind. A local hospital wanted to run a full-page ad offering tips to fight the virus in the three community weeklies he runs -- but wanted it for free. A softhearted Corrigan agreed.

He announced this week that the Webster-Kirkwood Times, South County Time and West End World will stop publishing, although he's keeping the website running. "I don't think people realize how much it costs to put out a newspaper," he said, noting that some readers are belatedly suggesting a GoFundMe page or a paywall for the web site.

A \$2.2 trillion relief act signed Friday by President Donald Trump could provide loans or grants to smaller local publishers who maintain their payrolls. Industry executives are also discussing future government bailout requests that would preserve the independence of news organizations, two newspaper-industry trade groups wrote in a Monday letter to Trump and congressional leaders.

One proposal under discussion would recommend creating a federal fund to pay for government newspaper ads that offer health advice. Another possibility might be to offer people tax credits for subscriptions.

The Shepherd Express newspaper, which took its name from an Allen Ginsberg poem, has for 38 years told residents of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, about up-and-coming musicians, hot res-

taurants, crooked politicians and where to find hemp-related products. Last week, it suspended publication and laid off staff.

Editor, publisher and owner Louis Fortis is keeping the website operating and promises to resume printing at some point, in some form. Yet he's feeling the same uncertainty as millions of other Americans. "I'm very disappointed," he said. "On the other hand, you have to look at the big picture. People are dying."

THE WICKER REPORT
By: United States Senator Roger Wicker



Wicker Details Federal Coronavirus Response *New Measures Will Provide Relief to Families, Businesses, & Hospitals*

Protecting public health during the coronavirus outbreak has required steps that were unimaginable only weeks ago. Businesses have shut their doors, children are staying home from school, churches have stopped gathering in-person, and nearly all public events have been canceled. Millions of Americans are working remotely, and many others are unable to work at all.

These extreme measures have been taken to stop the spread of the virus and save lives and are based on advice from health-care professionals. But they are also taking a toll on our economy and on the many hard-working individuals who now find themselves out of work and their savings threatened through no fault of their own. To save our economy from collapse, Americans need immediate financial support.

This month I have worked with my Senate colleagues to negotiate and pass several pieces of legislation to get urgent relief into the hands of families, workers, and businesses in need. At the same time, we are sending needed resources to those dedicated health-care workers who are on the front lines fighting this virus.

Swift Bipartisan Legislation

In early March, Congress and the President moved swiftly to provide over \$8 billion to help medical workers, expand testing, and develop treatments and vaccines. Mississippi is already putting some of this money to use. As a result of this legislation, our state received a grant of \$5.8 million from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help fight the spread of COVID-19.

Then on March 18, the Senate passed additional support at the President's request, requiring paid leave for workers who have contracted the coronavirus and for parents



OUTDOOR
Truths
BY
GARY MILLER

As everyone in the world knows, we're right in the middle of a pandemic. Many

people are falling sick, and some are dying. What is not killing us virally is killing us economically.

I hurt for small business, churches, and every worker. What comes to mind for me, are the situations I heard about concerning the Great Depression. I pray this time is different. But even though it will be different and even though we will make it through, everything will change. We will change how we do business, church, and our own personal lives. And we will find out what we can really do without.

In the middle of this catastrophe, turkey season opened in my home state. It felt different. It felt good. It felt like something I could run to and enjoy, while making sure I was social distancing. And since we are quarantined, I plan on spending several hours a week matching wit with the toms who have no idea our world is upside down.

What I'm taken back to right now is the simplicity of life as it is lived away from most manmade constructs. I have a gun, a few calls, and then I am in nature. I am wallowing in what is turning out to be the most trusted substance anywhere around. Dirt. Yes, dirt. No viruses. No unhealthy bacteria. Just dirt. What you and I are made of.

For some reason, I trust most things untouched by human hands. I had rather be bitten by a spider in the wild than in an abandoned old house. I had rather drop my bologna sandwich in a pile of leaves and still eat it, than drop it on blacktop, knowing I'll have to throw it away. I may be naïve, and I know I can't always trust these standards, but this morning, I can't imagine the Coronavirus being closer to me than about 15 miles. I run to the woods. Not only do I find comfort in nature, but I also find the clutter between her and her Creator is minimal.

The distance between dirt and Deity is only a starry sky interrupted on occasion by a welcomed gobble. I hope you have a place like this.

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essary to help our nation weather this crisis. However, no amount of federal action can solve this problem alone. We all need to do our part by following CDC guidance at <http://cdc.gov>.



In this March 30, 2020, file photo, a journalist records a press briefing following the arrival of the USNS Comfort, a naval hospital ship with a 1,000 bed-capacity at Pier 90 in New York. People desperate for information are more reliant than ever on local media as the coronavirus spreads across the U.S. But newspapers, magazines and digital publishers are feeling the pressure as advertising craters. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens, File)