

As newspapers decline, New Jerseyans wonder who will keep watch



Report by New Jersey Policy Perspective could inspire action

Will the time come when there are no major newspapers or public affairs programs devoted to New Jersey news?

New Jersey faces a growing crisis in coverage of news and public affairs, according to a report released by Tuesday New Jersey Policy Perspective, a Trenton-based think tank.

The report, "Less News is Bad News: The Media Crisis and New Jersey's News Deficit," shows the need for new revenue sources to fund news production or new ideas for disseminating information so media resources can better help check corruption in the state.

"We've been hearing stories of how news coverage in the state is declining," said Ingrid Reed of the Eagleton Institute of Politics. "With this new study, we have the facts that can marshal support for new ways to address the problem."

The report states that due in part to peculiarities of its geography and economic development, New Jersey has faced a news deficit for many years. The state developed in the shadow of the two great cities across its borders, New York and Philadelphia, and failed to develop a major urban center of its own. Today, New Jersey's largest city, Newark, is home to just 3.2 percent of the state's population, and rather than serving as an independent media center, Newark

falls within the larger New York media market.

Instead of watching local newscasts devoted to New Jersey issues, people in the northern part of the state tend to watch TV news centered on New York City, while people in the south watch stations based in Philadelphia. Many New Jersey residents also listen to out-of-state radio stations and read out-of-state newspapers, the report states. As a result, they know less about their state than people elsewhere in the country know about theirs. Lower levels of knowledge about politics have distorted campaigns and elections in the state and may be a factor in the endemic problem of political corruption.

Throughout the United States newspaper readership is down sharply, especially among 18-to-34 year-olds, and New Jersey has followed that trend, the report states.

The report notes that insufficient television coverage may be one reason New Jerseyans have been especially dependent on newspapers for news about state politics and government, and they may be affected more than residents in other states by declining circulation and cutbacks in newspaper journalism.

The Internet revolution has drawn advertising away from newspapers, and a general glut of advertising space online has made it impossible for newspapers to keep up their advertising rates and generate the revenue that they expected from online traffic, the report states. These problems, which were simmering under the surface when the economy was strong, have boiled to the surface in the recession. Measures to increase efficiency in production and distribution have proven insufficient, and most papers have been forced to cut staff in the newsroom, sometimes by more than 50 percent. That is exactly what has been happening in New Jersey.

Newspapers also employ other strategies to reduce costs, including consolidation and, as in the case of The Star-Ledger of Newark, replacing long-term salaried reporters with entry-level staff or short-term interns who are paid little or nothing for their work, the report states.

"New Jersey has long suffered from inadequate news coverage because of the domination of New York and Philadelphia news media that don't give much priority to this state, said Paul Starr, Princeton University professor and co-founder of The American Prospect. "Now, with the decline of newspapers in New Jersey, the state's chronic news deficit threatens to become an acute problem. New Jersey needs new ways to finance journalism."

So where can the money come from? The report lays out alternate sources of revenue, including:

Subscription and pay-per-content models that pass the cost directly to the consumer

Nonprofit models such as grants or governmental aid

While noting the difficulties involved with each model, the report also emphasizes that the cost of news can be reduced by only so much before the quality of journalism begins to deteriorate. The report concludes that the end of the recession may arrest the fall of newspaper advertising and circulation revenue, but it seems unlikely that they will recover to the levels of earlier in this decade. New Jersey's experience shows there is no substitute for a strong and vigilant media. Those who want effective and honest government, regardless of party, should seek to remedy New Jersey's chronic news deficit and to respond to the decline of journalistic resources.

— TOM HESTER SR., NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM