

American journalism is changing ... and New Jersey news is stirring things up



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BY RICHARD A. LEE

COMMENTARY



A little over 35 years ago, in an article about a young artist's performance as the opening act at a small New England theater, Jon Landau of *The Real Paper* declared, "I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen."

Landau's prophetic words about New Jersey's Bruce Springsteen also come to mind on a much different topic — journalism. Between the rise of the internet and the downturn in the economy, the industry has been in a state of flux, searching for new models and platforms to meet the demands of today's 24/7 news cycle while generating enough revenue to survive financially.

In all likelihood, there is no single, perfect model that will surface to meet the needs of the media and the public in the 21st Century. Instead, news and information will be delivered and digested through a variety of platforms that will include traditional news outlets, social networks, and entities and organizations not previously considered to have a role in the field of journalism.

And to paraphrase Jon Landau, if you want to see the future of American journalism, you may want to take a look at New Jersey today. Here is why:

One of the consequences of being the most densely populated state in the nation is that public policy issues often emerge here before they impact the rest of the country. Likewise, we are among the first to react and respond to them. Think back to the mid-1980s when New Jersey began running out of landfill space for our garbage while states in the Midwest and elsewhere still had plenty of room. We responded with mandatory recycling - long before similar initiatives took place in other parts of the country.

When it comes to the news industry, there is even more reason to look at New Jersey to get a glimpse of the future. The downturn in the economy and the rise of the internet has hit the print media particularly hard, especially when one compares the expenses involved in printing and distributing a newspaper with the cost of posting news and information online. Because we are a state without a major television station, New Jerseyans have come to rely on newspapers for news about the Garden State. We are not the only state to see cutbacks and layoffs in its newspapers, but because of the unique role the print media plays in New Jersey, we could very well be the first state to experience the broader public policy impact of these developments.

The first component of this change is the manner in which New Jerseyans obtain news about the Garden State. What has evolved here over the past few years are a wide variety of platforms in many different shapes and sizes which cumulatively disseminate the information citizens need. Whether the impact of this development has been positive or negative is a separate issue that can be argued back and forth. What is clear, however, is the fact that the media landscape in New Jersey has changed substantially.

Although traditional news entities, such as newspapers, continue to play a role, they are much different than they were five, ten or fifteen years ago. Today, newspapers also exist as online entities which no longer merely replicate their print versions. The online versions are updated regularly and feature audio, video and interactive elements. Radio and television — despite the dominance of the New York and Philadelphia markets — also remain a part of the state's media landscape. Talk radio, most notably NJ101.5, reaches and influences large numbers of New Jersey listeners.

But beyond these traditional entities, New Jerseyans are finding news in many other places.

- Topic-specific websites provide news and information on subjects of particular interest to different audiences. For example, political junkies who need to keep tabs on breaking news and analysis are likely to visit sites such as PolitickerNJ and In The Lobby, and to subscribe to electronic newsletters such as Politifax. Similar topic-specific sites and newsletters cater to sports fans, educators, environmentalists and more.
- Online-only news sites are becoming increasingly popular. NewJerseyNewsroom.com, an online site started about a year ago by a group of former Star-Ledger reporters, has attracted as many as 78,000 unique visitors in a week - a figure about equal to the circulation of a midsize daily newspaper. Hyperlocal news sites, such as The Alternative Press, also are attracting large numbers of readers by offering news on community activities, civic affairs and scholastic sports.
- As is occurring nationwide, social networks are being used by politicians, businesses and all types of New Jersey organizations to bypass traditional media outlets and bring their messages directly to the public. By their very nature, Facebook and Twitter also

- have become vehicles for members to share, spread and even break news stories about developments in the Garden State and beyond.
- New Jersey also is home to a large number of public policy organizations and academic institutions, each of which provides citizens with news and information in its own unique manner, whether it be the virtual debates sponsored by the Hall Institute, the public opinion polls conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute, or the seminars and lectures presented by the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Moreover, these entities are working collaboratively to pool their resources and produce valuable information for New Jerseyans. For example, NJBIZ, the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, and the Kaufman Zita Group recently launched Capitol Insights, a monthly survey of about 100 experts who offer their thoughts about news and developments in the Garden State. And last year a coalition of groups led by Leadership New Jersey not only sponsored the state's first Lieutenant Governor debate, but also presented a daylong forum on the new office.

Put all of these entities and activities together — the traditional news sources, the websites, the social networks, and the think tanks — and you will see that this is how New Jerseyans get their news today. It is not a perfect system, and it may or may not be better than what we had five, ten or fifteen years ago. That, as I said earlier, is a topic for a separate debate.

As for the future of American journalism, perhaps, it is too soon or too presumptuous to make a declaration as bold as Landau's prediction about Bruce Springsteen and rock and roll. On the other hand, New Jersey clearly has the potential to ignite change far beyond its borders, and as we have learned from Bruce: "You can't start a fire without a spark."

***Richard A. Lee** is Communications Director of the Hall Institute of Public Policy — New Jersey. A former journalist and Deputy Communications Director for the New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey, he also teaches courses in media and government at Rutgers University, where he is completing work on a Ph.D. in media studies.*

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