

grassroots editor



*A journal
for newspeople*

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**Journalism
in Rural America**

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Journalism in Rural America

From April 19-21, about 70 news people, foundation officials, academics and others gathered at the largest restored Shaker community in the United States to talk about rural newspapers.

It was the National Summit on Journalism in Rural America, put together by Al Cross of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky. The site was the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, 3,000 acres of National Historic Landmark and Living History Museum in the rolling Bluegrass horse country near Harrodsburg, about 20 miles southwest of Lexington.

The conference was sponsored by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation with additional support from the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation and the Farm Foundation.

Topics ranged from group ownership to alternative ownership styles such as Montana's Corporation for Public Community Newspapers to Tupelo's foundation-owned newspaper. Studies on training backgrounds and needs at rural newspapers were presented as well as a discussion on academic centers for rural and community journalism.

A highlight of the conference was the presentation of the Tom and Pat Gish Award for outstanding community journalism to the Ezzell family of the *Canadian (Texas) Record*. Laurie Ezzell Brown is an ISWNE member and accepted the award on behalf of the Ezzells.

ISWNE member Ray Laakaniemi was one of the presenters and reported on the events for *Grassroots Editor*, with the assistance of Cross and the IRJCI.

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Alternate forms of ownership: *The Corporation for Public Community Newspapers*

By Ray Laakaniemi

John Q. Murray is not your typical weekly publisher. His award-winning paper is the *Clark Fork Chronicle* in western Montana, serving several small communities west of Missoula. The previous owner, like many rural publishers, had difficulty meeting expenses, to the point where he once asked a reader to pay for a correction. Murray started in newspapers in Wrangell, Alaska, then wrote seven books about Microsoft software. When the paper in Montana moved out of the county due to economic problems, he founded his paper as a non-profit, member-based organization.

This is his description of how the Corporation for Public Community Newspapers works in a less-than-thriving economic community.

Rural community newspapers have long been achieving the goals of public journalism. We create a new model for journalism — a public-private hybrid — to help rural community newspapers thrive in a time of rapid demographic and economic change.

Introducing The Corporation for Public Community Newspapers: “The business model for rural newspapers no longer works.

The *Clark Fork Chronicle*, circulation 2,700, is just starting its fourth year. We are a typical community weekly covering Montana’s State House District 14. Our readership area follows the Clark Fork River, winding through two counties, four school districts, four rural fire districts, two U.S. Forest Service ranger districts, two incorporated towns, nine zip codes, and 17 voting precincts.

Jock Lauterer, author of the textbook *Community Journalism*, would recognize us as relentlessly local, focused on becoming the local experts on the public life of our area. Our typical front page (you can see them all at our web site <http://www.clark-forkchronicle.com>) has our top local hard news story, coverage of a local public meeting or event, a local feature story and a feature photo of a local event — often a local child, a 50th wedding anniversary. Yep, we’re relentlessly local.

We live here, our families live here — my wife’s grandma just turned 95 — and we care.

There’s no real secret to what we do. We attend and report on as many local public meetings as we can, and attend state and federal meetings when they are of interest to our readers. Schools are the heart of our communities, so we write as much as we can and encourage student contributions. We write about new and expanding local businesses, local residents and their achievements and milestones, local crimes and court cases, and try to keep people informed about all the local private organizations: the anti-drug use groups, the chamber of commerce, the senior citizens. We started a church page to recap the pastors’ messages. Our readership area includes a lot of public land so we also follow forest management, wildfires, and growth issues.

You wouldn’t think any of this would be worth discussing. But given that there are three other newspapers in the same readership area, it says a lot about the state of rural journalism that the *Clark Fork Chronicle* has grown steadily over its first four years, and has displaced the other community weekly, the *Mineral Independent*, as the paper of record in Mineral County.

Why have we succeeded? Why was this particular niche — providing local news — available for us to fill, especially when there was an existing long-established weekly already in the area?

Because the business model for rural newspapers no longer works.

We are in the midst of a vast set of interconnected demographic and economic changes. We’ve seen our traditional natural resource industries decline and families move away in search of work. That has cut into our base of traditional advertisers — the local mom-and-pop stores. With folks now driving 50-100 miles to shop in the big box stores, many of our rural areas are becoming outlying bedroom communities of the regional economic centers, with little local commerce of their own.

At the same time, many baby-boomers are retiring to the “third coast” — the Rocky Mountain states and especially western Montana — to enjoy recreation and wildlife on the vast neighboring public lands. Some are bringing their own money and businesses with them, but many of those businesses, enabled by the Internet and low-cost com-

munications, operate in markets elsewhere in the country and the world. They don’t need to advertise in their local community newspaper.

If the pure commercial model worked, all small-town weeklies would be thriving. But not many are, especially those with distant ownership. If you study rural newspapers owned by out-of-town interests in low-income areas, you find advertisements from other towns, other counties, other states. The reporters’ names in the staff boxes change every six to eight months as the companies reduce salaries to the point where young journalism grads can’t afford both food and gas.

Other changes are more subtle but can be summed up in four words: Fewer stories, bigger pictures. Over time, the editorial choices started to tilt toward stories and photos that would move papers off the drugstore racks: wrecks, crime, conflict. With its editor living in another county, basically a stranger to the community, the newspaper slowly turned into a tabloid.

The danger of operating under an old business model in a new economy is that many of our rural newspapers could enter what University of North Carolina journalism professor Philip Meyer calls the “death spiral”: As the managers of these regional chains cut costs by reducing the local news staff, the resulting drop in newspaper quality reduces circulation, which leads to more cost-cutting, which leads to lower circulation, more cost-cutting, and so on.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky points out that the metropolitan dailies are also failing their outlying rural areas. Subject to the same cost-cutting measures, they are pulling their reporters back to focus on their own metropolitan areas, and rural issues are ignored.

At first, we were surprised that there was such little overlap in the stories covered by the *Clark Fork Chronicle*, the *Mineral Independent*, and the metropolitan daily. Sadly, after further reflection, it was not surprising at all. We were the only newspaper willing to invest in the public life of the community by sending reporters to these public meetings. By simply being there, we were able to report on the news breaking in those

meetings, while also hearing about leads on other important stories. In our first three years, we wrote more than 1.7 million words in more than 3,000 stories that otherwise wouldn't have been told.

It is clear that the pure commercial model is failing in our rural areas, and that we need to come up with a new model. Because our approach has been consistent with the goals of what is known as "public journalism" or "civic journalism," we looked to that movement for the basic framework.

Public journalism is a grassroots reform movement that started among larger metropolitan newspapers in the early 90s. In brief, the champions of civic journalism believe that the newspaper plays a critical role in our constitutional democracy, and that by thinking of ourselves as full-time citizens and experts on public life, journalists can help all citizens better participate in our public decision-making.

Newspapers implemented public journalism in a wide variety of projects, most of them dedicated to public listening that let the public set the agenda for the newspaper's coverage of local issues. These listening projects included discussions over pizza, forums, polls, questionnaires, focus groups, clip-out surveys, interview projects, and formal panels. However, few if any of these projects advanced beyond the pilot project stage to become institutionalized in the organizational structure of the newspaper.

One critique written in 1999 by Michael Schudson, a sociology professor at the University of California at San Diego, points out that public journalism does not represent a fundamentally new model of journalism. Professional journalists still act as trustees on behalf of the public and continue to exercise their professional judgment as to what constitutes news. Schudson suggested that other potential alternatives to the "trustee model" do exist: an ombudsman, media critics and media reporters, local or national news councils, and even, he suggests, "publicly-owned news institutions such as the Public Broadcasting Service."

And so, to formally align ourselves with the goals of the public journalism movement, to establish ongoing formal methods of obtaining feedback from our communities during a time of rapid growth, and to provide ways for our new residents and business owners to support their local community newspapers as the pure commercial model fails our rural areas, we created the Corporation for Public Community Newspapers.

PCPN is an independent non-profit organization with a dues-paying membership. Members attend regular meetings to:

(1) review the progress of the local community newspaper towards its agreed-upon goals, (2) identify special reporting projects that the newspaper should undertake, and (3) vote to provide funding for specific special projects. The organization has three standing committees: the review committee, the special projects committee, and an outreach committee that focuses on the group's membership and funding needs.

In implementing the non-profit, the inspiration came from a hybrid automobile. Just as my Honda Civic hybrid uses gas and electric motors to improve overall performance, we engineered a hybrid public-private organization to take advantage of the strengths and best features of the for-profit and non-profit.

The non-profit does not seek to launch its own newspapers that will compete with existing locally-owned newspapers. Instead, it contracts with the existing papers to guarantee free space for community organizations and set minimum target levels for regular coverage of community events. The supplemental funding provided by the non-profit means the newspaper can increase its news hole to provide that coverage, regardless of the amount of advertising sold that week.

The non-profit is its own distinct organization, completely separate from the for-profit newspaper, but the two enter into a binding contract that gives the non-profit full budget authority over the special projects. The members of the non-profit vote on the special projects and provide the funding.

The newspaper is free to turn down the project and the funding. In that case, the non-profit can seek to contract with freelance writers or other citizen journalists to produce the special projects. Conversely, the newspaper can choose to implement all special projects recommended by the non-profit, even if they are not fully funded.

At the for-profit newspaper, journalists still exercise their professional judgment as to what constitutes news and are ultimately responsible for every word published. The professional journalists have some extra work. They must prepare a report for the annual or other regular performance review, and must pursue the requested special projects.

The end result is that the public and the community newspaper, working in collaboration, have a formal ongoing mechanism for setting the news agenda for the community.

The non-profit also acts as a focal point for citizen journalism, providing tools and training to community members so that they can contribute stories. Beyond adopting the

Rural News Network curriculum, we hope to develop Internet-based wizards to help authors write 5-W ledes and create first drafts using the traditional inverted-pyramid structure. Another effort involves analyzing news stories to create a taxonomy of story types and templates for each of these major story types. The non-profit would serve as an open source clearinghouse for all projects that can help rural newspapers, such as open source web sites and add-ons that allow online readers to rate story quality.

We are seeing a real hunger for information about our local communities. It has been very rewarding to be a part of the launch of the *Chronicle* where we regularly hear people tell us that they read every issue word-for-word, cover-to-cover. I believe the pendulum is starting to swing back in the direction of high-quality local community newspapers, and that we are at the beginning of a long period of renewal of American rural journalism. I hope that the Corporation for Public Community Newspapers will play a role in contributing to that movement.

For more information about the non-profit Corporation for Public Community Newspapers, visit <http://www.publicnewspapers.org>.

Comments during discussion at Shaker Village

Our audience is a little different from many. We have a lot of trophy homes, a lot of people who have come from elsewhere because of the scenery and the lifestyle.

They tell us they read two papers — the *Clark Fork Chronicle* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

People pay \$50 a year to be a member of the Corporation for Public Community Newspapers. For this they have voting power at the meetings and some budget authority. We sit down with the year's goals, go over the coverage, and ask whether we have met those goals.

We are concerned about what the readers are concerned about. The group identifies projects and issues they are concerned about.

The paper is very well accepted. We get numerous comments from people who read the paper cover to cover, every word. We are now the paper of record for legal ads, and in the 2007 Montana Newspaper Association contest we won awards for excellence in 14 different categories. In 2004 the paper won 11 awards, and in 2005, 10 awards. It has won community service awards in each of the last three years.

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Publisher's vision 35 years ago still brings economic growth

By Ray Laakaniemi

This is the story of a publisher with a vision beyond his city limits of Tupelo, Miss., and 50 years ahead of his time who is still changing lives in a 16-county area.

His was a dirt-poor, rural area once considered one of the most underdeveloped and undereducated regions of America, which in March received word a new \$1.3 billion Toyota plant employing 2,000 people will be built there.

This is the story of George McLean, who died in 1983, but willed his newspaper to a foundation dedicated to the improvement of northeast Mississippi. And his newspaper worked hand-in-hand with the foundation-inspired economic development committee to bring the Toyota plant to a site 10 miles out of town.

In March of this year, Toyota announced it would build a plant to make Highlanders in Blue Springs, Miss., about 11 miles from Tupelo in the northeast corner of the state. The plant will initially employ 2,000 employees to turn out 150,000 or so Highlanders starting in 2010. One Mississippi official hinted that Toyota has already told the state that it has plans to employ 4,000 people, which implies a doubling of the plant.

Tupelo is served by the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, which like any newspaper, had an obvious interest in a story of this magnitude. The irony is that the *Journal* is owned by the nonprofit CREATE Foundation formed by McLean "to be a catalyst for positive change in Northeast Mississippi by committing its resources to projects that will improve the quality of life for all citizens of Northeast Mississippi and by helping individuals and groups of providing financial support to meaningful projects."

CREATE is an acronym for Christian Research, Education, Action and Technical

Enterprise.

And so the CREATE Foundation and its economic development branches were heavily involved in seeking the Toyota plant, and the newspaper was after the story. But Toyota is known for being very sensitive about premature publicity, to the point where it will back out of contracts if premature publicity gets out.

So what did the paper do? The *Journal* sat on the story.

Joe Rutherford, who has been with the paper for 35 years, said there was absolutely no interference from the foundation that owns the paper. "We reported when we felt it was necessary, but we felt the prize (getting the plant) was more important than releasing the story prematurely.

"If it was in the *Wall Street Journal* that morning, we would report it because it is no longer a secret. We will hold up on economic development news for good reasons, but not on murders or embezzlements. But if we get compelling evidence to quell a story, we will do it."

The story of the foundation is the story of a rebuilt Tupelo, a city devastated before World War II by a tornado that killed 230 people — and then came WWII.

The central man in the rebirth was McLean, whose vision was a cooperative multi-county effort that would pull northeast Mississippi up by its bootstraps. His concept of regional cooperation was years ahead of its time, and now is being recognized as the wave of the future by economic development gurus.

Rutherford recalls how one day a business associate advised McLean how much his newspaper was worth, and McLean vowed to leave the paper to a foundation (ala the *St. Petersburg Times*) so that the community would benefit from the paper and it would not become part of an out-of-town or out-of-state group which would take the profits elsewhere.

"There were a thousand questions" in drawing up the agreement, but no real problems in implementing it, Rutherford said.

The foundation was established in 1972 and by 2006 had \$47 million in assets from the newspaper and other contributions. In 2005 alone it received three gifts totaling \$12.9 million.

Through the inspiration of McLean and the work of the CREATE, decades of economic and community development have transformed the Tupelo corner of the state from the poorest county in the nation's poorest state to the second most affluent, according to *Sojourner Magazine*.

Along the way, Tupelo and the 16 counties of northeast Mississippi worked through racial tensions without violence and developed an enlightened self-interest that is the marvel of community development experts nationwide. In fact, the paper itself reported that a key reason Toyota chose northeast Mississippi was "not because of money but because of the area's people."

"On my visits to north Mississippi, I have talked with area companies and observed their work force," said Toyota executive vice president Ray Tanguay. "What I observed were people who were educated, ethical and friendly with a strong work ethic — a perfect match for the Toyota way."

All stock in the *Daily Journal* is owned by the foundation that invests all dividends into projects for the development of area families and communities. And *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* recently reported that Lee County ranked 43rd of 3,091 counties in the nation in charitable giving.

And that was all before Toyota announced it was coming to town.

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The perspective of group editorial leaders

By **Ray Laakaniemi**

The literature of journalism is rife with material declaring the negative effects of group ownership of small newspapers. Three men in charge of the editorial content of their group papers had their “day in court” at the National Summit. This is a report on what they said.

The three, in order of their presentations, were Benjy Hamm, executive editor of Landmark Newspapers, Inc.; Bill Ketter, vice president for news, Community Newspaper Holdings Inc., based in Andover, Mass.; and Frank Denton, vice president of news for Morris Communications of Augusta, Ga.

Benjy Hamm’s Landmark Newspapers owns 57 papers in 13 states, all with local autonomy. “There is no central control, no one-policy-for-everyone, he said. All of the papers have their own editorial approaches. The central office hires the editors and lets them decide their policies and coverage.

The corporate office does provide guidelines and requires each paper to have at least one public service project each year. Many of the papers do more.

Corporate also provides for one two-day editorial meeting each year and quarterly regional meetings. It also maintains a training library for use by individual papers as needed. It also helps identify regional experts within the group on such things as design and photo-related programs, and pro-

notes from within. Eight of the last 10 general manager hires have come from within the group.

It also provides “rovers,” to fill in newsroom roles if a paper is short on staff temporarily, and provides extra help for major editorial projects whenever possible. Legal resources are shared, and attorneys present each year at the annual editorial meetings.

Bill Ketter has been at work at Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. since early this year. His company is 10 years old and is owned by the public retirement system of Alabama, currently numbering 93 dailies and 40 weeklies in 22 states.

The company provides regional training programs in several geographic areas, focusing on basics such as writing, use of numbers, computer-assisted reporting, and web skills. The company is heavily into web sites, and has an “absolute” focus on local. Ketter serves as a resource to papers as needed.

The group is also focusing on in-depth reporting, such as public service, in-depth projects of many types, with reporters released four to seven weeks to develop projects.

One of the in-depth projects, for example, done by the group as a whole last year was on addictive gambling. By pooling resources and working with several individuals from the group, the papers studied the 48 of 50 states that now have gambling (Utah and Hawaii do not). It found the state

and federal governments had nothing to help addictive gamblers, nor did the Bureau of Indian Affairs, even though many tribes have casinos. Their study showed one half of 1 percent of the money that went to the state sin casino payments went to help addictive gamblers.

Other major projects done by the group together include grandparents raising children, the wake of war, the effect of the interstate system on culture and habits of the country, and the Mississippi River as the No. 1 commercial transit way in the United States.

Frank Denton has been vice president of news for the Morris Communications Group for two years. It has 27 dailies and a dozen weeklies in 14 states.

His role has been to represent the news side in corporate meetings, to bring up the point of view of editorial in the total picture of news, advertising, circulation, web and other factors. Some of his jobs include “pounding the table at meetings with the corporate office,” overseeing the cooperative Morris News Service, heading some project reporting, doing a monthly newsletter highlighting achievements and activities in the news division, consulting and troubleshooting, and helping publishers hire editors.

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Taking your brand awareness to new levels

By Gary Sosniecki

My wife and I aren't in the newspaper business anymore. We're in the content business.

And we market that content through two products, our 131-year-old weekly newspaper, *The Vandalia Leader*, and our 15-month-old Web site, www.vandalialeader.com. Each complements the other, each supplements the other, each promotes the other.

And each makes a profit.

Yes, you read that right: Each makes a profit.

Our Web site generates \$950 to \$1,000 a month, not bad for a mom-and-pop newspaper business — I mean content business — in a farm town of fewer than 3,000. Our online expenses are \$200 a month to our Web vendor and a few hours of my time a week posting updates.

You do the math. It's like having another grocery insert in our paper.

PubAux's Stan Schwartz asked me to write about how we use our online edition to promote our print edition. But the road goes both ways. We market our Web site on every page of our newspaper. And we market our newspaper throughout our Web site.

The goal is the same: increasing readership of our content. More circulation for our newspaper, more visitors for our Web site, more visibility for the advertisers of both. So far, it's working. This year — its first full year — our Web site has averaged 461 visitors a day. We've had as many as 894 visitors in a single day.

A lot of people have seen our content, far more than would have seen it if we only published the newspaper. Credit those visits to fresh content throughout the week — obits, prep sports results, new pictures, breaking news — and consistent marketing of the Web site in our newspaper.

Most of that marketing is simple but effective. Our online address — www.vandalialeader.com — appears in our flag, between the date and the price. Below the fold on Page 1, in the column 1 rail, we publish the results of the prior week's online poll, along with the question for the new poll. "Vote at www.vandalialeader.com" is always the last sentence of the story. In the weather report at the bottom of the rail, we include this reminder: "See the current Vandalia weather and forecast 24 hours a day at www.vandalialeader.com." The folio line atop every inside page includes www.vandalialeader.com along with the newspaper name, date and page number.

The masthead on the commentary page includes our e-mail address and Web site.

I promote the Web site in my personal column every couple of months. Our site is still new, so every six months is a good time to give an update. A few weeks ago I wrote a column announcing our upcoming e-Edition. In 2004, just before our site went live, I wrote updates almost every week. On the "records" page, we run a filler ad almost every week reminding readers that new obits appear online between print edition.

Most of our filler ads throughout the paper — 1x1s, 2x1s, 1x2s — promote the Web site. "We make Vandalia click — www.vandalialeader.com — is one of my favorites; I borrowed the slogan from a Kansas daily. I also like "www.vandalialeader.com — Vandalia's daily newspaper." Filler ads also remind readers to check the Web site for up-to-date weather and for prep sports scores.

The centerpiece of our Web marketing in the newspaper is a three-column house ad that runs in the paper every week. "They make Vandalia click" is the headline, followed by "Look for these advertisers 24 hours a day on www.vandalialeader.com."

The ad includes a full-size reproduction of the banner or button ad of every online advertiser, along with the URLs of their own Web sites. With 24 online advertisers, the house ad currently runs 12 3/4 inches deep. This is value-added for the advertisers — it's part of the online ad packages we sell — and it's good marketing for them and for us.

Now let's look at how our Web site promotes the newspaper. The first time you click on www.vandalialeader.com, you'll see a popup that invites you to subscribe to the newspaper. A subscription form is at the bottom. The popup is timed to appear on your screen every fifth day. Click on the "subscribe" button on the menu bar of any page and you'll also see subscription rates and a form to fill out.

Click on the "about us" button and you'll learn our office hours, deadlines, where you can buy our newspaper (including 24-hour locations), rules for letters to the editor, how to submit births, engagements and weddings, how to place advertising, and, oh yes, how to subscribe to the paper. Our e-mail address is hotlinked throughout.

On the online classified page, you can click on a form to place classified ads, which appear in print and online.

When we post news or sports updates between issues of the print edition, we include

a line that says, "For a full report, see Wednesday's *Leader*."

We don't have a lot of money for marketing outside our own products, but when we do, we make sure both the newspaper and the Web site are mentioned. From yellow pages to school yearbooks, we're not just *The Vandalia Leader* anymore; we're also www.vandalialeader.com. We bought half a billboard this year on the highway to the school; the billboard ad (in the same colors as our news racks) promotes both the newspaper and the Web site. We trade-out some radio advertising during basketball season; the commercials promote both the newspaper and the Web site.

Every other month, we include a newsletter for advertisers in their bills. The "Adviser" announces upcoming ad promotions. It also announces developments for our Web site.

Web advertisers receive a personalized "online traffic report" every month giving statistics for their banner and button ads specifically and the Web site in general.

By the time you read this, our e-Edition will have gone live. The e-Edition will be a password-protected area of our Web site that contains PDFs of every page of our print edition, complete with hotlinks to print advertisers' Web sites. Print subscribers can access the complete print edition online by using an ID number and password from their mailing label. No more waiting for papers lost in the mail! In the coming weeks, we'll market the heck out of this new feature, the marriage of our two products.

None of the above examples is rocket science. A lot of big companies do the same things with more sophistication and pizzazz.

But even small mom-and-pop operations like ours — we're the only full-time employees — can take their brand awareness to new levels by using their newspaper to promote their Web site and their Web site to promote their newspaper. It's just common sense to use all your resources to promote your products.

Because if you don't do it, nobody else will.

Gary Sosniecki and wife, Helen, own The Vandalia (Mo.) Leader. They have worked for newspapers in Tennessee, Illinois and Kansas and previously owned weekly newspapers in Humansville and Seymour, Mo. They also previously published The Lebanon (Mo.) Daily Record for 1998 NNA President Dalton Wright. Gary can be contacted at vandalialeader@vandaliamo.net.

Independent publishing today:

Thriving in a world of box stores and chain papers

By John M. Wylie II

Editor's note: John M. Wylie II was scheduled to present this paper at the National Summit on Journalism in Rural America, but could not attend.

The stories of gloom and doom about our big-city brethren need not apply to our world. There's a simple reason: To our readers, we our not the newspaper, we are THEIR newspaper.

Down the block at Rogers Mini Stop, we sell more than a hundred papers every week. If our press run is late we get frantic calls from the Rogers family. They have a store full of irate customers who want THEIR papers NOW.

Three daily boxes are outside. If those papers are late people shrug, go inside, get a pop or a six-pack and move on.

We all know the traditional reasons — the little stories that never would be considered “news” anyplace else. Our readers really care about those things.

But bean counters who think that's all they care about don't have a clue. As you can see, we don't run from complex economic stories or tough investigations — we showcase them. And that's why nobody will ever run the *Oologah Lake Leader* out of Northwest Rogers County.

We know what interests our readers, what battles they want to fight, what wrongs they want to right, what problems they want to fix and what accomplishments they want to trumpet. And we do everything possible to exceed their expectations.

Some publishers believe that the local newspaper should carry only good news and never offend anyone. We say a good local newspaper should carry all the news, and provide quality coverage of the good, the bad and everything in between.

Our readers know that if they buy our paper and read our website, they will be insiders about everything important happening in the one-third of Oklahoma's fastest growing county which is our primary market.

When we fail, they tell us.

Our marketing director cringed when we began investigating Commissioner Mike

Helm, the subject of the special section you have in front of you. He is, after all, a Republican in an increasingly Republican county. Many of his supporters are our advertisers. Many of them barely tolerate our “ungodly” Democratic political beliefs.

But we didn't start investigating Mike Helm because of his politics. We began investigating him because he wasn't doing his job.

When we started publishing our findings, even his core supporters were shocked. We have lost no advertisers. We have not lost any subscriptions. Street sales have skyrocketed. Many of those first-time readers have become subscribers.

Advertising? We just sold a \$5,000 home tour tab, a new project that stretched our resources to the limit. We hoped for perhaps \$3,000 and 16 pages. We got \$5,000 and 24 pages. Several of those were purchased by developers with close ties to Helm. They didn't care about that. They knew that selling land and homes in new developments meant advertising in our pages. We gained first time advertisers we can convert to regulars.

The other project you have in your hands involves perhaps the most significant economic development opportunity Oklahoma has seen in decades — \$600 million, \$12 million in annual operating budget, a decades-long guarantee that our biggest employer will continue to grow and prosper. More important, the AEP commercial demonstration project at Northeastern Station is focusing worldwide attention on Oologah, Oklahoma. Coupled with the legacy of Will Rogers, this project has put us in the international spotlight.

AEP chose Oologah in part because corporate executives can bring distinguished guests from around the world to our community knowing they will not be embarrassed.

Although we are part of exurban Tulsa, our community has its own identity. Our people care intensely about where they live.

The newspaper is celebrating its silver anniversary, and Oologah is now Oklahoma's fastest growing small city in Oklahoma's fastest growing county. It is no accident.

When we bought the newspaper in 1984, Oologah still had rotary dial phones and a local calling area of just three square miles. Most kids calling home to get picked up from

football practice had to call long distance.

Working together, we changed that. Since we couldn't fix Oologah's problem in isolation, we forced the Oklahoma Corporation Commission to create the largest wide-area toll-free calling district in the state around Tulsa. Oologah now has the state's best phone service and is part of a dialing area that stretches 70 miles from north to south and east to west.

When high speed internet came along, we didn't have it. We worked with AT&T and fought off Cox Cable in front of the OCC. And we were the first small town in Oklahoma to have full DSL.

When we arrived, Oologah was on a death-trap two-lane highway, unimproved since before World War Two. The killer bridges (we named them and it stuck) were so narrow that trucks passing each other in opposite directions usually lost their outside mirrors.

Today, US 169 is a four-lane interstate standard superhighway. It has redirected the interstate commerce from Kansas City to Tulsa and Dallas from toll roads to our roads, and made jobs in Tulsa an easily accessible 25-minute drive.

When we arrived, downtown was one building which housed a combination barber shop and small engine repair. When a local resident started restoration efforts, we signed up and moved downtown.

Of course, once we got there, it wasn't “downtown.” We'd learned from creating the killer bridges. It was, of course, “Historic Downtown Oologah.” We're now three blocks of 100 percent commercially occupied properties, a jewel for locals and tourists alike instead of the eyesore found in most towns our size.

We didn't dream up these projects. Each one came from demands for change articulated by our readers and citizens. We just gave them the voice and the organization to solve the problem.

So what are the lessons for surviving in an age of box stores and cookie-cutter formats?

First, you are the only newspaper in the world that gives a diddy about your town. Act like it. Your town includes the preacher and the pauper; the millionaire and the welfare mom; the teacher and the mentally handicapped child. Speak for all of them, meet their needs

help them realize their dreams and you will prosper.

Second, take on the tough issues. Another weekly in our county had a flag depicting an ostrich with its head in the sand, coupled with the words, "Facts ignored are not problems solved." So true. Identify the problem and try to solve those you can.

Third, remember that Joan Baez was right when she said that love is just a four-letter word. But she never stuck that label on honesty. Love your community, but root out those whose dishonesty challenges it.

Fourth, work for the economic prosperity of your community the right way. Don't trust the economic gurus. Run, don't walk, from the folks who tell you that this private prison or that hazardous waste dump is the key to the future.

They aren't. Build a real community based on real community values and a strong economic base, and your economic future will be secure.

Finally, keep your backbone full of steel. In 1976, I was doused with methyl parathion by a spray pilot who didn't want my investigation of aerial pesticide abuse to continue. The dangerous application practices now are banned, as is one of the pesticides involved. The wheat crops still flourish in southern Kansas and northern Oklahoma, but the dogs and fish don't die and the drinking water is safe.

More than a decade later, I stopped a scam involving a Biblical theme park and a 650-foot plastic statue of Jesus. The promoter went on TV, telling his followers that God would reward anyone who slew this agent of Satan — me. Well, I'm still here and the con man is long

gone.

Now we have the Helm investigation. While our readers are supportive, some of those with direct knowledge are still reluctant to come forward. They're scared. So we just keep writing and helping to erase the fear.

So my message today may defy traditional wisdom. I say, "Don't worry about the consequences of covering the news well, thrive on the benefits. If you do it well, do it honestly, and do it fairly, your town will be one where the local residents come into the store and say, 'Hey, is MY paper in yet?'"

John M. Wylie II is publisher of the Oologah (Okla.) Lake Leader. He can be contacted at lakeleader@sbglobal.net.

The vital role of independent newspapers

By Moira Sleight

Editor's note: Moira Sleight was selected as ISWNE's Greenslade Bursary editor for 2007. This is the text of the speech she gave on June 29 at the ISWNE convention in Rapid City, S.D.

Good afternoon. I plan to use this slot to tell you a bit about my own publication, the *Methodist Recorder*, and then to widen out to talk about some of the challenges facing weekly newspapers generally in the UK, leaving time for questions and answers.

The *Methodist Recorder*, of which I'm managing editor and chief executive, is a weekly, national newspaper that primarily serves Methodists in Britain, but with a wider readership across the globe. We are based in London, just a few blocks away from Wesley's Chapel and John Wesley's House, where the founder of Methodism lived and served.

Even though we are a national publication, we are also of course really a local paper in that we serve a community — only rather than a town or city it is the Methodist people. Our news is a mix of events happening in British Methodism (both local church news and those of the national Church) and worldwide Methodism, and also events important in the secular world but from a Christian or Methodist angle. Thus we are more than just Methodism's parish magazine. More often than not, our front page headlines are concerned with issues on the world stage or questions of public concern such as racism, poverty and war. We also seek to provide our readers with helpful resources, reviews and information.

We were founded in 1861 to serve the ordinary people of the Church and are independent of the Methodist Church. This is very important to us as it means we can cover whatever stories we feel we should in the best interests of our readers. Our mission statement when we were founded was "To tell the truth in love" and this is what guides us even today. We like to see ourselves as a critical friend of the Church, supporting it but willing when necessary to challenge it,

which can sometimes be uncomfortable. Our pages — especially the letter pages — give Methodists a platform to make their views known and to discuss with others what is important to them. Basically, we are the voice of our community. This means that our readers feel a real ownership of us and are swift to tell us if they think we should be doing something differently.

Indeed, this can sometimes be a mixed blessing. Irate Methodists can hold you responsible for everything from a Methodist hotel running out of cheesecake before the writer could order it to a minister being refused a reinvitation to continue serving at a church. Also on sensitive subjects — especially to do with human sexuality issues — some readers can fail to distinguish between the message and the messenger and write to us in very aggressive terms.

Sometimes one feels that a rubber stamp saying "Don't shoot the messenger!" would be a useful gadget for replying to correspondence. And sometimes, I have to say, I am sorely tempted — though so far have resisted the temptation — to use the tactic that novelist Evelyn Waugh perfected which was to send a reply to writers of objectionable correspondence that said: "Dear Mr Smith, I thought you should know that some idiot is sending in letters under your name. Yours sincerely..."

The *Methodist Recorder* makes considerable impact on the literary culture of Methodism. Every year hundreds of writers find an outlet for their creativity in its columns, whether the letter pages, our occasional Voicing a View articles (which allow more space than a letter to develop an argument) or other sections of our feature pages. Occasionally, a series of articles becomes a book.

We have an annual poetry competition, which is very popular with readers. Entrance is free, prizes are modest, but we get many entries and the winners and the highly recommended ones are published as a supplement within the paper. Many are of a very high standard and the supplement makes good reading. The existence of the competition also allows us to be kind to writers of

unsolicited poems that are submitted for publication during the year. We write back to say that sadly we do not print poetry normally so must reject their offering but pointing them to the annual competition which they can enter in due course.

We also have an annual photography competition, run on similar lines. Once again this provides a lovely supplement within the paper, with the winning entry on the front page. It also helpfully refills our photo library with lots of useful stock shots for use in the future.

We have also run short story competitions and this year hope to have a columnist competition to try to turn up some new talent whose entries will be published and who might then write for the paper on an occasional basis.

As our community is so scattered across Britain and indeed the world, it is important we have things like this that can involve the readers and bind them together. Similarly, our question and answer column where readers send in questions and other readers offer replies is very popular, as is Grapevine which is basically a noticeboard for readers. They use this for such things as to trace former church members, seek out-of-print books, offer redundant organs and so on. This is incredibly well read and those who have an item featured there are usually very pleased with the response they get. All these things help readers feel part of the *Methodist Recorder* community.

One of our more recent spots in the paper — "Where do you read yours?" — has become immensely popular with the readers. It is a slot where readers send in photographs of themselves reading the *Methodist Recorder* in unusual or attractive surroundings and is placed amid the Classified Advertising pages, both to help as a filler when necessary but also to give readers who might not think they are interested in the advertisements a reason to turn to those pages.

The slot had a slow start and members of the staff were getting a little fed up of having to photograph their family members in various forms of disguise when it suddenly took

off. There is no fee for photos published but nevertheless each postbag always brings more offerings and we always have a backlog waiting to be placed.

We try to use them all if at all possible and have had some great ones, ranging from the unusual such as a reader surrounded by penguins on a stop-off on an Antarctic cruise and a minister scuba diving and holding the paper underwater to readers on the top of mountains, on beaches and on camels. One determined reader had planned to have a photo taken on their holiday but, having been taken ill, had a picture taken in the intensive care ward of a hospital instead!

Our news stories are a mixture of reactive and proactive ones and it is always satisfying when our coverage affects what is happening in the Church positively. For example, we ran a story (with names withheld) on the dreadful plight of spouses in those circumstances where a ministerial marriage has broken up, the minister has left with someone else and the spouse (usually the wife) has not only lost her husband, but also her role as a minister's wife (which she often viewed as a joint vocation) and in due course has to move out of her home because it is the church's and it will be needed for the new minister.

Because of our coverage, the matter was raised at the Church's Annual Conference — its decision-making body — and because of the debate and decisions taken there systems were set up to try to address the issues involved and make sure help is given sensitively and appropriately and that no one should ever be made homeless.

Another example was last year when the Church leadership decided it needed to rationalise the way it offered full-time residential ministerial training. It was decided that only two institutions were needed for this and therefore a group researched which colleges should stop offering this sort of training.

The recommendation was made and of course, when announced and publicised to our readers through our coverage, supporters of the colleges not chosen soon made their feelings felt. Our postman was soon complaining about the weight of the post he was having to deliver and letters and e-mails came from all over the world as former students and current academics all made their view felt.

Feelings were running high and the pros and cons were all argued out in our letter columns and the topic stayed lively right up to the Annual Conference when the decision was rejected and a new group set up to look into the matter. The fact that this new group

decided that a third college, Durham, should be allowed to continue — in itself an implicit admission that the previous decision had been wrong — justified our decision to give so much space for so many weeks to a topic that was of such interest to the Methodist community.

We try to offer strong support for campaigns on issues we and our readers feel strongly about. Some of these are of world importance like the Make Poverty History campaign, climate change, fair trade and human trafficking. Others are of more domestic interest. For example, we found it incredible that the British Methodist Church leadership decided not to have a national celebration this year to mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of hymn-writer Charles Wesley, even though many other countries were holding high profile commemorations. We articulated this concern in the introduction to a special anniversary supplement we produced as part of our first issue of the year and have continued drawing attention to the anniversary through a regular column about local events. We were very satisfied when as a front page story a few weeks ago we could announce that it had been decided to hold a national event attended by the Church President and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury.

In fact this year sees many anniversaries of interest to British Methodism. As well as the 300th anniversary of the birth of hymn-writer Charles Wesley it is the 200th anniversary of the first British Camp Meetings from which the Primitive Methodist Church emerged, the 75th anniversary of Methodist Union which saw the British Methodist Church take its present form and the 200th anniversary of the Parliamentary Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. And that's just some of them! So we are busy making sure we are reflecting all these anniversaries properly in our pages this year — explaining, informing, providing resources on the topics and covering events.

As an independent newspaper, we have to make a profit or we cannot survive, as I'm sure is true of most of you here. For us this means we have to run on a tight budget, with a very small staff. As managing editor, I am responsible not only for the editing of the newspaper but also running the business side and ensuring we remain in profit so we can continue in operation.

We run with a very small salaried team — all are based in our London office: one full-time and one part-time person in production who also help with advertising, one reporter and three part-time senior citizens

who help with administration, listings, typing etc. This is supplemented by two part-time freelancers who work in the business centre and deal with accounts, advertisement quoting and so on and a handful of regular part-time freelancers who help with reporting, subbing and proof-reading. Some of these freelancers come to our office to work, but others work from home and thus give us a greater geographic spread.

For photographs we rely on contributors sending in pictures, occasional commissioning of freelancers, pictures cadged from friendly local editors and pictures of national events purchased from Reuters.

Of late in Britain, the big national dailies keep going on about what they call "citizen journalists" — readers who contact them with items or — in this age of mobile phones also being cameras — pictures. Much play is made of this new development in their pages and on their web sites. Well, all the local papers I know, including the *Methodist Recorder*, have been harnessing the treasures of citizen journalists for decades — only we call them readers. Perhaps a case of the big boys learning from their smaller colleagues. But I think that they still have some learning to do. It caused some amusement in Britain recently when one of the big national dailies used a massive picture supposedly taken by a local person of a big gas terminal fire that was headline news. It was a very atmospheric picture, with lots of smoke and the sky lit up by the flames. Trouble was that also in the picture was an elk, not a species ever to be found in suburban England. It turned out to be a picture of your Yellowstone Park that some prankster had sent them.

It has to be said, of course, that necessity is the mother of invention and in the *Methodist Recorder's* case having a small staff, a global patch to cover and a small budget, it has always been essential to harness contributions from all sorts of quarters. An added benefit of this is the sense of ownership it gives the readers.

Each week our news coverage is a blend of the very local — who has become a member of a local church, which organists or lay preachers have received long service awards and so on — and the national and international. Just as we rely on local Methodists informing us of what is going on in their church or chapel, in the same way much of our international news relies on getting comments and information from our readers abroad.

Methodists are found all around the world so if a major event happens abroad, we contact our local Methodists there and

thanks to e-mail usually get swift replies and on-the-spot accounts. Our Zimbabwe coverage, for example, has been enabled by the bravery of some Methodists there who wanted the outside world to know what was happening under Mugabe even at risk to themselves.

Of course we do try to get out and about as much as we can to follow up stories. One of my most memorable assignments was spending some time with the chaplains serving the British Forces in Kosovo just after the conflict in that area had quietened down. Technically it was still a theatre of war so when we landed in the RAF plane and were ushered into a tent to be inducted I suppose I should not have been surprised that the lecture involved telling us how to recognise mines and how to tell if there was a minefield ahead, behind or — worst scenario — we were in one. When my blood group was requested, I realised that my annual holiday insurance policy probably wasn't going to cover me!

I'm sure it would have been second nature for any of you who have served in the Forces, but once ensconced in the camp I have to say I had my reservations. I am not one of life's campers and sleeping in a tent on a hillside in Pristina in December had not been a life's ambition. I soon found out the drawback of army sleeping bags. While they are wonderfully warm and cocoon you mummy-like, you do have to leave your nose exposed so you can breathe and thus you wake each morning looking like Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

Sometimes, on behalf of the readers for whom we write, we find ourselves witness to pieces of history. For instance, when I sat in Westminster Abbey at the funeral of the Queen Mother, there was a real sense of genuine national mourning and the passing of an era.

Another emotional piece of history I witnessed was visiting the Methodists in Estonia when the country was still under Soviet control. On this particular visit, independence was stirring but not yet won. I went with a local Methodist to an independence rally in the capital, Tallinn. He explained to the organisers that I was press and we were allowed to go into the section on a hill where the President was to stand to speak to the people. The park below was full of Estonians of all ages, carrying the flags of their country. As darkness fell, the crowd below lit candles. Everyone was represented there from old soldiers to young children in the arms of their parents. The candle flames lit up the scene and the crowd began to sing patriotic hymns, long banned by the

Communists. It was a moving moment and it was a historic moment.

Not long after, Estonia wrenched herself from Communist control and embraced a new future as a proud European nation. Indeed, later on, having returned to London, I was watching the television news and saw scenes of unarmed civilians surrounding the radio station building to protect it from Russian tanks. I am sure I saw my friendly Methodist among those brave folk risking their lives for freedom's cause.

Publishing just the one product, we don't have our own presses so print on contract with a large newspaper group, sending PDFs of our pages by e-mail and ISDN to them. We are usually 24 pages, with a maximum of 32 pages and a minimum of 20 pages. Our sales are mostly through people ordering it through their local newsagent, with an increasing number ordering it from us as an annual subscription and therefore receiving it through the post.

Our readership reflects Church congregations in Britain — more mature in years. This is accentuated by the fact that Christianity in Britain is very much in a post-denominational phase where many younger Christians do not think of themselves as belonging to a particular denomination but just as a Christian. If they move out of town, they will not necessarily seek out a church of the same denomination they had attended in their last town, but one which is easiest to get to or where they feel at home — often decided by whether it has many members of their peer group or perhaps a healthy junior church for their children. This means that they are much less likely than their parents to want to read a denominational newspaper.

Most of the traditional denominations in Britain have steeply declining numbers which of course means a reduced potential market for titles like us. Thus we have taken the decision that our cover price must be the key to our future financial health, not relying predominantly on advertising. We are a niche product and so readers will have to be prepared to pay more than they have in the past.

Because of this we always need to be making doubly sure that editorially we are offering what readers cannot get elsewhere. In the current environment, news can be obtained from so many sources — radio, television — of which there are more available channels than ever — teletext, web sites, podcasts, on office computers and on mobile phones...the list is endless. Thus it is no use running stories that quite frankly could appear in any other medium but instead ones tailored totally to our readers' interests and

needs.

This, of course, is what local or community papers have always done. Most local papers have always featured, for example, pages of village news (just like on the *Methodist Recorder* we run news from local congregations). However, now, seeing the need to become ever more niche in order to flourish or even survive, many local and regional newspapers are becoming even more local. This is not just the small independents but the big business groups, who have been affected by a slump in advertising revenue and are therefore looking for supplementary avenues.

For example, Johnston Press and Archant, two of Britain's big publishing groups, are among regional press groups boosting their print and online portfolios with the launch of more ultra-local community newsletters and neighbourhood editions covering just a few streets. The titles are typically monthly frees — delivery or pick-up — with a distribution of under 6,000 targeted at small rural area or local communities within larger towns and cities. Needless to say some of these are in competition to existing small, independent titles.

Johnston Press is currently publishing nearly 200 ultra-local newsletters. Its first was launched in Rossington, South Yorkshire, and there are now eight covering small mining villages in that area. Just last year it launched around 50 newsletters.

Most of Archant's regional newspapers have launched smaller, ultra-local editions to complement the news offering of its main newspapers and web sites with more focused but sometimes less frequent community news. It is also publishing a series of free glossy lifestyle magazines.

It has been reported that a former national daily editor is planning to launch a free newspaper for the wealthier London suburbs, with most of the content generated by readers. The ultimate plan is believed to be that it could transfer to the internet in around three years' time once broadband penetration has reached 90 percent.

A number of ultra-local web sites are already up and running in London suburbs. ChiswickW4.com in west London describes itself as the largest community site of its kind in Europe. Funded by advertising, it has 10,000 members and publishes a free weekly e-mail newsletter sent to 8,000 people. There are similar sites in Putney, Hammersmith, Ealing, Brentford, Wandsworth and Acton.

Thus ordinary, independent weekly newspapers are facing new competition and so are having to hone what they offer, mak

ing sure they are continuing to provide what their readers want, adapting as necessary and putting an emphasis on their editorial, concerns and campaigns being as truly local as they can.

What is interesting though is that while the regional newspaper industry is dominated by the top six businesses who together have 90 percent of the market, a new market is developing in new, small, local publishers acting in competition to these big organisations. These new publications are setting up within areas dominated by the large companies and carving out a niche for themselves by choosing a community they know well and focusing on providing at a very local level what readers want.

One particular concern to all local and regional community papers in Britain has been the actions of our BBC — the British Broadcasting Corporation. Financed by the licence fee that all television set owners have to pay, not advertising or subscription, they are effectively run on public money and therefore have resources unable to be matched by any other organisation.

They invested money in a pilot scheme of ultra-local coverage, the plan being to run regular web site news bulletins and ultra-

local TV on the web. Information would be fed from the vast BBC resources available to them and in that way they would secure the local franchises, promote their mainline products and attract advertising on to the web sites. Their intention was to roll out this service across the UK.

No local paper has the resources to compete with an organisation like the BBC yet these web sites were threatening local papers' own web sites linked to their newspaper titles. In defence, the BBC said they were only spending 3 million pounds (that's some 6 million dollars) on the pilot. Well, that may be small change to them but is obviously an unimaginable sum for any local company to emulate and the question remains: is competing with local, commercial organisations what licence-payers money should be spent on?

Even a paper like us is affected by the BBC, who brought out a glossy magazine carrying advertising to complement their most popular religious programme and have a web site that they encourage people to send news about their churches into.

The newspaper industry has been lobbying massively against the BBC's expansion plans, with some MPs taking an interest in

the industry's concerns, but the main hope at the moment is that as the BBC did not get the amount of licence fee increase it wanted from the Government, this expansion of their interests may be cut. If it goes ahead, it will have a very bad effect on many community newspapers as there is not a level playing field. The Newspaper Society — of which David Greenslade in whom honour this presentation is named was once president — has done great work in fighting the BBC on this but it is really just a cease-fire at the moment, not the war won.

It is certainly interesting times in UK publishing as newspapers adapt to changing patterns of readership, new competitors and the opportunities and challenges of the internet, all the while continuing to do what they have done for decades, which is to serve their communities to the best of their abilities. Among the people they serve they have trust and credibility — which is more than can be said for some of the daily nationals — and this is their great asset and why there will always be an important role for independent newspapers.

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