

NOTES BY
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Williamstown Historical Society

**“Pamphleteers to Presses; Bloggers to Social Media:
What Will Inform Communities in the Digital Age?”**

Thank you for asking me to join you and inform a discussion today about the history and potential future of newspapering in Williamstown.

If the purpose of recalling and documenting the past is to assist us in living the future, then I want to start by saying that a portion of the next hour is not going to be about newspapers – at least their physical form. It is going to be about the service they have performed – meeting the information needs of communities – and how the provisioning of that service is changing.

I'll explain why Williamstown -- for at least three reasons – is remarkably at the forefront of forging our new media ecosystem. All leading us, I hope, to end with a prediction and then dialogue on this question: What will sustain participatory democracy in our town, and others, once newspapers, in their physical form, are gone?

My introduction to newspapers and Williamstown began with a classified advertisement, in I think a fall, 1981 edition of the weekly trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*. It said an unnamed New England college town weekly was seeking a new owner and gave a P.O. Box to submit credentials. It was read to me by my wife, Betsy Johnson, one afternoon when we lived in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn and I was at my desk at Crain Communications Inc., in the old New York Daily News building on East 42nd Street in Manhattan. The advertisement lead us to Lauren Stevens.

Because it was Lauren who had the courage and civic commitment to start *The Advocate*, we've asked him to get us started this afternoon by giving us a backgrounder on newspapers and Williamstown. I also asked him to offer a sense of the mission of *The Advocate* when he began it, and how we worked at it – together -- for nearly a decade. Then I'll step back in and offer some thoughts about the changing news ecosystem from my perspective as a researcher for the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri.

Lauren?

Change at hyperspeed

Sixteen years ago, I gave a talk in San Francisco at a newspapers convention and I said something that ended up quoted in *The New York Times*. I said I felt that trying to be a pundit and advise editors on the Internet and news was “kind of like the blind leading the blind.” I still feel that way.

So with a sense of humility – and great fallability – let me offer a macro summary of what I think is going on; then I'll bring it back to Williamstown; in the end, I'll predict what I think is in store for towns like Williamstown, and what I think we should do about it.

Information overload; gathering attention

My macro point is that we have moved from an information economy to an attention economy.

Think about the 2010 Wikileaks disclosure of 76,000 pages of allegedly leaked U.S. military cables about Afghanistan – all apparently considered classified intelligence. The Pentagon was said to have had for a time more than 100 analysts pouring over those documents to see what damage may have been done by their release. The Pentagon and the news media both had the same challenge with the Wikileaks disclosure – how to make sense, for their own differing purposes, out of so much information.

Now think about last week's disclosures that the U.S. National Security Agency, using authority apparently extended by Congress and the president in December of last year, is receiving real-time feeds of essentially all email, photos and video that we are all pumping through Google, Yahoo, Facebook, and Microsoft, as well as records of all of our phone calls. Whatever you think about the constitutionality of such activity, that's a whale of a lot of data to try and turn into knowledge.

Finding, sharing trustworthy, valuable information

Thus the biggest challenge for citizens and businesses is finding – and sharing – relevant, trustworthy, valuable, actionable news and information hidden in a sea of bits and bytes.

So it seems pretty clear that the path to continued relevance for the reporting work of newspapers (in whatever form it takes) will have to be about *finding* and *sharing* information that is *trustworthy* – and finding a way to receive *value* for doing so. But the value is in the curatorial work, and the new insights which result. It is not in the raw information to start with - - which is more valuable, the flour or the bread? Nor is its value diminished or greatly enhanced by the physical form it is presented. Solid, factual reporting has value no matter what medium.

So what does this theory mean to Williamstown?

When we moved to Williamstown in 1983, there were five news organizations covering town hall with some regularity: The Advocate, The Transcript, The Eagle, The Springfield Union-News and WNAW. Today, there are two – The Transcript and iBerkshires.

That metric of vastly shrunken reportage has been played out across the nation in community after community. I don't have precise numbers but I can make a well-informed guess – there were probably at least twice as many reporters and editors in The Eagle's newsroom and three times as many at The Transcript in 1983 as now. The Springfield paper has no reporters in The Berkshires today and WNAW is now a satellite of a Pittsfield station.

The reasons for this change are pretty clear. One reason is that these institutions are no longer owned by local families but by distance corporations who capital structures require them to extra far more profit from our region than the families required.

But the larger reason is that there are fewer people, a smaller middle class and thus far fewer advertising dollars available here than in 1983. For at least 100 years, American journalism has been linked to advertising in a mutually beneficial relationship – the journalism brought audience, and the advertisers wanted to reach that marketplace.

But a vicious cycle has arisen. Big-box stores don't run display advertising or radio ads. And even in rural Berkshire County, big-box stores command many retailer dollars. In addition, when I buy a book or electronics on Amazon, most of those dollars go to Seattle. So the lifeblood of journalism – local advertising – is fading anywhere that locally-owned retail is fading.

Meanwhile, for every dollar that U.S. daily newspapers have lost in advertising revenue over the last decade or so they have picked up less than 10 cents in digital advertising. In fact, sometime last year, Google's total U.S. advertising revenues on an annualized basis surpassed that of the entire U.S. newspaper industry, combined. That giant, sucking shift of advertising dollars from print to web has cost the jobs of tens of thousands of reporters. And Google and Facebook aren't hiring any reporters – at least not yet.

But the news is not all bad. For the first decade of the Internet and World Wide Web, most of the activity was global and national. In the last five years or so, local operators around the country – iBerkshires is a great example – are using digital delivery to get the news out. There are now hundreds and hundreds of such local online news communities around the United States, and some of them – I'll wager iBerkshires is among them – are starting to make money, because it costs less to assemble and transmit news to your phone, tablet or desktop than print and distribute it physically.

At the same time, social media is having a useful impact. I am increasingly amazed at how much real, useful civic information is being shared locally via Facebook. With a careful selection of who your "friends" are, and by "following" the many businesses and NGOs that have Facebook pages, it is possible to construct a significantly useful alert system about what's happening in our town. And it seems likely that either Facebook, or a yet-to-be-minted competitor – will make it easier and easier to create a geographically centered sharing network – a Newshare, if you will. The fact is that tens of millions of people now get important news first from Facebook or even Twitter.

So while the instruments of mass media – radio, TV, newspapers – something not so unlike the colonial pamphleteers is bubbling at the fringes in thinks like Ozzie Alvarez' iBerkshires and the possibility of localized Facebook-like services.

And here I have to note an important bit of nearly journalism history that I would mark as the first of three reasons Williamstown has a historical role in the emerging news ecosystem.

Many of you will remember Tripod Inc., a company started in 1995 by Williams students Brett Hershey, Bo Peabody and the late Professor Dick Sabot. From offices in Water Street, Tripod began initially with the idea of providing career and living information – specialized news -- for college graduates. But when that took off too slowly, the little Tripod team hit on a different idea – give a growing Web audience tools for building personal home pages, and then make it easy to share words and ideas about those pages.

In effect, Tripod built the first social network. For a time, we were known as Silicon Village. But the name turned out to be premature. In 1998, Tripod was sold for \$58 million in stock and cash to search engine Lycos Inc., and after a year it moved to suburban Boston. I suspect its innovation was squandered by a company which didn't understand the potential of what it had bought, and Tripod languished. That made way for MySpace and then Facebook. Key podsters tried again with Streetmail, an email-based news and entertain information service. Today, AOL Inc. is pushing ahead with Patch – local websites in upscale, suburbs around the nation. In Patch, and iBerkshires, are seeds sown in part by Streetmail.

So Williamstown, in Tripod and then Streetmail, hosted early precursors of social media.

I think we can fairly assign Williamstown a second historical footnote for very nearly hosting an early precursor of citizen journalism. I say very nearly because it is actually in Hancock where Frank Patterson started the Citizen Media Council in 1981. I won't tell a lengthy story about Frank because I wrote and posted a story about him a couple of years ago and have put hard copies on the table. But Frank Patterson – before the Internet – was inspired to do what today's citizen journalists are doing – and what pamphleteers did in the colonial era – gathering and conveying important civic information -- without benefit of big presses or broadcasting towers.

It's here that I want to move off of Williamstown as ground zero for our thinking. I want to give you a quick sense of what I've been exposed to since Betsy and I and the founders of The Advocate turned over stewardship of the paper to Ellen Bernstein in 1992. It will allow me to reach the third reason to grant -- wishfully at least -- Williamstown another place in history for the future of community-information services. Then I'll finish up with a crystal-ball prediction for the future of news in the Village Beautiful and engage in some Q-and-A.

There were a few reasons why in 1992 we moved on from The Advocate after nine years running it. [In 1997 and earlier](#), I wrote that newspapers were going to face a train wreck once fat pipes came into the home and people could go anywhere for information. Newspapers, I wrote, would need to learn how to make money referring people to information from anywhere, [sharing both users, and content](#). Newspapers, I felt, would lose their de-facto role as the most-efficient way to receive a best-available daily diet of world, national and local news and information. And I think we can see, that's happened. Surveys show that about three years ago, more people started saying they were getting their news from the Internet than from newspapers, and that trend has accelerated with the rapid adoption of tablet devices and smart phones.

It was after we sold The Advocate it became clear this coming change would create an opportunity – an opportunity help newspaper publishers to make money by referring people to information from anywhere. That insight led me to form on Spring Street in 1994 a company called Newshare Corp., and to begin to think about how that could be possible – how could a newspaper serve as a “home base” in the digital world for its readers, help them discover information customized to their interests, and get paid for doing so?

Well, that was 19 years ago and we aren't close to that ideal. Google came along and did a much better job of at least helping *find* the information than any newspaper website. Nobody's yet doing a cutting-edge job of delivering really personalized, customized, trustworthy information – “tools for life” as Tripod once said – except perhaps advertisements that follow you around on the web.

Newshare Corp. morphed into a company called Clickshare Service Corp., which we based here in Williamstown from 1996 until 2007. It's growing in Amherst, because that's where our CEO, Rick Lerner, moved in 2007. It now provides online user registration, authentication, site access control (“paywalls”) and credit-card billing services to newspaper websites. It holds a patent which runs until 2023 on a unique method for allowing consumers like you to have an account at one website, and purchase information from lots of other websites down to the single article level – on the spot, aggregating charges to one ID and one account and one bill. We'll see whether that idea – we call it shared-user management -- catches on. And if it does that will allow Williamstown to claim its third historical footnote in the advancement of digital news and journalism.

Since starting and nurturing Newshare/Clickshare through 2002, I've been working with journalism program at the University of Massachusetts, the University of Missouri and the

University of Rhode Island. I started the Media Giraffe Project to “find and spotlight people making innovative use of media to foster participatory democracy and community.” And I’m on the board of and principal conference organizer for Journalism That Matters Inc. That’s a Seattle-based nonprofit which educates and conducts conferences for journalists to connect “cross silos” and find common ground with technologists, media-literacy educators, citizen journalists and, now, librarians.

Libraries, like newspapers, are undergoing disruption. Just as newspapers are trying to figure out how to fulfill their mission without presses, libraries are increasingly imagining how they will fulfill their role of fostering information access, and community outreach in a world with fewer and fewer books. While journalism has generally operated in the private sector and libraries as a public good, that’s starting to change. Both institutions share an intense respect for fact-based-inquiry and public literacy and open information. In April of 2011, JTM partnered with the MIT Center for Civic Media – how headed, by the way by Tripod alumnus and Lanesborough resident Ethan Zuckerman – for a 100-person conference of librarians and journalists. You can find that on the web at: <http://www.biblionews.org> . It was called “*Beyond Books: News, Literacy and Democracy for America’s Libraries.*”

As I thought back to the nine years I was privileged to try and meet the community information needs of Williamstown, I was drawn to a bankers box underneath a bed at our house. In it, in 1992, we placed a few copies of the Advocate issues were were most proud of over those nine years. A sampling are on the table and we are donating them to the Historical Society today. Two things particularly struck me as I look through them this morning:

- The narratives stories that we tell, don’t really change, just the particular circumstances. In the pages of the Advocate from 1983 through 1992 we covered affordable housing, socially responsible investing, economic and environmental change, the inspiration and creativity of the arts, and on and on – you can see for yourself.
- The news is best when it is a community process. I saw the names of so many people who joined in making The Advocate. Some have moved on to new lives, others have staying in journalism. Some have died. But many of you are still here meeting community needs in one way or another. For those nine years, you saw The Advocate as a place to help make community happen, and that should still be a source of great satisfaction.

During much of the 20th century, newspapers were the dominant general-public digest for timely, topical information relevant to daily life. Now web-enabled consumers can go anywhere and news companies have lost that position.

I am more and more finding it perfectly easy to enjoy both a lean forward and lean back relationship with my smart phone, tablet or computer. I like being able to talk to “Siri” on my iPhone. I especially am looking forward to next-generation services that will allow me to BOTH see the same New York Times or Berkshire Eagle virtual front page as everyone else – and ALSO get a totally customized information service. In fact, a company we’ve started in partnership with the Associated Press and the Reynolds Journalism Institute – a company called CircLabs --- yes, based at least for now in Williamstown – may be helping with that.

In wrapping up, I don’t think we need to wax nostalgic about the loss of newspapers as a medium. We are getting along OK, without gaslights, the iceman and the horse and buggy. We do need to ensure robust community broadband, and not let the telcom-cable duopolies, in collusion with the FCC, foist inferior, slow Internet service on us – America is way behind many developed countries in this regard. What we do need is institutions that help meet community information needs as set forth on the remarkable Knight Commission Report on the Information

Needs of Communities in a Democracy, copies of which I have put on the table and which are available digitally online.

The famous U.S. futurist [Buckminster Fuller](#), who died in 1975, once wrote: "You can never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change things, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

I don't predict that Williamstown will continue to have its own newspaper beyond the next several years – or that the principal role of libraries will continue to be to circulate books. But we will have iBerkshires, or the equivalent. And it will have more and better tools like Facebook that will allow each of us – as well as our town, business and civic organizations -- to both create and consume civic information. In that news social network, people will want four things: They want trustworthiness, access, control and value. And, I might also say that we will have libraries – as important facilitators, convenors and teachers of media literacy, inquiry, transparency and dialog.

What I worry we won't have enough of is independent, fact-based, public-spirited, in-depth reporting on civic issues, civic and public institutions. That takes talent and time. It was supported by advertising, and it won't be any longer, to any substantial degree.

And so that leaves us all with a question: Can we have participatory democracy without independent finders of fact informing us? And if not, are we willing to pay for that service with our tax dollars, our donations, our subscriptions, or in some other way?

Now let's discuss it, because we need ideas.

Thank-you for listening.

WHAT IS JOURNALISM?

Notes by William P. Densmore Jr.
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following the annual meeting of the
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What is journalism?

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From the Houghton-Mifflin dictionary at answers.com

jour·nal·ism (jûr'n.-l.z'.m)

n.

The collecting, writing, editing, and presenting of news or news articles in newspapers and magazines and in radio and television broadcasts. Material written for publication in a newspaper or magazine or for broadcast. The style of writing characteristic of material in newspapers and magazines, consisting of direct presentation of facts or occurrences with little attempt at analysis or interpretation. Newspapers and magazines. An academic course training students in journalism. Written material of current interest or wide popular appeal.

http://ca.encyclopedia.msn.com/dictionary_1861623323/journalism.html

jour·nal·ism [jûrn'l izz.m]

noun

Definitions:

1. reporting news for media: the profession of gathering, editing, and publishing news reports and related articles for newspapers, magazines, television, or radio
2. news gathering and reporting as genre: writing or reporting for the media as a literary genre or style

Excerpt from “The Principles of Journalism,”¹
from the book, “The Elements of Journalism,”
by Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach.

Found at: <http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles>

The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society. This encompasses myriad roles--helping define community, creating common language and common knowledge, identifying a community's goals, heroes and villains, and pushing people beyond complacency. This purpose also involves other requirements, such as being entertaining, serving as watchdog and offering voice to the voiceless.

Over time journalists have developed nine core principles to meet the task. They comprise what might be described as the theory of journalism:

1. JOURNALISM'S FIRST OBLIGATION IS TO THE TRUTH
2. ITS FIRST LOYALTY IS TO CITIZENS
3. ITS ESSENCE IS A DISCIPLINE OF VERIFICATION
4. ITS PRACTITIONERS MUST MAINTAIN AN INDEPENDENCE FROM THOSE THEY COVER
5. IT MUST SERVE AS AN INDEPENDENT MONITOR OF POWER
6. IT MUST PROVIDE A FORUM FOR PUBLIC CRITICISM AND COMPROMISE
7. IT MUST STRIVE TO MAKE THE SIGNIFICANT INTERESTING AND RELEVANT
8. IT MUST KEEP THE NEWS COMPREHENSIVE AND PROPORTIONAL
9. ITS PRACTITIONERS MUST BE ALLOWED TO EXERCISE THEIR PERSONAL CONSCIENCE

¹ -- In 1997, an organization then administered by PEJ, the Committee of Concerned Journalists, began a national conversation among citizens and news people to identify and clarify the principles that underlie journalism. After four years of research, including 20 public forums around the country, a reading of journalism history, a national survey of journalists, and more, the group released a Statement of Shared Purpose that identified nine principles. These became the basis for The Elements of Journalism, the book by PEJ Director Tom Rosenstiel and CCJ Chairman and PEJ Senior Counselor Bill Kovach. Here are those principles, as outlined in the original Statement of Shared Purpose.