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English 3H

28 April 2020

Voices and echoes:

### The ever changing state of local journalism

Buzzing in on an intercom to gain entry through the intimidating always locked double doors. The robotic voice responds to inform you that your intentions would have to be run past the higher-ups. Waiting in anticipation for the assessment of your legitimacy. This may sound like the start of a thrilling spy novel, but in the world of local journalism, these precautions are required to ensure the physical safety of the Mountain View Voice staff.

In the modern age, the public is more connected than ever thanks to social media. With such easy access to information, one might even begin to ponder what usefulness a physical newspaper would bring? The answer lies not in the physical paper, but rather in the information written on it. Local journalists have taken up the task of gathering information and forming it into more accurate and representative stories for the public to consume. The work of checking sources and conducting in-person interviews comes with a higher risk and greater accountability that has not replicated on social platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. The perpetually locked doors of the Mountain View Voice office stand not only to protect employees but also to protect the credibility of the information. Local journalism is threatened by the rise of readily available misinformation.

The dedication to providing reliable sources of information for their community can be seen throughout the Voice staff. Kevin Forestieri, a reporter for the Voice, recalls seeing the repercussions from stories he worked on at the Voice. In 6 months of reporting, Forestieri worked on the subject of youth mental health in the bay area. The story helped bring the lack of local mental health aid to the forefront of community issues causing a much larger push for more availability in mental health services. Forestieri remembers instances of people approaching him to convey how significant and meaningful that story was to them. Additionally, Forestieri discussed the alternatives to local reporting.

Forestieri described how new social media apps have allowed for rumors to spread through communities. Forestieri discussed how Nextdoor, an app that connects members of a local community, has been used to spread information both reliable and fictitious. Nextdoor has been utilized by the Voice to spread credible information, while also allowing rumors and speculations to gain momentum from paranoid citizens. Forestieri described the outcome of Nextdoor fueling rumors as “misinformation in the community and confusion”. Forestieri’s point is that local news organizations help sift through the rumors to report on more accurate and representative stories. Likewise, the trend of misinformation is escalated on larger scale social media platforms.

Fake News has been progressively becoming more prevalent on popular social media platforms. S. Shyam Sundar, a professor of PennState, discusses the reasons how misinformation became such a potent tool that affected events such as the 2016 presidential race. Sundar conducted studies that uncovered that avid social media users were more likely to trust stories attributed to other users over stories linked to news editors. Sundar asserts that the attitude

common on social media is one that passively accepts information without much attention to the credibility of sources.

Additionally, Sundar conducted a study to test how much personalization of social media affects the spread of misinformation. Sundar introduced false news stories containing fictitious advice and discovered that users who personalized their accounts were more likely to believe the fake story and forward the advice on to friends. Sundar states “This laissez-faire attitude, together with the difficulty of discerning online news sources, is at the root of why so many believe fake news”. The essence of Sundar’s argument is that the culture developing on social media has disadvantaged credible journalism and given ample opportunity for the rise of fake news.

For the past 40 years, The Mountain View Voice has been operating as a local newspaper. When it originally started it was a print newspaper in a world without the internet. Over time the Voice, along with journalistic papers around the globe, have had to navigate the shift from print journalism to digital. Currently, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mountain View Voice has changed so that digital and online reporting is their sole priority. Bill Johnson, a founding member and the current publisher at the Voice, described the cycle of change as “one of creating one new product and new innovation after another to try to take advantage of new technology that we have.” The essence of Johnson’s argument is that the world of journalism is in a continuous state of change and adaptation.

One such change that journalism has been shaped by is social media. Whereas in the past the cycle of journalism was lengthy and had a significant delay between when a story was published and when a news organization could receive feedback from readers, the new age of

technology has brought more instantaneous feedback. Alan Rusbridger, the previous editor in chief of *the guardian*, recounted how the creation of a website with comment sections allowed for more direct feedback with readers. “It was a huge philosophical leap for an organization full of people dedicated to refining everything before it was allowed into the outside world,” Rusbridger writes, “to enable anybody to post anything”(68). Rusbridger’s point is that with such a drastic change there was a greater connection to their readership, while simultaneously allowing for less sophisticated and more chaotic interactions between readers.

The ability to spread information quickly and efficiently through new social platforms was a key factor for the rise of illegitimate reporting and misinformation. This trend has become especially prevalent during times in which information has been in high demand. In a recent article, David Klepper writes that “residents looking for information about their communities increasingly turn to local message boards and social media, where virality is often emphasized over accuracy”. Klepper is corroborating the idea that the decline of local journalism is allowing for harmful information to circulate in communities.

In addition to more correspondence amongst readers, the internet brought with it a much fiercer competition in the world of local journalism as information and advertisements were no longer dependent on print newspapers. This, in turn, has led to the closure of a variety of local newspapers. In an NPR broadcast David Folkenflik, an NPR media correspondent, discussed the effects of major cuts to local newspapers because of financial difficulty. Folkenflik asserts “you’re going to see a lot less of the kinds of coverage exposing wrongs by city officials, by major developers, by police officers”. Folkenflik’s point is that the financial challenges causing

closure and downsizing of local newspapers will have greater negative effects on the accountability of local officials, resulting in more corruption.

In a series of letters to the editor of the New York Times, Richard Corso Oceanside discussed how the closure of local newspapers has been damaging to the communities they served. Oceanside cited studies linking newspaper closures with fewer voter turnout and higher municipal debt. “Without local investigative reporting, local politicians and municipalities will have a field day without having to look over their shoulders to see if someone is watching,” Oceanside wrote. In other words, Oceanside agrees that without strong local newspapers corruption in government will drastically increase. Additionally, Rusbridger documents how the financial challenges facing local newspapers have left them unable to challenge corruption. In his book, he documents several instances of when *the guardian* was risking going out of business in response to a libel action. “The weakness of the press was slowly eroding its watchdog function,”(176) Rusbridger explains, “enabling the rise of fake news”. In essence, Rusbridger argues that the financial issues disable local newspapers from tackling corruption and disproving misinformation.

Another staff member of the Voice has had to confront the beast of social media daily. Magali Gauthier, the chief visual journalist at the Voice, is tasked with gathering visuals for The Voice’s print newspaper while also managing their Instagram. Recently Gauthier was able to photograph a blood sample study that was being conducted by Stanford for the COVID-19 pandemic. “When that story was published, I was hearing from people from all over the United States contacting me to ask me about the study” Gauthier explains, “the results come in and the photos are really telling”. Gauthier’s point is that through something as overlooked as the photos

in a local newspaper the general public is benefited. In this time of crisis, the connective power of the internet was used to spread a local news story containing useful and relevant information.

As for the future of the Voice, there are no guarantees, similar to the state of Journalism in the country. The recent global pandemic has called attention to the importance of being informed about one's community with economic damage widely affecting local businesses, and constant safety concerns. This revitalized importance and a call for help from the staff has encouraged an influx of patrons to subscribe to the Voice in this time of crisis.

Across the country, however, the overall trend of local newspapers is extinction as a result of the new financial difficulties, coupled with the preexisting challenges brought by social media. Margaret Sullivan, a columnist from the Washington Post, described the local news industry as "in a death spiral". Sullivan elaborated that "the vacuum created as they fade allows false information to spread". Sullivan urges us to help support newspapers as the situation worsens because of their irreplaceable benefits to their community.

Whether or not the Mountain View Voice will continue to provide its community with credible information remains an issue only the Mountain View readers can solve. However, Andrea Gemment, the editor of the Mountain View Voice, remains optimistic about the future. Gemment said of the future "I'm hopeful that we will find a business model that works. And so local journalism will have a future".

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