

Depleting an Oasis in a News Desert - The Erosion of Student Journalism

My college campus declared the 2023-24 academic year the “Year of Free Speech.” Yet, in the Spring of 2023, the ink dried on our last printed campus newspaper and soon the student journalists would fade as well. While the year’s theme encapsulated the right to protest and the increasing role university campuses are playing on the national stage of free speech, the freedom of the press seemed to be overlooked. As a student journalist, I can’t help but feel the neglect and disregard for the vital role our newspaper played in our campus community. Our official campus newspaper since 1968, operated under the umbrella of Student Government and Student Media. However, as the program was defunded, disrespected, and diminished, students broke apart from our established campus newspaper and started a fully student-run independent publication. We may have rolled back the red tape, but we are now working with a much lower budget, solely running on the passion, dedication, and journalistic values of our reporters. As we face a future in a complex industry filled with uncertainty, now more than ever, student journalists are key to free expression as they bridge gaps in media and must not be dismissed.

Student journalists know what they’re signing up for, a tumultuous and ever-changing industry, but even so, the current state of the media world is disheartening. Journalists walked off their jobs at the New York Daily News, Forbes, and Condé Nast, in protest of layoffs and cost-cutting measures by their owners.¹ The New York Daily News specifically was acquired by investment firm Alden Global Capital, infamous for aggressively cutting down the operations of newspapers across the nation in favor of maintaining profit margins. And with their newsroom reduced, so does their ability to cover the city. Without this coverage, citizens are less informed,

¹ Philip Marcelo, “Media Workers Strike to Protest Layoffs at New York Daily News, Forbes and Condé Nast,” AP News, January 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/new-york-daily-news-journalism-layoffs-strikes-28bc63a66fe90f3edb2426a790103c74>.

engaged, and empowered in their communities. Not to mention the environmental impacts, as studies show factories whose businesses are covered by journalists produce 29% less emissions compared to those that are not reported on.² All this is to say that as the journalism industry faces harsh economic realities, more limiting factors strain journalistic work. The publication I grew up reading, The Los Angeles Times announced they were laying off more than 20% of their newsroom, which was one of their largest workforce reductions. LA Times owner, Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, said the cuts were necessary because the paper could no longer lose \$30 million to \$40 million a year, without higher readership for the advertising that would keep the paper afloat.³ With vulturous ownership, loss of advertising revenue, and widespread job cuts, the news industry looks as unstable as ever and I feel far from addressing the slurry of complex challenges in the industry.

As much as I am alarmed and heartbroken to see reporters that I admire lose their jobs in national newspapers, the silent disappearance of local news outlets has been consistent and just as threatening to our nation's communities. While news coverage of major cities may continue, reporting at the local level will not. According to Northwestern's "State of Local News Project," 2,900 newspapers have gone under since 2005, resulting in the loss of nearly 43,000 reporters. In 2023, on average two and a half of local newspapers closed every week.⁴ This extinction forms "news deserts," where consumers can't access the news most relevant to them, creating a disconnect between citizens and their local area. It may not be the most outright or glamorous, but cities desperately need a community journalist who attends every city council meeting,

² Sophie Yeo, "Why the Decline of Newspapers Is Bad for the Environment," Pacific Standard, November 20, 2018, <https://psmag.com/environment/why-the-decline-of-newspapers-is-bad-for-the-environment>.

³ Meg James, "L.A. Times to Lay off at Least 115 People in the Newsroom," Los Angeles Times, January 23, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2024-01-23/latimes-layoffs-115-newsroom-soon-shiong>.

⁴ "More than Half of U.S. Counties Have No Access or Very Limited Access to Local News - Medill - Northwestern University," Northwestern Medill, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2023/more-than-half-of-us-counties-have-no-access-or-very-limited-access-to-local-news.html>.

reports on local political races, and investigates concerns that directly affect the communities they serve. Without local journalism, democracy suffers, and those impacts reach not only readers but every citizen. For example, data shows that cities and regions with no local news pay higher taxes and have less democratic engagement. The fewer journalists in a region, the more likely their congressional representatives are to vote against the interests of their constituencies. Finally, local media is found to be a trusted and vital source of shared public understanding, two key factors combating distrust in national media.⁵ In today's cities, the main connection to your community may be through your local paper where you stay informed from feature stories to local advertisements. Without local journalism businesses are also left unchecked, and not only is democratic engagement damaged, but so is a strong community connection.

As more local news outlets disappear, student journalism is often what's left to fill in the gaps. At the Stanford Daily, a freshman writer investigated Stanford President's research for scientific misconduct, leading to his resignation. Student journalists at the Daily Northwestern reported that a top football coach knew of coerced sexual acts in hazing rituals, he was then fired. In New York, the Columbia Daily Spectator found toxic working conditions within the university's public safety department. In all these instances, student journalists, often unpaid, acted as watchdogs at their universities all the while also covering their surrounding towns and doing the work left in the wake of media declines.⁶ Often college reporting goes beyond the campus community and city news, but informs national audiences. After an active shooter lockdown on Aug. 28 at the University of North Carolina, The Daily Tar Heel published

⁵ Josh Stearns and Christine Schmidt, "How We Know Journalism Is Good for Democracy," Democracy Fund, October 26, 2023, <https://democracyfund.org/idea/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy/>.

⁶ David Bauder, "While the News Industry Struggles, College Students Are Supplying Some Memorable Journalism," AP News, October 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/college-journalism-students-investigations-e3239c974fee6455f36d5a0564049f54>.

harrowing text messages between students on the front cover that would touch the nation.⁷ Seeing the work and dedication of other student journalists demonstrates the vast reaches and impacts of student journalism and is nothing short of inspiring. But this year, I found myself on a campus without an accessible platform to engage in the same principles. Editors at my campus newspaper faced strict university policies demanding the hiring of external professional staff for print advertising and design clearance to resume weekly or monthly print publication. This was all work that our staff are qualified to do, and handled with almost no compensation. Paying a professional staff member upward of \$80,000 would be 99.625% more than the student staff Print Chief's pay.⁸ This distinction between professional and student work was disrespectful and demeaning, and along with other factors, ultimately led to the creation of a fully independent publication by student journalists. Although a separation would provide freedom from regulations, it only highlights the neglect our paper faced as a valuable and indispensable part of the campus community.

Unfortunately, this neglectful action against student journalism is not unique. The Daily Trojan at the University of Southern California, the only remaining daily print college paper on the West Coast, was relocated and downsized by 40%. In an editorial, the staff expressed their desire for "recognition, support, and respect," from the administration.⁹ Similarly, The Daily Collegian at Penn State University is being phased out by their administration, losing 53% of their funding in 2023, and 100% in the 2024-25 academic year. School officials claimed they were trying to balance their budget from a deficit and the publication was left on the

⁷David Bauder, "While the News Industry Struggles, College Students Are Supplying Some Memorable Journalism," AP News, October 16, 2023,

<https://apnews.com/article/college-journalism-students-investigations-e3239c974fee6455f36d5a0564049f54>.

⁸Dhanika Pineda, "Farewell New U, Welcome the Antreader | New University | UC Irvine," New University, June 7, 2023, <https://newuniversity.org/2023/06/07/farewell-new-u-welcome-the-antreader/>.

⁹Fall 2023 Editorial Board, "We Can't Afford to Silence Student Journalism," Daily Trojan, September 28, 2023, <https://dailytrojan.com/2023/09/28/we-cant-afford-to-silence-student-journalism/>.

chopping block. Student journalism maintains accountability through investigation, community through storytelling, and democracy through engagement. By undercutting student journalists, universities display their lack of commitment to the principles of a free press. Seeing the blatant disregard for the values of campus news is discouraging but college journalism persists. Their editor-in-chief, Nick Stonesifer, writes, “The Collegian will survive, and the journalistic work we do will never stop.”¹⁰

In conversations with career journalists, the most common piece of advice I received was that they began their journey at their school newspaper. However, with reduced support for student-run publications, the expansion of news deserts, and the cutthroat state of the media landscape, our on-ramp to a traditional career in journalism is crumbling. The diminishing of student voices on college campuses reflects a broader erosion of the free press. Students can’t rely solely on their passion for informing their campus. Recognition and support are crucial to allowing student journalists to thrive and eventually face the realities of the broader news industry. As our long-standing campus newspaper fades away, the declaration of the “Year of Free Speech” still lingers. The irony remains— a year dedicated to free expression is the backdrop to the decline of a platform crucial to fostering it.

¹⁰ Nick Stonesifer, “Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: The Daily Collegian Receives 100% Funding Cut by 2024-25,” The Daily Collegian, July 26, 2023, https://www.psucollegian.com/news/campus/letter-from-the-editor-in-chief-the-daily-collegian-receives-100-funding-cut-by-2024/article_41c7bfc2-2bd1-11ee-b5fc-df43430f05ff.html.