

Strong public trust, willingness to support local journalism provides hope

By Michael Standaert-North Dakota News Cooperative

Shrinking profit margins, aging ownerships and headaches from factors beyond their control like postal delays continue to strain local newspapers across North Dakota.

While some of the 73 local newspapers in the state are in critical condition, the bigger picture is not one of dying out, but of hope for the future anchored by their importance to local communities.

A two-year effort to gather data called the Future of Local News Initiative, led by the North Dakota Newspaper Association and the Rural Development Finance Corporation, finds some reasons for optimism and several paths forward for journalism prosperity.

The effort, supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation, brought together journalists and publishers from across the state to gather a rare data set through surveying newspaper owners, journalists and consumers.

The group released a final report of their key findings on Jan. 29, with the data paving the way for pilot programs to address challenges going forward.

"This has been the most focused effort that the North Dakota Newspaper Association has ever done to quantify where we are at as an industry," said Cecile Wehrman, NDNA's executive director.

Trust in print

The data gathered includes finding that 9 out of 10 news consumers believe having a local newspaper is important, with a similar amount saying that losing a paper harms local communities.

Newspapers are also the most trusted local news source, according to the data gathered by research partner Coda Ventures.

Chris Gessle, a development specialist with the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives Cooperative who was involved with the effort, said that struck him most about what the research found.

"People trust newspapers," Gessle said. "They view them as one of the more accurate media outlets or media forms out there."

Residents of the three counties where papers no longer exist - Sioux, Dunn and Slope - value papers even more, showing how those losses impact communities.

In those counties, 96% said having a newspaper is important, 87% said they would subscribe to a paper if it existed, and 21% said they would be willing to donate to help fund a newspaper beyond subscribing. "The absence of papers is really noticed in those communities," Gessle said.

Joy Schoch, publisher of the Dickinson Press, a Forum Communications newspaper, said having data to back up the vital importance of newspapers has been an important outcome from the project.

"It's essential," she said. "It's essential to keep people informed. It makes a healthy community."

The next step in the effort is to pilot several solutions that tap into the deep reservoirs of trust, demand and opportunity while acknowledging the current structural risks many newspapers face.

"This is a vital, trusted, neces-

sary industry that people want and need, and we need to find a way collectively forward that benefits society," Wehrman said.

Translating the value

Currently, 24% of households across the state are reached by a newspaper, but looking deeper at county-level data shows much deeper penetration.

Out of 53 counties, 20 have over 75% of households receiving a local newspaper and 15 more show figures of between 50-75%.

Wehrman said those numbers more accurately reflect the impact newspapers have locally, and losing them means communities lose out.

With the \$199 million in federal Rural Health Transformation funding being rolled out in the coming year, the importance of local newspapers in communicating what programs are available and how the funding can be used in those communities is crucial, Wehrman said.

People need to understand newspapers are "not a public utility," she said. "These are individual businesses that need the support of their local communities in order to continue doing the work people value so highly."

That disconnect between valuing newspapers and being willing to support them through subscriptions or donations is something that needs to be tackled by both the newspapers themselves and the communities they serve if their survival is to continue.

"People aren't seeing newspapers as a business like they see

their hardware store as a business, and they may not be aware of their struggles," said Ellen Huber, rural development director for NDAREC. "We talk a lot about retaining and growing other kinds of businesses in the state, but I don't think anyone has thrown newspapers in that bucket of important, vital businesses, and ones that are worthy of focusing on, retaining and strengthening and growing," Huber said.

The real value of local newspapers needs to be better communicated to the wider public, participants in the initiative said. "People think it should be free," Schoch said. "I think people forget about us. People forget about it until they really need us."

Piloting real action

The next step for the initiative is taking forward several pilot projects centered on succession planning, exploring new revenue models, providing print and digital samples for the next generation of news consumers, and developing ready-made promotions and content that can be adopted statewide. Whether those have a deep impact or not depends on securing grant funding to take them forward, Wehrman said.

The hope is that these don't become moonshots, but practical, replicable interventions.

One of the most immediate concerns is the succession planning component, since so many independent publishers are close to retirement age.

Currently, while group-owned newspapers show stronger margins and sustainability, indepen-

dent, family-owned papers are under pressure from owners nearing retirement, the high cost of printing and distribution, and the heavy reliance on revenue from public notices.

Younger journalists are interested in taking over the reins of these papers, but are constrained by a lack of training and the need for financing to sustain operations, the research found.

"Succession planning is something that we need to offer newspapers, because there is an urgent need for newspapers to change hands," Wehrman said.

Another aspect those involved in the initiative hope can gain traction is to meet demands of news consumers, particularly younger Gen Z and Millennial ones, for both digital and print versions of a newspaper. Offering samples of those to non-subscribers may be one way to boost circulation.

"I think there's a lot of optimism coming out of this about all of the different ways the data gathered for this can be used, and a lot of excitement about the positive momentum going forward," Huber said.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North Dakotans. The organization increases the public's access to quality journalism and advances news literacy across the state. For more information about NDNC or to make a charitable contribution, please visit newscoopnd.org.



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#3 North Main Street / P.O. Box 630
Velva, ND 58790

Ph. 701-338-2599 / Fax 701-338-2705

Email: vavads@srt.com

Office/Sales Manager:

Becky Cederstrom

Reporter:

Heather Tudor

Layout/Design:

DeAnna Frantsen

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