

Burlington County Times

Opinion

Guest Opinion: Sowing the seeds of trust in the media

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When I began a journalism career in 1977, community news was where I, and most of my friends, began.

My first beat was covering a South Jersey town with a population of 1,569. I worked the night shift and was assigned to the city council meetings, where the hot debate was over whether or not to install a traffic light at the main intersection.

I longed for bigger stories to cover, but our editor urged us to be the eyes and ears of the towns assigned to us, to open our minds and try to understand what mattered to local residents. I had no idea then how right he was.

With surveys and studies now showing how trust in media has declined in recent years, one factor is gaining attention: Many towns and regions far from the shadows of the bigger cities and within the vast expanse between the East and West coasts prefer to be covered by reporters rooted in the community and who engender trust in their readers, listeners and viewers.

Media consolidation makes this difficult. A recent study by the University of North Carolina's School of Media and Journalism found that almost 1,800 newspapers in the United States closed or merged with other papers since 2004. With shrinking newsrooms, it's tough for media to know what the interior of the United States is thinking, feeling and believing, according to media expert Candace Kelly, an associate professor at Rowan University, who spoke at a Socratic Dialogue at the college on Dec. 15, 2016.

Media became the least trusted institution globally, according to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, attributed mainly to people's lack of confidence in online search engines and social media. Sixty-three percent of respondents said they don't know how to tell good journalism from rumors or fake news, and 59 percent of respondents also noted their inability to identify the truth.

There are bright spots. As reported Nov. 18 in The New York Times, Sarah Baird, a journalist from Richmond, Kentucky, along with developer Cameron Decker developed a tool to promote better local reporting called Shoeleather. This is a database aimed at connecting journalists outside the nation's media hubs in places like New York City, Washington and Los Angeles with editors across the country for the purpose of reporting on their home regions. Since it was announced on Twitter in late September, more than 400 reporters representing all 50 states have registered.

Shoeleather's purpose is to make it easy for editors at national news organizations to find reporters who are working in communities. Baird suggested local reporters might be able to collaborate on breaking news like hurricanes or shootings, rather than large media organizations relying on sending reporters from out of town.

Moves like this can help the media better represent Middle America's views, as evidenced in the 32 Percent Project, named for the percentage of people who said in a 2016 Gallup poll that they have confidence in the media to report fairly and accurately. The project was funded by a grant from the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. The authors held public conversations with 54 people in four communities across the country, asking questions about what news organizations should do to increase public trust.

Among the findings published in June 2018, people said they want to know that news outlets share the community's values, and to some that means reporters are members of the community themselves. Journalists, they said, must approach their work as a service to the community, and must build deeper relationships with their readers, viewers and listeners. Diversity also was named as fundamental to earning trust in media, with newsrooms that mirror the makeup of their audience.

For centuries, the media has served as the watchdog that never sleeps and contributes to an informed public. Sowing the seeds of trust on the front porches and in the backyards and town squares of communities around the country can help the free press continue to play this vital role in a just and fair society.

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