From Kyrgyzstan to the Rockies: Overcoming the challenges of rural journalism

University of Montana--Missoula. School of Journalism
From Kyrgyzstan to the Rockies: Overcoming the challenges of rural journalism

Jailhouse Journalism | The Ugly American | A Death Documented
You know that life in Montana is marvelously varied, powerfully moving, and endlessly fascinating.

You should expect the same from your local newspaper.
One in five Americans lived in rural areas in the year 2000. That’s 59 million souls, give or take, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Fifty-nine million people living, say the census folk, in clusters of 2,500 people or fewer.

So Greybull, Wyoming, population 1,800 or so, home of the Greybull Standard, is rural. So is Custer, South Dakota, population 1,860, where if you show up on Wednesdays you’ll get to read a fresh copy of the Custer County Chronicle.

And so is Belcourt, North Dakota, population 2,440, where listeners to KEYA-FM (“The Voice of the Turtle Mountains”) hear country music and programming from National Public Radio.

News happens in such places, and not just when the FBI captures a lunatic like the Unabomber (Lincoln, Montana, population 1,100). Sometimes the news is about how a community deals with a growing wolf population, or how it wrestles with drought, or what it plans to do now that its high school has too few students and must ring its final bell.

In Montana especially, where about two-thirds of our population is rural, these things matter. That’s why the School of Journalism at the University of Montana, this magazine’s host institution, has for so long worked to help rural journalists do their jobs, and to help rural residents get their news. In that spirit, this year’s issue of Montana Journalism Review features ideas important to rural journalism. In our section on rural news, you’ll find articles about successful business models for rural newspapers and radio stations; you’ll learn how a Central Asian country struggles to get news to its rural residents; you’ll read about the adventures an urban East Coast journalist had as she reported her way through Montana, as well as the adventures of a rural reporter trying to make sense of law, science, and bureaucracy while covering one of the West’s most controversial issues; and you’ll catch a glimpse into a new citizen journalism project intended to help rural communities replace newspapers they’ve lost.

This year also marks a shift for MJR, our first year as a fully multimedia publication. Visit http://www.umt.edu/journalism/mjr/mjr2007/ to find photographic slide shows, audio clips, and more related to the articles you’ll find in these pages.

This magazine, though filled with articles and photographs by professional journalists, was designed, edited, and created online by students at the University of Montana’s School of Journalism. Keith Graham, my colleague on the faculty, gave up precious summer days to guarantee the magazine would look good. This staff – and especially the managing editors – worked long hours, fixed many glitches, and learned much about the work necessary to produce a professional-quality magazine. I applaud their dedication and, on behalf of the School of Journalism, offer its appreciation for a job well done.

– Michael Downs, editor
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African-American Pioneers

Lovie Smith and
Tony Dungy
coached against
each other in
Super Bowl XL.
The Bears lost,
but history
was made.

I salute Barack
Obama who made
history two years ago by
becoming Illinois’ first male
African American senator.
His accomplishments also
include being the first
African American president
of the Harvard Law Review.
His humble and articu­
late manner has attracted
many supporters as he has
expressed an interest in
running for president of the
United States.
Paul Crume, D8

I salute my English teacher, Ms. Joyce Hutchens, a
blessing and the list goes on. Having her as our teacher is truly a blessing. She is
patience, understanding, humor, willingness, and dedication to improvli
Anthony Eason Jr., D8

I salute Ms. Hattie
McDaniel
for being the first
African American
actress to win an Oscar
(best supporting actress)
for her performance in
“Gone With the Wind.”
Odion Paker, D8

In 1987, sin |
became the
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numerous
the Kenes
Awards. I
standing a

Jailhouse Journalism

Chicago Tribune reporters lend
time and talent to help produce
jail newspaper
Three & Eight Voices saluted African-American heroes in the February 2007 edition. The newspaper is created by high school inmates of Cook County Jail outside downtown Chicago.

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In 1960, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges Hall became the first African-American child to desegregate an elementary school and was the target of an angry segregationist mob that gathered there. For one year, she was the only student in her class because white parents removed their children from the school in protest. In honor of Black History Month, I salute this educational pioneer for her courage, strength and perseverance in her efforts to improve education.

Demarrio Martin, Dtc. 8

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Last year, with support from the American Society of Newspaper Editors and a nudge from a high school English teacher, some reporters and editors at the Chicago Tribune took on an interesting project: teaching journalism to students serving time at Cook County Jail and helping them to create a school newspaper. The product was Three & Eight Voices, a publication named for the students of Consuella B. York Alternative High School, Divisions 3 and 8, who made it a reality. The newspaper first published in February 2007.

Rex W. Huppke, Jon Yates and Angela Rozas contributed their efforts to this project. These are their stories.
A letter came across my desk last fall, a thoughtful note from a high school teacher looking for Chicago Tribune reporters willing to help with her after-school journalism class. This sounded simple enough. But as I read deeper into the letter it became clear this was no ordinary request.

The high school in question is located behind the razor wire-topped fences of the sprawling Cook County Jail outside Chicago. The students are all young inmates, facing charges that range from drug and robbery offenses to rape and murder.

Having written extensively about the prison system and about the struggles ex-offenders face once they're released back into society, my initial reaction was pragmatic and perhaps a bit cynical: Is journalism really what these folks need to be learning about? Couldn't they benefit from something more practical?

With these questions in mind, I contacted Joyce Hutchens, the teacher at York Alternative High School who wrote the letter. We spoke at length about the school, about the passion many of her students bring to writing and the interest — sincere interest — that several of her pupils have expressed in pursuing a career in journalism when, and if, they're released.

I told her I'd be happy to come in and help, and I said I'd ask around the newsroom to see if other colleagues would volunteer. Within hours of sending out a mass e-mail I'd heard from nearly thirty reporters and editors eager to participate.

I went to the jail myself for the first class. Built on nearly 100 acres about five miles southwest of downtown Chicago, the Cook County facility is the country's largest single-site jail, a veritable distribution center for criminals. It's an imposing complex and certainly not a setting that seems conducive to education.

Inside Division 8, under the flickering fluorescent lights of a cramped classroom, I met a group of eight young men. We spent two hours together. I explained my work at the Tribune and the highlights of my career. They asked pointed and insightful questions about the media and the manner in which journalists do their jobs. I touched on the basics of news writing: the hard news lede, the nut graf, how to ask the right questions. The time flew by.

And then I was gone. Out the gate, back into my car and off to a simple, comfortable world the inmates could only dream about.

What I walked away with surprised me. My colleagues who've gone to the class since have left with the same unexpected feeling, a feeling that, through talk of writing and journalism, we'd accomplished something, made a connection, introduced a flicker of hope and interest to a world that's dark and dull.

Many of these young men may end up serving decades in prison. Some will go free and struggle to find their way in the world. This journalism-in-jail effort may have little impact on their lives.

But if just one of them is inspired to start writing, if just one sees an avenue toward a better life, then this odd-sounding program stops sounding so odd. And spending a couple hours behind the fence begins to feel surprisingly comfortable.

Rex W. Huppke has been a staff reporter at the Chicago Tribune since 2002, writing about everything from homicide in the city to an albino squirrel colony in rural Illinois. Before that he worked for The Associated Press in Indiana, covering news from across the state and anchoring the news service's coverage of the Timothy McVeigh execution.
Lessons Learned

By Jon Yates and Angela Rozas

On the ride to the jail, we were a bit nervous. Why were we even doing this, we wondered? Who cares about journalism in jail?

We worried the teenage inmates we were supposed to teach wouldn’t care or, worse yet, they would become unruly.

The sight of the jail didn’t help. Cook County Jail is a massive place, with typical razor wire fences and multiple-check points. The jail guards we dealt with seemed to be surprised to find journalists trying to get into the building — not to interview anyone but to teach.

We walked through several buildings before we got to the “school” wing. On our way to our classroom, it was strange to see adult inmates milling about in the common rooms. When we got there we were alone for a few minutes, and we worked hard not to appear nervous.

To our surprise, the inmates who arrived for the class weren’t just interested, they were engaging. One by one, they asked questions about journalism. As we started brainstorming story ideas, their suggestions were insightful and surprising.

Was the commissary overpriced? How did the price of Ho Hos in jail compare to the price at a convenience store on the outside? There was a new sheriff running the jail. Did he care about the inmates? What was his plan for the facility? What was his background? There had recently been a series of fights in one of the cellblocks. What was the cause? What was the solution?

With each story idea, the teens offered ways they might report or write the stories. One boy showed us his drawings, and his classmates encouraged him to draw a picture for the newspaper. That led to a discussion about newspaper cartoonists and how these teens could use the skills and interests they already have in their work.

We didn’t talk about why they were there. We didn’t talk about crime at all, in fact. We talked only about how they could take their life experiences, their current situations, and find something compelling to say about them on paper.

As the inmates got more excited, so did we. The tiny, dark, windowless room began looking more like a classroom and less like a cell. The young men seemed less like inmates and more like students.

A jail newspaper? Why not? Journalism, it became clear, could prosper anywhere. In fact, it should.

Suddenly, the sprawling, concrete-walled, razor-wired corrections center seemed the perfect place for a newspaper. On the chalkboard behind us, we’d brainstormed an entire front page’s worth of story ideas. We assigned the inmates stories and suggested they start reporting right away. Before we knew it, our time was up.

As the boys left, our jail liaison, Joyce Hutchens, called it a good day. The kids seemed to like the classes more and more, she said.

We walked out feeling we’d done what we came to do, to teach a class about journalism.

But we walked out students as well, having learned more about what life is like for teens on the inside.

Jon Yates is a general assignments reporter at the Chicago Tribune and writes a twice-weekly consumer column called “What's Your Problem?” He has worked for the paper since 2000, after stints at the Nashville Tennessean, Palm Springs Desert Sun and Iowa City Press-Citizen.

Angela Rozas is a Chicago Tribune general assignments reporter, primarily covering crime. She has worked for the paper since 2003 and was previously a reporter for The Times-Picayune of New Orleans. A native of Louisiana, she covered Hurricane Katrina for the Tribune.
The world from the Hill
Senate fellowship provides a renewed faith in the power of journalism

BY LAURA KELLMAS

Ever wonder what it’s like on the other side? If you’re a journalist, you never really get the chance to know the world your sources inhabit, outside of your own reporting. There’s not much opportunity to really see the source’s realm — where they make the decisions we write about and where they gripe behind closed doors about people like us — unless you’re willing to do what your colleagues and your conscience have always told you not to: Sell out, risk being tainted, and never come back.

Turns out, there are ways to experience those other worlds without setting fire to the bridge as you cross over, and to come back with your integrity and career intact. Along the way, it’s also possible to gain a whole new appreciation for what we do.

I’m a political reporter who spent most of last year working for a Democrat. I spent the rest of the year covering other Democrats’ campaigns, and those of Republicans and Greens too, for my newspaper. Not once has anyone questioned it. That’s because I had the chance, along with a few other colleagues from newspapers and television stations, to spend a year as a fellow with the American Political Science Association.

In November 2005, we joined a diverse group of thirty fellows — including international scholars, diplomats and a twenty-year veteran of the CIA — who left jobs behind for ten months and worked instead for members of Congress.

The organization’s Congressional Fellowship Program pays a stipend to the journalists, so we didn’t have to take money from the government or anyone who works for it. I don’t think I would have been interested, otherwise. But accepting the fellowship did mean there was no way to avoid associating myself with people who have very public opinions about the issues I cover.

That made me nervous at first, and I wasn’t alone. The other reporters in the program worried, too, about lingering suspicions that prospective employers or future sources may have about our time working in Congress. Neil H. Simon, a television reporter and producer who moved from Albuquerque to Washington for the fellowship, said he was relieved when people on Capitol Hill as well as colleagues in journalism seemed to get it.

“I realized under the umbrella of the fellowship, that this just sort of immunized me from any taint of partisan concerns,” he told me recently.

Laura Kellams is a political reporter for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, covering the legislature in Little Rock. Since she started at the paper in 1997, she has covered city government, regional affairs and courts. She lives in Fayetteville with her husband, Kyle, who is news director for KUAF-FM, the University of Arkansas’ public radio station.
The value [of the fellowship] was my renewed faith in the power of journalism...
Issues that seemed inconsequential became top priorities when reporters called, and not just those from the national media but also those from small towns in Montana.

— Laura Kellams, former Senate Fellow
Still, we were careful to choose offices that wouldn’t brand us on the extreme wing of either party. Fellows seek out their own positions; the program doesn’t make assignments. We went looking for jobs in congressional offices just as anyone would, by submitting cover letters and resumes, but with the advantage that we could offer our services gratis.

Though the association’s fellowship is the oldest on the Hill, it’s now one of several. Congressional offices are used to seeing fellows come and go and have grown accustomed to all the free, sometimes expert, help. But journalism fellows are a rare sort, and I encountered people who were puzzled and understandably wary.

The director of our program, Jeff Biggs, discouraged the reporters in the group from accepting positions that would have us working in media relations or communications. It was good advice. Politicians’ interaction with the press was the one thing we understood already. We needed to learn something new. But more than that, he understood, and we enthusiastically agreed, that it would be a bad idea for any of us to speak on behalf of a member of Congress. Talk about a career killer.

So I was choosy in submitting applications, obsessively so. I interviewed almost exclusively with members of both parties who on occasion have been accused of disloyalty to their own. I liked Republicans from blue states and Democrats from red states.

Ultimately, I chose to work for the Senate Finance Committee, in large part because it has a reputation for bipartisan cooperation. That’s how I ended up working for Sen. Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat. At the time, Baucus was the ranking Democrat on the committee, a powerful one with jurisdiction over tax policy, Medicare and Medicaid, Social Security, and international trade.

Even with the committee’s reputation, I had qualms. I planned to return to my job at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, and a senator from Arkansas, Blanche Lincoln, is a member of the committee. Words were drawn up to protect us both: Committee staff promised in writing not to assign me to any of Lincoln’s projects, and I promised in writing to steer clear of them. Though I never came close, our little contract made me feel better and soothed my editors back home.

To my relief, the committee’s bipartisan reputation proved true for the most part, and I found myself occasionally collaborating with Republican staff members on projects that both our bosses signed off on.

Mostly, I worked on committee investigations, which proved to be a perfect fit. I used my reporting and writing skills and discovered that the staff members around me were doing the same thing, whether or not they were investigators. I watched them press for tidbits of insight from their colleagues, from their counterparts on other staffs, from lobbyists and even reporters. In many cases, they were better at it than I am, and I lamented that they weren’t journalists.

Turns out there’s nothing like working outside a newsroom to make you realize that your expertise would actually come in handy in the “real” world. Simon said it never occurred to him before he worked in Congress that he might like life outside of journalism. He’s still in television news, now in Washington, but the knowledge that he has marketable skills continues to gnaw at him.

“I saw myself enjoying certain things, and I saw the ways I could take that and make more money,” Simon said. “It made me much more entrepreneurial than I was in the first place. That’s something I’m still struggling with.”

Kenneth P. Vogel, another journalism fellow who is now senior staff writer with The Politico, said he was at first worried that spending time in a congressional office would dull his instinct of “extreme wariness – some might call it mistrust” of government.

“It hasn’t, but it’s made me more aware of all the well-intentioned people in government, an awareness I hope will help me temper my cynicism without sacrificing my watchdog mentality,” Vogel said.

Simon and I felt the same way.

“I have a sympathy and empathy for what they’re going through,” Simon said of congressional staffers.

“I know the stresses they’re under. As a journalist, when we understand people’s lives better, we’re better at communicating.”

I tried to be an observer mostly, but I was constantly amazed by staff members’ trust.

The Congressional Fellowship Program is devoted to expanding knowledge and awareness of Congress, so it makes sense that each year the American Political Science Association chooses a few journalists to take part. The idea is to give early and mid-career journalists an opportunity to learn more about Congress and the legislative process through direct participation. For more information, the association’s website is www.apsanet.org.
I saw myself enjoying certain things, and I saw the ways I could take that and make more money. It made me much more entrepreneurial than I was in the first place. That’s something I’m still struggling with.

— Neil H. Simon

of me. I pored over tax documents that I had to have the committee chairman’s permission even to look at and sifted through stacks of Jack Abramoff’s e-mails that Pulitzer Prize winners desperately wanted to get their hands on.

These were the moments when I resisted saying, “Don’t you people know I’m a reporter?” But this could also be where their East Coast bias crept in. What did it matter if a reporter from Arkansas was sitting in the back of the room? (Where is Arkansas, anyway?)

If there’s one thing I learned from those meetings on the Hill, it’s that staff members run the country. Indeed, they’re working so hard for such long hours that it was almost surprising what precious little was actually accomplished. In that way, Congress lived up to its reputation.

The real value of the fellowship, for me, was not so much in learning how an appropriations bill is passed or how tax policy is massaged behind closed doors, though I’m glad for the knowledge because it makes me a better reporter. Instead, the value was my renewed faith in the power of journalism.

Investigations would begin in response to clipped-out newspaper articles or on the basis of last night’s 60 Minutes interview. Conversely, weeks of work seemed to evaporate if reporters ignored the product. Issues that seemed inconsequential became top priorities when reporters called, and not just those from the national media but also those from small towns in Montana. As someone who’s been making those calls for years, it was fascinating and even gratifying to see the reaction at the other end of the line. Vogel, too, said he was reminded of the extent to which the actions and policies of government seemed driven by the media.

“I always suspected as much, but it was enlightening to watch it happen up close – how strategic, blatant, and occasionally shameless it was,” he said.

For me, it was a sobering reminder of the importance of what we do, how we select stories, and how we decide which issues are worth pursuing.

It’s enough to make me wish for a fellows’ exchange program to bring our sources into our own newsroom world on occasion. If nothing else, we could use the sympathy. MJR
Growth in Costa Rica’s English-Speaking Population Spurs Media Boom

Story and Photos by Meg Yamamoto

In the beginning, there were ox carts.

A few decades ago, when Costa Rica was a sleepy coffee republic, these sturdy wagons—painted miniatures of which now constitute some of the country’s most popular tourist-souvenir offerings—were the principal mode of transportation from plantation to port.

Now, in this Central American nation of 4.3 million inhabitants, ox carts have been replaced by Hyundais, Toyotas, and charter buses (though some might argue the country’s poor roads are still better suited to bovines).

Combustible engines aren’t the only things that have multiplied in this developing nation. A fleet of gringos—the semi-affectionate moniker Costa Ricans bestow upon English-speaking North Americans—has parked on the country’s rainforested hillsides and sandy beaches, and seems here to stay.

Many are retirees. Some are snowbirds who live here only part of the year, during the worst of the northern winter. Others are oddballs looking for a fresh, tropical start in life. Whatever its makeup, Costa Rica’s English-speaking expatriate community is alive, well and growing, spurring a parallel increase in the demand for information in English.

In this, the 51st anniversary year of the country’s oldest English-

Meg Yamamoto is the editor of the Weekend section of The Tico Times. She worked as a writer and editor in Canada and as a globe-trotting freelancer before settling in Costa Rica, where she has lived for five years.
language newspaper, *The Tico Times*, dozens of newspapers, magazines, and online publications are being produced in English in the country. While media in North America are increasingly being consolidated, with competing newspapers vanishing in most cities, in Costa Rica publications are on the rise, and most are independent—even mom-and-pop—operations.

The granddaddy of them all is *The Tico Times*, founded in 1956 by veteran newswoman Elisabeth Dyer, formerly of *The New York Post*, as a project to teach high school students about journalism. Chronicled in the paper’s archives are decades of original reports covering the news in Costa Rica, from the arrival of television in the country to the Sandinista Revolution in neighboring Nicaragua to the country’s transformation into a powerhouse tourism destination.

The paper has always been a family operation; Elisabeth Dyer’s husband Richard served as publisher from 1972 to 1996, and their daughter, Dery, now publisher, was the editor of the paper for more than thirty years.

Under Richard Dyer, *The Tico Times* found itself on the front lines of a decades-long fight against obligatory licensing for journalists imposed by the Colegio de Periodistas, a government-sanctioned journalists’ association that required all working journalists in the country to be members, but the colegio prohibited foreign journalists—i.e., English-speaking ones needed for an English-language paper—from applying unless they had completed five years of residency in the country. And, in a quintessentially Costa Rican catch-22, journalists could not apply for residency unless they were members of the colegio. Dyer did battle with the colegio for twenty-three years, and his eventual victory in 1985—the year the Inter-American Human Rights Court declared the compulsory licensing of journalists a violation of human rights—is the reason foreign journalists are allowed to practice their profession in Costa Rica today. Dyer’s efforts earned him the Inter-American Press Association’s Grand Prize for Press Freedom in 1995.

Fifty years after its founding, *The Tico Times* prints 20,000 copies weekly and is distributed throughout Costa Rica and the United States, with subscribers in fifty countries. Based out of an old, two-story house in the court district of San José, Costa Rica’s capital, the national weekly has an editorial staff of fourteen and averages fifty-two pages, including national news, with regular business, real estate and opinion sections, a “Weekend” features section, and *The Nica Times*, an eight-page Nicaraguan publication produced out of Granada, Nicaragua. *The Tico Times* is the only paid-circulation English-language newspaper in the country, with a local newsstand price of 600 colones (about $1.15).

*The Tico Times* Publisher Dery Dyer attributes the paper’s enduring success simply to “good journalism.”

“We offer an alternative to the Spanish-language press,” she said. “We cover national news with a different perspective.”

Over the years, Dyer, 58, has seen a number of rival publications come and go, though she says none has challenged *The Tico Times*’ supremacy in terms of reputation and following.

“The competition we’ve had has mainly been for advertising; we’ve never had any trouble with readership,” she said.

While *The Tico Times* remains Costa Rica’s only national English-language newspaper, distributed countrywide, the competition has multiplied in recent years, largely in response to an explosion of foreign development in the northwestern province of Guanacaste, where no fewer than three English-language newspapers have cropped up in the past four years.

With several international airlines now offering direct flights from the U.S. into Liberia, Guanacaste’s...
capital, tourists and residents have the option of bypassing the national capital entirely, and the region has become its own nexus of tourism and development.

Home to some of Costa Rica’s most celebrated beaches and the destination of choice for the greater part of the country’s annual 1.6 million tourists, Guanacaste has seen skyrocketing development in recent years. With the Four Seasons entrenched since January 2004, a Hyatt Regency and JW Marriott under construction, and vacation condos sprouting throughout the region, this explosive growth shows no indication of slowing down.

Ralph Nicholson, publisher-editor of *The Beach Times*, based out of the coastal village of Potrero, likens Guanacaste’s development to the Wild West.

“First you have a guy with a pick staking his claim on a plot of land,” Nicholson said. “A few more prospectors arrive, and a few more, and next thing you know there’s a land grab. Everyone needs supplies to build on their land, so up goes a general store. People start bringing in their families, and they need places to eat, so restaurants start popping up. You need telecommunications – electricity and phone lines are put in, which happened here less than twenty years ago.

“And then people want a newspaper.”

A career journalist and former Reuters executive, Nicholson, 50, from Australia, landed in Guanacaste in January 2004, and found himself sitting in a beachside restaurant, looking out at the ocean, beer in hand, wishing he had something informative to read that would tell him what was really going on in that part of the country. Three months later, he and his wife, former Reuters photographer Zoraida Díaz, from Colombia, published the first issue of *The Beach Times*, with a print run of 3,000 copies, which they distributed themselves in beach towns throughout Guanacaste.

After three years of “bloody hard work,” Nicholson now prints 10,000 copies weekly and distributes throughout Guanacaste and south to the central Pacific coast, home to the popular tourist destinations of Jacó and Manuel Antonio. Currently running forty pages, the free publication features original regional and community news reports written by an editorial staff of five.

Nicholson says his paper’s goal
is to inform people about what's really happening in coastal communities on a local level.

"I think the community newspaper, like local government, is the most important thing here," he said. "Ours is not a paper about foreigners for foreigners. It's designed to educate people who have chosen to live in this region. It's not always pleasant reading for investors."

The Tamarindo News, a free, monthly publication based in the tourist mecca of Tamarindo, takes a lighter approach.

"We're not too heavy or serious of a newspaper," said editor and publisher Juanita Hayman, 36. "People on vacation are trying to get away from all the terrible things happening in their own countries."

The first English-language paper based in Guanacaste, The Tamarindo News began in May 2003 as a joint venture between Hayman and Nicholas Viale, owner of the Century 21 real estate franchise in Tamarindo. Hayman, a seven-year resident of Tamarindo, said she saw the need for a local paper, and her then-future husband Viale — the two were married last year — wanted a place to advertise.

After starting with twelve pages, the paper doubled in size in just three months.

"That's when I started freaking out and thinking, 'Whoa, this is going to be a full-time job,'" Hayman recalled.

Today The Tamarindo News runs about thirty-six pages — more during the tourist high season — and prints 3,000 copies monthly, with a staff consisting of an English-language editor, a Spanish-language editor, and freelancers. Covering local issues and some newswire-provided national and international news, the bilingual publication runs stories in English with Spanish translations alongside. Hayman says the paper’s objective is to "serve as a community platform where residents can voice their concerns and have a place to talk about the things that are important. It's also an information tool for people who live here and come to visit."

Targeting a different market is The Journal, based out of Liberia. Formerly The Guanacaste Journal, the weekly started as an English-language section of Guanacaste's Spanish-language El Independiente, according to the newspaper's general manager, Jan Kozak, from the Czech Republic.

Thanks to the financial backing of its investors, who Kozak says are developers behind some of the biggest projects in Guanacaste, The Journal has been able to grow quickly since its inception in January 2005. Distributed along the Pacific coast and in San José, the free-circulation paper currently runs between forty-eight and fifty-six pages and prints 20,000 copies a week.

With an editorial staff of seven, The Journal publishes national and international news stories, with about 50 percent of its editorial content coming from newswire material.

Kozak, 26, says The Journal targets foreign residents and investors, high-end tourists and the Costa Rican business community, and that its role is to "promote Costa Rica and more importantly Guanacaste as a world tourism destination."

Asked if this objective, and the interests of The Journal's developer investors, are at odds with a newspaper's function of providing unbiased coverage, Kozak responded that recent editions have been "particularly filled with stories telling..."
We certainly do not pretend that all is rosy and that Costa Rica is a flawless paradise on Earth.

—Jan Kozak, general manager, El Independiente

about rising crime, illegal construction, etc. in Guanacaste and in Costa Rica generally.

"You may be about to decide whether to purchase a condo in Jacó, Tamarindo or in the Papagayo area. You read The Journal, and you make a decision," Kozak said. "We certainly do not pretend that all is rosy and that Costa Rica is a flawless paradise on Earth."

While the gringo settlement of Costa Rica may have driven the recent upsurge of English-language news publications in the country, the future of the market may ultimately be dictated by ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves.

In response to booming tourism and investment and a growing market of well-paying jobs with multinational corporations such as Intel, Hewlett-Packard and Hospira, more and more Costa Ricans are learning, speaking, and wanting to read English.

"We have more and more tico readers, so English is definitely the growing language," The Tico Times’ Dyer said.

That in mind, the next serious contender in Costa Rica’s English-language news market could be a paper written by ticos for ticos, leaving expat journalists with nothing to write but postcards to our families. MJR
Several years ago, one of my best friends, a fellow journalist, committed suicide. I couldn’t know at the time how his terrible decision would change the direction of my life. His death rocked me because, like his other friends, I had completely missed his depression. Charlie’s death loosened an avalanche of questions. The first: Why? For a journalist, the fact that there was no adequate answer to that question, or the others that tumbled out on its heels, launched me on a journey that I feel hasn’t yet concluded, one that would cause me to choose to take a year away from journalism at Stanford University, and that would ultimately help me find a fresh direction for my career. Some months after Charlie’s death, I began to research suicide for a piece about his death in The Hartford Courant’s Sunday magazine, Northeast, and I discovered that I wasn’t just researching suicide, I was researching men. Eighty percent of suicides in the United States are boys and men, and in most countries, a wide majority of suicides are male – something that is true in Argentina, in Russia, in South America.

Mike Swift was a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University from 2005 - 2006. He works for the San Jose Mercury News covering race and demographics, focusing on gender. Before the Mercury News, he was a staff writer at The Hartford Courant. Swift was awarded the New England Society of Newspaper Editors’ Master Reporter Award. He also received the Charles Dudley Warner Award for top writer at the Courant. He graduated from Colby College with a bachelor’s degree in English literature.
I discovered that I wasn't just researching suicide, I was researching men. Eighty percent of suicides in the United States are boys and men, and in most countries, a wide majority of suicides are male... Was there something inherently male in our embrace of death?

— Mike Swift

Africa. What could it be, I wondered, that would cause such a striking similarity in cultures as diverse as sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America? Was there something inherently male in our embrace of death? Given that 90 percent of people who take their lives are suffering from a diagnosable mental illness or a substance abuse problem, according to epidemiological data quoted by the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide represents a huge public health crisis that this country has essentially ignored — and continues to. This was what I had in mind when I applied to be a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University, studying “Manhood and the Male Code: The Cost to Men.”

When I arrived at Stanford in the fall of 2005, I expected to find a wealth of resources at one of America’s great research universities. There was actually a gender studies institute, so of course there had to be many professors and graduate students studying the gender roles of men in ancient Greece — interesting, to be sure, but not really applicable to what I hoped to do. I doubt my experience would have been different at any other large American university, and that in itself is a telling fact. To a large degree in the U.S., “gender studies” is really about feminist studies. The idea of studying the masculine gender strikes many people as somehow wrong: Isn’t there a whole library full of books about the lives of men? Well, yes.

But there is only a minuscule sliver of that library that has anything about the experience of masculinity and maleness. And just like people who think they speak with no accent because that’s what’s “normal,” many men and women are unable to see the degree to which their beliefs and perceptions are shaped by their unthinking adoption of “normal” male gender roles. We have such an iconic, closed view of what men are supposed to be that people say, “Be a man,” without thinking they need to consider what that means. No one would say, “Be a woman,” and assume the same universal understanding of what a woman is supposed to be. Women have more latitude to be androgynous in our culture; they can step outside traditional female roles and not lose their femininity — and that’s a good thing. We don’t think Hillary Rodham Clinton less feminine for pursuing the presidency. But we wouldn’t have the same feeling about Bill Clinton’s masculinity if he were to pursue the traditional role of First Lady — decorating the White House, say. In many ways, masculinity remains a very tight box.

At Stanford, I couldn’t approach the matter directly; I had to come at angles. I took courses on the sociology of gender and a class at the Graduate School of Business on how women’s entry into the labor force was changing the workplace. I studied gay history and women’s history. I studied the psycho-social development of boys, and I created independent study topics to try to get at how society and the media build our ideas of maleness. In a project I did for a women’s history course, I catalogued every issue or Enquirer, between 1950 and 1955, when it was the quintessential men’s magazine, analyzing the stories and cartoons to see how they constructed maleness in that most “normal” of decades. It was striking how many of the cartoons (about 70 percent of the several hundred cartoons I ana-
lyzed) were about gender; there were virtually none about sports, friendship, growing up, politics, or growing old, all things one might think were central elements of men’s lives. In the cartoons, you didn’t see men happy; you saw them mechanically fulfilling roles – breadwinner, husband and father, as if masculinity was more about the suit of clothes than the life within. While the pages of *Esquire* in that most marriage-centric decade were crammed with cartoons of couples getting married, there was not a single cartoon showing a happy man at the altar. You might as well have expected a cartoon of a happy Communist. And the Cold War language of Communist “contagion” echoed in stories and cartoons about the anti-male: in the “contamination” of homosexuality. It was a striking lesson to me about how men could have power but not freedom. The exemplary outward role of husband and dad was a mockery of the inner sadness and loneliness many men secretly felt.

Gender roles continue to morph in our society, and this is one story the media should cover better. In a course at Stanford’s elite Graduate School of Business, it was remarkable the degree to which a group of young women – who will no doubt be some of the most powerful and influential people in America two decades hence – felt the weight of old gender roles. Early in the course, the professor asked for a show of hands in the predominantly female classroom of those who considered themselves feminists. Perhaps half raised their hands. Feminism was an anachronism, they argued. You didn’t need it anymore. Later, the professor asked the class how many had thought about freezing their eggs in order to delay parenthood until after the critical career-building years of the late 20s and early 30s. The idea: Yes, you can have it all, both parenthood and power. At least as large a share raised their hands as who said they were feminists. Don’t call us femi-


(left and right) "Did you have a tough day at the office, dear?" and "Did you have a tough night at home, dear?" *Esquire*, January 1955 issue. Neither of the separate spheres of a 1950s man’s home or work lives are models of honesty or intimacy.
nists, the class said, but I was struck by how many of these very bright young women were worried about how prospective marriage partners would react to the likelihood that theirs would be the larger paycheck. “Will the kind of man that I want — ambitious, smart — still want me, if I make more money and have a better career?” Ultimately, the class concluded that it is impossible for both members of a couple to have high-powered, time-demanding careers and have children — even given a big income that allows a couple to “outsource” childcare and housework. I couldn’t help but wonder whether the future partners of these MBAs — and millions of other American men — will have to accept more of the grinding compromises between career and kids that woman have faced for so long but that many men have been spared to this point in time.

Gender, I came to believe in the course of my year at Stanford, is a great but largely unrealized opportunity for the media to connect with readers and viewers. While gender is so central to our relationships and our sense of self, relatively few newspapers cover it as a beat. It is one example about how today’s media continues to parse news the traditional way we always have, while ignoring how people’s lives are changing, and how we have to change to fit them. As a staff writer with the San Jose Mercury News covering demographics and gender, the job I began this past year at the conclusion of my fellowship, I hope to make some of the invisibilities of gender visible.
Lessons in journalism
through a spaceship design class

BY MIKE SWIFT

Gender wasn’t the only place I got insights about journalism at Stanford. One striking thing about a Knight Fellowship is how many important lessons journalists can learn about their profession by studying things that, on the surface, seem totally unrelated to journalism. Growing up in the late 1960s, I was captivated by the space program. So when I arrived at Stanford and saw a course on spacecraft design in the catalog, I hungered to be in that class. There was only one problem: For a journalist with a bachelor’s degree in English literature, whose main expertise was writing about demographic change, it hardly seemed likely that I would have the qualifications to design spacecraft. Still, I phoned one of the professors teaching the course. “I wouldn’t think you’ll have too much trouble,” the professor, Bob Twiggs, told me. “It’ll all be pretty superficial stuff.”

I was in! The first class was somewhat intimidating. I walked into a room that was filled, I soon found out, with veteran engineers from Lockheed Martin. One guy had an Eisenhower administration buzz cut. An Air Force captain, in full uniform, sat in the back row. Other class members, I came to know, had actually helped build components of the International Space Station orbiting the Earth. The other of the two professors teaching the course, Jamie Cutler, announced we would have a first-day quiz, nothing too tough, just a few calculations to test our knowledge of Ohm’s Law and a few other “basic” principles of electronics. When the quiz was over, my paper had two things on it: My first name. My last name.

But, I stayed. It turned out that while I couldn’t understand all of the math, I could get the principles. And they were interesting — everything from the basic principles of radio communication to writing computer code. When we began to work on actual satellite design I discovered that a journalist could do engineering. In the newsroom, we’d frequently had a discussion about our skill sets, which came to the conclusion: Our basic ability to gather information, filter and analyze it, and then present it in clear, cogent English would be valuable in many lines of work. Personally, I never bought it, although it always sounded good around the time when management was preparing its latest round of job cuts. Now, in a spacecraft design class at Stanford, I was discovering it was true. Engineering, I learned, is not so much about plucking some new concept nobody has ever thought of out of the ether. It’s really about defining a problem, and then searching out the information — which generally already exists out there somewhere — to solve that problem. It’s really not a whole lot different from a journalist who is thrown into a story on a topic that she knows nothing about. You cast your net and eventually you find the person who tells you what you need to know.

Stanford taught me that many of the limits I had constructed around myself during my previous seventeen years as a journalist were false. After that long in the newsroom of a metropolitan daily newspaper, I believed there was nothing else I had the ability to do well, and no other job that would truly make me happy. It was crucial to the continuation of my career in journalism to learn for myself that neither was true: I needed to know that I had a choice, and that I was choosing journalism. That knowledge was one of the great gifts of the fellowship. MJR
The Ugly American

by Henriette Lowisch

How the United States can Salvage its Image in the World
Henriette Lowisch was the T. Anthony Pollner Distinguished Professor at the University of Montana in the fall of 2006. She is currently an international journalist working as senior editor for the Agence France-Presse. Photo by Eleena Fikhman.
International journalist Henriette Lowisch analyzes the world's view of the "ugly" American, how the U.S. got there and what it will take to fix that image

By leaving international newsgathering to the global news agencies, a few elite newspapers and to European media like the British Broadcasting Corporation or The Economist, U.S. media organizations are in contempt of their public, which has manifested substantial interest in foreign news since the attacks of September 11.

Newspapers, television networks and radio stations have neglected their duty to help citizens understand, oversee and influence the policies of their government. At the same time, these news organizations have shown the world considerable disrespect. They have helped produce the ugly image of a powerful nation oblivious to the concerns of other peoples around the globe.

Yet this process is not irreversible. In fact, journalists and their audiences can and should play a pivotal role in reclaiming the abandoned mission of providing Americans with eyes and ears around the world.

It was on September 11 that the resentment against the U.S., festering in the hearts and minds of many around the world, manifested itself for the first time this century. The terrorist attacks provoked the question "Why do they hate us?" Initially that inquiry was directed towards extremists in the Muslim world. Americans found some consolation in the sympathy and solidarity expressed in Europe immediately after the attacks.

I remember going to a memorial concert in Berlin, one year after the attacks. The concert was sponsored by the German State Department. One and a half years later, the U.S. government embarked on the war in Iraq. To the best of my knowledge, that was the end of concerts put on by the German government in memory of September 11.

A survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project conducted in the spring of 2006 asked people around the world for their opinion of the U.S. and of the American people. In that poll, an average of 56.6 percent of the people questioned in four European countries — Britain, France, Germany and Spain — said they had an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. The American people, as opposed to their country, fared somewhat better, with 59.25 percent still having a favorable opinion of Americans. I will spare you the poll numbers from places with mostly Muslim populations. At this point, the only people that still like all things American are the Japanese.

Americans have always struck me as people who want to be liked around the world. I know that from talking to them, but if you don't want to take my word for it, just take another look at the polls. In 2006, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that six out of ten Americans thought that the U.S. should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations when dealing with international problems, even if this means going along with a policy that is not its first choice. So most Americans actually want their government to form alliances, instead of

For twenty years, Lowisch has been in nearly every field of journalism: reporting in her hometown, producing television in Austria, writing for a women's magazine in Germany, and working at Agence France-Presse most recently as editor-in-chief and senior editor. This article is adapted from a speech she gave while working as the T. Anthony Pollner Distinguished Professor at the University of Montana's School of Journalism.
going to war unilaterally. For me, that’s as good an indication as any that they care about what other people think and that they want to win back the respect of the rest of the world.

I believe that to turn things around, one needs to know about the forces that created the image of the ugly American in the first place. I mean the forces of history and foreign policy, of public diplomacy and popular culture, of interest groups in the U.S. as well as of the media. Rather than trying to give a moral critique of policies and behaviors, what I want to describe here is how these forces impacted the way the U.S. and its people are perceived in the rest of the world.

The scrutiny the U.S. faces as a superpower is not new, and much predates September 11. Look at Latin America, whose people in large numbers seem to have hated the Yankees forever. Some of us chuckled, some of us shuddered, but we all listened up, when Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela, called George W. Bush “the devil” in front of the U.N. General Assembly on September 9, 2006. Yet millions of people from Latin America keep on coming to the U.S., throwing their loyalties, their spirit and their workforce across the border to make this country even stronger.

Latin American resentment against the U.S. is partly the result of imperial overreach in the past, sometimes the very recent past. Similar instances of imperial overreach, like Vietnam, have contributed to an uninterrupted undercurrent of anti-Americanism in Europe, which is still dealing with the consequences of its own imperial past.

When I first lived in this country for an extended period, in the 1980s, I had a punching ball hanging over my television set. Whenever Ronald Reagan would come on, I’d punch the hell out of that ball. We tend to forget just how much young Europeans despised Reagan at the time. We seriously thought he’d get us all killed, with his Pershing missiles and other arms race projects. This was all before he went down in history as the man who won the Cold War.

People around the world tend to resent a nation that seems to have unchecked power. Their resentment tends to increase when that nation chooses to make use of that power the way it sees fit, with little or no regard for other opinions. To counterbalance this resentment, before it escalates into hate, the U.S. needs to address these concerns by agreeing to at least some limits on its power. For example those expressed in international law, the laws of war or other existing treaties. Then, to safeguard its credibility, America will have to adhere to those limits as well.

One way to do this is called the U.N., an organization that was initiated by a great U.S. president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Some Americans might not like the U.N.. They might even think it’s bureaucratic or corrupt. They might be mad that it lets people like Chavez call George W. Bush “the devil.” Yet there is absolutely no alternative I can see to embracing it, if Americans want to show the world some respect and thus salvage their national image for generations to come.

The question of how to deal with the U.N. is a question of foreign policy as well. I have no doubt that foreign policy, or rather, to call the devil by its name, the foreign policy of the Bush administration, has been instrumental in tarnishing the image of America throughout the world. This essentially has two reasons.

The first reason is that image-wise, in international politics, what is most important is success. If the U.S. had won the war in Iraq, if in some way Iraq was a peaceful and stable nation by now, the image of America would look very different. I don’t know whether it would have been possible to win this war. I’m just looking at the way this war has reflected on America’s image. Yet this war was not prosecuted successfully, and an indication of that is all the hate and resentment at the U.S. to be found around the world today.

The second reason is that U.S. foreign policy is generally more successful if America shares the work, if it shares responsibility with others. This was actually one of the major differences between World War II and the Vietnam War, and it contributed to their respective outcomes. If the U.S. wants to share the burden, particularly if it is the driving force behind a military or diplomatic initiative, not only does it have to convince others that its cause is legitimate. It also has to consult with others and include them in the decision making. If the U.S. doesn’t, or if it misleads its allies, at some point it won’t have many friends left. At first, it will still have the ones who owe it something. Then those will have paid their dues, and they will be gone too.

What is certain is that the Bush administration has awakened to the fact that the standing of the U.S. in the world has reached a low-point on its watch. For one thing, the administration has gone out of its way to mend fences with its estranged allies. Thus, in July 2006, President Bush spent an evening barbecuing with villagers in Germany. The villagers present were charmed and described the event as quite a success. Shortly afterward, a camera caught Bush giving the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, an impromptu backrub at the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, Russia. That didn’t go over as well, as viewers of the videotape around the world could deduce from the startled look on Merkel’s face.
By 2008, the top people responsible will be gone. Then the world can start over, with a fresh team of Republicans or Democrats at the helm of the U.S. government. That’s one thing that is still beautiful about America.

— Henriette Lowisch

The biggest effort the current administration has made so far to make over the American image is taking place in an arena called public diplomacy. Karen Hughes, a Bush confidante, was put in charge in 2005, and there is no denying she has done some smart things. She has secured additional funding for exchange programs, but she has stopped short of rebuilding the U.S. Information Agency, which was folded into the State Department under the Clinton administration in 1999.

Rather than revive an independent agency that might be hard to control, Hughes has used the existing infrastructure to respond more quickly to hostile representations of the U.S. abroad. Mainly, her activities have been geared towards the Muslim world. She has changed the way the U.S. government deals with Arabic news channels like Al Jazeera. The U.S. military no longer bombs Al Jazeera’s offices in Baghdad. Instead, American diplomats go on the air, confront tough questions and defend the U.S. position, in programs seen by millions of viewers around the world.

Ambassador Hughes operates on the theory that to reclaim your image you need to draw out your adversaries and engage them in debate. In May 2006, at the Council on Foreign Relations, she talked about how she has “unleashed the ambassadors” to go out and respond more quickly and more aggressively to accusations leveled by extremists. What she was saying is that the U.S. has to fight with words as well as with arms. Even if you agree to frame public diplomacy as just one way of fighting the so-called war on terror, that’s easier said than done.

For one thing, Hughes lacks the troops. In 2005, three out of ten relevant U.S. public diplomacy positions in the Muslim world were filled with officers without the necessary language skills, according to a 2006 GAO report. In other words, the U.S. sends people to communicate with the other side, but they can only communicate through a translator, which is going to make them less effective in getting their point across.

Secondly, there are some things that public diplomacy cannot undo. The most egregious example of this was the Abu Ghraib scandal, which uncovered the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers.

I fear that many Americans still underestimate the shock people around the world felt when they first saw those pictures in 2004 and learned about this crime. It pretty much wiped out any sympathy still lingering after September 11. It really scarred the face of America in a deep and lasting way.

What made the initial shock last was the fact that no one at the top of the command chain took personal responsibility and resigned. Ministers and generals stayed in office, while in other democracies, surely someone quite high up would have been forced to resign. To overcome the blow the scandal served to the international reputation of the U.S., all the world could rely on was the passage of time — the passage of time and the American Constitution.

I’m mentioning the Constitution, because after all, Americans do replace their government at least once every eight years. By 2008, the top people responsible will be gone. Then the world can start over, with a fresh team of Republicans or Democrats at the helm of the U.S. government. That’s one thing that is still beautiful about America.

Another thing the State Department in Washington has little control over is American popular culture, which as we all know pervades the world. American movies, American music, American food and other American consumer products have long given occasion to much anti-Americanism, from Europe to traditionalist societies in the Middle East.

From the point of view of many conservative, mainstream Muslims today, Hollywood is living proof that the U.S. is a decadent secular society; they don’t want to be molded in that image. These conservative Muslims don’t want to live the way they think Americans do. Come to think of it, many Americans wouldn’t want to live that way, either. Extremists easily exploit this observation.

Europeans, on the other hand, although they sneer at Hollywood movies and McDonald’s, dislike just the opposite thing about the U.S. They fear that in America, secularism is disintegrating, that the barrier between church and state is crumbling. This concern somewhat coincides with stereotypes and prejudices that have been underlying rationale for anti-Americanism for a long time.
For example, Europeans have long been wary about what they have come to call “Puritanism.” This version of “Puritanism” has really little to do with the beliefs and ideals of the people who originally founded the American republic. Rather, Europeans have come to use it as a synonym for “prudish.” So when they say that Americans are “Puritans,” they essentially mean that people in the U.S. have an unnatural relationship with their bodies that is somehow rooted in religion. You can’t lie topless on an American beach or show naked breasts on U.S. television, but you can cut these same breasts up to make them look better or show as many people getting killed on television as you want. That’s about as logical as creation science.

In the minds of the general public in Europe, most Protestant churches in the U.S. have somehow banded together to create a force behind George W. Bush whose goal, they presume, is to conquer the world for Christ by the sword – the new Crusades. This force is seen as a sinister element in American political life, something to watch out for. If you’re a foreign correspondent based in Washington, as I was in the second half of the 1990s, you get hit with demands for stories like that practically every day. Their home offices, like media everywhere, tend to propagate recurring story lines.

The ugly American is one of those story lines, and it has many incarnations: the fat American, the stupid American, the zealous American. Poverty, obesity, brutality, and ignorance – countless stories in foreign newspapers and on television present illustrations of these clichés on any given day.

If you’re a foreign correspondent, it doesn’t help that the longer you stay in the U.S., the more you come to appreciate this country for its diversity and even for its contradictions. Accounts of American society that paint a more complex picture are difficult to sell. You do your best to sneak in some additional points of view, hoping that they will make it past an editor who needs to cut.
The crux in all of this is respect. You don’t have to love each other or agree with other people’s ideas or lifestyles, but you have to show some respect, which is based on knowledge ... Part of what makes Americans ugly is that they don’t want to know about the peoples beyond their borders.

— Henriette Lowisch

Prevailing story lines have been a staple of journalism all the way back to medieval times. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t some truth in what they convey. For example, there is no doubt that under the Bush administration, the religious right has started to play a larger role in international affairs. If anything, evangelicals have given new energy and support to U.S. humanitarian efforts.

Evangelicals also take an interest in environmental issues, which are close to the hearts of people in countries like Germany. Yet so far, little public dialogue has taken place between American churches and their counterparts, whether in Muslim countries or in Europe. That’s too bad, as I believe that an open exchange of ideas between peoples of faith could do much to salvage America’s image in the world.

There are still other groups that could play a significant role in improving that image. Emissaries of the academic community did a good job reassuring Europeans that America was not synonymous with its leaders — until the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004, that is, when this perception of a good and a bad side of America fizzled.

The crux in all of this is respect. You don’t have to love each other or agree with other people’s ideas or lifestyles, but you have to show some respect, which is based on knowledge. Going back and forth across the Atlantic, the prevalent observation I have made is how little we know about each other. Thus part of what makes Americans ugly is that they don’t want to know about the peoples beyond their borders.

According to my own estimate, fewer than 500 U.S. journalists were posted around the world to cover international news for American media organizations. Not only does that number constitute less than a third of the number of foreign correspondents sent to cover just one country, the U.S. It is also shamefully little if you consider that journalists play a pivotal role in gathering information and transmitting it to the people back home. This is especially true for remote places ordinary people don’t usually get to see for themselves, like Asia or Africa.

Foreign correspondents are a citizenship’s eyes and ears in the world. They are different from diplomats in that they are more likely to tell things as they are, because ideally, they are not beholden to a government, but to their public. Their mission is to report, so that citizens can compare one account to the other and make sense of the world.

Had audiences in the U.S. been better informed about what the rest of the world was thinking, maybe U.S. foreign policy would have taken a different tack. More Americans would have known ahead of time that the war in Iraq was a risky proposition and that they would have to go at it almost alone.

Truth is, that the American public isn’t particularly well served with foreign intelligence these days. There simply isn’t enough international reporting by mainstream media to satisfy. Americans who want to learn through their own media about what is going on abroad have to rely on a few elite newspapers. There is not much diversity to be had, so it’s hard to compare points of view. In fact, most of the students I have talked to in Missoula, Montana, don’t even get their foreign news from American media — they get it from the website of the BBC.

I think there are a number of levers that can be used to shape the international image of a country like the U.S. Not much can be done about the forces of history, besides understanding them. One simply has to take into account that lasting undercurrent of anti-Americanism, which stems from the dominance of American cultural products and the relentless drive of the U.S. as a force of modernity.
efficient way to improve America’s image abroad is to expand Americans’ knowledge of the world that surrounds them. It’s a win-win proposition, because that way not only do Americans show more respect to others, they are also bound to elect a wiser government, which, again, is going to earn them more respect in the world.

I think that most Americans are ready to know more. I find it telling that people here in Montana get their news from the BBC, a source that originates halfway around the world. Which raises the question whether an American BBC would be best placed to make over the ugly American. What I mean by that is a media company that invests in sending American journalists around the world, to serve as the eyes and ears of a public that actually owns that company.

To some extent, National Public Radio has taken up that challenge, with sixteen bureaus and offices around the world. Yet this is far from the reach of BBC News, which entertains nearly fifty bureaus around the globe.

To make NPR a truly competitive and alternative source for international news, it would need funding similar to what the BBC enjoys. In fiscal year 2005, NPR was able to spend $112.4 million on programming. That’s not bad, but it’s a long way from the £240.6 million that were expended by the BBC World Service in the fiscal year ending March 2005. It remains to be seen whether a truly powerful traditional media organization financed by fees and controlled by government appointees will ever become a reality in the U.S.

In the meantime, my hope is that the Internet will become the new frontier in the quest to bring the world to the U.S. and ultimately restore America’s international reputation. What I envision is a far-reaching, highly professional web publication that relies on a sustained network of foreign correspondents to report on international events as fast as the BBC does. This Internet news service should offer as much expertise as the BBC does by having foreign correspondents actually posted in another country for a while, instead of just parachuting them in when a crisis comes to its head.

To create that kind of Internet publication from scratch takes the idealism and drive of journalists and audiences possessed with a sense of urgency and the spirit and stamina to rise to the challenge. All it takes is some pioneers, and we foreigners still believe in our hearts that this is what Americans are really good at — pioneering. That’s where the beauty lies behind the ugly American’s mask.

Michael Babcock
Dennis Baran
Stacy Byrne
Kristen Cates
Rich Ecke
Cathy (Kauffman) Gretch
Liz Hahn
Dan Hollow
Peter Johnson
Leon Lenz

Erin Madison
Barbara Mittal
Chelsi Moi
Gary Moseman
Matt Ochsner
Jackie (Galt) Rice
Kim Skornogoski
Scott Thompson
Také Uda
Paula (Latham) Wilmot

I’ve been a reporter for nearly 30 years, and the lessons taught me by University of Montana journalism professors still echo within me as I report and write. Research before interviewing, ask questions readers want answered, stick up for the public right to know, observe, write punchy leads, explain and be fair. I still relish the job most of the time, thanks in large part to that great training.

— Peter Johnson, business reporter, 1976 UM journalism graduate.
The Art of Criticism

By Joe Nickell

The world’s stage goes beyond New York City for Montana critic

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Catie? Hey, it’s me, Carrie. Guess what? My parents just took me to see this musical called 13 at the Taper Forum.

It was SO. TOTALLY. COOL. It’s about this boy who’s totally hot, and he’s Jewish, and he has to move to Indiana cuz his parents are divorced and so he has to have a bat mitzvah and the other kids call it a Bon Jovi and ... yeah, isn’t that funny? ... Anyway, and so he has to convince the other kids to come to his bat mitzvah so he tries to get them into some kind of horror movie and...well, it doesn’t really matter, there’s some other stuff that happens.

But the cool part is that there’s all these great songs where everybody sings, and it’s all about inviting the crippled kids to your party and stuff. I don’t know, it wasn’t like American Pie kind of funny, but it was definitely funny. Like, there was this part where the Jewish kid came out and laid down in some old ladies’ laps, and they gave him pom-poms and made everybody do a cheer like at a football game.

And what was cool was that it was all kids doing everything, even playing in the band, which was up above the stage on this platform. The black kid had a weird voice that was kind of squeaky, but he was funny and hot; and the nerd girl sounded like Sarah McLachlan or something, she was great.

My mom said she thought it was like a lot of other plays, and then my dad said it was predictable and kinda like going to Disneyland — but they always say things like that. I haven’t seen those other plays, and the plays my mom likes are all about serious stuff anyway. BO-RING! I mean, the cheerleader wrote a song for the crippled kid and then kissed him, and that’s not what really happens in real life — so how could my dad predict that? Hello!

So, you know, it was cool. You should totally go. Just don’t go with your parents. They’ll probably ruin it.

Don’t take your parents, indeed. And definitely don’t take a critic – let alone, two dozen of them. I wrote this review of Jason Robert Brown’s new musical, 13, while participating in the third annual National Endowment for the Arts Journalism Institute in Theater and Musical Theater, held this past February at the USC Annenberg School of Communication in Los Angeles.

I was one of twenty-five professional arts journalists and critics from around the country chosen to participate in the institute, which offers an intensive immersion in the theatrical world of Los Angeles.

L.A., we quickly learned, is home to more than 200 theater companies — every one of them anxious to prove that important theater sometimes happens outside of New York City.

“One of our major efforts here is to elevate the reputation and profile of what we do here in Los Angeles,” said Michael Ritchie, artistic director of the Center Theatre Group, on the first day of the NEA institute.

Center Theatre Group runs three theaters (including the Taper Forum, where 13 premiered) and boasts an annual budget of $45 million. Past premiers by the company include Biloxi Blues, Angels in America, and Children of a Lesser God. This is no minor theater company, even by world standards.

Why, then, the insecurity? Something of an answer came the next night from John Lahr, senior theater critic for The New Yorker. Speaking before an audience that included notable movers and shakers of the L.A. theatrical world as well as journalists from far-flung regions of the

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If it's not in The New Yorker, it doesn't exist in the culture.”

—John Lahr, senior theater critic for The New Yorker magazine

country, Lahr declared:

“If it’s not in The New Yorker, it doesn’t exist in the culture.”

To be sure, Lahr has written about theatrical events in Los Angeles and elsewhere for The New Yorker; his is certainly the most broadly studied and thoughtful voice in American theater criticism today. But the implication of his assertion was nonetheless clear: The majority of important theater happens in New York; and you can tell it is important because it is the theater most often covered in The New Yorker.

It’s a fair bet that John Lahr will never critique 13 in the pages of The New Yorker. Brown’s musical bonbon will not attain the broad cultural significance of even the least works of Tennessee Williams or David Mamet. Its songs, though catchy, are destined to be washed away in the wake of Disney’s High School Musical tsunami. Because 13 calls for a cast of thirteen teenage singer/actor/dancers, it won’t become a staple of regional or school theater companies, most of which do not enjoy the wealth of available talent one finds in Los Angeles.

But whether 13 exists in Lahr’s culture, it exists in somebody’s culture. How else to explain the sold-out crowd on the night that I attended the production?

As I thought about Lahr’s comment over the two weeks of the institute, I found my mind constantly drawn back to Montana, to the thousands of local productions over the years — many of them quite ambitious — that have never made it into the pages of The New Yorker, nor any other major national chronicle of the theater.

Does this mean that Montana theater (or dance, or music) does not exist in “the culture?” Of course not.

More than anything, Lahr’s bias only served to silhouette the dominant fact of American culture today: its fragmentation.

Over the course of just one generation, the range of art and entertainment available to anyone, anywhere, anytime has expanded exponentially. And people are eating it up. Headlines often paint a sorry portrait of the modern arts world, but the facts speak clearly: More people spend more money on more art today than ever before in American history. Culture — in the form of music, movies, performances, and so on — is now the largest American export, at more than $154 billion per year.

The problem, at least for artists and arts organizations, is that as consumers we spread out our money and time more than ever before. These changes are having profound effects on the core business models of arts organizations today.

In his discussion at the NEA institute, Michael Ritchie, of Center Theatre Group, predicted that “ticket subscriptions are going to die.” This from a man whose three L.A. theaters enjoy a combined annual subscription base of more than 63,000 people.

“Our culture is shifting,” Ritchie continued. “I mean, come on — do you know where you’re going to be, or what you’re going to be in the mood to do, on January 30th at 7 o’clock in the evening next year?”

Think about that in a local context. On any given night in a town as small as Missoula, Montana, one can attend a gig by a rock band or a recital by a university student, see one of a dozen or more movies at a local theater, check out art shows at one of the many galleries and coffee shops, or — more often than not, anyway — take in a theatrical production. One can also immerse oneself in a video game, or check out videos of Oscar Peterson on YouTube, or bop down to the video store for the latest DVD.

The choices are dizzying. So how to choose?

Here we bump into another aspect of our modern era: the democratization of critical influence, and the changing role of criticism itself.

Gone are the days when a single, negative review in The New Yorker or The New York Times could doom a Broadway show. The newspaper critic’s old bully pulpit has been overrun by a thousand bloggers and millions of thumb-pecking texters, whose readers probably know and trust them more than they know and trust any newspaper reporter.

By the time we can read Roger Ebert’s latest movie review online, the film itself has already been swapped on pirate file-sharing networks, friend-linked on MySpace pages, and chatted up — or down — on Web sites like Epinions and Reddit. Those sites are, according to The Wall Street Journal, “giving rise to an obsessive subculture of ordinary but surprisingly influential people who, usually without pay and purely for the thrill of it, are trolling cyberspace for news and ideas to share with their network.”

Nobody knows this better than
Doug McLennan, editor of artsjournal.com. Every day of the week, McLennan takes it upon himself to try to keep up with the arts news and criticism in some 200 American and British newspaper Web sites and arts blogs; he feeds the best of what he finds to thousands of e-mail subscribers and Web site visitors every morning.

Even he admits he can't keep up with everything.

"The idea of how we individually relate to culture changes as we evolve into more and more niches," said McLennan in a session at the NEA institute. "People are overwhelmed by all the options.

"The most important role a critic can serve today," said McLennan, "is to survey the cultural landscape, navigate through it, and map it out for people."

Criticism, by this model, is not so much about what is good and what is bad, what matters and what is just diversion. It is, instead, about pinpointing and articulating nexuses of social convergence in the cacophonous diaspora of the modern world. Every artistic product is potentially interesting to someone; it is the critic's job to say to whom and why.

In this regard, McLennan thinks that most newspapers today have it all wrong. In the stampede to fill their arts and culture pages with celebrity gossip and mass-entertainment news and reviews, newspapers are "trying to always be interesting to everyone," when what most people today need is "a place to turn to for information and perspective about the specific niches that interest them."

Where do people turn for that information? Increasingly, they turn to places like MySpace.

"Social networking sites like MySpace are made up of people thinking about the role of the media: As a means to bring people together around the ideas and interests that define a particular community in a particular place at a particular time," said McLennan. "The original genius of newspapers was to put together bits and pieces that reflected local people's lives - a little bit about bridge, something about the ducks at the park and the car crash on the highway, some national news and so on. That's the kind of thinking you find on MySpace and in the blogosphere."

In this world of endless opportunity, people need - and seek out - critical perspective more than ever. Trouble is, most of what they get from newspapers is built on a faulty model.


The bane of criticism in recent years has been the bandwagon trend toward pseudo-objective reviewing, toward replacing substance and discussion with stars (or thumbs). By attempting to give a subjective experience an objective rating, we not only shortchange the complexity of the aesthetic experience, but we grossly underestimate the diversity of our audience.

The fact is, one man's star is another man's splattered tomato. It is impossible to provide a consistent, one-size-fits-all gauge of good and bad, when different artistic experiences are designed for different audiences, in different places and times. Judging a work against the achievements and expectations of mass culture - or even of some nebulous nationwide subset of theater-goers or art-lovers - is a fool's errand that serves no one, local readers least of all.

Theater and most other art forms are intensely local; they happen right in front of our eyes. The critic's gauge of success must therefore be calibrated to that local context first and foremost. The critic must certainly know a good bit about the big picture - the history of the art form and its role in larger society: but he or she must be equally knowledgeable and engaged in the local context in which an event takes place.

This is not to say that a critic should never pass judgment; quite the contrary. The analysis and articulation of the success or failure of a particular artistic product is central to the responsibilities of a critic. But rather than tossing opinions from on high, the critic must endeavor to wrap herself in the skin of the target audience.
and engage, analyze, and articulate the experience from that vantage point. Call it critical relativism.

"You can't just engage theater in the walls of the theater," said Dominic Papatola, theater critic at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, in a workshop at the NEA Institute. "You have to connect it to local politics, sports, the other sections in the newspaper — in other words, all the things that are happening in your community ... As critics, what we should try to articulate is the relative humidity in the room."

So much for thumbs and stars. It is for these reasons that I chose to review 13 in the voice of a 13-year-old. My aim was to simultaneously give fair warning to those theatergoers who wouldn't care for this type of light, derivative, teen-oriented fare, while appealing to those who seek exactly that. I would hope that, just as people who attend a performance of 13 would have different reactions to the musical, readers of my review would similarly come away thinking either, "I need to see that," or, "No thanks" — depending on whether they would like the play in the first place.

A successful critic, by this approach, is less arbiter than matchmaker, introducing audiences to the artistic experiences that might connect to them.

In our very first session at the NEA Institute, we listened to Eric Ehn, dean of the theater program at CalArts, talk about his work in Africa. Ehn co-founded the Center for the Study of Genocide and Culture at CalArts, a program focused on exploring theatrical responses to the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Ehn has spent much of his career contemplating crimes against culture, the power of theater, and the role of the critic.

"A witness is not independent of a crime scene; he is part of what happened," said Ehn. "In the same sense, you as a critic are something of a co-creator in the experience of theater ... Criticism is not about writing reviews. It is about witnessing, experiencing, and then creating conversations that hopefully carry on in the world beyond the printed word.

"Good criticism should breed criticism," Ehn noted, "in the same way that good art begets more art."
So Long,
A Death Documented

Friend

Jack Slater waits as the back-up recipient for a liver transplant at the University of Washington as his wife Deborah Swets calls relatives to let them know Jack might be going into surgery.

For nearly three years, Seattle Times photojournalist Alan Berner chronicled the journey of Jack Slater, a local teacher and former actor who needed a liver transplant when he began to lose his battle with hepatitis C. The disease rendered Slater’s liver unable to process proteins and nutrients, creating buildup and blockages that caused swelling and pain. When Slater received a new liver in 2004, no one suspected that the same disease that destroyed his first liver would lead to his death less than two years after the transplant. Because of the passion and collaboration between Berner and Slater, Berner’s lens caught pivotal and painful moments of the journey from the needles and navel scoops to Slater’s funeral in 2006. Montana Journalism Review recently asked Berner about one of his most difficult assignments.

— Chandra Johnson

Photos by Alan Berner
Montana Journalism Review:
How did you first get the assignment to record Slater’s ordeal?

Berner: Jack had written a chronicle about his need for a liver and being unable to work as a high school teacher anymore, and I don’t know how it wound up in the managing editor’s hands, who said, “This is just terrific. It has potential to be terrific. He’ll write it and we’ll chronicle his journey to get a new liver.” In the fall of ‘03 was the first time I met him.

I got a printout of what he had written and just called him up because I wanted to meet him in person. What I was going to ask him was for total and complete unfettered access. I wanted to know how his wife, Deborah, was going to feel about it since I was going to be seeing things that he’s not used to having another party see. I needed that kind of access or it wouldn’t work.

When I came by, he was on the phone and I started shooting immediately, before I’d even really met him. I thought, “What the hell? I’ll get him used to it right away.” We hit it off immediately.

MJR: Obviously transplant surgery is a gamble, but since Jack didn’t die from complications until more than a year after the transplant, was it a shock when he started to decline?

Berner: The hepatitis C virulently attacked his transplanted liver. He was in the less than 5 percent who have that kind of a reaction. Within a couple of months after getting the transplant, he was just feeling terrible and they thought they may have injured one of the bile ducts when they were doing the monthly biopsies with this huge needle. God, Jack would never look at the needle.

Alan Berner, a native of St. Louis, has degrees in philosophy and photojournalism from the University of Missouri. The National Press Photographers Association has named him the Regional Press Photographer of the Year five times. He is the 1995 recipient of the Nikon/NPPA Documentary Sabbatical grant for his project on the New American West. He has received the Cowles Cup, the Associated Press Sweepstakes Award for Oregon and Washington, four times. He’s been a staff photographer at The Seattle Times for more than two decades.
But it turned out it wasn't any of those things; it was just his body was rejecting the new liver. We never expected it to take the turn it did. But I always thought he was going to make it, I really did. I always thought he would bounce back.

MJR: When it became clear that Jack wasn't going to recover, what were some of your challenges or reservations about covering him that closely?

Berner: We didn't know he was going to take a turn that badly. It really wasn't obvious until a couple of weeks before he died, because he was hoping to go to Florida and get a transplant because he knew that he wouldn't be able to get another transplant at the University of Washington. But then there were questions. Was he well enough to travel? Would they really give him the transplant there? If he goes there am I going to be able to go in with him?

I remember talking to editors, saying do I go with him to Florida because we could be there for weeks. But then he wasn't well enough to travel. While he was declining, it wasn't obvious that death was that imminent. I don't think it was to him or any of us.

But I think it would've been a lot harder for someone on staff who had just maybe graduated or was very inexperienced, because Jack was a very strong personality. We could be friends and adversaries at the same time in a way that was creative.

Had it been a younger person, Jack may not have respected them as much and they would've had a hard go.

MJR: What was it like coming to that realization that he was going to die?

Berner: It was a little odd because when I would come around it would perk him up. He's a guy who's used to being high energy, very vibrant, very outgoing, and all those things are turned around.

And then, Jack wasn't doing some of the things he was supposed to do, like walk 10,000 steps a day, eat five small meals a day. I don't think any of those things would've made a difference now. At the time I did.

I think anticipating the next series in some ways kept Jack going. He very much got into being published in the paper. When these pieces ran, he'd ask for two dozen or more copies, and I'd round them up.

MJR: What was the most difficult part of this assignment for you?

Berner: The day he died, far and away. That afternoon.

MJR: Can you describe the circumstances?

Berner: I was right there. And I remember thinking, "Have I ever been this close to a subject?" I'm in this odd position of being emotionally close to him and Deborah, and it was obvious that he was never going to leave the hospital.

And all these family friends are flying in who I've never met. They all had concerns about how I was going to depict him and how Jack was going to look, and they were telling this to Deborah, who began expressing their concerns.

I just told her straight up, it's a matter of trust. You've trusted me all along, you have to trust me the rest of the way.

MJR: How did you juggle your roles as a photographer and as Jack's friend?

Berner: I don't know. It was very, very hard, extremely hard to be both the documenter of this as well as emotionally close to him. And I will tell you, it's an odd thing.

I always told Jack I would give him prints of everything that ran, and I did.

Before the first piece ran, an editor showed him the layouts two days before it was going to run as an A1 Sunday centerpiece. He hated a number of the pictures and wanted to change them. He thought he looked sick and old, which is what he looked like.

I had talked to him before that I would never show him prints before publication because it puts him in the position of editing these prints. The person depicted is the worst judge of a photograph. How could they not be?

MJR: Give me an example of some of the prints he didn't like.

Berner: The ones that ran the day he was prepped, where he's coming out of the bathroom and where he's lying on the floor. Deborah's on the phone in the background telling relatives that Jack's being prepped. He really disliked those two pictures because they are hard. They're hard but they're very truthful about how he looks and there's a certain amount of fear, I think, or concern. There's enough ambiguity in his expression that you could read it a lot of ways about his concern about being in surgery. Anyway, he came around to a lot of the pictures later because of friends who liked the pictures because they captured what was going on.
In pain, Jack Slater, just back from another blood draw and post-transplant exam, rests in the hallway of his home before climbing the stairs to the main living area.
While he was declining, it wasn’t obvious that death was that imminent. I don’t think it was to him or any of us. ... I think anticipating the next series in some ways kept Jack going. He very much got into being published in the paper.

— Alan Berner
With Jack, the access was extremely good ... I think the camera helps. I don’t find the camera to be a barrier. I find that if anything it intensifies the whole experience. It gives me a more intense connection to the story.

— Alan Berner

MJR: What are some of the images that are the most powerful to you?

Berner: The one where Jack is sitting in the hall, and the one where he’s big in the foreground and the gesture by Deborah mimics his in the background. She’s on the phone telling relatives that Jack’s being prepped and might be having surgery.

MJR: Could you elaborate on the stories behind those photos?

Berner: The one where he’s on the bed and she’s on the phone was taken just a couple of months after I’d met him. They did exactly as had been asked. They had gotten a call from the hospital, and I was in the office and they called immediately.

Jack was called saying that he would be the backup to this other gentleman, and if the other person was not able to receive this liver because of his health or the size of his cavity that they’d have to prep both of them. It took five or six hours before he was released without getting the liver at all.

At this time, he was feeling really good and quite honestly, I felt that he and Deborah were greatly relieved that he didn’t get the liver at this point.

I felt there was a degree of great concern on both their parts as reflected in his eyes and in her tension on the phone.

Getting a liver isn’t what you’d call a joyful moment. The grave concern of facing this monumental surgery and possibly not surviving it is what I think is shown on his face and in her demeanor in the background. He is completely lost in his own thoughts.

MJR: And what about the one where Jack is in the hall? Was that before or after he’d gotten the liver?

Berner: That’s after he’s gotten the liver. He’s had a blood draw to see how he’s doing, and he’s not doing all that well.

Every week or so I would call to check on him just to see what was going on. I had just called him up that afternoon on his cell phone, and he said he’d finished a blood draw and was headed home.

I said I would meet him there, and maybe we’d go out for coffee. He often didn’t lock his front door, especially if he knew I was coming, because the living quarters were upstairs.

I opened the door and was really shocked to see him seated on the ground as he was: small figure, kind of vulnerable, looking weak and somewhat in pain. I just raised the camera and took a picture because it’s a very telling image about his situation.

On the second frame, he moves, so that’s it, there’s really only one frame. Jack’s a really charmed guy, and he knows how he wants to be portrayed.

He didn’t know exactly what the picture looked like, but he knew what it was going to show, content wise.

So he gets up and that’s it, bang, one frame. We walked upstairs and talked about the many blood draws and procedures he was being subjected to all the time.

MJR: Did you ever feel like you were intruding?

Berner: No, I never did. With Jack, the access was extremely good. Some days I’d go and pick him up, and if he didn’t really feel well I’d take him to a nearby coffee shop that was a favorite of his and sometimes we’d get a picture that would run and sometimes not. But I
felt it was important to keep the connection, and it was good for his mental health. It got him up from just lying there all day.

I don’t know. I think the camera helps. I don’t find the camera to be a barrier. I find that, if anything, it intensifies the whole experience. It gives me a more intense connection to the story.

MJR: How would you say this assignment changed you as a photographer, if it has?

Berner: That’s a really hard question. I don’t know how it’s changed me. It could have and I don’t even know how it has because it’s odd. I mean, when Jack died, I totally broke down. I lost it emotionally. I can’t remember that happening with other subjects or non-family members.

But it wasn’t as if I hadn’t been in near-death situations before. When it became clear that my father wasn’t going to recover from a brain aneurysm about ten years ago, I started making pictures.

Nobody said not to because I was the son. I was shooting black and white and at one point it’s just my dad and the oxygen mask. His eyes are closed, he’s unconscious, but there’s a hand from the left and a hand from the right. One is my sister’s and the other is his girlfriend’s.

It’s a very strong, telling picture that I gave them later. But I wasn’t the least bit uncomfortable doing it. That’s what I do. 

MJR
FEEDBACK
Embracing new ideas an important reality for today's journalists

BY ROBBIE MORGANFIELD

A few years ago, I was invited by City University of New York to lecture on any issue I deemed important to journalists. I chose accepting feedback, both from editors and readers. When I gave my talk, it was clear that most of the university officials thought I was coming from outer space. One tactfully shared that he expected to hear me talking about something like journalistic privilege, confidential sources or plagiarism, since at the time those issues were at the forefront of many journalists’ minds.

I chose feedback because I increasingly had become convinced that it should have been on journalists’ minds, although it was not.

Since then, there is mounting evidence that I was right. This is particularly true in newspaper journalism, where a new school of thought has emerged and everyone from the top executive down to the newsroom clerk is expected to be sensitive to what people want or think about news.

While the current frenzy is not totally reflective of what I had in mind when I did my lecture at CUNY, it is worth pointing out that in the past the culture of newspapers had been one in which feedback was not considered a core value. That is actually pretty shocking when you stop to think about the nature of newspapers. But it is not surprising

Robbie Morganfield, executive director of the Freedom Forum Diversity Institute at Vanderbilt University, is a veteran journalist and journalism educator. He worked as a reporter, editor and columnist at daily newspapers across the country, and taught journalism at universities in Arkansas, Texas and North Carolina before joining the Freedom Forum in 2002. He has journalism degrees from the University of Mississippi and Ohio State University.
What journalists must do is avoid a level of arrogance and disregard that many in the past displayed toward the very public they claimed to be serving.

– Robbie Morganfield

When you consider the way most journalists have been trained over time to think about their work.

One of the chief messages I took from my undergraduate training was that I had been given a trust – a somewhat sacred trust – as a journalist that empowered me to make choices about what people needed to know. In essence, it was my duty to find and write stories that were important to people, to be a “watchdog,” looking out for the public’s best interest.

Somehow, I never consciously thought that the best way to do that is to ask the people. On some level, I suppose I was doing that when I talked to sources about various things, but on many levels I was drawing my own conclusions based on questions I had and observations I made. Besides, most sources were officials, not everyday people. And to ask people to tell us what to report and write might have been considered lazy or uninspired journalism. It was my job to know.

Like most journalists, I also wrote about what my editors deemed “news-worthy.” In fact, about the only feedback many journalists considered important was what came from their editors, and some even struggled with that.

In some ways, I think the old-school way to think about gathering and disseminating the news is still useful. One of the important arguments journalists have used is that we are charged with telling people things they might not know they need to know. We are to be their eyes and ears, seeing what they might never see and hearing what they might never hear.

What journalists now must do is avoid the level of arrogance and disregard that many in the past displayed toward the very public they claimed to be serving. It often manifested itself when some disgruntled soul got up the nerve to call the paper and complain about something a reporter had written. Sometimes, the exchanges would be downright nasty. But, of course, the caller started it.

I can remember sitting through such phone conversations, largely concerned with whether I had reported anything erroneously. That was rarely the case. But I now see that I probably was missing a much more important lesson – the knowledge that could be gained from listening to people. As a journalist, I never really saw that as part of my job. I wasn’t thinking about journalism as a business. It was a calling. I was like the preacher, assigned by God, to tell people the news, whether they wanted to hear it or not.

What I didn’t realize or fully appreciate was that there was a good chance that many of them were not hearing it because they might have never read beyond the first paragraph or so of the stories I wrote. But back then, we didn’t think about that a lot because the newspaper’s bottom line seemed healthy. Circulation numbers at the papers I worked for over the years were good.

Since then, the public, little by little, has been turning away from newspapers as a way to be informed. In other words, the public had been giving us feedback all along and we were too busy “giving them what they needed” to even see it. Of course, the circulation department folks saw it, but we never saw them as colleagues, so why would we listen to them? It just wasn’t the nature of journalism back in the day.

What we realize now is that feedback from the public is not always expressed verbally. Sometimes, actions really do speak louder than words. People will let you know what they think by what they do. Many have stopped reading newspapers.

The problem has become so acute today that the newspaper industry is in a state of crisis. Circulation and advertising revenues are falling in most markets. The consequences
have been staff layoffs, lost space for stories, and low morale among journalists.

Now, newspapers are undergoing a great makeover, trying in various ways to appeal to an ever-changing public that is exposed to a growing number of avenues for how it acquires information. And the emphasis is on information more than on traditional notions of news, a reality that is driving many journalists who hail from a more traditional school of thought about journalism out of the profession — literally.

The key to the whole public feedback equation is that it must be considered equally with the feedback that comes from supervisors and peers. Journalism training must emphasize both angles of this process because it is central to the work and existence of journalists. It cannot be trusted to osmosis.

The need for this became most apparent to me when I began teaching at the Diversity Institute at Vanderbilt University. The institute is a 12-week fellowship that trains adults who had been pursuing other careers to become journalists. It is funded by the Freedom Forum, a nonpartisan newspaper foundation based in Arlington, Virginia which promotes education about the First Amendment and works with newspapers to promote diversity.

As I worked with these adults transitioning into journalism careers, I found that many of them readily grasped the concepts of reporting and writing that other lecturers and I shared with them. What they seemed to struggle with most, however, was feedback that other instructors and I shared with them about their stories. Some of the fellows would get depressed while others would get downright angry when we would edit their stories or make suggestions on how they could be improved.

After several classes, the pattern became so predictable that I decided we needed to go further in preparing fellows for the editing process. I also realized that it was important to prepare them for the feedback that they would receive from the public.

That's when I developed the lecture I eventually presented at CUNY. And each time I would present it, I would see a light bulb go off for students who clearly were uneasy with receiving feedback on their work.

Of course, feedback that comes with the editing process always has been essential to newsroom journalism. But the reality is that many newspaper editors and reporters struggle through this process.
Some editors are better than others, perhaps because they have the right disposition or just the right touch to make stories better. Some reporters get through the process better than others because they don’t place too high a premium on the writing; they are reporters at heart. Still others on both sides of the equation simply endure. Some editors are heavy handed and rule by authority, doing as they will to the copy submitted to them. They might edit the story and then ask the reporter to look it over to ensure no mistakes have been made. If objections are made, they shoot the reporter down.

Some reporters consequently divorce themselves from the story and the process, caring only if the facts are accurate. I remember hearing some colleagues say that once they push the send button, they never read the story again — even after it’s in print.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the editors who just send everything through, leaving some reporters to think that all is well, when, in fact, it is not.

Then there are those reporters who care about every jot and tittle of what they write, those who will go to the mat on just about every proposed change or suggestion for improvement. The World Wrestling Federation has nothing on these folks. So the editor has to be ready.

I’ve endured my share of wrestling matches but have come to believe that reporting and writing is a shared ordeal — between reporter, editor, and reader.

Unfortunately, many reporters have long considered their work a matter of ownership, that they are the only ones with a vested interest in the story. As a consequence, they haven’t taken too kindly to anyone — whether inside the newsroom or outside — telling them how to report and structure their stories.

The days when such thinking can be tolerated seem to be over.

While my lecture has not been flawless, I have found that it has helped many students get the most out of the editing process. It also has helped them understand the importance of listening to what their readers are telling them. For better or worse, the industry is understanding that the latter is a fact of life. I hope that journalists will learn how to take a balanced approach that will lead not only to better journalism but also better bottom lines.

In this age, the great looming question is, can the two coexist? I think they must. MJR
Feedback Tips

In his lecture, Morganfield stressed the importance of understanding the value of feedback both on an internal and external level. Here are the major points he shared:

1. Get in tune with how you respond to feedback/criticism. This is important because what someone is saying and what you are hearing could be distorted based on your personal experience. One student admitted to me that any time I critiqued her work, she was reliving some of the criticism she had experienced from her father as a child.

2. Feedback is never personal. This obviously is up to the editor, but feedback should never be personal; it should be about the story. Some editors will praise something when it comes from one reporter and reject it when it comes from another. Be careful not to let personal biases creep into your editing.

3. Feedback is necessary. You’re here to learn; feedback is always intended to be constructive and help you improve, since we aim for the highest standard.

4. Let go. It’s not your baby; it’s your work. It’s a shared ordeal.

5. Critique yourself. Ask how you feel about what you’ve done and what you might do differently or additionally if time permitted (but don’t attack or belittle yourself or make excuses).

6. Be open to the ideas of others. The best feedback always starts here. Most editors get so busy talking that they don’t ever stop to listen. Editors should begin by asking the reporter how he or she feels about what has been submitted.

This allows him or her to see where they might be connecting and where they might be missing each other. The editors then respectfully offer their perspective — not as law but as a means for moving the story forward.

7. Compare and clarify. Study the changes that are made in your story and compare the final product to the original. Seek clarity about points that you have questions about (Each experience should help you get just that much better if you learn from what transpired.).

8. Debate is OK. Editors are not always right; they just have the ultimate responsibility for decision-making. But pick your battles; learn to hear before you speak (As I said, this works both ways.)

9. Get used to it. Feedback is a daily part of life as a reporter, whether it’s coming to you directly or indirectly. It comes from peers, from supervisors, from readers, from sources. You need to develop an ear to hear, and a thick skin, because it can sometimes be nasty. Also maintain a beginner’s mind, because it’s all about learning. If taken properly, you grow and get better at what you do and all parties involved benefit. Remember this is your career, your signature; you want to be proud of what you do, and so do those with whom you work.

10. Grow with the flow. Remember most editors won’t hold what you don’t know against you until you have had an opportunity to learn it. To not be the greatest – from the start – is not a crime. It’s only after you’ve had time and opportunity that the expectation changes. MJR
Continuous news is continuous change.

At The Washington Post, continuous news is the name of the desk in the print newsroom that provides breaking news stories to the paper's sister company, washingtonpost.com. The Internet is a dynamic, fast-paced world—and so is our response.

For example, on January 11, the day after President Bush’s pivotal prime-time announcement that he was sending more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq, the Continuous News Desk, called CND at the Post, moved an early-morning instant poll reaction story to the speech and another story late in the day with more refined analysis of the poll; a story that chronicled administration officials talking about the new policy and congressional reaction; a story about then-Director of National Intelligence John D. Negroponte’s congressional testimony on the official threat assessment of Iraq’s insurgency; and a column by our media critic, Howard Kurtz, about the president’s remarks and the coverage that day. This was in addition to eight other news stories dealing with subjects not involving Iraq sent to the Web on January 11. Many of those stories (a total of 324 column inches) were updated throughout the day, including the main congressional reaction story, which was rewritten six times as news warranted.

Lexie Verdon is a native Montanan—born in Malta and raised in Libby. She fell in love with newspapers working for The Western News, which was published by her parents, Paul and Elaine Verdon. She graduated from the University of Montana School of Journalism, and this year marks her 30th anniversary working at The Washington Post.
The efforts to support and enhance daily news coverage at washingtonpost.com have the full attention of all senior editors in our newsroom. It is possible to teach old print journalists new tricks.

— Lexie Verdon

The CND began in earnest in 1999 with one editor, who was hoping to get six stories or online-only columns from the print newsroom to post on the Web site at midday as a "PM Extra" edition of the paper. The objective was to alert Web readers that this was not a static site and they could come back to it during the day for news. Then came such major stories as the President Clinton impeachment, the disputed election of 2000, the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Afghan conflict and the Iraq war.

With each crisis came new readers, who often returned to the site. In addition, Web news became more accessible for many people with the increasing use of computers and broadband connections. Both factors led to tremendous growth of the readership at our Web site. In late summer of 2000, regular daily page views at washingtonpost.com were somewhere in the 3 million range. Today, they are more than 8 million.

By the end of 2006, the CND employed five reporters and three editors and routinely moved a dozen stories or more to the Web while also providing regular morning updates to the Post's local radio station. Our work includes editing stories from beat reporters who file early for the Web, writing our own spot stories based on quick reporting, or serving as a rewrite desk that takes information from other reporters who are too busy to sit down to file for the Web. We serve as a primary conduit between the print newsroom and the Web newsroom for breaking news.

The system has been a success at the print newsroom for breaking news. It is possible to teach old print journalists new tricks. The efforts to support and enhance daily news coverage at washingtonpost.com have the full attention of all senior editors in our newsroom. It is possible to teach old print journalists new tricks.

I say this from experience. As an editor who has been at the Post for nearly thirty years, I am truly an old breed in my newsroom. In fact, I was hired in 1977 because I was one of the few college interns who came here knowing how to read the lead-type galleys and pages that this big city newspaper was still using. Having grown up in a print shop and small weekly newspaper in Libby, Montana, I felt right at home on the fourth floor of the Post, listening to the deafening roar of clacking Linotypes and dealing with the printers who could simultaneously smoke a cigarette, complain that we were missing deadline, suggest a deft trim in a story that was running long, and shuffle spacer slugs between each line of type to fill out a page — just like they were dealing cards in Las Vegas.

So it is the height of irony that I have been lucky enough to be at the center of this major transformation in the Post newsroom for the past six years. The move to Web journalism is an effort that reporters and editors have come to embrace and have helped define for the entire industry. It is also a part of the newsroom's mission now, to provide Post journalism — both from the print edition and with breaking stories — to washingtonpost.com, so that it can reach a wider and much more diverse audience than we could possibly attract with our "dead-tree" product.

At times, it hasn't been an easy transition. We have sometimes had to invent new procedures on the fly. But with a growing global audience — and a shrinking print audience — it is the future, and editors and reporters of all ages and backgrounds here are striving to find ways to serve both sets of readers.

Flexibility has been at the center of the success. Even when the Post's Web efforts were in their infancy, there were senior editors in the print newsroom who saw the Internet's potential and worked hard to bring along an occasionally reluctant newsroom. But fairly quickly, both editors and reporters began hopping on board, aided by the efforts of the CND to make any writing for the Web as effortless as possible.

Post staffers began to understand that the Web stories they put up during the middle of the day were not rivals to their print stories, but instead allowed them to reach sources and readers earlier, to begin to frame the stories that would take shape in the paper and save them time later in the day, and to become competitive with radio and television outlets. As our successes built, they also began to realize that on the Web, audio and video are important tools to enhance stories. This year, nearly 100 reporters and editors are planning to take video training from Web videographers so that they can provide their own visuals for stories on the Web.

It would have been inconceivable ten years ago to project this kind of transformation in a very tradition-bound newsroom such as The Washington Post. So it would be foolish to try to pinpoint where exactly our Web efforts will take us in the next decade. But editors and staff are constantly moving and changing to meet the challenge.
That was then: men work at Linotypes, a machine operated by one person that was used by newspapers beginning in the late 1800s. In the thirty years since Lexie Verdon started working at The Washington Post, she has moved from a world of lead type to continuous news. Photo from the 1939 book News Workers, credited to the New York Times Studio.

Keys to Online Success

1) **Fast, clean, good writing.** Given the condensed news cycle associated with Web postings, clean writing is essential. For many breaking news stories, the basics are best — a simple pyramid story that can be updated easily. When we started the Web efforts in the Post newsroom, many older reporters who had started their careers with wire services had more grace in their Web filings. They understood the old system of being able to add to an existing story without having to write through all the material. It is a useful skill that young people looking for jobs in this arena might want to practice.

2) **Flexibility.** Nothing is set in stone in the Web world. To thrive in this world, an individual journalist must be flexible and willing to look at the world — and the workplace — in new ways.

3) **Multimedia.** Publishing on the Web is not just having a different outlet for a text story. The Web is a different medium, and it offers much more potential than print or broadcast alone. It is increasingly important in a print newsroom to have experience in Web design and formatting, digital photography, audio, and video. Take classes in those areas or experiment on your own.

4) **Curiosity.** This reportedly killed the cat, but it can save journalists. Explore the Web. Remember that innovations such as blogs, RSS feeds, YouTube, and file sharing services may seem ubiquitous today, but they are relatively new. They are evolving into new services, and many more will follow. Check them out. Play around with them. And maybe you’ll come up with a new, hot item for the Web.
Old farmstead near Dutton, Montana. Photo by Sarah Welliver.
Kyrgyzstan

the Rockies

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL JOURNALISM
What is a wolf? When John Rember began reporting on the wolf and the proposal to bring it back to parts of the Rocky Mountain West, he learned that the animal was the lead character in a story of how truth is manipulated in environmental debates.
In March 1990, I flew into Missoula, Montana to attend a public law conference on the reintroduction of wolves to the American West. The conference speakers included lawyers who had tried cases resulting from the Endangered Species Act, ranchers, wildlife managers, and wolf advocates. Listening, I learned that the wolf was a child-eating predator, and I learned that no human being had ever been harmed by a wolf. I learned the wolf was a pack animal. I learned it was a solitary animal. I learned it was a prolific breeder and an animal whose numbers wouldn’t increase without help from human beings. The crumbling legal tablet that was my conference notebook contains the statement that, by some counts, there were 190 separate regulatory or advisory entities involved in wolf reintroduction, and under that statement is a scribbled question: 190 separate truths?

I was there as a reporter for Wildlife Conservation magazine, which is published by the New York Zoological Society, and I had been charged by my editor to present a balanced view of a complex and angry controversy.

I had interviewed people from all across the political spectrum in the weeks before the conference. But only in Missoula did I realize that the various factions opposing or supporting wolf reintroduction were not going to live comfortably on the same planet. Some of them, I decided, weren’t even on the same planet.

My article, “The Big Howl Over Wolves,” was published in the September/October 1990 issue of Wildlife Conservation. It concluded that wolf reintroduction in the West would succeed, but that the wolf could become a legal animal rather than a wild one.

The passage of time has vindicated my words, but a good part of my success as a prescient wildlife journalist came from my writing partner, Mr. Dumb Luck. In 1990, I saw myself as a writer who could ask penetrating questions and startle interview subjects into revealing the truth. I prided myself on being able to see the big picture.

I was able to stand back as a journalist and say, near the end of the article, “If a camel is a horse designed by a committee, then the animal I saw in Missoula was a wolf designed by a committee—which is to say that it wasn’t a wolf at all.”

I should have said it was a beast of burden for the legal profession and the biological sciences.

Seventeen years later, I can look out the window of my home in Idaho’s Sawtooth Valley and see wolves. Sometimes I can see them chasing elk, which is interesting to watch but not something you’d want the kids to see if they’ve just finished watching Bambi on the minivan’s DVD player. Last spring I counted seven kills within a mile of the driveway, and my neighbor upriver counted more than thirty.

Wolf reintroduction has been a success here in Idaho, but the humans who supported it have only won a battle in a war that is far from over. Wolves are about to be removed from the Endangered Species Act protection in Idaho and Montana. Butch Otter, Idaho’s governor, has said he wants to be first in line for a wolf tag, and he wants to see the state’s estimated 650 wolves hunted down to a population of 100.

Letters to the editor of The Idaho
Statesman range in tone from despairing to murderous. Most writers tend to favor keeping the wolves and getting rid of the hunters. The minority of writers who favor killing wolves tend to advocate killing all of them.

Nothing is going to happen anytime soon. Lawsuits are being prepared to stop the delisting of wolves even as the federal agencies are preparing to delist. Lawsuits are being prepared to stop the lawsuits. Lawsuits are no doubt being prepared to stop the stop-the-lawsuit lawsuits.

I thought I saw the big picture at the Missoula conference. I was wrong. I missed the overpowering financial reality behind wolf reintroduction, and I also missed the fact that many of the people I thought were telling their version of the truth were lying and knew they were lying.

Occasionally, I came close to seeing a truly bigger picture. One of the lawyers at the conference kept asserting that litigation was constitutionally protected free speech. Another of the lawyers said that people who had been forced to move because of federal condemnation proceedings were saved “a few more payments on their trailer houses.” Yet another described the court-case-by-court-case evolution of the Endangered Species Act.

I sensed that the wolf and the people surrounding it had been caught in a great legal net, and what mattered was not its presence as a member of an ecosystem but its suitability for the courtroom. My notes include the phrase, “odor of litigation in the air.” I was able to describe the wolf as a legal animal, but if I were writing the article now I might describe it as grist for a great and all-powerful legal mill, a machine set to grind and grind until it has processed into dog food every environmental controversy in the West. Wolves and people matter less to that legal machine than briefs and rulings. That we are a nation of laws, not men, takes on an Orwellian meaning in this particular big picture.

A certain amount of human damage was expected, saved trailer house payments notwithstanding. A wolf advocate I interviewed said, “We need to get rid of the ranchers.” My interview subject, knowing that I was reporting for *Wildlife Conservation*, had assumed that I was an Eastern journalist, one who saw—at a distance—wolf reintroduction as the rightful restoration of an ecosystem. After I asked a number of penetrating questions about what “get rid of” meant when applied to ranchers, that person stopped treating me like a gleeful co-conspirator. I had instead become a potential legal opponent.

Later that day, my editor received a telephone message insisting I be taken off the story. She refused.

The real damage, though, was to the wolves. In my Missoula notes, I have the bald statement by a federal wildlife official that wolves will always be managed by killing them. He was absolutely confident that his agency would always be in control of the wolf populations in the West. His statement didn’t make it into my article, but it should have. It was probably the truest thing I heard at the conference. Even though I was good at asking penetrating questions, I wasn’t ready to penetrate all the way to the self-assured legal lethality that underlies federal wildlife policy—especially when I was working for *Wildlife Conservation* magazine, whose readers, after all, expected the animals they read about to be both wild and living.

In seventeen years I have learned that in environmental fights in the West, as in war, truth is the first casualty.

I’ve also learned that humans seldom come to their careers out of their beliefs. Instead, careers impose beliefs.

For magazine journalists who want to know how this process works in their profession, Gloria

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**John Rember** is Writer-At-Large at Albertson College and on the faculty of Pacific University’s Master of Fine Arts in Writing program. He received his MFA from the University of Montana in 1987. He has written for Travel and Leisure, Naturalist, and Skiing magazines. He consented to do this article in return for a University of Montana hooded sweatshirt.
Montana State wildlife biologist Mark Atkinson checks for trap damage around the paws of a female wolf killed by Wildlife Services for preying on cattle near Livingston, Montana. Among the 
truest things John Rember learned at a Missoula conference on wolf reintroduction was what he was told by a federal wildlife official who said that wolves would always be managed by 
killing them. “His statement didn’t make it into my article,” Rember writes, “but it should have.”

Steinem’s tell-all essay, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” is a good start. As 
editor of Ms. magazine, Steinem learned that advertisers expect favorable editorial content. They 
expect it at travel magazines, ski 
magazines, newsmagazines, outdoor 
magazines, newspapers, network news shows, and blogs. As Steinem 
found out, editors who insist that 
their reporters tell the truth do so at 
their peril.

While advertisers did not con­ 
trol the editorial content of Wildlife Conservation, the magazine’s readers 
held strong assumptions about wild 
animals, and I knew what they were. That understanding stopped me from seeing the whole grim truth 
about wolves and their manage­
ment.

I’ve also learned that many peo­ple stand to materially benefit if 
environmental arguments are never 
resolved, and that they don’t mind 
lying to further their interests. Thus 
we have biostitutes, research biolo­
gists who will testify that any envi­
ronmental question will not be 
resolved without another decade of 
well-funded studies. And we have 
environmentalists who put color photographes of wolf puppies in their 
funding drive brochures. And 
ranchers who wave newspaper clippings from the 1890s about people 
being attacked by wolves. And 
outfitters and guides who tell us that 
the elk and hunters will disappear 
from the West unless wolves are exterminated.

In all these cases, economic interest trumps reality. A journalist’s 
old-fashioned adherence to unbi­
ased truth can bring clarity to our 
legal battles over wolves, grizzlies, 
salmon, wilderness, water, and land

use.

But adherence to unbiased truth 
is under fire from Fox News on the 
right and postmodernism on the left. 
It requires a studied “pox on all your houses” attitude on the journalist’s 
part, and in a world that confuses 
identity with allegiance, its practi­
tioners are decried as cynics.

So be it. Cynicism is the jour­
nalist’s best friend (and you thought 
journalists didn’t have friends), but 
it’s also the truth’s best friend. The 
people you’re interviewing are never 
your friends, and to the extent you 
doubt that, you risk your adherence 
to unbiased truth. And if you risk 
your adherence to unbiased truth, 
turn in your reporter’s notebook. 
You can make more money as a 
lawyer. MJR
Cowflops 
& Cowtows

By Gwen Florio

Urban journalist remembers rural stories and sagebrush survival
A Freemen sympathizer who traveled from Oregon retrieves firearms cached in a culvert, as the news media looks on. Photo courtesy of The Billings Gazette.
The West is about more than cowboys and Indians and those headline-grabbing, photo-hogging, “charismatic mega-fauna” — grizzlies, wolves, and bison.

— Gwen Florio

A little more than ten years ago, I moved from the Philadelphia area, population 6 million, to Denver to become the Philadelphia Inquirer’s national correspondent for the Rocky Mountain West.

Only a few weeks after the move, I found myself in Jordan, Montana, population about 400.

This was before the standoff with the anti-government Freemen, so the town had yet to nearly double in size with an influx of people just like me. That meant, thank God, there was no one around to hear when I asked one of the residents what those low, clumpy bushes out in the fields were.

There was a long silence.

“Sagebrush,” he said finally.

Or worse yet, when — wanting to give Philadelphia readers an idea of the vastness of the area — I asked someone how big his ranch was.

The silence was longer this time and accompanied by an icy stare.

“We don’t ask people that here,” he said.

At least I didn’t order a micro-brew at the Hell Creek Bar.

There, people lined up shots and beers — Miller Genuine Draft — for me. If I wanted interviews, first I had to drink. I don’t remember much about that night except walking back to my motel room in the snow. The temperature was well below zero. I was colder than I had ever been in my life. Some guy followed me back from the bar and pounded on my door, which had no lock. I piloted my suitcase and whatever moveable furniture I could find against it, and held my aching head and wondered why I had ever left the sweet familiarity of Philadelphia. In Philly, I carried money in my pocket in case I was mugged, crunched crack vials beneath my running shoes on my nightly jog, and knew better than to call the insurance company to replace the vent window whenever somebody broke into my car.

Street smarts? Those I had.

And they were absolutely useless in a place where most of the streets weren’t even paved, where cell phones didn’t work, and where once, when I asked to use someone’s bathroom, I was ushered outside to a tastefully appointed two-seater (padded toilet seats, one pink, the other blue, and a magazine rack on the wall).

Rural reporting was going to require a whole new set of skills.

I grew up on a wildlife refuge in Delaware. Our nearest neighbors were about a mile away. Town was 7 miles. It might as well have been on the moon — or so I thought then.

Then I moved out West. I still remember that first trip to Jordan, driving the 80 miles north of Miles City and never seeing a house, a convenience store, or — uh-oh — a gas station the whole way. I was used to the New Jersey Turnpike, with its rest stops every 10 miles or so. I coasted into Jordan on fumes.

Lesson No. 1: Don’t let your gas gauge drop below half.

Then there was the matter of learning to translate maps. Early on, I got bored while driving west on Interstate 70 in Colorado and decided to take what looked like a shortcut to Durango, in the southwest corner of the state. So the line on the map for my shortcut was a little squiggly. And maybe I should have peered more closely at those triangles that meant, well, mountains. Three mountain passes and a couple of hours later than it would have taken had I just stuck to the main roads, I coasted into Durango, again on fumes. (I’m a slow learner.)

Lesson No. 2: Pass your newfound knowledge along to your editors. My editors on the East Coast were forever calling and
telling me to get some place fast. “That’s an eight-hour drive,” I’d say.
“But it looks so close on the map,” they’d say.
*#&$@!

**Lesson No. 3:** The West is about more than cowboys and Indians and those headline-grabbing, photo-hogging, “charismatic mega-fauna” — grizzlies, wolves, and bison. (Although, it must be noted that those stories always found a ready audience.)

But the longer I stayed in the West, the more similarities I found with the stories I’d done back East. Just because people were living in tiny, far-flung rural communities instead of inner-city rowhouses didn’t mean they weren’t struggling with low-paying jobs, bewildering changes in federal programs, and burgeoning drug problems. In my experience, Philly readers enjoyed the “Hey, me too!” factor when they recognized their own issues in people seemingly so different.

The problems of people in fast-emptying Eastern Montana towns were eerily like those in the old, inner-ring Philadelphia suburbs where abandoned shopping centers stood like ghost towns, albeit surrounded by concrete rather than exhausted grazing land. In each place, it seemed the only way to survive was to leave.

Colorado’s mountain communities found themselves grappling with exploding immigrant populations, when Latin Americans came to work in the ski resorts; just as Italian neighborhoods in South Philadelphia struggled to become accustomed to the Vietnamese and Cambodians now in their midst.

As for getting those stories, interviewing techniques turned out to be pretty much the same everywhere. That is to say:

**Lesson No. 4:** You’re an idiot.

Seriously. The person you’re interviewing is the expert. Be humble. And give him or her time to warm up. Talking about the weather for longer than you ever thought possible lets somebody size you up, and relax enough to get down to the matter at hand. If I’m going to a place off the beaten path where people aren’t used to talking to reporters, I always budget two to three times as long as I would for an interview with, say, police or county commissioners.

Still, some things apply only to rural areas.

**Lesson No. 5:** Wear good shoes. By which I mean sturdy. Lest you think this is frivolous advice, try walking through gumbo in loafers. Or savor the nice warm feeling of a cowflop squishing into open-toed sandals.

And on your way to change your footgear, go fill your gas tank. MJR
Rural news challenges in Kyrgyzstan

BY KUBANYCHBEK TAABALDIEV

Kyrgyzstan is the only country of the five Central Asian states with comparatively free media, and the press covers all current affairs in the country without exception. Theoretically, the Kyrgyz population has every opportunity to know what is going on through the media to make decisions pertaining to the country’s young democracy. However, in the two years since the March 2005 Tulip Revolution, when the previous head of state, Askar Akayev, was forced out and replaced by opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiev via an election the same year, the situation in the media has seen little improvement.

According to the Kyrgyz Justice Ministry, about 1,000 media sources have been registered in the past four years, including print media, radio and television, and online. As the number of Internet users in Kyrgyzstan increases, the influence of online media also grows. According to data published in 2006 by international organizations in Kyrgyzstan that study the media, the number of Internet users in the country has reached 500,000, or 9 percent of the total population. Kyrgyzstan leads all Central Asian countries in number of Internet users.

However, an enormous part of Kyrgyzstan’s Internet users, about 90 percent, live in urban areas — and most of them live in the country’s two largest cities: Bishkek, the official state capital, and the so-called southern capital city Osh. Altogether, 1.5 million people live in these two cities out of the country’s total population of 5.2 million.

Kubanychbek Taabaldev has been in charge of Kyrgyzstan’s national news agency, Kabar, since 1998. He is a 2007 Fulbright Scholar researching rural Montana’s press to learn how Kyrgyzstan might transition to independent media from state-controlled news.
Older era print houses have gradually been removed and decommissioned. Only a few of them continue to work for the reasonable prices affordable to small, rural newspapers. But the quality and design of newspapers printed in these older print houses is unattractive and readers do not read or subscribe to them.

-Kubanychbek Taabaldiev

By comparison, CIA data shows that in neighboring Uzbekistan, with a total population of 27.3 million, 800,000 people have Internet access, which is just three percent of the total population.

And Kyrgyzstan’s more industrial neighbor Kazakhstan has a population of 16 million people — a million of whom have access to the Internet — around 7 percent of the population. But this figure will soon increase dramatically, as Kazakhstan is experiencing one of the world’s fastest growing economies.

Besides the increasing influence of the Internet, many Kyrgyz people still use the more classical types of media — radio and television, as well as print media. Sixty-five percent of the Kyrgyz population lives in remote, non-urban areas, far from the industrial and more developed regions of the state.

Also, mountains cover 93 percent of the country’s territory. Therefore, there are a lot of natural obstacles that prevent radio and television signals from spreading across the country. This is the main reason for the limitations to the country's communication system, as well as its transportation systems, like automobile roads and train tracks.

According to the Kyrgyz State Agency of Communication, 7 percent of the land is not covered by electronic broadcast signals and a lot of people in these remote areas live outside of the information space.

Kyrgyzstan is geographically divided into two areas by high mountains — the north part, where the capital is located and most of the urban population lives, and the south. Slightly more than half of all the Kyrgyz population — only a half million of whom live in urban areas, live in the south.

The people in these rural areas have no alternative news sources. They receive only the signals of the Kyrgyz Radio and Television company, which is owned by the state and has all the technology to broadcast radio signals. The existing independent broadcasters have a lot of technical difficulties in distributing their signals to receivers and can only spread their own signals within a 125-mile radius or less. In order to distribute a signal, independent broadcasters have to use the state-owned transmitters, which is expensive. All four of the country’s biggest independent telecommunications companies are located in Bishkek, and only users who live in the valley nearest to the capital can receive their signals.

There are also several independent broadcasting companies with small power transmitters with limited transmitting power. They are located in Osh and Djalalabad — the largest cities in Kyrgyzstan’s south. The signal radius from any broadcaster there is only about 62 miles. The most widely received signals come from the state television and radio channels.

Though the majority of the country’s population is Kyrgyz, 18 percent of the population is from the Uzbek Diaspora. While the signals of the comparatively weak Kyrgyz broadcasting companies cannot reach people in their own country, the signals of foreign broadcast companies located close to the state border, mostly from Uzbekistan, easily reach the viewers and listeners in the south. The result is that the southern Kyrgyz population hears more news from Uzbekistan than Kyrgyzstan, a kind of national information imbalance.

It is not obvious now if Kyrgyz authorities clearly understand the importance of this problem. Besides the technical problems in broadcasting media to people, there is no new wave of ideas to bring the content of a state-owned broadcasting company to the same level as neighboring broadcasters and thus compete for the attention of rural populations. That is why local people in the south prefer to watch foreign broadcast programs. In the north, the most popular radio and television programs are broadcast from Russia.

In terms of influence on the population, the basic alternative to radio and television is print media. The daily, but mostly weekly, newspapers are more sophisticated, and comparable to print media in other Central Asian states. Most Kyrgyz newspapers are printed and distributed in the urban areas of the country like Bishkek and the provincial centers. However, a majority of the Kyrgyz population lives in non-urban areas, where people have limited access to newspapers. Transportation and the delivery of newspapers to villages, especially those in remote areas, is not profitable for newspaper owners.
Also, most popular newspapers printed in the big cities are written and published in Russian, while the majority of villagers speak Kyrgyz.

In the time of Soviet control, all the different regions, like counties in America, had their own weekly newspapers, printed and distributed under the supervision and financial support of the local authorities. Such newspapers printed information that mostly reflected the opinions of the government authorities and were heavily censored by officials. That was the way all Soviet newspapers had to work, but since Kyrgyzstan's independence, all Kyrgyz print media gained comparative freedom. There is no censorship anymore, or at least it is not as restrictive as it was.

But the region's smaller newspapers rarely receive financial support from the authorities. When they do, the amount they receive is too small to maintain quality. Consequently, their influence on the local community decreased, and in some regions, has completely failed. Government interest and financial support in newspapers comes now only on the occasion of big political events, like elections or referendums, when politicians need support from local voters. Also, the poorer economy in the countryside means that there are too few advertisers, and newspaper circulation is too small to make it worthwhile for advertisers.

Also, there are fewer people interested in working on local newspapers' editorial staffs, and current staff members have no experience working in the new free-market economy because they have not been educated on how to work in such conditions. There are fewer occasions for them to go outside and get new skills and knowledge.

The print media in Kyrgyzstan often face these problems; therefore, people in rural and remote areas have limited access to objective and balanced information, as well as to fresh and independent sources of information. Many of the international organizations working in Kyrgyzstan understand these problems and give some support to local media representatives to avoid greater deterioration of the press. Some of them, like the United Nations Development Program, the United States Agency for International Development, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and others, continue to try to mitigate the problem. In all of Kyrgyzstan's provincial hubs, information resource centers have been created with support from these organizations. At these hubs, ordinary people, as well as journalists, can get any information they want — including access to the Internet. These organizations conduct special seminars for local media representatives and teach them how to get the information they are missing and prepare qualified material for newspapers and Web sites.

Unfortunately, not even journalists go regularly to these areas. Also, people from villages, even those who are aware of these centers and know their advantages, can go to them only occasionally. Therefore, access to the news is not improving and people remain less informed than they could be.

One of the reasons why people of non-urban areas have less interest in the media could be that people can't buy the newspapers they want because of the papers' limited circulations. Also, the high level of politicization in Kyrgyz society during the past two years is a reason for little interest in the local print media. Recent events in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that people who live in the south are more political than anywhere else within the country, and many of them have been involved in complicated political
The expectations of ordinary people in Kyrgyzstan after the 2005 revolution have not been met.

-Kubanychbek Taabaldiev
By Mike Stebleton

KCGM (Kids, Cattle, Grain, Minerals), 95.7 on your FM dial, "the voice of the prairies, your good-neighbor station" in Scobey, Montana, can attribute its thirty-five years of continued survival to just one thing: unconditional support from the Daniels County community and surrounding area. In 1969, it was Larry Bowler, Publisher/Editor of the Daniels County Leader weekly newspaper, who spearheaded the effort to establish Scobey's first radio station.

"We were being considered colonies of neighboring, larger populated areas, and I wanted us to develop a certain amount of political clout so that some of our feelings could get to higher levels," Bowler explained in an August 19, 1995 interview. "We also wanted the business people who wanted to get their message out to have that opportunity."

He applied for an FM license because they were more available, but it got hung up somewhere in the Washington, D.C., bureaucracy. "There was some opposition [in D.C.], but we couldn't put our finger on it exactly," he said.

Bowler's next move could be labeled as brilliant.

He wrote a letter and - "to cut through the underbrush" - mailed it to the residence of the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. The letter, however, wasn't addressed to the chairman; instead it was addressed to the chairman's wife.

"I wrote to her saying when your husband comes home tonight, serve him one of his favorite drinks..."
and then hand him this letter, if you don't mind," Bowler said. "There was a letter within the letter."

Like magic, the roadblock was cleared, and within a week Scobey received its channel assignment and permission to construct.

On Monday, June 21, 1971, KCGM sent out its first signal from high atop the Leader building with Bowler as president of Prairie Communications, Inc., which operates the station.

"I was told when I first began as the station's manager: 'Don't ever try to be like the big-city radio stations. We have to keep it local or it's not going to survive,' " said Dixie Halverson, who has been KCGM manager for twenty-seven years.

"The board of directors and the stockholders don't care if we don't make a huge profit. They want to make sure we serve the community and are here for its benefit."

One of those benefits has been the ability to raise significant amounts of money through radiothons.

The first radiothon occurred in the spring of 1979 when the Daniels Memorial Hospital in Scobey faced serious financial troubles. The problem was solved when a whopping $178,000 was raised over the KCGM airwaves.

In 1988 another radiothon was needed for a worthwhile project - the radio station itself.

Serious vandalism to the radio tower a few miles east of Scobey and other problems put KCGM so far in debt that there seemed to be little chance of recovery.

A radiothon to encourage support from the community was the only way. The total raised to save KCGM was $160,000.

"We hoped we could pull it off, but we certainly didn't expect it," Halverson admitted. "During the radiothon and the next few days we had a tremendous response, but we were still $45,000 short. Then we had one contributor come up with that entire amount. The overwhelming support from people as far west as Opheim and as far east as Plentywood was unreal. The thing that amazes me that it was during the drought years, and to come up with that money when most people didn't have any money, was really a surprise."

All told, KCGM has conducted 13 radiothons between 1979 and 2005 for community projects, raising $679,939.

In the spring of 2004 KCGM even broadcast live from the Scobey School gym during a sixth grade boys basketball game at the Scobey Lions Club Youth Tournament.

Other live remote broadcasts have included sheriff candidate forums, annual 4-H beef sale auctions, the Daniels County Fair and parade, election night coverage, interviews during the annual Pioneer Days celebration at Pioneer Town, and Scobey-to-Opheim railroad branchline abandonment hearings in Opheim.

"To our knowledge we are the first radio station to do live play-by-play of a Cub Scout Pinewood Derby," said station manager Halverson.
To our knowledge we are the first radio station to do live play-by-play of a Cub Scout Pinewood Derby.

– Dixie Halverson, KCGM manager

KCGM has also hosted/sponsored the annual Colgate Country Showdown, including the state finals in 1998, a Halloween haunted house (huge success), an Ugly Dog Contest, an Ag Appreciation Concert featuring Ken Overcast, a toy show, and Fourth of July activities such as outhouse races, tug-o-war, barstool races, kids' games, and a street dance.

Perhaps KCGM's greatest moment of service occurred on a cold, stormy winter morning with a ton of snow on the ground.

A man and his two small children were traveling on a gravel road south of Richland, located 29 miles west of Scobey, and the vehicle got stuck in the deep snow. The father knew he'd have to do some walking to get help so he tuned in KCGM and instructed his children to listen to the radio because it would tell them what to do.

When he finally arrived at his destination around 8 a.m. he called KCGM and told announcer Lisa Thievin his plight. She told the kids, via the airwaves, Dad was safe and help was on the way and they were not to leave the vehicle.

Thievin and KCGM then went beyond just telling the two children Dad was safe and help was on the way; it pushed its regular programming aside and began catering to the stranded children by playing kids' songs, and Thievin told them stories until KCGM learned the kids had been rescued. At that moment those two children were KCGM's most important listeners. MJR

DJ Wallace Fladager works a weekday afternoon shift at the KCGM building in Scobey, Montana. Photo by Mike Stebleton.
Introducing the Nonprofit Newspaper Hybrid

The Corporation for Public Community Newspapers Creates a New Business Model for Hometown Papers

BY JOHN Q. MURRAY

The Clark Fork Chronicle, circulation 2,700, is just starting its fourth year. We are a typical community weekly, covering Montana’s state House District 14. Our readership area follows the Clark Fork River, winding through two counties, four school districts, four rural fire districts, two U.S. Forest Service ranger districts, two incorporated towns, nine zip codes, and seventeen voting precincts.

Jock Lauterer, author of the textbook Community Journalism, would recognize us as relentlessly local, focused on becoming the local experts on the public life of our area. Our typical front page has our top local hard news story, coverage of a local public meeting or event, a local feature story, and a feature photo of a local event — often a local child, a 50th wedding anniversary. Yep, we’re relentlessly local. We live here, our families live here — my wife’s grandma just turned 95 — and we care.

There’s no real secret to what we do: We attend and report on as many local public meetings as we can and attend state and federal meetings when they are of interest to our readers. Schools are the heart of our communities, so we write as much as we can and encourage student contributions. We write about new and expanding local businesses, local residents and their achievements and milestones, local crimes and court cases, and we try to keep people informed about all the local private organizations: the anti-drug use groups, the chamber of commerce, the senior citizens. We started a church page to recap pastors’ messages. Our readership area includes a lot of public land, so we also follow forest management, wildfires, and growth issues.

You wouldn’t think any of this would be worth discussing. But given that there are three other newspapers in the same readership area, it says a lot about the state of rural journalism that the Clark Fork Chronicle has grown steadily over its first four years.

Why have we succeeded? Why was this particular niche — providing local news — available for us to fill, especially when there was an existing long-established weekly already in the area?

Because the business model for rural newspapers no longer works. We are in the midst of vast interconnected demographic and economic changes. We’ve seen our traditional natural resource industries decline and families move away in search of work. That has cut into our base of traditional advertisers — the local mom-and-pop stores. With folks now driving fifty to one-hundred miles to shop in the big-box stores, many of our rural areas are becoming outlying bedroom communities of the regional economic centers with little local commerce of their own.

At the same time, many baby boomers are retiring to the “third coast” — the Rocky Mountain states and especially western Montana — to enjoy recreation and wildlife on the vast neighboring public lands. Some are bringing their own money and businesses with them, but many of those businesses, enabled by the Internet and low-cost communications, operate in markets elsewhere in the country and the world. They don’t need to advertise in their local community newspaper.

If the pure commercial model worked, small-town weeklies would be thriving. But not many are, especially those with distant ownership. If you study rural newspapers owned by out-of-town interests, you find advertisements from other towns, other counties, other states. The reporters’ names in the staff boxes change every six to eight months as the companies reduce salaries to the point where young journalism grads can’t afford both food and gas.

Other changes are more subtle but can be summed up in four words: fewer stories, bigger pictures. Over time, the editorial choices start to tilt toward stories and photos intended to

John Q. Murray is publisher of the Clark Fork Chronicle and a graduate student at the University of Montana, pursuing a master of public administration degree. For more information about the nonprofit Corporation for Public Community Newspapers, see the Web site http://www.publicnewspapers.org. The Clark Fork Chronicle Web site is http://www.clarkforkchronicle.com.
move papers off the drugstore racks: wrecks, crime, conflict.

To keep a newspaper alive under a strict commercial model in an economically depressed rural county, the formula is too often to reduce costs and increase revenues. I know of one rural weekly that even tried to charge for a correction, offering ad space to the offended party rather than a mea culpa.

The danger of operating under that old business model in a new economy is that many rural newspapers could enter what University of North Carolina journalism professor Philip Meyer calls the “death spiral”: As the managers of regional chains cut costs by reducing the local news staff, the resulting drop in quality reduces circulation, which leads to more cost-cutting, which leads to lower circulation, more cost-cutting, and so on.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky notes that the metropolitan dailies are also failing their outlying rural areas. Subject to the same cost-cutting measures, they are pulling their reporters back to focus on their own metropolitan areas; rural issues are ignored.

At first, we were surprised that there was such little overlap in the stories covered by the Clark Fork Chronicle and our rival weekly and the nearby metropolitan daily. Sadly, after further reflection, it was not surprising at all. We were the only newspaper willing to invest in the public life of the community by sending reporters to these public meetings. By simply being there, we were able to report on the news breaking in those meetings, while also hearing about leads on other important stories. In our first three years, we wrote more than 1.7 million words in more than 3,000 stories that otherwise wouldn’t have been told.

It is clear that the purely commercial model is failing in our rural areas and that we need to come up with a new model. Because our approach has been consistent with the goals of what is known as “public journalism” or “civic journalism,” we looked to that movement for the basic framework.

Public journalism is a grass-roots reform movement that started among larger metropolitan newspapers in the early ’90s. Champions of civic journalism believe that the newspaper plays a critical role in our constitutional democracy and that by thinking of ourselves as full-time citizens and experts on public life, journalists can help all citizens better participate in our public decision making.

Newspapers implemented public journalism in a wide variety of projects, most of them dedicated to public listening that let the public set the agenda for the newspaper’s coverage of local issues. These listening projects included: discussions over pizza, forums, polls, questionnaires, focus groups, clip-out surveys, interview projects, and formal panels. However, few if any of these projects advanced beyond the pilot project stage to become institutionalized in the organizational structure of the newspaper.

One critique, written in 1999 by
It is clear that the purely commercial model is failing in our rural areas and that we need to come up with a new model. Because our approach has been consistent with the goals of what is known as ‘public journalism’ or ‘civic journalism,’ we looked to that movement for the basic framework.

— John Q. Murray

Michael Schudson, a sociology professor at the University of California at San Diego, points out that public journalism does not represent a fundamentally new model of journalism. Professional journalists still act as trustees on behalf of the public and continue to exercise their professional judgment as to what constitutes news. Schudson suggested that other potential alternatives to the “trustee model” do exist: an ombudsman; media critics and media reporters; local or national news councils; and even, he suggests, “publicly owned news institutions such as the Public Broadcasting Service.”

And so, to formally align ourselves with the goals of the public journalism movement, to establish ongoing formal methods of obtaining feedback from our communities during a time of rapid growth, and to provide ways for our new residents and business owners to support their local community newspapers as the pure commercial model fails our rural areas, we created the Corporation for Public Community Newspapers.

CPCN is an independent nonprofit organization with a dues-paying membership. Members attend regular meetings to: (1) review the progress of the local community newspaper toward its agreed-upon goals; (2) identify special reporting projects that the newspaper should undertake; and (3) vote to provide funding for specific special projects. The organization has three standing committees: the review committee, the special projects committee, and an outreach committee that focuses on the group’s membership and funding needs.

In implementing the nonprofit, inspiration came from a hybrid automobile. Just as my Honda Civic uses gas and electric motors to improve overall performance, we engineered a hybrid organization to take advantage of the strengths and best features of the for-profit and nonprofit.

The nonprofit does not seek to launch its own newspapers that will compete with existing locally owned newspapers. Instead, it contracts with the existing papers to guarantee free space for community organizations and set minimum target levels for regular coverage of community events. The supplemental funding provided by the nonprofit means the newspaper can increase its news hole to provide that coverage, regardless of the amount of advertising sold that week.

The nonprofit is its own distinct organization, completely separate from the for-profit newspaper, but the two enter into a binding contract that gives the nonprofit full budget authority over the special projects. The members of the nonprofit vote on the special projects and provide the funding.

The newspaper is free to turn down the project and the funding. In that case, the nonprofit can seek to contract with freelancers or other citizen journalists to produce the special projects. Conversely, the newspaper can choose to implement all special projects recommended by the nonprofit, even if they are not fully funded.

At the for-profit newspaper, journalists still exercise their professional judgment as to what constitutes news and are ultimately responsible for every word published. The professional journalists have some extra work. They must prepare a report for the annual or an equivalent performance review, and must pursue the requested special projects. (At the Clark Fork Chronicle, it will likely mean one more job for the publisher.)

The end result is that the public and the community newspaper, working in collaboration, have a formal ongoing mechanism for setting the community’s news agenda.

The nonprofit also acts as a focal point for citizen journalism, providing tools and training to community members so that they can contribute stories. Beyond adopting the Rural News Network curriculum [see story p. 72], we hope to develop Internet-based wizards to help authors write 5-W ledes and create first drafts using the traditional inverted-pyramid structure. Another effort involves analyzing news stories to create a taxonomy of story types, and creating templates for each of these major story types. The nonprofit would serve as an open-source clearinghouse for all projects that can help rural newspapers, such as open-source Web sites, and add-ons that allow online readers to rate story quality.

We are seeing a real hunger for information about our local communities. It has been very rewarding to be a part of the launch of the Chronicle where we regularly hear people tell us that they read every issue word for word, cover to cover. I believe the pendulum is starting to swing back in the direction of high-quality local community newspapers, and that we are at the beginning of a long period of renewal of American rural journalism. MJR
Creating a News Network
A team of University of Montana students and professors are building a new kind of journalism in the rural communities of Montana.

Looking west at Dutton’s Farmers’ Elevator Company, one of two cooperatives in town. Dutton is a town of 375 people, according to 2005 estimates. Photo by Keith Graham.
The Rural News Network was started in 2006 by Keith Graham, a journalism professor at the University of Montana, and Courtney Lowery, the managing editor of an online news site called New West. It became clear that a need for a rural news connection was growing, so Graham and Lowery jumped on the opportunity to create a news network.

Funded by J-Lab, the Institute for Interactive Journalism, through that organization's New Voice's program, the Rural News Network began in Dutton, Montana, Lowery's hometown. Located northeast of Great Falls, Dutton was once home to the Dutton Dispatch newspaper. But the Dispatch folded, and Lowery and Graham hope the RNN Web site will allow people in Dutton to publish their own news.

RNN students at UM visited Dutton during fall semester 2006 to photograph, report and create multimedia stories for the Web site. Students also worked to help community members write their own stories, take their own photographs, and conduct their own audio interviews.

The goal of the project is to teach the town’s citizens how to contribute to their own online news network and provide them with the appropriate resources to do so. Eventually, Lowery and Graham plan to take the project to other rural areas in hopes of creating a larger network.

MJR sat down with Graham and Lowery to discuss the necessity of RNN, its benefits, and its future.

For more information, visit www.duttoncc.org.

— Eileen Fikhman

Keith Graham: Why do you think the Rural News Network is necessary?

Keith Graham: Well that’s the question, why’s it necessary? That’s a great question. It’s necessary because two-thirds of our population in the state of Montana live in rural areas. So it’s an underserved populace, the rural community. We’re going into small towns where towns have lost their newspapers or never had any. We’re replacing them with online sites to give them a sense of community. The streets of the rural areas create a sense of community and a newspaper provides part of that.

I’m going to try to rephrase [a quote from John Barrows, executive director of the Montana Newspaper Association]. Essentially he says, “What’s necessary for a town is two bars, a newspaper, and a school.”
Courtney Lowery: As quickly as rural places are depopulating, there’s a lot of towns that are striving to maintain their sense of community, and as some of the matriarchs and patriarchs start dying off, there’s really fewer and fewer people to kind of carry the flag for community building. That’s one of the reasons that people move to small towns. It’s one of the reasons people stay in small towns, and so a newspaper is just a good reflection of a community.

When a newspaper dies, the community starts to feel less cohesive, and we’ve seen that in Dutton. We’ve heard that from just about everybody we’ve talked to. When we first scouted out the town, everybody said there’s no way of connecting. If there’s no way of knowing who’s getting married, who died, or who was born, or any of those things, there’s just less connective tissue in the town.

KG: I think it was Betty Brumwell, the district clerk of the superintendent of schools, who told us that, you know, it’s the school that is so important. They’re going through a school consolidation, and the other thing is once the newspaper died they really missed that community connection. The paper serves that purpose to help people stay connected, just makes a stronger community.

CL: Like Sepp [Jannotta, a student in RNN] was saying, when he was talking to Verna [Schluter], they were trying to get together. Verna is the town hairdresser, His & Her hair design, she’s been cutting my hair since I was wee. She still charges like $8-$10 for a really solid haircut, which is awesome.

KG: It’s a deal.

CL: She’s sort of carrying the torch for being a community leader, and she helps with the Dutton Fun Day and benefits and that kind of stuff.

Her next-door neighbor had a baby a couple months ago that was struggling and having some health problems, and they were having to go to all these specialists. Verna said it was really difficult to get that benefit together without the newspaper. It was one of the first benefits she’d thrown since the newspaper died, and she said it was really difficult to get people motivated and get them to come and get them to know about it. And so she called the Great Falls Tribune and they did a story about it, but apparently it didn’t really reflect what exactly the community wanted and that’s going to happen any time you come in and cover something from out of town. But it was difficult, Verna said, to mobilize the troops, as it were.

KG: I think the other great thing is that the journalists that we’re training, the students, [are] the journalists of tomorrow. It’s helping them learn what’s important for rural communities. So that when they go out in those places, they understand the important issues of the day. I think that’s crucial for journalism.

The other part of this puzzle, too, is that it’s necessary to bring the rural community to the online world. That’s the other thing this does. It gets people connected to the online community. The newspaper not going to be a printed one. This is going to be an online publication. So that, I think, helps get the citizens there. So we’re going to create citizen contributors, citizen journalists, citizen staffers.

CL: We were kind of struggling at first with what this site was going to be. Was it going to be just a newsletter? A newspaper?

Here in the journalism school we think of journalism in very specific terms. What we’re trying to accomplish in Dutton is, by some standards, not the journalism that we practice here in the school. There’s a very real tug to want to do real reporting and investigations and all kinds of stuff, and there’s a need for that in that society, but there’s also a very basic need for just basic communication. And so we went back and forth with that in class, and it was definitely a struggle to figure that out, but then it became abundantly clear that what we were going to be doing here is informing the citizens about when the next pancake breakfast is, and what went on at the town meeting, and where they’re storing the Christmas decorations this year. Things that we as professionally trained journalists wouldn’t see as journalism. When I was growing up in Dutton, the Dutton Dispatch served a very specific role. When I got to college and started learning what journalism was all about, I sort of poo-pooed the Dutton Dispatch. I brought it into the college newspaper office and showed it off and made fun of it. It was printed out on 11x17-inch...
The Dutton Volunteer Fire Department truck was the last vehicle during the 2006 Fun Day parade. The Rural News Network allows people to record town events. Photo by Keith Graham.

paper, copied off in Bonnie Powell's laundry room, and it wasn't by any means what I thought of as journalism. "Oh, look at what us hicks out there do with journalism."

But then as I got older, as the paper started dwindling and died, you see a very, very distinct need for that kind of information.

KG: I think the other thing with that, that we've learned that has been clear in the national media, is that when Gannett, the largest newspaper chain in the country, said in November 2006: We are going to go to a 24-hour news Web cycle, and we're going to be concentrating on local and hyper-local journalism. Well, this is what [RNN] is. This is very hyper-local journalism. The example that is probably the best so far is Naples News in Florida where they are really getting very hyper-local with their coverage, mostly online. This kind of works with what is good training for students, because they're going to need to understand what hyper-local journalism is. I think it helps the students, and I think we are benefiting the citizens of the Dutton community by doing it this way.

MJR: What do you think is the future of this project?

KG: Well, we know the immediate future. We will never leave Dutton. There will still be an umbilical cord to Dutton. We will be communicating with them and working with the contributors, the editors on this project. But our next town is Crow Agency.

[Graduate student] Mary Hudetz, who is going to be coming back to the class in the fall -- and she is from that area -- she also wants to do her master's project on all of this. That's the short-term goal.

Courtney and I were at the New Voices grantee meeting last week-
end in Washington, D.C. RNN is the brainchild of Courtney Lowery; she is the one who came up with this idea, the multimedia component. We were in D.C. and Jan Schaffer, who is the executive director of J-Lab ... she said that we can apply for $5,000 more [in] grant money, if we get a match from the university.

CL: What we want to be able to do is provide training and resources to keep small newspapers in small towns alive and vibrant as well as helping keep those communities vibrant by going into towns that want an RNN site.

The next step after Crow Agency is to do an application process. We'll be sending out letters to targeted towns in Montana that we think might be interested and then have them apply to be the next town in RNN. Because that's really a big part of it, and we learned that very starkly this weekend listening to a couple of the other projects. The key part of making this work is the town actually wanting a newspaper and seeing a need for it. And in Dutton, I knew as a local, there was a need for it and that's why we went there to begin with.

I think Crow Agency — Mary knows there's a need there and that's why we're going there. The next town, that's a key part. We don't want to sort of parachute in and say "We're from the university and we think you need a newspaper." We want to be able to give communities the tools they need and identified that they need. That's sort of the next round of RNN 2.0.

KG: I think part of this, too, is that we have to realize that journalism is changing. We are seeing the shift to the online world. In the last bit of statistics, we saw a 36 percent increase of new visitors to news Web sites. So we are seeing that shift.

This online publication is actually perfect in that regard, and it's also great for the rural communities because they will be able to be more connected. Yes, there's still a digital divide. Yes, we need to get better connections in rural communities. But, Montana is very wired. If you look at the rural states, we're at the top of that.

CL: And our survey that we did, it was very informal. We did it at the town hall meeting at the pancake breakfast, but I was amazed at how many people had Internet, used Internet, and had high-speed Internet, not just dial-up, because that was a huge online component. The reason we decided to go online is because that is the future.

We wanted to give Dutton something sustainable, not something that is going to dinosaur out in the next little bit. We're very cognizant of the fact that we'll have to have some sort of print component, whether it's people printing it out at the library, or the librarian printing out ten copies and just piling them around at the cafè or whatever. I do think that the hybrid model of print and online will be the future of journalism, so not just strictly online. It was also a very low-cost way for us to do this.

One of the reasons the Dutton Dispatch went out of business is because of the printing costs and the mailing costs and all that were all very expensive. In a small town like that, you couldn't support it. And as the grocery store closed and the Conoco closed and all these stores closed, the Dutton Dispatch had, like, four advertisers.

When you lose three of those, it's not viable to keep going. This was a low-cost way of doing it. We kind of went in with that in mind — not really knowing anecdotally how many people were online in Dutton, but not really having any hard numbers. So, when we got those numbers we were like "Oh God, thank God, this is gonna work. People can actually read us.”

KG: And Courtney is right. We're going to do this as a hybrid. We already had a couple of older people ask, "Can we get something printed out?"

The design class this semester is going to actually take our Rural News Network online site and do a print publication from that. So we'll get some ideas in that regard. This project is supported a lot by this community, the UM School of Journalism community. We already have our eyes on other towns, and that's really useful.
I've Read Every Sheet

By Dennis Swibold

(Sung to the tune “I’ve Been Everywhere” by Geoff Mack)

Chorus:

I've read every sheet, man,
That's ever hit the street, man,
From Sidney to Trout Creek, man,
The smell of ink is sweet, man.
Newspapers make life complete, man,
I've read every sheet.

I've read the ...

Free Press, Valley Press, River Press, Radiator,
Pioneer, Mountaineer, Inter Mountain, Liberator,
Ranger, Ledger, Messenger, Vociferator,
Outpost, Outlook, Lookout, (I'll read it later),
Herald, Banner, People's Voice (an agitator!),
Standard, Record, Miner (a Red baiter!)

(Chorus)

Mountain Star, Prairie Star, Western Star, Clarion,
Echo, Acantha, Independent, Guardian,
Rustler, Maverick, Courier and Husbandman,
Bee, Post, Prospect, Producer's News, Plainsman,
Folkeblad, Zeitung, Celt and Scandinavian,
Wave, News, Chronicle, Borrowed Times, Missoulian

(Chorus)

Populist, Socialist, Optimist, Promoter,
Upstart, American, Progressive, Recorder,
Democrat, Advocate, Picket, Reporter,
Plaindealer, Reveille, Graphic, Informer,
Searchlight, Beacon, (am I getting warmer?)
Barker, Leader, Knocker, Eye-Opener.

(Chorus)

Farmer, Prairie Breeze, Enterprise, X-Ray,
Pilot, Pick and Plow, Inter Lake and New Age,
Times, Wave, Mail, Call, Calumet and Fairplay,
Stockgrowers' Journal (a corker in its hey day.)
Transcript, Telegram (subscribe and win a Chevrolet)
Argus, Hornet, (I'm running out of wordplay).

(Chorus)

(Fade out ...)
Citizen, Tribune, Bulletin, Northwest,
Index, Chief, Sun, (Did I mention Loyalist?)
Sentinel, Advertiser, (Whose paper have I missed?)

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/mjr/vol1/iss36/1
Listen to the multi-talented staff of Montana Journalism Review perform this song at the Web site http://www.umt.edu/journalism/mjr/mjr2007.html

Dennis Swibold, a journalism professor at the University of Montana, wrote this poem late one night to blow off some steam while working on his recently published book Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959. The book was recognized by the Western Writers of America with a 2007 Spur Award for best contemporary non-fiction.
2007 Staff (from left to right): Joe Nowakowski, Lacey Hawkins, Ashley Schroeder, Amanda Determan, Eleena Fikhman, Danny Bobbe, Alison Squires, Keriann Lynch, Chandra Johnson, Tim Ratte, Sara Lettus, Jennifer Reed, Ethan Robinson, Caitlin Copple, Michael Downs, James Laber, Sarah Welliver

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Technical help from Peet McKinney, systems administrator at UM School of Journalism
Our students

HEARST JOURNALISM AWARDS
Eighth overall in 2007, seventh time in the last decade that the J-School has finished in the Top 10.

Our students have also won awards from the Broadcast Education Association and the Society for Professional Journalists, fellowships at the Poynter Institute, and internships through Chips Quinn and Dow Jones programs.

Recent faculty awards

SPUR AWARD from the Western Writers of America
Professor Dennis Swibold,

2007 Distinguished Auburn University Journalism Alumnus Award
Dean Jerry Brown

2007 Jeannette Rankin Civil Liberties Award
Professor Clem Work

Our new home

Don Anderson Hall, dedicated May 11, 2007
A new $14 million, four-story building dedicated to journalism education and named for Don Anderson, a journalist and newspaper executive.