
Snapshot of a Rural Dilemma: What Happens to Community Wellbeing When Local Media Outlets Disappear?

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The president of the Minden and District Lions Club squinted in the afternoon's bright light. He was also smiling, holding the corner of an oversized cheque for \$2000. The recipients, three organizers of a local live music event, smiled too. A *Haliburton Echo* reporter stood with her back to the Gull River and took the photo.

This is the "grip and grin." Peruse the pages of any small-town paper and you'll likely come across one. The Ontario Community Newspaper Association even gives out an award for the ubiquitous shot – the Most Creative Grip and Grin.

But the photo taken by Minden's Gull River wouldn't be winning any awards. "Don't worry," my editor said when the edition hit the stands. "Grip and grins are never easy."

During the summer of 2016, my editor popped her head into my office on a regular basis. "I need you to go to the Bank of Montreal," she would say, or Head Lake Rotary Park, or Todd's Your Independent Grocer. "Bring your camera," she often noted, which was code for the grip and grin.

At first these outings irked me – a Master of Journalism intern from Toronto with her sights set on the *New York Times* – but after a few weeks, something beyond my borrowed Canon EOS Rebel clicked. The rictus-inducing grip and grin is more important than it seems. It's an essential spoke on a wheel of community giving that keeps rural communities such as Haliburton County

rolling.

That summer the photos, along with a constant stream of articles about the County's numerous non-profits, charities, and foundations, combined to create a newspaper that seemed less focused on the old media adage "if it bleeds it leads." Instead, if it bleeds, it's time to throw a fundraiser.

If your house burns down, if you're dying alone in the hospital, if you're hungry, if you want your underprivileged child to star in a play or, these days, if you have COVID-19 – Haliburton County has got your back. And you can read all about it in the local paper.

Haliburton is not alone. In the summer of 2018, a nearly 22,000-kilometre journey across Canada to visit rural media outlets and interview dozens of publishers, editors, reporters, and locals revealed a landscape steeped in the reporting of giving and receiving.

In a country where nearly three-quarters of the population is urban, the day-to-day goings-on in rural Canada rarely make national headlines. But many in the philanthropic world continue to support communities in these areas, which comprise 95% of Canada's land mass and account for nearly one-third of our GDP. In [a recent article in *The Philanthropist*](#) John Lorinc introduced readers to several philanthropic initiatives across Canada's remote and rural regions. With the potential to attract new donors, provide opportunities for collaboration and funding diversification, and boost social and economic development – he showed that rural Canada is ripe for more than just the annual harvest.

Local journalism is a vital connector in this process. And in times of crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic, local coverage is even more important: it's an essential service. But Dan Nicholson, publisher of the *Valley Voice*, which serves several communities in BC's Kootenay region, acknowledged [in a recent note](#) that covering a crisis like this is especially difficult for a small town paper.

"New developments are happening every hour," he wrote. "We go to press on Monday night. You don't get the paper until Thursday. It would be wrong to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that it's not happening. But we can't cover the story adequately. By the time that you get the paper, much of the information will be obsolete."

Yet he noted that, because many "readers rely on the print edition for their local news," his team will be there, and the paper will publish news on social media if supply chains break down.

Despite such challenges, local media has remained resilient: cameras poised, ready to lend a helping hand. Unless, of course, they've closed shop. The latest data from the [crowdsourced Local News Map](#) – produced by a team of Ryerson University and University of British Columbia researchers – shows that, of the 307 local news outlets that closed or merged since 2008, 215 were community newspapers like the *Valley Voice* and *Haliburton Echo*.

But even amid this shifting landscape, many other rural outlets have survived, continuing to provide information, cover local events, and share news about community organizations. The reason for this is simple, says Fay Martin, the founder of Places for People, a Haliburton non-profit that prevents homelessness. "You not only need to let people know what's happening, you need to tell people why they should care."

Caring and giving go hand-in-hand, according to a recent Imagine Canada report, *30 Years of Giving in Canada: Who gives, how, and why*. Most Canadians who give are "motivated to donate by a mixture of personal and ideological factors," the authors observe, such as compassion towards people in need, a desire to contribute to community, and a belief in an organization's causes.

Such values aren't "formed in a vacuum," noted Katie McDonald and Wendy Scaife in [a 2011 paper](#) that compared 25 years of media coverage by the top four newspapers in Australia and the United States. Their research found that media coverage may be the only way "everyday people" engage with philanthropy and that its "potential media impact on people is considerable."

In parts of rural Canada where government cutbacks and service reductions have become the norm, local journalism helps connect philanthropic foundations and generous citizens with these "everyday people." The media's role of "filling in the gaps," says Martin, is "crucial" in creating a more self-sustaining economy. "I think without the media it would be practically impossible to raise awareness about the issues."

This "why" was all too clear on a cold evening during the winter of 2019 when Martin and several other community members spent a night in their cars to raise awareness about rural homelessness.

For a month leading up to the event, Haliburton County's print and radio journalists joined forces to highlight the cause. Stories about the difficulty of thawing frozen toes and finding places to pee in the middle of the night explored an issue that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, says Martin.

But Martin noted that it's a two-way street. "Without philanthropic events, most rural papers would have trouble finding stuff to fill the papers," she said, "It would be mostly council stuff, accidents, fires. Nothing uplifting."

Haliburton Echo editor Jenn Watt agreed, calling the County's non-profits "news generators."

Organizations such as Places for People are "really dominant," Watt said. "So much of what happens here is run either by a not-for-profit or charity. They are the drivers of the community."

The decision to cover fundraising events is an easy one. "This is something everyone in the community is talking about," Watt said. "It's attracting hundreds of people. It's raising thousands of dollars. It's making everyone happy."

Cultivating this type of community wellbeing may not typically be top of mind when we think of the role of media. But things are different in rural Canada. The journalists at almost every outlet I visited in the summer of 2018 stressed the helping role of their paper. All these establishments are [listed by News Media Canada](#) among the more than 1000 community papers that publish fewer than four times a week.

They also agreed that their role differs from that of the urban dailies, whose focus is often skewed toward serving shareholder interests. "Their reason for being a newspaper is different from our reason," said Paul MacNeill, the publisher of the *Eastern Graphic* in Montague, PEI.

“We’re here to serve our community. We’re not here to make a million bucks; we’ll never make a million bucks, nor should we try.”

While no one can deny the clout of Canada's big dailies – serving about 30 urban centres with populations of 100,000 or more – community newspapers also wield geographical might. They deliver news to 975 communities that are classified as rural and small town to medium population centres – parts of this country “no one else gives a damn about,” according to MacNeill.

Not giving a damn, many studies concur, has consequences. Local news is “as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools, and public health,” noted a 2009 [Knight Commission report](#). As more outlets close or downsize, everything from community resiliency to the survival of democracy is at risk, warned Penelope Muse Abernathy in her recent report [The Expanding News Desert](#). This risk increases, she noted, in rural areas where, in general, average poverty rates are higher, education levels are lower, and few alternative news sources exist.

Media serving these areas, what researchers Damian Radcliffe and Christopher Ali [call “small market newspapers,”](#) play an important role in community capacity building. They do so, the authors observe, by acting as “community champions” and focusing on solutions rather than just problems.

In Kahnawake Mohawk Territory in Quebec, several local organizations have found an ally in Greg Horn, publisher of *Iori:wase* – “news” in the Mohawk language. Horn sees his newspaper as a way to foster community wellbeing and address decades of negative stereotypes about his First Nations community. “Our philosophy is that there's a lot of good, and a lot of good stories that are happening in our community and in our sister communities that don't always get told,” he said.

Horn doesn't just report on local organizations, he collaborates with them. He uses the *Iori:wase* online platform to post videos of Mohawk lessons for Iakwahwatsiratátie, otherwise known as the Language Nest, a non-profit immersion program for parents or caregivers of children under four. With a goal to “help them tell their stories,” he also showcases inspirational community members from Skátne Tsi Tewaie’wen:ta (Together We Will Heal), a collective focused on raising awareness about substance abuse.

Not all communities, however, maintain these types of relationships with local media. “There is no longer a strong connection between rural media and rural philanthropy [in our community],” noted Terry Carroll, the executive director of Ontario’s Elgin-St. Thomas Community Foundation, in an email. “Believe me, I could not have imagined I would ever write that sentence.”

Carroll, who spent three years as publisher of the century-old *St. Thomas Times-Journal* and nearly 10 years as general manager of the now defunct *St. Thomas/Elgin Weekly News*, said he witnessed “the decimation of an industry.” Over a decade he watched newspapers in his area close, merge, or downsize – a process accelerated by the 2017 Torstar-Postmedia swap that resulted in the closure of dozens of community papers.

In the past, he said, running an event meant contacting the local paper; “You would really have

been negligent if you didn't have that event advertised in the local paper, because it was *the* source people came to for information.

"Now, in St. Thomas," he said, "That is simply not true."

Carroll's foundation now looks mainly to social media to get its message out. This shift has caused a few rifts, especially among some of the older board members. "Old habits die hard," he said. "I think we wouldn't be the only organization that is somewhere on the learning curve of what works on Facebook and what doesn't . . . It's one thing to be there. It's quite another thing to understand how it all works."

Being there can also be time consuming, noted Carroll, a capacity issue for rural or small-town organizations with few staff. From toolkits to webinars to conferences, many of these organizations have had to dedicate resources to honing social media strategies. But not everyone is able to fully participate in this digital world.

In a valley surrounded by nearly 3000-metre peaks in the West Kootenays of BC, Val Mayes, secretary of the Slocan Valley Legacy Fund, described her area's connectivity as "flaky" and said she can't even rely on being able to make a call on her cell phone.

While things have improved since the days when you had to go to the local cafe to log in and upload a photo, Mayes said her local newspaper, the *Valley Voice*, remains "one of the key ways that we communicate." As Dan Nicholson, its publisher, acknowledged in his recent COVID-19 note, the paper he co-owns with his partner, Jan McMurray, is the only local news source for many members of the community. "If stopping in at your local coffee shop on Thursday morning to have a java and read the *Valley Voice* has become a ritual for you, we apologize," he wrote.

When it comes to basic access, price, and speed, numerous studies have identified a digital divide between urban and rural Canada. Approximately one million rural residents do not have access to high-speed internet, often experiencing download speeds less than half that of urban Canada. The 2019 [Canadian Internet Registration Authority report](#) estimated that 13% of households do not have any internet access.

Plans by the Columbia Basin Broadband Corporation to connect the entire Slocan Valley by March 2021 could change this.

Some residents, though, especially seniors, aren't likely to go digital overnight. According to [a 2017 Media Technology Monitor report](#), 43% of Canadians 71 and older still have a print newspaper subscription. Many of these seniors call rural Canada home. Indeed, they make up 40% of the population of New Denver, the small town in the Kootenays where the *Valley Voice* is based, which is more than double the national average. Coincidentally, this demographic also accounts for a large chunk of donations nation-wide, more than 30%, according to Imagine Canada.

For both rural media outlets and charitable organizations, the potential loss of this demographic sets off alarm bells. To be blunt, said *Eastern Graphic's* Paul MacNeill in the summer of 2018, "our readers are dying off." The days of a population who still prefer print, he said, are numbered. Imagine Canada couches their sector's dilemma in slightly different terms: "There is

a limited amount of time left to tap into the philanthropic impulses of this generation."

But, for now, papers such as the *Valley Voice* aren't going anywhere. In fact, in an interview before the COVID-19 crisis, Nicholson said his newspaper was growing, and selling more ads than ever.

"Everybody and their brother advertises with them," said Mayes. She attributes this to the paper's reach – more than 6000 issues reach an area straddling three valleys – but also to residents who support a paper that is firmly rooted in community. Nicholson and McMurray's commitment to continue publishing in some form throughout the COVID-19 crisis is a case in point, even though the crisis means they have to discontinue his regular drop-offs to local businesses.

In a place where more than 90 non-profit organizations flourish, as much as a quarter of every issue of the *Valley Voice* is dedicated to their work, noted Nicholson. "Readers demand it."

But it's not just about business. Nicholson and McMurray sit on boards, sponsor events, and donate to a long list of local non-profits and charities. In normal times, the couple hand deliver more than 1000 papers, year-round – on winter roads that weave alongside steep and icy cliffs – for "face-to-face" contact with readers and advertisers.

"Because they're so connected, we're all interconnected," said Mayes.

Much like the glacial meltwater of the area's mountain ranges that converges in its valleys, the local paper is a tributary of a bigger-picture way of viewing philanthropy. Whether "you shovel your neighbour's walk or leave a bequest," Mayes said, "you're part of this stream of giving."

Driving the backroads of this country, where abandoned farms and boarded-up motels became a common sight, I wondered if these streams will soon dry up altogether. My standard question – "Do you have a local paper?" – was often met with a blank stare. "We used to have one of those," said one teenage gas-station attendant. "I think."

Yet, around other bends, a rural Canada determined to "being creative and solving problems collaboratively to stay alive, sustainable, and relevant" – as [the latest State of Rural Canada report](#) noted – comes into view. Fields of canola blaze neon yellow against skies black with storm clouds, and glacial lakes glow in shades of jade and sapphire. In one such rural spot in Quebec's Chateauguay Valley, residents banded together to save the 156-year-old *Gleaner*. In another, a small-town Saskatchewan reporter launched a digital news site.

And back in Ontario, on the edge of the Canadian Shield, a dozen people gathered in front of a supermarket to pose for the cameras as they tossed some of the sports balls they were donating to local elementary schools into the air – a possible future prize-winning shot for the Most Creative Grip and Grin. The balls hovered in the grey sky. Some of the donors laughed, others concentrated on the task at hand. The local reporter snapped the photo.