

Democracy & Government

BREAKING NEWS: NEWSPAPER CLOSURES HURT OHIO COMMUNITIES

CAITLIN JOHNSON, ZACH SCHILLER, EMMA SCHUBERT, WILLIAM VIDMAR & ALEXANDER THOMPSON

Newspapers are important threads in the fabric of Ohio's communities. At the community level, they tell us when a neighbor dies, whether a new restaurant is worth visiting, which high school won the basketball game (with a clippable summary for the proud parents). They also uncover and explain our community's most serious issues. In 2017, the Cincinnati Enquirer dispatched more than 60 reporters, photographers and videographers to chronicle "an ordinary week" in the lives of people touched by the drug crisis, earning the paper a Pulitzer Prize. Tireless reporting at the Cleveland Plain Dealer exposed the lead poisoning crisis harming the city's children - especially those who are poor and black - and the city's lackluster response to it.

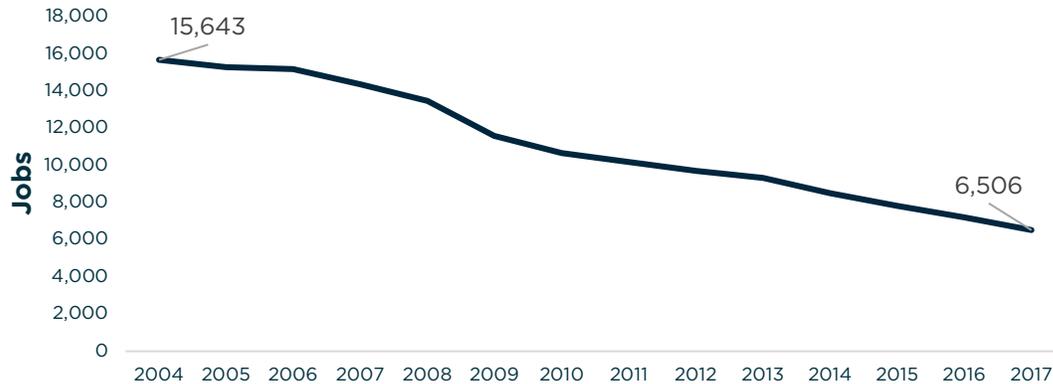
In 2018, The Youngstown Vindicator mapped the connections between public officials embroiled in a corruption investigation, including a former mayor. The mayor will stand trial next year. Unfortunately, the people of Youngstown and Mahoning County won't be able to rely on the Vindicator much longer. In June 2019, the paper's owners, a local family, announced they would shutter the paper and its website on August 31, 2019. In the 1970s the 150-year-old paper reached more than 100,000 every day and 160,000 on Sunday. Today, those numbers have slipped to 25,000 and 32,000, respectively. When it closes, Youngstown, with a population of 65,000, will be the largest city in America without a newspaper.

The Vindicator is just the latest casualty in Ohio's fading newspaper industry. Today, Ohio has 32% fewer newspapers than it did in 2004, according to the University of North Carolina School of Media and Journalism. Small, independent publishers struggle to make a profit. Big media companies - some run by hedge funds - swoop in and gobble up papers, consolidating operations within the state and outsourcing some operations to hubs located elsewhere. That trend is likely to intensify with GateHouse Media - owner of the Columbus Dispatch, the Akron Beacon Journal and others - making a play to purchase Gannett, which owns the Cincinnati Enquirer and 10 other Ohio papers. After such mergers, many newspapers become "ghosts" of their former selves, struggling to cover local news with reduced staff.

When it closes, 144 Vindicator employees and about 250 newspaper carriers will lose their jobs. Between 2004 and 2017, Ohio's total newspaper publishing employment - which includes upper management, advertising and circulation employees, clerks, truck drivers, and others in addition to the standard newsroom staff - dropped from 15,643 to 6,506, a loss of more than half of the industry. The number of people who report, edit, photograph and produce the news (we refer to these positions as newsroom jobs) fell from 2,870 in 2012 to 1,640 in 2018 - a drop of approximately 42.9%. Even worse, although many of these jobs require a college degree, the annual median wage of a news reporter in Ohio was only \$32,020 in 2018, below the median annual wage for all Ohio jobs of \$37,356.

Ohio's Newspaper Publishing Industry Jobs

Ohio loses more than half of its newspaper jobs from 2004 to 2017



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

Research shows that when newspapers close, voter turnout and civic engagement drops. Newspapers help government work better. After local newspapers close, governments may borrow more and become more inefficient. Communities of color especially value local news. When newspapers close, they lose an important source of information.

Because the news media – often called the fourth estate – plays an indispensable role in upholding democracy and connecting communities, it’s what economists call “a public good.” This presents a case for providing public policy support. While some communities have benefited from the rise of digital outlets and nonprofit journalism, these important outlets cannot completely fill the void left by newspapers. Nor do the moves by news organizations within and outside the Mahoning Valley to create additional news options in Youngstown, welcome as they may be, fully replace the Vindicator. The state of Ohio recognizes the importance of journalism, providing funding for the Statehouse News Bureau and public broadcasting. As the newspaper industry at large will likely continue to struggle in coming years, several policies can help ensure Ohio’s communities don’t go without good journalism.

- The General Assembly should boost support for public broadcasting by \$5 million a year. Stations in Youngstown and other areas that have lost traditional media could apply for funds, which like the existing funds could be administered through the Broadcast Educational Media Commission.
- State legislators should follow the lead of their counterparts in New Jersey and invest in efforts to strengthen local journalism through collaboration with educational institutions and community organizations.
- Congress should approve legislation allowing traditional media enterprises to become nonprofits, assuming there are guardrails to ensure that the priority is public service and investment in news coverage; and
- A national tax should be enacted on the multi-billion-dollar online platforms like Facebook and Google that dominate digital advertising. The money could be used to create an endowment to support independent journalism. Ohio should not provide additional subsidies like those it has given these companies in connection with data centers set up in the state.