

IN EARLY 2018, A SPORTS PHYSICIAN NAMED LARRY Nassar was sentenced for up to 175 years for sexually molesting minors. Reports of his crimes against Olympic and Michigan State University athletes led to the resignation of the entire USA Gymnastics board and the MSU president.

Kyle Pope, editor and publisher of the nonprofit Columbia Journalism Review, loves pointing out that the uncovering of Mr. Nassar’s decades-long series of crimes began with a story in the Indianapolis Star. A veteran journalist whose résumé includes a long stint at The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Pope believes that touting the public benefits of local newspapers is the surest way to steer them out of “a death spiral.”

“It’s hard to build a business around people having compassion for journalists losing their jobs,” he says. “Jobs are being lost in lots of professions. We have to move the discussion away from us and toward the effects on democracy if local news goes away.”

“Two recent reports illustrate that value. One shows that the spread of viruses is much faster in communities without a local news infrastructure. With no reporting, you don’t know it’s out there, and you may not know to go see the pediatrician if your kid gets sick. The other study found that if there’s not an active newspaper looking over the city manager’s shoulder, public financing winds up costing more. You may not care about journalism, but you probably care that your kid doesn’t get a smart screen in their school because the city manager is siphoning money. You probably care if you’re buying a house on a lake that is contaminated from a plant upstream that a local newspaper has found out by testing the water.”

The number of daily newspapers in the US has fallen below 1,300 from nearly 1,800 in 1970. The survivors are shrinking in size and subscriber numbers. The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal replaced some revenue from disappearing print ads with digital subscriptions. That’s proven to be a tougher transition for local papers, partly because they were slower to develop first-class digital versions, and also because a multiplicity of municipalities and school districts in any one metropolitan area makes it difficult for a local paper to be consistently relevant to all readers.

Speaking to Brunswick the day after the New York Daily News announced the layoff of half its newsroom, Mr. Pope said, “I don’t think we’ve hit bottom. This is the journalistic equivalent of a public health crisis that is spiraling out of control. The longer these local news outlets are starved, the worse they get. When I ask people around the country why they aren’t supporting their local paper, they say, ‘Have



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you read my local paper?’ That’s not a knock against the journalists at those papers, because they’re doing really heroic work, but they’ve just been cut to the point where it’s really hard for them to produce a product that their readership really needs.”

In two years running the CJR, Mr. Pope has attended many conferences on how to save newspapers. “There are lots of ideas, but no answers,” he says.

The nonprofit model that propelled ProPublica to prominence offers some hope. Might health foundations pay for a reporter to cover medical issues? Might governments offer taxpayers the option of making a tax-free contribution to local news?

“I think that there has to be some institutional support. I don’t think it’s likely you’re going to see most of these papers standing on their own two feet.” ♦

KEVIN HELLIKER, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist, is Editor-in-Chief of the Brunswick Review.

KYLE POPE of the Columbia Journalism Review compares the “death spiral” of local newspapers to a public health crisis. Brunswick’s **KEVIN HELLIKER** reports.

ILLUSTRATION: MELINDA BECK

The Good News about **NEWS ECONOMICS**

Brunswick's **KIM FLETCHER** sees a healthy focus on the quality of journalism emerging from the sinking fortunes of print media.

BRITISH JOURNALISTS TENDED NOT TO think too much about the economics of the newspaper industry, first because that demanded numeracy, second because it interfered with stories. They relied on a simple model: Someone else worried about the money, they spent it.

These days they think about the economics a lot, for they are not sure how long they will continue to have jobs. Readers and advertisers – the two traditional sources of revenue – are disappearing. In the last 30 years, circulation of the tabloid Sun, for example, has fallen from almost 4 million copies a day to fewer than 1.5 million. In the last 10 years, the digital giants Google and Facebook have run away with most of the advertising.

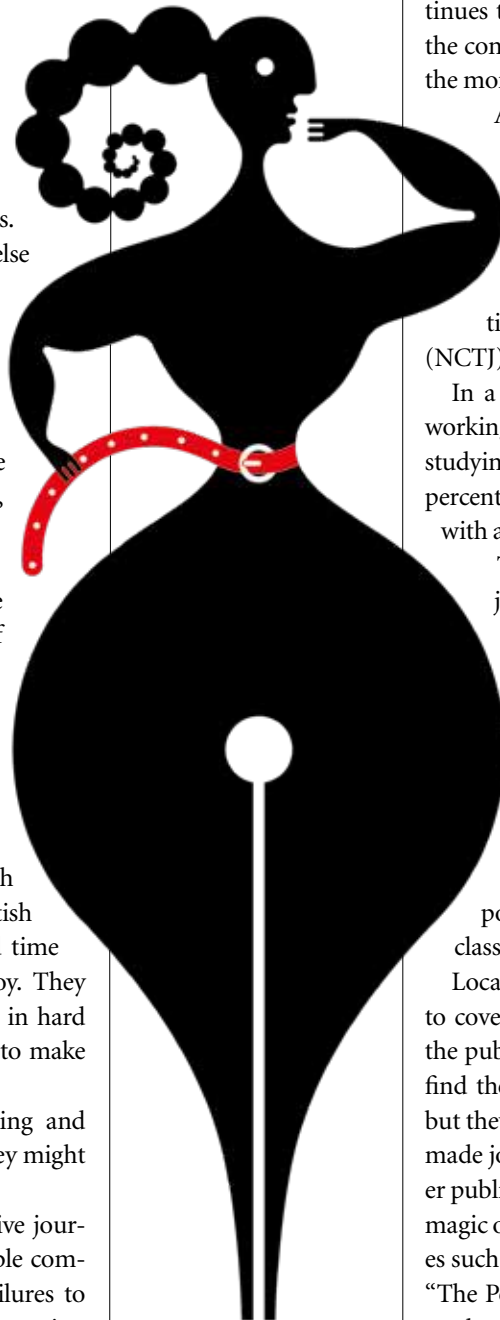
Recent years have been a frustrating story of trying new stuff – free websites, subscription websites, hybrid websites, commercial data collection, reader merchandise – and cost-cutting.

The encouraging news is that, faced with the final curtain, traditionally brutish British newspapers seem to have resolved to find time for good works, even to kindle a little joy. They know the internet will kill them – at least in hard copy form – but until then they are eager to make each day count.

They have realized that, in rediscovering and proving the public utility of journalism, they might prolong their lives.

To that end, we've seen more investigative journalism, exposing such things as questionable commercial activities by web giants, police failures to investigate predatory sexual behavior, corruption in international sport and lechery in the London financial sector.

These have been real stories, painstakingly researched, clearly presented and eagerly read. They



have raised internal morale, stimulated readership and fulfilled the important watchdog role of the press. Amid the polarization of politics over Brexit in the UK – mirroring passions about Donald Trump in the US – there is some attraction to objective investigation, independently sourced. In an age when so much “news” is pumped through internet channels free of charge, papers can charge for stories that are exclusive and original.

Perhaps it is this sense of public good that continues to attract bright young people; perhaps it is the continued promise of mischief. It certainly isn't the money.

As the newspaper industry declines, the number of schools and colleges teaching journalism rises. In the academic year just ended, more than 1,300 young people enrolled on courses at universities, training centers and news agencies accredited by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), an organization that examines basic skills.

In a recent survey, the NCTJ found 82 percent working full or part time within a year of finishing studying journalism at school (compared with 70 percent of those who had studied something else) with almost a third of them in newspapers.

This is encouraging to those who believe journalism matters, but the money is less so: the young journalists surveyed were paid an average of £17,500 – some £2,500 less than the starters in other industries – and had substantial student debt. There's a danger that only the middle classes, subsidized by their parents, can afford to be journalists. If it is to understand everything that is going on, this is an industry that needs reporters from minority ethnic and working-class backgrounds.

Local papers struggle now to find the resources to cover the councils and courts that should be in the public eye. The young reporters I meet seem to find the joy and mischief of previous generations, but they no longer see the kind of career ladder that made journalism comparable with teaching or other public service roles. No one who has fallen for the magic of print, been touched by Hollywood homages such as “All the President's Men,” “Spotlight” and “The Post,” should ever want to leave, but it's hard to plan a life in an industry that really doesn't know where the money is coming from. ♦

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