

TRENTON: Panel laments erosion of watchdog press in NJ

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TRENTON — New Jersey's news industry is in crisis, and if the growing deficit of state and local government reporting continues, citizens will suffer and government waste and corruption may be allowed to proliferate without public airing, according to a report released Monday by New Jersey Policy Perspective.

"New Jersey faces a growing crisis in coverage of news and public affairs," according to the report "Less News is Bad News," authored by Scott Weingart, a 2009 graduate of Princeton University.

"As a result of the state's chronic news deficit, the people of New Jersey know less about their state than people elsewhere in the country know about theirs," according to the report. "Lower levels of knowledge about politics have distorted campaigns and elections in the state and may be a factor in the endemic problem of political corruption," it states.

Because New Jersey is largely suburban, and is sandwiched between the large cities of Philadelphia and New York, with their urban-centered news coverage, broadcast news has largely bypassed the state, said Mr. Weingart at a panel discussion Monday at Thomas Edison State College in Trenton.

The recession and the decline of newspapers and other print media as a profitable business model has constrained newsgathering around the country, but has affected New Jersey in particular with its formerly active network of regional newspapers — one of the primary sources of municipal and state news in the face of the broadcast deficit, Mr. Weingart said.

In the state, as elsewhere in the country, newspaper circulation has declined as fewer young readers turn to print media, and classified and other ad revenue has migrated to the Internet, Mr. Weingart said. Newspaper companies have, in turn, cut newsroom staff, cut resources for staff they do retain, and consolidated bureaus, sometimes with competitors, he said.

The result is less regional coverage of local New Jersey government entities with "the power of the purse" and less region-specific coverage of policies enacted by state government, Mr. Weingart said. "There is something lost," he said.

"If nobody is watching, if nobody is holding government accountable, it is very likely that the quality of government, the integrity of government will deteriorate," said Paul Starr, professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, and a co-founder of The American Prospect.

Mr. Weingart said that some Web sites had attempted to fill the growing void of government and policy reporting in the state, mentioning politickernj.com and newjerseynewsroom.com. But the former site was too narrow, drawing political junkies and not a general audience, and it was not clear if the latter, founded by former Star-Ledger reporters, would succeed. At newjerseynewsroom.com "there are 50 staffers and right now no-one is getting paid, they are all working on their buyout money," he said.

"Quite frankly, in New Jersey it is really hard to get news that helps you understand your state government," said Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics.

While news of talk show host David Letterman's workplace affairs riveted the public late last week and was duly covered, newspapers were "rather recalcitrant" about providing details about the New Jersey gubernatorial debate happening at the same time, Ms. Reed said.

"It should have been in a little box on the front page of every newspaper to watch the debates that night," she said.

Ms. Reed said the public had a responsibility to decide what type of news coverage it wanted and inform the news media about its interests. She said citizens and other watchdog groups were also needed, who would examine government data and policies and post their findings online.

"We need explanations. Explanations of what is going on that we can find for ourselves," she said.

In the future, no one media outlet will provide full news access, with interested citizens needing to seek out multiple outlets, Ms. Reed said.

"It is not going to be any one thing and we are going to have to find a way as citizens to get what we want," she said.

Mr. Starr said in the past charitable foundations never considered supporting journalism "because journalism could take care of itself." But now that traditional journalism may require more financial support, foundations, including New Jersey foundations specifically, must be convinced to provide more resources to the field, he said.

Outside funding of any sort had its pitfalls, however, Mr. Starr said. "Wherever there is patronage there is the possibility of subservience, and dependency and manipulation," he said.

Mr. Starr said traditional newspapers were a unique resource, which drew a broad audience who would be exposed to news and policy features while seeking out sports, crossword puzzles or other items of special interest to them. "Online this all breaks apart," with no cross-fertilization between specifically targeted Web sites, he said, adding he wasn't sure the newspaper's broadly inclusive model could ever be recreated.

For more information, or to obtain a copy of the report "Less News is Bad News" call New Jersey Policy Perspective at 609-393-1145 or go to www.njpp.org.

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