

The Times

Report: Papers' loss is corruption's gain

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STAFF WRITER

TRENTON -- As newsrooms in New Jersey continue to shrink, their ability to play the watchdog diminishes, and political corruption may worsen, a study by New Jersey Policy Perspective says.

In a report titled "Less News is Bad News: The Media Crisis and New Jersey's News Deficit," the nonprofit that researches and analyzes state issues examined "a growing crisis in coverage of news and public affairs" and concluded that new revenue sources are needed to fund news production "so media resources can better help check corruption in the state," according to the report.

The report found that New Jersey has failed to develop a major urban center of its own that could support a highly aggressive watchdog publication or other media agent. Because television coverage of state news is less extensive than print media, New Jerseyans have depended on newspapers for news about state politics and government. But declining circulation and cutbacks in newspaper journalism may have left state residents with "lower levels of knowledge about politics," and that "may be a factor in the endemic problem of political corruption," the report said.

"We have regional newspapers, but they cover a large area and can't delve into what many local governments are doing and hold elected officials to account for what they're doing," said Ingrid Reed, policy analyst and the New Jersey project director at Eagleton Institute of Politics.

"New Jersey has always been in a media shadow because of New York and Philadelphia but it did have strong local newspapers. As there become fewer of them and their resources dwindle, you can't possibly cover all 566 municipalities, much less the larger municipalities," added Richard Benfield, a former editorial page editor for The Bergen Record who also worked as a part-time editorial writer for The New York Times.

"People know less about what is going on," Benfield said, "it gives government officials more liberty to do whatever they want," said Benfield, who participated in a panel discussion following the report's release yesterday.

Both newsroom staff and circulation have been on the decline for more than a decade.

Among all papers surveyed, daily circulation in New Jersey dropped to just under 1 million copies in 2009 from 1.57 million in 1993, a 36 percent decline.

Sunday circulation fared much better over the same period, dropping to 1.18 million this year from just under 1.9 million in 1993.

While a large newsroom staff allows for more investigative journalism, many papers have been forced to cut staff in the newsroom, the report indicated.

Part of the problem, according to the report, is that the internet has drawn advertising away from newspapers, making it impossible for them to charge as much as before for advertising, and they have not been able to generate sufficient revenue from news websites to offset the loss from print operations.

"Now, with the decline of newspapers in New Jersey, the state's chronic news deficit threatens to become an acute problem. New Jersey needs new ways to finance journalism," Paul Starr, Princeton University professor and co-founder of "The American Prospect," said in a statement.

The report identifies various potential sources of revenue, including subscription and pay-for-content models that pass the cost directly to the consumer, and grants or governmental aid for newspapers. Also suggested were partnerships with organizations like ProPublica, a nonprofit newsroom "that produces investigative journalism in the public interest," according to its website.

Starr, who recently spoke before the Joint Economic Committee, a congressional advisory panel, in support of creating a nonprofit status for journalism organizations, told The Times there needs to be a ProPublica counterpart on the state level.

"There needs to be an investigative unit that would make its stories available to the news media of the state and those stories could get out to a larger public. Nonprofits could finance some of the production costs of the news," Starr said, adding that NJN and other public media should be better funded because "they provide an important service for New Jersey."

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