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COMMENTARY

Standing up for news

SCOTT HAYES
Special to the Gazette



Nearly 70 years ago, the Alberta government – under then premier William Aberhart – issued the Accurate News and Information Act to force newspapers to print official statements in response to news stories that the cabinet disagreed with. Sources would be forced to be revealed upon Aberhart's demand. It would have made the free press essentially a state propaganda machine. There would have been essentially no public voice of dissent or critique of the premier's policies, one of the major markers of a dictatorship.

The *Edmonton Journal*, rather than back down from the imposing request, stood up and successfully fought the edict at the Supreme Court level. It was a triumph that was so important in the preservation of journalistic integrity that the newspaper won a special public service Pulitzer Prize for it, the only time the award has ever stepped outside of the U.S.

That's not the first time that newspapers acted as champions in the pursuit of the truth regarding bureaucratic misdeeds and public catastrophes, not to mention other grand and calamitous affairs. It was not too long ago that the *Journal* teamed up with the *Calgary Herald* to investigate deaths of children in foster care. After initially requesting the information in 2009, the two newspapers underwent a four-year court process to force the province to release the information. Eventually succeeding, they revealed horrible details of far too many children being dealt far too harsh a life, all while in the province's care.

Without that effort, no one would have been the wiser about the seriousness and the extent of the problem. And that's just one example. Newspapers reveal the awful and the awesome on a daily basis. That's why they're so important. They provide the 'behind the scenes' details of everybody's big picture.

But apart from all that, they're also vital bulletins. They tell you about what's going on in your own neighbourhoods: how well your city is doing economically

or otherwise; trends in crime close to home; and who lost an expensive dog.

When the news broke last week that PostMedia was making major cuts to its staffing and operations, especially in Alberta, it sunk my spirits. I'm a big believer in what journalists and reporters do. We're messengers (a noble undertaking if you ask me) but more than that, we play a largely unspoken role of keeping communities connected. It's easy enough for people in small towns to know everybody and everything but as communities grow, it gets increasingly difficult for news to spread. How else would two strangers on opposite sides of a city know what's going on? The Internet? Sure, if you trust what people write on the Internet.

It was here that I first learned what a newspaper of record was and what it meant. There have been other newspapers come and go in this city but the *St. Albert Gazette* is now about to celebrate its 55th anniversary. We are here to offer professional, critical, insightful, and reasoned information to this fair burg. It means something to have words put in print on paper. That's a document that lasts forever. The Alberta Legislature has a library full of newspapers from across the province. I imagine that job is getting easier to do, because there's no such thing as a blog of record.

Eight years ago, I was hired as a reporter not because I had a journalism degree but because I know this city very well. I've lived here for more than 30 years and raised my children here. I once was a mailman here too because getting to know the people has always been important. That's how you learn their stories and sometimes discover news that might just affect that stranger on the other side of the city too.

As media megacorporations layoff reporters and merge newsrooms, making their newspapers even more reliant on stories that originate as syndications from a national or international source, it's those local stories that will shrink and shrink, eventually to disappear. How will we really know what's happening right around us in our neighbourhoods and cities then? How will we trust information if it isn't reliable enough to land on our doorstep? What will we care about when we don't know anything?

Scott Hayes is a reporter with the Gazette



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