

Foster's Daily Democrat, "So where are we headed in this ever-changing world of print and electronic journalism?"

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Editorial: 140th Year Celebration - Founding of Foster's Daily Democrat

DOVER – These continue to be challenging and interesting times for newspaper journalism.

Sometimes it seems there is almost too much to overcome. We continue to deal with the perfect storm of an economy foundering at the same time we need to absorb and develop the revolutionary wave of the electronic and social media reporting.

It is rare a day that goes by without someone asking, with a sense it's not too good: "How's it going in the newspaper business?"

My answer, generally: "Well we're holding on, adapting and changing how we do what we do to get local news of local people and communities to serve our readers."

And, really it isn't all bad news about the newspaper business. We laugh at ourselves sometimes that we do so much to tell people about other businesses and what they are doing and how they are doing it, yet we do little to promote our work and our successes.

For example, because of the new electronic media, small newspapers such as Foster's Daily Democrat have a far greater reach, or circulation, than ever before ... but the popular opinion is we have less.

Surveys continue to show newspapers, and their websites, have a good readership, remain a primary source of value for advertisers and maintain a high level of credibility with readers.

It is true a significant part of print subscriptions are with an older generation, but almost all traditional newspapers are adding to their print work the new methods of communication – the web, email, mobile, Twitter and Facebook.

As a historical note, Foster's was one of the first newspapers to produce web news when, in 1995, under the direction of former News Editor Phil Kincade, we created “Primary Destination: New Hampshire” for the year of the presidential primary and election.

We are doing all this not only to be effective as a local business, but to uphold our responsibilities in a country with a free press and continue what has always been an overall goal: To be a value to the community.

But, for newspapers we yet have much to overcome making the adaptations to the new, quick-paced world of instant communication.

For example, taking on the development of new electronic communication is like adding a whole new process and product to your existing business in a time when resources are already stretched.

To help with revenue, this past September we joined other newspapers by putting up what's called a paywall for the website, Fosters.com. After few free reads, one can pay a fee to subscribe to read our electronic news for a day, a month or a year. If one has a subscription to Foster's or the Sunday Citizen, access is free.

Frankly, the negative reaction of people having to pay for news on the web was less for us than we'd heard had happened at other papers. However, some months later, a bit of complaining still goes on.

“It should be free,” was the cry for weeks on the phone and on Facebook (sometimes adding words not able to be repeated here, but use your imagination).

And we just shake our head. Do those complaining about a fee for reading the news think all those people who collect, write, photograph and prepare the news for publication...in print or online...are employees who don't need to be paid? Do they not know there is a complicated manufacturing process that produces a newspaper and a website with news, features, comics and advertising seven days a week?

Do they understand we are not television – for which people pay a cable fee to watch?

But enough of all that. Let's talk about what's happening now and where we are headed.

For nearly a decade, there have been two questions discussed among newspaper journalists and now more frequently asked by our readers: Will small newspapers survive as print products? Is the local newspaper relevant?

Focusing on what I've been doing for the past 38 years ... having worked as a reporter and/or editor at three small daily newspapers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire...my hope is that daily newspapers will remain daily newspapers.

But it is more likely, I think, as the electronic communication progresses; the frequency of the print publication will become less because more and more people are growing up with electronic communication only.

There is speculation local daily newspapers may change to be more like expanded weekly newspapers, coming out once or twice a week with more in-depth reporting on issues of importance to the community. Similarly, some think the small newspaper market would be best served by one paper, on Sunday, with an expanded coverage of news of the week and more in-depth reporting and explanations of what it all meant.

What is understood in these scenarios is that websites would be developed to serve reader needs on all the other days of the week, probably 24/7.

First, unfortunately, fewer days of publication fulfills speculation the daily newspaper, per se, is irrelevant.

Second is an irony of the electronic age. More people are sending more news to the newspaper and asking more be published in print than I have encountered in my time in a newsroom.

Because of email, Facebook and Twitter, sending news and photos to a newsroom is faster and easier than ever before.

It wasn't too many years ago that it took a half-hour to an hour a day to open and distribute as much a foot high, or more, pile of mail in the newsroom. Today, what is delivered is a small amount of junk and a few bits of news information.

In its place is this continuous flood of electronic news, far greater in volume than we ever received by regular mail. These bits of news and press releases come from businesses, organizations, clubs, schools, social organizations, municipalities and churches...you name it, they send it.

Add to these messages, requests for coverage of some event or activity.

People want all this in the newspaper. They don't say put it online. They ask it be put in the newspaper.

Even if we were staffed as we were 10 years ago, it would be impossible to fulfill all the requests for coverage.

What is great about this new electronic communication is that when we cannot cover an event, we ask the group to send us a story and photos. And they do.

So, more is "covered" and more news is coming into the paper.

The flow in to us is sometimes in and of itself overwhelming, so much so we sometimes can't we keep up with moving the emails to the news system.

And, with having just so many pages available each day, we often put a lot of the news on Fosters.com and in the newspaper at a later date, or not at all.

So here's a conundrum:

If word is that the print newspaper is irrelevant, that subscriptions are down because news is online and that newspapers are a dying breed, why do people complain to us when their news is only online and not in the newspaper?

A conversation goes something like this:

Caller: "My story (announcement etc.) hasn't been in the newspaper."

Editor: "Well, some of the news we get we put online. Newspaper space is limited and online space is limitless. So when we can't get it all in on any day, or over a period of days, we put it on Foster's online."

Caller: "But I need it to be in the newspaper."

Editor: "Well, we'll see what we can do."

Caller: "When will it be in?"

Editor: "I really can't tell you. We have so much stuff to get in the paper it is impossible to alert everyone when something will appear. Just keep reading the paper."

Caller: "Oh, I don't subscribe. That's why I need to know when it will be in the paper."

Editor: (verbal silence, mental scream) "Sorry, I just can't answer that."

So how do we interpret this?

People believe the printed-on-paper word has an impact and makes a difference. And, of course, it is easier to clip and stick on the refrigerator.

I don't deny this belief is changing with the new generations of young people.

But, whatever we are going through, and wherever we are headed, your local daily newspaper – and/or its electronic partner - is important to the community.

Your newspaper is the paper of record. It is a continuous record of the history of the community and region. Whether you like it or not, it is the reflection of the current life and times. It helps hundreds of people and organizations get their message out. It brings constant recognition to those who deserve it. It brings attention to those who violate our rules and laws. It helps so many who are in need to get help. It takes on the powers that be in favor of those who can't.

Despite the current lack of civil discourse on issues, it makes a strong effort every day to encourage discussions, opinions and debates with its Letters to the Editor and Community Commentary. It takes a stand on issues on the Editorial Page for what it feels is correct. It helps fight for public access and your right to know and it joins those who stand up to protect those rights.

It is the voice of the purpose of the First Amendment of our Constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of grievances.”

These are among the reasons your daily newspaper has value for you.