



The (Sad) State of Local Media in South Jersey and How to Change It

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INTRODUCTION

The state of local news coverage in South Jersey is...not good. The *Press of Atlantic City* now prints newspapers only three days a week and has eliminated deliveries. Gannett significantly reduced the newsrooms of the *Vineland Daily Journal* and the *Courier Post*, laying off award-winning journalists. We've gone from a time when every town council meeting was covered by at least one reporter to seldom or nonexistent coverage of local governments.

With residents having no idea what's going on in their communities, they often seek local news and notice of happenings from social media, which can be incomplete, incorrect, biased, or a combination of all three.

The purpose of this report is to make recommendations about how collectively we – the general public, the private sector, and government – can work together to improve local media coverage in Southern New Jersey.

SOUTH JERSEY JOURNALISM AND THE "GIG ECONOMY"

The sad reality is that there is no longer an abundance of full-time jobs in journalism in Southern New Jersey. Like much of the "gig economy," many endeavors in local journalism must be looked at as "side hustles" or part-time jobs. Neill Borowski of 70and73.com noted that coverage of a municipality, for example, may start off as a passion project in which one works for free before building up his or her news organization so that it can start to generate advertising revenue.¹

RECOMMENDATION: ENHANCED TRAINING FOR CITIZEN-JOURNALISTS AND THOSE WISHING TO COVER LOCAL ISSUES

For hyperlocal coverage of South Jersey, whether it be politics, high school sports, commercial development, or any other area, a bachelor's degree in journalism isn't always necessary, especially if one is a citizen-journalist or only working part time. Often, passionate citizens who have an entrepreneurial spirit can maintain successful, credible local news outlets with nontraditional training. Government should work with institutions of higher education, such as community colleges, and nonprofit organizations to offer no-cost or low-cost educational programs to citizens. That way, they can earn certification in local journalism to help them establish their own news footprint while learning the basic fundamentals of journalism. The New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC) has provided funding to organizations to help with education and training², and philanthropic organizations should be encouraged to support these efforts.



¹ SJF roundtable 8-17-23

² <https://medium.com/journalism-design/how-organizations-across-new-jersey-are-training-community-members-to-meet-local-information-needs-2ab571f9a6d1>

EMBRACING A FRAGMENTED MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The fragmented news ecosystem in South Jersey, while at times frustrating for the consumer, allows journalists to focus on specialized, hyperlocal subject areas. Citizen-journalists can take a passion project and turn it into a "side hustle" precisely because the news void is so large and the opportunities for specialization are so great.

Some examples of this in Southern New Jersey include:

- BreakingAC: crime and courts news in the greater Atlantic City area
- New Jersey Globe: a preeminent leader in political and campaign news in New Jersey
- Front Runner New Jersey: an outlet specifically focused on communities of color in Southern New Jersey
- 42Freeway.com: a respected outlet on the issue of transportation and commercial development in Camden and Gloucester counties
- Pine Barrens Tribune: a hyperlocal newspaper serving mainly Southern Burlington County news and happenings

Taking advantage of this fragmented news ecosystem in South Jersey requires local media organizations to work together. In particular, journalists and news operators should be encouraged to share each other's articles on social media as well as collectively embrace the use of news aggregator websites and mobile applications like NewsBreak to disseminate content to the general public.



RECOMMENDATION: MAKE IT EASIER FOR NEWS ORGANIZATIONS TO BECOME NONPROFITS.

There are advantages to for-profit news organizations becoming nonprofit organizations, such as:

- Making them more attractive for philanthropic support
- Increasing tax benefits
- Creating the ability to accept tax-deductible donations
- Engendering more trust with the communities they cover

Stefanie Murray, the director of the Montclair University Center for Cooperative Media, cautions that transitioning to a nonprofit organization is a change in tax status, not a business model.³ Revenue problems will persist regardless of how an organization is structured. Additionally, there are significant upfront costs and investment requirements in becoming a nonprofit organization, including legal and accounting, as well as the efforts of establishing a board of directors and adopting a constitution and bylaws. Nevertheless, establishing nonprofit status is still an important tool that local South Jersey media outlets should explore in order to determine whether it's the best move for them.

RECOMMENDATION: ESTABLISH AND ENHANCE SALES AGGREGATORS SO THAT ADVERTISEMENTS CAN BE BUNDLED AND SOLD TO MULTIPLE NEWS OUTLETS AT ONCE.

Most news outlets in Southern New Jersey do not or will not have the luxury of having full-time, dedicated advertising and sales professionals. While some journalists, particularly at online-only outlets, will spend part of their time on advertising or sales, others may find a sales aggregator service to be beneficial. A sales aggregator could sell ads on behalf of multiple outlets at once while taking a nominal fee. Successful sales aggregators will require contracts or agreements among the various news outlets as well as with the aggregator itself. This is particularly important with digital platforms so that advertising revenue is divided in a fair manner, typically based on impressions.

There have been some attempts at sales aggregation with varying degrees of success. The New Jersey Press Association offers aggregator services for classified advertisements as well as small-space advertisements.⁴ In New York, the firm URL Media has pioneered a sales aggregator system that's specifically geared towards media focused on communities of color. However, in speaking with local news operators in Southern New Jersey, we have found that many either are unaware of sales aggregators or do not see the value in them. Local news organizations, particularly start-ups, should explore options currently available to them or form business agreements with colleagues to create their own aggregate systems.

³ Interview with Director Murray, 9-5-23

⁴ <http://www.njpa.org/Advertising/2x2.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION: AMEND STATE LAW SO THAT COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES CAN PLACE SOME PUBLIC NOTICES IN NON-PRINT (DIGITAL) MEDIA OUTLETS.

State law requires public notices like government meetings and bid announcements to be placed in traditional print newspapers.⁵ While this has undoubtedly provided a lifeline to keep print newspapers afloat, it is an archaic requirement that neglects the reach of digital news outlets and the support they too could use. Additionally, the public notices statute requires that notices be placed in English-only newspapers, ignoring the prominent role that small, non-English language media outlets play in ethnic, minority-majority neighborhoods in New Jersey.

Instead of pursuing a total abolition of public notices that was explored years ago,⁶ this report is recommending that state law be amended so that counties, towns, and private businesses can place some of their public notices in non-print news outlets. Not only would this help support new forms of media, but it could save taxpayer dollars should advertising in digital-only platforms be cheaper than traditional print media. State policymakers will need to decide what specific percentage of public advertisements are earmarked for digital news outlets. Additionally, lawmakers could enact some sort of pilot program to offer financial support to newspapers as their print operations continue to shrink. This balanced approach to public notices recognizes the realities of South Jersey's media ecosystem while at the same time not pulling the rug out from under legacy news media.



⁵ NJSA Title 35

⁶ <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2016/12/16-12-18-does-letting-legal-notices-be-published-solely-online-punish-the-press-financially/>

EXPLORING THE FRANCHISE MODEL TO FILL THE MEDIA VOID IN SOUTH JERSEY

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The media industry is undergoing a dramatic transition from print to digital. Meanwhile, national conglomerates are buying up local media outlets and slashing newsrooms while other local print newspapers are shutting their doors. At the same time, advertising dollars are rapidly migrating from print to digital. There is a tremendous opportunity to save local news and ensure transparency and accountability of public officials by having a robust digital local news ecosystem. TAPinto's unique franchise model for local news is doing just that.

TAPinto (tapinto.net) is a network of more than 95 franchised online local news and digital marketing platforms in NJ, NY, PA, and FL, with more than 2 million readers in August 2023 alone. Of 90 TAPinto platforms in New Jersey, more than 50% are owned by women and almost 15% are owned by African Americans.

The 90 TAPinto platforms in New Jersey cover more than 125 municipalities in the Garden State, providing original local news coverage for those communities on a daily basis. In addition to providing original local news reporting every day, each TAPinto site is also required to follow the Society of Professional Journalists' ethical code and to be objective. No anonymous comments are accepted, thereby increasing the potential for civil discourse.

As a result of TAPinto's local news platforms, residents in dozens of communities in New Jersey are able to find out what transpired at their town council, board of education, planning and zoning board meetings. They are able to be informed about, and involved in, their communities. And TAPinto local news platforms help to hold elected officials accountable by providing transparency and accountability on an ongoing and consistent basis.

TAPinto local news platforms also engage in local journalism the right way – through objective, fact-based reporting that does not sensationalize the news and does not engage in creating click bait. That's why year after year, TAPinto local news platforms win awards from the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists, the Center for Cooperative Media, the Garden State Journalists Association, and many other similar organizations.

With TAPinto, each local news platform is an independently and locally owned and operated franchise. This bottom-up model helps ensure that the TAPinto local news platform is deeply rooted in the community it serves. It also means that the local owner/publisher is invested in the success of their local news business long term, which helps create a local news platform that the community can rely on for many years to come.

More information can be found at starttap.net.

CONCLUSION

The state of local media in South Jersey presents a concerning picture marked by dwindling resources, reduced coverage, and an increasing reliance on fragmented and often unreliable sources of information. However, the challenges faced by our local media landscape also bring opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Our recommendations emphasize the importance of empowering citizen-journalists, exploring nonprofit models, establishing sales aggregators, and embracing a more interconnected media ecosystem. By collectively working together—citizens, the private sector, and government—we can chart a path forward toward a revitalized and robust local media landscape. A stronger local media presence is not only crucial for keeping our communities informed but also for fostering transparency, accountability, and a sense of civic engagement. As we move forward, it's incumbent on all of us to support and sustain the vital role that local media play in the fabric of South Jersey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Michael Suleiman

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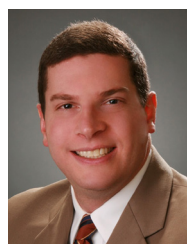
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ABOUT SOUTH JERSEY FORWARD

South Jersey Forward is a nonprofit think tank and advocacy organization that is committed to exploring bold public policy to solve our problems. From Atlantic City to the Delaware Bay, the Pinelands to Cape May, we will research and identify solutions that will make South Jersey a better place to live.

We thank you for reading this report. South Jersey Forward will continue to host roundtable discussions, write public policy papers, conduct research, and work with policymakers to enact good public policy. We will not promote milquetoast ideas or boilerplate positions just to get a headline. South Jersey Forward and its contributors will be focused on bold proposals and ideas regardless of their political popularity. We are committed to preserving the issues-based, apolitical nature of South Jersey Forward.

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