



Lisa Hills and Sarah Jackson of the Minnesota Newspaper Association

Vibrant communities have newspapers that push conversations forward to spur community change

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

Steve Anderson, Heather Bandeen, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Lisa Hills, Sarah Jackson, Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Dave Broden (vice chair).

Summary

According to Lisa Hills of the Minnesota Newspaper Association (MNA), community newspapers around the state, i.e., smaller dailies and nonmetro and suburban weekly newspapers, are very involved in talking about issues and challenges facing their communities. They are the only source of information in their communities and their reporters the only ones attending meetings and reporting information from government entities like county boards, city councils and school boards. She says many newspapers are doing an excellent job of discussing issues in their communities and sharing information before decisions are made. Good, solid newspapers make for vibrant communities, she asserts.

MNA's Sarah Jackson adds that there is a general feeling among newspaper people in the state that, as community leaders, newspapers have an important responsibility to push conversations forward and help make community change where they can. Hills points out the importance of newspapers carrying strong, locally written editorials on public issues. She says most community newspapers across the state have active editorial pages and nearly all publish letters to the editor.

MNA's nonprofit training arm, the Minnesota News Media Institute (MNI), offers skills training for newspaper people and a community leadership program for editors and publishers to help enable newspapers to report and lead on community issues and challenges.

Overall, Hills reports, Minnesota's community newspapers are healthy and sustainable and are not dominated by large chains. Jackson says research shows that people are reading newspapers, either print or online. Many community newspapers post their content online and some set up paywalls charging digital readers for stories in past issues of the paper or for stories beyond five or 10 that are accessible for free. One sign of the health of community newspapers around the state is that most report they have job openings, but can't find people to fill them.

Biographies

Lisa Hills is executive director of the Minnesota Newspaper Association, the trade association for 330 member newspapers, and its training arm, the Minnesota News Media Institute. Hills has been with the association since 1989, serving as its advertising director until 2006, when she was named executive director.

Prior to joining MNA, Hills worked in the advertising department of the Scottsdale (Ariz.) *Daily Progress*. She served on the Minnesota Advertising Federation board of directors and currently is president of the national Newspaper Association Managers board of directors. She is a graduate of the University of Iowa with a B.A. in Mass Communications.

Sarah Jackson is program director for the Minnesota Newspaper Association, a position she has held for five years. She manages all training programs for the Minnesota News Media Institute, the MNA's nonprofit training arm, as well as MNA's annual Better Newspaper Contest. Jackson also oversees MNA's convention, which attracts more than 700 newspaper people annually to Bloomington, Minn.

Jackson speaks regularly about media ethics, the history of press councils, the role of social media in journalism, women's leadership and various journalism-related issues with civic groups, visiting foreign journalists, high school and college students, as well as in newsrooms. Previously, Jackson was executive director of the Minnesota News Council.

Jackson served on the board of directors of the Minnesota Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists for eight years, and is currently the national awards committee co-chair. She graduated from the University of Minnesota with degrees in journalism and philosophy.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past and present public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. The Caucus interviewed Lisa Hills and Sarah Jackson from the Minnesota Newspaper Association to learn about the role of smaller newspapers throughout the state in raising public issues, reporting on issues before decisions are made and using editorials to make recommendations on resolving issues and community problems.

Discussion

Overall, Minnesota's community newspapers are healthy and are not dominated by large chains. According to Lisa Hills of the [Minnesota Newspaper Association](#) (MNA), the 149-year-old

trade organization for the state's newspapers has 330 member newspapers. The members include 24 dailies in the state and 306 weeklies located mostly in suburban areas or in communities outside the metro area.

She said in general, Minnesota newspapers are not dominated by large chains. ECM Publishers and Forum Communications Company own a number of newspapers, but those companies are locally owned, as compared to large corporate chain ownership. She remarked that local ownership is very positive. This is different from other states where many newspapers are corporately owned.

Overall, she noted, newspapers in the state are healthy and the mood of the 700 Minnesota newspaper people at MNA's January 2016 convention was very positive. Community newspapers have stayed healthy, even during the downturn in the economy, Hills said. "They're the only source of information in the community and the only people going to the city council meetings and talking about issues in the community. Vibrant communities have good, solid newspapers." She said there haven't been big changes in circulation or in readership in recent years. One-third of MNA's member newspapers have 1,500 circulation or less.

Small newspapers are sustainable. MNA's Sarah Jackson said small newspapers are sustainable, many because they've diversified. For example, she said, the *Parkers Prairie Independent*, in addition to running a weekly newspaper, has a photography business, a shop selling housewares and clothes and a commercial printing business. Hills said many newspapers publish "shoppers", separate publications with all or mostly advertisements, or have common advertising supplements that are carried in a group of area papers. Some newspapers also do specialty magazines or supplements like summer tourist guides. "Newspapers are doing lots of different things," Hills said.

People are reading newspapers. According to Jackson, data from a 2013 study show that 89 percent of adult Minnesotans have accessed newspapers in the last month, either print or online. People who are reading their news online are going to trusted news sites like newspapers, Jackson said. Nationally, 2015 data show that eight of 10 Americans read newspaper digital media each month.

The 2013 study shows that newspaper print readership rises steadily from 52 percent of the population in the 18-to-34 age group to 86 percent of the population 65 or older. Readership on newspaper websites peaks at 38 percent in the 35-to-49 age group and then declines to only 10 percent for those 65 or older. Readership on smartphone newspaper apps is most popular in the 18-to-34 age group, at 11 percent.

Most newspapers have websites, but it depends on the community. Many newspapers don't have a strong digital presence or aren't necessarily maintaining their own websites, Hills said. Those without websites are often communicating through social media and Twitter.

In 2010, the MNA created the Minnesota News Media Institute (MNI). Jackson said MNA created the nonprofit News Media Institute to do training work, including the following:

- Internships for high school students across the state, done in cooperation with the Pohlad Family Foundation;

- An Editors & Publishers Community Leadership Program, now in its 12th year and funded by the Blandin Foundation;
- Training programs in partnership with the Online Media Campus, a consortium of other state newspaper associations that include webinars a few times a month; and
- Stand-alone courses, such as an introduction to newspaper sales and a post-legislative download session for new reporters.

The nonprofit MNI can receive grants from foundations. Hills noted that MNA, the parent organization, is a not-for-profit organization that pays taxes so it can do lobbying work at the Legislature.

Newspapers around the state are reporting on meetings of city councils, county boards and school boards. An interviewer asked how many newspapers have the capacity to cover what public entities, such as county boards and city councils, are doing locally. Hills responded that newspapers around the state are very involved in talking about the issues and reporting information from all government entities. "They attend the meetings and report on them," she said.

She said newspapers are focusing on challenges in their community, such as economic, mental health and drug issues. Part of MNI's goal is to give newspaper people the tools and skills to cover that information and all the important issues happening in the state.

MNA lobbies for data practices, along with public notice, open meetings and other news media issues

. Hills said MNA is very active in issues like the following:

- Access to public documents. There was a big case recently involving the Tower-Ely Timberjay newspaper trying to get access to public documents related to a school construction project. There was a subcontract involved and the paper was denied access to the subcontract documents. The case took many twists and turns and ended up in the state Legislature, where legislation known as the "Timberjay bill" was enacted. It amended the data practices act to clarify the classification of data held by private contractors as public.
- Working to keep public notices issued by government entities in newspapers rather than moving them to government websites. People reading newspapers are more likely to see public notices than if they have to access them by going to a government website. And newspapers that carry public notices are required to post them on the newspaper website, if they maintain a website.
- Making sure that police body-camera data are accessible to the public.

There's a general mood that newspapers are community leaders. There's a feeling, Jackson said, that as community leaders, newspapers have an important responsibility to push conversations forward and help make community change where they can. MNI's Editors & Publishers Community Leadership Program includes a community engagement project where newspapers try to target an issue facing their particular communities and look for a place where they can make a difference.

Jackson remarked that attitudes toward the newspaper and relationships between the newspaper and various public entities differ from community to community.

Getting timely access to public information is a problem. An interviewer commented that, in his experience, often people who've requested access to public information aren't granted access until sometime after a decision is made. "If access isn't timely, it doesn't help," he said.

Hills responded that it is a problem and an ongoing issue at the local level. Some states have specific timelines for granting data access, but Minnesota doesn't. State law just says access must be granted in "a reasonable time," but she said that's open to interpretation.

The Minnesota News Council, which helped resolve disputes involving the news media, shut down in 2010. Jackson, former executive director of the Council, said calls to the Council are still directed to her, so she is still able to offer advice on dispute resolution.

Most newspapers have active editorial pages and nearly all publish letters to the editor. Hills said a large percentage of newspapers across the state have editorial pages. Most papers publish strong local editorials at least some of the time.

MNI offers training that encourages newspaper people to publish editorials and offers information about the components of a good editorial. Jackson said there is a category for editorials in MNA's Better Newspaper Contest. The entry judged as the best editorial is honored with the Herman Roe award. The 2016 award went to Andrew Broman of the *Litchfield Independent Review*.

The list of must-read Minnesota newspapers can change, depending on what's going on in the state. An interviewer asked which newspapers the governor should read every day or every week. Hills responded that he should read the *Star Tribune*, the *Pioneer Press*, the large regional dailies, northern Minnesota papers to keep up with issues on the Iron Range and community newspapers, especially in southern Minnesota, to keep up with water issues. She said the list changes, depending on what's happening in the state.

When the interviewer asked what the best newspaper in the state is, Jackson replied that in the 2016 MNA Better Newspaper Contest, the *Detroit Lakes Tribune* was named the top weekly newspaper, because it won the most awards in the weeklies category. Similarly, the *Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* was named the best daily. (The *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* are not part of the contest.)

Many newspapers are doing an excellent job of discussing issues in their communities and sharing information before decisions are made. Hills pointed to some recent issues, such as the school closings in Stillwater and mining in northern Minnesota, as examples of newspapers keeping the public informed before decisions are made. She noted a recent "Mining Edition" special section published by the papers in Chisholm, Virginia and Hibbing.

Young people finding their news on Facebook and Twitter are still being directed to traditional news outlets like newspapers. Jackson said she reads more national and regional newspapers than before, after being referred to them through social media. "I have more access than ever," she said. "There are 24-hour news cycles now, especially in the Twin Cities."

Small newspapers often share photos and stories, especially in the same regional areas. Hills said there is "quite a bit of sharing" among newspapers. She noted that the **Forum News Service** works with a number of newspapers in the region, weeklies and small and large dailies, which contribute and are able to pick up stories from the other newspapers in the group.

According to Jackson, a lot of newspapers exchange their papers with other newspapers, so they can get ideas from each other or perhaps rerun an editorial they've spotted in another paper. Also, MNI sponsors idea-sharing events among newspapers.

Even with the sharing, Hills said, newspapers are still very independent and competitive in news reporting within their own communities.

Lack of broadband Internet access in some areas of the state means not all newspapers are able to put their content online. Jackson said the Blandin Foundation is working to get broadband access throughout the state. "We're not there yet," she said.

Some newspapers have put up paywalls that require digital readers to pay for at least some online content. An interviewer asked what kinds of revenue streams newspapers are finding for delivering online content, which many people assume should be free. "There is no perfect model out there," Hills responded. Some small community newspapers have put up paywalls and then taken them down. "What we're seeing most frequently is, if there's breaking news, it goes ahead of a paywall and is free," she said. "But if you want the newspapers' regular content, it stays behind a paywall and readers must pay for it. It's a model people are still trying to figure out."

Weekly newspapers' websites are mostly open, she said. Sometimes, people who are traveling and want to stay up with the community news will get a PDF of the entire newspaper. That provides more of a revenue stream for small newspapers than the paywall approach.

Jackson added that the most popular model for papers using paywalls is a metered paywall. Under that system, digital readers can see five or 10 articles for free and then must spend \$1 a week for digital access. That's the model the *Star Tribune*, the *New York Times* and other large newspapers around the country are using. Sometimes, small weeklies will post the current week's stories for free, but past stories, including last week's, are behind paywalls. "There's not one thing that's working great yet," she said.

Newspapers around the state report that they have job openings, but they can't find people to fill them. Jackson said that's the top thing MNA hears from newspapers around the state. While there might not be as many job opportunities at the *Star Tribune* or *Pioneer Press*, there are lots of opportunities at community newspapers. She pointed out that all of Minnesota's 87 counties have at least one newspaper.

An interviewer asked which schools are providing highly qualified people for these jobs in small communities. Jackson responded that graduates of the University of Minnesota's journalism school seem to look for jobs at larger or regional newspapers or jobs in advertising or public relations. But there are many journalism programs in the state beyond just the U of M's. She said she's seeing

many students from two-year programs at local community colleges and from smaller four-year colleges throughout the state participating in the college Better Newspaper Contest. In turn, many graduates of those programs are filling some of the openings at community newspapers.

Other journalism programs that are feeding into these newspapers include Bethel University; St. Cloud State University; Minnesota State University, Mankato; University of Minnesota Duluth; Moorhead State University; University of St. Thomas; and Rochester Community and Technical College. Finding the right recruits is the current challenge, Jackson said.

Hills said MNA's Journalism Education Committee members have been visiting some of the state's journalism schools to tell students that newspapers are alive and well in Minnesota. They're also telling students that working at community newspapers can be a good steppingstone for other journalism jobs. "You might not get rich," Jackson quipped, "but there are definitely jobs available."

People who want to get through to a newspaper should make a personal connection with the editor. Jackson mentioned that MNA operates a press release service for clients who wish to get a message out to various newspapers around the state. But she tells the clients that it's very helpful in this digital age to pick up the phone and talk to the editor. Hills added that it's good to send out e-mails, but people who want to reach a certain newspaper should make a personal connection with the editor.

Part of MNA's mission is to promote a fraternal spirit among newspapers. An interviewer asked if there is a role the state's newspapers could play in helping reduce the disconnect between Greater Minnesota and the metro area and between rural and urban. Hills responded that MNA tries to promote a fraternal spirit among the state's newspapers through gatherings of newspaper people. MNI's Editors & Publishers Community Leadership Program is another opportunity to decrease the rural/urban division, she said. "It's important, because the division is getting stronger," she said. "Newspapers certainly have a role in starting the discussions to help change that."