



Reed Anfinson

Small-town newspaper publisher Reed Anfinson: Community newspapers are a public good; we must work to save them

A Minnesota in-the-post-pandemic-world interview

September 25, 2020

In a September 25, 2020, interview with the Civic Caucus, Minnesota small-town newspaper publisher Reed Anfinson speaks of the important role played by small-town newspapers in

their communities. Many small communities have lost their newspapers and Anfinson says when a newspaper is lost, democracy suffers. He offers ideas for subsidizing small-town newspapers to ensure their survival.

Background

00:00 - Introduction. (Dana Schroeder)

Reed Anfinson is a nationally recognized leader in the world of community newspapering. He publishes and owns three west-central Minnesota small-town papers: the *Swift County Monitor-News* in Benson, Minn.; the *Stevens County Times* in Morris, Minn.; and the *Grant County Herald* in Elbow Lake, Minn. He has served as president of both the Minnesota Newspaper Association (MNA) and the National Newspaper Association (NNA) and is currently president of the NNA Foundation.

02:45 - Reed Anfinson Opening Remarks: Over the last 15 years, 2,000 newspapers have disappeared-1,800 of them community newspapers. Two hundred counties in the U.S. no longer have newspapers. That threatens our democracy, because it emaciates civic knowledge.

There are over 19,495 incorporated cities in the United States, with 76 percent--14,768 - having fewer than 5,000 people, according to the U.S. Census. There are 1,643 cities with populations between 5,000 and 10,000, bringing the total number of cities under 10,000 to 16,411, or 84.1 percent of the nation's cities.

Many small-town community newspapers earn between one percent and five percent of their income from digital advertising and subscription sales. Some earn nothing from digital.

Without newspapers, research shows that fewer people vote, people don't know the candidates up for election and people don't know what's going on in their schools and city and county governments. At 95 percent of the public meetings I cover in Benson, I'm the only member of the public there. People need a trusted source of information. If the newspaper doesn't send a reporter to a public meeting, no one from the public might be there. Citizens tend to check out when they know less. Newspapers have to have the financial strength and the gravitas to challenge power. Support for newspapers must go back to the people. We must rely on the citizens.

Discussion

10:16 - What is the impact of the loss of local newspapers on civic awareness and engagement in local issues? Is there a relationship between that loss of local engagement and the rise of tribal partisanship at the national level? (Paul Ostrow)

Anfinson: Where a community newspaper is lost, there is a huge polarization between the right and the left. All people have to rely on is the internet and the national news.

12:52 - Should public funding be allocated to newspapers, as a business that should be expected to survive on its own? Is this the responsibility of government, and if so, how does the newspaper business differ from other businesses that may go under? (Chuck Gilje)

Anfinson: You're talking about letting newspapers fail. Do you believe democracy should fail because people don't have the information they need to pay attention? There was a reason we have freedom of speech and freedom of the press. When people don't know what their government is doing, corruption seeps in. A small town in California lost its newspaper and the city council members and city staff started paying themselves \$500,000 salaries, because nobody was watching. It takes newspapers' knowledge of the Data Practices Act and the Open Meeting Law to make sure people know what's going on.

So, if you have the premise that newspapers are not a public good and that people don't need to be informed and that democracy can fail right along with newspapers, you can go with the idea that newspapers are just another business.

18:15 - Can you give us an overview in your newspaper communities about the state of Main Street and local businesses, including newspapers? (Dana Schroeder)

Anfinson: A newspaper is a barometer of the community's health. Our three newspapers' income is down by 30 percent, because the pandemic has affected businesses in the community that usually would support the newspaper through advertising.

23:15 - Can you explain why a community newspaper might choose to be a nonprofit organization or a business? (Janis Clay)

Anfinson: We've talked about angel investors and going nonprofit as options for newspapers. But 14,768 communities have fewer than 5,000 people, according to the U.S. Census. The one thing you have to have in order to keep a newspaper in a community is for the newspaper to have a sustainable income, so it can challenge power.

In order to have that, we shouldn't take public notices, which are a source of income, out of newspapers. Perhaps a newspaper could get a tax break for hiring a new reporter. In recent years, many farmers have received \$100,000 from the government annually. I've met with U.S. Representative Collin Peterson (D-Minn.) about how the preventive planting program for agriculture could be applied to newspapers.

When the *Washington Post* started running its Watergate stories, it lost \$7 million in income. When the Post's chief financial officer told publisher Katharine Graham about the losses,

she reportedly replied: "It's a good thing we can afford it." What would she say today? What happens when I need to write a controversial story or a controversial editorial? Can I afford to lose an important advertiser? Or will I back off?

In rural Minnesota we have higher rates of poverty and lower levels of education than in the Twin Cities. So, it's hard to mobilize people to save a newspaper through contributions, as has happened in some Twin Cities neighborhoods.

A newspaper is a public good and no one person can claim it for his or her own.

25:53 - Are community newspapers also reporting on impactful national issues?

(John Cairns)

Anfinson: No. We don't reporting on things that aren't local "Afghanistanism." We just don't have the staff or time. We might run a guest editorial on a nonlocal issue, but our focus is local. And I might write an editorial or column occasionally on a national issue. But I don't have time to be a state and federal reporter at the same time as covering local issues. We do occasionally carry an AP story.

31:00 - Why don't Minnesota foundations value the public service provided by local community newspapers as being worthy of the kind of support provided to organizations such as NPR and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)?

(John Adams)

Anfinson: Some of the big foundations don't see community newspapers across Minnesota as that important. CPB and NPR get some federal money, but their funding is tenuous in the midst of political partisanship. Community newspapers, though, are supported by both sides of the aisle.

34:54 - Do the communities that your newspapers serve experience issues with broadband access? How do we cope with the fact that younger generations are not being taught civics in school and they emerge less aware of issues at the local level?

(Clarence Shallbetter)

Anfinson: No child in rural Minnesota or in Minnesota in general should be able to graduate from high school without attending a public meeting and reporting back in class on what they learned. There is fiber-optic throughout all of Swift County. The public voted to pay for it with a loan to the phone company. But big parts of rural Minnesota have some issues with internet connectivity. In this era of distance learning, not every family can afford internet access and the devices students need.

38:06 - Seeing the service provided by community newspapers as a public good, what might a model for public funding of local newspapers look like? (Lee Munnich)

Anfinson: There are many different ideas of how to fund newspapers. One model is called prevented printing, based on the prevented planting farm program. (Anfinson wrote an **op-ed piece in his own newspapers and in the August 17, 2020, Star Tribune** explaining his preventive printing plan to help subsidize small-town newspapers.) It involves paying newspapers the cost of pages that have been dropped for financial reasons. The newspapers would then have to print those pages, filling them with news.

There are other ideas, as well: subsidies or tax credits for hiring news staff and subsidies to businesses that advertise in newspapers. The BBC and CBC in Europe and Canada and newspapers in various European countries are subsidized by the government. In Europe they have taxes on digital devices that we could replicate here and use to help fund community newspapers. Or we could place a tax on Google's earnings, which could subsidize all community newspapers in the country. For years, Google and Facebook have made money using content from newspapers.

The **March 18, 2009, Nation article "The Death and Life of Great American Newspapers,"** by Robert McChesney and John Nichols, explains why newspapers are a public good. McChesney and Nichols conclude that only government can implement policies and subsidies to provide an institutional framework for quality journalism. They make similar arguments in their 2010 book *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again.*

43:15 - Does a lack of reporting on rural Minnesota contribute to the lack of understanding that breeds in urban enclaves for rural and small-town America? Is there a role for community newspapers or journalism to be a part of information-sharing to help bridge these divisions? (Paul Ostrow)

Anfinson: We need coverage by the *Star Tribune* of rural Minnesota, but they don't have the staff and revenue to provide it. The growing divide between left and right, red and blue will hurt rural Minnesota. The seven-county metro area now contains 57 percent of the state's population and that figure is growing. Minnesota might never have another legislative committee chair.

47:09 - Did the daily presence of more urban newspapers in small towns strengthen the mission of small-town newspapers in presenting local news, while leaving urban publications to cover a broader perspective? (Pat Davies)

Anfinson: The *Star Tribune* is available in Benson now, but many people see it as too liberal. They thought the *Pioneer Press* was more conservative, but it has not been available here for years.

48:42 - Does political opposition for public funding of newspapers stem from the fact that politicians don't want to see negative reporting about themselves in the newspaper? (Chuck Gilje)

Anfinson: The only source of information in small towns is the community newspaper. If a government official does something outrageous, people are going to see that headline in the newspaper as it sits on the counter of a coffee shop or a bar. If it's only digital, it doesn't have the same impact as in print.

51:33 - Are local and community papers featured or readily accessible in schools for kids to learn about their local communities? (Janis Clay)

Anfinson: The kids in school grab the paper and look for pictures of themselves. Through the National Newspaper Association Foundation, someone developed an internet civic education program where kids read their local newspapers and then answer a quiz about what they've read. But the U.S. Department of Agriculture, saying that newspapers are a thing of the past, didn't renew the grant for the program. They don't really know much about rural America.

What replaces newspapers when they're gone? Political campaigns and corporations are putting their own spin on what's happening. More and more governments are hiring public-information officers. We journalists are outnumbered five- or six-to-one by public relations people.

54:41 - What percentage of newspaper revenue comes from various revenue sources? Have you considered fund drives like the kinds done by MPR to reach individual financial supporters? How local do you go as far as political endorsements and, similarly, how national? (Dana Schroeder)

Anfinson: Advertising accounts for 88 percent of his newspapers' revenue; subscriptions, nine to 10 percent; and digital about two percent. In a digital world, I disappear. Having MPR-style fund drives would not produce consistent revenue.

As far as endorsements, U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson, whom we endorsed, is a conservative Democrat with a lot of seniority. At the local level, we'll endorse if there's a difference in candidates' positions on issues. And we'll endorse sometimes at the state level. You have to have the courage to be out of step with the mainstream.

1:00:08 - To what extent do you see that strong partisanship in the public decision-making bodies you cover contributes to decisions being made without public input? How do you begin to cover some of the complicated welfare and child-protection issues at the county level? (Clarence Shallbetter)

Anfinson: I see far, far more stories than I can write. The state has been shifting care of mental health patients to the police and emergency rooms and they're not geared up to handle it. We could use another reporter or a regional reporter to cover those issues. The local governments are public bodies and, generally, their conversations take place in public.

1:06:02 - How do we get people in rural and urban areas to see that their lives intersect, that they are struggling with some of the same issues and that their decisions affect one another as one community? (T Williams)

Anfinson: One place where our lives intersect is that almost everyone in rural Minnesota has family members living in the Twin Cities or another big city. In Morris, we have a diverse population because of the University of Minnesota campus there. We cover some urban issues. Many people I'm writing for have very little experience with life in the city, so I try to find a way to increase their empathy.

1:13:33 - How do you see local governments trying to adapt to reduced revenue due to COVID-19? (Dana Schroeder)

Anfinson: They're acting very warily right now. They can cut spending or raise taxes. They have to set their final budgets in December, but they don't know what the state is going to do next year. Some local governments have reserves to draw from.

Conclusion

1:16:05 - Anfinson: The community newspaper is a public good and must be saved. It creates a sense of pride within the community. It brings the community together for the good of the people.

Present on Zoom interview

John Adams, Reed Anfinson, Helen Baer, John Cairns (vice chair), Janis Clay (chair), Pat Davies, Chuck Gilje, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.

Biography

Reed Anfinson is the publisher and owner of the *Swift County Monitor-News* in Benson, Minn.; the *Stevens County Times* in Morris, Minn., which he purchased in 2019; and the *Grant County Herald* in Elbow Lake, Minn., which he purchased in 2014. He is a partner in Quinco Press, Inc., a central printing plant in Lowry, Minn., that prints 36 publications.

Anfinson served as president of the National Newspaper Association (NNA) from September 2011 to October 2012. He is currently serving as president of the National Newspaper Association Foundation and continues to serve on the NNA Board of Directors. From 1999 to 2000, Anfinson served as president of the Minnesota Newspaper Association (MNA) and was a member of its board for nine years. He has served on the MNA Legislative Committee since 1994, currently serving as its chair. He served six years on the Minnesota News Council hearing panel and later served as its vice president.

Anfinson has received a number of awards: in October 2019, he was presented with the NNA's James O. Amos Award, given for a career of distinguished service and leadership to the community press and community; in 2003, he was awarded MNA's Al McIntosh Distinguished Service to Journalism Award; in March 2010, the Minnesota Coalition on Government Information named Anfinson the winner of the John R. Finnegan Freedom of Information Award; and in 2013, St. Cloud State University presented him with its First Amendment Award.

Since 2016, Anfinson has been serving a six-year term on the [Center for Rural Policy and Development](#), which advises the Legislature on rural issues. He also serves on the Benson Industrial Development Corp., a private group that works to energize economic development in the community. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota's School of Journalism and Mass Communications, now the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communications.