

The Mission Is Local Journalism

National Newspaper Association keynote, Detroit

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I was born a few miles from here, in Dearborn, which means I have spent most of my life doing what every suburban Detroiter eventually does when traveling around the country. I tell people I'm from "The D." My daughter used to get exasperated every time she heard me say it.

"Dad! You're not from Detroit! You're from Dearborn." And I'd say, "Yeah, but it's in the 313." To this day, she remains unconvinced. So, for the record, I fully acknowledge that Dearborn and Detroit are not the same place. Dearborn's a couple miles that-a-way. But today I'm claiming Detroit, and I'm giving you permission to do the same.

You've chosen a pretty great city for this convention. If you've spent any time along the riverfront, you've seen a city that has been reinventing itself for decades. New investment. New energy. New confidence.

Detroit has been knocked down, counted out, challenged and written off more times than I can remember. But it keeps getting back up. That Joe Louis fist statue right outside this hotel? Yeah - that's us. This is a city that understands resilience. And because of that, I can't imagine a better place to have a conversation about the future of local journalism.

So, let's address the obvious. I am here from the future. Not 2030. Not 2050. Not, as the old song goes, the year 2525. I am here from December. That's when MLive will publish the final printed editions of eight newspapers that have served Michigan communities for generations. And if it feels a little incongruous that I am standing before the National Newspaper Association delivering a keynote address just weeks after making that announcement, I understand completely.

When I accepted the invitation, I figured one of three things had happened: The program committee wasn't aware of our plans, it has a wicked sense of humor, or this was some kind of elaborate setup. I'm still not completely certain which. But I'm not here because the future arrived two weeks ago. I'm here because the future arrived for me seventeen years ago.

In 2009, four Michigan newspapers that had been delivered seven days a week for more than a century stopped showing up on readers' doorsteps every day. I was executive editor of three of them: Flint, Saginaw and Bay City. At the time, the industry considered that a radical move. Some people predicted disaster. A few - not many outside our company, for sure - hailed it as innovation. Most of us had no idea what would happen.

What I did know was that we were scheduled to stop daily home delivery on Monday, June 1, 2009. The next newspaper wouldn't arrive until Thursday. And we knew in advance that General Motors would file for bankruptcy on that Monday. Think about that. One of the biggest news stories in the history of our communities ... and for three days, no newspaper on anyone's porch.

I remember pulling my editors into a conference room. Nobody had a roadmap. Nobody had ever navigated this before. I told them: "We will be relevant to our readers the day General Motors files for bankruptcy, newspaper or not. We need to figure out how." That certainly wasn't a strategic

plan. That was survival. And it forced us to confront a question that has shaped the rest of my career: What exactly are we trying to preserve? Because if the answer was paper, we were in trouble. But if the answer was journalism, we had options. That moment launched seventeen years of experimenting, learning, failing, adjusting and listening. And slowly discovering what actually matters.

I've learned something else along the way. For many of you in this room, print isn't just a format. It's the business model that has sustained your journalism. It's the habit your readers depend on. It's the product that may still make the economics of local journalism work in your community. And for some of you, it may continue to do that for a very long time. I sincerely hope it does. So, I want to be careful about what I'm saying here. I'm not standing in front of you as the guy who has figured out the future. I haven't. I've just had the opportunity to experience a few versions of it.

Another thing I've learned is that every major change arrives looking like a threat. The internet. Mobile. Social media. Search. Artificial intelligence. Sometimes those threats are very real. But the future rarely arrives all at once. It arrives one decision at a time. One adaptation at a time. One painful conversation at a time. The organizations that survive aren't necessarily the ones that predict the future best. They're the ones willing to keep learning.

That's one reason I'm encouraged when I look at this convention. I reviewed the agenda. I don't see surrender - I see determination. I see people talking about AI, digital advertising, subscriptions, audience development, fundraising, public notices and protecting intellectual property. In other words, I see people trying to preserve local journalism.

And that brings me to a distinction I think matters enormously. Preserving local journalism is not the same thing as preserving every method we've ever used to deliver it. A few weeks ago, MLive announced that we will stop printing newspapers at the end of this year. As you might imagine, people had opinions - lots of opinions. But the overall tenor has been "I'm disappointed, but I understand." There has been more sadness than anger.

Here are some quotes from my inbox: "I have no intent of going digital. Will be canceling before the December 6 date." "I understand the rationale for the decision, and am accepting of that decision, but I am nonetheless disappointed." And... "Rather than sulk or stew, my goal now is to be personally seamless when December comes."

Amid the disappointment, there are positive signals - we had to cap attendance at a webinar last night that was offered to show print readers how to use our online newspapers. And our stop rate the past two weeks has been just a half-percentage point higher than our average for the year. Calls are up, but the most common reason is to discuss a lower subscription rate for going digital. Beneath all of this, I'm hearing something important.

People are grieving not for the loss of news, but the loss of a routine, of habits that had grown over decades of readership. One reader described a routine she had followed for decades: Coffee. Kitchen table. Newspaper. Another talked about clipping stories and mailing them to family. Others talked about sports pages, crosswords and obituaries.

And as I read those emails, something occurred to me: People weren't writing about paper; they were writing about their lives, and where we fit into them. And honestly, I understand. Because I love newspapers, too. I grew up reading The Detroit Free Press with my family. I was fortunate to have worked at papers in their heyday, when we had household penetration in some of our

markets pushing 90 percent. But even at that peak, I never thought about my role as predicated on newsprint. The format, in fact, was an afterthought. I spent forty-four years in this profession because I love journalism. There is a difference ... and if you'll allow me an extended metaphor ...

A few weeks before our announcement, I wrote a column about another thing I love: Music. When I was younger, music came on vinyl records. Then eight-tracks. Then cassettes. Then CDs. Then MP3 players. Now streaming. The delivery systems changed constantly, sometimes annoyingly so. For many people, each change was a disruption. But the music survived. In fact, the music became increasingly more accessible and convenient. It's customizable, it's transportable, you can make playlists and on and on.

Now, I find there is still something special about records. There's nostalgia - like playing the Broadway musical albums my mom used to play when she cleaned house. Or spinning "Frampton Comes Alive," which I'd play through headphones when I wanted to tune out as a teenager. There is a physicality to removing the record from the sleeve and hearing the pop and hiss when you drop the needle into the groove. Not only do I still own records - I still own the turntable I bought in college nearly 50 years ago. But if somebody asks whether I value the vinyl or the music, the answer is easy. I love music. Without the music, the record is just plastic.

And that's how I think about newspapers. Print was never the purpose of what we do, it was a vehicle. Undoubtedly, print has been an enormously important way of doing it - I won't diminish that. For generations, the printing press, the delivery truck and the newspaper itself have been the machinery that allowed us to put journalism into people's hands. We can't pretend that print doesn't matter. It matters enormously to the people who produce it and, as the past two weeks have shown me, the people who prefer it and read it avidly.

But the machinery is not the mission, and neither is the format. The mission is local journalism. That's been true since I was fifteen years old and got my first byline in the high school paper. Long before I was a professional reporter. Long before I was an editor. Long before I was a president. Local journalism mattered to me because it did something no other institution could do. It helped communities understand themselves. It gave a voice to the weakest among us while also holding powerful people to account. It strengthened democracy. It created informed citizens. That is the mission.

And if the mission is local journalism, then we have to be willing to ask, over and over again: What choices give us the best chance of sustaining that mission in our communities? That's not a question with one answer. And it's certainly not a question with one answer for every newspaper in this room. For MLive, the answer increasingly became digital. Not because digital is inherently better. Not because print suddenly stopped mattering. And certainly not because we stopped believing in newspapers. We changed because we followed one credo - we will follow our audience in the ways they access news and information.

As of this year, we had more paying digital subscribers than print subscribers. And when you count our newsletters, apps and social media accounts, 99 percent of our audience has moved into digital formats. We have more reach and we engage in more ways with readers than we ever could have imagined, 17 years ago in that conference room in Flint. Print is expensive, comparatively - but MLive's decision to stop print was not a cost-cutting move. Our reader base has shifted so profoundly to digital that it became logistically not feasible to serve our remaining readers. In many cases, we lost dozens of readers at a time because no distributor could afford to service far-flung routes.

That doesn't mean digital is free. It isn't. But it has a reach and a scalability that is a powerful advantage for traditional publishers - publisher who have built reader trust and preference over generations. The decision we made wasn't about saving money. It was about determining where our resources can do the most good for the journalism our communities need. That's the calculation we made. Your calculation may be different. And that's OK.

But I do think every publisher should continually ask that difficult question: What choices best preserve local journalism in my community? Not, "What has always worked?" Not, "What are our readers accustomed to?" Not even, "What do we love?" But rather: What gives us the best chance of sustaining the journalism our communities need? Because that's the thing worth saving.

And if that sounds abstract, let me give you a very local example. Earlier this year, residents in Bay City started complaining about fines related to trash bins being left at the curb. Now let's be honest. Nobody was producing a documentary about garbage cans. Nobody outside Bay County cared. And that's precisely the point. A local reporter started asking questions. He filed FOIA requests for records. He examined the data. What he found was a dramatic increase in citations, and fines that doubled overnight. Residents had been complaining. Nobody was listening.

Then local journalism showed up. The story ran. City officials responded. Policies changed. Penalties were replaced with warnings. What is special about this story? It is pretty routine, to the point that you could say, "That is what a local reporter should do." Exactly. Local journalism is a utility, like flipping a switch and expecting a light to come on. We are that service people count on. That story matters because people in Bay City needed somebody to notice what was happening, and we were there. Time after time after time. Nobody else was coming to Bay City to do that work. Not Google. Not Facebook. Not AI. A local journalist did it. That's the mission. And that's what we're trying to preserve.

I'm uncomfortable when conversations about the future become conversations exclusively about format. Formats matter. Technology matters. Business models matter. Distribution matters. But none of those things, by themselves, are the mission. The mission is showing up. It's asking questions. It's documenting communities. It's earning trust. And it may be more important today than ever. Because information is abundant. Opinion is abundant. But independent local journalism is not. Accountability reporting is not. Trust is not. And the people in this room represent the best who still do that work.

That's why I'm optimistic when I look around this room, and this conference agenda. This convention is full of people trying to solve problems. Still learning, still adapting. Over the next two days, you're going to hear ideas about AI, circulation, subscriptions, advertising, fundraising, public notices and digital products. You don't have to leave Detroit agreeing with every speaker. I hope you leave with one inspiring idea. Just one. One idea that helps preserve local journalism in your community. It may come from a session. It may come from somebody you're talking to over coffee. It may come from a hallway conversation. It may be something somebody else has tried that you can adapt to your own community. But if you find that one idea, the trip was worth it.

And maybe that's the most important thing I've learned over career. It was perhaps the only sure thing I knew in that room in Flint, 17 years ago: You don't have to know exactly where the future is going. You have to be willing to keep learning. Keep listening. Keep experimenting. And above all, keep investing in journalism. Journalism creates value, trust, accountability and community. For forty-four years, I've believed the mission is local journalism. Everything else is delivery: newspapers, websites, newsletters and apps. Whatever comes next, the mission remains.

Outside these walls, the river keeps moving. Our challenge isn't to stop it. Our challenge is to navigate it. I don't know exactly what local journalism will look like 10 years from now. Even five, at the pace our world is changing. But I know this in my soul: communities will still need watchdogs. They will still need people willing to ask questions when nobody else is asking them. They will still need local journalists. And that's why, despite everything, I remain optimistic. So, I invite you all to enjoy Detroit these next two days. Not just what the city has to offer, but also each other. Steal shamelessly from the best ideas you hear and take those ideas home. Because somewhere in this convention is an idea that could help preserve local journalism in your community. That's worth the trip.