



## **After the Fact | [The Loss of Local News—A Good Story](#)**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

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*[Cold open with Melissa Baehr.]*

**Melissa Baehr, programs manager at the Berkshire Community Action Council (BCAC):** I work right around the corner. And this is where I run and grab the paper-- grab my coffee and breakfast sandwich-- right over there.

*[Car door opening and closing, door bell jingling.]*

**Melissa Baehr:** Morning—grabbing a paper.

*[Melissa Baehr and cashier speak in the background as Dan's voice fades in over their conversation.]*

**Dan LeDuc:** Melissa Baehr's morning routine includes buying her local newspaper, The Berkshire Eagle at Palmer's Variety Store down the street from her house and to check in with neighbors she meets there.

**Cashier:** Have a great day.

**Melissa Baehr:** Thank you. You, too.

**Dan LeDuc:** It's just another way a newspaper brings her community together. But as we've been learning in this series on what's happening to local news around the country, more and more communities are losing their newspapers and the reporters who go to city council sessions and school board meetings and take pictures at the high school sports events. The Pew Research Center reports that the number of newsroom employees at newspapers dropped by 47 percent between 2008 and 2018. And that's our data point for this episode of After the Fact.

**Rick Edmonds, media business analyst at the Poynter Institute:** The basic problem for local news in the making for a number of years, and unfortunately it's gotten that much worse the last few, is that print advertising is shrinking greatly. And after a while, print circulation has started falling, too. And while there's digital



news and digital news income, both from advertising and now from subscriptions, it doesn't really make up the difference.

**Dan LeDuc:** That's Rick Edmonds, who analyzes the media business for The Poynter Institute, a journalism thinktank in St. Petersburg, Florida. In this series, we've been telling you about the more than 2,000 newspapers that have closed in this country over the past 15 years. But the financial cutbacks that Rick talks about are having a big impact on the papers that remain, too.

**Rick Edmonds:** Dan, the numbers of papers that are shrinking are a lot greater than the ones that are actually gone out of business. And many of the ones that have gone out of business are very small. So, you may be in the metropolitan area looking at a paper that has 50 people producing it where there used to be 200, and it's skinnier. But I'm not sure everybody's going to notice that.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, people were noticing it in Western Massachusetts. The Berkshire Eagle, the daily paper that in one form or another has covered that bucolic bit of New England almost since the founding of this nation, had been purchased by corporate owners 25 years ago. In recent years it faced budget cut after budget cut. There were fewer reporters and less news was covered. Then, in 2016, a group of local investors took over The Eagle. They are expanding coverage and hiring new reporters—it's all so counter to the national trends that we had to go up there and talk to people about it—and what a good local paper means to them.

*[Music transition.]*

**Melissa Baehr:** My office is right through here. Morning, Walt.

**Dan LeDuc:** That's Melissa Baehr again, you heard her at the beginning of this episode buying her local paper. She has lived in the Berkshires for eight years.

**Melissa Baehr:** Welcome to BCAC.

**Dan LeDuc:** She relies on the paper to get the word out to drive donations and dollars so her organization can serve the poorest in that region.

**Melissa Baehr:** I help low-income individuals in our community, specifically children around wintertime, with our warm clothing program, which we serve over 2,000 children every year.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, you care a lot about the fabric of your community, the civic life here.



**Melissa Baehr:** Yes, I do. Our community matters. And I'm blessed because what we do every day is help people who are vulnerable or in need. It really doesn't feel like work. It's the good work.

**Dan LeDuc:** What's the role of your newspaper in everything you've just described, the work you do and the civic life here in the Berkshires?

**Melissa Baehr:** The warm clothing program has been in the Berkshires for 38 years. The newspaper, Berkshire Eagle, has always supported the program. When that article hits the paper, we see a huge increase in donations, cash donations, new coat donations, new boot donations, and I have people calling me on the phone, saying what can I do to help? How can I help? Are you still looking for sponsors? And it just goes to show you how important the local paper, reaching people who might not have access to their phones and social media. So, yes, it is really important to this program.

**Dan LeDuc:** If the paper wasn't here, what would it mean for your work?

**Melissa Baehr:** I think we would be missing out on a huge demographic of the community. I think a lot of our older community relies on the newspaper to get the information that they need. It's important to have these local newspapers, the Berkshire Eagle, to get in the hands of the people that might not have access to news or what's going on in their community.

**Dan LeDuc:** The paper's gone through some changes here and local ownership has returned in the last few years. Have you noticed a difference?

**Melissa Baehr:** I have, actually. I can see a lot more community interest stories, because I think the paper has been more local. You see what other people are doing positively in the Berkshires.

**Dan LeDuc:** Beyond your work, what does the Eagle mean for you, just as a resident of this community?

**Melissa Baehr:** I was thinking about the local newspapers, and I went back to Pennsylvania, my hometown. And one of the first things I did was go to a coffee shop and read the local paper. It's like picking up a little slice of what's happening in this little spot. And that's the beauty of the paper. It's about digging deeper and getting to the real stories and the pulse of things. And I feel like sometimes that's lost on the internet.

*[Music transition]*



**Dan LeDuc:** So, we're sitting in Dottie's. And both of you suggested this would be a good place for a conversation.

**Carole Siegel, longtime community member of Pittsfield, MA:** It's a hangout.

**Dan LeDuc:** It's a hangout, OK. So, yeah, I'm looking around. And this feels like a community with a lot of life to it. If I could, tell us who you are.

**Carole Siegel:** I'm Carole Siegel. I came here right after college and married a Pittsfield native. I've lived here ever since. I worked in the Pittsfield schools for 38 years. And I don't think you have a community without a newspaper.

**Peter Marchetti, Pittsfield City Council president:** My name's Pete Marchetti. I'm born and raised in Pittsfield. This January, I started my 13th year on the city council. When I'm completed, it'll be seven terms. I am pretty much a community advocate in a whole host of ways.

**Dan LeDuc:** Tell me a little bit more about Pittsfield as a place to live and sort of community involvement in general.

**Carole Siegel:** It's a great place if you want to be part of a community. Because I can't tell you how many parts of the community I'm involved in just as one citizen. Across the spectrum, there's a tremendous opening for people to be involved.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, let me ask you then about the role of your local newspaper and news in general. Because that's how a community knows what's going on. What's been the flow of news in your community, in your time on the city council?

**Peter Marchetti:** I mean, ironically, when you ask a political figure what they're opinion is of the media, you know, the answer is it depends on the day of the week. And it depends on the issue. But you know as any person you agree or disagree with their editorial or you agree or disagree with the quote/unquote slant to an article, but for my involvement with the newspaper on a couple fronts, one on the political front, they're putting out the information so that the general public knows what we're doing. They're reporting the stories as accurately as they can. You know, they're local reporters. So they know the players. It's not like we're dealing with people that have been imported to report our local news. They're local players, local owners.

I have chaired the Pittsfield 4th of July parade for the last 20 years. And last year, we had a conversation that due to fundraising, it could be the last one. I still remember going in and having a meeting with Judge Rutberg and saying, you know, we're in trouble and what can you do to help? And his enthusiastic approach of this is an event that Pittsfield can't afford to lose I'm all in to do



whatever I need to do. And the Eagle took a very major role in kind of saying to the community, if this is an event you want, you have to help us save it. And they kept the news on the forefront every day. They helped promote fundraising events that we were having.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, Carole, you've been reading the local newspaper here for as long as you've lived here. That's awhile.

**Carole Siegel:** Close to 60 years.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, you've seen that paper evolve over the years. How has it changed? How has it served the community in the time you've lived here?

**Carole Siegel:** Well, first of all, it changed greatly. When I first came here—remember, I was particularly interested in journalism—The Berkshire Eagle had an amazing reputation. I don't know what year. I wish I could tell you. But sometime in that period—and I did cut it out—but Time magazine had an article about the great newspapers of the world. And so there it was with Le Monde, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Berkshire Eagle. We were all out of our minds. Are you old enough, Peter, to remember that?

**Peter Marchetti:** Probably not.

*[Carole laughs.]*

**Carole Siegel:** And I just trusted it. I read it, of course, every day, which I still do. I'm sad that it's much smaller than it was in those days. It's just—that's our times.

**Dan LeDuc:** If the paper was to go away—

**Carole Siegel:** Oh, God.

**Dan LeDuc:** —what would you miss the most?

**Peter Marchetti:** I love the editorial page and the letters to the editor. Because it keeps you in tune with what the community—

**Carole Siegel:** That's the first thing I read.

**Peter Marchetti:** —is thinking. Sometimes I'll read a letter and then go, whoa, what are they thinking? And sometimes I'll read a letter and say, yeah, they're right on. Sometimes I read the editorial and go, oh, that was a little harsh. But again, it's one person or a couple people's perspective. And it's a good place to start a conversation from.



**Dan LeDuc:** What would you miss the most, Carole?

**Carole Siegel:** I'd miss knowing about the community, who's doing what, what organizations do something. I mean, I love going to events. But I would also miss the point of view. If I'm very rushed on the day and don't have time to read the whole paper in the morning, first thing I do is open to the editorial page to read the editorials, the letters to the editor, and the op-eds.

I would feel an incredible loss without the Eagle, incredible. And I worry about it. I do. Obviously, all of our papers are under siege right now. On the other hand, I think people also know in the country how crucial our First Amendment is, you know? But just the local paper concept, I would miss it. It's a very absolute part of my life that matters to me.

*[Transition music.]*

**Kevin Moran, executive editor of The Berkshire Eagle:** This is the sports department, because you can tell by the mess. This is our awesome features department. These are our wonderfully awesome page designers.

**Dan LeDuc:** So how many reporters do you have now?

**Kevin Moran:** We're staffed up for 12, but we're searching for some right now. We have three openings.

**Dan LeDuc:** That's Kevin Moran, executive editor of The Berkshire Eagle. He's showing us around the newsroom where he's hiring more reporters to give more local news to the readers in the paper's coverage area, which stretches from the Vermont border in the north down to Connecticut. The new spending is possible thanks to local investors taking over the paper. One of them, a retired judge, Fred Rutberg, is now the publisher.

**Dan LeDuc:** If I could, Fred, start with you. I know you've lived most of your adult life—talk to us a little bit about what it was that gave you the idea to buy this newspaper, return it to local ownership, and do what you're doing here.

**Fred Rutberg, publisher of The Berkshire Eagle:** Well, first of all, I'm not doing it alone. What I did, I did with three partners—Stan Lipsey, Bob Wilmers, and Hans Morris. Unfortunately, Bob and Stan have passed. But the story that I've told a thousand times, and it's true, I was in Nantucket in the summer of 2014. I went to a lecture with my wife. Joe Klein spoke of raising money for the Atheneum out there. And in the middle of his speech, he said, "Democracy requires citizenship and citizenship requires a town square."



I looked over my wife and I whispered, The Berkshire Eagle. And it was the town square. I used to say it was required reading. People would start your sentences in the middle assuming you'd read the paper in the morning. And it had let go of that under corporate ownership.

**Dan LeDuc:** This has been a storied newspaper. For people who may not follow journalism, this has always been considered one of the best local papers in the country. What was it like when it sort of slid for that short period? And what happened to the community as a result of that?

**Kevin Moran:** When resources go—and, by resources, I mean reporters and editors—when they leave the newsroom and when the size of the newsroom is reduced, you simply cannot cover the community like you had been able to. And journalism is a labor- and time-intensive business. It requires fortitude. It requires persistence. It requires people to have to spend time covering the communities to develop institutional knowledge about the people, places, and things that make the community great. And we started to lose that under corporate ownership. And it deteriorates from there and readers notice that.

**Fred Rutberg:** I was on the bench for 21 years and I said I had a front-row seat. I saw what deindustrialization did to the fabric of this community culturally, socially. But the idea was if we could shine a light on all of the good things that are happening in this community, we could then have a better case to attract smaller companies to come back to the Berkshires and re-establish our industrial base, which is what the history of this community comes from. So, to that extent, the newspaper had a real part to play in that role in that situation.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, talk about staffing up. What were you looking to do that you weren't doing before, specifically? Like numbers of reporters, what they were going after what. What's your marching order as the boss in the newsroom?

**Kevin Moran:** We added some very fine journalists. We've expanded sections and we've expanded our features department. We used to run a little six-page feature section that probably was 80 percent wire on Sundays. Now, we run a 12-page feature section on Sundays and it's all local. We've expanded the sports section. We've expanded our business section and coverage. And, obviously, local news.

**Dan LeDuc:** What's been the reaction of the community to 12 pages of features instead of six that are locally produced and all of the other great investigative reporting you're doing?

**Fred Rutberg:** I walk down the street and strangers come up and say thank you. That's why I'm the luckiest man walking. I mean, this doesn't happen to too many



people in the world. People say, oh, you're Fred Rutberg. I say, yeah. I just want to say thank you.

**Dan LeDuc:** That's amazing.

**Fred Rutberg:** And it's true.

**Dan LeDuc:** It also goes against the trend, because a lot of the loss of local news, the analysts who look at this business are attributing it to people being distracted, not paying attention to their own community life maybe they once did. They didn't put a monetary value on the news because they knew you had to pay for it. You're doing it and people seem to be happy with what you're offering them.

**Kevin Moran:** We're developing what I like to call an "emotional connection" with our readers. I think it's extremely important to build that emotional connection, whether it's providing the news and information that they need or entertaining them, providing thought-provoking commentary. Having a thriving letters to the editor section and commentary section, which we do in spades. That's a real conversation changer.

And it's nice, as Fred said, to be able to walk down the street and have our journalists be revered. And I don't want to sort of overstate the fact, but there's a certain amount of heroism that they are receiving or being attributed. And that's pretty powerful because it wasn't going like that before. I was a little daunted walking down the street sometimes because people would get after us because of the lack of quality left to the newspaper. That's no longer the case.

**Dan LeDuc:** You've been at it now four years. As I understand, your circulation is holding steady in the print side, right?

**Fred Rutberg:** It's fairly flat and I like to say that in the newspaper industry today, flat's the new black. The good news is that our digital-only circulation is increasing and that's on an upward trajectory. So, everyone knows that's where the future is, so hopefully that's where our future is.

**Dan LeDuc:** You were talking a moment ago about trust and what it means in the community. You've been at it, as I said, for four years. If you want to keep this going, what's next?

**Fred Rutberg:** We believe that the community's trust in us is our No. 1 asset. That's the thing that is our most valuable asset. And we do everything we can to respect that and to increase it. So, I go out into the community at every chance I have to talk to people. To talk the gospel of newspaper. To explain to them what





we're doing and why we're doing things. To hear from them what they want and hear their complaints.

I answer my own phone. I get emails every day from people whose paper was delivered in the bushes or didn't get the way they wanted or it was wet this morning. We deal with all those things personally.

**Kevin Moran:** One of the things that we hear frequently from people is they thank us for giving them their newspaper back.

**Fred Rutberg:** Even some of the reporters come and say thank you for giving us our newspaper back.

**Dan LeDuc:** I know what you mean.

**Fred Rutberg:** And, personally, last May was three years and they asked me to come into the newsroom. And our new staff put together a video just "Thank you" from the staff. I can't watch that video without getting tearful. I mean, put that in my casket with me.

**Dan LeDuc:** Yeah, let the record show that the hard-boiled editor's got tears in his eyes. Gentlemen, thank you very much.

*[Music transition, Dan's voice fades in.]*

**Dan LeDuc:** For a podcast that is all about data, it's worth repeating some from this series: Nearly 2,100 newspapers have closed in this country since 2004. Over the decade that ended in 2018, the total number of newspaper newsroom jobs have dropped by nearly half. And in that year alone, a quarter of newspapers with a circulation of 50,000 or more had layoffs.

If you'd like to learn more about the loss of local news, there are more resources on our website, [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](https://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact). And if you'd like to learn more about what's happening in your community, pick up your local newspaper—if you're lucky enough to have one.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

*[(Female voice over music) "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]*