

Disappearing Act

A declining statehouse press corps leaves readers less informed about lawmakers' efforts.



BY EDWARD SMITH

Declining coverage of the statehouse is one casualty of the rapidly deteriorating newspaper business. There are fewer journalists spending less time writing fewer stories about legislatures than in the past decade.

A recent survey conducted by *State Legislatures* found a steady erosion in the number of print reporters covering the legislature, the number of newspapers maintaining a capitol bureau and the amount of space in print devoted to news from the statehouse.

Of the papers that have kept a bureau, there have been cuts in staffing and an increase in the number who have gone to part-time coverage. At the same time, there has been steady growth in the number of

bloggers covering legislatures, both at newspaper websites and on freestanding blogs.

It's a decline that goes to the heart of how our system of government operates, according to Evan Cornog, associate dean at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and publisher of *The Columbia Journalism Review*.

"We have a federal system of government whose founders believed power should be kept away from the national government except when it had to be there," he says. "As a result, state governments have a tremendous amount of effect on people's lives. A huge amount of power is concentrated in the states and vastly less energy goes into finding out about that by journalists and citizens."

The most comprehensive census of statehouse reporters is done by the Project on the State of the American Newspaper and reported on in *American Journalism Review*.

In 2003, the project found 524 statehouse reporters covering the 50 state capitols as a full-time beat. The most recent survey, reported on in the April issue of *American Journalism Review*, found the number had dropped more than 30 percent to 355, with 44 states reporting a net decline in the number of reporters assigned to the capitol.

"The sad truth is statehouse numbers have been dropping since the early '90s," says Tiffany Shackelford, executive director of Capitolbeat, the national association of statehouse reporters. "We're sort of the canary in the coal mine."

But numbers are not the only measure of coverage, she says. "We are also seeing reporters who have been in these states for 20-some years taking buyouts or getting cut and being replaced by 22-year-olds," she says. "These may be talented reporters, but they don't have the institutional knowledge."

Edward Smith is the managing editor of State Legislatures.

And the statehouse beat is one of the most complex in the nation.”

While it is not clear the reduced coverage has the same effect, closing newspapers does appear to have a negative effect on participation in public life, according to a study published in March by Sam Schulhofer-Wohly and Miguel Garridoz of Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School. They attempted to gauge what effect closing *The Cincinnati Post* had on the northern Kentucky suburbs where it was widely circulated. They concluded that closing the paper at the end of 2007 “reduced the number of people voting in elections and the number of candidates for city council, city commission and school board in the Kentucky suburbs, and raised incumbent council and commission members’ chances of keeping their jobs.”

While the pressure is on to make cuts throughout newsrooms, some top editors still see coverage of the statehouse as a key part of their mission.

“We view statehouse coverage as part of local news, and it is just as important as covering City Hall,” says Martin Kaiser, editor of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and vice-president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. “We have three reporters full time in Madison and have had that for at least eight years.”

Kaiser says his newspaper may be unusual and, looking more broadly, thinks the attention given to capitol news is based partly on the state and also on the proximity of the newspaper to the capitol. In Illinois, for

example, his experience was that news about Chicago politics and government often overshadowed what happened in Springfield.

Kaiser says newspapers also face the challenge not only of reporting on state government, but doing it in a way that will attract readers. “There’s a struggle over making governmental news matter to people.”

BUSINESS IS SHRINKING

There is no question newsrooms are contracting. Every week for the past few years it seems there is a new report of layoffs or buyouts at newspapers large and small. Nailing down exactly how many jobs have been lost is more difficult.

Although definitive figures are not available, the second half of 2008 saw devastating cuts. Gannet slashed about 3,000 jobs, McClatchy another 2,500, Tribune more than 1,000. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates about 21,000 newspaper industry jobs disappeared in 2008. This year the trend may accelerate. Several newspapers have been put up for sale and as of early April, two of them, the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, closed when no buyers emerged.

Other studies also show a steep decline in the number of reporters, editors and photographers. The Project for Excellence in Journalism releases an annual study that looks at a wide variety of issues dealing with news coverage. The 2008 report concluded that some 5,400 newsroom jobs had been lost in the decade ending in 2007, nearly 10 percent of the newspaper editorial workforce. The

REPORTERS, BLOGGERS WEIGH IN

State Legislatures’ survey, sent to more than 500 reporters and editors, found plenty of change and some stability in statehouse newsrooms. Responses came from reporters in 18 states. About 100 bloggers were sent a separate survey and responses were received from 13 states. These were the highlights.

- ◆ Statehouse reporters working full-time tended to be veterans; 61 percent have covered the capitol for more than five years.

- ◆ 56 percent of the reporters say their newspaper does not maintain a capitol bureau.

- ◆ 54 percent say their paper devotes less space to covering the legislature than 10 years ago; 43 percent report their paper devotes about the same amount of space to coverage; 3 percent say they devote more space.

- ◆ 43 percent say their newspaper assigned two to four reporters to statehouse coverage 10 years ago. Now, only 31 percent report two to three reporters covering the legislature. No one reported four.

- ◆ 59 percent of reporters say they use blogs, many for breaking stories; 31 percent use video; and 6 percent use podcasts.

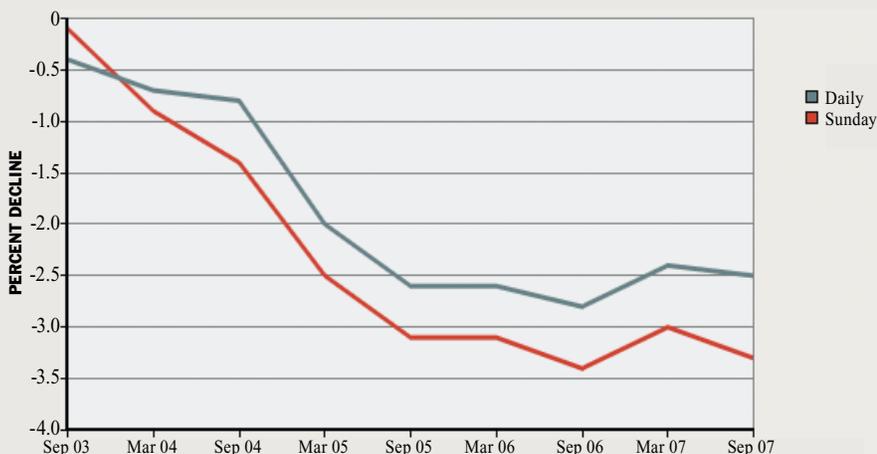
- ◆ 56 percent of reporters agree their website has changed the way they cover the legislature, but only 34 percent think it has improved coverage. 73 percent of bloggers think mainstream news organizations have changed how they cover the statehouse because of the Internet.

- ◆ Only 28 percent of reporters say the website has increased the number of stories filed on the legislature, suggesting either more stories end up online because there is less space in the paper or most stories are repurposed from the web into print.

- ◆ 62 percent of print reporters say blogs on state politics increase the amount of information available to the public. 91 percent of bloggers think blogs have increased the amount of information.

- ◆ Only 44 percent of print reporters say the quality of the information has increased because of blogs. 82 percent of bloggers think the quality has improved.

NEWSPAPER CIRCULATION 2003-2007



Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism, Deutsche Bank Securities, 2009

BLOGS FILL SOME OF THE GAPS

As the statehouse press corps continues to dwindle, who will replace it?

Perhaps bloggers. Across the country, hundreds of bloggers are reporting on legislatures.

One is Scott Henson. For a decade, he's watched the declining number of reporters covering the Texas Legislature. "We really are losing a national treasure," says Henson. "I feel like the daily newspapers' decline is heart wrenching and horrifying, and I don't know how democracy functions without it."

To pick up some of the gaps in coverage, Scott started gritsforbreakfast.com, a blog that covers the ins and outs of the Legislature. Blogs such as his, along with other social media tools such as podcasting and Twitter, have been gaining momentum with the public as a source of information on news and politics.

"Gone are the days when people say 'blog,' what does that mean?" says Richard Roesler, a blogger for eyeonolympia.com at the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper in Spokane, Wash.

In NCSL's survey of bloggers and print reporters, 59 percent of the reporters said they blog on a website run by a news organization to cover the state legislature. But 77 percent of bloggers who answered said they host a stand-alone blog.

"Blogging is not the type of journalism that relies on access, but what bloggers do more often is go through the paper trail," says Henson. "A blogger is more likely to get a public policy report and quote from it or analyze the details."

While reporters try to include all sides of an issue in a story, he says, bloggers are not necessarily operating under those rules.

The explosion of bloggers means someone is watching the store, says Tiffany Shackelford, executive director of CapitolBeat, an organization of statehouse reporters.

"Some of them are great; some of them are not so great," she says. "But the point is, someone is covering [state legislatures] and that's a good thing."

NCSL's survey found that 44 percent

of statehouse reporters surveyed say blogs have affected the quality of information available to the public about their state legislature.

"Blogs are places where you can put stuff that would otherwise stay in the notebook," says Roesler. "It's often interesting, relevant stuff that appeals to specialized readers."

The editor of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* agrees bloggers can fill the need for those who want more detail about the Legislature.

"If you're really into this stuff, it's there," says Martin Kaiser, who is also vice-president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. "We feel it's important to cover it some way."

Although bloggers can play some role in replacing traditional reporters and print stories, they cannot entirely fill the gap. "There are not enough of them, and in 40 percent of legislatures, they can't get access," says Shackelford.

Henson says credentials are not essential. In Texas, the Legislature has made information accessible to bloggers and the public on its website. "I've seen relatively inexperienced bloggers come up with insider scoops they are getting from publicly sourced information that was way ahead of the mainstream media."

Blogs are not immune to what is going on in the newspaper industry. Roesler has seen several blogs associated with newspapers dry up over the past few months because reporters left a paper.

Blogs also face challenges as a business. For Henson, gritsforbreakfast.com is a hobby, not a full-time job. The key to staying in business is to have advocacy groups and the private sector lend their support—and advertising dollars—to blogs, he says.

"There are bloggers who can fill the newly created gaps in the media," he says. "Blogs are providing information and analysis that no one else is covering."

But he knows there's a chance he might be having grits for breakfast each morning—on his plate, not his computer.

—Meagan Dorsch, NCSL

American Society of Newspaper Editors has conducted a newsroom census since 1978. Its 2008 report found that about 2,400 journalists left newsrooms in 2007, the largest decline in at least 30 years, and that 3,800 had left since 2001.

Newspapers remain a key source of information, however; more than 50 million papers are sold daily in the United States.

LOSS FOR READERS

Fewer reporters covering the statehouse and less space in the newspaper to print their stories add up to an ill-informed public, in the view of reporters on the front line.

"More of the coverage is probably horse race and political, and less of the meaty kind of policy analysis that you can do when you have more people and more time," says Dan Weintraub of the *Sacramento Bee*, who has been covering politics and government in California's capital since 1987.

He said the capitol press corps there probably peaked two years ago and then went into a steep decline, leaving a statehouse reporting pool about the same size as that of the 1960s.

"During the first three years of [Governor Arnold] Schwarzenegger's administration, the press corps did the best job covering policy that I have ever seen. People dug into the details of his proposals and his actions and wrote about them and analyzed them," he says. "Now there is much less of that. Reporters are covering multiple beats within the Capitol or politics, and they just don't have time or space to get into as much depth. That's a loss for the readers, definitely, and for the political process."

Jim Gaines, who covers the Kentucky General Assembly for the *Daily News* in Bowling Green, also sees less coverage, and it's less sophisticated.

"People have less of a sense of just how much state government affects their daily lives. When there aren't enough reporters to translate legislative language into plain language, state government becomes just one more thing people don't understand and don't think they can influence," he says.

"People actually become hostile to their own elected representatives when they don't know what legislators are doing. If they could read regularly about what legislative decisions actually mean for them, they'd be more apt to become politically involved."

“WE’RE CHANGING THE WAY WE DO BUSINESS”

The declining number of statehouse reporters and the rise in the type and ease of social media tools have changed the role of the traditional public information officer.

“The lack of statehouse coverage in the mainstream media leaves the public increasingly disconnected from the actions of their own state government,” says Mike Sunseri, photography director of Kentucky’s Office of Public Information, and a long-time advocate of legislatures creating their own online newsrooms. “Rather than shake our collective fist at the disconnect, we should instead recognize the tremendous opportunities it presents.”

Anne Burkland with the Washington Senate Democrats is grappling with the same issue in the Northwest. “Just like everywhere else, Washington has seen our press corps dwindle,” she said in a recent online discussion with other legislative communications staff. “We’re changing the way we do business.”

Cissy Taylor, a 37-year veteran journalist who now works for the New Hampshire House of Representatives, has seen the same reduction in staffers in that statehouse press room. “I do believe it means significant changes in the way we do our work, if we want our citizens to remain informed,” she said in the same online discussion.

Perhaps no legislative chamber has embraced this opportunity more than the Utah Senate. Chief Deputy Ric Cantrell was the first to create a blog for a legislative chamber—called “The Senate Site.” Since then, he’s taken advantage of social media tools such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Gcast and LinkedIn.

In addition, Cantrell produces podcasts, uploads photos and allows anyone interested to get text updates on their mobile phones. He’s even set up a user-controlled Web cam in various Senate locations.

In mid-March, Cantrell organized an online press conference for Utah bloggers. Bloggers could watch live—from the comfort of their home computers—video of the Utah Senators participating in the event and at the same time, get live Twitter and blog updates from other participants. One blog, “The Sidetrack,” proclaimed afterward: “This presser alone upped the ante on public engagement in the process, and dissolves 50 percent of the excuses we all have for not paying attention to what our governing bodies are up to and how laws are being made.”

Carol Marovic, director of communications for the Pennsylvania Senate Republican Caucus, says Republicans in that chamber increasingly are using social media tools as well, since many newspapers “don’t have the manpower to cover the legislative process or do in-depth reporting.”

“This has made our job more challenging but also given us the opportunity to pitch

more stories, and provide more background and content,” she says. Legislators are creating blogs, Facebook sites and e-mailing more missives rather than producing printed pieces. Also, they are producing audio and video content to supplement news releases.

Kentucky Public Information Officer Rob Weber says his office’s philosophy to engage citizens directly is working. “Citizens across the state come to our website for regularly updated legislative news.” The service, “eNews,” was created in 2000 primarily to communicate with the media. Today, about 75 percent of the subscribers are not affiliated with the media.

Weber says the media still use the other tools his office provides, but says he is “keeping an eye on the growth of social media and considering ways that we might incorporate it into our work to a greater extent in the future.”

Still, as Pennsylvania’s Marovic points out, legislators, caucuses and chambers should not ignore traditional media outreach. “We find that many of the smaller newspapers will use news releases more than they used to, as well as guest columns and letters to the editor. Legislators who make an effort to cultivate media sources and get information to them quickly can still improve the coverage they receive.”

—Gene Rose, NCSL

 **CHECK OUT** Ric Cantrell’s “Government 2.0 Lab” at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

DROP OFF IN STORIES

Barbara Rosewicz is managing editor of *Stateline.org*, a nonprofit, nonpartisan online news site that reports on issues in state policy and politics. Her staff scans 400 news sources daily as they aggregate stories about state government from around the country.

“They report noticeable drop-offs in the number of stories from news-rich state capitols such as in New Jersey, where buyouts last year cut the whole news editorial staff 40 percent and shrunk the size of the Newark *Star-Ledger’s* bureau in Trenton from 10 to four,” she says. “Another indicator: Stories often are shorter.”

One reason stories are shorter is the amount of space allotted to news as opposed to advertising also has been shrinking. Many regional newspapers have cut back drastically on the space devoted to national and international

news in favor of local coverage.

Not all the cutbacks in statehouse coverage are an inevitable result of newspapers’ declining fortunes. Columbia’s Cornog says at some papers there is a lack of enthusiasm for covering state government and a greater fixation on Washington, D.C.

“The ongoing issues of education, Medicaid and others are not covered nearly as much,” he says. “For the past generation we’ve had much less attention paid to the quality of life of the poorest people. As news organizations have become more bottom-line driven, there is less interest.”

Even with the increased focus on states in fiscal crisis, many stories miss the mark.

“There should be stories connecting this federal policy, economic policy, business policy,” Cornog says. “The weight of what is covered is not the weight of what’s important.”

Simply selling state legislative stories to top editors is a key challenge, says Shackelford of Capitolbeat.

“The state capitol is often away from the main news desk and main city,” she says. “Sometimes you have to convince the editor this is worthy of a front-page story or home page of your site.”

There is little reason to expect the fortunes of newspapers to improve. The increasing number of bloggers covering the statehouse and the growing use of social media by legislatures, however, does offer some hope. Even with less coverage from traditional media outlets, voters still will have options for keeping up with their elected representatives. ■

 **CHECK OUT** the full results of NCSL’s surveys of reporters and bloggers at www.ncsl.org/magazine.