



**LITTLEVILLAGE**  
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OF THE FUTURE**

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**A L W A Y S F R E E**

# THE FUTURE OF NEWS

As Gannett restructures to give us the news we 'want,' our community suffers as a result. • BY ROBERT GUTSCHE, JR.

In early January, the *Press-Citizen* announced a new roster of reporters and aims for their newsroom of the future.

The changes come after months of reorganization within the paper's parent company, Gannett, which has resulted in layoffs across the country. In October 2014, one reporter from the company's paper in Vermont was fired after she refused to reapply for the position she already had. She called the process "degrading and demoralizing."

The company has laid off thousands from its ranks over the past four years, even as Gannett remains profitable. *The Wall Street Journal* reported last fall that the company's third quarter earners were up some 49 percent after spending \$1.5 billion on a broadcast corporation, Belo Corp. and a \$1.8 billion completion of its ownership over Cars.com.

For those following the news industry, these changes have been seen by many of us to be problematic to the field—if not personal attacks to the very core of what it means to be a journalist.

Following the layoff of a good friend at *The Tennessean* in Nashville, for instance, former Gannetter Jeff Pearlman, at his website (jeffpearlman.com), titled his open letter to the company with a simple headline: "Dear Gannett. Fuck yourself. Love Jeff."

His September 2014 letter goes on to criticize the company for other things he thinks it did to ruin journalism, but more recent changes made to Gannett papers—including the *Press-Citizen* and *The Des Moines Register*—are to create a "Newsroom of the Future," one that relies upon fewer managers; on reporters who can cross between reporting, production

and planning; and on more journalists who are charged with engaging with the community.

Jim Romenesko, an online mediate, published new job descriptions for the "future" *Pensacola News Journal* (Florida), which are representative of changes in Gannett papers across the country. The *News Journal*, for instance, now boasts a community content editor who will be paid between \$46,400 and \$69,000 to provide "complementary community content" that meets "audience needs."

A reporter for prep sports at the *News Journal*, with a salary between \$25,280 and \$37,920, will be a "public ambassador through community outreach and connects with readers through social media." And at the *Press-Citizen*, journalists will be "host(ing) a time for coffee and chatting with community members at least once a quarter."

And despite rhetoric that these new newsrooms will better serve the public, there's little to suggest that Gannett will change how its news is covered—and who it's covered for.

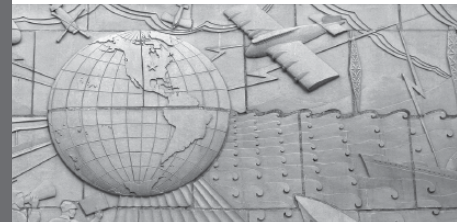
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The *Press-Citizen* has long been overshadowed by economic ties to its big sister paper, the *Register*. Content is shared, republished and repurposed—often with little effort to localize news from 'there' to 'here' and vice versa. Today, if readers are lucky, the same stories that appeared in one paper will run in the other—and on the same day—as opposed to a day or two later.

For as long as many of us have been in journalism, media owners have focused on reducing the labor force—even when it meant



- 1860 *Iowa State Press* established (a Democratic paper)
- 1891 *Iowa City Citizen* established (Republican paper)
- 1920 Both papers merge into *Press-Citizen (P-C)*
- 1937 *P-C* building at 319 E. Washington St. dedicated
- 1977 Speidel Co. merges with Gannett Co.
- 1985 Gannett acquires *Des Moines Register* and Tribune Company and owns over 80 papers.
- 1991 *P-C* moves into 1725 N. Dodge St. building
- 1997 *P-C* switches from afternoon to morning paper
- 2008 *P-C*'s press decommissioned, printing switched to the *Des Moines Register*
- 2011 *P-C* newsroom moves back into downtown Iowa City at 123 N. Linn St.
- 2014 Gannett reveals their vision for the "Newsroom of the Future"



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moving resources to investigative and literary journalism near the end of the last century. And with claims that they will maintain the mythical “wall” between news and business, these changes in the types of journalism—and journalists—that appeared were rooted in notions of community building and democratic watchdogging.

Today’s changes to the news labor force have moved away from any sense of specialization or hyper-localization to centralization and multi-tasking. Especially concerning, some critics say, is that editorial decisions made for local newspapers are carried out in corporate boardrooms. And, in some cases, in separate parts of the country.

But these decisions have always been made based on potential profits, not public service, in mind. Since conception, the press has always put their own needs and communities of police, politicians, business leaders and popular demagogues first. The public comes second.

Indeed, moments of mainstream “investigative” work that appear to be critical of the status quo are merely temporary instances of conflict that suggest the press have an interest in stories that operate outside of their tight relationships with fellow institutions.

Even this month, the *Press-Citizen*, for instance, ran a bloated breaking news story about University of Iowa President Sally Mason retiring. The PC’s initial breaking story that appeared online stated that she was “retiring from ‘fishbowl’ life,” a nod to her comments that she’s always under watchful eyes. A follow-up story by the newspaper boasted “flood recovery” was “key in Sally Mason’s UI legacy.”

Nothing was mentioned in either story about her inability to effectively address rampant sexual assault of college students.

Nothing was mentioned about the militarization of the UI police force under her watch.

Nor was there a mention of the university’s lack of success in recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty and student body—let alone parity of pay and treatment among minority faculty and staff.

Coverage related to local racial issues are left to the imagination within police blotters. Stories of discrimination and inequalities are left to texts heavy on data but absent of shared human experience. Conversely, a story about local police releasing new decks of baseball-card-like Cop Cards is personified through photos and quotes of local police officers, one who apparently believes that baseball cards



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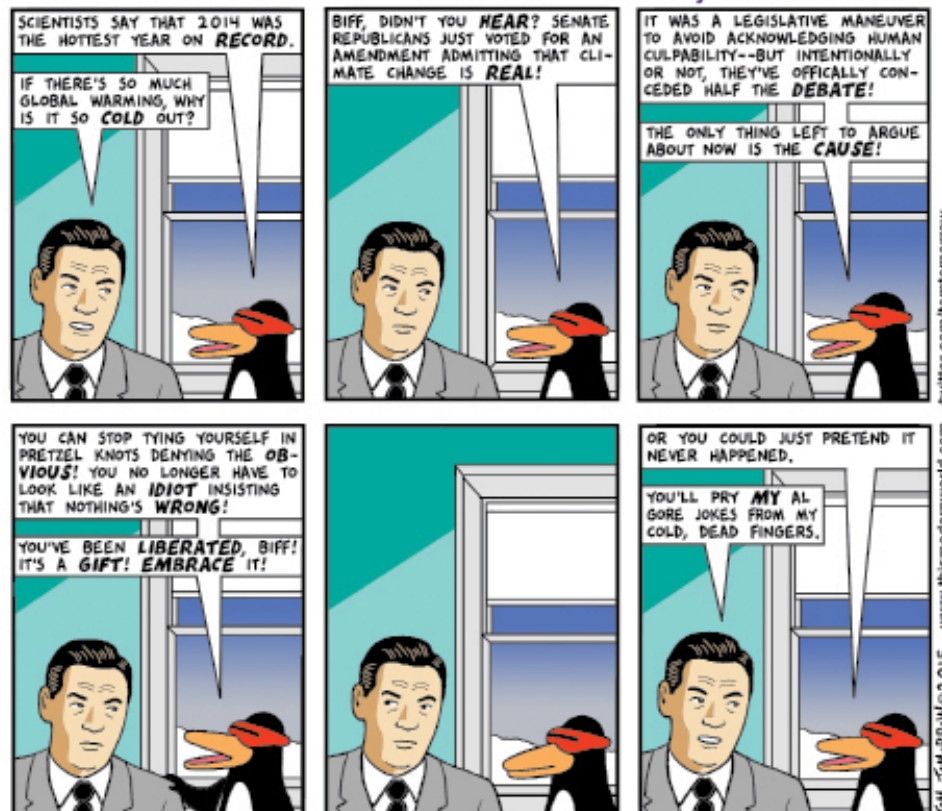
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## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



of local K9 cops “builds a positive interaction with the public.” (Just a side note: That’s not why people don’t “trust” you. Your guns are.)

There may be a time when journalists step up and remember the problems that have been ignored in our community, but there is little to suggest that any changes coming from the new newsrooms of the *Press-Citizen*—or any newspaper, perhaps—will challenge such boosteristic coverage.

\* \* \*

Over the past few years, I’ve focused my research and journalism on exploring how communities, including Iowa City, host a journalistic community that is one and the same as its local power elite, and which covers a single local community—no matter the geography.

As I wrote in my book about mythical histories of Iowa City, local media have long segregated the pages of the paper to ignore such things as black news, or news of other marginalized groups within our geographic borders—portions of the populations that have now been gentrified out of the Southeast Side to other parts of the region, including Coralville and

North Liberty.

Reduced to no other option, some of these families have simply moved out of the area, leaving us with a largely monochromatic citizenry. But when people have stuck around and found places to live, news media have found ways to push them out, too.

The cover of the June 7, 2014 *Press-Citizen*, for instance, proclaimed: “WESTSIDE CRIME ON THE RISE” in response to an increase in shots fired in and around the Pheasant Ridge apartments, an effort to focus on the next section of the city to be ghettoized based on myths of violent, dark-skinned citizens settling there.

Especially in the past three years, since the murder of black youngster Trayvon Martin by a white Hispanic in Sanford, Fla., and then the killing of black teen Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., local news organizations across the U.S. have localized these racialized news events by ignoring local cultures that are based on racial divides, thereby presenting issues of race issues as something that happens “somewhere else.”

A Sept. 24, 2014 editorial related to nationwide debate about the police murders of black

folk, the *Press-Citizen* editorial board asked what was to stop police response and a death like Ferguson “from happening somewhere else? Anywhere else? Here?”

**THE PROBLEMS OF THE *PRESS-CITIZEN*, THE *REGISTER* AND *GANNETT*’S OTHER PAPERS ARE NOT THEIR OWN. THEY ARE ALSO OURS.**

The paper’s editorial board members were pleased to announce local law enforcement officials had already taken action, listing efforts by Iowa City police to increase the use of police body and car cameras, the purchasing of 15 more body cameras by Coralville police officials and a continued use of cameras by both the University of Iowa police force and by police in nearby North Liberty.

Yet local press have seemed to forget that “a Ferguson” has happened in Iowa City with

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the police shooting of John Deng in 2009. Furthermore, local media have failed to report on the role of the police in the most recent racial issues on University of Iowa campus contributed to the rise of #BlackHawkeyes.

Another Iowa City “Ferguson” is undoubtedly on its way due to increased racial tensions and the intentional ignorance among community leaders of what the issues are and what can be done about them. Instead, our local media seem satisfied publishing propaganda from officials at public meetings during which they claim, as the *Press-Citizen* notes most recently, a “desire to resolve” issues of inequality. We’ve read that in local press before.

\* \* \*

The problems of the *Press-Citizen*, the *Register* and Gannett’s other papers are not their own. They are also ours.

What appears in the pages of our newspapers and what’s broadcast on our public, profit-supporting airwaves is not our community in its true richness and complexities. They are stories based only on the experiences of a segment of the population, most notably those in

the business of boosting particular images of Iowa City.

In fact, according to public notes from editors at the *Register* and the *Press-Citizen*, Iowa City’s “future newsroom” will be focused on expanding its downtown and dining coverage. How civically minded.

So, instead of wondering to what degree these changes may influence the community—as though these changes would reduce the most important of civic coverage and information related to our “democracy”—we must ask why these changes are doing nothing more than maintaining the business-centric and hegemonic coverage that we’ve become used to.

More troubling, however, is that these “changes,” which expand the paper’s commitment to a closed interpretive community of city leaders, are teaching future media users—our children and students—that this is the kind of journalism we expect them to want. News managers know that the most we as a public have ever done to influence the press—other than burning presses during the country’s formative years and again during movements of abolition—is to cancel our subscriptions.

To be clear, individual journalists and

editors aren’t necessarily to blame for their safe and kind reporting. They are only reporting what we want. The public seems not to really want what it says it does from its local press. We need to ask ourselves the following: Do we really want journalism to remind us what’s wrong in the world? In our own world? In our back yards?

We say we do, and journalists say that’s what they are for.

But though most journalists try to be accurate, try to be fair and balanced, and just want to find a good story, they work in a system that’s rigged against good intentions, and, in turn, the public seems confused about just what we want in the news.

So maybe the first question we need to ask ourselves during these changing times of journalism is what we really want from our press and what we are going to do to get it. **IV**

*Robert Gutsche, Jr. is a journalism professor at Florida International University in Miami. His book, A Transplanted Chicago, appeared in 2014 and focuses on media coverage of race in Iowa City. His new book, Media Control will appear in 2015.*

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