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# Breaking the news

## What is the state of journalism in Alaska?

By Lynne Lott

Libby Casey remembers feeling like she was in a movie as she jumped into a taxi and said, “Take me to the Justice Department!” It was her second day of work as the Alaska Public Radio Network’s Washington, D.C., correspondent. She was on her way to Congressman Don Young’s office for an interview when her phone rang.

U.S. Senator Ted Stevens had been indicted.

“I was covered in sweat and my hair was frizzed out beyond belief,” Casey recalls. Unfamiliar with her new hometown, she was surprised again when the cab dropped her just two blocks from where she’d started. Flustered but not shaken, Casey dove into the story. Less than a week on the job and she was reporting some of the biggest news Alaska had seen in decades. It was just the beginning.

Alaskans who travel frequently likely remember 2008 as the year Outsiders stopped asking “Do you live in an igloo?” and “Is it really dark all winter?” and started asking “What do you think of Sarah Palin?” Casey was one month into her job at APRN when John McCain tapped Sarah Palin as the Republican vice presidential candidate.

After years on the fringe of the national consciousness, of being a dream cruise destination or the place where someone a friend knew was stationed in the military, Alaska suddenly seemed to show up everywhere.

“It changed dramatically,” Casey says of the time following the Palin pick. “Suddenly people had this heightened interest in Alaska.”

Reality television jumped on the bandwagon. Following forerunner *Deadliest Catch* came *Alaska State Troopers*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* and more. Alaska now draws interest, viewers and readers like never before. While that intrigue may have leveled off, Casey says, “You can’t go back to unmarked snow.”

Around the same time, Alaska newsrooms underwent a different sort of change: media began to shrink as part of a national trend. Now as the state enjoys unprecedented coverage nationally, the state of the state — at least journalistically speaking — is far less certain.

### The long and wired road

When the *Anchorage Daily News* hired Wesley Loy in 1991, the newspaper was one of two dailies in Alaska’s largest city. Loy’s job would be covering retail businesses in Anchorage and beyond. The paper had a reporter dedicated to the fishing industry and another with the oil and gas beat. All told, Loy was one of five reporters covering Alaska business in a department with its own editor.

Today, Loy says, “there is no business editor and no business reporters. They don’t even have a reporter covering oil and gas, the lifeblood of this state.”

“There were times back when [reporters] would fly out to places and cover things at the drop of a hat if it was a big deal,” says Casey Grove, ’06, who has worked at the *Daily News* for two years. “But that was before my time.”

The *Anchorage Daily News* is hardly the exception. When he started at the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* 18 years ago, managing editor Rod Boyce says, the paper boasted double the number of reporters it has now.

None of the reductions happened overnight. Journalism enjoyed a heyday in the 1970s and ’80s. It was a golden age for reporters, brought on by coverage of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Journalists enjoyed enormous popularity, and while the paycheck didn’t always match the prestige, hundreds of bright young people entered journalism’s ranks hoping to be the next Woodward and Bernstein. In Anchorage, the *Anchorage Times* and the *Anchorage Daily News* duked for the title of “best newspaper on the Last Frontier.”

Pulitzer Prizes were won in the process. Yet even after the *Times* shuttered in 1992, Alaska’s media presence remained robust. Communities as small as Dillingham possessed both a radio station and a newspaper.

### Then, the Internet

The rise of the web caught journalism off guard. Media outlets scrambled to build websites without a revenue model in place. Craigslist, with

its free online classifieds model, poached revenue from daily and weekly newspapers. On-demand television and iTunes provided ample opportunity for music, news and information without having to go through traditional means.

With newspaper and station websites, “there was this ‘if you build it, they will come’ mentality,” says Charles Mason, professor and chair of the Journalism Department. “No one bothered to think about how they would pay for it.”

Media outlets faced cutbacks as advertising dollars decreased. In February 2009, Colorado’s oldest newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain News*, ceased publication. A month later, the



**Newspapers have always lived on the margins — the defunct *Anchorage Times* stopped running long before the Internet — but the modern wired world poses new threats to paper-based media.**



# NEWS

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Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* shut down its printing press in favor of a web-only presence, gutting the reporting staff in the process. Newspapers alone saw a 30 percent drop in ad revenue in the first quarter of 2009. The *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune* and other major American newspapers faced layoffs, contract buyouts and other cutbacks. TV newsrooms and radio stations, both public and private, found themselves in similar circumstances.

When Casey left her job as a reporter at KUAC-FM in Fairbanks in 2008, she wasn’t replaced for almost four years. Loy took a contract buyout from the *Daily News* in 2009.

“When I left the *Anchorage Daily News*, it was a really depressing place,” Loy says.

“There had been multiple rounds of people being laid off, bought out, encouraged to leave. And that atmosphere of uncertainty was ...” Loy hesitates, “wearing.”

The *News-Miner* didn’t replace reporters and photographers who moved on, which whittled the newsroom to five reporters. The *Anchorage Daily News*, by

some counts, has a newsroom less than half the size it was in 2002. Alaska Newspapers Inc., which published six weekly newspapers in rural Alaska, including Seward, Cordova and Dutch Harbor, shut down its operation in mid-2011. Though other interests eventually purchased several of the papers, few retained reporters in the towns they covered.

“Across the state it seems like the size of the nuts-and-bolts reporting staff has declined in the last four to five years,” says the *News-Miner*’s Rod Boyce. “And that means readers are getting less, and what they are getting might not be as comprehensive.”

Loy, who now works as a freelancer after his career at the *Daily News*, agrees. “I used to write stories that would take a week or two weeks to develop,” he says. “And I could count on the *Anchorage Daily News* for a paycheck while I put that together. Now, as a freelancer, I’m more in the business of producing what I would call a commodity, just thousands of words. The reporting is thinner.”

## That which does not kill news ...

Tony Hopfinger spent more than a decade working in Alaska journalism, first as a reporter at the *Anchorage Daily News*, then as a reporter and editor at the weekly *Anchorage Press* and finally as a freelance reporter for *Bloomberg News* and *Newsweek*. Though his freelancing commitments added up to a full-time job, Hopfinger noticed an odd trend.

“I was reporting, and I would come across things that I thought were good stories. But then I’d look in the newspapers and TV and they wouldn’t show up,” he says.

So despite a climate that seemed inhospitable to taking chances, Hopfinger and journalist Amanda Coyne launched *Alaska Dispatch*, an online-only news site with original content from a variety of contributors.

When it started in 2008, Hopfinger says, they didn’t have much money and relied on journalist friends and community members for much of the content. But again, Alaska’s

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growing reputation Outside and, specifically, Sarah Palin came to the rescue.

“Two weeks after we launched, Palin was picked,” Hopfinger says. “Our site crashed. The jury-rigged servers we were using had problems.”

The problems eventually turned into opportunities. Like the many bloggers who’d hitched their wagons to Palin’s star, the *Alaska Dispatch* used Palin and the Ted Stevens corruption trial as a launching pad for their journalistic endeavors. *Dispatch* eventually attracted the interest of an investor-publisher who now owns 90 percent of the company. In an industry filled with layoffs and downsizing, *Dispatch* starting hiring.

“So far it’s been a doubling factor,” Hopfinger says. “The readership, the revenue. It doubles every year.”

Hopfinger credits the venture’s success to its nimble nature. A printing press is expensive to run. Without a print product and associated infrastructure, Hopfinger says, the site can take chances and try new things. The *Alaska Dispatch* is now one of

only a handful of for-profit news websites operating in the country. The Internet can take away. It can also give.

“The *News-Miner* is not just a newspaper company anymore,” Boyce says. “We’re a communications company operating on multiple platforms.

*News-Miner* reporters uses Twitter, Facebook and the paper’s website to gather and write the news these days. *Newsminer.com* gets more than 1.5 million unique visitors every month, Boyce says. He credits this to the web’s reach, but also the new focus of the organization. Without as many reporters, they can’t do what they used to do.

“We’ve turned our attention to local,” Boyce says. “Because that’s the one thing we have that nobody else has. So we cover Fairbanks. That’s our primary goal.”

KTOO, Juneau’s public radio and television station, takes a similar tack, according to new-media producer Heather Bryant, ’12. Instead of a radio station, a television station or a website, Bryant says, they’re “content creators.” Her position didn’t exist

before 2012. The “new-media producer” is a relatively recent addition, especially to Alaska newsrooms. Positions such as these fill the gaps created by downsizing. They also speak to the industry’s future.

“I’m going to be producing content primarily for the website,” Bryant says. “But it could be used on TV or radio.”

Today’s newsrooms also rely more heavily on users for both feedback and content. When the *News-Miner* redesigned its print edition in 2007, it included a page known as “Our Town.” It showcases reader poetry, photos and stories. Sometimes a reader sends in a particularly compelling photo, Boyce says. The paper might follow up and ask that person to write an essay or article.

“I’m not sure that if we had a big, fat old staff here we’d be engaging those people,” Boyce says.

Those people — readers, viewers, listeners — fill an important role, especially when they provide content or comments that lead to a story. They bridge the gap between

**Newsprint is no longer at the forefront of the information revolution — mobility is.**

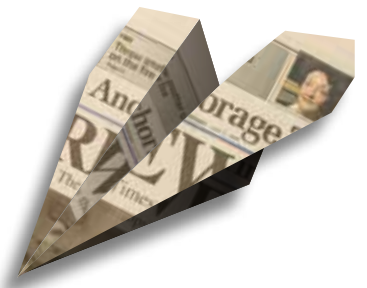
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the journalism of the past, in which journalists told the public what the journalists thought was important, and the journalism of today, in which news consumers engage on a level that makes them active participants in the news process.

With the web, KTOO producer Bryant says, “there’s an element of people being able to participate immediately in what I’m doing. Now it’s become a dialog. And that’s a great way for journalism to be heading.”

### Reporting the future

In his essay “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable,” media theorist Clay Shirky explores this new future for journalism. The Internet, he writes, is no less a revolution than Gutenberg’s printing press. While everyone now knows that the ramifications of movable type extended far beyond the printed word, what no one talks about is what life was like immediately after the printing press became a reality. Shirky points out that it was a chaotic time filled with upheaval, conflict and rapid change. In answer to the question about what will work for journalism now, Shirky writes, “Nothing will work, but everything might.”

Casey Grove graduated from UAF with a job offer in hand — at a mine. Days before he was set to begin he got another job offer, this one from the *Anchorage Press*. The *Press* offered him significantly less money. Grove didn’t hesitate.

“It seemed fun,” he says. “It seemed like a lot more fun than going mining. It was like an adventure.”

“Because Alaska is so rich with stories, I think young journalists are getting a chance to cover

stories that they wouldn’t 10 or 20 years ago.”

Today’s journalists and journalism graduates face a job market significantly different from that of 20 years ago. Traditional newsroom jobs like Grove’s, who now works at the *Anchorage Daily News*, are more difficult to find.

“We’re in some really confused seas right now,” Loy says. “It’s a weird time. It’s especially befuddling to those of us who grew up, at least in terms of our careers, in a steady, stable environment.”

But if “everything might” work, it’s also an exciting time. Loy maintains a blog called *Deckboss*. He regularly reports news on Alaska’s fishing industry. He doesn’t make money from the blog, he says, but “some of us are natural born newspeople. We’re gonna tell the news, by God, whether we’re paid to or not.”

“The new generation of journalists needs to have an entrepreneurial spirit,” says Mason, the journalism professor. “Today’s students aren’t going to go into jobs that exist right now. They’ll make their own way.”

That entrepreneurial spirit is a lot like what Alaskans call the pioneer spirit. As the state enjoys its tenure in the media spotlight, Alaska will continue to draw those seeking a singular experience, personally and professionally. That may make Alaska journalism more adaptable than Lower 48 newsrooms grappling with the same issues.

“I think a lot of journalists go to Alaska for the adventure and then they stay,” says Libby Casey, who now works as a host and producer for C-SPAN’s *Washington Journal*. “There are

some compelling, interesting and rewarding stories in Alaska.”

High-caliber journalists from across the country work in small Alaska newsrooms by choice, Casey says. That’s one thing that won’t change any time soon. Alaska’s glaciers, open spaces, mountains — and mountainous personalities — will continue cast a wide net, capturing the dreams of journalists Outside and homegrown, novice and seasoned.

“I’m still excited about coming to work each day,” Boyce says. “It’s still a fun biz. I get to learn new things as an individual. We’re always exploring.”

Though the way Alaska journalism looks might change, people will always be curious. And people will always want to tell Alaska’s stories.

“I look forward to continuing to add more people,” Hopfinger says of *Alaska Dispatch*’s future. “The fun part is being able to do bigger and better stories. All of us, as journalists, want to contribute something to the conversation.”

“I get to bother people who should be bothered, and I get to tell good stories at the end of the day,” Grove says. “You can’t ask for much more than that.” ■

Lynne Lott teaches journalism at UAF. She came to Alaska in 1997 seeking journalistic adventure and never left.



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