

## POINTS OF VIEW

## He's dedicated to giving news that has impact on readers

"Coverage of state government is in steep decline. In capital press rooms around the country, there are more and more empty desks and silent phones. Bureaus are shrinking... stories get less space and poorer play, and all too frequently editors just don't care."

"At the same time, state governments have more power and more money than ever before. Their tentacles reach into every household and business. Everyone — political parties, academics, trade organizations, labor unions, corporations — has discovered this. Everyone, that is, except the press."

That sad conclusion was reached in a study called the "State of the American Newspaper" conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The results were published in a series of articles over the past year in the American Journalism Review.

I've been covering communities in Oakland County for better than two decades now, the last 10 as editor of The Novi News, and in that time I've seen countless examples of how state news can have a direct impact on readers' daily lives.

Since I've drawn the assignment to cover the statehouse for the HomeTown Communications Network — the company which owns this newspaper — it'll be my job from here on out to find those stories and write them up.

In Lansing, lawmakers seem to agree with the "State of the American Newspaper" study that state government is getting less attention from the press than it did a decade ago. It's reached the point that lawmakers say they "miss" the coverage.

A lot is going on here that we think deserves coverage. But they prefer to run entertainment and features. That has been the trend, less government news," said Sen. Bill Bullard, R-Highland.

In the 1980s, 25 reporters were assigned full-time to cover Michigan's statehouse, according to the study. Now the number is down to 16.

In his first four years in office, Sen. Len Bennett, R-Canton, said he was interviewed by the capital press corps "six, perhaps a dozen, times. To me, that hardly seems adequate."

The press' withdrawal from capital coverage has come at a curious time, according to Sen.



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Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield, when the government is going through a process of "devolution" in which the feds keep handing more power and authority off to the state governments. It began in the Reagan era and was known then as "The New Federalism."

State governments are now setting policy on all kinds of issues that people care deeply about — education, health care, roads, insurance, environment, welfare reform, crime control, gun control, and the list goes on.

Why the lack of coverage? In the '70s and '80s, editors concluded that readers were bored with hard news, government news especially. Papers across the country lightened up their coverage with more "news you can use," more features and entertainment, more food and fashion pieces.

Now, the study says, readers want their hard news back.

There may be other reasons for the diminished interest. "In the past, much of the writing about state government was undeniably dull," is the only suggestion in the study that reporters themselves may have had something to do with the decline.

I think the writers should take more of the blame. If readers have had a hard time relating to capital coverage, it's probably because the stories often read as if they were written by insiders for insiders.

One bright spot in this dismal picture has been a guy named Tim Richard and this newspaper company. In his years as state reporter for HomeTown Communications, Richard could always be counted on to find a fresh perspective on the issues. He kept a sign taped to the inside of his laptop that read, "What does it mean to the reader?" And this company gave him the support and resources necessary to carry on his work.

He retired April 30, but this company has decided that Lansing is a beat important enough to warrant continuing the tradition.

So that's the challenge I face — finding those stories that have a direct impact on readers' lives, and doing it without getting caught up in the maneuverings and machinations, and political intrigues that go on in a town like Lansing.

If you believe the "State of the American Newspaper" study — that the state's "tentacles" reach into every home and business — it ought not be that difficult.

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## We are respectful and responsible

The massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado has set off shock waves that are still reverberating through every community in America.

In Michigan, not a day has gone by without news of another threat posted on the Internet, more graffiti talking violence or some troubled students caught/suspected of acting out their anger.

The concern has gone so far that literally all the schools in the Port Huron school district were closed last week after a killing plot was discovered and a bomb was found.

For hometown newspapers like this one, such events call for special responses. Part of our company philosophy says this: "Because we publish community newspapers, we think about community journalism in a fundamentally different way than our bigger competitors. They consider themselves to be independent of the stories they cover, swooping in to write the unusual or sensational and then dash off to cover something else. We regard ourselves as both accurate journalists and as caring citizens of the communities where we live and work."

In the context of this policy, I've tried to think through how this hometown newspaper can best respond to the events now unfolding in our schools. I've tried to set out a few general principles that should help provide a standard by which our readers can judge how we carry out our responsibilities as community journalists:

Tell the truth. No obligation for any journalist is greater than this.

This obligation extends to the ways we report what officials tell us. Consider two examples.

Students at Walled Lake Central High School were evacuated in response to a bomb threat under the pretense of a fire drill. Officials later explained they wanted to avoid creating a panic, which makes sense. But those same officials, for a time, tried to justify covering up the bomb threat, which does not. Later, however, school officials sent a letter home fully explaining the situation.

As our editorial on the subject said, "It is unconscionable for the administration to assume that it has a right to withhold such critical information about the students from their parents."

At Birmingham's Seaholm High School, principal Terry Piper wrote a letter to parents acknowledging graffiti in a boy's bathroom that said, "Death May 6. Someone will die." People knew the facts. Piper neither under-reacted nor over-reacted. He deserves credit for telling the truth in a responsible way.

Do not sensationalize. These situations are



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serious enough in their own right without some TV reporter on the make sticking microphones in front of terrified kids and anxious parents. Because we're not engaged in a battle to puff up our circulation numbers, we have no reason to overplay stories that are serious enough as they are.

Protect our sources. Be a responsible citizen.

These two principles are often in conflict. It isn't possible to be a good journalist — in seeking out and telling the truth about school officials, for example — without protecting your sources. But as community journalists, we also have the obligations of citizenship in the community we serve.

Our newspaper in East Lansing experienced this conflict recently when threatened by the prosecutor with a subpoena demanding we turn over all the unpublished photographs taken of the riot. Our policy is to oppose such subpoenas, not because we condone riots or rioters nor because we are immune to the obligations of citizenship. Rather, our concern is that by setting the precedent of complying with one subpoena, no matter how compelling, we open the door to countless other less justified fishing expeditions by police or prosecutors.

Nevertheless, our policy is that should we get even one morsel of information about an act of terrorism — a plot to bomb a school or stage a riot — we will instantly contact the appropriate authorities.

Be respectful and responsible. Hometown newspapers respect their readers and the institutions (such as schools) that define the community. At the end of the day, it is only by being a responsible institution within the community that we can be respectful to the community itself and to its citizens.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: at ppower@coonline.com

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