

All the news that's no longer fit to print

The NYT and the death of local coverage

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

It may tout itself as providing “all the news that’s fit to print,” but the New York Times has decided that most state and local news won’t fit that criterion any longer. [An August 6 article by the New York Times Public Editor Liz Spayd](#) noted that the paper will be cutting back its coverage of the metro beat, as its editors look to focus on stories that reach its global readers and have “larger, more consequential themes.”

In the words of the Public Editor: “You can’t have your reporters parked in courthouses and police stations all day — or chasing fires — and still deliver memorable, ambitious stories that take time to produce.”

That statement has it exactly backward. In fact, you can’t really deliver memorable stories if you are not on the ground doing the day-to-day reporting to understand what is happening on the local level. The desire to chase the big exciting scoop or write the long think pieces that win Pulitzer Prizes forces reporters to miss out on the real stories that reveal what is actually happening in the city, country and world.

This attitude is what has led some many journalists to be caught completely by surprise by the ascent of Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, the Brexit and the growing rage of different groups. Examining detailed on-the-ground discussions is how you eventually uncover the memorable stories.

I write about recall elections throughout the country. It hasn’t given me any special predictive power — I certainly didn’t see Trump’s success coming — but just regularly following local fights gives a different perspective. Scott Walker and Gray Davis may have allowed people to think that recalls are driven by national events, but the vast majority of recalls are over extremely local issues. Tip O’Neill’s quip that all politics is local still counts, and if the Times and others looked at these local fights, they would see that very frequently the anger bubbles up, and by watching it from the beginning, they could see where candidates like Trump and Sanders come from.

The public editor also notes that the paper will be cutting back on state government coverage, which seems almost impossible. The NYT currently has over 50 reporters in its Washington, DC bureau. They have only two in Albany. From those numbers, you would not realize that state laws frequently have more impact than federal ones. And you certainly wouldn’t understand how this fits in to covering memorable stories. After all, DC may get the criticism, but outright corruption in the nation’s Capitol isn’t that common. But Albany is a very different story. In the last year alone, both the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Majority Leader have been convicted of criminal behavior. Despite long-rumored rumors about both of these officials, the Times didn’t break these stories.

The Times and some many other editors want memorable groundbreaking stories. They should look and see how stories were broken in the past. In *The Powerbroker*, Robert Caro points out that the fall of Robert Moses started with the basic understanding of neighborhoods that you

would get from working a regular beat. It was a lack of garbage cans that helped tip off the people to the real scandals of Moses' team.

The reality is that this change in newspaper policy is probably driven by economic motivations. The Times understandably is looking for increased page views and advertising buys, and those come from a certain affluent type of readers who wants news about their groups. Their target audience may prefer soft-features and be under the belief that Brooklyn is filled and ruled by a couple of thousand Millennial hipsters instead of a 2.6 million people from all backgrounds, with some neighborhoods becoming basically retirement communities. So local news goes by the way side.

According to the public editor, a story about an apartment fire in the Bronx — and two children dying alone in an apartment — was the precipitating factor in the change in philosophy. That story apparently wasn't memorable enough for your average reader. Others may think differently. It may be that the story of why they were left there and what the impact means for the neighborhood could be more important than a story about a man publicly declaring that he is giving up all his possessions — save a laptop, a phone and iPad. The problem is that by moving away from the local coverage and the difficult stories, the Times and other papers won't show you the whole forest of society like they hope— they are not even going to see the trees.

It may not get the page views, but that seems to be a very relevant piece. The Times is waiting to miss both the forest and the trees with their new plan.

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