

Inadequate Resources

A large majority of Western dailies need to commit greater resources to gathering news about growth, development and the environment.

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Good journalism and good storytelling take time, a commodity that is usually scarce at Western daily newspapers. The people who run at least three-fourths of these papers cite insufficient time for reporting and an inadequate number of reporters as the biggest obstacles to improving coverage of the environment.

Throughout the North American West, being short-handed is the newsroom norm. IJNR researchers found that most of the West's daily newspapers are constantly contending with problems caused by having an overall shortage of news reporters. Journalists in the large majority of these understaffed newsrooms are trying earnestly, we believe, to make do with what they have as best they know how. Yet the long-term, cumulative effects of chronic shortages are often draining and demoralizing.

Many reporters and editors provided convincing evidence that the staffing deficiencies in their newsrooms are significant. They volunteered

hundreds of examples of important stories that they wanted to pursue (or to pursue more vigorously and more often) but couldn't because the news staff was already overloaded.

To supplement insider perspectives, we looked for some kind of time-tested benchmark, a numerical norm or minimum standard for newsroom staffing that is widely accepted in the newspaper industry. We found that neither the Newspaper Association of America nor the American Society of Newspaper Editors has adopted any such standard. We also checked with several major newspaper chains, including Gannett, Knight Ridder and Scripps, but they all said they had none and don't wish to develop one.

In an article published in the July/August 2002 issue of *American Journalism Review*, that magazine's managing editor, Lori Robertson, recounted her effort to track down an old guideline that daily newspapers should have one newsroom employee per 1,000 circulation. She wondered about

the source of this benchmark and its validity. To make her long (and entertaining) story short, no living soul affiliated with the newspaper business seems to know for sure the origin of this rule. Ms. Robertson did find plenty of journalism people willing to criticize or dismiss it.

For about 90 years, however, the Inland Press Association has been collecting national data about newsroom staffing levels. The association used to apply the benchmark of one news staff member per 1,000 circulation, but now it considers the norm among 25,000-circulation papers to be 1.2 full-time equivalents (including part-timers) per 1,000. Its most recent study of 350 dailies, completed in 2000, showed that norms among newspapers in the ranges of 50,000-circulation and 100,000-circulation were about 1.6 full-time equivalents per 1,000.

IJNR's research showed widespread reluctance among Western newspaper executives to be held accountable for meeting or surpassing such a benchmark. Yet some journalism scholars argue that having an accepted, independent benchmark for newsroom staffing would provide a useful baseline for tracking change. Philip Meyer, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, goes so far as to suggest that staff size does affect overall quality of news coverage. His latest study, published in 2002 by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, found that the number of newsroom employees also has a significant effect on a newspaper's ability to retain circulation.

IJNR's steady monitoring of Western dailies during 2002 indicates some correlation between higher reporter-to-circulation ratios and better overall quality of news coverage. Yet when it comes to coverage of growth, development and the environment-related topics that we believe deserve more attention than they now receive—most of the West's daily newspapers appear to lack sufficient resources to cover these topics often and well.

During the first three months of 2003, IJNR attempted to contact the current managing editors of all 285 dailies in the North American West. Despite busy schedules, more than half of these newsroom managers or other supervising editors answered our survey. Among those who responded, 75% identified constraints on reporting time and 83% cited an insufficient number of reporters as the most significant obstacles to improving coverage of growth, development and the environment.

This overwhelming consensus held true regardless of circulation-size category. Views of these newsroom supervisors also corroborated what IJNR learned from hundreds of face-to-face interviews with Western reporters during 2001 and 2002: At more than two-thirds of the West's dailies, reporters who cover the environment are also responsible for at least one other beat. About 80% of these reporters told us that they frequently get pulled off environment stories in order to chase an unrelated spot-news development, such as a violent crime, a house fire or a heavy storm.

The IJNR data suggest that these patterns of

Full-Time Juggler

Don't talk to Rod Boyce about fancy-pants environment projects. In fact, don't talk to Rod Boyce too long at all, because he's always busy. A reporter needs to be sent on assignment, the photo editor needs to check with him about an upcoming "Best of Fairbanks" section, a series on special education needs wrapping up and—another interruption—"Sorry, there might be a fire."

Mr. Boyce is the city editor of MediaNews Group's *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. His newspaper has a weekday circulation of about 17,000. His reporting staff has been cut to 10 from 12. His coverage territory is the size of Pennsylvania. The next-nearest city, Anchorage, is 350 miles away. The temperature can hit 40 below zero Fahrenheit, and many

reporters don't stay long. "It's difficult here," Mr. Boyce sums up.

That doesn't mean he dislikes his job. A southern Californian who came to Alaska to work for the now-defunct *Anchorage Times*, Mr. Boyce has been running the city desk in Fairbanks for about a decade and loves his life. He and his wife have a dog-sled team and a backyard bigger than Texas. "We live for the winter," he says.

He's also alone on the city desk and figures the paper does well to produce one good reporting project or series per year. Covering the environment? "Not a priority," he says.

Mr. Boyce faces some unusual problems. To get to any of the 40 villages that the newspaper covers requires a bush-plane trip. All local

multi-beat duties and frequent interruptions are most pervasive at dailies with a circulation of 50,000 or smaller. However, the patterns are also prevalent at most dailies in the circulation range of 51,000 to 150,000. We found evidence of these conditions even at some of the region's largest newspapers:

- In California's Central Valley, where problems of water consumption, rural sprawl and pesticide contamination are particularly vexing, most daily newspapers have reduced their coverage of such topics during the past decade. Among the largest of these dailies is *The Fresno Bee* (circulation 158,000), which used to have as many as four reporters covering the environment. "Now there's just me," says reporter Mark Grossi.

- Andrew Silva started at *The Sun* (circulation 72,000) in San Bernardino, California, as the environment reporter, but within a year, his supervisors added transportation and county government to his workload as other staff positions were cut.

- In New Mexico, the city editor of the *Carlsbad Current-Argus* (circulation 8,000) also reports on one of the most important—and most complicated—local issues, the nearby nuclear-waste plant.

- In Nevada, Keith Rogers covers the environment beat for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, a newspaper with a circulation of 166,000 but only 40 reporters. Mr. Rogers is also assigned to cover two other complicated, high-profile beats, the Nevada Test Site and the military.

- In central Washington's apple-growing country,

Michelle Partridge covers both county government and the environment for *The Wenatchee World* (circulation 25,000). In Kalispell, Montana, Jim Mann is the political reporter as well as the environment reporter for the *Daily Inter Lake* (circulation 15,000).

- In Provo, Utah, environment reporter Caleb Warnock covers three beats for *The Daily Herald* (circulation 31,000) and estimates he writes more than 30 news stories a week. At most, he says, just one of those might be an environment story.

For anyone who approaches the job with dedication, says veteran *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* columnist Joel Connelly, "there is inevitably more to do than time to do it." He believes it was easier in the past to get adequate time to pursue complex stories.

Serious shortages of time for reporting, funds for news-related travel and other newsroom resources take a toll on reporters and coverage. At *The Desert Sun* in Palm Springs, California, environment reporter Lukas Velush became frustrated when his budget for traveling and attending newsworthy conferences disappeared. He later left to take a job at a daily in the Northwest. At Flagstaff's *Arizona Daily Sun*, Anne Minard sometimes paid her own travel expenses to complete out-of-town assignments during her tenure as environment reporter. She has since left the paper.

Hundreds of interviews convinced us that many former and current environment reporters in the West have felt unsupported and unappreciated by the

stories are written by his staff because there is virtually no other source. The Anchorage bureau of *The Associated Press* has so many other places to cover that it simply rewrites *Daily News-Miner* stories and sends back what the paper already had.

Each reporter is expected to write up to 10 stories a week. Mr. Boyce must feed not only the maw of the daily newspaper, but also an incessant stream of special sections: The 100th Anniversary of Gold Discovery in Fairbanks, The Best of Fairbanks, the Back to School edition, the September Primary edition, and so on through the year.

Local environmentalists complain that the paper doesn't do a very good job, he says, but then just about every other interest group complains as well. "We sift through it all and do what we think is best," he says.

The community as a whole is fairly

conservative, as are the Alaska congressional delegation and the state legislature. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline comes right through town, there's a refinery nearby and the entire state's economy is heavily dependent on oil. Still, Mr. Boyce has never been told not to cover the environment. The topic simply must compete with other news of community interest, he explains.



Rod Boyce

The paper has won awards for coverage of such topics as village schools and the clash of cultures in the Alaska bush. "I really like interacting with reporters," Mr. Boyce says. He also says that he gets support from the managing editor, who "knows what my day is like," and no interference from the publisher. That's all he asks for.

management at their newspapers. While some leave their jobs, many others keep their chins up and stay. It is not as if worthy environment stories are in short supply. To the contrary, we found ample evidence throughout the West of significant but neglected and under-reported stories about growth, development, natural resources and the environment.

San Diego, for example, should be an environment reporter's paradise. The city has more than doubled in population and geographic size since 1970. While this growth reflects an expanded job base, it also has taken a heavy toll: Eighty-five endangered or threatened species are now listed in greater San Diego—more than in any other metropolitan area in the country. The city is reaching the limit of its water supply. Future sources of water are a matter of extremely contentious debate. A decaying and inadequate sewage system and the toxic dumping from nearby military bases are polluting the oceanfront. The sea is over-fished.

But the coverage of these and similar issues by San Diego's dominant newspaper has languished or declined. Steve LaRue, a veteran reporter of water and environment issues who loved his job, left *The San Diego Union-Tribune* in 2002 at age 52 to look for other work. He had spent more than 20 years in that newsroom. Story lengths had been tightened, he says, and analysis-based series had not run. In his view, editors had stopped encouraging deeper digging into the region's problems. Eventually, Mr. LaRue says, he was just too dispirited to stay.

After Mr. LaRue's departure, Terry Rodgers covered the *Union-Tribune's* environment beat for a while by himself. But because he also had other responsibilities, he could devote only about half of

his time to it.

Mr. Rodgers remembers wanting to investigate reports that the U.S. Marine Base at nearby Camp Pendleton was discharging raw sewage into the ocean. He thought he might need as much as two weeks to report the story. "Take a day," he says his then-supervisor told him. "That happened two supervisors ago, when things were very, very frustrating," Mr. Rodgers says. Having a difficult relationship with a supervisor can be "like walking through a vat of molasses," he adds. "Things are much better now."

Degrees of Support

Not all environment reporters in the West have had to contend with such roller coasters of newsroom support. In fact, we interviewed a substantial number who appear to love their jobs. The more fortunate ones feel supported and rewarded by management. They are paid to get outdoors, and they enjoy the challenge of having to learn continuously about science, economics, law, politics, health and culture on a beat that often requires creativity.

It is also true that several Western newspapers have strong traditions of environment reporting—and numerous awards to show for their efforts. Among others, the list includes the *Anchorage Daily News*, *The Denver Post*, *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Oregonian* in Portland, *The Press-Enterprise* in Riverside, *The Sacramento Bee*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Seattle Times*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *The Vancouver Sun* in British Columbia.

In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, *El Diario* breaks environment stories in a hostile and polluted setting,

Interested in Growth

Palm Springs has the soul of a playground. It is a getaway for golfers, snowbirds and off-road enthusiasts who worship sunshine and low humidity. Although smaller than many other cities in southern California, it shares most of the big environment stories. Growth, development and water scarcity are serious issues.

During his eight-year tenure as the environment reporter at the local daily, *The Desert Sun*, Lukas Velush had orders to keep his stories short, typically no more than 15 column-inches, or about 700 words. Rarely was he allowed any time to step back and examine the

broader context or significance.

The community has only about 52,000 residents, but it has 7,000 hotel rooms and more than 100 golf courses, all within a short drive of downtown. Several of the golf courses have 27 holes. Some have 36. More courses are coming soon. Groundwater is becoming ever scarcer, yet the local utility sells it for less than a penny a gallon.

Mr. Velush found the stories interesting and the beat frustrating.

He bumped up against editors who didn't understand or appreciate the beat. The Gannett-owned paper had no budget for any

without benefit of the kind of detailed government-agency information that U.S. reporters take for granted. The paper must start from scratch by doing its own testing of soil, water or metal contamination. Editor Julian Resendiz and environment reporter Rubin Terrasas have forged a close working relationship, and chain owner Osvaldo Rodriguez has given them the freedom to break stories that embarrass the authorities. Mr. Terrasas persuaded a University of Texas professor to help him test for radioactivity in a scrap-metal dump that poor people were scavenging to build furniture. The result was 22 articles about the health risk.

Such examples are heartening. Yet even several of the better Western newspapers have seen environment coverage wax and wane in ambition and commitment. Scores of veteran journalists told us that environment stories are generally more complicated than they were two or three decades ago. Sources are more sophisticated, these veterans note, and sometimes more manipulative. The validity of scientific research is frequently more questionable, and scientific findings are increasingly susceptible to “spinning” by groups with competing economic and political agendas. Despite these factors and others, the IJNR data clearly indicate that newsgathering resources are becoming sparser, not greater, at many Western dailies.

Some reporters and editors are heroic in their devotion to the craft and the issues, but many others told us they feel dejected. Some seemed defeated.

Why is it that commitment to reporting on the environment, natural resources and growth has declined in importance at many Western dailies for the past 10 to 15 years? Several editors told us it is

because the subjects themselves have grown too stale and too predictable. Newspapers such as the *Juneau Empire*, *The Calgary Sun*, *The Montana Standard* in Butte, the *Standard-Examiner* in Ogden, the *Press-Telegram* in Long Beach and the *Daily News* in Los Angeles don’t have an environment beat—despite the array of environment-related pressures that their communities face. This doesn’t necessarily mean that such publications ignore the environment altogether. But many Western reporters say the environment beat’s absence from a newsroom’s organizational structure is a sign that management considers the subject less important than others.

The Training Gap

The gap in attitudes about the beat’s importance also affects other newsroom resources in the West, especially training and professional development. In our own survey of managing editors at Western dailies, more than 40% cited the lack of training as one of the most significant obstacles to covering news about the environment.

For this report, our researchers also analyzed the Western results of a 2002 national study of news organizations. Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted that study for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Researchers interviewed a total of 1,015 local newspaper executives across the country. Among these respondents were 195 news executives at dailies in the West.

A large majority of these Western newspaper executives characterized the training opportunities for the news staff where they work as meager to non-existent. But that’s not the whole story. In analyzing the data, the IJNR researchers also found that:

kind of news-staff travel—whether for reporting or for professional development—and the rigid limit on the length of stories was disheartening.

“These are complicated issues,” Mr. Velush says. “You can boil them down enough to where you don’t even have a story anymore.”

The biggest professional problem was that he had stopped learning. In mid-2002, he described the situation this way: “Editors rely completely on me for what’s a story and what’s not a story. There’s little direction and little leadership. I’ve topped out here. No one else is invested in the subjects I cover. They don’t have time unless it’s a story in their area. No one learns an issue enough to ask me questions. They move the story around and clean it up, but



Lukas Velush

they don’t say what about this and what about that—and that’s my biggest complaint, because I need that to grow.”

Determined to keep growing as a journalist, Mr. Velush recently left *The Desert Sun* to become an environment reporter in Everett, Washington, a city with about twice as many residents as Palm Springs—but with only six golf courses. Everett has a lot more water. The starting price per gallon is higher, however, and the rate goes up with increased consumption.

- More than three-fourths said their Western dailies provide no training whatsoever in how to cover the environment, science, public health, government, business or economics.
- Among the relatively few Western newspaper executives who said their organizations do provide such training, most said it happens no more often than once or twice a year, and even then only for five or fewer days.
- Nearly half said their Western dailies could not afford to spend more than \$500 a year toward the training and professional development of a typical news-staff member, regardless of that person's beat assignment.
- Asked to name any specific coverage areas or beats on which members of their news staffs would benefit from more training, none mentioned science as a priority and only 4% cited the environment.

Alongside the training gap, there appears to be an attitude gap. Western reporters and lower-level editors don't share the outlook of their bosses. In the same Knight Foundation-sponsored study conducted in 2002, surveyors interviewed about 350 local newspaper reporters, writers, city editors and assignment editors in the West. Analyzing their responses, IJNR found that complaints about the lack of training and professional-development opportunities are much more prevalent at Western dailies than are such perennial sources of employee discontent as salary levels and chances for promotion.

About 90% of these reporters and front-line editors (compared with only 75% of senior news executives) said their news organizations provide no training whatsoever in how to cover the environment, science, public health, government, business or economics. Nearly the same proportion of reporters and front-line editors said they believe they would benefit from receiving more training and professional development. Half said they believe they would benefit "a lot."

Although the senior management at most Western newspapers give low priority to news-staff training and professional development, there are some exceptions. One of them is *The Oregonian*, where the current leadership encourages continuous training, convinced that it has contributed to a steady, general improvement in the newspaper's quality since 1993.

Among many other awards for journalistic excellence, *The Oregonian's* newsroom has won three Pulitzer Prizes in that 10-year period—the first such awards for the newspaper since 1957—and has been a finalist for four others. News-staff members

say these award-winning projects, as well as the training efforts behind them, also have helped to inform and invigorate day-to-day coverage.

"Training helps define the newsroom culture," contends George Rede, who directs newsroom recruiting and training for the paper. In 2002, with support from the top, the news staff started an in-house training program called "Oregonian University." Mr. Rede explains that the motivation behind this program was to create "something comprehensive and coordinated, tied to newsroom goals. For example, we wanted to improve our profiles, so we created a training session on profile writing." Later in the year, the staff held a session on writing trend stories.

Benefits of such training can extend beyond craft competencies to higher levels of job satisfaction. Bob Giles, curator of Harvard University's Nieman Fellowship Program for journalists, says he is convinced that, by investing a lot more in training, news organizations would reduce turnover significantly. "I don't know why they don't make that connection," he says.

Looking Ahead

IJNR's conversations with Western journalists revealed many opportunities to increase newsroom resources for the environment beat. But it remains to be seen whether owners and managers of more Western dailies will become motivated to pursue these opportunities anytime soon. Neither the top-down demand for higher newspaper profits nor the anemic economies of many Western communities bode well for environment reporting.

IJNR did encounter exemplary journalists at some Western newspapers and did find a number of signs at others that there is a desire to improve. But the preponderance of evidence we accumulated about current conditions inside many Western dailies was not encouraging.

The list of these conditions is long: Shortages of reporters, layoffs, burnout and buyout of senior talent, freezes on hiring and travel, scarcity of training and, too often, the attitude gulf between reporters and senior management.

Perhaps a huge environmental disaster in the West (such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989) could galvanize the interest and will of more reporters, editors, managers and owners, at least for a while. But without changes in attitudes that lead to greater investments in newsroom resources, the coverage of growth, development and the environment at many Western newspapers will probably continue to languish.

Empathetic Editor

While the elite at the biggest newspapers may enjoy the lion's share of the profession's prestige, pay and self-congratulation, the majority of American readers get their news from unsung heroines such as Pat Bean.

In the late 1990s, Ms. Bean was promoted from environment reporter to city editor of the *Standard-Examiner* in Ogden, Utah, inheriting a news staff that was suffering from poor morale. Ms. Bean, who recently became the paper's associate editor, recalls that her city-desk mission was anything but simple.

She was expected to oversee the 61,000-circulation daily's transition from evening to morning publication, to cover the Winter Olympics, to help manage a budget freeze, and to keep tabs on five counties across northern Utah.

She says she held things together with bailing wire, duct tape and "the seat of my pants."

Her sympathies were then, as they are now, with the reporters. She was one herself for many years—covering communities both small and large in Texas, Nevada, Idaho and Utah, including two stints in Ogden. Yet when she became city editor in Ogden, the budget was too tight even to replace Ms. Bean in the reporting ranks.

"Our biggest gap [was] the absence of an environmental reporter," she recalls. "The trouble with environmental issues is that they span all beats. The issues are complex."

The paper has a news staff of about 50 that includes a city desk with three editors and 12 reporters. Those reporters are divided up among traditional beats: local government, cops, courts, education, health, transportation, the military (because of nearby Hill Air Force Base) and weekend rotation.

A local family owned and ran the *Standard-Examiner* (and its two predecessors) for about a century. In 1993,

struggling with high debt and sharply diminished advertising revenue, family heirs sold the newspaper to Sandusky Corporation, a small private chain based in Ohio. The newspaper's building and printing press are new. Its newsroom computers aren't.

Several of the reporters are just a few years out of college. Reporter pay ranges from about \$27,000 to \$40,000. Travel is tight, overtime pay is rare and the news staff is strained. "We're asking reporters to do more," Ms. Bean told IJNR during a visit in 2002. "I've worked really hard to keep morale up in the newsroom. That comes



Pat Bean

from getting reporters excited about what they're doing."

While running the city desk, Ms. Bean wrote two regular columns—one on women's issues and another on birding.

She also tried to get her staff enough time to do stories more ambitious than the 15 to 20 that each was expected to grind out every month simply to fill the paper. During her tenure as city editor, environment-reporting projects included series on the Great Salt Lake, the Bear River and Ogden's riverfront.

"You try to look at what you can do with what you have," Ms. Bean says. "I care about reporters. That's why I took the job [of city editor]. But it's tough. You burn out."

During her years on the city desk, Ms. Bean says she felt that she had a "very supportive" managing editor. "I'm not sure upper management, however, fully understands what it takes to make a good newspaper," she adds, choosing her words carefully. "They're more tied to the business angle than the newsroom angle."