

As some newspapers struggle, local news is harder to find in Virginia

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL
For Foothills Forum

It is, unfortunately, old news.

Virginia's newspapers, the single biggest source of local news, face unprecedented challenges, with their readers, revenues and staffs steadily dwindling.

People still hear about bickering in Congress and mysterious Chinese balloons overhead. What they learn less about is what's going on in their own backyards, towns, schools, counties and state capitals.

Some 2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005, over-reliant on advertising-dependent business models that cratered in the rise of the Internet. Most were weeklies.

The casualties as of September 2022 included 42 Virginia newspapers, according to researchers with the State of Local News Initiative, at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

That doesn't include several weeklies that closed since January, including the *Chesterfield Observer*, the *Shenandoah Valley-Herald* and the *Washington County News*, nor the *Mechanicsville Local* and the *Virginian Review*, which merged with sister papers, according to the Library of Virginia.

Virginia now has about 20 dailies and 100 weeklies, not counting specialized publications.

Those still standing have suffered deep staff cuts. Big papers have retreated from parts of Virginia they used to cover. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk once had print circulations approaching 200,000. Now, counting both print papers and replicas read online, they stand at 57,695 and 51,284 respectively, according to the Alliance for Audited Media.

"People aren't really aware of the extent to which traditional journalism, with a set of values and proper procedures, has wilted away," said Clark Hoyt, retired vice president of now-vanished Knight Ridder Newspapers. "You don't have people covering school boards, city and county commissions, courthouses and police departments on a regular basis."

Local news coverage is "absolutely critical for democracy," said Melody Barnes, executive director of the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy and former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama.

Without reporters' showing up, "who is tending to the issues ... critical to life in [that] community?" asked Barnes.

With the nonprofit Foothills Forum providing expanded and explanatory news coverage for readers of the local weekly newspaper, tiny Rappahannock County has bucked the trend for going on nine years. Much of the rest of Virginia isn't as fortunate. The Virginia Humanities council, the Karsh Insti-



NEWS ABOUT LOCAL NEWS
An urgent search for solutions as local news faces challenges

With little awareness among Virginians themselves, the Old Dominion has seen a steady erosion in the staffing and delivery of local news over two decades. For two years, Virginia Humanities and the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy have worked with local journalists to better understand how to meet Virginia's news needs. With support from Knight Foundation, the American Press Institute, Piedmont Journalism Foundation, PATH Foundation, Foothills Forum and others, the organizers of the April 20-21 Local News Summit have produced a series of stories made available for newspapers and news websites to publish around the state. This public service project profiles Virginia journalists and involves national, state and local partners including practitioners, academics, funders, students and policymakers.

TODAY | Virginia's local news crisis: Some of Virginia's newspapers – still the primary providers of local news – are in trouble, bleeding readers, revenues and reporters. The loss threatens democracy itself.

► For an expanded version of today's report, go to rappnews.com/localnews

Coming in May

PART 2 | The innovators: Virginians are filling the news vacuum in interesting ways, from digital sites and podcasts to nonprofit content providers.

PART 3 | The BIPOC/special interest news ecosystem: Who is meeting the news needs of Virginia's eclectic communities and special interest groups – historically, culturally, journalistically? Big state, many interests, fewer reporters.

tute and Foothills Forum are convening an April 20-21 summit in Richmond on the crisis. Nonprofit media pioneer Evan Smith, Karsh's inaugural practitioner fellow, will deliver the public keynote.

News deserts

Two-thirds of the nation's 3,143 counties have no daily paper, according to the State of Local News. The presses have stopped rolling at more than a quarter of the newspapers that existed in 2005 and some of the 6,380 surviving papers are "ghosts" with skeleton staffs, according to Penelope Muse Abernathy, a Medill visiting professor.

The State of Local News said 205 U.S. counties – affecting 70 million Americans – were "news deserts" where coverage of local institutions is insufficient. Five were in Virginia: Buckingham, Caroline, King George, King and Queen, and Surrey.

But Betsy Edwards, executive director of the Virginia Press Association, said, "There's still coverage going on in most every place in the Commonwealth.... Circulations continue to go down for print, but they are through the roof online."

If people want news "in new and different ways, then newspapers need to meet them there," she said. "They need to push it out on a website, through email blasts, and whatever else."

The *Henrico Citizen* illustrates this. COVID-19 helped kill the print edition of the twice-a-month *Henrico Citizen*, which Tom Lappas launched in 2001. At its peak, the *Citizen* distributed 20,000 free copies across Henrico County. But he printed his last paper on St. Patrick's Day 2020.

Lappas continues to aggressively report the local news online—and attracts 65,000 readers a month on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. He splits the salary of his one reporter with Report for America, a nonprofit modeled after Teach for America that places novices at newspapers that need help. He also runs stories by students at the University of Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Taking a cue from public radio, Lappas launched a campaign last summer to entice 500 followers to contribute \$75 or \$150 a year to keep the *Citizen* going. He is a third of the way.

What's lost: Voting, citizenship

Researchers have documented that with the loss of local news, citizens are less likely to vote, less politically informed, and less likely to run for office.

Political scientists Danny Hayes of George Washington University and Jennifer L. Lawless of the University of Virginia wrote in their 2021 book, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*: "As struggling newspapers have slashed staff, they have dramatically cut their coverage of mayors, city halls, school boards, county commissions, and virtually every aspect of local government." Cuts in local coverage were worst at the smallest papers, they found.

Leaders on the front lines



Five profiles of the editors and publishers bringing Virginians the news: Anne Adams, Monterrey, *above*; Gregg Glassner, Caroline County; Carlos Santos, Fluvanna; Billy Coleburn, Blackstone; Stan R. Hale, Roanoke.

► Read their stories at rappnews.com/leaders

The search for new models

The remedy does not seem to lie in the once-reliable ways of the industry.

In 2020, for the first time, U.S. newspapers brought in less revenue from advertising (\$9.6 billion) than circulation (\$11 billion). Five of the 10 largest newspaper companies are owned by hedge funds or other investors, according to the Associated Press. Hedge funds are notorious for selling off the papers' real estate and slashing staffs.

Younger Americans never acquired the habit of reading newspapers. Even older readers, who are more likely to subscribe, now often pay for less expensive digital access.

In 1987, daily newspaper circulation peaked at nearly 63 million. In 2020 it barely topped 24 million.

Roughly a half-dozen nonprofit news organizations and foundations have sprung up in Virginia to help plug the gaps. Most rely on donations. They include:

► Foothills Forum has collaborated with the *Rappahannock News* since 2015, raising local support that has allowed the *News* to produce in-depth stories regularly. VPA named the paper the best weekly of its size last year.

► The online *Virginia Mercury*, based in Richmond, which covers state government, politics and policy. Launched in 2018, it is an affiliate of States Newsroom, a network of similar news nonprofits in 33 states.

► *Cardinal News*, an online nonprofit covering Southwest and Southside Virginia with a news staff of 10 and a budget of \$1.3 million.

See **NEWS**, Page 24

Nationwide newspaper woes hit state

Newspapers suffered a series of blows over the decades, including the rise of television news channels, Craigslist's capture of classified ads, and the desertion of department stores and other businesses that found that their display ads were no longer delivering results.

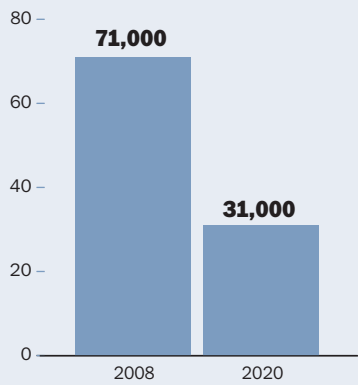
Newspapers are still struggling to generate sufficient ad revenues from their websites, but online ad sales aren't as lucrative and many readers expect content for free.

Some family-owned dailies and weeklies had to sell because of deaths, divorces or lack of interested heirs. Newspaper chains with long roots in the news business purchased some, but others have been snapped up by hedge funds and venture capitalists that buy distressed papers, sell off their real estate and impose draconian staff cuts.

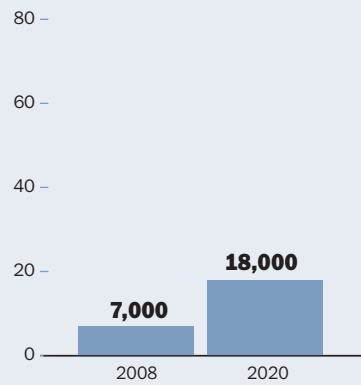
— Christopher Connell

2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005

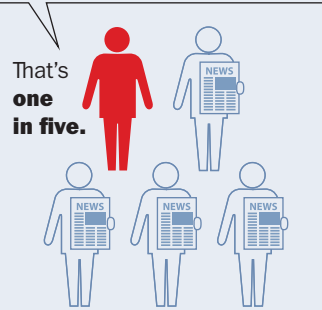
Newsroom employment has more than halved...



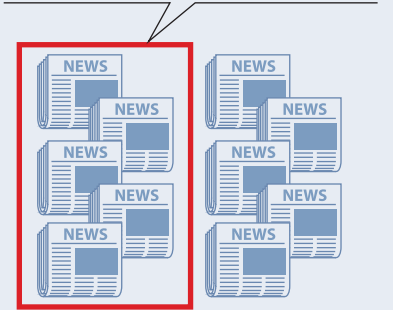
...only partially offset by an increase in **digital staff jobs**.



70 million Americans live in the **200+ counties with no newspaper** or just a weekly stretched to cover multiple communities.

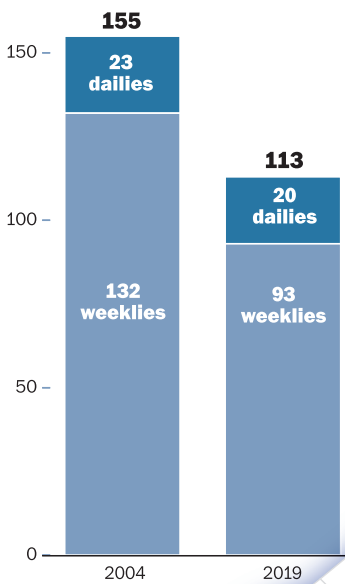


Five of the 10 largest U.S. newspaper companies are now **owned by hedge funds or other investors with unrelated businesses**.

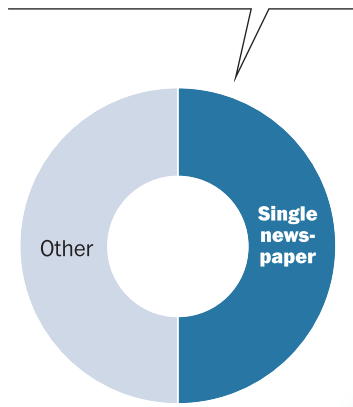


Nearly four dozen Virginia newspapers have closed or merged

More than 40 newspapers have closed or merged between 2005 and September 2022, according to the State of Local News. **Five more** have ceased publication in the first three months of 2023, according to the Library of Virginia.

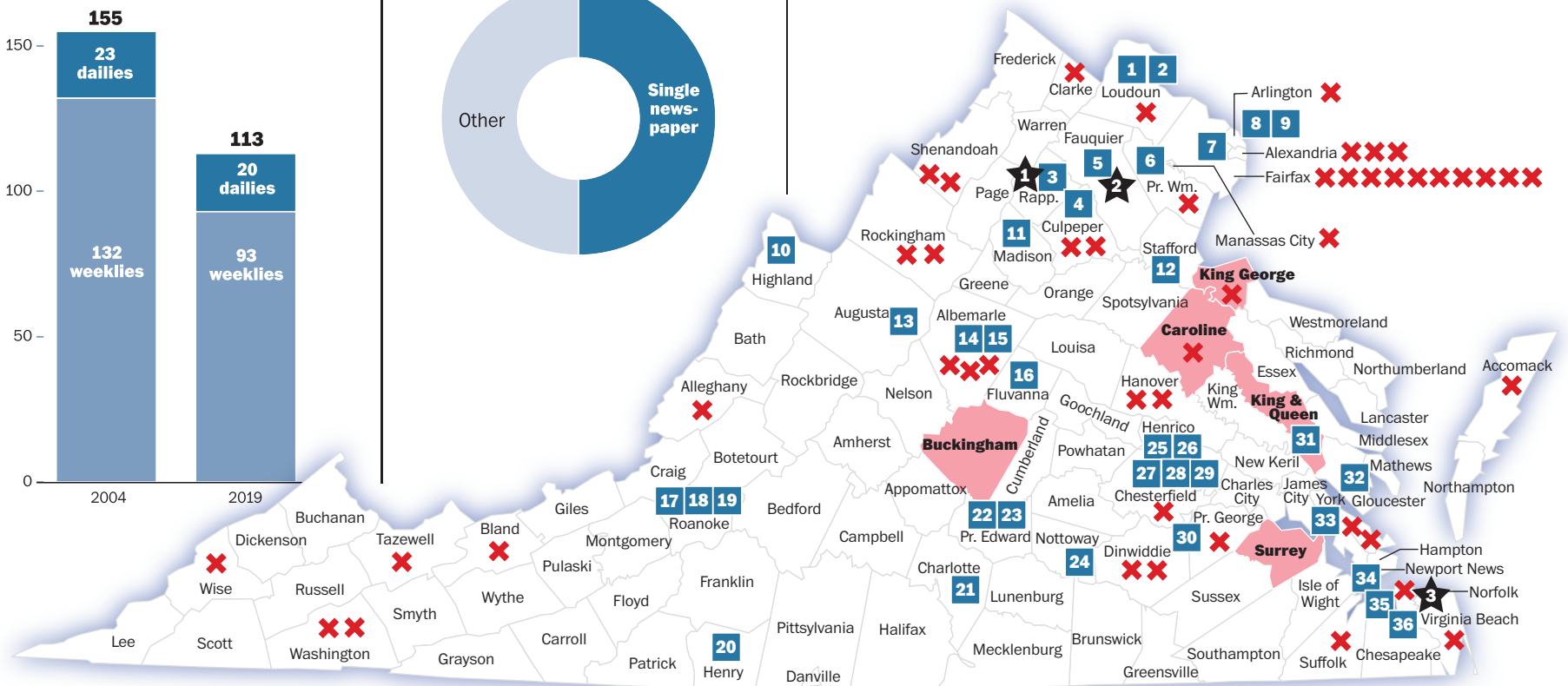


Half of Virginia's 134 counties are now covered by a **single newspaper**.



Rural areas have been hit hard by the closings and mergers:

- State of Local News has declared five Virginia counties "news deserts"
- Paper closed, merged or deemed insufficient on news by State of Local News



XX Operating papers, websites mentioned in this series:

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Loudoun Now | 10. The Recorder | 19. Roanoke Times | 28. Axios Richmond |
| 2. Leesburg Times-Mirror | 11. Madison County Eagle | 20. Martinsville Bulletin | 29. Richmond Free Press |
| 3. Rappahannock News | 12. Free Lance-Star | 21. Charlotte Gazette | 30. Progress-Index |
| 4. Culpeper Star-Exponent | 13. News-Virginian | 22. Farmville Herald | 31. Country Courier |
| 5. Fauquier Times | 14. Charlottesville Tomorrow | 23. Kenbridge-Victoria Dispatch | 32. Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal |
| 6. Prince William Times | 15. Daily Progress | 24. Courier-Record | 33. Williamsburg Yorktown Daily |
| 7. Korea Times | 16. Fluvanna Review | 25. Henrico Citizen | 34. Daily Press |
| 8. El Tiempo Latino, DC | 17. Cardinal News (online only) | 26. Richmond Times-Dispatch | 35. Virginian-Pilot |
| 9. Washington Blade, DC | 18. Roanoke Tribune | 27. Virginia Mercury (online only) | 36. WHRO Public Media |

Nonprofits providing content to various papers and sites

- ★ Foothills Forum in Washington, Va.
- ★ Piedmont Journalism Foundation in Warrenton
- ★ Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism in Norfolk

Sources: Pew Research Center, State of Local News Initiative, The Associated Press, Library of Virginia Newspaper Program

By Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum