



Ants at the Picnic: A Status Report on News Coverage of State Government

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Ants at the Picnic: A Status Report on News Coverage of State Government

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PRESS • POLITICS



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Summary

I borrowed a wonderful quote from Ross Ramsey, managing editor of the *Texas Tribune*, for the title of this Discussion Paper. His is one of the more interesting Internet start-ups focusing on news coverage of state government. “It’s not that there’s anything wrong with the journalists [covering state government] now, it’s that we need more ants at the picnic,” he told me. Ross Ramsey’s observation captures the essence of what I found in my research: there’s a feast of news and information to be had about what’s happening in the 50 state capitols — news and information that matters much more directly to the average news consumer than what’s happening in Washington, DC — but the traditional media, for a variety of reasons, is not covering it the way they used to. All is not lost, however — an army of Internet start-ups, some practicing traditional journalism in a new medium, others delivering political propaganda dressed up as journalism — are crawling all over the picnic. My paper includes an overview of news coverage of state government (pp 2–7), findings of a survey that shows how some state officials view the situation (pp 7–15), a look at a couple of interesting new state news initiatives (pp 15–19) and what I call “Journalism with an asterisk” (pp 19–27), and some conclusions about what might be done to reinvigorate this critical journalistic endeavor. (pp 27-33).

Chapter I: Overview

News coverage of state government isn’t what it used to be, but it soon could be better than ever. For all the handwringing about the sad state of this aspect of American journalism, there are plenty of efforts to fix it. Some are promising, some problematic. What’s undeniable is that there’s a great deal of interest in the matter.

To imagine the future, it helps to examine the present and past. Simply put, the old model of covering state government is broken, probably beyond repair. Fewer than 500

professional news people, including those employed by the Associated Press, report fulltime on what's happening in the 50 capitols of these United States.¹ That, of course, is a tiny fraction of the number of reporters and editors who cover the federal government.²

In fairness, one cannot make an apples-to-apples comparison. Unlike the Congress, only eight state legislatures meet year-round.³ The other 36 that convene annually meet from six to 12 weeks. Legislatures in six states⁴ hold regular sessions only every two years. But policy decisions made in state capitols touch our lives much more directly than what happens in Washington, DC.

Health care is a good example. President Barack Obama's promethean struggle with Congress to win approval of health care reform hogged the media spotlight for months, but it's not the federal government that licenses doctors, nurses and other health care providers. Nor does it set standards for hospitals and nursing homes or regulate health insurance firms. All of these responsibilities fall to the states. In addition, states will play an important role in making or breaking the newly-enacted federal health care law.⁵

States also have a much greater say than the federal government about whom we marry, and how we educate our children, operate our motor vehicles and run our businesses. States collectively spend more each year — in fiscal 2008,⁶ the last year for which figures are available, state spending totaled \$1.5 trillion — than the federal government spends on defense and discretionary programs. Moreover, states often try out programs that are eventually taken national.⁷ When you add to all this opportunities for mischief offered by a decade-long flood of federal "free money" for homeland security and economic stimulus,⁸ the low priority given news coverage of state government by traditional news organizations is hard to fathom.

Florida, which historically boasted one of the nation's most robust statehouse press corps, exemplifies a national trend. "Two years ago, the Clerk's Manual listed 80

reporters assigned to the capitol. A year ago, when the last Clerk's Manual came out, it was down to 57. There have been some further cuts since then," said Lucy Morgan, a Pulitzer Prize winner who headed the statehouse bureau of the *St. Petersburg Times* for more than two decades.⁹

Morgan said statehouse reporters are especially vulnerable to news industry downsizing because "all of us are away from our main newsrooms, and it's easier to cut someone you don't see every day."¹⁰

The trend is the same nearly everywhere. According to an American Journalism Review survey, in 2009, fewer reporters were covering state government in 44 states than was the case six years earlier. The number of statehouse reporters was unchanged in four states. In only two states — Rhode Island and Oregon — was there growth.¹¹

The financial havoc upending the news business only partly explains the decline of statehouse reporting. Other key factors are the rise of "news you can use," the falloff in wire service competition and a tidal wave of mergers and acquisitions.

In a seminal article published 12 years ago, Charles Layton and Mary Walton said a 1979 study sponsored by the Newspaper Advertising Bureau and the American Newspaper Publishers Association helped drive a movement away from covering government.¹² They said its principal finding was that readers wanted "help in understanding and dealing with their own problems in an increasingly complex world" — so-called "news you can use." Layton and Walton said the study's author, focus group researcher Ruth Clark, lived to regret having conducted it. She believed that media managers had taken her advice to extremes in an effort to reverse declining circulation figures.

The demise of United Press International is another reason that statehouse reporting is no longer flourishing. In the golden age of American journalism — in my view, a 40-year period between the end of World War II and the bankruptcy of UPI in 1985 — UPI and the Associated Press fought tenaciously to preserve and increase their subscriber

lists. Each of the wires placed great importance on their coverage of state government because it frequently was the deciding factor in whether subscribers signed or renewed contracts.

Sara Fritz, UPI's Harrisburg bureau chief in 1971–72, said that five reporters and a photographer covered Pennsylvania state government for UPI when she was there and that the AP had an even larger staff. Covering the statehouse was an eagerly sought-after wire service assignment, she said, because "it was the first step toward covering [national] politics. So many people who covered state government ended up in Washington."¹³

Fritz, who went on to become a Washington correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* and then a top editor at *Congressional Quarterly*, recalls her stint in Harrisburg as one of the high points of her career. "The Pennsylvania legislature was so corrupt, and there was so much going on. It was amazing — it was every bit as busy as Washington," she said.¹⁴

Yet another factor in the decline of state government news coverage was a buying spree by newspaper chains that got underway in the late 1980s and culminated in early 2007.¹⁵ In its heyday, dozens of independent newspapers that had operated state capital bureaus were gobbled up by industry powerhouses such as Gannett and the now-defunct Knight Ridder, which frequently consolidated or reduced statehouse coverage.

Ferrel Guillory, a longtime *Raleigh News & Observer* statehouse reporter who now teaches journalism at the University of North Carolina, said the trend was especially pronounced in his state. "By around 2005, all of the state's most powerful newspapers were owned elsewhere," he said.¹⁶

"The McClatchy Company, based in Sacramento, California, bought the *Charlotte Observer* from Knight Ridder Newspapers [based in San Jose, California] and the *Raleigh News & Observer* from the Daniels family," he said. In addition, Guillory said, "the *Winston-Salem Journal* is owned by Media General, based in Richmond, Virginia, and the

Greensboro News and Record is owned by Landmark Communications, headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia.”¹⁷

“The Gannett chain owns the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, the New York Times Company owns the *Wilmington Star-News* and Paxton Media of Paducah, Kentucky holds the *Durham Herald Sun*,” he said.¹⁸

Another indication that neglect of the statehouse predated economic problems now plaguing some sectors of the news business is the fact that journalistic Cassandras were bemoaning the situation long before these problems were even on the horizon. The *Washington Post*'s David S. Broder was one of them. “Most papers do a pretty good job of covering their local communities and local governments. Many papers also try conscientiously to deal with what’s going on in Washington. But the state capitol is often the orphan in that coverage,” Broder said in a 1997 speech.¹⁹

The nation’s preeminent political journalist coupled his lament with a warning. If coverage of state government did not improve, he said, “the next generation of reporters is going to have something like what gave the muckrakers at the turn of the last century their great opening — scandal upon scandal of unexamined government decision making ...”²⁰

“You put that much power and that much discretion and that much money in the hands of people who essentially know they’re not being watched at all, and this is bound to happen,” Broder said.²¹

The erosion of statehouse news coverage that Broder decried has been magnified by the economic troubles that now beset traditional print journalism. But the digital revolution, which makes it inexpensive to get into the news business, has ignited an explosion of interest in replacing what has been lost. Dozens of news websites and hundreds of blogs are devoted to covering state government — there are 17 statehouse-focused blogs in California alone.²²

However, as we shall see, while some of what's available on the Internet is traditional journalism, with all its standards and quality controls, it's often hard to tell the real thing from political propaganda dressed up as journalism. The propaganda is problematic when it's picked up and amplified by other news organizations, websites and blogs, because then it's not easily filtered out of the political information bloodstream. As this paper will note, there are several instances where this has already happened.

Chapter II: How State Officials View the Situation

Reasonable people might conclude that asking elected and appointed state officials to assess news coverage of state government is tantamount to asking prowlers to grade the watchdog. It seemed to me, however, that it might be useful because state officials know the subject matter and, I suspected, were likely to be avid consumers of state government news. I therefore asked the Council of State Governments (CSG), whose members represent all three branches of state government, to help distribute a 19-question online survey to the group.

Respondents were asked how they got their news, how closely they followed the news, how they rated various delivery systems in terms of accuracy, thoroughness and fairness and what they thought of several possible options to preserve and improve state news coverage. There also were other questions that will be treated at greater length later.

CSG emailed the survey to more than 12,000 state officials on March 11, 2010; by the cutoff date of April 2, 2010, there were 336 responses.

The survey was unscientific: respondents were self-selected. The 336 who participated hailed from 46 states and the territorial Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. There were no responses from New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina or Texas.²³ Nonetheless, I believe the results offer a unique perspective.

They showed, among other things, a keen interest in state government news coverage. Nearly all respondents (97 percent) said they followed the news very closely or somewhat closely. Less than 1 percent said they had little or no interest in it.

Somewhat surprisingly, the officials saw no shortage of state government news. A sizable plurality (45 percent) said there was much more or somewhat more news coverage today than there was five years ago; 33 percent said coverage was about the same; and only 23 percent said there was somewhat less or much less coverage.²⁴

The response clearly reflected the multiplicity of sources from which news and information about state government is now available because there were numerous complaints about the caliber of the journalism. "Quality news coverage seems to be rapidly eroding here," a Kansas state agency director said. "Those journalists I know who seem interested in trying to maintain the integrity of their profession often have to fight their parent news organizations to focus on topics that are really important rather than merely sensational or salacious."²⁵ "It seems all media representatives are overworked and underpaid, i.e. too much to do on deadline and unable to 'get things straight,'" a Utah official said.²⁶

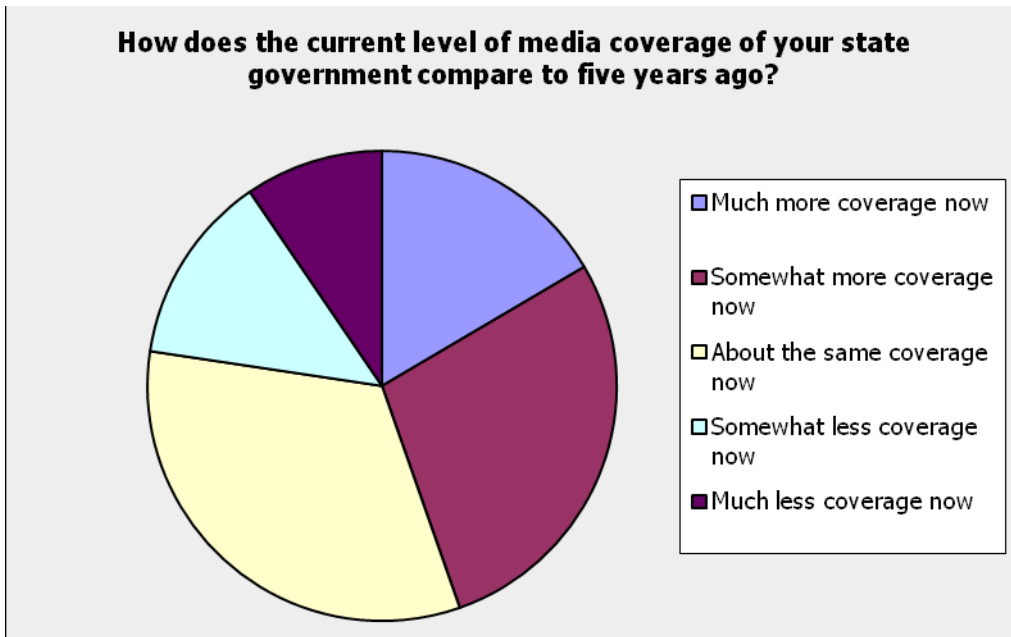


Figure 1

Despite the hemorrhaging of experienced staff, newspapers overwhelmingly were the favorite source of state government news for state officials. More than eight in 10 (86 percent) said they accessed the print press daily or almost daily; just over half (52 percent) said they tuned into public radio for news; and four in 10 (40 percent) used commercial television as a news source daily or almost daily.

The impact of the digital revolution was evident, too: more than one-third of the respondents (36 percent) checked websites, blogs, electronic newsletters or other forms of new media daily or almost daily — new media tied to traditional news organizations, that is. Having a known brand name was a decided advantage for online news sites; only 25 percent of those who answered the questionnaire said they checked stand-alone new media daily or almost daily for news of what they and their colleagues were doing. Although new media associated with civic organizations or trade associations often offer flashy technology and are extensively promoted, they were among the least-favorite options for state government news and information. Only 17 percent of the

survey respondents said they checked these new media sites daily or almost daily, the same percentage that checked public television, which in most states offers little or no statehouse news coverage.

State officials' usage patterns correspond with those of general public. According to a report by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, six in 10 Americans get some news online in a typical day.²⁷ PEJ said two-thirds of the top roughly 200 news sites it analyzed (67 percent) were associated with legacy media outlets.²⁸

Although my survey was distributed to members of all three branches of state government, more than half the respondents (55 percent) identified themselves as state legislators. One in four was a statewide appointee or agency head. There were scattered responses from statewide elected officials, governors' staff, legislative staff, career agency staff and judiciary staff. No governor or state judge responded. More than seven in 10 (72 percent of the respondents) had served in state government for six years or more. Forty-nine percent identified themselves as Democrats, 25 percent as Republicans.²⁹

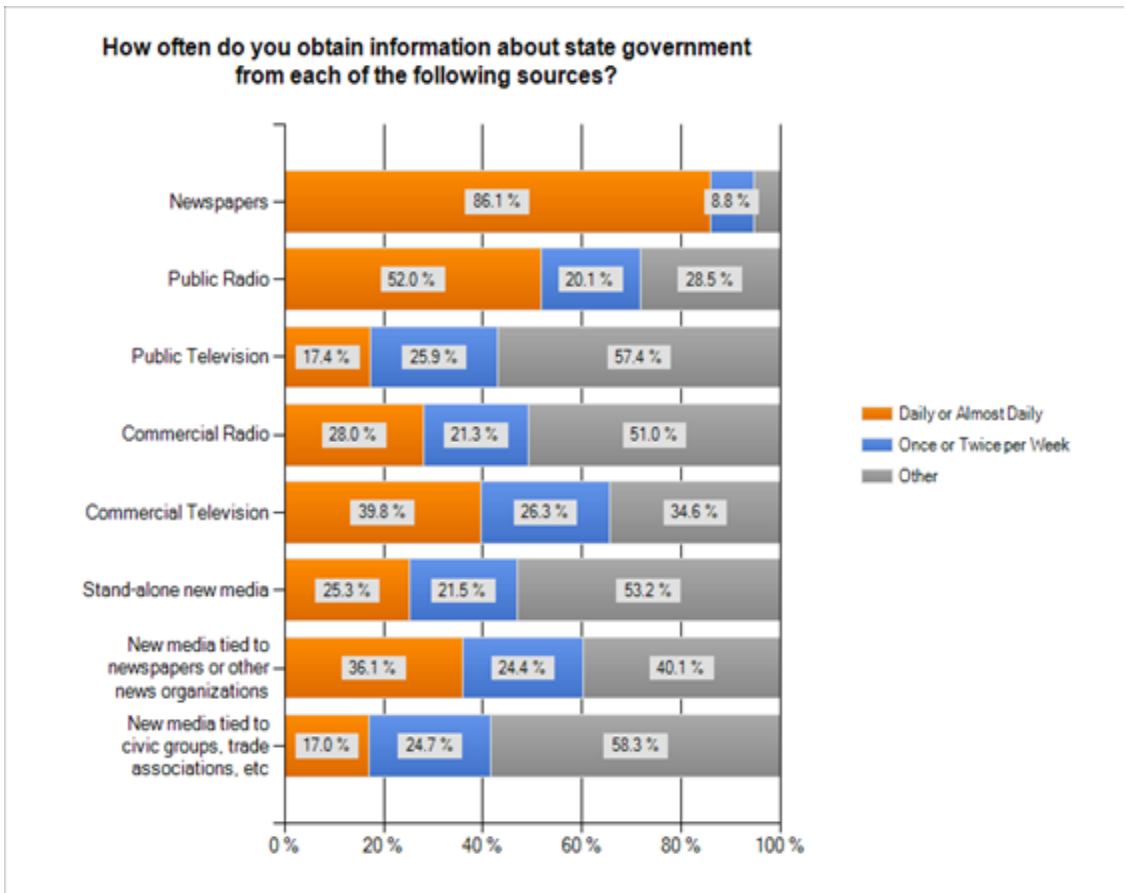


Figure 2

Respondents said news coverage of state government was most useful in learning of problems or potential problems or public concerns. Few regarded it as useful in explaining official actions, rallying public support for their positions or generating political or campaign support.

Online expertise received some applause. “Many of us have come to value certain blogs presented by agencies that hold institutional knowledge and can reflect the unintended consequences of much legislation. Term limits have hamstrung administrative staff and elected officials to do the best jobs possible,” an Oklahoma state legislator said.³⁰

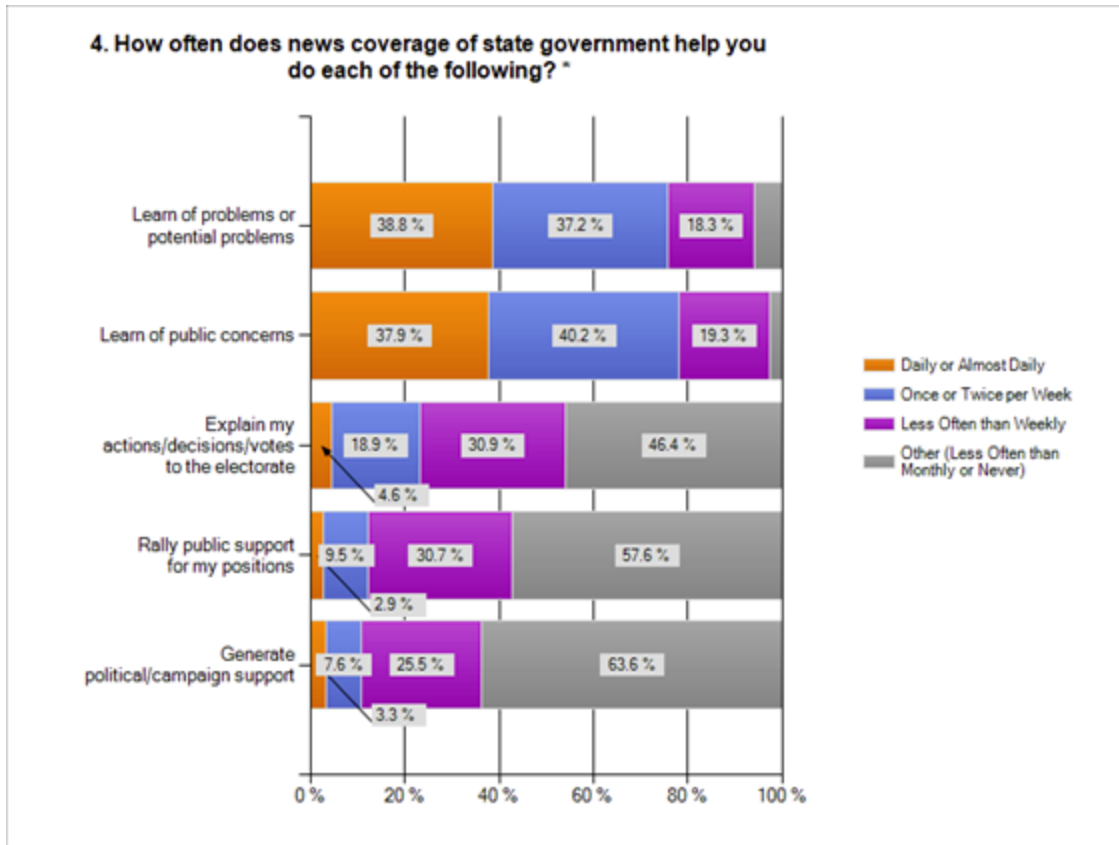


Figure 3

*Only those participants who said they followed state government news coverage “very closely” or “somewhat closely” were asked how it helped them do their job. In other words, of those participants who follow media coverage of their state government “very closely” or “somewhat closely,” 38 percent find that the news coverage helps them learn of public concerns on a daily or almost daily basis.

Public Radio Seen as Most Accurate, Thorough and Constructive

Survey respondents voiced near unanimous agreement (95 percent) that accuracy was the most valued attribute of state news coverage, followed by thoroughness and constructiveness. Of those respondents with an opinion, nine out of 10 state officials (94 percent) said public radio was accurate or usually accurate. Public television was close

behind, seen as accurate or usually accurate by 92 percent, and newspapers followed at 85 percent.

Significantly, new media associated with traditional news outlets was regarded as much less accurate than its traditional print journalism parents — but it was considered more accurate than commercial television, commercial radio and stand-alone or advocacy-sponsored new media.

Public radio also outpaced its competitors for thoroughness and constructiveness. Commercial radio and television got the lowest marks in these categories; their output was dismissed as superficial and unconstructive more often than the work of other media.

The survey showed that the digital age is inspiring new forms of news coverage. “There are regularly individuals or members of interest groups attending legislative hearings to film testimony and legislators’ comments, and these frequently appear on YouTube, sometimes to great effect,” a New Hampshire legislator said.³¹

Recommendations

Asked how news coverage could be improved, 61 percent recommended more substantive coverage and 53 percent said by staffing news outlets with better informed reporters and editors. Nearly half (48 percent) urged less focus on political gamesmanship and more on issues, and a similar share said they would like to see more stories about how policies affect people.

Statehouse reporters should provide “better explanations of how new laws will affect citizens, follow up of laws passed recently (the last few years) and how they are working, generating money, reducing crime, etc,” a Wyoming legislator said.³²

A Minnesota legislator complained that too much coverage today is geared toward news and political junkies. “The public is getting information about government through TV shows involving political conversations of political insiders, who are

predominantly white, upper middle class men who have little in common with the general public,” the legislator said. “We need to develop a medium to inform everyone, mediums that attract regular people.”³³

“Stop the sound bite journalism and investigate rather than reprinting press releases,” a New York State career employee said.³⁴

While many survey respondents said the financial difficulties of some elements of the news media were clearly affecting the quality of coverage, there was overwhelming opposition to any form of government financial help to shore up statehouse journalism. Seven in 10 (70 percent) were against state financial aid and 63 percent rejected state tax breaks.

Smaller majorities said they opposed federal tax breaks (55 percent) or federal government subsidies like those provided public radio and public television. But a substantial number of survey respondents (68 percent) favored philanthropic support.

Requiring radio and television outlets to cover state government as part of their public service obligation might be an option that wouldn’t require government expenditures: 53 percent favored this approach, while 35 percent said they opposed it and 11 percent had no opinion.

Money and Politics

My survey included a series of questions about the U.S. Supreme Court’s controversial January 21, 2010 ruling that the government “may not ban political spending by corporations in candidate elections.”³⁵ The Court decided the case, *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission*, by a 5-4 vote.

The purpose of the questions was to gauge state government opinion on the ruling and to determine what, if any, new role there might be for journalism in light of it. Nearly four out of five (78 percent) of the respondents opposed the ruling, with a majority of them (57 percent) strongly opposed. Nine out of 10 (91 percent) said they

would support congressional action to reinstate the corporate spending limits that *Citizens United* overturned.

Of those who opposed the ruling, 67 percent said the news media could help blunt its impact by doing more reporting on which special interests were behind various legislative initiatives.

The strong bipartisan opposition to *Citizens United* tracked the findings of a *Washington Post*–ABC News poll conducted February 4–8, 2010.³⁶ It found that Americans of both parties were against the ruling — eight in 10 poll respondents said they were opposed, and 65 percent strongly opposed it. Seventy-two percent of the respondents in the *Post* poll favored reinstating limits.

Chapter III: New Initiatives

One of the most intriguing efforts to revitalize news coverage of state government is the *Texas Tribune* (www.texastribune.org), a non-profit online news operation launched in November 2009. It started with \$1 million in seed money from Austin venture capitalist John Thornton, a self-described liberal Democrat who has forsworn any future political activity to avoid tainting the enterprise.³⁷

Since its launch, the *Texas Tribune* has raised more than \$3 million more³⁸ from foundations and wealthy individuals, including former Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes, a Democrat, and conservative Texas oilmen T. Boone Pickens and Red McCombs.³⁹

“We were supposed to be at \$3.5 million at the end of last year, that was the goal we set for ourselves for the initial raise, what we call the capital campaign, and we [wound up] at \$4 million,” *Texas Tribune* CEO and Editor-in-Chief Evan Smith said in a telephone interview.⁴⁰

In addition to Smith and Managing Editor Ross Ramsey, former editor of *Texas Weekly*, a political newsletter with about 1,200 paid subscribers, the *Texas Tribune* has a staff of 10 experienced journalists, all of whom receive competitive salaries and benefits.

“We wanted it to be a real deal and not kind of a volunteer organization,” Ramsey said. “Instead of finding really good people who would work for nothing, our challenge became ‘How do we find the money to pay people real salaries?’”

Ramsey’s newsletter has been folded into the new operation, whose mission is to provide more news and information about Texas state government and politics.⁴¹

“I came to Austin in 1989 and there were about 60 journalists covering the capital, and today there are about 20 covering the capital,” Ramsey said. “It’s not that there’s anything wrong with the journalists, it’s that we need more ants at the picnic.”⁴²

The *Texas Tribune* has forged a partnership with KUT Austin, the public radio station in the Texas capital,⁴³ and offers its content free to any newspaper or other news provider that wants it. “Our deal is anybody can use our stuff for free. We just would like credit,” Ramsey said. “So our stories have been in a bunch of papers around the state.”

This initiative is especially noteworthy because of its business plan: it has five major sources of revenue — memberships, major gifts, corporate sponsorships, foundation support and earned income. Smith said that *Texas Tribune* has more than 1,700 “members,” each of whom contributed anywhere from \$50 to \$5,000.

As of mid-March 2010, the *Texas Tribune’s* fundraising success was remarkable. It had received 55 major gifts, more than half for \$25,000 or more. It had signed up more than 70 corporate sponsors at \$2500 apiece; and it had received several foundation grants, including \$500,000 from the Houston Endowment and \$250,000 from the Knight Foundation.⁴⁴

Its fifth source of revenue — earned income — includes subscription fees for premium content and interest on its foundation funding, most of which has been provided in up-front lump sum amounts, Smith said.⁴⁵

The *Texas Tribune's* transparency is impressive: its website lists all of its sources of income, a point of pride with Smith. "Every single giver is on our website and you're welcome to take a look," he said.⁴⁶

John Thornton declined my request for an interview. But in an email exchange with Jeff Jarvis of the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, Thornton wrote that news coverage of state government can and should be publicly and charitably supported. "Dance companies in Texas raise \$20 million a year . . . If journalism philanthropy, 10 years from now, were the size of dance, we'd put 150 reporters on statewide issues and could literally change the way state government operates," he said.⁴⁷

Variations on the *Texas Tribune* model of non-profit journalism can be found in several other states. These include the *Connecticut Mirror*, a Connecticut enterprise headed by former *Hartford Courant* editor Michael Regan and launched in January 2010; *NJ Spotlight*, a New Jersey initiative led by John Mooney, an alumnus of *The (Newark) Star Ledger*; *Wyofile* (www.wyofile.com), an online Wyoming startup funded by foundations and individuals and staffed by journalists and educators; and *Investigate West*, a Washington state initiative led by Rita Hibbard, former assistant managing editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Like the *Texas Tribune* (which it acknowledges it patterns itself after), the *Connecticut Mirror* has broad-based funding,⁴⁸ and a five-person staff of experienced professional journalists who are salaried with benefits. "Some of us are probably making a little less than we did in the traditional newspaper market — it's a startup, that's what happens. But nobody's on food stamps," Regan said.⁴⁹

Regan said the *Connecticut Mirror* was adding a sixth staffer in Hartford and a seventh, based in Washington, DC, and reporting on "how government and policy decisions in Washington play out in Connecticut." He said opening an outpost in the nation's capital was "a really big thing because none of the newspapers in Connecticut have a reporter down there anymore."⁵⁰

James Cutie, the *Connecticut Mirror's* chief operating officer, is a former New York Times Company senior executive with 35 years of management, marketing, syndication and fundraising experience.⁵¹ He said the *Connecticut Mirror* has secured more than \$1.8 million in foundation funding so far, and envisions two additional revenue streams: corporate sponsorships “not unlike what NPR [National Public Radio] does” and individual donations.⁵²

Cutie said the *Connecticut Mirror* already has the largest staff in the statehouse press corps. It also has content sharing agreements with seven Connecticut newspapers with a combined circulation of 115,000, and it is forging relationships with colleges and campus newspapers throughout the state.

“One [aspect of it] is what we’re calling a knowledge partnership — to work with colleges and the academic community in taking existing relevant research and helping to promote it to make it available to a broader audience,” Cutie said.⁵³ He said the *Connecticut Mirror* is also enlisting academic experts on health care, the environment and other public issues to write point-counterpoint op-ed articles that illuminate state policies.

“I think what we’re doing in Connecticut, what the *Texas Tribune* is doing in Texas, will work in every state,” Cutie said. “Every state has one state capitol. It’s not like covering statewide sports (where) you have to be in every town that has a team.”⁵⁴⁵⁵

Another promising initiative is Investigative News Network (INN), a non-profit cooperative involving both established and startup media outlets that sprang from a June 2009 meeting at the Rockefeller family’s estate in Potantico, N.Y.⁵⁶

At the two-day meeting, representatives of more than two dozen news organizations ranging in size from National Public Radio to Voice of San Diego discussed ways to work together on everything from raising money to creating a libel insurance pool to engaging in collaborative journalism projects.

Since then, INN has raised more than \$500,000 from individuals such as retired San Diego venture capitalist Buzz Woolley⁵⁷ and charitable foundations like the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. It also has started a search for an executive director. At the same time, six members of the fledgling coalition⁵⁸ produced independently researched stories on the under-reporting of sexual assaults on state college campuses that were released simultaneously.

One other category of statehouse news providers also bears mentioning: independent, for-profit news services that operate in several states, serving newspapers, broadcasters and private subscribers. Among them is the highly regarded *Statehouse News Service*, which covers Massachusetts, and its sister service in Tallahassee, the *Florida News Service*. Similar operations include the *Hannah News Service* (www.hannah.com), which covers Ohio; *Howey Politics Indiana* (www.howeypolitics.com); and the *Gongwer News Service*, which covers Michigan (www.gongwer.com) and Ohio (www.gongwer-oh.com).

College journalism programs are also part of the mix. The University of Maryland's *Capital News Service* provides coverage of events in Annapolis and Washington, DC to three dozen daily and weekly newspapers in the region, including the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*. It also produces a nightly newscast available to more than 400,000 households and an online news magazine.⁵⁹ More than a dozen other colleges and universities such as Michigan State, the University of Illinois, the University of Missouri and Arizona State run similar operations, giving journalism students on-the-job training and experience in covering the making of public policy.

Chapter IV: Journalism with an *Asterisk*

As newsrooms get smaller, the range of non-journalistic players entering the information and news field is growing rapidly. The ranks include companies, think tanks, activists, government and partisan activists. Some are institutions frustrated by the shrinking

space in conventional media and the absence of knowledgeable specialists to cover their subjects. Others are partisans and political interests trying to exploit a perceived opportunity in journalism's contraction. There are varying degrees of transparency about the financing and intentions of these efforts. Some are quite clear. Others present themselves as purely journalistic and independent when in fact they are funded by political activists, yet only by digging and cross-referencing websites can the agenda and financing be divined. In an age where linking and aggregation are part of journalism, news organizations must decide how they want to interact with this growing cohort of self-interested information players. Will they pick up this material and disseminate it? Can they possibly police it? Can they afford to ignore it? The only certainty is that these new players are increasingly vying for the public's and the media's attention, and their resources, in contrast to that of traditional independent journalism, are growing.
– *State of the News Media 2010*, Project for Excellence in Journalism

Nowhere is the emergence of non-journalistic or quasi-journalistic players more prevalent or problematic than on the state government news front. Several state news websites have a liberal or leftist pedigree, or at least *provenance*. Many more are funded by conservative foundations and think tanks.

While all profess to adhere to traditional journalistic values, there is at least the potential of using journalism as a vehicle for “astroturfing” — trying to sway public opinion or promote a political agenda with deceptive means.⁶⁰

One of the unconventional news providers on the middle to center-left of the political spectrum is American Independent News Network (formerly Center for Independent Media), which has non-profit news sites in Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, Colorado, New Mexico and Washington, DC. It opened another in Florida in June 2010.

AINN's mission statement declares that it “investigates and disseminates news that impacts public debate and advances the common good.”⁶¹

It also conducts The New Journalist Training Program, which provides “skills training and mentoring to bloggers and online journalists, state by state” and The New Journalist Editorial Program, which “provides talented online journalists with direct support to conduct original reporting.”⁶²

AINN has an editorial staff of 31 and an annual budget of about \$2.3 million.⁶³ It got much of its original funding from George Soros' Open Society Institute and the Gill Foundation, which was established by Denver-based gay rights activist Tim Gill. Coincidentally or not, the states in which it initially operated were all swing states in the 2008 election.

It has since broadened its funding base and secured a \$352,000 grant from the Knight Foundation that helped it launch its Florida news site.⁶⁴ It has won awards for its journalism from such groups as Capitolbeat, the Society of Professional Journalists and the Online News Association.⁶⁵

Most of AINN's staff are independent contractors who work from home. Few have conventional journalism backgrounds.⁶⁶ Most previously wrote for alternative newspapers or were on the fringes of what usually is defined as the news media; one contributor is also a social worker, another is active in gay rights causes. David Bennahum, the organization's founder and CEO, acknowledges that AINN is agenda-driven.

"We have a notion in the newsroom that if you don't see consequences from your reporting, then what are you really doing as a reporter? It's not enough to be a stenographer. You've got to, you know, show a kind of return socially on the investment philanthropy is putting into this," he said in an interview.⁶⁷

A Harvard-trained technology whiz who went on to become one of *Wired* magazine's original writers, Bennahum is disdainful of contemporary mainstream journalism. "The reason journalism matters is because it has a social conscience and is giving voice and holding people accountable and what's so sad is how so many newsrooms, while they pay lip service to those ideals, frankly in their day-to-day behavior really have nothing to do with it," he said.⁶⁸

AINN's goal is to become the leading online provider of public interest journalism. But it's unlikely to become a refuge for experienced statehouse reporters and editors

whose future employment prospects diminish by the day. “We’ve found a lot of them have been worn down so they don’t necessarily have the comfort level with, you know, doing the kind of journalism we want to do. They’re uncomfortable with that,” Bennahum said.⁶⁹

Another online source of state government news coverage that crosses red lines of traditional journalism is Stateline.org (www.stateline.org), one of the pioneers in the field. For more than a decade, it has produced a steady stream of original news articles about state policy innovations and trends. (Full disclosure: I was a founding editor of Stateline.org.)

Every weekday, Stateline.org also compiles a digest of news stories about state government from other sources that typically includes more than 400 items, complete with links to the full stories. It recently added a state-by-state roundup of editorial commentary which enables users to get a good sense of the political pulse-beat throughout the country. Its other features include two goldmines for researchers: an archive of news stories about state policy and politics that covers the past decade and a collection of governors’ state of the state speeches going back to 2000.

Stateline.org has an impressive stable of professional journalists, including Stephen C. Fehr, who came from the *Washington Post*. It gets respectable traffic for a niche publication — more than 150,000 unique visitors month⁷⁰ — and extends its reach through a syndication agreement with McClatchy Newspapers. Because of this, Stateline.org stories have also appeared in such print publications as the *Miami Herald* and the *Detroit News*.

The Pew Charitable Trusts, with more than \$5 billion in assets⁷¹ from seven philanthropic trusts created by the family of Sun Oil founder Joseph Pew, is the sole funder of Stateline.org and has been since the news website was created in 1998. But Stateline.org was an independent entity for the first 10 years of its existence.⁷² In July 2008 however, Stateline.org was taken over by the Trusts and became part of the Pew

Center on the States, which advocates for prison reform, children's health programs and other issues. Within a year, Managing Editor Barbara Rosewicz, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter responsible for much of the recognition Stateline.org's journalism had achieved, was transferred out of the operation. She remains a Pew employee with an array of other assignments.

Alan Ehrenhalt, a former managing editor of *Governing* magazine who replaced Rosewicz as Stateline.org's top editor, acknowledges that being part of an advocacy organization raises "sensitive" issues. But he said he was confident the relationship can be managed in a way that avoids compromising Stateline.org's editorial independence.

"I think that as long as we report the news in a way that is unaffected by the campaigns that Pew is mounting and that we even cover the news of those campaigns but under the same standards that we would cover news generated by any other enterprise, we're okay," Ehrenhalt said. "If we're asked in some way to augment the work of the campaigns or to promote them or augment them, then I think we're really asking for trouble. But that hasn't happened so far."⁷³

On the liberal to moderate side of the point-of-view spectrum, AINN and Stateline.org pretty much stand alone. There are some smaller online providers of state government news such as North Carolina Justice Center, but their main mission is advocacy. Most activity is on the right, orchestrated by an interlocking group of conservative foundations and think tanks that are unresponsive to the point of secretiveness about their sources of funding.

At the forefront is the one-year-old Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity,⁷⁴ an organization headed by Jason Stverak, former executive director of the North Dakota Republican Party. The Franklin Center is headquartered in Bismarck, ND, but its mailing address is a law office in Stafford, Texas, and its fundraising agent is a Bristow, VA firm that also raises funds for the Republican Party and the Heritage Foundation.⁷⁵

It appears to be part of a web of conservative groups that also includes the Chicago-based Sam Adams Alliance and the State Policy Network, an Arlington, VA organization “dedicated solely to improving the practical effectiveness of independent, non-profit, market-oriented, state-focused think tanks.”⁷⁶

The Franklin Center supports news websites in at least a dozen states — Maine, New Hampshire, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Tennessee, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma and New Mexico. Most use the word “Watchdog” as part of their name, and most have the same logo and layout template. (Texas Watchdog, which has won awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and Capitolbeat, the association of statehouse reporters and editors, also seems to be part of the group. But unlike the others, it lists the Sam Adams Alliance rather than the Franklin Center as one of its benefactors.)

Stverak said in an interview that his organization works with journalists and non-profit news sites in more than 40 states, and that advice and training account for much of the assistance it offers. He declined to discuss financial relationships.

“We have a very strict donor anonymity policy, so those organizations, if they choose to say where or how they get their resources or make them public that’s up to them. We file that information with the IRS on our 990, which we’ll be doing for the first time this year,” he said.⁷⁷ Form 990, required annually of most non-profits, provides some information about an organization’s mission, program and finances.

Len Lazarick, editor of the *Maryland Reporter* (www.marylandreporter.com) told a public radio interviewer⁷⁸ he received \$100,000 in start-up funding from the Franklin Center. “That interview got me in a little hot water with them,” he told me. “They would just prefer that everything be as anonymous as possible. They really don’t want us to talk about our business models very much.”⁷⁹

However, Lazarick said his operation⁸⁰ is independent editorially. “I submit progress reports. They [the Franklin Center] see our content. They don’t have any

control over it. It doesn't get edited by them. Beyond that, it's kind of like an arms-length advertiser," he said.⁸¹

Besides funding news websites, the Franklin Center is "partnering with college journalism programs to produce joint investigations and creating the Benjamin Franklin Fellows program to train a new generation of statehouse reporters," illinoisStateHouseNews.org (www.illinoisstatehousenews.org), its Illinois affiliate, said in a news release.⁸²

Stverak said the Sam Adams Alliance gave his organization a start-up grant⁸³ but otherwise was not willing to specify where the Franklin Center gets its funds.

"We do it through various methods, like any other non-profit — direct mail, personal solicitation, apply for grants from foundations, asking individuals for support. It's no different than your local non-profit, the museum, the opera, any other civic-based organization. They have to go out and ask other people to support them," he said.⁸⁴

The Sam Adams Alliance is equally opaque about its financing. "The organization declines to provide specific identifying information on its donors on the grounds that such disclosures may chill the donor's First Amendment right to associate in private with the organization," it said in its 2007 Form 990 filing.⁸⁵ The organization cites two legal precedents for its position: "*NAACP v. Alabama*, 357 U.S 449 (1958) and *International Union UAW v. National Right to Work*, 590 F. 2nd 1139, 1152 (D.C. Cir. 1978)."⁸⁶

The State Policy Network–Sam Adams Alliance–Franklin Center troika is at least loosely associated with more than a dozen other conservative groups⁸⁷ funding news websites in various states.⁸⁸ These include the John Locke Foundation, which funds the monthly North Carolina newspaper *Carolina Journal* and a companion website, www.carolinajournal.com; the Public Policy Foundation of West Virginia, which funds the news website West Virginia Watchdog; the Commonwealth Foundation, which

supports the Pennsylvania Independent (www.paindependent.com)⁸⁹; and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, which funds Michigan Capitol Confidential. (www.michigancapitolconfidential.com).

The latter was the most avowedly conservative news site of any I reviewed. Its home page “Video of the Day” was a video snippet about the Tea Party Movement and its About Us page stated “*Michigan Capitol Confidential* is the news source for Michigan residents who want an alternative to ‘bigger government’ remedies in policy debates. MichCapCon reports on the public officials who seek to limit government, those who do not, and those whose votes are at odds with what they say.”⁹⁰

Stverak said it would be wrong to infer from his partisan background and that of others associated with the constellation of Franklin Center news sites that its journalism skews to the right.

“I ran a Republican Party. We disclose that fully on our website. But at the end of the day it’s the same standard that you would hold Fox News, CNN, the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Fargo Forum* from my home state of North Dakota to — you will judge any news organization based upon the content that they produce,” he said.

“Look at ABC News. Do you automatically discredit them because at one time George Stephanopoulos worked in the Clinton administration and Diane Sawyer interned in the Nixon White House? No, you judge them on the stories that are produced.”

However, writing for the blogosphere, conservative columnist H. Daniel Glover credited the Franklin Center with helping the conservative cause. He said most investigative journalism being done now “has at its core a belief that government is the solution to whatever problems the investigations uncover.”⁹¹

“Once conservatives realize they can conduct great investigations that expose the flaws of intrusive government and the special interests that corrupt it, you will see more of them embracing that kind of journalism,” Glover said. “Mainstream publications like

the *Washington Examiner* and organizations like the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, which helps support and fund budding watchdogs, are showing them the way.”⁹²

Reporters for news sites in Ohio, Illinois and Idaho funded by the Franklin Center or its affiliates have been denied press credentials by accrediting bodies because of the lack of transparency about donors and links to advocacy groups.⁹³ Veteran journalist John Dougherty, who was briefly on contract to a Nevada group with links to the Franklin Center, said he quit because it became clear to him the journalism was not non-partisan.

“They were clearly looking for gotcha stories to embarrass Democrats in any way they could. That’s not what I do,” he said. “I’m an equal opportunity basher — I’ve written stories that have damaged Democrats as well as Republicans and Independents. I’m apolitical. If it’s a story, it’s a story; if it’s not, it’s not,”⁹⁴ Dougherty said. (Several weeks after I interviewed him, Dougherty announced he was a candidate for the Democratic nomination to run for the U.S. Senate from Arizona).⁹⁵

Chapter V: Conclusions

Mark Twain might have been talking about news coverage of state government when he famously remarked that “reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”⁹⁶ While it’s true that statehouse press corps throughout the country have been decimated as “old media” tries to weather an economic storm, covering what governors and legislatures are doing is seen as an appealing niche by many new media startups. Ross Ramsey of the *Texas Tribune* said that the journalism is clearly needed, and that this makes for an attractive fundraising pitch.

“The shrinkage of state capitol press corps’ is an easy thing to illustrate and an easy thing to explain to people, and the value of journalism in a democracy is pretty easy to explain and it’s easily understood by people — if you don’t have that feedback loop, if

that feedback loop is broken, then you lose some critical part of democracy,” Ramsey said.⁹⁷

Some of the non-profit start-ups are helping improve state government news coverage by collaborating with old media — a practice pioneered by Stateline.org and *Pro Publica*. Both the *Texas Tribune* and the *CT Mirror* syndicate their content to state newspapers free of charge.

“We believe that newspapers are always going to be around with us, but they may not always be able to provide — in the amount necessary — the kind of public interest journalism that they once upon a time did. That’s simply a matter of economics,” *Texas Tribune’s* Evan Smith said. “We think that through a non-profit approach, we can do much more than they can and then provide it to them for free so they can, in turn, publish it for the value and benefit of their readers.”⁹⁸

Whether the new non-profits are economically sustainable in the long run remains to be seen. Foundations love start-ups, but they are notoriously loathe to provide operating funds. The interests of corporate sponsors and aggressive journalists can often conflict. And as public radio or television managers can attest, individual donors are a fickle and elusive lot.⁹⁹

Some media critics claim journalism projects dependent on charity cannot be truly independent. One of the most outspoken of them is Jack Shafer of *Slate*. “In the current arrangement, we’re substituting one flawed business model for another. For-profit newspapers lose money accidentally. Non-profit news operations lose money *deliberately*. No matter how good the non-profit operation is, it always ends up sustaining itself with handouts, and handouts come with conditions,” he said.¹⁰⁰

News coverage of state government driven by a real or perceived agenda also seems problematic. The American Independent News Network and Stateline.org arguably approach the subject matter from a government-is-good perspective. The constellation of Franklin Center-funded or associated news websites arguably approach it from a

government-is-the-problem point of view. There have been several recent instances of questionable content spilling into the journalism mainstream, none of them involving news coverage of state government per se.

One was the *Washington Post's* publication on December 31, 2009, of a story headlined "Support grows for tackling nation's debt; Bipartisan task force would head efforts to find places to cut." The story, which appeared on page A-10 of the newspaper under the bylines of respected journalists Elaine S. Povich and Eric Pianin (a former *Post* reporter), was accompanied by a footnote which said: "This article was produced by the *Fiscal Times*, an independent digital news publication reporting on fiscal, budgetary, health care and international economics issues." But as critics¹⁰¹ quickly noted, and the *Washington Post* later acknowledged it should have disclosed,¹⁰² the *Fiscal Times* is funded by Peter G. Peterson, a leading advocate of debt reduction.

In another instance, the Associated Press said a widely disseminated report that President Barack Obama's administration had poured \$6.4 billion in economic stimulus funds into "phantom congressional districts" was "a phantom issue."¹⁰³ The report was produced by New Mexico Watchdog, a Franklin Center-affiliated news website. While the AP said the website's original report was correct and yet another example of problems in the government database of stimulus spending, it concluded that the problems appeared to be data-entry errors, not examples of government waste.

"There are problems with the stimulus data being reported, problems that call into question how accurate the job count is. But the 'phantom congressional districts' are being used as a phantom issue to suggest that stimulus money has been misspent," the AP said.¹⁰⁴

Brant Houston, a longtime investigative reporter who now teaches at the University of Illinois, doesn't find the situation too worrisome. "I think we're entering an era in which there's going to be money coming from various ideological groups or people who have a certain ideology," he said. "It may be a bit of a return to a time when we

had newspapers that really meant it when they said (they were) the Waterbury Republican or Democrat-News or whatever.”¹⁰⁵

Houston said the tendency of journalists to be hypercritical of one another should help stop any spreading of misinformation. “One of the fortunate or unfortunate parts of journalism is that journalists are cannibalistic,” he said. “It’s hard for me to think of another profession in which people criticize each other and jump on the mistakes of others.”¹⁰⁶

“I also think politicians will get into the mix and question who’s doing what,” Houston said.¹⁰⁷

Princeton Professor Paul Starr contends partisan journalism can be healthy for representative government. In a January 2010 *Atlantic* magazine article headlined “Governing in the Age of Fox News,” Starr wrote: “Democracy needs passion, and partisanship provides it. Journalism needs passion, too, though the passion should be for the truth.

“If we can encourage some adherence to professional standards in the world of partisan journalism, not via the government but by criticism and force of example, this republic of ours — thankfully no longer fragile — may yet flourish,” Starr said.¹⁰⁸

State officials offered lots of ideas about how news coverage of state government might be improved. “The problem of journalistic news coverage is that [it gravitates] towards disagreement and controversy,” a Wyoming legislator said. “Much of what we do as successful legislators behind the scenes is to build consensus before our bills even appear before the public.”¹⁰⁹

“Meanwhile, the press gives coverage to the controversial issues debated (and often meaningless or political issues that generate outrageous quotes.) That preoccupation with the gossipy or trivial does not add to the understanding of the important decisions being made. However, some of us are in this to get things done, and not for grabbing headlines, in which case, the press is irrelevant,” the legislator said.¹¹⁰

A West Virginia official said journalists who cover state government should be better informed. “Reporters need more in-depth understanding of the various initiatives and events they are reporting on. Too often they get caught up in process and the won/lost report, rather than the potential impact of a policy chosen. Therefore the public doesn’t have a chance to become fully educated,” the official said.¹¹¹

Numerous survey respondents complained that the news media are preoccupied with sensationalism. Some attributed this to what they said was a misguided quest for more readership at a time when newspaper circulation numbers are dwindling. “As a nonpartisan head of an audit agency, media coverage of our reports is important in assisting with the “sentinel” effect that comes from audit findings,” a Wisconsin official said. “Today, I believe there is more sensationalism and less balanced, thorough reporting of our findings and other issues in state government.”¹¹²

Thanks to the digital revolution, participants in the policy process today have many sources of information on what their state government is doing, what the issues are in any given public policy debate and when key votes are coming up. To cite just one example, Focus on the Family, a conservative interest group, has Family Policy Councils in each of the 50 states, each with its own sophisticated and informative website. Liberal groups have similar outreach arrangements, but they tend to be less organized. Finding out and disclosing who’s pushing what state policy, using computer-assisted reporting and old-fashioned investigative journalism techniques, could be the key to reinventing state government news coverage.

Another possible role is acting as a verifier, a trustworthy fact-checker. The *St. Petersburg Times*, with funding assistance from the Knight Foundation, now devotes some of its journalistic resources to reporting on the truth or falsity of political statements. The project, known as Politifact, operates both in print and online.

The *Miami Herald* is a partner in Florida and the *Austin American-Statesman* runs a franchise operation in Texas. Politifact editor Bill Adair said publications in several

other states will soon be involved as well, and he ultimately expects the project to reach all 50 states.

“I just think this is what the mainstream media needs to do in a world where everything is fragmented, and there are so many other messengers,” Adair said in an interview. “I think we’re the ones that become the honest broker, and we’re the ones that tell voters and readers and viewers that this guy’s right, and this guy’s not. That’s the perfect role in this new world for the major media.”¹¹³

Some of the new non-profits offer other possibilities. One can imagine 50 separate but interconnected state news websites such as the *Texas Tribune* or the *Connecticut Mirror* partnering with your favorite newspaper or with public radio or television.

Technology makes it easy for a story in one state that’s relevant to others to automatically appear on or be referenced by other publications, or be pushed to interested parties via RSS feeds, text messages and email newsletters. Using a smart phone or iPad, readers could test the consequences of various policy options, form a judgment on the preferred course to follow, even offer their comments.

“Getting beneath the surface of what government is doing takes time and manpower and some money,” said Lucy Morgan of the *St. Petersburg Times*, who is often described by her peers as the dean of statehouse reporters.¹¹⁴ Given what’s happening currently, with new coverage efforts blossoming on the Internet as newspapers and other “old media” retreat from the fray, a death knell for statehouse journalism would seem to be premature.

The situation merits continued watching, however. The scramble underway to fill all those empty chairs in statehouse press rooms might very well lead to the best news coverage of state government ever. But at this stage of the changeover, it’s equally possible that partisan interlopers posing as journalists could ultimately cause the demise of news coverage of state government as we know it.

Endnotes

¹ “Statehouse Exodus,” by Jennifer Dorroh, *American Journalism Review*, April-May 2009

² Project for Excellence in Journalism report, *State of the Media 2010*, estimates the number as just under 4,000 (All media outlets with a presence in DC)

³ “Legislatures vary in session length,” by Kathleen Murphy, Stateline.org, January 9, 2003

⁴ Arkansas, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon and Texas

⁵ See “Florida Suit Poses a Challenge to Health Care Bill,” by Kevin Sack, *New York Times*, May 10, 2010. See also “Health-care Overhaul Is Up Against Long Campaign Across U.S.,” by N.C. Aizenman, *Washington Post*, May 12, 2010

⁶ *2008 State Expenditures Report*, National Association of State Budget Officers

⁷ Wisconsin’s Welfare to Work program famously was the model for sweeping welfare reform legislation that President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1996.

⁸ More than \$800 billion, the biggest transfer of federal funds to the states in the nation’s history, according to a Pew Center on the States report, *State of the States 2010* and a February 17, 2010 report by the Center for Public Integrity.

⁹ Telephone interview with Lucy Morgan, February 23, 2010

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ AJR’s 2009 Count of Statehouse Reporters, *American Journalism Review*, April–May 2009

¹² “Missing the Story At the Statehouse,” by Charles Layton and Mary Walton, *American Journalism Review*, July–August 1998

¹³ Telephone interview with Sara Fritz, March 1, 2010

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ “The Newspaper Bubble Too Has Burst,” by Richard Perez-Pena, *New York Times*, December 9, 2008

¹⁶ *Mass Media and North Carolina Politics: The New Politics of North Carolina*, Christopher Cooper and Gibbs Knotts, editors, UNC Press, 2008

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Speech at the Edward W. & Charlotte A. Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media, University of Denver, April 2, 1997

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Stateline.org blog list

²³ I asked CSG's Kelley Arnold, who supervised the distribution, about this. She was unable to explain it.

²⁴ Figures may not total 100 percent due to rounding

²⁵ Survey respondent, self-identified as "Statewide Appointee or Agency Head," March 11, 2010

²⁶ Survey respondent, self-identified as "Statewide Appointee or Agency Head," March 11, 2010

²⁷ *The State of the News Media 2010*, Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2010/online_summary_essay.php

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Three percent identified themselves as "Other" and 23 percent, presumably non-partisan or career employees, said the question was not applicable

³⁰ Survey respondent, self-identified as "State Legislator", March 29, 2010

³¹ Survey respondent, self-identified as "State Legislator," March 16, 2010

³² Survey respondent, self-identified as "State Legislator," March 30, 2010

³³ Survey respondent, self-identified as "State Legislator," March 29, 2010

³⁴ Survey respondent, self-identified as "Agency Career Employee," March 29, 2010

³⁵ "Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit," by Adam Liptak, *New York Times*, January 21, 2010

³⁶ "Poll: Large majority opposes Supreme Court's decision on campaign financing," by Dan Eggen, *Washington Post*, February 17, 2010

³⁷ "Texas Tribune makes its debut in the realm of non-profit journalism," by Kevin Brass, *The Austin Chronicle* (<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/column?oid=oid:901866>), October 30, 2009

³⁸ Telephone interview with *Texas Tribune* CEO and Editor-in-Chief Evan Smith, March 17, 2010

³⁹ Article previously cited, *The Austin Chronicle*, October 30, 2009

⁴⁰ Smith interview, March 17, 2010

⁴¹ Telephone interview with *Texas Tribune* Managing Editor Ross Ramsey, March 15, 2010

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Smith interview, March 17, 2010

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ State Coverage as a Worthy Charity, New Business Models for News, CUNY Graduate School of Journalism (www.newsinnovation.com), posted June 22, 2009

⁴⁸ Funders include The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, Connecticut Health Foundation, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Knight Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust, the San Francisco Foundation, Seedlings Foundation and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Foundation

⁴⁹ Telephone interview, April 12, 2010

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ CT Mirror website

⁵² Telephone interview, April 14, 2010

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The *Connecticut Mirror* is apparently flourishing. In an email to subscribers reporting on the initiative's first 100 days, COO John Cutie said: "Our website has been visited 165,000 times. Hundreds of thousands of readers have enjoyed our reporting in our nine partner newspapers across the state or followed us on Twitter and Facebook. Readers from virtually every Connecticut community have been directed to our site by more than 1000 other web sites or heard our reporters interviewed on WNPR.

⁵⁶ I was a participant in the meeting

⁵⁷ Buzz Woolley is also a financial supporter of the *Voice of San Diego* website

⁵⁸ Center for Public Integrity, New England Center for Investigative Reporting, Wisconsin Center for Investigative Reporting, Rocky Mountain News Network, Investigate West and National Public Radio

⁵⁹ Capital News Service website, <http://journalism.umd.edu/cns/>

⁶⁰ The late U.S. Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Texas) is credited with coining the term “astroturfing.”

⁶¹ AINN website

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Center for Independent Media: Four Lessons From a Non-Profit That Raised \$11.5 Million in Four Short Years,” by Laura McGann, Nieman Journalism Lab, February 3, 2010

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ AINN website

⁶⁶ Based on a check of staff bios.

⁶⁷ Telephone interview, March 18, 2010

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Source within the organization

⁷¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts 2009 Annual Report.

⁷² The Pew Research Center, which housed Stateline.org from 2004 to 2008, is an independent subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts and does not advocate causes. For the first six years of its existence, Stateline.org was nominally part of the University of Richmond, but this was for administrative purposes only; the university had no authority over Stateline.org operations.

⁷³ Telephone interview, April 12, 2010

⁷⁴ Incorporated in North Dakota in January 2009, received 501(c)3 status in June 2009

⁷⁵ Information gleaned from a filing with the State of Washington. Asked about the out-of-state mailing address in a March 30, 2010 interview, Stverak said: “We have to go out and solicit funds, so we have an attorney who makes sure we’re up to date on all the

non-profit solicitation laws in each state, and that's where our attorney is located, so if there's any questions or someone on record, if they need to directly contact them with regard to that, that's where it is." He said the fundraising firm was familiar to him and highly experienced, and that no implications should be drawn from its work with Republican Party affiliates. Still, I found the array of arrangements curious, given the opaqueness of the Franklin Center's funding.

⁷⁶ State Policy Network website, About Us section

⁷⁷ Telephone interview, March 19, 2010

⁷⁸ Maryland Morning with Sheilah Kast, WYPR 88.1 FM, November 2, 2009

⁷⁹ Telephone interview with Len Lazarick, April 20, 2010

⁸⁰ See "Who is behind Marylandreporter.com?, Maryland Politics Watch," November 2, 2009. <http://maryland-politics.blogspot.com/2009/11/who-is-behind-marylandreportercom.html>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "Non-Profit Group Opens News Bureau at Statehouse," by Bernard Schoenburg, *State Journal Register*, December 13, 2009

⁸³ Telephone interview, March 18, 2010

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Sam Adams Alliance 2007 Form 990 filing, accessed through www.guidestar.org

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Franklin Center email list obtained from confidential source

⁸⁸ State Policy Network 2007 Form 990 filing, accessed through www.guidestar.org

⁸⁹ Pennsylvania Independent states on its About Us page: "*Pennsylvania Independent* is funded through voluntary contributions to the Commonwealth Foundation. We neither seek nor accept taxpayer grants or public subsidies, and we do not engage in contract work, fee for service, or *quid pro quo* contributions. We do, however, protect the identity and ensure the anonymity of our financial supporters — our reporters and editors don't even know who is funding their journalistic endeavor, eliminating any potential conflict of interest between those reporting the news and those who are paying the bills."

⁹⁰ Based on a March 23, 2010 review of www.michigancapitolconfidential.com

⁹¹ Undated posting, "Conservatives See Need for More Investigative Reporting," by Tony Rogers, About.com guide, www.about.com/od/trends/a/gloverinterview.htm

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "News Sites Funded by Think Tanks Take Root," by John Miller, Associated Press, April 13, 2010

⁹⁴ Telephone interview with John Dougherty, March 26, 2010

⁹⁵ Dougherty announced his campaign on May 6, 2010.

<http://www.johndougherty2010.com/>

⁹⁶ Twain made the remark in May 1897 after the *New York Journal* published a premature obituary.

⁹⁷ Telephone interview, March 15, 2010

⁹⁸ Telephone interview, March 17, 2010

⁹⁹ "Public Radio Fundraisers Dial It Back," by Steve Hendrix, *Washington Post*, February 14, 2009

¹⁰⁰ "Non-Profit Journalism Comes at a Cost," by Jack Shafer, *Slate*, September 30, 2009

¹⁰¹ "*Washington Post* Lets Pete Peterson Write the News on Deficit," by Roger Hickey, *Huffington Post*, January 1, 2010

¹⁰² The *Washington Post* subsequently published a correction that is attached to the online version of the article. The correction reads: "The article by the *Fiscal Times*, about growing congressional support for a bipartisan commission to address the nation's debt, contained a statement supporting the concept by Robert L. Bixby, the executive director of the Concord Coalition. The article should have noted that the Concord Coalition receives funding from the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. Peterson, but not his foundation, also funds the *Fiscal Times*, the independent news service that prepared the article."

¹⁰³ Associated Press report, November 18, 2009

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Telephone interview with Brant Houston, March 29, 2010

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ "Governing in the Age of Fox News," by Paul Starr, *Atlantic* magazine, January/February 2010

¹⁰⁹ Survey respondent, self-identified as "State legislator," March 29, 2010

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Survey respondent, self-identified as "Statewide appointee or agency head," March 29, 2010

¹¹² Survey respondent, self-identified as "Statewide appointee or agency head," March 26, 2010

¹¹³ Telephone interview with Bill Adair, April 28, 2010

¹¹⁴ Telephone interview with Lucy Morgan, February 23, 2010