



A REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY // Fall 2023

NEWS MEDIA IN NORTHERN KENTUCKY

In an effort to listen to local citizens about the transformation in local media, the Northern Kentucky Forum conducted three small group discussions in August. This report is a summary on what we heard.

INTRODUCTION

The news media landscape changed dramatically as the 20th century gave way to the 21st. Newspapers got smaller and newsrooms lost reporters and editors. Some closed. Simultaneously, digital delivery of news became common. Surviving newspapers tried to adapt even as new, online media competitors emerged. Among the media sites born in our region of Kentucky during this new age were Soapbox Cincinnati/NKY Thrives, the Northern Kentucky Tribune, the River City News (now closed), and, most recently, LINK nky, and, for statewide news, The Kentucky Lantern.

Nationally, the trend away from print newspapers is obvious, and the decline is continuing. In 2016, national newspaper circulation was 34.7 million. By 2020, it had fallen to 24.3 million, a decline of 30 percent in just four years.*

In Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties, news consumers have lived with this trend, perhaps most starkly manifested on Dec. 31, 2007, the last day of publication for The Kentucky Post, an afternoon daily (Monday through Saturday). With an all-local page one and a full section of local coverage inside, The Post covered local government as well as Northern Kentucky sports, arts, culture, and business. It included a daily editorial page that kept local issues front and center. The Post's morning competitor, The Kentucky Enquirer, continues to publish but has cut its staff and coverage and, in March 2022, ceased printing and delivering a newspaper on Saturdays.

**Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers. The circulation numbers reported above reflect a trend that started well before 2016. An earlier Pew report stated: "Confirming speculation that 2006 has been a difficult year, the six-month statistics from the Audit Bureau of Circulations – from March 30 to Sept. 30 – reveal the steepest average decline in at least 15 years. As of September 30, average daily circulation for all papers dropped 2.8%, compared with the same period last year, while Sunday circulation fell even more, 3.4%. These figures put combined newspaper weekday circulation for dailies at 43.7 million, reportedly down from its peak of 63.3 million in 1984."*

THE FORUM RESPONDS

The Northern Kentucky Forum exists to consider topics facing our region and to do so with deliberation and discussion. Given that the challenges facing local media have consequences for the our region and its ability to stay informed about issues that shape our lives, we were eager to listen and respond when one local media outlet asked if we would be willing to explore public opinion on this topic. Our stipulation was that our findings would be shared with all local

media outlets and not exclusive to one. The Forum board agreed that the best way for us to do this would be to host several facilitated small group discussions around key questions. We would capture what was said and report on that. This paper is our report.

We advertised our plans for our small group discussions several weeks in advance, primarily with email notices to Forum followers and on social media posts. Two local news media outlets also provided some advance coverage to allow the public to know about the opportunity.

Our goal was to have eight to ten people in each small group and to include a diversity of voices. We did not, however, exclude anyone who signed up; that is, we did not select participants to achieve an exact mirror of Northern Kentucky’s demographics.

In the end, our breakdown was as follows (we had 27 participants):

Average age: 56.6 years	Self-identify as rural: 3
Oldest participant: 78	Self-identify as suburban: 18
Youngest participant: 24	Self-identify as urban: 6
Ethnicity: 26 white, 1 Latino	Working: 18
Zip codes represented: 16	Retired: 9

Note: All of those working reported employment in white-collar fields. We did not track gender.

OUR LOCATIONS

We held our small group discussions at three public libraries, one each in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties. Each was 90 minutes long. They were held on three successive days but, in order to give people options convenient to their own schedules, they were at three different times of day:

- August 15, 9:30 a.m., Boone County Public Library, Burlington
- August 16, 2 p.m., Campbell County Public Library, Fort Thomas
- August 17, 6:30 p.m., Kenton County Public Library, Covington

ABOUT THE NKY FORUM

The Northern Kentucky Forum, founded in 2008, is a collaboration of Northern Kentucky University’s Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement and the three public library districts in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties. The Forum hosts about ten events each year to foster

civil, civic dialogue around issues and needs in Northern Kentucky. The Forum's formats vary, but facilitated, small group discussions represent one format the Forum uses to explore community topics.

OUR APPROACH

Our goal was to listen and take notes. Forum board members attended as scribes to capture the participants' thoughts but did not participate themselves. Board member Gayle Hilleke was our facilitator. Gayle is the executive director of the Kentucky Campus Compact, which is headquartered at Northern Kentucky University. The Compact is a consortium of community engagement offices at public and private universities around Kentucky.

Participants began by watching a 14-minute video from the PBS News Hour on the closure of a weekly newspaper in a rural community, The Canadian Record in Canadian, Texas. The report stressed the importance of local media in informing people. "Information is the key to our democracy," said Laurie Brown, The Record's editor and publisher. A reader said the paper's closing felt "like a death in the family."*

* [How the loss of local newspapers fueled political divisions in the U.S. | PBS NewsHour](#); first broadcast Aug. 2, 2023 and available online.

WHAT WE LEARNED: AN OVERVIEW

1) Overall, it was clear from all three sessions that our participants are hungry for local news coverage that is consistently provided, trustworthy, and that include breaking news but also thoughtful analysis.

Though most of our participants grew up with a print newspaper and the evening news on television, they have shifted to digital delivery and consumption. They don't expect a return of print media. They do want 21st century digital outlets to provide timely, accurate, comprehensive community coverage in the tradition of the 20th century newspapers.

2) Readers want broad coverage, including hard news but also lifestyle and sports coverage.

It is hard to determine what topics rose to the top of our participants' minds. No two readers were the same. Some want more politics and government coverage, others want more topical coverage of ongoing issues (education, LGBTQIA+, climate change), and others want more sports or arts coverage. Overall, the conversations seemed to confirm that local news consumers simply want to know what is going on in the community broadly. They want to be informed.

3) Our participants want balanced coverage. Stay independent. Don't be indebted to anyone.

They believe a healthy, vibrant press is important in holding government accountable, including at the local level, and in keeping citizens well informed. Too often, in the current media environment, they feel as if they are in the dark.

Our participants don't want opinion and bias. They do want context and analysis. There is an evident hunger for depth.

WHAT WE LEARNED: THE DETAILS

We used the same set of questions with each of the three groups. Here is a summary of what we heard.

Question 1: What is your family story about news? Attitudes, traditions, availability?

Most of our participants grew up with a print newspaper in the house. Older participants subscribed to and read a local newspaper – The Kentucky Post, The Kentucky Enquirer, or both. Those from other cities and towns relied on the local newspapers there. Some grew up in multiple newspaper homes. If, for example, their family lived in a small town near a big city, they got a newspaper from both communities. Younger participants grew up with parents who read the newspaper and instilled in them an appreciation for local news and sports reporting.

Many participants lamented the closing of The Post in 2007 because of its daily local coverage, which not only informed the community but created a common conversation around what was happening in Northern Kentucky. It served an area too often neglected by Greater Cincinnati media and by statewide media based in Lexington and Louisville. This affection for The Post (and for the “old” Kentucky Enquirer versus today’s leaner Northern Kentucky coverage by the Enquirer) was not expressed as nostalgia but as a concern that, without such coverage, Northern Kentucky’s civic life and sense of community is diminished.

Here are some other key points that emerged from the discussion around this question:

- Many grew up with the local and national evening news on television, whether they were watching or their parents were. Fewer turn to that ritual now.
- Mostly, participants have now switched to digital delivery, either through social media or by following a one or more digital news sites. Neighborhood Facebook pages are gaining readership for hyper-local news.
- A common concern is that the coverage today is lacking in both breadth and depth. Too many things go uncovered, and what is covered is not explored or analyzed sufficiently.
- Participants also miss the routine components they once saw in their daily newspapers, including timely sports scores and a comprehensive compendium of obituaries daily.

- Another common complaint is too much bias and opinion and not enough straight, factual reliable news. This was not a complaint against analysis or context but against reporting news with a slant to the left or the right.
- The digital revolution has existed long enough now that the expectation is that content is free. Many said they want depth and broader coverage, but they do not want to pay for it. In the view of many participants, news providers need a revenue model that doesn't charge the reader or viewer.
- Some participants still prefer paper. They like the "feel" of it, the tradition of it, and, in their view, its broader range of news. They also like that it is all in front of you as a single package so you can browse. With a newspaper, you sit and read about one thing, then turn the page and serendipitously discover something you didn't seek but that drew your interest. You are exposed to something new.
- The two newspapers most often cited as still a favored source of news are the two that have best survived the digital revolution: The Cincinnati / Kentucky Enquirer and the Cincinnati Business Courier. However, even readers still faithful to those consider the Enquirer, in particular, to be a shadow of its old self.

Question 1 content sampler

Note: The content samplers below are not verbatim; they represent our scribes' notes. Our transcribers made every effort to capture these comments correctly. The participant comments have been edited for clarity and grammar but in each case reflect what participants were conveying during the focus groups.

"If you were in the paper in a small town, you were something."

"I miss the smell and feel of the paper."

"I was a big fan of AP radio in the 1970s. It was different then. Not conservative or liberal. It was more news and sports talk. That led to NPR, which came into my life in the 1980s and 1990s."

"Having the newspaper available to me as a child was important to becoming more literate."

"Growing up, I watched the evening news with my dad. After dinner, you watched the news. It was a ritual."

"The Kentucky Post was a very credible source of news. I remember our family discussing The Post and waiting for it because there was no better source of news."

"I miss newspapers because you read them all the way through, whether it was something you are interested in or not. With digital news, you are only reading stories that the algorithm thinks you want to read. You don't learn about new things."

Question 2: When you think about your sources of news, what topics are important to you – that you hope to find?

There was no consensus answer on this. Politics and government were mentioned most often, but others are most interested in sports or the arts. Some participants pointed out a dearth of reporting on often-marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, and broader topics, like the environment and climate change; that is, topics that may not be on the City Council agenda but that matter to people. The best “newspapers” (or their digital progenies) help to set a community’s agenda. They don’t just follow; they also lead.

A common theme is that readers want variety. They don’t just want national news or politics or local government news. They like the traditional newspapers’ approach of a news section but also an arts and lifestyle section, a business section, and a sports section. Variety makes a news outlet more interesting. It also makes the coverage of a community more thorough since community life is broader than just what happens at City Hall.

Some participants pointed out that the modern news landscape requires the reader or viewer (the “news consumer,” if you will) to be proactive in seeking out news that informs them about topics they want to follow. They also pointed out that too many people look for “point of view” news that aligns with their thinking. They seek out that category of coverage, then join an echo chamber where divergent views are unseen and perhaps unwelcome.

Another concern is cost. With news coming from so many different places/sources, consumers cannot afford to pay to get through multiple paywalls or over other financial hurdles. One person, for example, liked what she was seeing on Spectrum News, but lost access to it when her family decided to stop its cable subscription. Participants were aware and sympathetic to the challenges that media provides faces in finding the revenue it takes to collect and report the news. They just don’t feel it is their direct obligation to solve that challenge.

Northern Kentucky’s unique geographic location is at the root of another concern. As part of a metropolitan region weighted to Ohio, Northern Kentucky exists in a media market weighted toward coverage on Ohio’s politics and policy rather than Kentucky’s. What happens in Columbus is prioritized over what happens in Frankfort except in more localized media outlets, such as the Northern Kentucky Tribune and LINK nky.

Question 2 content sampler

“I look for things that are going to tell me why something’s happening versus what is happening. I will spend 20 minutes reading something to understand why.”

“I don’t watch local news. I don’t like ‘if it bleeds it leads.’ I listen to NPR.”

“Too much Ohio news.”

“Northern Kentucky gets overshadowed. Everything is filtered through a Cincinnati lens.”

“Facebook feeds are full of garbage. Things that should not be news become news.”

“People are not equipped to sort through the misinformation. They can’t point to a single news source and say that this is my source of news and it’s accurate.”

“I want facts. Neutrality. Information about things I should know about. Good opinion pieces. City news. Making sure people know where to find information. Obits. I went to obits on LINK nky, and only two there. Both were important people in the community, but they are not the only people who died.”

“The Northern Kentucky Tribune is a nonprofit. In the past, newspapers have not been nonprofits. They worked with ads and subscriptions. It’s tough for Judy Clabes [The Tribune’s publisher] to get revenue, and you can’t do it without revenue. Where is the entrepreneur who can figure out where the market is and how to make money from reporting news?”

“Younger people are not going to support paywalls. It’s been tried for years, and it’s not a good model.”

“I’d like to see more on the arts. Not just the ballet, but things like Tiger Lily Press [a small, arts-oriented nonprofit] and local art clubs.”

“I’d like more stories about climate change. I don’t always understand the science behind it, but I enjoy learning about it. And I enjoy good reporting on local government and education.”

“I’m interested in LGBTQIA+. And I’ll read anything about anything that has to do with education.”

Question 3: There are many sources of news. Let’s go down a list and talk about the pros and cons.

Nearly all of our participants rely on multiple sources for their news, underscoring the fact that news consumption today is fragmented.

Our participants said they find that they must rely on multiple sources since no single source can be relied upon to be comprehensive day in and day out. Very often, people must curate the news for themselves.

The single most common way that people get their news, among our 27 participants, is from digital news sites. Second is a tie between two means of sharing, one old-fashioned (word of mouth) and the other modern (email). The chart below provides a closer look.

Source	Number	Source	Number
Digital news sites	21	Television	16
Digital / social media	18	Radio or podcast	15
Word of mouth	18	Digital / email	11

Question 3 content sampler

“I don’t watch television news at night because it’s depressing. So I pick what I want to watch online.”

“I hear about stories from a friend, then go back and look them up online and read them.”

“The information overload creates information fatigue and it reinforces consuming news in snippets.”

Question 4: What is your opinion on the sources of news in our region? What is working well? Where are the gaps?

Views were wide-ranging on this question. Some participants are loyal to some providers, especially some of the new, online sites, such as the Northern Kentucky Tribune, LINK nky, and, for statewide news, the newcomer to our market, The Kentucky Lantern. Also receiving notable mention was Spectrum One, a cable news channel based in Louisville but covering local stories across the state, including in Northern Kentucky.

A common concern is that the reporters covering the region are young, inexperienced and don’t have the expertise to cover complex issues. Once they gain it, they move along to another job elsewhere and the next reporter arrives to repeat the cycle of learning, then leaving. Some of our participants work in local government and talked about a recurring need on their part to “school” young reporters who do not come prepared to cover what they’ve been asked to cover. Reporters need to understand the governments they cover and have a working grasp of the public policy questions that routinely confront local government. And more broadly, it is impossible to report on the big picture if you don’t know about it.

Bottom line, our participants want quality in the news they consume, no matter what platform is providing it – print, digital, television, radio or other. Quality includes holding government accountable and comprehensive coverage of what government is doing.

Question 4 content sampler

“You have to read so many sources to get a balanced view before you can make up your mind. We have them in the area but you have to look for them.”

“We are really lacking in local government accountability in the Northern Kentucky suburbs. For example, who goes to the Boone County Fiscal Court meetings when the budget is decided, where the decisions were made about how to spend money. There needs to be a journalist there to ask why a decision was made.”

“I appreciate Mark Payne [of LINK nky] and his reporting out of Frankfort.”

“I like the reporting that the Tribune does. I like that the Tribune is a nonprofit. I like KET and Spectrum news.”

“The challenge in Northern Kentucky is that we are just all in our little enclaves. In Lexington and Louisville, the League of Women voters has observer boards. If we wanted to do that in Northern Kentucky, we would need the Marine Corps to come in and go to all the meetings.”

“I miss The Post. They had 25 reporters and had one or two reporters in Frankfort all the time.”

“You used to be able to count on a reporter to specialize. Now we have a whole bunch of generalists. The reader has to rely on reporters who don’t understand the topic they reporting on.”

“All news coverage these days is biased.”

“The news is either too feel good or too bad.”

“On the whole LINK is doing well. There is a large gap with obituaries. The office hours they are holding are done very well. I do not see depth in LINK’s reporting. I see a lot of PR in LINK’s coverage. I had hoped the Tribune would take on the in-depth reporting.”

“We have grown lazy in our decision-making because newspapers require some energy. Consuming things that come across the net doesn’t require energy. We can consume media passively.”

Question 5: Have the changes in our news had an impact on our civic life or mental health?

The information gap that exists as our community transitions from newspapers with robust newsrooms to fledgling digital newsrooms disturbed our participants, who see a risk to our democracy (which suffers when voters are not well-informed) and our mental health (too much rage). To put it another way, many expressed concern that a decline in civic health is linked to decline in news coverage – especially explanatory coverage and accountability coverage.

The issue is not solely about what media outlets exist or do not, but also about how the public’s news consumption habits have changed. Many participants are concerned that our civic health is being diminished as our consumption of news narrows. By narrowing, participants meant driven, for example, by social media friends selecting things for them to see rather than by the habit of reading a newspaper as a whole and seeing a broader range of news.

Question 5 content sampler

“Our civic health is terminal because we have so many citizens who can’t make informed decisions when an election is coming up. Mostly, I hear who’s running and then people default vote on party lines.”

“Today, people can completely live in their own bubbles. You don’t have to get broad news. Any difference of opinion is shocking due to the bubble. You don’t have to see anything other than what you’ve chosen to see.”

“I’m getting off Twitter because it’s too toxic. There are so many news sources that you get tired of reading it.”

“It is affecting our civic life. We need to teach young people digital literacy.”

“People are tired of being shouted at.”

“I often wonder why no one is looking into why things are going on with local government, like why someone got a contract.”

“Social media effects your mental health. I’m glad that Twitter and Facebook didn’t exist when I was in school.”

“Civically, people are very separated. You can create your own bubble. It’s easier to pick on people when they are anonymous behind a screen.”

“There is a trust issue with media. The presence of sponsors affects what is written and how it’s written. We get stories that are glossed over. A quote and a graph, and it’s supposed to be a news story. There is no getting down to the heart of the matter.”

“Outrage sells. It has affected our mental health. We need to go back to the local news and the good things that are going on. People will read the local news because they know people in the stories. Instead, to be tribal we latch onto divisions.”

“News can be depressing, and you can only take so much. Civic health is declining, due to the tribal way they cover things and fundamental lack of knowledge about the way things work, the forces that cause things to happen, etc. I love explanatory journalism – not necessarily investigative but explaining why something happened, why it is happening or going to happen and then what are the fundamental points that are a part of it.”

“Some media outlets are rage machines.”

“The lack of local news and focus means that we don’t read things in common anymore. We are all picking what we want to read, which leads to a breakdown that we don’t trust one another because we are not reading the same things.”

“If your mind is made up you will find what you are looking for, and that’s what people do. The mental health part is very impacted because you will find what you want to validate. We have a hard time stepping back and zooming out.”

“Newspapers put things in political terms that should not be. There are topics that are way more universal than political parties’ take on it. Education should not be Democratic or Republican, but that’s how it’s reported. That increases tribalism.”

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was prepared based on notes taken by members of the Northern Kentucky Forum Board of Directors who served as scribes: Dawna Branch (Boone County Public Library), Amy Carroll (Campbell County Public Library), Nancy Knauf (Kenton County Public Library), JC Morgan (Campbell County Public Library), and Mark Neikirk (NKU’s Scripps Howard Center for

Civic Engagement). Mr. Neikirk drafted this report from the notes taken at each session. The full Forum board reviewed it.

The Forum board does not present this report to the community as the definitive word on local media. We do believe, however, that it represents a fair cross-section of opinion in our community. It is our hope that this report will help local media outlets consider what they are covering and how, and perhaps make improvement beneficial our region's understanding of itself and the issues it faces.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the participants. The Forum's sole role was to convene, collect and report what we heard.

- Learn more about the Northern Kentucky Forum and its events at www.nkyforum.org and follow us on Facebook.
- Email us at nkyforum@gmail.com.
- Email Mark Neikirk at neikirkm1@nku.edu