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dailynews.edu: A Proposal

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In this year of the Great Newspaper Meltdown, it has become commonplace to quote Thomas Jefferson: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right,” he wrote in 1787, “and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Jefferson’s witty maxim, of course, was explicitly counter-factual. Like the state of nature or the social contract -- other speculative conditions with which Enlightenment thinkers analyzed the actual workings of society -- a government without newspapers was posited as a kind of thought experiment, an imaginary lens for bringing the needs of civic life into focus. The point was clear. Democratic self-government depends on informed citizens, and therefore on the news organs that inform them.

Yet the current crisis has brought us close to realizing Jefferson’s dystopian speculation. Since 2008 nearly 20 newspapers -- including dailies in Seattle, Denver, Detroit and Cincinnati -- have closed or moved to online publication in reduced formats. The *Boston Globe* and *San Francisco Chronicle* teeter on the brink of bankruptcy; my hometown paper, the Ann Arbor News, morphed this July into [an online news site](#) ^[1] with two print editions a week. Among surviving dailies, there are draconian cuts in coverage; the *Los Angeles Times* has shrunk its newsroom by half. According to the blog [Paper Cuts](#) ^[2], U.S. newspapers eliminated 25,000 jobs in the past 18 months.

The causes of the calamity are well-known. A new class of corporate owners has shown itself willing to cut journalistic assets to secure short-term earnings. The brave new e-world of Craigslist and cable infotainment has kneecapped an older business model in which local ads funded local news. Many dailies retain loyal readers, for whom browsing the paper remains a rite of community affiliation. Yet even sustained circulation does not ensure solvency in the current business and technological environment.

These problems have simmered for years, but the recession brought them to a boil. And the resulting decline is measured not simply in readers, revenues and reporters’ jobs, but in civic vitality. With thinner sections and thinned-out substance, its columns increasingly barren of investigative reporting, cultural criticism and political analysis, the daily paper threatens to become a kind of civic fast food: empty calories for the body politic.

All this is well-known, as I said, and much-covered in the media. Why then rehearse it here, in *Inside Higher Ed*? What does the ordeal of the daily paper have to do with academic institutions?

Quite a bit, I think. For (as *IHE* itself underscores) we are not witnessing the demise of news gathering, but its transformation. These are revolutionary times; the ancient regime of the print daily is giving way to new modes of reportage, commentary and publication. Colleges and universities may have a powerful role to play in the emerging regime: as a host and partner for nonprofit, online news ventures that meld civic journalism, professional

apprenticeships, and the Jeffersonian project of informing the public. Such ventures would help to re-secure the democratic function of the daily news -- and in the process, renew the public purpose of higher education.

The shape of the “new news” is still up for grabs. Indeed a freewheeling public brainstorm is well under way, concerning the institutional practices, professional norms, technological media, business models, and modes of writing by which the news should be produced and disseminated in the 21st century. The shift of many news organizations to online publication is only the most visible experiment.

U.S. Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.) has drafted legislation to subsidize nonprofit news organs with federal tax breaks. A consortium of journalists, alarmed by the decline of the long-format reporting on public affairs, has launched [Pro Publica](#),^[3] a foundation-funded initiative to produce and disseminate national investigative stories. Some critics argue that the “daily novel” of the newspaper will inevitably be replaced by a dispersed system of small-scale reportage and commentary: perhaps an online marketplace of plug-in subcontractors, reporting for hire, perhaps a network of neighborhood-based “micro-journalists,” perhaps a community of netizens, creating wiki-like news forums. Each of these scenarios (along with many others) raises its own questions about reliability, viability, availability and depth of news coverage.

We do not, then, face Jefferson’s nightmare of a government without news. But we may well face something even more corrosive. For it is possible -- extrapolating from the landscape of e-tail and talk radio, viral YouTube fads and Twitter gossip -- to envision a news ecology so fragmented, amnesiac and sensational that it starves the kind of informed, engaged, shared civic life for which Jefferson believed newspapers to be essential. Which pathway to the new news will best nourish democratic citizens? How might academic institutions advance it?

Our current news culture offers one clear answer: the academic blogger. Scholars like the Middle East historian Juan Cole ([Informed Comment](#)^[4]) or the law professor Glenn Reynolds ([Instapundit](#)^[5]) bring real-time commentary and advocacy to the electronic public sphere. The intellectual blogosphere is often uneven in content and (for my taste) too snarky by half. Yet its commitment to critical analysis through open engagement -- “expertise on tap, not expertise on top,” as the saying goes -- mobilizes the resources of the academy for democratic deliberation.

Even the best prof-bloggers, however, cannot make up the civic deficit of the newspaper crisis. For blogging is not news-gathering. It supplements, but does not supplant, the public need for a daily, iterative, trustworthy ensemble of information (however incomplete and contested) about the doings of the world. It may seem counter-intuitive to imagine higher education contributing to the work of producing that ensemble.

But I would argue just that: Colleges and universities can offer a crucial response to the crisis not only by exporting peripatetic scholarly expertise, but also by playing host to campus-based ventures that cover local and state news.

For it is here, in the home regions surrounding our campuses, that the decline of the print daily poses the most corrosive threat to civic life. News gathering is suffering at every scale of coverage, of course, from the Darfur beat to the city council meeting. Yet in sites like nytimes.com, we can discern the emergence of sustained, online reportage of national and international issues by large news organizations. In contrast, the capillary coverage of local and regional affairs is on life support. Since 2003, according to the *American Journalism Review*,^[6] the cohort of full-time reporters covering U.S. state government has declined by one-third. Local business, education, and cultural reportage is even more threatened.

If these trends continue, the public affairs that most nearly touch our everyday lives -- school board elections, library censorship battles, state bond issues, social service regulations, land development schemes -- will become veiled from public discussion. Those with power will have a powerful incentive to inside dealing and corruption; those without it will have a powerful inducement to acquiescence. If we take seriously Dewey’s notion of democracy as a way of life, the regional impact of the newspaper crisis will be toxic for local communities -- and the toxins will inevitably trickle up into national politics.

Conversely the role of academic institutions as regional “stewards of place” (in [the wonderful phrase](#)^[7] of the

American Association of State Colleges and Universities) offers an untapped asset for engaging the crisis. It is a truism of academic administrators to tout their campuses -- large or small, private or public -- as regional engines of economic development. Colleges and universities can serve as equally robust catalysts of civic development. Indeed in recent years they have generated a veritable laboratory of engaged practices (service-learning courses, public partnerships, community-based research) that infuse their educational mission with a commitment to place-based institutional citizenship. Campus news sites offer a new arena for such civic engagement. One of the academy's most neglected assets, in short -- the rootedness of our intellectual capital in specific communities -- can meet one of the most glaring threats of the newspaper crisis.

Imagine, then, a national network of campus-based daily news sites. Newsrooms of professional journalists would cover local, regional, and state issues -- politics, economic development, work and labor, community affairs, art and culture, and (yes, that most important of community attachments) sports. The "dailynews.edu" website would be a nonprofit entity, overseen by a campus-community advisory board, but editorially independent. In place of a traditional editorial page, reflecting the views of its owner-publisher -- a wholly owned soapbox that will surely disappear with the print daily itself -- the news site would have a large, diverse op-ed section, a "Speakers' Corner" for campus and community voices on public affairs.

Undergraduates and graduate students -- whether "J-school" enrollees, Communications majors, or simply veterans of the student paper -- would do apprentice reporting, editorial work, and administrative support. Indeed, in contrast to the traditional newsroom, campus-based journalists would include in their portfolio a healthy dose of mentoring and teaching. The bills for the venture would be paid through a blend (different for different institutions) of government funding, campus support, soft-money grants, and reader-donor contributions.

Far-fetched? Economically unsustainable? An egregious case of mission creep for overextended campuses that ought to stick to classroom teaching and traditional research? Perhaps: I can already imagine the skeptics gathering under the banner, Save the Fourth Estate on Your Own Time.

Yet before we dismiss "dailynews.edu" out of hand, I would point to several other campus initiatives -- all of them at odds with a back-to-basics vision of higher education, yet all of them success stories -- with which to assess the feasibility and value of this idea. Three initiatives come to mind as models. Indeed every detail in the previous paragraphs has been tested by one or another of them.

Most obviously, there are campus-based public radio stations. Many have news operations with vigorous state-wide coverage; Michigan Radio, for instance, based at the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus, boasts more than a dozen reporters, commentators, producers and news hosts. They rely on a nonprofit business model that successfully blends government, academic, foundation, and grass-roots donor support. To be sure, most public radio newsrooms are small, often struggling operations. Reporters and commentators tend to be spread thin in covering their home state; and they tend to have thin connections to their home campus, treating it more as a venue than a professional context for their work.

The second model embodies a broader connection to the regional community and a deeper connection to the academic enterprise: the extension service of land-grant universities. Like the newspaper, extension divisions exist to distribute useful knowledge, mobilizing the gifts of higher education -- applied research, expert training -- to inform and instruct the public. Their business model depends on a confluence of government subsidies and user fees, but it is widely accepted that such funding constitutes a useful investment of educational resources in popular instruction.

The third model is less obvious and more interesting: the constellation of institutions -- galleries and museums, theaters and concert halls, arboretums and botanical gardens -- often grouped under the rubric of "the creative campus." It is notable that American higher education takes for granted the value of funding such institutions, with their distinctive mix of culture-making, public outreach, experiential pedagogy, and research. Their business model relies more on grants and university operating budgets, less on government subsidies.

Yet not unlike campus public radio or extension services, these institutions are in effect nonprofit subsidiaries, blending not only income streams but also cultural, civic and educational functions. The curators, set designers,

sound engineers, and arborists of the creative campus tend to integrate their core conservation or presentation work with public programming and undergraduate mentoring. In fact museums and performing-arts centers are often vanguards of the civic engagement movement, serving as liminal spaces where campus, community, and culture-making come together in partnership. They suggest a model of news sites that might similarly combine journalistic practice, professional apprenticeship, and collaborative public work.

Of course this sketch raises more questions than it answers. “Dailynews.edu” would be a dramatic departure for both the press and the academy. Can colleges and universities undertake such an ambitious venture at a time of fiscal crisis? Can two such different traditions of free inquiry -- the daily montage of news-gathering, the distilled analysis of scholarship -- fruitfully accommodate each other?

I hope not: for it is precisely the disruptive possibilities of this idea that make it so intriguing. Campus-based news sites pose transformative implications for both the press and the academy. They might catalyze new forms of journalistic education, less pre-professional, more organically connected to liberal learning, writing pedagogy and student engagement in public affairs. They might serve as a much-needed laboratory for the civic journalism movement. And conversely they would energize the civic engagement movement within higher education, grounding our sometimes grandiose commitment to public work in the frictional, daily encounter with our communities and their stories.

It is well-known that Thomas Jefferson saw the founding of the University of Virginia as one of his signal achievements. It would be fitting if the nation’s network of “academical villages” (as Jefferson called the Charlottesville campus) might contribute to renewing the democratic function of the daily news. Such a venture would reclaim the role of the news in public life -- and the role of public life in higher education.

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