News You Lose: How Fading News Outlets Are Changing the Work of One Special Library in British Columbia

Anna Loster, MLIS
Technical Services Librarian, Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

Megan Laflin, MLIS
Reference Librarian, Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

Abstract

Newspaper closures and reductions in service have become increasingly common across North America, leading to a shrinking number of news sources, and a consolidation in ownership of the remaining few. This paper looks specifically at the jurisdiction of British Columbia and how changes to the newspaper industry have forced a shift in the work of the Legislative Library of British Columbia. Special libraries might be able to draw conclusions that affect their own practices.

The Legislative Library of British Columbia offers a media monitoring service to its clients. This service is a crucial tool that keeps politicians and their staff informed of the news in the capital and their home constituencies. Significant loss of local newspapers available from vendors prompted an investigation into the newspaper industry and how major daily and small community newspapers have fared over the last decade. This paper will illuminate the business of newspapers through the lens of British Columbia, from large-scale news ownership structures and exclusive media rights deals to the reduced print service, mergers and closures of many local newspapers.

This research shows that British Columbia has seen a significant loss of community and daily newspapers over time, creating gaps in local and provincial news coverage. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the news environment have magnified this downturn. These gaps are revealing a market for new independent papers and online news models that are beginning to emerge. These results suggest a persisting impact on services offered by the Legislative Library
of British Columbia as the industry continues to evolve and could have broader consequences outside of the library sphere.

Introduction

The Legislative Library of British Columbia (LLBC) was founded in 1863 to serve the Colonial Legislature of Vancouver Island and subsequently the Province of British Columbia when it joined Canada in 1871. Today, LLBC primarily supports the research needs of the Legislative Assembly through the provision of confidential, non-partisan reference services including research requests and document delivery. The Legislative Assembly is the lawmaking body of British Columbia and consists of eighty-seven elected Members (MLAs) who represent constituencies (ridings) across the province. Members of the Legislative Assembly meet in the provincial capital Victoria to debate, pass laws, approve finances and set the direction for the province. Victoria, on Vancouver Island, is located on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations.

The primary clientele of LLBC are MLAs, their political caucus and constituency staff, Legislative Assembly staff, statutory offices and government employees. LLBC also serves members of the public when the Assembly is not in session. One of the services offered to primary clients is a current awareness newsletter distributed using a vendor-based software. The newsletter collects articles from both major daily provincial newspapers and the community weekly papers and delivers them to clients via email every weekday morning. This service helps MLAs to stay up to date on news from both the capital and their constituencies. This is crucial because the province is geographically large and diverse, requiring Members to monitor multiple news sources in order to stay informed.

Over the course of a regular procurement review, LLBC began investigating the newspapers available via eligible vendors and discovered that an underlying issue for the success of its media monitoring product was the state of the newspaper industry in the province. This paper is a culmination of LLBC’s research into the newspaper business in British Columbia and the implications for library services and local communities generally.

Current Awareness Services at LLBC

A primary goal of the Legislative Library of British Columbia is to keep its clients informed. MLAs and their staff want to stay up to date on current events of provincial interest, but also have more specific information needs, such as checking how a government initiative is being received in their constituency or tracking how and when each Member is mentioned in local and provincial papers. LLBC supports this through the creation and distribution of several email-based current awareness newsletters:

- **BC Daily News Update**—a daily roundup of news stories from British Columbia newspapers on topics of provincial interest.
• *BC Today*—a daily newsletter reported by a press gallery member on happenings in the Legislature and committees, funding announcements, lobbyist registries and other news of note. LLBC began distributing *BC Today* in 2019.

• Custom news scans—sent to clients who request them on specific subjects, offered daily or weekly.

**BC DAILY NEWS UPDATE**

LLBC has offered BC Daily News Update digitally as an email newsletter since 2013 and as a print product before that. BC Daily News Update consists of news of provincial interest from the major daily provincial papers, the *Vancouver Sun, The Province* (Vancouver, BC) and *Times Colonist* (Victoria, BC) and smaller community papers. The newsletter contains a mix of embedded full-text content and links to community news websites. Library clerks manually tag the stories with the names of MLAs featured in the article or the byline of the story to allow for quick browsing.

LLBC creates BC Daily News Update using a media monitoring vendor that offers access to news stories, as well as the ability to produce newsletters. Within the vendor’s media monitoring platform, LLBC developed a complex Boolean search string that generates a collection of news stories from selected newspapers. Each weekday morning a clerk logs in to the platform, selects news stories from the search results and tags the stories with the names of featured MLAs. The news clerk then forwards the newsletter to a librarian for review before sending it out to clients. The aim is to include news and editorials of provincial significance, articles written by Members or that feature their work, and articles that cover activities of ministries or legislative committees. Letters to the editor, unless written by Members or influential groups, are generally avoided. This service is distributed to approximately 200 clients including Assembly staff, political caucus staff, constituency assistants throughout the province, and the Members themselves.

Figure 1 shows a sample of BC Daily News Update’s table of contents. The newsletter is divided into two sections, provincial daily news and community papers. By clicking the article’s title, the reader will either be directed to the full-text article embedded within the newsletter or linked out to the article on the newspaper’s website, dependent upon licensing.
Provincial Daily News

NDP begins process for redrawing riding boundaries; Move could slash representation in north: Liberals
Vancouver Sun (Print Edition) - Katie Derosa - May 11, 2021
changes were last made to electoral ridings in 2015, Attorney General David Eby said when presenting amendments to the Electoral Boundaries
Featured MLAs: David Eby, Mike de Jong

NDP tosses two public servants under the bus: Horgan, Dix had no business sending doctors to answer for document leaks
Vancouver Sun (Print Edition) - Vaughn Palmer Victoria - May 11, 2021
for the government side was Health Minister Adrian Dix, who insisted that "the information about Fraser Health has been available every day"
Featured MLAs: Adrian Dix, John Horgan, Shirley Bond, Sonia Furstenau, Adam Olsen

10 shootings in Metro Vancouver linked to gang war
Victoria Times Colonist (Print Edition) - Amy Smart - May 11, 2021
"McDonald said. Representatives from the police agencies plan to meet today with Mike Farnworth, B.C.'s minister of public safety and"
Featured MLA: Mike Farnworth

Community Papers

Lil Mack of Williams Lake honoured with BC Achievement Community Award
The Williams Lake Tribune - May 11, 2021
15th year offering the program, award recipients were announced May 10 by Premier John Horgan and Annie Gardini, QC, OBC, QC and Chair of
Featured MLA: John Horgan

Opposition grills government over vaccine rollouts for cancer patients
Peninsula Herald (Print Edition) - May 11, 2021
are in places like Alberta and Ontario," said Opposition Health Critic Renee Merrifield. "With a large and more stable supply of vaccines"
Featured MLAs: Renee Merrifield, Adrian Dix

Figure 1: A screenshot of BC Daily News Update
Media Monitoring Vendors

Between 2013 and 2017, LLBC relied on one vendor for digital media monitoring. In the fall of 2017 that vendor was acquired by a larger media monitoring firm and with this came changes. Notably, there was a significant drop in full-text BC community newspaper coverage which resulted in much less content for client newsletters. Where previously it was common to have over fifteen articles per day, after the acquisition only about five or six were appearing and LLBC staff noticed that articles from certain newspapers we no longer being retrieved. This drastic drop in content prompted LLBC to investigate the cause and see if a media monitoring vendor with more comprehensive coverage of BC community newspapers was available.

LLBC undertook an extensive evaluation of media monitoring vendors on the market. As part of the evaluation, LLBC identified the key criteria required in order to meet its client's needs. Most importantly, LLBC needed a vendor that could provide full-text coverage of the British Columbia major daily newspapers because the content of these papers is paywalled. These papers provide an important look at the day’s top news stories province-wide, which LLBC’s clients rely on as part of the service. In addition, comprehensive coverage of BC community newspapers was essential.

Other criteria LLBC identified were access to licensed content, finding a vendor that could provide newsletter distribution as part of its service and access to a range of other British Columbia news sources. In order to provide the best news coverage to clients, LLBC needed the vendor’s content to be licensed. Licensed content is key as it allows for the inclusion of full-text articles, not under embargo, that can be printed in the newsletter the same day as publication. The vendor also needed to offer the capability for the creation and distribution of an email newsletter. This would be necessary as LLBC is not equipped to produce a newsletter service in-house and needed a way to distribute the product to its clients. Lastly, a variety of BC news from other sources was identified as an asset. Ideally, the successful vendor would offer news coverage from online platforms, independent papers, ethnic newspapers and Indigenous media outlets. In selecting a vendor, LLBC sought a comprehensive picture of BC news that didn’t simply include traditional media, but instead provided a broad range of viewpoints.

As the market evaluation was conducted, research revealed British Columbia to be a very small, niche market with only two media monitoring vendors able to provide full-text, licensed access to BC community newspapers. Further to this, LLBC discovered that each of these vendors has exclusive distribution rights with publishers, who tend to own newspapers within certain geographic areas of the province.

NEWSPAPER HOLDINGS GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The map shown in figure 2 demonstrates the geographical distribution of full-text licensed newspaper content offered by the two vendors considered by LLBC. An interactive version of the map can be found here: https://bit.ly/3bWTbv1. The pink pins represent content offered exclusively by Vendor A and consist primarily of papers owned by newspaper publishers.
Glacier Media and Postmedia. The blue pins represent exclusive content offered by Vendor B - primarily papers owned by Black Press. As shown in figure 2, Vendor B offers strong coverage in the northern portion of the province and on Vancouver Island, while Vendor A offers greater coverage in the Okanagan and Lower Mainland regions.

![Google My Maps](image)

*Figure 2: Map showing geographic distribution of full-text British Columbia newspaper coverage of two media monitoring vendors.*

**SOLUTIONS**

At the conclusion of the evaluation, LLBC found that no single media monitoring vendor met all specified criteria. Despite Vendor B’s larger selection of full-text community newspapers, only Vendor A offered full-text licensing for the major provincial dailies the *Vancouver Sun*, *The Province* (Vancouver, BC) and *Times Colonist* (Victoria, BC), ultimately leading LLBC to continue on with its previous vendor (Vendor A). This choice did involve some give-and-take, and as a result LLBC lost full-text access to one of Canada’s primary major dailies, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, ON). The loss of distribution rights for full-text access to a portion of the province’s community newspapers was also a significant compromise, resulting
in gaps in geographic coverage. Vendor A’s platform does have a workaround with the capability to find freely available news articles online, which can be included in the newsletters with embedded links.

**Community News - Civic Institutions**

Beyond their necessity for the work of the Legislature, local newspapers play an important role in the civic life of communities. The availability of diverse, local content is critical for community identity building. Polling in Canada shows that citizens value their community newspapers and see them as trusted sources for news (Lindgren et al. 2019). Strong local news organizations can build social cohesion at the local level, foster political participation and encourage efficiency in municipal governments. Both the local free weekly and the daily provincial papers have a role to play in creating a healthy news ecosystem within a community.

According to Penelope Muse Abernathy, the very local news organization “helps residents in small and mid-sized communities understand what is going on in their community and also put into local context national issues such as the opioid crisis or the coronavirus pandemic” (2020, 13). These papers also cover niche issues that a larger regional paper may not pick up, see figure 3, the first issue of the *Rocky Mountain Goat* based in Valemount, BC. The cover story reports on the impact of train whistles on the community.

![The Rocky Mountain Goat](https://www.the-rocky-mountain-goat.com)

**Vavenby enjoys first spring train whistle free**

Other communities still mixed in dense process to remove it

Laura Reil
Reil@the-rocky-mountain-goat.com

The building and detonating of trains are still Lake Valley residents to keep, but their not is no longer disturbed by the piercing whistles trains approaching the community.

“Trains are no longer heard to server their whistles when passing through Valley, a community of 700 sets, along the Blue River” says one resident. “Train engineers still use the whistle at their discretion in emergencies situations.”

The Valley has had 20 years of a house that backs onto the rail line.

“Most of the kids can play out here now and it doesn’t bother them,” says one resident.

His son, Chris Volfen says the grass and flowers are now free from the ground when a train comes.

“A would never keep the noise out of the kids,” he says.

“Shouldn’t winos in the middle of the night?”

The whole town was behind their house. When they reported about stopping the whole several years, the Valley learned 52.

**TransAlta Harnesses Bone Creek**

Project to power 8200 homes at peak

Laura Reil
Reil@transalta.com

The water from the spring run-off is always to easy or depositing dirt by the train.

“Wind turbines” are now a peak. It is slated for completion next spring.

The project is exploring about 300 people equipment operators, carpenters, and skilled labourers.

![Figure 3: The first cover of local paper The Rocky Mountain Goat (Valemount, BC) from June 8, 2010.](https://www.the-rocky-mountain-goat.com)
Regional papers (such as metro papers, or provincial/state papers) communicate how citizens across a larger geographic area are connected and may help people come together to address problems, by perhaps lobbying their MLA or starting a community initiative. “The journalists at these papers spot trends among the various smaller community papers, and their reporters on beats, such as education, health and politics, provide journalistic oversight and editorial commentary on areas that affect the future of all residents in a city, region or state” (Abernathy 2020, 13).

Local media also helps to preserve collective memory. The archives of the British Colonist, an early iteration of the Times Colonist (Victoria, BC), dates to 1858 and the Vancouver Sun was established in 1912. These archives are invaluable for the work at LLBC as reference librarians regularly consult historical news coverage in their research work. The historical newspaper archives are also a popular resource utilized by historians and researchers from across the country.

ETHNIC AND MINORITY-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS

Non-English, or what is often referred to as “ethnic” newspapers, support the development and vitality of minority language communities. New immigrants often rely on papers in their native languages or dedicated to their ethnic communities to gain information about Canada and news from their home countries (Canada 2017). Governments often use these papers to advertise initiatives that impact minority communities. This role was widely utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic to communicate crucial information on public health orders and vaccine distribution. Figure 4 shows an article from the Greater Vancouver-based Punjabi paper, Canadian Punjab Times, announcing the opening of additional COVID-19 vaccine clinics in Surrey, BC.
Just as traditional media helps document the life and culture of a community over time, ethnic papers record the history of minority communities. Il Marco Polo is a weekly newspaper based in Vancouver that has been covering the Italian-Canadian community in both English and Italian since 1974. In addition to covering current events, world news and sports, the paper provides a record of local social and cultural events, including community weddings.

INDIGENOUS MEDIA

Indigenous media provides content that reflects the distinctive culture within Indigenous communities and may help bridge the gap in understanding between Indigenous and settler-Canadians (Canada 2017). Article 16 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples declares the right of Indigenous people to establish media in their own languages and calls for state-owned media to reflect Indigenous cultural diversity:

Article 16

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of
expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity (United Nations 2007, 14).

Additionally, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action number 86 speaks to the need for journalism programs and media schools to create specialized media initiatives for Indigenous Canadians. Article 86 also calls for media reporting that educates Canadians on indigenous issues and provides connections between Indigenous and settler communities (Canada 2017, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

Ha-Shilth-Sa (Port Alberni, BC) has been published by the Nuu-Chah-Nulth tribal council since 1974 and is based on Vancouver Island. The name of the paper means “interesting news” in the Nuu-Chah-Nulth language. Other BC based Indigenous media includes the quarterly news magazine Lexéy’em (Williams Lake, BC), meaning “to tell a story” in Secwepemctsin, produced by the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council and Windspeaker, a national Indigenous newspaper. While Windspeaker ceased its print publication in 2016 it continues to publish digitally. IndigiNews is an emerging media model that consists of a weekly email newsletter of Indigenous-focused news covering Vancouver Island and the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia.

COMMUNITY NEWS HISTORY

Community newspapers in British Columbia have a long and vibrant past. Historically, most municipalities had their own newspaper or multiple competing newspapers, reporting on many aspects of community life. Local reporters had a vested interest in their communities and provided in-depth coverage of noteworthy events, including city council meetings, school board meetings, sports and general municipal affairs. Home-grown businesses advertised, helping to fuel the local economy. Papers were a primary source for citizens to access information about what was happening in their town and beyond. They were available freely or as paid subscriptions; some were family owned and operated, while others were locally owned by small businesses.

Several community newspapers in British Columbia date back to the turn of the century or earlier. Examples include the Peninsula News Review (Sidney, BC), founded in 1912, the Salmon Arm Observer, founded in 1907, the Quesnel Cariboo Observer and Vancouver Courier, both founded in 1908 and the Chilliwack Progress, with its first publication dating back to 1891. These papers are still being published in some form (except for the Vancouver Courier, which closed in 2020). Another recent casualty of the volatile newspaper industry is the Prince George Citizen. Figure 5 shows an image from the last daily edition. After 103 years, it ceased publication in September 2019 as a daily print newspaper and moved to a free print weekly model with a focus towards its online publication (Sparrow, Godbout 2019).
British Columbia Media Landscape

Like many jurisdictions across North America, British Columbia has seen a significant number of newspaper closures, decreases in service from daily to weekly publication and a consolidation of media ownership. Figure 6 shows the number of daily newspapers in British Columbia in 2010 versus 2021 based on data available from News Media Canada, a trade association for newspaper publishers. In 2010 there were sixteen daily papers, and as of 2021 there are six. Some of the newspapers that have reduced service to weekly distribution or ceased publication altogether since 2010 include the *Prince George Citizen, Alberni Valley Times* (Port Alberni, BC), *Prince Rupert Daily News* and the *Kamloops Daily News*. During this time, the *Vancouver Island Free Daily* (Parksville, BC), a free community paper was established. These numbers only account for traditional newspapers associated with News Media Canada and do not include online/newsletter-based media models or most ethnic or Indigenous media.
The graph in figure 7, also compiled using reports from News Media Canada, shows the ownership of newspapers in BC. Black Press owns a huge share of newspapers in British Columbia, but the graph also shows that independently owned newspapers are still a player in the media landscape in this province. A few independent papers in BC include the Richmond Sentinel, the Pender Post, and the Gulf Islands Driftwood (Salt Spring Island, BC). There are some jurisdictions in Canada where newspaper ownership is even more concentrated. In New Brunswick for example, nearly every major print newspaper is owned by Brunswick News Inc. (Couture 2013). The newspaper industry is relatively volatile, so this data changes frequently.
MAJOR COMPANIES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA PRINT NEWS MEDIA

Due to the increasing consolidation of newspaper ownership in British Columbia, a small number of companies control the majority of mainstream newspapers in the province. Here we examine three of these companies, Black Press, Glacier Media and Postmedia. These companies collectively reach the majority of British Columbia through their circulation. They also each represent different forms of newspaper ownership shaping the dynamics of the media landscape.

Black Press, owned by David Black, is a privately held company. In many ways David Black represents the traditional media ownership structure of the “newspaper baron.” Black bought his first newspaper, the Williams Lake Tribune, in 1975, and then began adding papers in the BC interior and Vancouver Island. Today his company owns over 80 papers in British Columbia, Alberta and Nunavut as well as newspapers in Washington, California, Alaska and Hawaii (Williams Lake Tribune 2018). Black Press currently owns every community newspaper on Vancouver Island, an area with a population of nearly 800,000 according to recent census data (Statistics Canada 2016). “I began to understand that if you buy papers within a certain geographic area and put them on your press, you’re going to make more money,” Black told BC Business in 2006, and he predicted further expansion into other regions, particularly to the United States (Jordan 2006).
Another important player in BC community newspapers is Glacier Media. Glacier is a publicly traded company, formerly a bottled water company, that transitioned into the media industry when it was purchased by Sam Grippo in 1998 (Edge 2018, 5). Glacier Media now owns newspapers across western Canada, with papers in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. In addition to community news, the company owns a number of trade publications in the areas of real estate, mining and agriculture. In 2011 Glacier Media purchased British Columbia’s third largest daily paper, the Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) from Postmedia when that company began downsizing in the province. The deal, valued at $86.5 million, included 20 other community newspapers and two additional dailies (Krashinsky 2011). Glacier Media’s influence is strong given its considerable reach in circulation despite owning a smaller share of community weeklies than Black Press.

Postmedia is Canada’s largest media chain and owns a daily newspaper in nearly every major Canadian city, including two in Vancouver, BC: the Vancouver Sun and The Province. While the company has downsized considerably since the deal to sell the Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) in 2011, their influence is still substantial as the publisher of two key provincial papers. Postmedia represents a trend emerging across North America of hedge funds owning or being the primary investors of newspaper companies. In 2016, New Jersey based hedge fund Chatham Asset Management assumed ownership of Postmedia. According to Postmedia’s fiscal 2020 Annual Report, Chatham owns 66% of Postmedia shares and 33% of the outstanding voting rights. While Canadian law prohibits full foreign ownership of media companies, Chatham has enormous sway over the direction of the papers within Postmedia. Since Chatham’s takeover, the Vancouver Sun and The Province (Vancouver, BC) have seen their journalist staff cut in half and an overall staff reduction of 38% across all Postmedia papers (Lee 2020).

Chatham Asset Management has continued to build its portfolio of newspapers across North America. In 2020 they were the winning bidder in the bankruptcy auction of McClatchy, one of the last major family-run newspaper companies in the USA, acquiring 30 newspapers. Included in this deal were the Kansas City Star and the Sacramento Bee (Lee 2020). The rise of investment funds purchasing distressed newspapers has been termed the ‘rise of the new media baron’ -- “unlike the local owners of the past who had a stake in their communities, or the professional managers who ran those large 20th century chains, these new newspaper owners focus almost exclusively on driving the performance of their holdings, of which newspapers are often a small and expendable part” (Abernathy 2016, 19).

Whether privately or publicly owned, British Columbia print media has experienced rapid change over the last ten years with small newspapers traded, merged and closed in the face of economic challenges facing the traditional newspaper business model.

CLOSURES, MERGERS AND REDUCTIONS IN SERVICE

Community newspaper closures have risen dramatically over the past decade. Based on data from the Local News Research Project, the timeline in figure 8 shows that at least thirty-nine community newspapers have shuttered in BC since 2010. One of the reasons for this rise in
closures is because newspapers are acquired or traded between publishers. In some cases, this trading has no monetary value but creates a monopoly for one publisher in a particular town or region (Edge 2016, 16). Once a single publisher owns all the newspapers in an area, there is no need to keep multiple competing papers, resulting in closures. Both Black Press and Glacier Media have been responsible for these types of closures. In 2014, Black Press owned several of the newspapers on Vancouver Island and traded with Glacier Media for the papers it didn’t already own (Edge 2018, 6), creating a proprietorship on the island.

![Timeline of community newspaper closures in British Columbia, 2010 – 2021.](image)

The city of Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island, is a particularly evident example. Nanaimo originally had three local newspapers: the *Harbour City Star* (Nanaimo, BC), the *Nanaimo Daily News* and the *Nanaimo News Bulletin*. Black Press owned the *Nanaimo News Bulletin*, and in late 2014, purchased the *Nanaimo Daily News* and the *Harbour City Star* (Nanaimo, BC) (Edge 2018, 7). Less than a half year later, the *Harbour City Star* (Nanaimo, BC) was closed and in 2016, the *Nanaimo Daily News* was closed as well (Edge 2018, 7). This was an especially significant loss to the community as the *Nanaimo Daily News* opened in 1874 and had been publishing for 141 years (The Canadian Press 2016). After these two closures, only the *Nanaimo News Bulletin* remained, leaving no competition and only one local paper.
Figure 9, also produced from data collected by the Local News Research Project, captures community newspapers in British Columbia that have reduced their services, merged with other local newspapers or changed their print run practices. The first bar shows which newspapers, either free or subscription model, reduced their services from printing daily to publishing less often and on a varying schedule. The *Vernon Morning Star Daily* is a good example of this, in 2014, it ceased publication as a daily and began printing three issues per week. In 2018, the paper’s print service was further reduced to twice a week as the publisher began a shift in focus towards its online newspaper and Facebook news account (Morning Star Staff 2018).

The second and third bars in figure 9 show community papers that have reduced their print services and those that merged with another newspaper to form one community paper. Examples of these include the *Kelowna Capital News*, which in 2014 reduced its print cycle from three days per week to two days (Kelowna Capital News 2014), and the *Langley Advance* and *Langley Times* which merged in 2019 to form the *Langley Advance Times* (Lindgren and Corbett 2021).

**THE PRESS GALLERY**

Reporters based at the Legislative Assembly, known as the press gallery, have direct access to politicians and are on-site and tuned in to the legislative proceedings. These journalists play an especially important role in keeping the public informed about politics and holding
government officials to account. As the primary conduit between MLAs and their constituents,
press gallery reporters have an enormous amount of power to shape the conversation about the
work of the legislature (Reeder 1997). As more newspapers close or downsize their newsrooms,
press gallery membership across Canada is also declining. According to a 2016 report by J-
Source, press gallery membership has dropped significantly in the provinces of Quebec, Nova
Scotia, Alberta, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan. “Press gallery presidents who said
their membership has remained mostly steady during their time in the Legislature—
Newfoundland and Labrador, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Manitoba— mentioned the
effects of tightening resources weaving into their daily work. Reporters are under increasing
pressure to cover more with less time, at the cost of the deep digging that holds politicians to
account” (Zeng 2016).

The British Columbia press gallery is a self-governing body. Press Gallery membership is
made up of selected journalists who are given accreditation (Reeder 1997). Current press gallery
membership includes journalists from newspapers The Globe and Mail (Toronto, ON),
Vancouver Sun, The Province (Vancouver, BC), Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) and one reporter
each for the Rocky Mountain Goat (Valemount BC), Black Press and Canadian Press. Television
and radio reporters make up a large share of press gallery membership. There are also members
from the digital-only publications: The Tyee, Orca, The Narwhal and BC Today.

LOCAL NEWS DESERTS

The closure of community newspapers in British Columbia is part of a larger
phenomenon called “news deserts”. This term is being used to define the significant decline of
both community and regional newspapers, resulting in no local news coverage or very little news
coverage within a particular region (Abernathy 2018). The Media Center for Innovation and
Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill defines a news
desert as “a community either rural or urban with limited access to the sort of credible and
comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grass roots level” (What
exactly is a ‘news desert?’ 2019). This includes communities that have only one newspaper
resulting in a lack of competing reporting. This is not only happening in British Columbia but
also across other parts of Canada and the United States.

Ghost papers are another phenomenon that results in the loss of local newspapers. This
happens when a newspaper reduces its staff so significantly that it cannot continue to produce
original reporting (Abernathy 2018, 24). Newsroom staff are left to reprint articles from regional
or national papers, or government press releases as news articles, and the quality and quantity of
news that was once covered cannot be maintained. An example of this is the now defunct 24
hours (Vancouver, BC) commuter newspaper. In 2014, after almost a decade of publishing, it
was purchased by Postmedia. Soon after the purchase, half of the newsroom staff were laid off
(Edge 2016, 152). In 2016 the Vancouver office was closed completely (Slattery 2016). The
paper continued printing but was operated out of Toronto, reproducing content from British
Columbia’s regional dailies, the Vancouver Sun and The Province (Vancouver, BC), both owned
by Postmedia (Edge 2016, 152). In 2017, the 24 hours (Vancouver, BC) shut permanently as a result of a large swapping of papers between publishers Postmedia and Torstar (Smith 2017).

Communities suffer when investigative journalism produced by local newspapers disappears (Abernathy 2018). Citizens in news deserts are left with little or no choice of where to obtain the news, forcing readers to seek out other options. Many community members will simply choose to not read the news or will find alternatives that may not be reliable. Well-intentioned community Facebook groups often fill the void left by the closure of local papers. With no editorial oversight or professional codes, rumors and false information can spread quickly on these pages (Zadrozny 2021). An example of a community-led approach to local news is the website The Sooke PocketNews, on southern Vancouver Island. This online-only news site consists of community-authored stories produced by a team of regular contributors and articles supplied by local citizens.

While many online-only news models are reliable sources produced with editorial oversight, many are not, including news shared on social media pages. This may cause confusion as to which news sources have been fact-checked and reported, and which rely on hearsay and gossip. Traditional journalism adheres to professional standards and codes, and professional journalists are trained to gather news and synthesize the information in a meaningful, credible way (Canada 2017, 60).

**Emerging Media Models**

The landscape of news is evolving as traditional print newspapers continue to disappear. Many citizens still desire local news coverage and this hasn’t changed with the decline of print news. As these gaps in local news availability have developed, new media models are emerging to fill them. Independently owned newspapers are popping up across the province. One example of this is the Rocky Mountain Goat (Valemount, BC) which serves east-central British Columbia, a largely rural area peppered with a handful of small communities. This newspaper began publishing in 2010 and has a significant online presence, as well as producing weekly print editions. Its website receives roughly 3,500 page views weekly from a population of about 5,000 people (Rocky Mountain Goat, n.d.).

Reader preference in where to obtain information has changed dramatically in the last decade as more readers turn to the internet for news. In response to this, digital media models have become a significant means of reporting. Between 2010 and 2019 there have been at least eleven online news services launched across BC (Lindgren and Corbett 2021). Most newspapers now have an online presence, as many are operating under a mixed business model of print and online distribution to expand their reach to a wider audience (Canada 2017, 11). In British Columbia, community newspapers such as the Vernon Morning Star are turning their focus towards their social media news platforms.

In addition to the mixed print-digital model of traditional newspapers, a new crop of online-only news sources is emerging. National news services, such as iPolitics, Canada’s National Observer and La Presse have all transitioned to online-only based subscriptions (Canada 2017, 9). The Narwhal, which has three press gallery reporters at the Legislative
Assembly, is a Canadian online magazine and states its goal is “to bring evidence-based news and analysis to the surface for all Canadians” (The Narwhal n.d.). The Tyee, Castanet and Capital Daily in British Columbia also operate in an online-only model.

A range of entrepreneurs are experimenting with new business models and ways of providing local news to communities that have lost their papers (Abernathy 2018, 9). An example of this is the email newsletter model which is gaining popularity as journalists are leaving their newsroom jobs to build their own platforms (Bogage 2020). LLBC is noticing this trend in BC with emerging local newsletters like the Burnaby Beacon and Fraser Valley Current. In 2019, LLBC began subscribing to BC Today, a small grassroots email publication that provides detailed coverage of the Legislature, including committee meetings, funding announcements, lobbyist registries and cabinet shuffles. This publication is an offshoot of the Ontario-based Queens Park Today that launched in 2012 and has since expanded to offer newsletters for British Columbia, Alberta and Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

COVID-19 Pandemic Consequences

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on newspapers in British Columbia. The already struggling industry has been dealt a significant blow by the pandemic. By April 2020, community papers across the province had announced staff layoffs and some reduced their print editions or cancelled them entirely (Wechsler 2021). The Vancouver Courier, Osoyoos Times, Oliver Chronicle and Meritt Herald all shut their newsrooms completely and ceased publication (Wechsler 2021). The publishers claimed that these closures were temporary, with the hopes of resuming publication in the future. In May 2020, the Osoyoos Times and Oliver Chronicle announced they would be dismantled and merged to form the Times-Chronicle, to serve communities in the South Okanagan. It currently publishes in print every Wednesday and has an online presence (Times-Chronicle 2020). It is unclear if the Merritt Herald, which has been publishing since 1908, has resumed its print editions but it continues to contribute to its online platform. The Vancouver Courier is a casualty of the pandemic. It announced that its temporary closure would become permanent and closed on September 10, 2020, after 112 years of publication (Correia 2020).

In the wake of COVID-19, journalists, citizens and staff of newspapers rallied for local news and found creative ways to support the industry. Many newspapers put a call out asking for donations from the public to try and keep themselves afloat, including the newspapers published by Black Press, Glacier Media and Aberdeen Publishing (Rothenburger 2020). Some individuals bought ads in their local newspapers, knowing that revenue from advertising is key to a newspaper’s bottom line. Advocates posted on Twitter hoping to engage other concerned citizens to buy ads, such as this tweet from White Rock resident Chad Skelton who bought an ad in the Peace Arch News (Surrey, BC), “if you value your local community newspaper-and you want it to be around when all this is over-there's an easy way you can help: buy an ad. I can confirm it’s super easy to do and gives you a warm fuzzy feeling” (@chadskelton, April 2, 2020).
Conclusion

Today's news landscape has changed drastically from what it was just a few years ago and continues to evolve. More and more local and regional newspapers are suffering and closing across the province. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the downturn in the local newspaper business, and this is expected to continue as effects of the pandemic further reveal themselves. The newspapers mentioned that have been hit hard by the pandemic are just a few examples of many that continue to endure hardship in an already teetering industry.

As shifts in the news landscape in British Columbia are expected to continue, LLBC is hopeful it can remain vigilant for the changes to come. Media monitoring vendor license agreements with publishers will continue to evolve. This will directly impact media monitoring at LLBC and the library realizes that it needs to be creative with how this service is delivered to clients. LLBC is currently employing new strategies to capture the news and experimenting with the different models popping up in the BC news landscape. LLBC’s recent subscription to the BC Today email newsletter stands out as a key way it is adapting. BC Today offers select coverage of the work of the Legislative Assembly and is extremely popular amongst clients. Librarians at LLBC discovered this publication through efforts to stay informed of emerging media trends. By following this example, LLBC is hopeful it can pivot and provide the best service possible, even through challenging times.

Research for this paper revealed a very fluid environment of news reporting and delivery. The volatility of the local newspaper market is expected to persist into the foreseeable future and could have implications for special libraries with a mandate to provide news services to clientele. With niche publications, online news models and newsletter models surfacing to fill the void of disappearing local print news, libraries will need to find inventive ways to adapt to the changing dynamics of the newspaper industry.

Endnotes


