

00:04

I've been a journalist for more than 23 years, at the "Arkansas Democrat-Gazette," the "Pittsburgh Tribune Review" and most recently, "The Denver Post."

00:14

(Applause)

00:17

When I started at "The Denver Post" in 2003, it was among the country's 10 largest newspapers, with an impressive subscriber base and nearly 300 journalists. At the time, I was in my 30s. Any ambitious journalist that age aspires to work for one of the big national papers, like "The New York Times" or "The Wall Street Journal." But I was simply blown away by my first few weeks at "The Denver Post," and I thought, "This is going to be my paper. I can make a career right here."

00:51

Well, seven years passed, we were sold to a hedge fund, Alden Global Capital. Within a few years --

01:00

(Laughs)

01:01

(Laughter)

01:03

Some of you know this story.

01:04

(Laughter)

01:08

Within a few years, buyouts ordered by past and present owners would reduce the newsroom by nearly half. And I understood. The rule of thumb used to be that 80 percent of a newspaper's revenue came from pricy print ads and classifieds. With emerging giants like Google and Facebook and Craigslist, those advertising dollars were evaporating. The entire industry was undergoing a massive shift from print to digital. Alden's orders were to be digital first. Take advantage of blogs, video and social media. They said that one day, the money we made online would make up for the money we lost in print. But that day never came.

01:55

In 2013, we won a Pulitzer Prize for covering the Aurora theater shooting. Alden ordered that more journalists be cut. Again, and again, and again, and again. We were forced to say goodbye to talented, hardworking journalists we considered not just friends but family. Those of us left behind were stretched impossibly thin, covering multiple beats and writing rushed articles. Inside a windowless meeting room in March of 2018, we learned that 30 more would have to go. This paper that once had 300 journalists would now have 70.

02:44

And it didn't make sense. Here, we'd won multiple Pulitzer Prizes. We shifted our focus from print to digital, we hit ambitious targets and email from the brass talked up the Post's profit margins, which industry experts pegged at nearly 20 percent. So if our company was so successful and so profitable, why was our newsroom getting so much smaller and smaller?

03:13

I knew that what was happening in Colorado was happening around the country. Since 2004, nearly 1,800 newsrooms have closed. You've heard of food deserts. These are news deserts. They are communities, often entire counties, with little to zero news coverage whatsoever. Making matters worse, many papers have become ghost ships, pretending to sail with a newsroom but really just wrapping ads around filler copy. More and more newsrooms are being sold off to companies like Alden. And in that meeting, their intentions couldn't have been clearer. Harvest what you can, throw away what's left.

04:02

So, working in secret with a team of eight writers, we prepared a special Sunday Perspective section on the importance of local news.

04:11

(Laughter)

04:14

The Denver rebellion launched like a missile, and went off like a hydrogen bomb.

04:19

[In An Extraordinary Act Of Defiance, Denver Post Urges Its Owner To Sell The Paper]

04:23

['Denver Post' Editorial Board Publicly Calls Out Paper's Owner]

04:26

[On The Denver Post, vultures and superheroes]

04:28

(Applause and cheers)

04:32

Clearly, we weren't alone in our outrage. But as expected, I was forced to resign.

04:39

(Laughter)

04:41

And a year later, nothing's changed. "The Denver Post" is but a few lone journalists doing their admirable best in this husk of a once-great paper.

04:52

Now, at least some of you are thinking to yourself, "So what?" Right? So what? Let this dying industry die. And I kind of get that. For one thing, the local news has been in decline for so long that many of you may not even remember what it's like to have a great local paper. Maybe you've seen "Spotlight" or "The Paper," movies that romanticize what journalism used to be.

05:23

Well, I'm not here to be romantic or nostalgic. I'm here to warn you that when local news dies, so does our democracy. And that should concern you --

05:34

(Applause and cheers)

05:42

And that should concern you, regardless of whether you subscribe. Here's why. A democracy is a government of the people. People are the ultimate source of power and authority. A great local newsroom acts like a mirror. Its journalists see the community and reflect it back. That information is empowering. Seeing, knowing, understanding -- this is how good decisions are made.

06:11

When you have a great local paper, you have journalists sitting in on every city council meeting. Listening in to state house and senate hearings. Those important but, let's face it, sometimes devastatingly boring committee hearings.

06:26

(Laughter)

06:27

Journalists discover the flaws and ill-conceived measures and those bills fail, because the public was well-informed. Readers go to the polls and they know the pros and cons behind every ballot measure, because journalists did the heavy lifting for them. Even better, researchers have found that reading a local paper can mobilize 13 percent of nonvoters to vote. Thirteen percent.

06:55

(Applause)

07:00

That's the number that can change the outcome of many elections. When you don't have a great local paper, voters are left stranded at the polls, confused, trying to make their best guess based on a paragraph of legalese. Flawed measures pass. Well-conceived but highly technical measures fail. Voters become more partisan.

07:25

Recently in Colorado, our governor's race had more candidates than anyone can remember. In years past, journalists would have thoroughly vetted, scrutinized, fact-checked, profiled, debated every contender in the local paper. "The Denver Post" did its best. But in the place of past levels of rigorous reporting and research, the public is increasingly left to interpret dog-and-pony-show stump speeches and clever campaign ads for themselves. With advertizing costing what it does, electability comes down to money. So by the end of the primaries, the only candidates left standing were the wealthiest and best-funded. Many experienced and praise-worthy candidates never got oxygen, because when local news declines, even big-ticket races become pay-to-play.

08:21

Is it any surprise that our new governor was the candidate worth more than 300 million dollars? Or that billionaire businessmen like Donald Trump and Howard Schultz can seize the political stage? I don't think this is what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they talked about free and fair elections.

08:41

(Applause and cheers)

08:49

Now this is exactly why we can't just rely on the big national papers, like "The Journal" and "The Times" and "The Post." Those are tremendous papers, and we need them now, my God, more than ever before. But there is no world in which they could cover every election in every county in the country. No. The newsroom best equipped to cover your local election ought to be your local newsroom. If you're lucky and still have one.

09:20

When election day is over, a great local paper is still there, waiting like a watchdog. When they're being watched, politicians have less power, police do right by the public, even massive corporations are on their best behavior.

09:38

This mechanism that for generations has helped inform and guide us no longer functions the way it used to. You know intimately what the poisoned national discourse feels like, what a mockery of reasoned debate it has become. This is what happens when local newsrooms shutter and communities across the country go unwatched and unseen.

10:04

Until we recognize that the decline of local news has serious consequences for our society, this situation will not improve. A properly staffed local newsroom isn't profitable, and in this age of Google and Facebook, it's not going to be. If newspapers are vital to our democracy, then we should fund them like they're vital to our democracy.

10:28

(Applause and cheers)

10:35

We cannot stand by and let our watchdogs be put down. We can't let more communities vanish into darkness. It is time to debate a public funding option before the fourth estate disappears, and with it, our grand democratic experiment. We need much more than a rebellion. It is time for a revolution.

10:56

Thank you.

10:57

(Applause and cheers)