Yes, hyperlocal newspapers are dying. But here’s what’s rising up to fill the void. "We're trying to seize the future."

Rebecca Coleman, a designer, displays The New Bedford Light’s logo at their office in New Bedford. Tony Luong/The New York Times

By Christopher Gavin
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Rumbling press plants and the vibrant orchestra of ringing phones, incessant keyboards, and the booming voices of nosey characters have long faded to silence in many of the local newsrooms that once brought word of the essential and eccentric to the people of Massachusetts.

The story of how it happened, for those reporters left to write it, is well known: The Internet killed advertising revenues for traditional print media.

And that’s true. But there’s always more to the story.

“A lot of the problems that we’re seeing in local news are exactly the kinds of things that we know about — the Internet killing advertising, basically. But I think at least half of that is the terrible effect that corporate chain and hedge fund ownership has had on these papers,” said Dan Kennedy, a media commentator and Northeastern University journalism
professor. “They suck out what little revenues are left and use it to pay down debt and enrich their owners, and so there’s no money to pay for more journalism. There’s no money to invest in whatever it would take to transition to digital.

“So in a lot of cases, you’ve just got these giant print newspapers with terrible websites, and everyone is fleeing them — readers and advertisers.”

In Massachusetts, many of the state’s local papers are owned by Gannett, the national chain best known for publishing USA Today and a few of the region’s local daily newspapers, including the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, The Cape Cod Times, and the Framingham-based MetroWest Daily News.

And Gannett has had a rough year: Earlier this month, the company announced yet another round of coming layoffs in its news division, with an estimated 206 out of 3,440 employees expected to lose their jobs in early December.

The news follows a disappointing third quarter for Gannett, which reported a net loss of $54.1 million in revenue. The company reported similar losses the previous quarter as well.

News of the last round of job cuts — coupled with other measures such as forcing workers to take a week of unpaid leave in December — prompted hundreds of Gannett staffers to go on a one-day strike from newsrooms around the country at the start of November.

Although those demonstrations didn’t make their way to Bay State newsrooms, Gannett-owned local papers have had their own shake-ups to navigate.

According to Kennedy, who regularly tracks the shifting local media landscape, earlier this year, Gannett closed at least 19 print weekly newspapers that served, at minimum, 26 communities in eastern Massachusetts, and merged another nine weeklies into four publications. The company also reassigned nearly all of their weekly reporters to regional beats.

“They just keep shrinking,” Kennedy said.

But that trend is being replaced by another.

In the past year especially, as Gannett has shuttered papers, some communities around the state have seen new media outlets rise out of their news deserts — the pockets of cities and towns left abandoned by the mega-corporate fourth estate.

Their formats vary. Many use a non-profit approach for keeping their operations running amid the vulnerabilities of the old ad-driven model. Many are online-only.

Kennedy, who keeps a running list of independently-owned news outlets in the commonwealth through his Media Nation blog — more than 270 of them, and counting — notes the idea is not exactly new. Some forms of these nonprofit digital news reporting projects around the country have stretched back into the early 2000s. But he acknowledges Gannett’s actions over the past two years have apparently triggered a “wave of launches in response” back here in Massachusetts.
“There is a real consciousness and awakening on the part of the public, the community, to the need for a strong local news operation if democracy and community are to be served,” said Barbara Roessner, a founding editor of one of those initiatives, *The New Bedford Light*, which launched last year. “It’s just an integral part of the whole system of government and community.”

**New Bedford finds the light**

As Roessner puts it, the *New Bedford Light* is not out chasing ambulances, covering high school football games, or pinning down breaking news.

But since its launch last year, the online news outlet has churned out a steady stream of high-quality, analytical, investigative, and deeply curious journalism centered on the challenges of its namesake city — the stuff reporters know is not easy to pull off.

Take the outlet’s investigation in partnership with ProPublica, that spells out how foreign private equity latched its claws into the port city’s lucrative and storied fishing industry.

“I can’t think of anything more important than to really dig into what’s going on — who’s winning and who’s losing,” Roessner told Boston.com. “And of course, who’s losing are the little fishermen.”

It’s that level of storytelling, mixed with a potent sense of community, that’s driving the *Light*, a shining example of the local news industry’s latest experiment: A publication powered on a nonprofit engine.

Steve Taylor, the Light’s founding publisher, says under the hood, the outlet runs on the “true nonprofit model,” not dissimilar from the foundations of public radio and public television.

Funding comes through individual donors, businesses, sponsors, foundations, etc., and the journalism comes subscription-free for readers.

Taylor, after all, knows the mechanics of the industry better than most in New England. The former president of Boston Globe Electronic Publishing and executive vice president of the paper’s print edition, Taylor pioneered online news with the inception of Boston.com in the mid-1990s.

As he tells it, the story of the *Light* begins with the shrinking scope of the Gannett-owned *Standard-Times* in New Bedford.

Residents were left concerned what the lack of a robust fourth estate would mean for their city of approximately 95,000. The situation became so concerning even Mayor Jon Mitchell reportedly begged his constituents to support their local paper.
Several of those citizens banded together in pursuit of quality journalism — a team that included experienced editors and reporters that once graced the *Standard-Times* newsroom.

The *Light* now has a board that boasts among some of the best talent in the industry, not only Taylor and Roessner, a Pulitzer Prize-winner former managing editor of the *Hartford Courant*, but also Walter V. Robinson, the *Globe*’s former editor of its Pulitzer-winning Spotlight investigative team.

By the measurable standards, the outlet doesn’t seem to just be surviving — it’s thriving.

The paper boasts three editors, a designer, and seven full-time reporters and “a bunch of freelancers,” Taylor said. By the end of 2021, the free-to-read *Light* had nearly $1 million in the bank after bills — a sum that more than eclipsed their hopes of a $600,000 fractional first-year budget, he said. It was all made possible through voluntary donations, not subscriptions.

“I think in some ways the city was ready for it,” Roessner said. “You know, great things are happening in New Bedford. There are also very, very difficult … like, gruesome challenges in New Bedford: poverty and health care and childcare and education, housing. I mean, you name it. The stories are ripe for the picking.”

But Roessner adds she’s worked in cities like New Bedford for most of her career, and the *Light* “really thought broadly and creatively from moment one about who we are.”

“We are not the newspaper of yore,” she said. “We’re not about replicating something that is gone, that has passed. We’re trying to seize the future.”

The future, especially in print media, has been hazy for some time. Roessner has been in the business for 45 years; she rode ridden the journalism highs of the post-Watergate era, “the golden days” that followed, and then the descent into the downward slide, as the Internet ate into print profits and national corporations bought up local news only to sell off newsrooms in piecemeal.

For local news to have some of its bite back — that is, for a local newspaper to be able to have a true impact on a community — has been a wonderful thing, she said.

“I think so. I think it’s working now. I don’t know what it’ll be 20 years from now. But at this time, in this place, with this vision and the support we’ve gotten, it’s quite an exhilarating experience.”

*Editor’s note: This article has been corrected to reflect Gannett’s estimate of the number of employees affected by pending layoffs, and the headline was updated to better reflect the focus of the story.*