



# Westchester's Shrinking Media Landscape

With layoffs and consolidations striking our local media outlets, county residents stand to lose their “watchdog” **BY KATE STONE LOMBARDI**

**W**hen longtime *Journal News* columnist Phil Reisman wrote the headline “Heads are rolling at News 12” to describe layoffs at Westchester’s local cable-news network in October 2016, he had no idea it would be one of his last columns. Reisman himself

would be let go a few weeks later, as part of an overall cost-cutting measure by Gannett, the owner of *Lohud.com* and *The Journal News*.

Westchester’s media landscape is shrinking. The production studios of News 12 Westchester are relocating from Yonkers to Long Island, a

move that may result in the loss of well-known local anchors and meteorologists. Gannett, the largest US newspaper company, recently cut 2 percent of its staff nationally; locally, the axe fell on Reisman and four other journalists at *The Journal News*. Those were only the latest rounds of cuts and early buyouts over the last eight years at Gannett, where hundreds of jobs have been shed.

New York’s largest newspapers have also slashed their suburban coverage. The *New York Times* recently folded its freestanding Westchester Section and cut out the remaining zoned local arts and dining coverage last summer. Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* ceased the print edition of its standalone “Greater New York” section in November.

What’s happening in Westchester reflects a national trend. News organizations are looking to stay afloat amid declining revenues by cutting staff, consolidating services, investing in digital platforms and using terms like “content” in place of “journalism.” For residents, it’s not only a loss of familiar faces and bylines but also the disappearance of a good chunk of the Fourth Estate — the press that provides oversight on public institutions and officials.

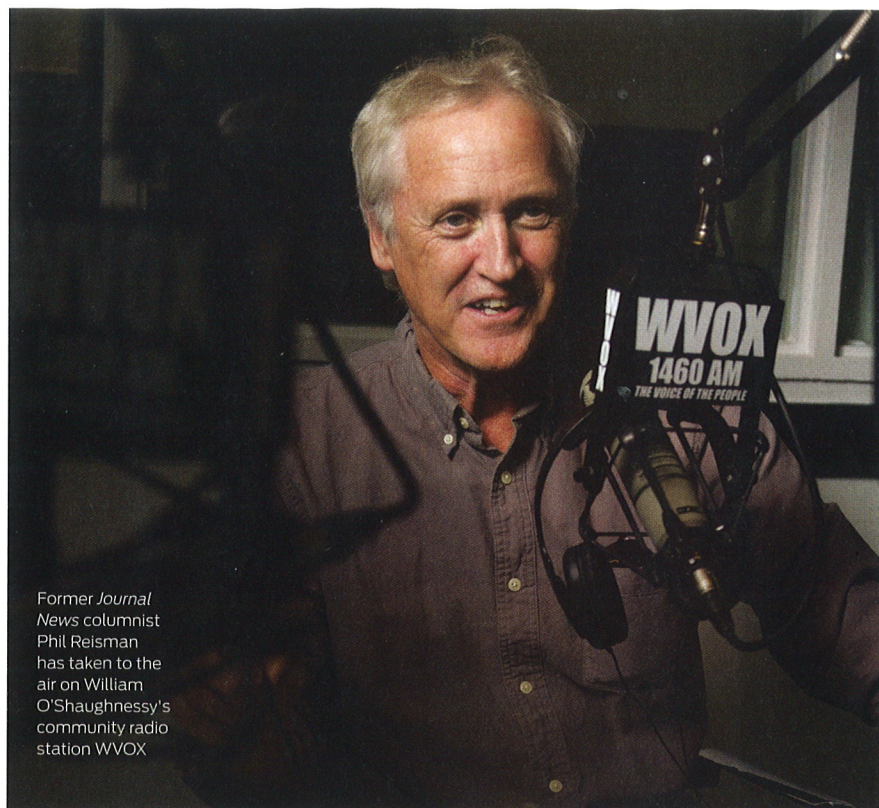
“The fizzling of the media in Westchester will be a disaster, perhaps on wheels,” says Marek Fuchs, who teaches media studies at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville. “On the most basic level, our local watchdog has officially been put to sleep.”

Phil Reisman notes that in its heyday, Gannett had as many as eight reporters covering Yonkers alone. Now there is one. “There is a potential for local politicians to get away with so much more now,” he says. “There are still good reporters left at the *Journal News*, but they are spread out too thin. They can find stories that need to be reported, but they can’t be in 15 places at once.”

It’s not as if media companies enjoy shedding employees. Newspapers, in particular, have been hit hard by declines in advertising. Nationally, newspaper advertising is expected to fall 11 percent this year, according to the Interpublic Group’s Magna, and digital revenue is not making up the slack. When Gannett announced its latest round of layoffs, the company reported that while digital-ad revenue rose 6 percent compared with the same period a year earlier, print-ad revenue declined 35 percent. The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* face the same pressures. At the *Times*, roughly 70 employees took buyouts last year, and more layoffs are expected early this year as management continues to reshape the newsroom. The *Wall Street Journal* also offered buyouts to a “substantial number of employees.” In an email to staff in the fall, management said it hoped “to limit the number of involuntary layoffs.”

News 12 Westchester is owned by Cablevision, which is itself owned by Altice USA, a sub-





Former *Journal News* columnist Phil Reisman has taken to the air on William O'Shaughnessy's community radio station WVOX

subsidiary of the Altice Group, a multinational telecommunications company based in the Netherlands. The company is restructuring studio operations. Anchor jobs are moving to Long Island. According to Reisman's article, the Westchester County Board of Legislators' communications director Matt Richter, husband of 10 p.m. news anchor Suzanne Colucci-Richter, posted on his Facebook page that both his wife and Emmy Award-winning anchor Janine Rose have been let go by the company. (Multiple attempts to confirm this with News 12 were unsuccessful as of press time). Other positions, such as station meteorologists, were also up in the air.

Deborah Koller-Feeney, VP of marketing and promotion at News 12 Networks, said the company would not comment on individual personnel matters. Current on-air talent were also keeping mum during negotiations. Koller-Feeney noted that the Yonkers site, while no longer a production studio, would remain open as a satellite facility used by reporters, photographers, and video editors. According to Koller-Feeney, the reporting staff for News 12 Westchester and Hudson Valley will remain in the region.

The changes to studio operations "will enable us to more effectively and consistently deliver high-quality hyper-local news for viewers in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut," she says.

But as Reisman points out, "The feisty motto 'as local as local news gets' will soon be put to the test." Many on the News 12 Westchester team are visible in the community, as well as on TV, appearing at charity events and giving a sense of intimacy and connection with viewers. As production is consolidated in Long Island (News 12 Connecticut, New Jersey, and Westchester are moving to the hub), Cablevision's challenge will be to prevent coverage from feeling regional and generic.

Cablevision also faces competition. In 2014, Verizon moved into the local television news market, launching FiOS1 News Lower Hudson Valley, a direct competitor to News 12. Currently available to residents of 11 Westchester towns, it is produced in partnership with the Regional News Network, based in Rye Brook, New York. The rival local television stations are part of a larger contest between the two communications companies to provide Internet service to the region.

Not all local media is suffering. Publications like this one, *Westchester Magazine*, owned by Today Media, are doing well, in part by cross-marketing — creating events and moving into digital without abandoning what print can do best, says publisher Ralph A. Martinelli.

"People say print is dead, but we're not buying it," insists Martinelli, vice president of Today Media, which publishes *Hudson Valley*, *Westchester*, *Westchester Home*, *Westchester/*

## Making Waves

Radio is a smaller player in Westchester journalism. Both major terrestrial stations (stations broadcasting from the ground and not a satellite) 107.1 The Peak and 100.7 WHUD are music stations. Community radio does exist at WVOX and WVIP, owned by Whitney Media out of New Rochelle. William O'Shaughnessy, former president of the New York State Broadcasters Association, has been holding forth on-air for more than 50 years, making it his business to know every key figure in Westchester. Phil Reisman also hosts a radio show on WVOX, and O'Shaughnessy was distraught about his colleague's layoff from the *Journal News*.

"By excising Reisman, the corporate elders of the Gannett empire have attacked not only the sinew; they went right to the very heart of our regional paper, as part of an effort to clean up their balance sheet," O'Shaughnessy says. He likened Reisman's departure to "a death in the family for readers."



A new player on the radio scene is Westchester Talk Radio, an Internet radio station launched by Andrew Castellano, owner and CEO of Sharc Creative. The station covers local events and creates podcasts. Castellano says the new venture gives a voice to nonprofits and charities, and "shines a light on all the great things happening in the community." The station sees itself as promotional, not as a traditional news organization.



Hudson Valley Weddings, and 914INC. (Today Media, a family-owned business, also publishes *Delaware Today*, *Main Line Today* and has a custom-publishing division.) "Regional magazines serve a unique audience," Martinelli says. "People still like to read magazines. We're just packaging it with our digital and event business. We get out to see our customers and find out what they want and how we can serve their needs." While *Westchester* is primarily a lifestyle magazine, Martinelli says the publication tries to fill in the news void by covering issues important in the county.

Another player holding its own is the *Westchester County Business Journal*, owned by Westfair Communications, a privately held company based in White Plains that has been covering the county's business community for more than 50 years.

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"We are a niche publication with devoted readers who look for our news coverage and information each week," says Dee DelBello, owner and publisher. "Therefore, we have not been impacted as heavily as other more general-information media in the region during this digital age."

DelBello adds that Westfair is not ignoring digital and, in fact, has invested in improving their digital platform. The company also hosts events and publishes *HV Biz* (Hudson Valley Business), the *Fairfield County Business Journal*, and *WAG*, a monthly magazine focusing on fashion, home décor, and food.

A relatively recent addition to the local journalism scene is Examiner Media, which launched in 2007, just as others were retrenching.

"I had confidence that we could produce a product that would be immediately popular, even if the broader industry, especially larger daily papers, were facing a real crisis," explains Adam Stone, publisher of four weekly local newspapers: *The Examiner*, *The Northern Westchester Examiner*, *The Putnam Examiner*, and *The White Plains Examiner*. "There's a deep thirst in any community for professionally reported local news."

The *Examiner* papers are free — roughly 25,000 copies are distributed to about 1,000 locations. Stone says the business is sustained by display advertising and low overhead, as the papers have no brick-and-mortar editorial offices. The content is also available digitally.

As newspaper journalism began its decline


years ago, several online startups tried to fill the void. In 2009, Hale Global and AOL Inc. formed a partnership to launch Patch Media, which focused on community-specific news. But over the years, Patch has shed employees, too, and much of its content comes not from journalists but from "community contributors" and press releases. The *Daily Voice*, with the tagline "Your Town. Your News," has a similar approach of focusing on individual localities. Both *Patch.com* and *DailyVoice.com* employ reporters, but often just one person covers an entire town.

Online news and social media have transformed the journalism paradigm, says Elizabeth Bracken-Thompson, a partner at the public-relations and marketing firm Thompson & Bender who has watched *Westchester's* news coverage change over

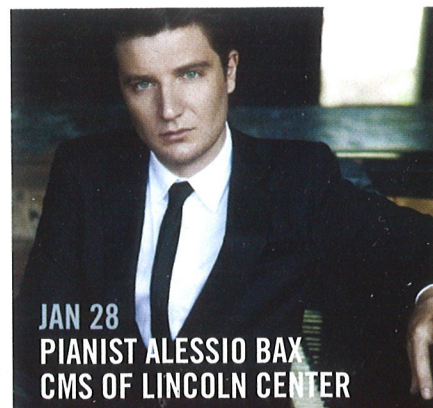
several decades. "The agenda used to be set by the media in terms of what was news," she says. "Now, it's determined by the readers, and it's all based on what stories they are clicking on."

Geoff Thompson, her business partner, husband, and a former journalist at Gannett for 17 years, agrees. "What the *Daily Voice* and the *Patch* have figured out is that people are most likely to click on a weather forecast if it's a dire worst-case scenario," he says. "Second is a car accident with traffic tie-ups. They know these have huge click-through rates, and they're hoping people will then stay on the site."

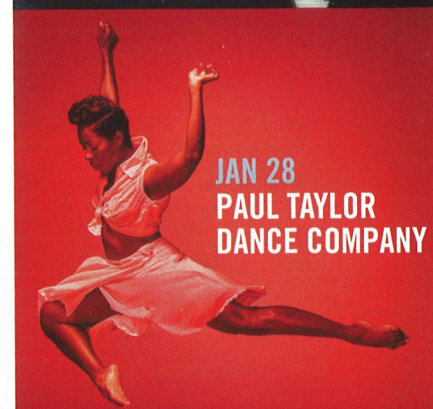
The articles with the most clicks "trend," pushing other news stories down the page. Reisman says that at Gannett, success is increasingly measured by clicks, no matter how trivial the story. An intensive, investigative piece about political malfeasance may be less valued than a story on *Westchester's* top-five ice cream shops.

Who are the winners and losers in this media shakeup? The winners are likely the corporate balance sheets, which hope to stem the bleeding via continued consolidation. The losers are not only seasoned journalists facing unemployment but also county residents. Local press acts as a watchdog on corruption while creating a sense of community, says Fuchs. "Local news breeds a sense of place and belonging. People won't die without it, but they won't feel the visceral ties that a vibrant local press maintains." 

Kate Stone Lombardi is a journalist who covered *Westchester* for the New York Times for 20 years.



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