

YOUNG WRITERS

Student newspapers at high schools and universities are in decline. But local schools are finding new ways to inspire future journalists

D.C. Everest senior high school

in the mid-1990s made national news, and probably not for the best of reasons. A columnist for the school's newspaper (who, in the interest of full disclosure, was a classmate of mine) wrote a column that mentioned he found the current principal attractive. She responded by pulling the issue from the school's stands, and instituted a rule for prior review of articles in the newspaper.

That review process lasted for a few issues, and as things settled down over the next few years, Supreme Court decisions gave the big OK for prior review of high school newspapers — something that would be considered a major violation of the First Amendment if allowed in the general, "adult" free press.

Turns out, that was just a minor blip in the overall landscape of student newspapers. Today's media environment has made for an even more complicated, interesting era in which to run a student newspaper and to run a media literacy class. With the internet and social media, and with a U.S. president constantly attacking the press and even calling established journalists "the enemy of the people," it's a constantly changing environment.

D.C. Everest teacher Leonard Fike, who advises the student paper *The Jet* and runs D.C. Everest's media literacy class, says that he could, and often does, change his course daily to use the day's news as a teaching moment.

Teachers like Fike worry about the future of journalism. Student participation has dwindled on Everest's school newspaper, *The Jet*. Nine students work on the paper now, when dozens once did.

Wausau West High School's newspaper is now a magazine published only twice per year, with a combined staff that also works on the school's yearbook.

Wausau East High is considering a new project that would combine business, technology and writing to move its student newspaper, *The Skyrocket*, completely online.

The latter is a logical combination since newspapers, which always have involved business and writing are increasingly involving digital technology, though not always for the better.

Like the newspaper industry in general, student newspapers are declining in Wisconsin and nationwide. But these programs are about much more than training future journalists. Working on the newspaper teaches kids skills like working under deadline, dealing with people, scheduling, creativity, time management and organization, among others. Sounds like a set of skills any employer would value.



Changing formats

It's no secret that the newspaper industry has been on the decline, and has been since the early 2000s, according to Pew Media Research. Total U.S. daily newspaper circulation dropped about 10% in 2017 compared to 2016, for example, and 2017's daily newspaper circulation of 30.1 million is less than half compared to the late 1980s.

Maybe there is hope in digital — average unique visitors to newspaper websites are on the rise, from about 8.2 million in 2014 to 11.5 million in 2017. That statistic can be misleading though; the data from Pew Research only measures the top

50 newspapers because most papers don't have enough visitors to collect meaningful data from. Not a good sign.

In Wisconsin, numbers of student newspapers appear to be dropping as well. According to data provided by Linda Barrington of the Kettle Moraine Newspaper Association, which holds contests for high school newspapers, newspaper members have dropped from 38 in the 2014-15 school year to just 28 this school year (up from only 19 in 2017-18). The numbers of total publications, including news magazines, yearbooks, online only publications and literary magazines also dropped in that time period.

Some publications have evolved into news or feature magazines, and others have gone completely online, Barrington says.

That's the case with Wausau's two high schools. Wausau West once won numerous awards for its newspaper, and now it has become a twice-yearly published news magazine, says Publication Lab Teacher Cathy Newton. Newton says the staff of 62 handles both the magazine and the school's yearbook.

West still participates and does well in the Kettle Moraine Press Association contests, but now they're in the magazine

category. A lot more schools have gone to the magazine format, Newton says. In the 2014-15 school year, the Kettle Moraine Press Association had only 2 magazine members; this year that number was 11.

This year's staff numbers are unusually high, Newton says. Numbers in the 40s are much more common for the yearbook/magazine staff.

The format means the newspaper's writers need to focus on writing features and broader enterprise stories; they're not working on breaking news stories because they would be old news by the time the issue comes out.

◀ **Breanna Narlock and Sam Davisson hold up issues of The Jet in the hallway at D.C. Everest Senior High.**

Wausau East is planning on going the opposite route. Planned for the 2019-2020 school year is taking its paper, The Skyrocket, completely online. The result will be a multi-disciplinary course called Real World Writing, which will combine classes in technology, writing and business-marketing, says Wausau School District Director of Secondary Education Thom Hahn.

The move makes sense, since a newspaper of any kind involves all three of those disciplines, Hahn says. The move combines courses already in the curriculum and makes use of staff already at the school, so it shouldn't cost the district any more money to add the course. The Skyrocket isn't the sole focus of the class but is a major component of it.

And it should save money on the material side, Hahn adds. "One thing East realized is that printing the newspaper The Skyrocket is an expensive proposition," Hahn says. "Students will put together from start to finish this digital newspaper."

Reaching out to youth

Outside of Leonard Fike's classroom, where The Jet is produced, is a poster with a list of qualities that go along with working on a newspaper. Many of them are useful in any profession: Time management, people skills, objective evaluation, meeting deadlines, working with others. The list goes on, such that one might think this class should be required in building the skills of tomorrow's workforce.

This semester there are nine people on the school's newspaper staff; much lower than the two dozen or so staff they once had a few years ago. Fike says he has seen

the decline for more than a decade now. That means fewer students are doing more to get the paper out, and the staff is putting out fewer papers than in years past. Like with West, it means more of an emphasis on features, especially in the sports realm.

Fike hopes to change that soon. He has a plan to start reaching out more to students at the middle school, to start getting them interested in journalism. That will hopefully start growing numbers on The Jet again.

It's an interesting time to be studying journalism, Fike says. With President Trump making attacks on the media, with the media itself under scrutiny and often becoming the news, besides simply reporting it (a recent example is CNN's Jim Acosta having his press credentials revoked and then reinstated), Fike says his media literacy class' lesson plans often change with the day. "I don't want to politicize the news," Fike says. "I shoot for the middle, but we talk about what is real, and what is not. They can determine what path to take from there."

The biggest goal, Fike says, is to teach students to look critically at the news, figure out what they need to know and where to go to find that information.

Students on the Jet staff say learning to become journalists themselves taught them how difficult the job can be, and how rewarding. Amber Marten, 17, a D.C. Everest senior, says she learned that in her three years on the Jet newspaper staff. She discovered there is usually more going on with an issue that originally meets the eye, and participating in journalism has helped her grow as a person.

"It's getting out of my comfort zone, going to interview people, talking to people I don't know," Marten says. "I was nervous [approaching people]. It was really nerve-racking for me."

Now as a veteran on The Jet staff, she has developed time management skills as well as people skills that will benefit her in a future occupation.

Sam Davisson, a 17-year-old Senior at D.C. Everest, decided this year to give journalism a try. He says his experience so far taught him how to stay objective and approach writing from that perspective.

"It gave me an insight into what goes into journalism," Davisson says. "It's not as easy as you might think it might be."

A labor of love

The Forum, once UW-Marathon County's newspaper (now the UW-Stevens Point Wausau), disappeared for a year and a half but is back in action, says current advisor Renee Wallin. The paper put out three issues last spring, and just published its first issue of the year last week, Wallin says.

The Forum no longer has a paid editor position as it had in the past, and the costs of printing the paper come from segregated fees. The newspaper also has an online component.

Part of the reason for the disappearance of the student newspaper is the cutting of journalism classes, including a class dedicated to the newspaper itself, says former advisor Mark Parman. That happened in spring 2015, he says.



▲ Students work on The Jet on deadline at D.C. Everest Senior High. The staff has shrunk to nine from a more typical two dozen.

Student Christina Ireland helped revive The Forum in the spring of 2018, after an attempt to get the paper restarted a semester prior fell through, Wallin says. She published it primarily by herself with a pair of contributors, and this year's current editor, Chris Lofgren, is publishing issues with four contributors, Wallin says.

The Forum office was moved into the library and Wallin, a librarian, helps advise. She says she does her best to help without a journalism background, and the lack of journalism classes at UWSP-Wausau adds an additional challenge.

It might seem like a big staff in comparison to The Forum, but the Jet's small staff makes working on the paper stressful at times, says D.C. Everest Junior Breanna Narlock. She says journalism is important, and as someone who followed government and economic news before getting involved on the school newspaper herself, it bothers her to see how journalists are being attacked.

But through her work on the paper, she like others learned how to step outside of her comfort zone, organize her time and look critically at situations. Working on a small school newspaper staff can be stressful, but there's also a comfort in being part of the small, tight-knit group, Narlock says.

"We know we will work really hard to get the paper published," Narlock says. "It makes us feel really good when it's finished." **CP**

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Cover story: Why student newspapers matter

You're reading this, so you already know that this newspaper, at least, is going strong. For many reasons, City Pages is bucking the trend of the general newspaper industry decline, which largely was caused by its own making when companies jumped on the digital bandwagon at the existential expense of their main product, the news. For example, the Wausau Daily Herald once was one of the larger employers in the county. Today it doesn't even have an office the public can readily visit.

City Pages has seen its readership rise over recent years, yet operationally we feel the overall effects of an ailing industry. Printing presses have closed around the state, and I now have few choices, all farther away. Hiring can be difficult because there are fewer people who know, or at least are interested in, the business, as they decide to move into other professions.

And in the bigger, societal picture, I lament the increasingly fuzzy lines between real and fake news. The term "fake news" was created to describe stuff that literally is made up, but sometimes disguised with a few facts to provide plausibility. It's critical that our society have a segment of professionals who work to delineate the difference between wholesale making shit up and reporting facts. That starts by exposing young people to real journalism and the nitty gritty involved. It's been said that communication is key to success in nearly every aspect of life. So let's not forget to educate young people on skills that contribute to democracy, community and even commerce. **CP**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tamy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.