
Survive and Thrive in a
Shrinking Newsroom

DONALD W. REYNOLDS NATIONAL CENTER
FOR BUSINESS JOURNALISM WITH AMY WU



Introduction

Newsrooms are operating lean and mean.

As someone who started in newspapers when telephone books and column inches were still part of the lingo, I have seen the world of media transform to a vast and fragmented digital landscape.

But for local and regional journalists, who most often feel the brunt of this reality, change can mean opportunity.

In early 2016 I started covering government and business at one of the oldest newspapers in California, owned by one of America's largest media companies.

When I arrived, the copy desk had been eliminated and the paper was being designed from a universal desk. In less than a year, I saw the city desk go from three reporters to two. I wish we had more reporters, but we are proof that even a skeleton staff can produce a quality paper.

Small can be mighty. Across the country the number of local and community news organizations is holding steady, and many are thriving. This is evident in part by winners of two Pulitzers in 2017. The prize for Breaking News Reporting went to the staff of Oakland, California's East Bay Times, while the award for editorial writing was given to Art Cullen of The Storm Lake Times, a family-owned newspaper in Iowa.

In the new newsroom, where resources and manpower are at a premium, business reporters need to develop a fresh set of work habits and practices. This collection of tips and tricks can help journalists traverse the workspace with agility and accuracy. In addition to tried-and-true tactics that have been used for generations, we've added a hefty dose of strategies and tech tools specific to the digital era.

We hope you'll find these 25 suggestions useful as you navigate the ever-evolving media world.

Amy Wu

August, 2017



25 Tips for Today's Newsrooms

1. Think digital first

I love the smell of print and flipping versus swiping. I've waxed nostalgic at the Smith Corona an ex-boyfriend gave me. But as anyone under the age of 35 will tell you, unless your story is developed for digital consumption, you might as well not write it in the first place. You don't need to go all-in digital overnight. Explore and add digital assets one project at a time. Maybe it's thinking about how you could present a story as a photo gallery or a 45-second video instead of—or in addition to—a text article. With fast-shrinking attention spans, there's a growing thirst for visual content. Business stories, in particular, are often starving for good visuals. If done right these assets can make the information a lot more interesting, accessible and sharable.

2. Understand analytics

A changing media landscape means a shift in performance measurements too, and clickability—no eye rolling here—counts. This can be hard to embrace for those of us who started in the print world. A slew of new analytics software measures everything from where on a screen viewers first look to the point at which they stop. Get to know how it works. I have a program that emails me a daily report of the paper's most popular stories and how my byline ranks. Checking your

ranking can be addictive (a bit like the stock market), but it gets my competitive juices flowing.

3. Polish your mobile strategy

Remember the inverted pyramid? Now forget it. Or at least selectively toss it out. In the smartphone-centered universe, the pyramid doesn't always hold water. Reporters need to write for a mobile audience. That includes a juicy headline incorporating key elements in your story, including geography. In my case, that means "Salinas City Council Says 'No!'" or "Salinas Police Raid YMCA." Follow it with a "tell all" paragraph that summarizes the most important points and you're done. This can be tough, but the good news is you can collect the "yarn," save it and perhaps use it for another story. Nothing is truly wasted.

4. Know how much story is enough

In the good old days you might saunter into your editor's office and use her as a sounding board about how deep a story should go. Say sayonara to that. You are your best curator. In general, in a 24/7 news cycle it's best to share just enough story to keep the readers' attention, and have confidence that you are your readers' best North Star. You are the one interviewing sources, sitting through the City Council meetings and talking to the community. Think like a chef: Too little food and the customer complains about the anemic portion. Too much and the customer can't finish.

5. Welcome the virtual newsroom

It's not just newsroom staffs that have shrunk, it's newsrooms themselves. Journalists need to equip themselves with the basis for reporting on the fly, whether it's

tweeting from a budget hearing or interviewing a source from your kitchen table. The critical checklist includes Skype, robust WiFi, a smartphone with ample storage, a battery charger, power cords and a fast and light laptop. Try to go paperless and email documents and store them in a portable hard drive.

6. Tap young talent

Reach out to local journalism programs in your community for interns. Be ruthless and pick the crème of the crop—you don't have time for hand-holding. A good intern can be a godsend, helping with research and basic reporting. Meanwhile they get to build their portfolio. Also, befriend a digitally proficient newsroom newbie—that's basically anyone in their 20s and early 30s—who can teach you the ropes on an unfamiliar app or device. In return, you might take them along to an industry gathering.

7. Build your brand

I winced when I arrived in my new newsroom and was told to start yet another Facebook page and Twitter account. I had enough to keep track of on my personal accounts. Truth is, to survive in the industry you need to build your brand—and media companies expect journalists to play along. Use this to your advantage. Savvy reporters understand the value of using a variety of tools (from social media to public speaking engagements) to attract your own fan base. Include all social media information on your stories. Say yes to speaking at journalism seminars, conferences, community organizations, churches and colleges.

8. Connect with influencers

As part of brand building, make sure you use social media to connect with your community's key influencers. It's an overused term in the social media world, but critical in a shrinking newsroom. Key influencers are the ones whose actions and opinions hold the most sway. At a local level they may include the mayor, city manager, president of the Chamber of Commerce, CEO of a major agriculture company and, in my community, pastor of a megachurch who wears Hawaiian shirts and draws a congregation of several thousand. It can take a while to build your connections (18 months, at least) but patience wins out. It helps to have a quota. Tell yourself you will reach out to and connect with five key influencers a week.

9. Bring your business cards

Even in the digital era, business cards are important. When I lived in Asia the business card ritual meant presenting your card with two hands, almost as though you were serving someone a platter of hors d'oeuvres. This was a sign of respect, a non-verbal way of saying, "I want to remember your name and stay in contact." Here in the U.S. business cards aren't as ubiquitous, but they're still a tool that establishes you as someone with serious intentions. Bottom line: Don't forget your business cards and always bring more than you think you'll need.

10. Accept the pop-up office

Mobile doesn't just refer to your smartphone, it's a way of operating. My newsroom recently went from a brick-and-mortar office building to brick-and-virtual. We moved from a 30,000-square foot historical building to a much smaller space, and employees are encouraged to work from home—or in the field. For reporters, the silver lining is the opportunity to spend more time out in the community. As a

colleague observed. “You can find out more about people by sitting inside the café at Target” than tethered to your office.

11. Embrace solo

In the new newsroom I found it increasingly difficult to get old-fashioned photographers to embrace new technologies. One colleague told me he refused to take any “30-second videos and do low-quality work.” But a good friend who is the photo and video editor at a large news outfit gave me a boost of confidence. “You can totally do this on your own,” she said. She was right. I took our staff photographer to coffee, and he gave me basic tips on shooting, including the “rule of thirds” and how to hold the smartphone steady (it helps to hang a purse on your arm). He gave me a primer on using the Canon Rebel—basics from locking the lens to how to check the ISO and aperture to the importance of getting as close to the subject as possible.

12. Walk the streets

Shoe-leather journalism has fallen by the wayside in this age of text messaging, emails and smartphones. I’ve had sources who ask me to text over my questions so they can respond. Instead, I pick up the phone and call them. I do email, but my emails are requests to meet sources face-to-face. If that’s impossible I at least push for a phone call. Insurance salespeople can work from emails, but journalists need responses in real time. Only accept email interviews as a last resort. It puts the interviewee in the driver’s seat and frankly, it’s lazy.

13. Revisit Q&A

Man-on-the-Street roundups were very popular when I was a reporter for my college paper eons ago. Whether it's tapping the masses for their thoughts on the rising cost of avocados or how they feel about the most recent elections, the Q&A is an easily digestible format that readers enjoy. There will be days when you just have to feed the beast, knowing your editor's daily mantra, "What do you have for me today?," is just hours away. A trick that has worked for me is a weekly column called "Snapshot," in which I profile a county or city staffer using the Q&A format.

14. Stay on top of sources

One of the most important ways to maintain your credibility is regularly reaching out to sources. In reporting, especially on complex investigative stories, make sure you leave a voicemail, send an email and follow up with a text. Be specific in telling the source when you need to hear from them; for example, by the end of the business day. This sounds obvious but is critical. You don't ever want a source feeling they have not been given the opportunity or the time to respond. And if you or your editor are ever accused of unfair reporting, you can prove that you tried.

15. Meet your chamber

Business associations, especially chambers of commerce and rotaries, can be hotbeds of stories that explore the intersection of local government, economic development and the community. Perennial questions—how projects are funded and who stands to benefit—often elicit interesting discoveries. Make a list of the associations and organization in your community and get their membership directo-

ries. Identify their presidents. Follow them on social media. Invite them for coffee and let them know you're keen on the buzz.

16. Learn the business basics

Business reporting at all levels requires some basic knowledge of everything from the markets to personal finance. There is free training at businessjournalism.org; organizations such as SABEW and IRE offer their members a wealth of online training. If you have a friend who is an accountant, head of investor relations or a CFO, ask them to break down their business role for you.

17. Diversify coverage

Don't forget to load up your source list with chambers of commerce and associations for Hispanic/Latino, Asian, African-American, LGBT, religious and other communities. Not only will you get scoops and great feature ideas, but you'll develop sources that offer diverse viewpoints on business development in the community.

18. Weekend where you work

San Francisco may be sexier than Salinas, the community that I cover. But spending weekends here helps me develop stories and sources. Depending on your interests, join a choir, a softball team, explore the food scene or jump into a local meet up. I've gotten some of my best tips from the senior citizens in the aqua aerobics class at the city's municipal pool. If you're a regular in the community, readers, business owners and officials know you're not just helicoptering in and are likely to share more. Word gets around that you're there.

19. Collaborate with other media

Competition keeps us sharp. I would love to see at least two news organizations in every city. But the reality is the cohort of journalists in local and regional markets is shrinking. Rather than work against each other, find ways to collaborate and give all of your local brands a boost. Our paper's crime reporter has partnered with the local TV station to share coverage, while I co-host a show on the week's big events with a regional radio personality.

20. Understand budgets

When I ask officials about the cost breakdown for a municipal program, I'm often handed information in the form of a budget. The budget looks comprehensive and there is a breakdown of allocations, including how much is going to personnel or parks and recreation. But allocation isn't the same as expenditure. To allocate is to set apart or earmark; expenditure is the act of spending money. Meet with the city's finance director or your municipality's department heads to review what is being spent on key projects.

21. Look for Main Street mergers

Deals apply to Main Street as much as they do Wall Street. First hunt for publicly traded companies (many are headquartered in smaller cities), which are required to report their financials to the SEC, making them easily searchable through the EDGAR database. Pursue private companies, too. Cracking private companies will put your source building skills to the test. When interviewing CEOs, ask if they have plans to merge or acquire. Big deals can have a ripple effect on local communities including layoffs, consolidation or the change of the company's name or even headquarters.

22. Refresh your fact-checking

In the fast-paced digital newsroom it's easy to forget one of the most critical basics in our profession: fact-checking. It becomes a lot easier when your reporting is thorough. When doing interviews, especially on sensitive stories, I bring my Olympus mini-recorder, but also take ferocious notes in case of a technology fail. If interviewing in person, ask the individual to write their name, title and contact information on your notepad, or get their business card. You can't rely on the company website, which isn't always up to date or even authentic.

23. Get graphic

Embrace graphic elements, starting with bullet points, which can be a visual oasis for readers who don't have the time or patience to plow through text. Videos are a catchy way to capture readers' attention. With a few tools such as [Canva](#), which lets you add your own graphics, you can create your own mini video of one minute or less. "Briefs are your best friend," a veteran reporter once told me. Not every piece needs to be a hefty investigative or enterprise piece. Less can be more, leaving you energy to pursue bigger projects.

24. Network like you mean it

If you want to stay in the game, making connections is vital. The easiest way is to pick a conference you really want to attend and make the case to your company. Maybe you can pay for half and they can pay for half; maybe go as a representative and help man an exhibitor booth. But if that doesn't work and even if you're working in Smalltown, USA, see what's available in the nearest cities. Many journalism organizations hold regional conferences or day-long events that require minimal commitments of time and money.

25. Check and re-check your numbers

Data and numbers are a bedrock of business reporting. You'll find them in stories from municipal budgets to the revenue for local and regional businesses. Common calculations include percentage changes year on year, and tabulating money allocated compared to the expenditures. Expand your fact checking routine to numbers. A missing or additional zero makes a tremendous difference. The good news is the web is filled with free calculators that can produce percent change results with a click, but it's even better if you learn the formulas yourself and check and recheck.

About the Author



After 23 years of reporting from such far-flung spots as Rochester, San Francisco and Hong Kong, Amy Wu now covers politics and government at The Californian, a Gannett paper in Salinas, Calif. Wu, who earned her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University, finds that while the media landscape has changed profoundly in the last two decades, new challenges lead to new rewards.

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