

"And That's All She Wrote."

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Somerset, Ohio

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Thank you Bob for your kind words. It is an honor to present my inaugural essay to the illustrious members of the Columbus Kit Kat Club.

I hope that this evening's virtual gathering finds everyone well and that in some small way I am able to evoke a measure of the club's stated purpose of "promoting social intercourse among congenial men who are interested in literature, art, and other matters of broad human concern."

While we won't be enjoying an incredible meal together as Christopher Katt has helped us imagine tonight and while we won't be in the wonderful envelop of hospitality and warmth that is the Columbus Club, I welcome each of you to spend a few minutes with me at home virtually tonight while we ponder together some issues of human concern that I've found myself reflecting upon lately.

Of all the areas of our lives impacted by technological advances, business innovation and financial pressures perhaps nowhere are the changes more pronounced than in the media landscape.

Here we are together on an evening in November 2020, eight months into a global pandemic, in a divisive presidential election year and during a period where many businesses and individuals face unexpected financial and personal hardships. Tonight, let's take a few minutes to look at the ways these changes are impacting individuals and communities. Hopefully, our reflections on the current state of affairs can provide us some thoughts on how we might best respond to these changes as individual media consumers and engaged citizens.

How we view the challenges and opportunities that we collectively face as a society is influenced by the news media and social media we consume. The traditional media landscape is changing. Google, Facebook and Twitter dominate today's advertising revenue markets and new media platforms such as Snap Chat and Tik Tok are popping up and reaching global audiences seemingly overnight.

Over 1,800 local newspapers have closed in the last fifteen years. Newspaper circulation peaked in the United States at 71 million per day in 1999. Since that time there has been a steady decline as readers switched to on-line subscriptions as well as accessing their news via social media.

Today print and digital circulation combined reaches only about 31 million, according to the Pew Research Center.

From the printing press to the advent of radio and tv and now with the internet and social media, change has been a constant force in how Americans get and share their national and local news. As Bob Loversidge mentioned in his gracious introduction, I'm the mayor of the little town of Somerset in Perry County. A town of about 1,500 people founded during Ohio's early settlement period when news traveled from the east coast on horseback to then "frontier" Ohio. By 1820 a weekly paper was being produced in our town and it continued to be until 1977. Looking back over those 200 years might be able to give us some insights into the changes were facing today in the media landscape.

Today's level of social discord and partisan conflict can sometimes leave us feeling that as a nation we're irrevocably losing a long-held shared common purpose and identity. In looking back at the historical newspaper record, I'm not so sure things have changed so much in that regard.

Let's imagine the world our founding fathers grew up in and take a look at how news was shaped and consumed during our struggle for independence.

Benjamin Franklin's first articles were submitted when he was just sixteen years old under the pseudonym, Silence Do-good, the widow of a country minister, "an Enemy to Vice, and a Friend to Virtue". She abhorred arbitrary government and unlimited power. In 1722 fourteen "Do-good letters" were published and were

well received. Her "voice" was of interest to people of the day and young Franklin found his "voice" through her.

In 1732 Ben launched what was to be his greatest success as a businessman with *Poor Richard's Almanac*. It contained the calendar, weather, sayings, poems, demographics, aphorisms, and proverbs about industry and frugality. Franklin considered it a vehicle of instruction for common people who could not afford books, a literature for the masses.

Young Franklin's developed a powerful voice that is still heard today. I remember as a boy that while my grandfather helped me with my 4H garden project he was fond of sharing Ben's sayings.

Here are some of my favorites:

1. "Dost thou love life? Then do not squander Time; for that's the Stuff Life is made of."
- Poor Richard's Almanack, 1746
2. "Hide not your Talents, they for Use were made. What's a Sun-Dial in the shade!"
- Poor Richard's Almanack, 1750

And the simple:

1. "Haste makes Waste."

- *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 1753

It turns out in researching for this essay I learned unfortunately that not all of my grandfather's Franklin quotes could be genuinely attributed to Ben. Notably, "a penny saved is a penny earned" and "waste not, want not" are sadly attributed to others.

Let's look at the issue of media partisanship. We bemoan the fact that certain cable news channels seem to be party mouthpieces. But looking back at my village's newspaper record, in the spring of 1877, the *Somerset Press* was sold to W.P. Magruder, who later that year decided to support the interests of the Greenback Party, then at the height of its popularity. In this agricultural region, Magruder could count on many who favored a system based on non-gold backed paper money that would boost market prices and allow farmers to pay off their loans faster. Aside from the political news, the *Press* continued to report on matters both domestic and foreign and printed a regular column titled "Topics of the Day" that covered major news from around the world in a concise, easy-to-read format.

Going back further to the American Civil War, in 1863, our newspaper here in Somerset was aligned to the anti-war "Copperheads". The paper reported that over 15,000 people flocked to the public square to listen to an anti-war speech

given by Clement Vallandigham, a nationally known politician that ran for the Governor of Ohio on his antiwar platform and the leader of the “copperhead” political movement. It is safe to say not one in a hundred current Somerset inhabitants would believe you if you told them 15,000 people attended an anti-war rally in town. Further, if asked to guess during which war the anti-war rally occurred, I’m sure the Vietnam War would win not the Civil War.

Today’s media reflects the deep social discord that exists in America. The images showing rioting and social injustice are sometimes hard to look at. It’s equally hard to look at the masthead on the Somerset paper during the Civil War period which contained the Copperhead party slogan. Instead of saying “A party for White Men, etc., it read: “A Paper for White Men: opposed to Nigger Equality; for Liberty, the Old Union, and the Nigger where He Is. It seems while we can’t change our history to adapt to modern sensibilities we can take comfort in that civilization progresses over time and there is hope for mankind.

I’d like to share a quote from a speech that Andy Alexander, a fellow Executive in Residence with Ohio University Alexander gave recently about the dire situation facing local and regional news media. Andy is a lifelong journalist and former ombudsman for the Washington Post. Commenting on what he sees in Ohio he states, “The metro newspapers are shells of what they were. Newsroom staffs that once numbered in the hundreds have been cut to a few dozen. In places like Dayton, where I began my career, school boards go uncovered and

politicians run for office without a single story on their race – all because there aren't enough reporters to cover them.” Andy's reflections are applicable sadly across America today.

Newspaper chains have expanded as large companies have bought up struggling independently owned community papers and wringing cost from them to increase profits. The Columbus Dispatch recently owned by the Wolfe family is now part of the Gannett network along with over 260 other daily and 300 weekly newspapers. In addition to the Dispatch, in Ohio Gannett owns the Cincinnati Enquirer, the Akron Beacon Journal and newspapers in countless other Ohio towns such as Newark, Lancaster, Marion, Kent, Zanesville and New Philadelphia. The Perry County Tribune, the local paper that covers Somerset is owned by Gannett and several years ago because of staff cuts, they stopped covering our local village council meetings and rarely now attend county commissioner meetings.

Newsrooms employ almost 40 percent fewer people than they did in 1994, and "newspaper reporter" was rated "the worst job in America" for four years running, according to CareerCast, which ranks jobs based on factors such as stress, risks, compensation, and opportunity for growth.

The lack of local coverage in Somerset has been rapidly supplanted by a robust community dialog on Facebook. We started the Somerset Facebook page just

over ten years ago as social media developed a broad following. With only 1,500 current residents that page has grown to over 13,000 followers as people “like” and share photos from a small town that they grew up in, have relatives from or just have visited or would like to.

We’re using social media to shape and define how we see ourselves as a community. Posting pictures of community events, parades and celebrations results in countless shares, likes and fond comments and shared recollections of community pride. We frequently get 20,000 to 30,000 view of community events, historical photos or other posts that catch people’s eyes. It’s not uncommon to have several hundred comments tied to such images.

Conversely, our most shared with over 80,000 views detailed a record heroin bust at one of our two gas stations. Last week we had over 120 comments criticizing a picture of the local Christmas decorating committee taking a break for lunch in the courtroom. “Where are their masks”, “why aren’t they socially distancing, the town will look great as the hearses drive by were just a few of the comments. Of course there were comments in support as well. Yesterday I got the news that the Christmas event organizer has come down with COVID. While the pandemic has been very divisive, social media has been a valuable tool for us to not only get the word out but to also help shape public opinion for the better I hope.

I'm part of the Mayor's Partnership for Progress group of mayors in rural Southeast Ohio that meet once a month to share best practice and ideas on how we can navigate some of the challenges and opportunities our communities face.

A number of us including the mayors from the cities of Athens and Chillicothe have been working together to develop effective community social media platforms and policies we can agree with our councils. In talking to the mayor of Chillicothe I learned that there was a "fake" Chillicothe Facebook page (Chillicothe with one "l" instead of two) that had over 60,000 subscribers compared to the real one with 9,000. While as mayor's we were working hard to shape community pride and a sense of purpose through our posts, the "fake" page's popularity was based on their wry sense of satire with postings like. "The mayor has announced that the 4th of July fireworks are cancelled this year because we've spend all our money on Narcan." And, "what do you get when someone from Chillicothe falls in love with someone from Circleville? A white trash wedding," and so on and so forth. The author of the fake page was a mystery to everyone and given all the theories out there about "fake news" I was certain it was part of a Russian plot to sow social discord in America. It turned out it was a twenty something local man who developed a voice that generated 60,000 subscribers even though it probably hurt civic pride and the town's reputation.

A couple of years ago my sisters and I put a 200 acre farm up for sale as we were finalizing our parent's estate. Interestingly enough, the all cash mystery purchaser turned out to be a young man in his early thirties that lives in a small town nearby and is a top 50 worldwide You Tube personality with the pranks he plays on family and friends. The guy has over 9 billion You Tube views and 25 million subscribers. Think of the ad revenue potential for that! This demonstrates the potential for earning a successful living by mastering emerging technology and social media platforms and developing a "voice" that is of broad public interest. Not unlike Ben Franklin and the lucrative "voice" he found in his day.

Newspapers' ad revenue plummeted from \$48 billion in 2000 to \$16.5 billion in 2017. Classifieds once generated up to 40 percent of newspaper ad revenue, peaking at \$19.6 billion in 2000. You can see how the incredible number of social media views are switching revenues to those platforms.

How as consumers can we best respond to the "new normal" news media?

We need to understand that what we view and share on the internet becomes a valuable revenue source for providers. Our "eyeballs" that are tempted by click bait ads result in dollars flowing to those content providers. We need to ensure we support trusted news sources through paid subscriptions and intentionally curating news we can rely on.

As part of my state and federal policy work that focuses on addressing disparities that exist in Appalachian Ohio I'm looking forward to seeking out ideas and thoughts about some policy recommendations that can foster and support local news coverage and help our educational system adjust to the these tectonic shifts in the media landscape.

Ohio Wesleyan University announced last month that they were eliminating their journalism department and would no longer be offering a degree in journalism. This decline in traditional media education might signal decline in journalism standards and norms but maybe there are counter forces and new ways journalistic skills are being developed and new "voices" are beginning to be heard.

One development that I'm particularly interested in seeing is the growth of local community media maker spaces where people can learn how to master media equipment and techniques. Ohio University and our fellow Kit Kat member Tom Reiland is working on opening a \$30 million WOSU building adjacent to the OSU campus that will house a media makerspace for the community as well as OSU students. If I may take the liberty of quoting Tom in a recent article, "Much more than just a structure, this space encourages public engagement through experiential activities and events, it'll be a place for the community and students to create their own stories, a collaborative public space to discuss the public

issues facing our community and the world. This new space provides a new model for public media across the country.”

A century ago or more a man or woman that owned a sewing machine could support a family with their industry and work. Today, what if owning a smart phone and having access to the internet could be a young persons “pathway to prosperity” by mastering the magical digital cameras and recording equipment these phones hold within and learning how amplify their voices to the broad universe the world wide web provides?

Thank you for your attention and good night!