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Religion reporting matters

Nicole Sotelo | Sep. 2, 2010

The state of religion reporting is in peril. The newspaper industry is struggling on 46 percent less revenue than just four years ago, according to *USA Today*. As newspaper revenues drop it is not the business or sports sections which are being significantly scaled back. It is religion reporting which is at risk and that is bad news not only for religion, but for the health of our communities.

Two years ago Susan Hogan-Albach was a religion reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. As part of its aggressive cost-cutting efforts the newspaper eliminated her job. On the day she was let go she posted a final article to her blog for the paper. It was an exposé of the Catholic archdiocese of Chicago that revealed a troubling pattern among church officials who were promoted after having turned a blind eye to clergy sexual abuse allegations dating back to 1992.

Local and investigative reporting such as this, not online aggregated content or syndicated news, is critical for the health of local faith and civil communities. Without the fourth estate there is precious little accountability. Simply put, religion reporting matters.

Yet religion news reporters like Susan and diocesan news reporters are slowly becoming an endangered species. The implications for our communities are dire. Healthy communities --including faith communities -- depend on healthy newsrooms.

Today, however, news outlets are compromised -- particularly with the rise of the internet. When a news outlet adds online coverage it requires additional technology and staffing. But online advertising has not produced the same profits as print advertising. Traditional print advertising rates are often 10 times higher than corresponding online rates. What?s more, classifieds are no longer producing significant revenue for news outlets with the rise of marketplace giants such as Craigslist and eBay.

While news executives weigh the risk of requiring online subscriptions, or the potential for a publicly-funded foundation to support their organization, bills still must be paid. As a result religion coverage is often reduced or religion reporter jobs are eliminated completely. In my native state of Arizona, *The Arizona Republic*?s former religion reporter now juggles a number of beats. The *East Valley Tribune* cut its sole religion reporter. *The Catholic Sun* had its staff dismantled by the bishop of the Catholic diocese of Phoenix.

While the immediate loss is a noticeable reduction in the number of local or investigative religion stories, the impact of this loss on our communities is sometimes less visible.

News executives may rely on syndicated content to fill the hole of professional religion reporters, but national or global news stories don?t fill the gap of local coverage or in-depth investigative reporting that is necessary for healthy communities. The mother of a gay son wants to know how the local diocese of the Episcopal Church will treat her son, not how the Archbishop of Canterbury may treat him.

The same phenomenon of inadequate reporting occurs when news outlets try to rely on freelance reporters

instead of fulltime staff. While often just as qualified, freelance writers are not paid what is needed to sustain them over the period of weeks or months that it takes to unearth a big story. Imagine the 2002 *Boston Globe* investigative team that revealed the deep roots of the sexual abuse crisis without its key religion reporter, Michael Paulson.

While the growth of the internet has broadened the number of religious voices that are heard, news media has not yet found a way to maintain the same quality of local reporting that we have come to know -- and need -- to maintain healthy communities. Local communities offer a wellspring of news that is ?fit to print,? but increasingly little religion news gets printed. For the wellbeing of our communities religion reporting must be saved.

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