

The hottest urban livestock bleat, quack, oink, buzz and ... well, whatever noise rabbits make

FOOD, PAGE 52

Life

□ MEDIA □ EDUCATION □ FOOD



MEDIA

Killing the News to Save It. Ann Arbor is the first big town to lose its daily paper—now it's a laboratory for new media

BY BELINDA LUSCOMBE

WHEN LARRY KESTENBAUM, clerk of Washtenaw County, Michigan, was in Lansing for a meeting recently, he saw something unfamiliar on the faces of the other clerks: pity. Colleagues from hard-pressed towns like Flint, Jackson and Kalamazoo were offering

sympathy because, despite everything, they still had a local newspaper, while Ann Arbor, his county seat, did not.

At first blush, Ann Arbor is an unlikely place to earn the dubious distinction of being the first good-size municipality in the U.S. to give up on its only daily newspaper. As the town is known, is more

or less the beauty queen of Michigan: pretty, confident and seemingly immune to the problems of her peers. It still has a downtown with sidewalk cafés and quirky local stores. Its biggest employers are two universities and two hospitals, and it has weathered the recession better than most of the rest of the state. Nearly

half its residents have graduate degrees. How could the paper die in a place like this?

The answer is that it didn't die. It was killed by its owners in a high-stakes gamble to try to create a new and more profitable enterprise. (In the past nine years, the paper lost more than half its classified-ad pages.) The Ann Arbor News



Final deadline Tammie Graves, left, and Sonia Gottfried were two of the News's last 254 employees to lose jobs



PAPER SHORTAGE

The owners of the Ann Arbor News shut it and started a new website and a new (\$9 a month) twice-weekly paper, both called *AnnArbor.com*. Others are handling the crisis differently

RESTING IN PEACE

Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* stopped publishing after 149 years

STRUGGLING ON

Detroit's *News and Free Press*, as well as other Michigan local papers, are not being delivered as often

RECYCLED TO THE WEB

The Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* became a Web-only publication

ceased to exist on July 23. On July 24, *AnnArbor.com* was launched. The new website has a paper version—also called, oddly, *AnnArbor.com*—that comes out on Thursdays and Sundays. The *News*'s owner, Advance Publications, is betting it can rebrand the 175-year-old *News* as a Web publication, turn a profit and still satisfy its readers' craving for local news. A lot of U.S. newspapers, and their readers, have a stake in whether the experiment in Ann Arbor succeeds.

A local newspaper is more than an organ for delivering news and information. It's a habit, a watering hole, a local landmark. It's a unifying force, even if that's just because, like a loud uncle, it gives everyone something to complain about. It's the hub that connects many people to their community. "The *News* was like an old friend. You weren't sure why you spent time with it, but you did, because it was such an old friend," says Charles Eisen-drath, who runs the Knight-Wallace Foundation at the University of Michigan. How does a city deal with that loss? What, if anything, is irreplaceable in the transition from print to Web?

Death's paperboy has been

tossing a lot of venerable titles onto the porch of history recently. The 146-year-old *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the 149-year-old *Rocky Mountain News* are gone. Dozens more are shadows of their former selves, their revenues and resources gutted by the flight of classifieds, the gasping economy and the hordes of websites competing for readers' attention. The best that most print publishers can do is try to slow the drain-circling while frantically figuring out how to make money on the Web. This means cutbacks, layoffs, misery.

Instead of stanching the blood, the Newhouse family, which owns Advance—a group that includes more than 20 daily newspapers across the country—is using Ann Arbor as a lab subject to see if it might hurt less to tear the Band-Aid off quickly. Fixed costs such as paper, printing and delivery have been drastically reduced. From a staff of 316 at the *News* in May 2008, *AnnArbor.com* has a full-time staff of approximately 60, about 35 of them "content creators" (reporters)—plus some 80 from the "preferred blogging community," the majority unpaid—according to *AnnArbor.com* president and

CEO Matt Kraner. Rather than looking like a news-media website, *AnnArbor.com* deliberately reads more like a social-media site, with equal weight given to reports on a new diner and the proposed city income tax. Ads—known as "deals"—are incorporated into the feed, and users can vote for their favorite, with the highest vote getter scoring a place on the cover of the Sunday hard-copy edition. Not exactly Pulitzer material—yet.

"Ann Arbor is an extremely Web-savvy market," says Kraner of why it was selected for this experiment, "probably the most Web-savvy New-house has. Secondly, with all the high-tech industries in this town, this market is very open to new ideas and new concepts. Third, we want to be the hub of connection. I don't know if you can find a market anywhere that has such passion for its community."

But passion cuts both ways. "It feels like they wrecked part of our community and built this shiny new thing," says Julie Weatherbee, 42, who works at the University of Michigan library. "And we don't want it." Weatherbee wasn't a huge fan of the old paper but thinks it could have been improved instead of destroyed—and that locals might stay away from *AnnArbor.com* because of what Advance did.

Besides, if there's anything Ann Arbor won't lack for, it's news. There's already at least one profitable local-news site in town. Mary Morgan, 48, a former *News* staffer, and her husband Dave Askins, 44, started the *Ann Arbor Chronicle* last September. It specializes in long-form accounts of local council, school-board and other civic-association meetings. "I hand-tooled most of the HTML myself," says Askins. (He learned on his other site, *Teeter Talk*—word-for-word transcriptions of interviews with local figures on the couple's teeter-totter.) The *Chronicle*, says Morgan, has about 20,000 unique visitors a month and draws enough

LEISA THOMPSON—THE ANN ARBOR NEWS/AP

advertisers and donations for the two of them to live off. "A lot of people don't want to read an 8,000-word piece on the city council," says Askins, smiling gently behind his foot-long beard and granny glasses, "but they want it to be there."

Some locals are seeing the loss as an opportunity. The folks behind the *Ann Arbor Observer*, a 33-year-old free monthly, hope to pick up some of the *News's* journalists and advertisers. Then there's the *Ann Arbor Journal*, a free weekly paper/website that started circulating to 20,000 homes three weeks before the *News* closed. Plus, the university has the *Michigan Daily*, which doesn't cover the town but keeps an eye on its biggest employer. All in all, there may eventually be more reporters covering Ann Arbor than before the newspaper was killed.

Still, for residents like Dave and Micki Moray, it's not the same. Every day they'd come home from work—he as a manager and she as a nurse at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital—pick up the paper, take it to the back porch and read. Dave, 58, was a *News* paperboy. The couple sold and bought cars for themselves and their daughters through the classifieds. The Morays are employed, active, avowed news junkies and won't read a newspaper online, because it feels like work. "We're not against change. But just to have the rug pulled from under us like that—why didn't they tell us how bad it was?" says Dave. "I would have paid more for it." Now Dave buys one of the Detroit papers, usually at the newsstand because they deliver only three times a week. But it's not the same.

In a fragmented media universe where the battle will be fought for every eyeball, dedicated readers like the Morays are treasures. But their loyalty is hard-won. Whatever the ultimate outcome of the Ann Arbor community-content experiment, it's already proved one thing: the content part is easy; the community part is not. ■

EDUCATION

\$chool Ranking\$. A website is ranking colleges by how much money alumni make—and is catching flak for it too



BY REBECCA KAPLAN

AMERICANS ARE SUCKERS FOR A GOOD ranking. Give people a copy of the annual *U.S. News & World Report* on the country's best colleges and you'll have them gloating, sulking and arguing over the results for hours. Ditto for the various lists put out by the Princeton Review. (Should Penn State really be this year's top-ranked party school? What happened, University of Florida?)

But for all the college rankings floating around, there's still one area students and parents can't find much concrete info about: how much an undergraduate degree will pay off. Enter PayScale.com, which claims to be the world's largest salary survey. Its 2009 College Salary Report uses data supplied by 1.2 million visitors who came to the site and plugged in all sorts of info to find out whether their salaries were in line with those of people doing the same kind of work in their geographic area.

When the list is sorted by school, Dartmouth College alums lead the PayScale pack with a median midcareer salary of \$129,000. (The site defines midcareer as having a minimum of 10 years' experience.) Not far behind are the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University and Harvey Mudd College (a small school with a big engineering pro-

gram). On the other end of the 600-school spectrum: South Dakota's Black Hills State University, whose midcareer graduates reportedly earn \$42,000 a year.

PayScale's college ranking, in its second year, is drawing fire for its methodology. Median salaries for smaller institutions—like Black Hills—can be based on as few as 100 people. And the salaries are not adjusted for factors like cost of living. Another problem with the ranking is that it excludes anyone with a graduate degree. As a result, a huge portion of alumni can be left out; a recent Dartmouth survey of its 2008 grads found that 80% of them were either attending graduate school or planning to apply in the next five years.

Al Lee, director of quantitative analysis for PayScale, defends the exclusion. He doesn't think it's fair, for example, to credit his undergraduate institution (Swarthmore College) for the salary premium he gets for having a Ph.D. from Yale University.

And he may be right about that. But what is this ranking really saying about higher education? That every student's goal should be to make as much money as possible, betterment of the world be damned? As Bruce Breimer, former director of college guidance at New York City's prestigious Collegiate School, says, "This is only one way to judge success." ■