

Municipal leaders can support local news outlets by raising awareness of UN World Press Freedom Day. One way to do this by illuminating their town hall or civic square in UN colours (blue and white). *Photo: Uptown Waterloo BIA streetlights / courtesy of Mirko Petricevic*



Municipal leaders build community by supporting local journalism

by **Mirko Petricevic**

Few people who hold power invite more scrutiny. Yet, there it was for all to see in the 2024 Ontario Small Urban Municipalities (OSUM) conference program: A panel discussion dubbed “Revitalizing the Local Media Landscape.” What in the world were organizers thinking?

While many mayors, councillors, and municipal staff have good working relationships with local journalists, fielding a call from a reporter can quicken a civil servant’s pulse.

Most municipal leaders understand the crucial role journalists play in maintaining a healthy democracy. And as plunging advertising revenues hollow out local newsrooms or close them down completely – more than 560 news outlets in 372 communities across Canada have merged or closed since 2008 – Brian Lambie, president of Redbrick Communications, said municipal officials appreciate the value of local news.

“Not having it is far, far worse than any frustration they might have with local journalism,” said Lambie.

Municipal officials would much rather respond to criticism that is based on factual reporting than on rumours and

misinformation spreading in their communities, said Lambie, who has worked in public sector communications for three decades.

During the panel at last year’s OSUM conference, Lambie encouraged the roughly 180 attendees to beef up their communications departments to publicize some of the types of stories that local news outlets covered in the past, saying, “The newsrooms we knew 10 years ago are not coming back.” Delegates appeared to leave the session not knowing what they could realistically do to help revitalize local news, he said.

Campaign for Local Support

As COVID-19 locked us down in 2020 and choked economic activity, a handful of former *Waterloo Region Record* employees launched a campaign to muster material and vocal support for a sector whose revenues had already been free falling for a decade.

They proudly identified as ink-stained wretches – an old pejorative for print journalists – and started working to build a culture of appreciation for quality journalism, because it is one of the bedrocks of our democracy.

While its flagship project involves asking municipalities to help build awareness for United Nations World Press Freedom Day, the website includes a list of things people can do to support local journalism. The next logical step for the grassroots group was to create a tailor-made toolkit for municipal leaders.

In addition to including Lambie’s suggestions in the toolkit, the group collaborated with the Local News Research Project, led by researchers at Toronto Metropolitan University, the University of British Columbia Okanagan, and Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C.

The toolkit, called “Fostering a healthy democracy through support for a local journalism: A toolkit for municipal leaders,” highlights the precarious state of the news sector in Canada and presents more than a dozen ideas on how municipal leaders can support their local news outlets.

In 2024, the Government of Ontario directed its largest agencies to dedicate at least 25 per cent of their advertising budgets to Ontario-based publishers. If municipalities shift a portion of their advertising spend to local outlets,

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they could support local news without increasing demands on their budgets.

In 2023, tech giant Meta blocked reliable journalism on its Facebook and Instagram platforms. So, consider suspending paid advertising on U.S.-based platforms while continuing to upload only unpaid (organic) posts.

To determine whether one of your municipality's social media campaigns has paid off, identify truly valuable outcomes rather than "vanity metrics" such as likes and views. For example, ask event organizers and communications staff whether they can clearly demonstrate that paid social media advertising drew additional people – above organic posts – to your latest community information session.

Another way municipal leaders can support local news outlets is by raising awareness of UN World Press Freedom Day. On May 3, municipal leaders can raise awareness by:

- making a press freedom proclamation
- raising the UN flag
- displaying messages on digital signs in front of fire halls, libraries, and community centres
- illuminating their town hall or civic square, a bridge, or other municipal infrastructure in blue or blue and white (UN colours)
- participating in the

#SpotlightPressFreedom campaign
The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) has included the toolkit in its new Democratic Engagement Solutions Bank, which is part of the association's Healthy Democracy Project.

"We included the supporting local journalism toolkit in AMO's Solution Bank because it offers ideas to help support local media as key to a healthy democracy," said Petra Wolfbeiss, director of AMO's membership centre.

"The slow demise of local media has been on our radar, and we have been hearing about it from our members for years. From a democratic standpoint, local media are key to accountability and

transparency. Municipal governments support these values strongly."

Role of Local News in a Healthy Democracy

If the trust of Canadians in the news media has tanked, as the prevailing narrative goes, why would municipal leaders bother supporting local news? In part, because the death of trust in local news has been greatly exaggerated – often by journalists.

Rarely is the decline in trust set within the broader context that people's trust in many institutions has dropped since the 1960s. The Edelman Trust Barometer suggests Canadians' trust in news media dropped below 50 per cent only twice (in 2017 and 2018) since 2012.

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025, Canadians' overall trust in the news media measured 39 per cent, but trust levels for local news outlets scored significantly higher. For English-speakers, the report suggests 62 per cent trust in regional or local newspapers. For French-speakers, the trust level in regional or local radio measured 60 per cent.

Unfortunately, the prevailing low-trust narrative overshadows these figures. But as Martin Baron, former editor of *The Washington Post*, notes in his book *Collision of Power*, "Without democracy, there will be no independent press. And without an independent press, there can be no democracy."

In short, an independent press and democracy do not just co-exist, they need each other.

In this era of democratic backsliding around the world, the time has come for every Canadian to fully appreciate the essential role local news outlets play in creating and maintaining a healthy democracy.



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as published in

MUNICIPAL WORLD
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