An Information Community Case Study: Scranton
An Industrial City with a Media Ecosystem Yet to Take Advantage of Digital Opportunities

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Summary
In the past several years the Scranton, Pennsylvania, news media have steadily lost workers. As a result the space to publish quality journalism has been reduced. Residents and local governments in Northeast Pennsylvania have been slow to adapt to new online information practices despite high speed internet access in the area and readily available online publishing software.

As the Knight Report, Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in a Digital Age, highlights it is important to understand that there are three important elements to be considered as we analyze media and democracy in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century:

• availability of relevant and credible information to all Americans and their communities;
• capacity of individuals to engage with information; and,
• individual engagement with information and the public life of the community.

The Great Recession battered local media, highlighting the limitations of the Scranton news and information ecosystem. If residents are to understand their role in communities and how they function effectively, they require consistent, quality information, information that they are less likely to receive than even the recent past without additional developments in the Scranton media landscape.

Introduction
Scranton was incorporated in 1866, a hub of anthracite coal mining, railroading and iron smelting during the industrial revolution.\textsuperscript{1} That same year, the first electric streetcar in the United States was operated in the city. It was a milestone that crowned Scranton “The Electric City,” a moniker that continues to the present.\textsuperscript{2} The population rose to more than 140,000 by 1940, according to Census figures, and within two decades would steadily fall, losing a significant amount of residents with the decline of major industries. Today, Scranton’s population is about half what it was seventy years ago. It is the seventh largest city in Pennsylvania.

During the last decade, politics and entertainment converged to thrust Scranton into the American imagination as the working-class Everytown, USA. Since 2005, “The Office,” the popular, ongoing NBC prime time sitcom set in Scranton, has brought attention to the city. Furthermore, Scranton was central
to 2007-08 presidential politics, especially within the Democratic party. During the presidential primary campaign, then-Senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Joseph Biden visited Scranton on several occasions and the Republican party presidential and vice-presidential candidates John McCain and Sarah Palin stopped in Scranton at least once. Personal ties of some candidates helped raise Scranton’s election profile in the state and nation. Vice President Joseph Biden was born in Scranton, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s father is from Scranton, and Secretary Clinton spent childhood summers there with her paternal grandparents. The late Robert P. Casey, a popular Pennsylvania governor from 1987-1995, was from Scranton and he raised his family there. Mr. Casey’s son, Robert Casey Jr., lives in Scranton and is a U.S. Senator. Scranton is also the seat of government for Lackawanna County, which has a large majority of registered Democrats, many of whom are conservative and Catholic.

Scranton and Lackawanna County, in collaboration with public/private organizations, have invested in a number of revitalization efforts to lure business and residents to the area. Over the past eight years $300 million investment in city projects has been overseen by Mayor Christopher Doherty. Also, Scranton officials entered the Google Fiber for Communities contest to be considered for a high speed Internet, fiber optics infrastructure experiment in March, 2010.

Demography

Scranton is the largest of 40 municipalities in Lackawanna County and is the county government seat. As mentioned above, Scranton’s population has been declining since 1940. More recently, from 1990 to 2000, the Scranton population shrank 7 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau reports the 72,861 population estimate in 2006 is 4 percent less than the Year 2000 count. Despite rapid growth in nearby Pike and Monroe counties to the southeast, Lackawanna County’s population is shrinking. There are 209,408 people in the county, according to 2009 estimates, which is a decrease from about 212,000 people counted in the 2000 census. The population is also older, poorer, and less educated than the national average.

Scranton comprises 20 neighborhoods and is largely working-class, much like the region it occupies. The Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce defines Greater Scranton as all of Lackawanna County, a land mass of 458 square miles. Scranton is surrounded by populous, active municipalities – the contiguous townships and boroughs are all part of the metro area and the borders are invisible. Scranton’s population density is 3,028 persons per square mile, which for example is far less dense than Philadelphia’s 11,233 persons per square mile density, but is higher than Lackawanna County’s 455 person-per-square mile density.

The Scranton median household income is $28,805. 15 percent of the population lives below poverty level. A 2008 projection put median income at $32,794. A three-year, American Community Survey estimate released in 2008 by the Census Bureau reports 18.8 percent of Scranton residents live below the poverty line, compared to a national average of 13.2 percent. Although 83 percent of Scranton school district students receive a high school diploma, the percentage of Scranton residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 15.8 percent, which is below the 27.4 percent national average, according to the 2000 census.

Scranton is also nearly 94 percent white, which is less ethnically diverse compared to the 75 percent national average. Scranton contains more older residents than the national average, with 20.1 percent of the population over age 65, compared to a 12.4 percent national average. A January 2010 snapshot of unemployment numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate Scranton’s unemployment rate was 10.5 percent, slightly higher than the 9.7 percent national average.

The Scranton School District has 18 public K-12 schools and enrolls approximately 9,700 students. The Scranton Catholic Diocese system in the city includes four schools offering kindergarten through high school education. There are two universities in Scranton and a new medical school. The University of Scranton, a private, liberal arts Jesuit school, is the largest higher education institution in the area, with approximately 5,600 students. Marywood University, another private, Catholic university has 3,300 students. The University of Scranton and Marywood University confer post-graduate degrees. The Pennsylvania State University system has one area outpost, in neighboring municipality Dunmore Borough, with the 1,200-student Worthington Campus. The city has one private junior college, Lackawanna College, and no community colleges. Commonwealth Medical College opened last year and enrolls 80 students, with plans to reach 650 students in the coming years.

There are 12 public school districts in Lackawanna County including Scranton and 11 colleges, universities or career schools. Total college enrollment in the county nears 30,000 students.

Of the Lackawanna County colleges, at least three offer journalism majors and practical media training. There are student-run, independent radio stations at the University of Scranton and Keystone College in La Plume. Marywood University offers bachelor and post-graduate communication arts degrees in a department with updated media equipment.

The University of Scranton recently introduced a Media and Information Technology major oriented to digital platforms and content creation. The three schools also publish student newspapers. Students studying communications at area universities usually find news internships at local traditional media outlets.

Two major local governments in Lackawanna County are struggling financially. Scranton has been under state “distressed municipality” designation (Act 47) since 1992, a status akin to financial restructuring due to fiscal weakness. A city council super-majority elected in 2009 opposes most fiscal policies of Mayor Chris Doherty, who sued the council in May 2010 for amending the $77.9
The Scranton area economy is largely driven by services, logistics and manufacturing. The city is in the northeast corner of the state — about one hour from New York and New Jersey borders — and is a central throughway from all points. Interstates 81, 84, 380 and 476 either run through or are proximate to Scranton, and Interstate 80 is less than 30 minutes away. Scranton is within two hours driving distance to New York City, Philadelphia, Harrisburg and Syracuse.

According to The Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce “Scranton Plan”, a program to recruit new business and residents to the area, among the top 20 employers in Lackawanna County are: the US government (3,300 employees), the state government (2,700), Allied Services, a nonprofit physical rehabilitation complex (2,500), Kane is Able, Inc. trucking and warehouses (1,700), Cinram Manufacturing DVD factory (1,550), Lackawanna County (1,544), and The Diocese of Scranton (1,420). Three hospitals in Scranton — Mercy Hospital, Moses Taylor and Community Medical Center — together employ 4,169 people, and the Scranton School District has 1,100 employees. There are more than 50 nursing, personal and home health providers in the county.

Print Media

Scranton is a one-newspaper town six days a week. The Times-Tribune and The Sunday Times have been owned by the Lynett family since 1885. Times-Shamrock Communications is the paper’s parent company. A rival newspaper, The Times Leader: Scranton Edition, owned by Wilkes-Barre Publishing in Luzerne County is circulated on Sunday and competes with The Sunday Times.

Multiple daily newspaper ownership ended in Scranton in 1990 when Times-Shamrock Communications, which owned The Scranton Times, bought its “century-old rivals” The Scrantonian and The Tribune. Times-Shamrock Communications continued to publish The Tribune as a morning paper and The Scranton Times as an afternoon paper for the next 15 years until The Times-Tribune was formed in June 2005, through the merger of the two papers. The Scranton Times in 1946 received a Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism for its examination of judicial practices in the region. John Harold Brislín, a reporter at The Scrantonian and The Tribune, received a Pulitzer prize for local reporting in 1959.

Newsroom staff count at The Times-Tribune, as of spring 2009, was about 60 unionized staff — total for reporters, photographers and the copydesk, across all editorial departments. Ten years ago there were approximately 90 newsroom employees. Advertising revenue declines, exacerbated by the deep national recession of 2008-09 forced the newspaper’s management to cut 15 percent of staff companywide in a round of layoffs and buyouts in March 2009, which meant a reduction of approximately 10 newsroom staff, from 70 union employees to 60. The paper, which claims “the largest newsgathering operation in Northeast Pennsylvania” also instituted management salary reductions, wage freezes and one-day-a-month work furloughs for one year. However, a more stable financial outlook in 2010 has prompted the company to announce a lifting of the furloughs and re-instatement management salaries.

The paper’s editorial priority is Scranton, its city council, the county commissioners, the justice system, and area politics. It maintains a state capital bureau staffed by one reporter. The paper’s coverage area includes county towns outside Scranton plus parts of six surrounding counties, but much of that reporting has been eliminated or scaled back as bureaus in Carbondale, Honesdale and Pittston closed.

Readers are devoted to the daily newspaper. The Times-Tribune claims a reader penetration rate of 59 percent for The Times-Tribune, among the highest in the industry. More than 75 percent of adults read The Sunday Times, and 86 percent “read our daily or Sunday newspaper or visited us online during the past week” according to the paper’s publisher. Online readership is also growing.

The Times Leader introduced a daily, 25-cent Scranton Edition in 2008 with some limited local content to the local newspaper market, hoping to undersell the Times-Tribune 75-cent paper, but the effort was short-lived. The Times Leader has since retreated to a 50-cent Sunday-only edition. The Times Leader’s Wilkes-Barre Publishing, Inc. Maintains a bureau in Scranton and publishes a weekly newspaper in The Abingtons, a cluster of municipalities in the Lackawanna County market.

Some readers are disappointed in The Times-Tribune because they sense political bias. Regional news narratives are driven predominantly by the local daily newspaper.


The newspaper’s staff is experienced and award-winning, receiving accolades for aggressive political and judicial coverage. In the past year, the staff has closely followed major stories such as upheaval at the Scranton Diocese; the advent of natural gas drilling in the region; county political corruption, and the costs of a large state legislature.

Times-Tribune circulation is dropping, but not as quickly as the national
average; circulation is 66,600 on Sunday, and 49,500 to 58,000 Monday through Saturday. The paper relies on advertising, like most American news businesses.

Times-Shamrock owns 42 print publications and 17 radio stations in 10 states and the Virgin Islands. In Northeast Pennsylvania, Times-Shamrock owns and operates daily newspapers in six cities or towns; seven weeklys; plus specialty publications (i.e., a business journal, a publication for senior citizens). The company also owns three commercial radio stations in the region.30

A handful of print weekly newspapers or magazines published by other organizations are circulated around the county, but they have either no web presence or a low profile online. There is also a Spanish-language publication in Scranton, the monthly $La Voz Latina Mensual$38

**Commercial Television**

Cable and satellite television is available in Scranton from three companies: through Comcast, DirecTV and Dish TV.

The Scranton-Wilkes-Barre metro area is the 54th largest television market in the country (out of 210). WNEP, the ABC affiliate, claims a 17-county coverage area and consistently dominates the commercial news market in ratings.39 WNEP is owned by Local TV LLC, which is owned by private equity firm Oak Hill Capital Partners.40 The station airs 10 local news programs throughout the day, Monday through Friday, starting with 5 a.m. coverage and ending with the 11 p.m. newscast, and is less frequent on weekends. The station claims 34.5 hours per week of local news broadcasts, according to promotional material.

The CBS affiliate WYOU is owned by Mission Broadcasting, and WBRE, the NBC affiliate, which is owned by Nexstar Broadcasting Group Inc., are partners in a joint sales agreement where Nexstar provides sales and operations support to Mission Broadcasting. WBRE airs seven local newscasts Monday through Friday starting at 5 a.m. and ending with an 11 p.m. newscast. The weekend news programming is less frequent than during the weekdays. WNEP and WBRE each have at least one designated investigative reporter on staff.

A look at the March 2009 ratings sweeps indicate WNEP’s 6 p.m. newscast received a 21 rating/42 percent audience share. WBRE received a 4.8 rating/9 audience share, and WYOU pulled in a 1 rating/2 percent audience share, according to Nielsen results as reported by The Times-Tribune.

On April 4, 2009, due to lagging ratings, Nexstar abruptly pulled WYOU’s newscast from the Scranton-Wilkes-Barre market and laid off 14 news and production staff. Mission Broadcasting replaced the news with the syndicated programming “Judge Joe Brown,” “Judge Judy,” “Access Hollywood” and “Entertainment Tonight.” Representatives at Nexstar Broadcasting, NASDAQ: NXST, stated the company would save $900,000 annually by ending the WYOU newscast.42

"By offering a broad range of popular entertainment choices to our Wilkes-Barre/Scranton viewers, WYOU can provide additional attractive business solutions to our advertisers and as such we believe this is a win-win situation for our entire community," Louis Abitabila, Vice President and General Manager of WBRE, said in a press release on the programming changes.

In 2006, three years before ending WYOU’s local newscast, Nexstar Broadcasting lobbied the public and the FCC to relax rules on station cross-ownership. They argued deregulation would boost local news content and the local economy, stating: “Operating two stations gives companies like ours the ability to deliver another news voice to the market. It means more local news not less. It means more local jobs. It’s good for our community. ...A media monopoly is simply impossible in today’s world.”43

In November 2009, Nexstar began producing the 10 p.m. newscast for local Fox affiliate station Fox 56-WOLF under a multi-year contract. The Fox 56 station broadcasts a daily, one-hour local news program at 10 p.m., which is produced by the WBRE news team. Before that agreement, ABC station WNEP delivered Fox 56 news.

Fox 56-WOLF is owned by New Age Media and mostly runs syndicated entertainment programming. The station runs some local sports programming.

From NEPA Media Blog, an online bulletin board of Northeast Pennsylvania local news media activity, an anonymous poster called "Dodger Fan" wrote the following on April 4, 2010, on the one-year anniversary of the last WYOU local news broadcast:

> The only way for WYOU to get news will be if the FCC orders a sale, or if the economy improves and a buyer surfaces in about a year, looking at the potential 2012 revenues from a political cycle. The pluses: a CBS affiliation which would guarantee good lead-ins to their late news shows, and a market size that while shrinking, still carries a decent population base, and there are TV people well known to this market that might return to give familiarity. The minuses: building a newsroom from scratch, and a lack of established people. But its a virtual luck that next April, we will still have a WYOU without local news, and NEPA deserves better.

The Times-Tribune ran a story on April 16, 2010, headlined “Former WYOU-TV staffers miss newscasts” on the one-year anniversary of the station ending its local CBS news broadcast. Here is a reader comment posted below the story on the newspaper’s website:

> As a former news reporter for WYOU, who lived through three ownership changes and the change to WYOU, a part of me died when I heard the news a year ago. We worked hard and put out an increasingly solid product in the 80’s. Diversified Communications sunk a lot of money and effort into the station. But a cultural change takes time...What was needed was commitment to the people that made it work. Viewer’s don’t really care about the mascara and lipstick, they want a solid product. Mission Broadcasting, the facade for Nexstar (where the hell is the FCC?) ripped the soul out of the station. the “shared services agreement” was the death toll. My dear friend David DeCosmo, a solid reporter who knew Wilkes-Barre and Luzerne County like no one else, was the only reporter left, in Scranton? ...The station itself should have worked with it’s strengths and focused on Scranton and Lackawanna County...More than I can go...
into here, but it shows the lack of station identity and commitment to the community rather than to the bottom line. If you become an integral part of the community, which Diversified tried to do, the rest will come as you build up that loyalty.

Unfortunately the formerly locally, family owned stations are all now owned by investors who look at nothing but the bottom line.

News 22, with you in Lackawanna County

[signed] WDAU’s first morning anchor, 04/16/10 12:27

**Public Television**

Regional public broadcasting is provided by PBS/NPR affiliate WVIA, which has a wide reach on television and radio — 22 counties in Northeast Pennsylvania — and has new, state-of-the-art studios including High Definition equipment at its Pittston headquarters in Luzerne County. The station receives 40 percent of its funding from the state and federal government, and funding the past two years has been troubled. In 2009, management at WVIA implemented spending cuts effective in anticipation of a 50 percent decrease in funding from the state. Station president and CEO William Kelly released a statement on Dec. 9, 2008 indicating management projected a $200,000 deficit in the station’s finances within six months.\(^6\) The station, according to a 2010 financial audit, received only $123,000 in state grant funding for the 2009-10 fiscal year, a significant reduction in the historical $745,000. In response, management cut original programming, laid off four full-time staff, implemented a furlough schedule for remaining workers, reduced management pay by up to 10 percent, reduced spending on training, travel, maintenance, and hospitality, banned overtime pay, and re-aligned staff duties.

The public access PEG station is Electric City Television. ECTV took over PEG operations in 2008 from a group that operated out of the Scranton Public Library. ECTV is only available to the 80,000 Comcast cable subscribers in a tri-county area (Lackawanna, Luzerne and Wyoming), according to ECTV president John Darcy. ECTV channels are not carried on satellite systems.

ECTV’s headquarters are on the ground floor of a building in downtown Scranton. The group launched a website in spring 2009, has started promoting its facilities to the public, offers digital video training and is planning to create weekly shows.\(^5\) The group broadcasts contributed public content and regularly records Lackawanna County commissioner and Scranton city council meetings, plus some planning and school board meetings. Broadcasts of public meetings in the Greater Scranton area are upon request and availability of staff. ECTV has three paid employees and one volunteer (Darcy). The nonprofit group operates with a $250,000 annual budget, according to the station president. The group is awaiting cable franchise fee payment by the City to continue operating. The City receives approximately $700,000 from Comcast through the franchise agreement and is renegotiating the PEG contract with cable company.\(^5\)

**Internet media**

The local traditional media outlets maintain dominant web presences geared to several communities, both social and demographic. The daily newspaper’s online news component, TheTimes-Tribune.com, tracked an average of 200,000 unique visits in April 2010, according to Quantcast metrics.\(^5\)

The online version of the daily newspaper features staff blogs, links to its Twitter account, posts video generated by staff and has a My Towns tab, where readers can click to find news aggregated (mostly Times-Tribune newspaper content with no outside links) for 10 towns and regions in the paper’s coverage area. There is also designated space for crime stories.

Times-Shamrock in 2008 launched a local entertainment directory site, the570.com, and high school sports site Varsity570.com. Times-Shamrock also operates Electric City Weekend ECWeekend.com, the online version of its free, weekly arts and entertainment publication. The Times Leader’s Wilkes-Barre Publishing group distributes its own free, weekend print publication, The Weekender, and online at TheWeekender.com.

All four commercial television stations have a website. WBRE (NBC affiliate) and WYOU (CBS affiliate) share PAHomepage.com, which had approximately 43,000 unique visitors in April 2010.\(^4\) WNEP (ABC affiliate) maintains WNEP.com, which saw 230,000 unique visitors in April 2010. All the local TV station websites post to their sites video clips of news stories, breaking news, alerts, calendar listings, user-generated photos, links to civic booster items, and advertisers among other things.\(^5\) The last site is MyFOXnepa.com, features clips from the 10 pm newscast.\(^5\) Other news on MyFOXnepa.com is linked to online content provided by news partner, The Times Leader-newspaper in Luzerne County.\(^5\)

Online, the majority of the area’s news organizations, regardless of original platform (print, TV, radio), provide similar features: local news, both original content and links to national outlets or news partner sites, sports, weather, civic announcements, obituaries, some user-generated features, advertising, links to its own products/promotions, and other notices, plus advertising.

The public television affiliate WVIA maintains WVIA.org, where visitors can check links to programming, read messages from the station president, donate, find board of directors contacts, and other general station information, including community events, promotions and sponsorships.

These traditional media are mostly unchallenged. There are few independent community news sites and no identified hyperlocal news endeavors staffed by reporters to generate information or engage the community. The traditional outlets online largely duplicate what they provide on their primary platform — that is, while the online sites for legacy media may contain more accessories and features than can be delivered in print or television, there is almost no additional hard news, public service or long-form journalism on the sites.

One independent website site has established itself as an alternative outlet to traditional media in Scranton. DohertyDecoit.com averages about 7,000 unique visitors a month according to Quantcast estimates, though much site traffic is directed to a message board for which figures can’t be obtained and is likely significantly higher given the number of posts.\(^5\) The site was started by Scranton resident Joe Pilchesky some years ago to publicly challenge Mayor Chris Doherty and councilmembers who regularly support him. Pilchesky approaches community information as material that has to be fought for. He regularly criticizes, yet relies heavily upon, The Times-Tribune. His scope has
since expanded beyond Scranton council and he now follows officials’ activities in different public agencies, such as police administrations and school boards around the region.

Though Pilchesky’s site is a nexus for rumor and gossip, it also generates news. Pilchesky also facilitates dialogue on stories newspaper and television have abandoned while presenting an editorial counterpoint to local mainstream media. He has created a large following in his forums, where he manages an active message board. Pilchesky also outpaces the Times-Tribune newsroom in Right to Know and Freedom of Information Request filings. He posts news tips, court papers, memos and other official documents to his site. The Times-Tribune has written stories about him, but refuses to name his site or link to it.

Electric City Renaissance, ElectricCityr.com, exists to promote Scranton arts and entertainment. The site was recently redesigned and has good name recognition, solicits contributed material, but is infrequently updated.

Four other independent news and information sites, all one-person operations, have emerged to promote dialogue on community issues, but they are mostly political commentary and do not deliver enough new information to readers for change or impact. If the daily traditional media ceased publication, these outlets would be insufficient information sources.

Michael Hayes, a resident in Dunmore Borough, started Dunmorenews.web.com in March 2010 to post news about the borough. The site is infrequently updated, though Hayes occasionally videotapes monthly council meetings and uploads them to the site, the only known person in the county municipalities to do this service. However the videos have poor sound quality and he does not report original news in the borough. Rather, he posts stories about Dunmore reported by The Times-Tribune.

Scranton resident Thomas Borthwick runs NEPArtisan.com, a blog about area politics, mainly the Democratic office holders and candidates. Resident and “retired professional journalist” Joe Talamini runs the blog ScrantonAtLarge.blogspot.com, “NEPA Source for Real News.” And an unidentified individual founded in 2010 NEPABuzz.com, a regional online bulletin board for community discussion of general topics in several counties.

Radio

There are nine commercial and noncommercial radio stations in Scranton, and about two dozen radio outlets in the Scranton-Wilkes-Barre metro area. One station, WLK-FM Newradio in Wilkes-Barre, offers a popular talk show about local issues, but is mostly commentary. The NPR affiliate, WVIA, provides limited original news content and other regional programming. Additionally, there is an independent radio station at the University of Scranton with a format mix of music and sports talk. And Keystone College, in La Plume, has a low power FM student radio station. Station formats are varied, from Top 40 rock, country, adult contemporary, and “oldies” music to talk radio and religion.

Other: News Aggregation Sites and Social Media

Major news aggregator sites such as Outside.in, Everyblock.com, Fwix.com, or OurTowns.com, do not provide significant value to the Northeast Pennsylvania news market. Search results for “Scranton” on those sites round up published reports (news, features, sports, calendar listings) from all local traditional media, plus other mentions that include the search word. There is virtually no original content presented in any of the major news aggregation sites.

Regarding social media, the established commercial media outlets post content to Twitter and Facebook, however local government has not adopted social media policies. Neither the City of Scranton website nor the County of Lackawanna (other than the bus system) maintain official Twitter or Facebook accounts or RSS feeds, nor do they point to social sites from their sites. Beyond news-centric social media there is activity on Craigslist.com that suggests there is a critical mass of people who find it productive to trade locally online.

Other groups and individuals use social media to share community information. There are myriad Facebook pages for events and causes around Scranton. A local FreeCycle group on Yahoo has 4,861 members and recorded an average of 942 posts a month in 2009 to its digital bulletin board. A Scranton community bulletin board on Yahoo is less active with 619 members and an average of 87 posts each month last year.

Library

The Lackawanna County Library System comprises nine libraries and one bookmobile. The system’s central library is the Scranton Public Library, also known as Albright Memorial Library, and was founded in the 1890s. The Scranton Public Library serves as the District Library Center for five counties in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The county system operates the County Children’s Library in Scranton. The city has one other system library, in the Green Ridge neighborhood.

The county libraries, which serve as community anchor institutions, offer cultural and historical programs, genealogical research services and computer classes, and all locations offer wi-fi and high speed Internet access of 6 Mbps download speed on its network of 275 computers. The Albright library reference department maintains a blog on the latest library resources. The system website features online collection searches and contact information for all locations. The libraries are visited approximately 750,000 times per year and the system has 60,000 registered users. A county library tax funds approximately 60 percent of the library system’s operating budget. The Lackawanna County Library Board adopted a $4.85 million budget for 2010, which is 9 percent lower than the prior year’s budget, according to a Dec. 18, 2009 Times-Tribune article.

Broadband Connectivity

High speed satellite and cable Internet access is available through the major national companies Comcast and Verizon, plus some smaller competitors such as Hughes Net and WiMax. Broadband is readily available in the metro area. Public wi-fi is available at some locations such as the mall, some businesses (i.e. Starbucks, McDonalds), the county libraries and on the University of Scranton campus.

According to a January 2010 Verizon press release, high speed Internet access is available through digital subscriber lines (DSL) at its 504 “switching
stations" across the state. The company has a station near Carbondale, in Lackawanna County. Speeds available for purchase through the service are up to 1 Mbps downstream and 384 kilobits per second (kbps) upstream, for $29.99 a month with a year long contract. Faster speeds of up to 3 Mbps downstream and 768 Kbps upstream are available, for $49.99 with a year long contract.

Comcast offers high-speed Internet access to the area in tiered speed plans of download speeds up to 50 megabits per second (Mbps) through its “Extreme 50” plan for $139 a month and broadband service with download speeds of 16 Mbps for $69.95 per month. Hughes Net offers satellite Internet, but at higher pricing: $59.95 per month for 1 Mbps download and up to $349.95 per month for 5 Mbps download speed.

The Lackawanna County Board of Commissioners in March 2010 hired Maryland-based company ConXX to apply for Recovery Act funds that, if approved, would cover 70 percent of a $5.5 million wireless infrastructure upgrade project for countywide broadband. The county spends upwards of $447,500 per year on Internet service for its county offices and commissioners say implementing a new wireless infrastructure would save the county about $200,000 per year.

Local Government Websites

City of Scranton

The city’s website contains all standard information of government functions. City council meeting schedules, agendas and approved budgets are stored there in a timely manner. City Hall hours of operation and address are listed, as are local events and municipal codes. There are instructions on the site for filing open records requests, and a list that includes recent request filings. The site includes phone number and e-mail contact information for the mayor, city councilmen and heads of departments. The site also contains links to other local public agencies and predominant civic organizations. However, an RSS feed option, social media and regular city hall news is absent.

Lackawanna County

The county provides better interactive information on its website for the public than the City of Scranton. Digital video footage of bi-weekly county commission meetings are stored on the site within a day of a meeting. Agendas and schedules are clearly posted and linked to. Approved budgets are online, and the county site contains hundreds of links to municipal, civic and public safety organizations. Like Scranton, the county’s site does not maintain RSS or social media options.

The county publishes a quarterly newsletter called “Living Lackawanna” that is available online and in print. The newsletter focuses on budgetary issues such as county expenditures, major projects and grant funding.

Town-to-town, municipal sites are inconsistent with information. For instance, the Dunmore Borough website does not list e-mail addresses or direct phone numbers for any of the elected borough officials or employees. It instead refers users to the main office number, fax and the municipal building’s physical address. There is no mention of how to file open records requests, who the local Right to Know agent is, or links to the Right to Know office. And the City of Carbondale, the only other municipality in Lackawanna County that is has a city classification besides Scranton (i.e., is not a township or borough), appears to have a new website, but it is incomplete — there are no other pages than the homepage and no hyperlinks to resources. The homepage lists only the Carbondale city hall address, but no phone numbers to departments and no listings of local officials.

Open Records

The Pennsylvania legislature overhauled its open records law with the Act 3 of 2008 Right-to-Know law. Pennsylvania had one of the weakest open records laws in the nation and the new law strengthened the definition of an open record, and more importantly, placed the burden of proof of an open record on the government agency, not the citizen. That is, the government has to presume a record is public and defend its confidentiality, rather than the other way around as it was before the law changed.

The law also established the Office of Open Records and an Open Records officer who serves a six-year term. It mandated an Open Records agent be designated across municipalities, and clarified filing procedures. According to the Office's 2009 Annual Report, government agencies received “thousands” (the agency did not specify a number) of open records requests, and the Office handled 1,159 appeals. Eighty-eight of these appeals were from media outlets.

Conclusion: Do Citizens and Communities Have All the Information They Want and Need?

The traditional media, especially print and television employ fewer news workers than a decade ago. The dominant daily newspaper has reduced staff through attrition, buyouts and layoffs, and in 2008 daily shrunk the physical size of the paper by one column.

One commercial television station ended its local newscast in 2009, shedding 14 news workers. And one newsroom produces newscasts for two network affiliates. The public broadcasting affiliate in 2009 announced layoffs, furloughs, salary cuts and less original programming due to a budgetary crisis. Meanwhile, the dominant public broadcasting organization is operating with drastic funding cuts.

The majority of investigative or public service journalism comes from the daily newspaper, although two television stations employ investigative reporters. Special projects by television, print and radio should be more frequent. Also, few outlets link to competing news creators.

A few online news endeavors have emerged to gather and present more information about their communities, but these sites are not serious contenders for alternative news sources. They are understaffed, underfunded and are not run by professional journalists. They are also “vertical” in that the focus is on a particular topic, namely political commentary, rather than general neighborhood or local news. Also, these sites rely heavily on reports generated by traditional media.

Local governments need to better promote public records accessibility and a culture of strong civic engagement. As the Internet is incorporated into daily
life, it is vital that governments and civic groups meet a growing demand for
goodly quality information. The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American
Life Project has found that nearly 40 percent of adults go online to retrieve
government data about spending and 31 percent of adults use blogs, online
video, social networking, and e-mail to obtain government data. The group
also has found 92 percent of Americans access news online, and people are getting their
news from the Internet than newspapers or radio. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
strengthened its Right-to-Know law in 2009, which better organized and raised standards of
filing requests. More importantly, the law presumes all government records are public, which
removes from the requestor the burden of proof that a record is open. Governments are complying with the basic requirements of the law, but open
records practices should go much farther.

Nonprofit organizations could step in to assist the public with open records training. In the digital era, collaboration in media has become the new norm.
Although area traditional media have embraced convergence across platforms,
newspaper information remains mostly siloed. Creating a stronger, more diverse media ecosystem locally should be a priority for officials, civic leaders and
business owners. These groups should begin examining specific information needs to create solutions. New sources of funding should be explored, as should
methods for low-cost news gathering. Focus groups could be formed to
determine information gaps.

Public/private news partnerships could be proposed to generate additional
news outlet diversity. Media literacy programs could be offered at public
institutions, such as in libraries, or universities to increase the capacity of
individuals to engage with information. Collaboration across media platforms
and media businesses should be common practice and community outreach
programs for regular two-way discussion on issues could be supported.
Moreover, local government could clearly provide much more information and
do so in digital formats for easy analysis by local residents.