

COMPETITOR AND ALLY: THE TEXAS TRIBUNE'S IMPACT ON A DEPLETED AUSTIN PRESS CORPS

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ANALYSIS

In 2008, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, a victim to McClatchy's struggles, offered a buyout to its employees. It was just one in a series, but this round would have particular consequence for the newspaper's coverage of state government.

At the time, the paper's Austin bureau was down to a couple of reporters, a clerk and a bureau chief, and when the chief announced he'd be putting in for the buyout, each reporter followed suit. Still, nobody expected the result: the Star-Telegram accepted all three. The office at 1005 Congress was closed.

The Star-Telegram's decision was a drastic example of a statewide trend. When things were at their worst, newspapers started to view statehouse coverage as expendable. The bare bones reconfigurations of city dailies left less room for coverage of state government.

Enter the Texas Tribune. Dreamt up by venture capitalist John Thornton and brought to fruition by the then-editor of Texas Monthly Evan Smith, the Tribune sought to fill the void in coverage of state government, politics and policy. Seven years later, the news nonprofit has proved sustainable, booming to about 55 full-time editorial employees. It focuses on day-to-day coverage but has an increasing aim toward investigative work.

The success of the Tribune – which has come largely by catering to a core

readership of engaged Texas elites – has coincided with a bounce back in the Austin press corps at large. Some, but not all, of that bounce back can be attributed to the Tribune itself; Pew Research reported in 2014 that 15 of Texas' 53 full-time statehouse reporters, the most of any state, are the Tribune's. The Tribune's 15 represented the largest statehouse bureau of any news organization in the country.

But newspapers, too, have seen a recovery in Austin – despite the Star Telegram's continued closure. Ask Smith, and these developments are a direct response to the Tribune's presence. Survey the state's top editors, and the picture begins to blur.

Rocky Beginnings

In October 2009, Smith met in Austin with the five editors of the state's largest dailies. Across the table sat Bob Mong, of the Dallas Morning News; Jeff Cohen, of the Houston Chronicle; Fred Zipp, of the Austin American Statesman; Rivard, of the Express-News; and Jim Witt, of the Star-Telegram.

Smith had hoped to come in peace, to explain his new venture's strategy and willingness to give away content for free. Instead, he says, the faces that stared back were made of stone.

The new kid on the block with millions in the bank wasn't immediately embraced.

The skepticism could be tied at least in part to the verbiage Thornton and Smith were using when talking about their new endeavor.

"Our only gripe was about some of the things particularly John was saying publicly about the future of newspapers, which I thought was just incredibly self-

serving," says Mong, now the president of the University of North Texas at Dallas. He says that, based on conversations with large Dallas donors to both the Morning News and Tribune, he wondered whether the message being sold was, *You don't know how long newspapers are going to be here, so you need to support us.*

"They didn't need to approach it like a zero sum game," he says. Overall, Mong says the Morning News' view of the Tribune was "nuanced, but mostly supportive."

Rivard, on the other hand, was an early donor to the Tribune who says that at one point he seriously considered opening the South Texas Tribune.

"I thought there would be great synergy between the Texas Tribune and print newspapers," he says.

It didn't happen – at least not immediately. The bigger papers were reluctant to run the Tribune's free content, and collaborations were, for many, out of the question.

And then, if by nothing else than necessity, the Star-Telegram's approach to using the Tribune's content changed in a significant way.

Reporting Austin from Fort Worth

After the Star-Telegram shut down its office in Austin, the major and obvious question remaining was where the paper would turn to fill the hole in its coverage of state government.

Dave Montgomery, a veteran, well-respected political reporter, returned from the paper's Washington bureau and set-up shop at a workspace in the capitol for a few years. He served as bureau chief (and the Star-Telegram's lone Austin

presence) until 2012, when he, too, accepted a buyout.

Montgomery has freelanced for the newspaper during legislative sessions and campaign seasons since he left on a full-time basis. And one reporter, Anna Tinsley, spends at least half her time doing legislative and state government-related stories from her base in Fort Worth.

But these days, for much of its Austin coverage, the Star-Telegram relies on the Tribune, the Associated Press and other newspapers, including national newspaper content and stories from Texas' other major metros through a content-share program.

The Tribune is about a third of the pie, estimates Deputy Managing Editor John Gravois.

"We trust them," Gravois says. "They provide content, and they have a big enough staff in the exact place where we're not right now."

He says that his bosses are less concerned with where the content is coming from and more concerned that he's able on a daily basis to provide Fort Worth readers with "a really good local report of what's going on in state government."

"They'll ask, well, are you able to find it?" he says – the 'it' in reference to a passable state government report. "And as long as I can answer, 'Yes,' they're going to be OK."

Still, Gravois says he couldn't say whether the Tribune's existence specifically has impacted staffing at the Star-Telegram.

"We'd get by without," he says. "But I'm a lot happier that they're here."

A free wire service

In 2012, following the round of Star-Telegram buyouts that included Montgomery's departure, blogger Stephen Robert Morse wrote a piece later published by Editor and Publisher called, "Nonprofit newspapers hurt journalism." As the title suggests, it was not kind to the Texas Tribune.

Among other qualms – speckled by compliments of the Tribune's actual product – Morse pointed out that the buyout accepted by then-Star-Telegram political reporter Aman Batheja, who quickly signed on with the Tribune, had effectively taken Batheja off the Star-Telegram's payroll without cutting their access to his work. This, Morse insinuated, was bad news for Texas news organizations in the for-profit realm.

Smith called the idea that his news outlet was responsible for the closing of the Star-Telegram's bureau preposterous.

"They made that decision on their own," he says.

It's not unreasonable, however, that an editor could use the availability of the Tribune's free content as justification for thinning out coverage in Austin – if they haven't already.

"I can imagine an editor taking that viewpoint," says Zipp, who now works part-time with student journalists at the University of Texas.

The Associated Press has adjusted its state government coverage, for one, since the emergence of the Tribune. The bureau, which is down to three reporters, has taken a step back from "gavel to gavel" statehouse coverage in favor of delivering "unique, impactful journalism," says James Beltran, the AP's Texas news editor. The Tribune is "part of the equation," Beltran says.

“The Tribune offers their content to the very same members that we serve,” he says.

Competition

And yet, while the AP and Star-Telegram have seen decreases in Austin staffing, other newspapers have rebounded. The Hearst bureau in Austin, staffed by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News, is back up to seven total reporters, plus a few paid interns. When Editor Nancy Barnes took over less than three years ago, the bureau was at three full-time employees and a single intern; the Chronicle provided just one body.

Smith says the Tribune has been responsible for that rebound in the numbers of the Austin press corps and its spirit of competition.

R.G. Ratcliffe, who was the Chronicle’s lone representative before retiring to write in a freelance capacity in 2011, isn’t so sure.

“My understanding is that when Nancy Barnes came on board, she was unhappy that the state’s largest newspaper did not have a greater presence in the state capitol and wanted to beef up the bureau,” he says. (Barnes declined to comment for this story.)

Mike Leary, who became the editor of the Express-News in 2012, said in an email that the Tribune has not impacted his staffing decisions.

For his part, Ryan Rusak, the politics editor at the Morning News, says the answer might be somewhere in the middle. He doesn’t attribute a statewide recovery directly to the Tribune – particularly given how coverage of statehouse’s across the country bottomed out at the end of last decade. But Rusak’s sense was

that newspaper editors have started once again to see the worth in reporting on politics and policy in Texas, where state news becomes national news in a hurry.

“Was that driven by the Tribune?” he says. “I think it had to be noticeable. People had to realize, ‘OK, this is happening in our state. And the Tribune is getting a ton of attention. And we’re not.’”

The Morning News held up well during the recession, all things considered. The paper lost a single reporter, who has not been replaced. In Austin, The American Statesman maintained its five full-time statehouse reporters, Editor Debbie Hiott says. Both papers have in recent years softened their view of using the Tribune’s content. The Statesman recently collaborated with the Tribune.

“I think over time we’ve realized the more we can work together, the more content we can get to our readers,” Hiott says.