

Local newspapers produce game-changing coverage

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Nikki Mantell, publisher, Low Down to Hull and Back News

COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS do a lot with a little. The result is game-changing coverage that not only informs the immediate regions they serve, but reflects the issues that contribute to the public conversations on a provincial and national scale.

While large media outlets were debating the possible ramifications of Bill 21, Quebec’s so-called secularism law that prohibits civil servants and other public-sector workers from wearing religious clothing or jewelry, the editor of *The Low Down to Hull and Back News* was interviewing Grade 3 teacher, Fatemeh Anvari, in the little town of Chelsea, Que., in the Outaouais region. She had just been fired for wearing a hijab.

“That’s one of the stories that wouldn’t get picked up if we wouldn’t do them,” said *The Low Down’s* publisher Nikki Mantell.

The story, broken by a newsroom with a staff of three, was picked up by the *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and international outlets, including *Newsweek* and *The Guardian*.

It put a human face on Quebec’s often-virulent secularism debate. And, as Mantell put it, “changed the discourse.”

Mantell continued: “Before *The Low Down* published Ms. Fatemeh’s story, support for Bill 21 was hovering around 64 per cent. Following the story, which every major news outlet in Canada picked up, support for the bill dropped to 55 per cent.”

In another corner of the province, in the Vaudreuil-Soulanges region west of Montreal, when Bill 96 threatened to strip small bilingual towns of their dual-language status, the mayor of one of those tiny communities appeared set to let the deadline for the municipal council to affirm its will to keep the status expire. The local English-language paper in the region, *The 1019 Report*, questioned the mayor. On repeated occasions that spanned months, the mayor refused to commit whether council would vote on the needed resolution.

In response to the coverage, residents in the tiny town of 120 grew concerned. Two reporters with *The 1019 Report* started working the phones and going door to door. By the time they were done, the paper reported on the results of an exhaustive survey: a clear majority of residents of the island community of Île Cadieux wanted the town

to keep its official bilingual status.

“Most of the residents credit the paper” when the resolution was finally renewed, said *The 1019 Report’s* editor Brenda O’Farrell, adding that large media outlets would never have bothered to do the legwork.

“We spread ourselves thin. We work really hard. And we’re good at stretching a buck,” said Mantell. “We put our hearts and souls into this.”

This is the type of journalism the Local Journalism Initiative helps produce. The federal funding program provides resources to hire journalists who produce civic content – coverage of health, education, rights, public policy and other essential issues.

It also ensures that members of Quebec’s English-speaking community continue to be informed. As Lily Ryan, publisher of *The Aylmer Bulletin* and the *West Quebec Post*, points out, as the province’s language of business and politics is French, English-language papers offer the minority community the opportunity to stay in touch with what is going on in their communities and government decisions.



BY THE NUMBERS	10,815	Number of LJI articles on civic issues produced at QCNA publications between April 2019 and February 2024. SOURCE: QCNA
	4	Number of community newspapers launched in Quebec serving the English-speaking community since 2020. SOURCE: QCNA
	518	Number of local news operations that closed between 2008 and Feb. 1, 2024. SOURCE: LOCAL NEWS RESEARCH PROJECT
	547	The number of job cuts announced by Quebec television network TVA in November 2023. SOURCE: TVA
	800	The number of job cuts announced by CBC in December 2023. SOURCE: CBC
	1269	Number of media jobs eliminated in Canada during first year of the COVID pandemic. SOURCE: LOCAL NEWS RESEARCH PROJECT
	4800	The number of job cuts announced by Bell Media in February 2024. SOURCE: BELL MEDIA



Community newspapers emerging as last journalistic soldiers standing

LAST MONTH, Bell Media announced its largest workforce restructuring in 30 years, laying off 4,800 workers.

In December, CBC/Radio-Canada announced plans to cut 800 jobs.

One month earlier, Quebec television network TVA cut 547 jobs.

Earlier in 2023, Postmedia, one of the largest media companies in Canada with a daily newspaper in almost every major city in the country, announced it was cutting 10 per cent of its staff, just the latest in a long string of downsizing moves that has spanned more than a decade. The cuts planned for Quebec went much deeper.

Almost every month, evidence of the continuing shift in the media landscape can be seen. And the result is fewer and fewer journalists reporting the stories that keep Canadians informed.

But in many communities a singular journalistic soldier remains standing: The community newspaper. These small, often privately-owned outlets are the last providers of reliable, professional local news.

“Community newspapers aren’t just filling the gap, they’re the whole fabric,”

said veteran journalist and president of the Quebec Community Newspaper Association Brenda O’Farrell.

That is why support for community newspapers is so important, O’Farrell says. As the media landscape continues to shift, the role these news outlets play is not only crucial, but gaining importance.

And they need to be supported by initiatives like the federal government’s Local Journalism Initiative, O’Farrell explains, referring to the funding program that helps qualified outlets hire reporters in communities across the country. But readers in these communities, have to do their part, too, she added, by subscribing to papers that offer that option, especially in Quebec where the minority-language community needs to maintain access to information in English.

Without programs like LJI and reader support, many community papers would struggle to survive.

Since 2012, journalist Marie-Ève Martel has tracked community news outlet closures across Quebec.

“For the moment, I’ve counted more than 80,” she reported late last year, af-

ter the abrupt shuttering of the Montreal daily *Metro* and its offshoots in several Montreal suburbs and Quebec City.

Each closure represents not only jobs lost, but “a hole in our social cement,” as Martel describes it.

Local media “makes us more informed, more aware and more likely to vote,” she said.

“CBC and the *Ottawa Citizen* aren’t going to cover a byelection in Chelsea,” said Nikki Mantell, the publisher of *The Low Down to Hull and Back News*, which covers the small towns in the Gatineau hills. “We have boots on the ground, and often our stories get picked up by larger media.”

“Local papers are where you hear about the most important things — health care, schools, getting your roads paved, the environment,” said Sharon McCully, publisher of *The Record* in Sherbrooke and the *Brome County News*, two papers that cover about 30 municipalities for the English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships. “These are stories that impact people directly.”

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Brenda O’Farrell, journalist and QCNA president