

'Ghosting the News': Margaret Sullivan's Alarm Bell | The Atlantic

By Margaret Sullivan

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In the summer of 1945, for 17 days, the newspaper deliverers of New York City went on strike. As hundreds of thousands of city residents found themselves temporarily deprived of their daily papers, the behavioral scientist Bernard Berelson saw an opportunity: He wanted to understand what it felt like for people to suddenly lose their primary sources of news. So he set about interviewing them. Asked what the absent papers had meant to them, the interviewees often responded with bromides about news's crucial role in a government of the people. With more pressing, though, their responses deepened. What they really missed, Berelson came to realize, wasn't the news as a noun so much as the news as a verb: the daily rituals of the reading, and the connection that reading made them feel to their communities and to the wider world. News is a product and a service and a foundation of any functioning democracy; what it is also, though, is an anchor—a tether to other people, woven of words and arguments and daily discoveries. Without it, people felt adrift.

Many Americans now find themselves in the situation those New Yorkers did all those decades ago: The papers have stopped arriving. The absence, however, is permanent. Even as the news writ large has expanded its reach, through cable networks and talk radio and the internet, local journalism is in grave danger of dying out. That fact, with its dire implications both for individual communities and for the fragile democracy that contains them, is the premise of a book-length warning: Margaret Sullivan's *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*. Sullivan travels across the country, to observe papers in the process of shuttering and new enterprises that hope to fill the void left in their place, and makes an argument that is as plain as it is worthy of panic: The journalism that Americans need to function—the institutions that provide people with the information they require to make decisions for themselves and for the country—is in the midst of a mass extinction.

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