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# The Education Beat in a Declining Industry

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# Ethics and Impact of the Education Beat in a Declining Newspaper Industry

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## Abstract & Introduction

The newspaper industry has been in a decades long decline. This has impacted newspapers across the United States with over 25 percent of the American newsroom's full-time staff laid off since 2001, according to a 2010 study.<sup>1</sup> The newsroom layoffs impact the level of reporting with fewer and shorter stories being written, and opportunities for longer, in-depth investigative reporting becomes harder.

With these layoffs, the education beat is squeezed of specialized reporters as they are pushed to cover broader issues, reducing the issues to testing and budgets leaving important issues inequality underreported. The local conversation on education is impacted but the national conversation seems better fit to survive the industry transition.

Lee Shaker's article "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement" found the closure of newspapers in Denver, Colorado, and Seattle, Washington negatively impacted civic engagement. Using the findings of this study, it is easier to see how newsroom layoffs and smaller beats might impact local communities.

Once identifying the main stakeholders, using tools like dilemma paradigms and ethical theories allows for a deeper analysis of the potential impacts a declining newspaper industry and education beat might have on local communities. These tools also help to identify solutions to the problems that arise.

The future of the education beat in an industry decline isn't all doom and gloom. While local newspapers may close down, the news industry has been transitioning to a digital presence. The education beat continues to adapt to the changes in the industry and how education is covered. The best solution to the problems stemming from industry decline and smaller education beats and its effects on local communities is to continue to evolve and adapt.

## Key Questions

- 1) What are the possible solutions to the newspaper industry decline?
- 2) What are the ethical implications of decreased education beat reporters?
- 3) What are the applicable ethical dilemma paradigms to this situation, and how can we apply them to find a potential solution?

## Identifying the stakeholders (weakest to strongest)

- 1) The community: rely on newspapers to provide accurate and important information as to what is happening. As shown in Shaker's study, these stakeholders are impacted the most by industry decline.
- 2) Teachers, students, parents: rely on accurate news from education reporters to make informed decisions for their family and children.
- 3) Journalists, editors, newspapers: affected by layoffs, newspaper closures, and newsroom cutbacks. They also rely on the community for funding through subscriptions, ads, and classifieds.
- 4) Newspaper owners: affected by the industry decline, decreased subscriptions, and profitability.

## Ethical theories

**Value-based ethics:** Does the decrease in staff on the education beat contribute to the flourishing of society?

**Rule-based ethics:** If decisions are moral absolutes, is the reduced amount of education beat reporters setting the correct standard for future generations?

**Outcome-based ethics:** Does reducing education beat staff produce the greatest good for the greatest amount of people?

**Veil of Ignorance:** Divested and seen from all perspectives, is reducing education beat staff the best decision for all those involved?



No, the reduction in education beat staff does not contribute to the flourishing of society, set the correct standard for future generations, produce the greatest good, and doesn't work for all stakeholders.

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## Ethical Dilemma Paradigms

Community vs. Individual  
Right vs. Right



Schools and  
Newspapers

Need for smart funding  
Right to ensure profits to  
function

Teachers, parents,  
students

Need for good public  
education and correct  
information from the news  
Right to public education

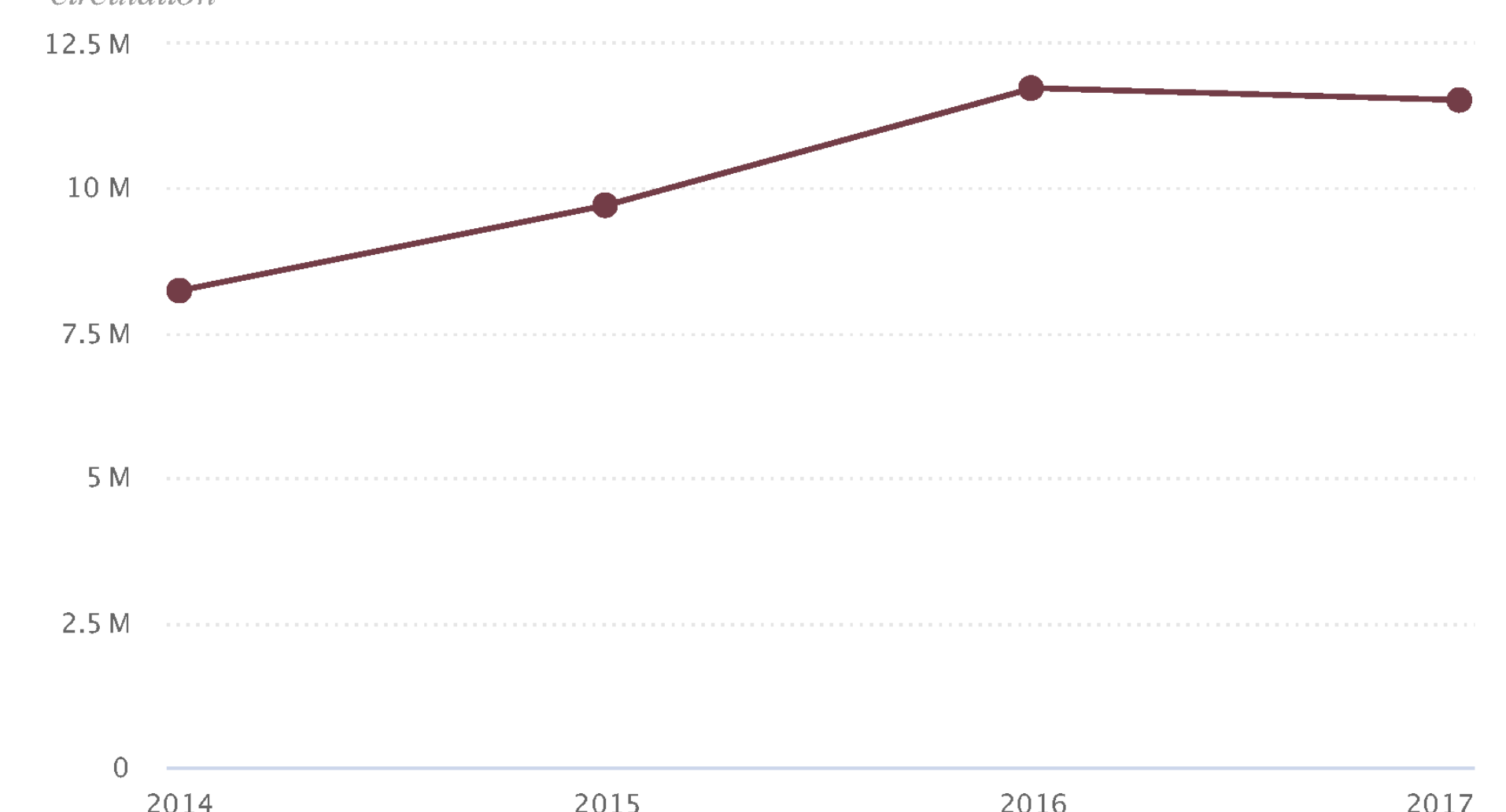
Stakeholders	Short-term impact	Long-term impact
<b>Newspaper owners</b>	Reducing staff and smaller beats increases profits allowing company to stay in business.	Decline in readership, lower local coverage
<b>Teachers, parents, and students</b>	Decreased access to important news about education like levies, funding, curriculum, etc...	Accumulation of programs, levies, and curriculum changes that don't work for teachers and students
<b>Education Journalists</b>	Loss of jobs, forced to cover broader issues outside of their beat, less opportunity for in-depth reporting	Missing coverage of key events and changes, less informed public

## Solutions and the Future

The future isn't all doom and gloom. While the industry may be declining and in transition, the education beat still has a future in online newspapers. According to a Pew Research Study, unique visitors for the top 50 newspapers increased by over 3 million unique monthly visits from 2014 to 2015. The best solutions to the ethical dilemma is for education journalists to continue to evolve. By contributing to trade press and online news organizations, education journalists can continue their work in informing the public.

### Unique visitors of newspaper websites

Average monthly unique visitors of the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation



Note: For each year, the average traffic for each website for October/November/December was calculated; the data point represents the overall average of those numbers. Analysis is of the top 49 newspapers by average Sunday circulation for Q3 2016 and Q3 2017, according to Alliance for Audited Media data, with the addition of The Wall Street Journal. For each newspaper, the comScore entity matching its homepage URL was analyzed.

Source: comScore Media Metrix Multi-platform, unique visitors, October-December 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017.

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