

Bigger, But Better? The Quad-City Times Dwarfs the Argus/Dispatch's News Coverage

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Thursday, 10 December 2009 08:00

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On December 1, the *Quad-City Times* ran 29 square inches of copy on the not-for-profit organization Skills Inc. shutting down at the end of the year.

The Rock Island Argus

ran an eight-square-inch brief on its front page.

This can be seen as a microcosm of the Quad Cities' two daily newspapers. A *River Cities' Reader* analysis

found that last week, the

Quad-City Times

devoted 80 percent more space to local news content than the twin Illinois papers, the

Rock Island Argus

and the

Moline Dispatch

.

For the week of November 29 to December 5, the *Times* had 91 articles, editorials, and columns written by staff members or Lee Enterprises bureau reporters concerning local and state issues and news, totaling 2,300 square inches. The

Argus

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had 69 such articles, totaling 1,274 square inches.

Including letters to the editor, the *Times* had more local news content each day last week than

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the *Argus* or *Dispatch*. Outside of Saturday's paper -- in which the amount of local news content was nearly the same -- each day the *Times* devoted at least 23 percent more space to local news content than the *Argus* / *Dispatch* did. On Monday, the *Quad-City Times* featured 307 square inches of local news content; the *Argus/Dispatch* had 30 -- all letters to the editor.

Total Local News (in Square Inches), November 29-December 5, 2009		
	Argus/Dispatch	Quad-City Times
Sunday	225	462
Monday	35	307
Tuesday	270	403
Wednesday	260	328
Thursday	263	359
Friday	291	381
Saturday	251	251
Total	1,484	2,479
Daily Average	212	348

Total Local News (in Square Inches) by Article Type, November 29-December 5, 2009		
	Argus/Dispatch	Quad-City Times
News	1,118	2,020
Editorials	99	278
Columns	66	65
Letters	201	278

Total Local News (in Square Inches, Letters Excluded) by Subject, November 29-December 5, 2009		
	Argus/Dispatch	Quad-City Times
Business/Employment	193	242
Crime/Courts	351	463
Economy	362	328
Government/Politics	483	945
Health	15	117
General/Spot News	59	371
Thames	12	196
Community/Vitality	84	110

For the week, the *Times* had 2,020 square inches of local news articles compared to the *Argus/Dispatch*'s 1,118; 216 square inches of local news-related editorials compared to the *Argus* / *Dispatch*'s 90; and 278 square inches of letters to the editor compared to the *Argus* / *Dispatch*'s 210. There was only one area in which the two were comparable last week: local-news-related columns.

In eight subject areas (and not including letters), the *Times* had more coverage than the *Argus/Dispatch* in each. This was particularly pronounced in the Government/Politics category (945 square inches to 483), which is to be expected because of Lee Enterprises bureaus in the Iowa and Illinois state capitals.

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(See the [charts](#) accompanying this article for more information. To learn more about the methodology of this survey, see the [sidebar "Methodology and Disclaimers."](#))

The news mix is similar for both papers, with between a fifth and a quarter of non-letter local content being devoted to crime and courts, and roughly 40 percent devoted to government and politics. The *Argus/Dispatch* had a greater emphasis on business, agriculture, and the economy (24 percent of non-letter local content compared to the *Times'* 16 percent.)

Of course, the volume of coverage is not necessarily an indicator of the depth, thoroughness, and incisiveness of the coverage.

Even though the numbers tell a clear story on the space devoted to local news, *reading* the coverage produces a narrative that's more ambiguous. There are certainly situations when the *Argus* / *Dispatch* coverage is superior, even when the *Times* offers *more* coverage. (The *Times* is pretty good at overkill; last week it had three articles on an ATF agent's loaded gun found by kids in Bettendorf -- a news article, a column by Barb Ickes, and an editorial. The story never showed up in the *Argus* / *Dispatch* .)

What follows is a look at the substance of some coverage. These are only three examples, meant to illustrate that the *Times'* volume of coverage should not always be equated with better coverage.

Community Vitality Shapshot

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The release last week of the annual Community Vitality Snapshot -- a compilation of statistics meant to give a picture of the health of the community overall -- offers a good opportunity for content analysis. The report's net is wide and the information is varied, and it presents a challenge to reporters; they need to interpret it.

The *Times'* coverage eclipsed the *Argus'*, 110 square inches to 84 square inches. But that's largely a function of presentation; the article on the front page of the December 4

Times

had a large point size. And the

Argus

coverage is certainly clearer, and came a day earlier.

The *Argus* lead reads: "The Quad-Cities is growing in population, the median age is getting younger and household income is increasing The annual community snapshot ... also indicates there are more community volunteers and gains in education. But homelessness is on the rise and domestic abuse complaints doubled over the past year." The accompanying front-page graphic illustrates those trends and includes stats on the growing racial-minority population.

The *Times* employs a similar "this but that" structure for its lead: "On the one hand, Quad-City residents may weigh less, read more and volunteer to help others at a higher rate than last year. On the other hand, the lagging economy is still affecting the area in the form of more abuse reports, a higher number of residents lacking health insurance and many more seeking help from pantries to feed their family." The front-page graphic details food-pantry and meal-site use, the number of registered library cards, and turn-aways and crisis calls at domestic-violence shelters.

The *Times* coverage, first of all, is choosing specific measures that, out of context, might or might not be meaningful. Second, it's attributing certain conditions to the "lagging economy," which is speculative and supported only by quotes. (Actually, it's making the economy the story, rather than the indicators that are actually in the report.)

In contrast, the *Argus* article presents the big picture up-front and doesn't jump to conclusions: "The Community Vitality Task Force doesn't know why these changes occurred"

Elijah Reid

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During the week, the *Quad-City Times* published three articles on whether Elijah Reid will be eligible for the death penalty, totaling 100 square inches. The

Argus

published two, totaling 45 square inches. I doubt the case itself merits the

Times

' volume -- a preview article and coverage of two days of testimony and the ruling -- but its reporting and presentation are superior.

The December 3 coverage in both papers is instructive. The *Argus* article covers the same basic territory as the *Times*, but with less context and no real sense of the logic of arguments. The article notes that Reid has been tested at an IQ of 65 but never states what IQ would disqualify one from the death penalty. It also doesn't note Illinois' current death-penalty moratorium. And it attributes the following paraphrasing to Rock Island State's Attorney Jeff Terronez: "The inability to hold a job and living with others ... could just be a case of a person being a freeloader." If that's what he said, a direct quote is essential.

The *Times* article notes the standard for a mental-retardation disqualification from the death penalty, and mentions the current moratorium. It's also an example of the importance of specificity: Terronez "asked the doctor if Reid's poor eyesight could have affected the results of the tests he was giving and asked whether it was possible for someone with five children by three different women, as Reid has, to be deficient in social and communication skills." He also quotes Reid at length: "Every time I'm going to trial there is a continuance. ... I'm trying to prove my innocence. I've seen four or five murder trials go to trial in the time I've been here. I've been sitting here 18 months."

In contrast, Reid is quoted in the *Argus* as saying: "Can I please have my trial?"

Reading the *Times*' coverage, the judge's ruling on Friday that Reid is eligible for the death penalty makes sense based on what's been presented in the paper. That's not true with the *Argus*

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John Deere Classic

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The extension of a sponsorship agreement between Deere & Company and the PGA's John Deere Classic tournament through 2016 was the lead story in both papers on Tuesday. They handled it very differently, yet neither did it particularly well.

The *Argus* piece is a bit of hometown boosterism, beginning: "Rick George says the John Deere Classic is 'really in a league of its own' when it comes to running a first-class PGA Tour event and being a gracious host to the world's best golfers and their families each year." One might think he was talking about the Masters for all the gushing.

The *Times*, however, lays on the gloom: "Significant fourth-quarter losses and a 2009 fiscal year that saw hundreds of Deere & Co. layoffs across the Midwest could have led company leaders to balk at continuing Deere's multimillion-dollar sponsorship of the John Deere Classic."

The *Times* casts the tournament as "good business" for Deere, although it never explains that assertion beyond quoting company executives as saying that the tournament is good for business. The gist of the article is that Deere took a "very serious look" at its sponsorship, suggesting that not extending it was considered. But by not explaining how the tournament is good for Deere, the *Times* doesn't give readers much understanding.

The *Argus/Dispatch* article makes no mention of a decision-making process, and offers no hint that extending the sponsorship was ever in doubt -- making it seem far less newsworthy. Unlike the *Times* article, however, it does peg the overall local economic impact of the tournament at \$25 million annually.

There's a good story here that both papers missed, although the *Times* came closer to getting it.

Both papers also ran editorials on the tournament on December 2, and that's pretty sad.

First, given the small number of words devoted to the opinion of each paper's editorial board,

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this is what they chose to write about? During the week, the *Times* had seven local-news-related editorials and the

Argus

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Dispatch

had three.

Second, what the editorial boards wrote was as dull and predictable as it gets: Both editorials take the highly controversial position that the John Deere Classic is good.

Sidebar: Why Did We Do This?

The March 18 issue of the *River Cities' Reader* featured [a look at the business of daily newspapers in the Quad Cities](#). This is a look exclusively at the content, recognizing that there's more to newspapers than just money.

The daily print media are the primary sources of local news for most of us; they should present a picture of the community and the issues it faces at any given time. So it made sense to see how thoroughly they did that job.

Sidebar: Methodology and Disclaimers

This analysis was drawn from a week of newspapers, beginning on Sunday, November 29, and ending on Saturday, December 5. For information on *The Rock Island Argus* and *The Dispatch*, I used the Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday editions of the

Dispatch

and the Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday editions of the

Argus

.

For the purposes of this analysis, only bylined articles were included in which the author is an employee of the newspaper or its corporate parent. This skews the analysis in favor of the *Quad-City Times*

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, whose parent Lee Enterprises employs reporters in various bureaus. While that might change the numbers somewhat, it won't alter the overarching conclusion that the *Quad-City Times* has significantly more local news than the Illinois papers.

For measurements, we used only the space devoted to the story itself, sidebars, and informational graphics/charts. Headlines and photos were not counted. The length of the article was multiplied by the width of its columns.

Our purpose was to measure local news, so sports and arts coverage was excluded, along with "soft" news or features without a clear larger relevance. Although spot news (covering events such as fires and accidents) and crime and courts news are of debatable import, they were included and made up roughly a quarter of local news content in each paper.

More than 160 articles were included in the analysis.

This sort of analysis requires judgment calls, both on inclusion and classification.

Examples of excluded articles are the *Quad-City Times'* extensive coverage of the move of the South Bethel Church building, the *Times'* coverage of the featured speaker at the release of the Community Vitality Scan, and the *Argus* / *Dispatch* coverage of high-school state scholars and a diversity lecture.

The eight subject areas (Business/Agriculture, Crime/Courts, Economy, Government/Politics, Health, General/Spot News, Thomson, and Community Vitality) were exclusive, meaning that an article counted in one category could not be counted in another. The Thomson correctional center and Community Vitality Scan were given their own categories for three reasons: They don't fit comfortably in any other category; they were major local stories during the week in question; and they illustrate the larger trend, namely that there's greater coverage in the *Times* than in the *Argus*

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A few caveats when looking at this information:

- While seven days of newspapers should be considered a fair representation, it should not be considered definitive.

- Our dailies don't always cover issues at the same time. While the *Times* had a big package on Sunday on the possibility of federal Gitmo detainees moving to the Thomson correctional center and the

Argus/Dispatch

had relatively little during the week, that doesn't necessarily mean that the

Times

' overall coverage is superior. It just means the

Times

coverage was heavier in this particular week.

- Monday's numbers for the *Argus/Dispatch* were clearly a function of coming immediately after Thanksgiving. But even if the day had featured a more typical level of local content, the *Quad-City Times*

would still have had more. The

Argus

/

Dispatch

topped out at 290 square inches of local-news content last week; on Monday the

Times

had 307 inches.

- Typos happen in every publication, but this sports headline in the Monday *Dispatch* is a horrific mangling of the language: "Poor Sports? UCLA, USC Flaunt Etiquette." No, they flouted it.

[\(Return to the main article.\)](#)