The past decade’s decline, by more than a third, in the number of newspaper reporters and editors is a dramatic sign that not only public opinion, but American journalism itself is changing. More difficult to determine is the effect of these changes on democracy. What we can observe is that shrunken newsrooms are unable to offer the same breadth of information to readers that they once did. At the same time, digital platforms offer a vast array of information, the veracity of which can be difficult to judge. Only 27% of Americans are very confident that they can discern when a news source is reporting factual news as opposed to commentary or opinion, reports Gallup/Knight.

Here in Wisconsin, what is happening to our journalists and how are they responding to the changes that economics and technology have thrust upon them while pursuing their mission as the Fourth Estate? What can Wisconsin citizens do to stay well-informed on issues that matter to us?
ELIZABETH MCGOWAN CONT.

The WHC’s *Beyond the Headlines* initiative brings citizens and journalists together to talk about pressing local issues. Through those conversations, citizens probe how journalists in Wisconsin now work to provide the information that we want and need. In Madison, Wausau, Eau Claire, Milwaukee, and Superior, *Beyond the Headlines* events dig into issues like policing, poverty, racism, and the future of our waters. To learn more, visit the *Beyond the Headlines* website at beyondtheheadlineswisconsin.org.

To kick off our conversation about journalism and democracy, we turned to Elizabeth McGowan, who began her reporting career at the Janesville Gazette. McGowan won the Pulitzer Prize in National Reporting in 2013 while with InsideClimate News, for stories on the regulation of the nation’s oil pipelines, focusing on potential ecological dangers posed by diluted bitumen (or “dilbit”) which is a controversial form of oil. The stories began with a spill in Kalamazoo, MI.

What drew you to journalism and what has kept you reporting?

Listening was one of my strengths growing up and I wanted to pursue a career where I could use it to absorb and translate people’s insights and ideas.

Seeing the film The Post reminded me how the precious power of the press is not to be squandered. Although I was a child when stories broke about the Pentagon Papers, and then Watergate, those events made me gung-ho about seeking my own truths. “Afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted,” a motto I learned long ago in journalism school, is still so relevant today.
Yes, digital tools have created a 24/7 media, but I have continued to find that readers are hungry for well-told stories that require experienced reporters and editors to “commit” old-fashioned shoe-leather journalism.

No doubt I have to stay nimble to keep up with social media and other electronic tools. That’s why I am a big fan of intergenerational journalism. Younger journalists always want to learn how I do what I do, but I am even more interested in knowing how they pursue, organize and share their stories because it forces me to evolve and learn new methods.

Recently, I’ve connected with an organization called the Solutions Journalism Network founded by two New York Times reporters. SoJo, as it’s abbreviated, doesn’t entail writing articles about puppy dogs and rainbows. It requires the same rigorous standards that apply to any balanced reporting. Rather than dumping more problems on readers, however, this approach allows them to learn how communities and/or organizations are tackling daunting challenges.

Longtime readers of energy and environmental news have told me repeatedly that they now tune out many articles because the news is so grim.

That’s part of why it was inspiring for me to do SoJo on-the-ground reporting in Tonawanda, N.Y. The community next to Buffalo could have sung a “woe is us” chorus when its largest taxpayer, a coal-fired power plant, shut down.

Instead, teachers and labor unions combined forces with a tiny environmental justice group to lobby the state legislature for millions in temporary, first-in-the-nation “gap funds” so Tonawanda could cover its expenses while it expanded and reconfigured its industrial tax base. The joint effort was messy and hard, but ultimately rewarding—and a potential model for other cities as the nation burns less coal.

Image from Shattered by Oil: Exxon Arkansas Spill and the People Left Behind, a documentary produced by InsideClimate News and This American Land.
In the dilbit reporting, you use individuals’ stories to help tell a larger one. How do you gain sources’ trust?

I make it clear to potential sources that I don’t engage in “gotcha” journalism. If I lose my credibility, my career is over. Keys to gaining trust are showing up, really listening, not taking sides, and ensuring accuracy by double-checking everything instead of making assumptions.

I had some memorable experiences with sources doing the Kalamazoo story. Finding John La Forge in Marshall, MI, was crucial. He was golden. Not only did he introduce me to people up and down the river, but his voice was also crucial for the narrative, day-by-day arc my editor and I wanted to present to readers. The spill had interrupted John’s entire life, but once he understood what I was trying to do, he set aside time to go over and over—and over!—details.

Enbridge spokesman Jason Manshum and I tangled all the time over details little and big, but he never stopped answering my questions. Never once did he say, “Why should I keep talking to a tiny start-up like InsideClimate News?”

Then, as now, Environmental Protection Agency officials were reluctant to talk with reporters and difficult to track down. When I thawed that ice with Mark Durno and Ralph Dollhopf, they became invaluable sources. After the stories were published I asked why they chose to answer my calls and emails. “We could tell how persistent you were about seeking the truth,” one said. “And we wanted it out there.”

Researching the dilbit story, you must have been presented with contradictory claims. What did you do?

Up until the day before InsideClimate News began publishing “The Dilbit Disaster,” Enbridge officials insisted that what their pipeline leaked into the Kalamazoo River was just heavy crude oil—and threatened legal action if we characterized it as anything else. This could not be explained away as a “he said, she said” sidebar argument.
because it was the crux of our series. Plus, as a tiny online outlet challenging an oil behemoth, we couldn’t afford to be wrong.

My charge wasn’t to prove Enbridge wrong; it was to find the truth for readers. That required reviewing outside technical data, studying the specifics of Material Safety Data Sheets and repeatedly interviewing local, state and federal scientists, industry experts and outside scientists.

Such research and verification made us 100 percent comfortable with all of our diluted bitumen conclusions. I like to think we added the word dilbit to the U.S. vocabulary. Enbridge continued to challenge our dilbit conclusion, but never took legal action.

What do you feel that citizens may not know about the media’s role in our democracy – or about the work of journalists — that you wish they did?

These days, a lot is lumped together as “media.” It’s difficult for citizens to find a signal amid all of the noise. And even if they can, the traditional boundaries between news and opinions are often very blurry. Newspapers clearly define that line, but that is more challenging now that the journalism umbrella has expanded.
In my mind, it’s criminal that news outlets in smaller towns and larger cities alike are shrinking or dying. They are the heartbeat of a democracy that can’t function without watchdogs and informed citizens. All communities need sustenance and depth beyond a headline service.

Four things I wish citizens knew are that legitimate journalists: follow a strict code of ethics because accuracy and credibility are paramount; don’t approach a story with a specific agenda but instead dig in to separate fact from fiction; are committed to inventing new funding models for solid reporting and editing as “mainstream or legacy” news outlets shrink or disappear; and are aware of and humbled by how much power they wield as the Fourth Estate.

**BEYOND THE HEADLINES**

*Beyond the Headlines* is a program of the Wisconsin Humanities Council that brings members of the Wisconsin media and the public together to examine how we can obtain information that we need and trust in order to meet our communities’ challenges.

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- Journalists are aware of and humbled by how much power they wield as the Fourth Estate.