



Published on *East Lansing Info* (<https://eastlansinginfo.org>)

Home > Dear ELi Readers

Dear ELi Readers ^[1]

Thursday, May 31, 2018, 8:04 am

By:

Alice Dreger, Publisher of ELi



Dear ELi readers,

Today, I'd like to talk to you a little about human nature, dancing, and ELi's wondrous self-destruct mechanism. I hope you'll bear with me.

While ELi takes up most of my work time nowadays, I still have, as our Managing Editor Ann Nichols calls it, "another life." It's not as James Bond-worthy as it sounds. In that other life, I write essays, commentaries, and occasionally investigative news reports for national and international outlets.

That other life brings me an income and national exposure. By contrast, my work as Publisher and investigative reporter for ELi costs me money (I don't get paid, and I do donate) and takes time away from the high-profile work.

On Monday of this week, my two lives came together and I had an opportunity to explain in *The Guardian* why I do public service journalism for East Lansing. I said there ^[2] that, because

people in government are human, even at the local level, we need investigative journalists watching and reporting.

Human nature is such that people (*all of us*) sometimes function in ways that are self-interested and not ideal?and that?s why when it comes to democracy, we need investigative journalism and solid nonpartisan reporting. It?s a critical check on governments made up of humans.

Coincidentally, this week, thanks to ELi?s membership in LION (Local Independent Online News) Publishers, I also came across a post ^[3] by Rusty Coats called ?Four Words for Local Media,? which so resonated with the project that is ELi, I felt almost as if it were a companion piece to my Guardian essay.

Basically, Coats? message is this: Stop asking ?who will save local news?? Stop thinking some rich angel is going to come and fund your town?s news operation. Stop whining about how the internet has changed the news economy. *Try something new, and see if it works.* As he put it, ?Come dance with me.?

We?ve now been dancing for four years at ELi?dancing on our online platform, dancing at city meetings and school events, dancing at local festivals and shops and watering holes. It is kind of working.

Yeah, we are running out of money in the bank again and I?m going to have to stop reporting and fundraise again soon. Yeah, we have more serious stories to report than we have reporters to cover them right now.

But what we?ve done here is not only bring East Lansing the news like never before. This town is doing something I think is unique in America (something I?m now looking actively to propagate), namely *giving itself the news* by using an innovative model promoted by the late, great, investigative reporter David Carr: citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism doesn?t have to be thought of as an act of desperation. It can be thought of as an act of liberation. Here?s a bit of a 2008 interview ^[4] between Terry Gross and David Carr on *Fresh Air*.

Terry Gross: Do you feel like, as a reporter who covers the business of media, that you are reporting on the dismemberment of your own profession?

David Carr: No, I think I?m living through a golden age of journalism, actually. I do think that there have been horrible frictional costs, but I think when we look back sort of at what has happened, I look at my backpack that is sitting here, and it contains more sort of journalistic firepower than the entire newsroom that I walked into 30, 40 years ago.

I still remember where I was driving on I-69 when I heard a repeat broadcast of this interview and realized he was right. ELi wasn?t (just) an act of desperation, as I had been thinking at that point. It was the next act in local journalism?s history.

When Carr talked about this approach, he often spoke of the people reporting from the streets in the Arab Spring. In East Lansing, we?re not facing that kind of revolution. I?m happy to say my

reporters are never in that kind of danger, nor in the kind of danger faced today by reporters in places like Turkey [5].

But here in East Lansing we *are* facing—as is the whole of the world—a revolution in the news economy, a revolution in the role of journalism in democracy. And for that, we at ELi believe, Carr’s model is right-on.

We are not alone in trying this new-ish approach. Alec Saelens interviewed me about ELi recently for a report [6] for *The Membership Puzzle* on news organizations that do the kind of thing we do: blur the lines between reporters and readers, engaging our community members as active journalists, tipsters, editors, advisors, and more. Saelens’ report shows that this kind of thing is being done around the globe—in the U.K., Brazil, Chicago . . . and East Lansing, Michigan.

And people are getting it. They’re understanding it as an approach that can not only water “news deserts” in communities like ours, but an approach that can help people understand in their guts why nonpartisan news matters.

The best thing about ELi, as I said in a conversation with ELi Board Treasurer Travis Stoliker on Tuesday, is the self-destruct button that is built in. (He enthusiastically agreed.) ELi purposefully depends upon the goodwill of our readers—people in our own community. That means that if we screw up—if we become partisan, unethical, abusive—what makes us possible (your support) will evaporate.

That’s one hell of a self-correcting news system.

So, you know what? We *shouldn’t want* an angel philanthropist to pay for this whole project. We should continue not even to attempt to use a conventional advertisement-based funding model—and not just because it doesn’t work for serious local news in most small cities today.

The model we have at ELi is ideal because it *requires* high-quality, honest, nonpartisan devotion to fact-finding and truth-telling in the service of this community. It forces us to do what you’ve come to expect from us. If we don’t do that—if we don’t keep satisfying a broad and diverse base of many hundreds of people in this city—we will self-destruct.

We are the check on those in power. You are the check on us.

Thank you for being that. We need you. Because we’re human.

The ELi management, editing, tech, and reporting team is so grateful to you for working with us, as readers, as tipsters, as advisors, and as donors. You make us proud to bring you the news.

Alice Dreger, Publisher

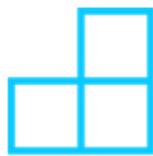
Photo shows a gathering of the ELi core reporting team, last week. Back row, from left: Aron Sousa, Paige Filice, Karessa Wheeler, Ken Sperber, Ann Kammerer, Alice Dreger, Chris Wardell, Val Thonger. Front row, from left: Jessy Gregg, Chris Root, Sarah Spohn, Ann Nichols, Andrew Graham.

Want to support us financially? [Click here.](#) [7]

Related Categories:

Your ELi [8]

ELi is a member of INN and LION Publishers



**Institute for
Nonprofit News**



This news is brought to you by our financial supporters!

Source URL: <https://eastlansinginfo.org/content/dear-eli-readers>

Links

[1] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/content/dear-eli-readers>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/28/news-journalism-politics-democrats-republicans>

[3] <https://www.rustycoats.com/blog/2018/5/22/four-words-for-local-media>

[4] <https://www.npr.org/2015/02/13/386015153/david-carr-called-himself-part-pirate-part-thug-but-also-a-decent-person>

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/world/europe/turkey-journalists-prison-terrorism.html>

[6] <https://membershipuzzle.org/articles-overview/reinventing-journalism-education>

[7] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/contribute>

[8] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/youreli>