ELi's Impact [1]

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East Lansing Info (ELi) has been providing the people of East Lansing with real, nonpartisan, nonprofit news for about five years. Just as importantly, it has become a model for how small American cities like ours can bring themselves the news?and, in doing so, how a local news organization can engage a whole community in the understanding of why journalism matters to local democracy.

ELi is based on the ideal of the great investigative journalist David Carr, who believed that the internet had produced a golden age of journalism.

Given that the internet has caused the economic collapse of traditional investigative journalism to the great detriment of ordinary people, Carr's idea of this being a golden age for journalism may sound upside-down.

But Carr's point was that, because of smartphones and the internet, ordinary citizens could become reporters, and we could all therefore know better what is really going on.

ELi functions as a "news brigade."
We would love it if we had professional journalists adequately covering our city! But we don't.

Here's how we see it: If East Lansing didn't have a fire department, we would have to have a fire brigade, made up of ordinary citizens dedicated to neighbors.

Because we don't have a dedicated news organization made up entirely of professional journalists, we have had to create a news brigade to save our community from living without a basic component of a function democracy: real, timely, meaningful news.

At ELi, we recruit ordinary citizens ? stay-at-home parents, retirees, high school students, and sometimes working people embedded in news that needs reporting ? and we help them report high-quality, meaningful, nonpartisan local news. A fraction of our reporters are professional journalists. But most of us are not.

**We cover serious issues in East Lansing.**

Those include a $200 million debt [2] for a city of only 20,000 permanent residents [3], a government prone to the usual problems [4] of loyalty and obfuscation, a school system that ? like all in Michigan ? gets inadequate support from the state, a Mom-and-Pop electric company [5] that reasonable customers have to worry about, environmental risks [6], and more.

Like every other, our community needs investigative reporters who will make public records requests, watch for unequal treatment by government (including law enforcement), and follow the money. We also need people who will keep neighbors informed about the needs of the less fortunate, the labor of artists and public service employees, and the offerings of locally-owned businesses.

All this is why an increasingly large group of us work to be East Lansing's news brigade. So far, about 140 local people have been reporters through ELi.

Because we use a blended model of volunteerism and paid work, and because no one gets paid very much through ELi, we currently operate on only about $100,000 a year [7]. With that sum, we consistently provide news of city government, lawsuits involving the city, local schools, local businesses, environmental issues, and arts and entertainment opportunities.

We see ourselves as being like a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, or the local League of Women Voters. We see our work as vital, necessary, and urgent.

**That's because East Lansing would have almost no organized local news reporting without us.**

But what's even more exciting about our news production is that, by engaging about 140 people so far as reporters, and engaging even more as members of our Board of Directors, Community Advisory Board, and readers, what we've done is cause a vibrant local conversation about how journalism matters.

ELi gets people here to talk (and argue productively) about:
What makes a local issue newsworthy?
How can citizens report in a nonpartisan fashion in a town that is so blue (or so red)?
How should we decide who to name in a small-town story that involves credit or blame?
What do government transparency and accountability look like, and what is the role of the free press in pushing for those things?
How do we manage conflicts of interest when we engage in formalized information sharing?
Who should pay for news?

Because of ELi, East Lansing started having conversations about these issues years before we had a president who would call reporters “the enemy of the people,” years before we would learn how social media can be manipulated by foreign governments interested in pushing propaganda and sowing discord and disarray.

**Because of ELi, our city has long had a grassroots literacy campaign that has helped us defend ourselves in the age of disinformation.**

We are so excited that people are now paying attention to this model, seeing in it what we do: a chance to reawaken an appreciation of high-quality, old-fashioned journalism in America from the ground up.

Our work at ELi has been featured in *The Christian Science Monitor* [8], the Lenfest Institute’s report [9] on local news operations, the Poynter [10] report on local news (twice [11]), *The Guardian* [4] (in a guest op-ed by me), and *The Membership Puzzle Project* [12]’s report on news operations like ours that engage audiences in news production.

We have had over 700 local people and over a dozen small businesses in town support our work by contributing financially. We take no advertising, do no “native advertising” (manufactured news for profit), and we have had only one small grant, namely $3,600 from the Lansing Area Community Trust for our Summer Youth Journalism Program [13].

Our economic method shows you just how seriously we take accountability to our community [14].

If you want to support our efforts with a donation, or if you live here and want to become a reporter with us, click here [15]. If you want to keep track of what we’re reporting, sign up for our free mailer [16].

Thank you for listening. And thanks, as always, to the entire ELi team – advisors, reporters, sub-editors, tech managers, donors, accountants – for allowing us to work with you on bringing East Lansing the news!

**ELi is a member of INN and LION Publishers**