

# The New Easton Courier at Four Months: A Model for Innovative Community Journalism

---



Little did anyone know that Easton, Conn. could be a model for the nation. Since “going live” on February 29—four months ago today—[EastonCourier.news](http://EastonCourier.news) has published more than 390 articles.

The new digital publication filled a hole in the local news landscape just before the Covid-19 pandemic drove a surge in demand for information, and as community newspapers have sharply declined nationwide.

## The Local News Trend

According to the University of North Carolina’s School of Media and Journalism 2018 report on “The Expanding News Desert,” more than one in five papers in the U.S. has closed in the last 15 years, due primarily to the rapid loss of advertising dollars after the Great Recession and the proliferation of digital media.

As many as 1,400 communities that had papers of their own in the early 2000’s now have no newspaper at all. Small communities without papers have been left with fragmented or no access to news covering local politics, municipal government, school board decisions, budgets, businesses, sports, events, and more.

The demise of the print Easton Courier in 2018—along with many other papers in this region, including the Redding Pilot—was part of this sad trend.

“It was devastating,” said Nancy Doniger, former editor of the print Courier, and a managing editor with the Hersam Acorn Newspapers group. “I think community journalism is so important. I also really enjoyed covering Easton. It’s an interesting and dedicated community.”

Many efforts sprang up on Facebook and elsewhere to try to close the news gap in Easton, but for more than a year there was no single “go-to” news source.

## How the Courier Revival Began

In an environment of overwhelming financial pressure and cutbacks in journalism, trying to revive a local paper would seem like a fool’s errand. But James Castonguay, associate dean of the School of Communication, Media, and the Arts (SCMA) at Sacred Heart University (SHU), felt that the school might be able to play a role in bringing the paper back.

As an involved Redding resident, and Board member of the Boys and Girls Club of Redding-Easton, he also knew there was demand for local news: “At the ballfields, Easton and Redding residents were constantly talking about how much they missed their papers. At SHU, I had also gotten a few unsolicited calls from Easton residents asking if there was anything I could do. It was interesting to see how important local news is. It really seemed like the quality of democracy had been compromised.”

Castonguay reached out to Doniger, whom he had known for years since her days as an adjunct professor at SHU and who had periodically offered internships with Hersam Acorn Newspapers to SHU students, to see if they could figure out a path forward.

“When he reached out, I had no idea how it would grow, but I was very interested in the

challenge. I knew the old model would not work,” Doniger said.

They met in early 2019 and agreed to explore whether a new local paper could be launched. Initially, their vision was to bring back a combined Easton-Redding paper, but it turned out that someone else in Redding was already moving forward on a new Pilot.

So they concentrated next on conversations with Easton stakeholders, including the first selectman, the police chief and many others, and each conversation reinforced the community’s excitement for a new paper. Doniger secured permission to use the Easton Courier name, and the nascent effort began to build momentum.



**Easton community leaders and other residents attended informational meetings last fall and winter at Sacred Heart, the Easton Library, and the Easton Community Center, leading up to the new Courier’s launch on February 29, 2020.**

Castonguay and Doniger became champions of the Courier 2.0, and steadily gathered input and involvement from numerous community members and partners. Over time, a new model was forged for the Easton Courier, with four intersecting pillars: 1) digital format; 2) powerful experiential education for university students; 3) non-profit organizational structure; and 4) citizen journalists.

## The Innovative Model Emerges

*Digital Format:* It was clear immediately to Castonguay and Doniger that the new paper

would need to be online only, at least to start. With the dramatic decline in local advertising, a print paper would be too costly to create and sustain. Castonguay asked Keith Zdrojowy, a SHU faculty member, studio manager, and webmaster for the School of Communication, Media, and the Arts, to help set up the Courier site and make it viable technologically. He created a WordPress site from scratch.

Zdrojowy was happy to volunteer: “I see where media is heading. Print is great but it’s cost prohibitive to do a print version of a paper. I really want to help communities get their news, and we [SHU] have always partnered with local communities; it’s part of our mission. I also think there are important possibilities with a digital medium. A new generation of readers may gravitate to online news. Stories can be published quickly before news gets stale. And, the cost is minimal; the only budget is for the domain name and hosting. I enjoy being a part of it.”

*Powerful Experiential Education:* The new Courier will provide SHU undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity for hands-on learning through service in their neighboring Easton community. Before the pandemic, SHU sophomore Dan Gardella had been covering Barlow’s basketball team’s playoff tournament run, and more recently, rising junior Tomas Koeck has been taking photographs for stories, in addition to producing a video to complement a story about the 2020 Joel Barlow High School graduation ceremony.

When classes start up again in the fall, SCMA will also integrate additional courses and programming into the Courier project, including the student-produced news magazine show *The Pulse* and relevant undergraduate and graduate courses in journalism, communication, and media production. Some students will also be assigned a “beat,” learning and supplying every aspect of local coverage—including stories, photos and videos—and providing objective and enlightening reports about people and events. In the process, they will help to record town history, promote democracy, and shed light on the workings of local government, ultimately helping to make the new Easton Courier an indispensable news source for residents.

The Courier experience will also give SHU faculty the opportunity to teach ethical journalism at the local level—a complex yet vital challenge in today’s media marketplace. In addition, this election year will provide students with the opportunity to learn how to cover local and national races without being partisan. They will learn about fact-checking, the importance of fairness, and how to provide a voice to all sides. “I really want to impart that,” said Doniger. “It will be exciting to work with the students on this essential part of our American democracy.”



**Students in Sacred Heart’s School of Communication, Media, and the Arts will learn the ins and outs of local journalism through their work on the Easton Courier.**

Students from Joel Barlow High School will also be involved with the Courier, and in fact, Doniger has received the names of six rising sophomores and juniors who want to write stories this summer. Recent Barlow graduate Sophia Danuszar wrote an article this spring about the “pandemic pivot” that local businesses were making to survive.

“I enjoyed writing for the paper because Barlow doesn’t have a ton of opportunity to

explore journalism,” said Danuszar, who will study creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. “It was also nice to be able to advocate for the small businesses that comprise our community.”

*Non-profit Organizational Structure:* Along with an online format, Castonguay and Doniger agreed that the site should be free of advertising and free of the pressures that can compromise for-profit journalism. Under the auspices of SHU, Castonguay established a non-profit structure for the Courier, with 501(c)3 status.

An all-volunteer board was also established during 2019 to guide the Courier’s policies, operations, and editorial decisions. The board thus far consists of SHU faculty members and others who are committed to the Courier as an important journalism experiment. In addition to Doniger, Castonguay, and Zdrojowy, the board has current and former national and regional journalists like Ann Marie Somma, and Rick Falco, a world-renowned photo and video journalist.

Board member Jane Paley is not only an adjunct professor in the School of Communications, Media, and the Arts, but also a published writer and a 16-year Easton resident, and fellow Eastonite Kelly Wendt, who completed an internship at the old Courier while still in college, reunited with Doniger after completing her master’s degree in business administration from the College of William and Mary.

“When we lost [the original Courier], I was bereft,” Paley said. “I jumped on board as soon as I heard that this new initiative was happening. The need for information was great among people who are passionate about the community.

“The board is wonderful because while we all bring different perspectives, we are all pulling in the same direction,” Paley said. “We take seriously the role of the Courier as a study in journalism ethics, and as a model for students and the general public. We spend hours wrestling with issues, and we keep running into challenges that require adjustments in policy. We want people to have a voice, but we also want the discourse to



be civil. We see it as our moral obligation to be relevant, thoughtful, factual, and ethical.”

While the minimal costs for set up and operation of the Courier have been absorbed by SHU thus far, and virtually all of the startup work has been done by volunteers, the non-profit structure can allow for future grants and donations to support stipends for permanent staff members and ensure the ongoing quality and sustainability of the coverage.



**The Courier Editorial Board has continued its weekly meetings online throughout the pandemic. Top row, from left: Rick Falco, Jim Castonguay, Jane Paley; middle row, from left: Ann Marie Somma, Kelly Wendt, Keith Zdrojowy; bottom row: Nancy Doniger**

*Citizen Journalists:* The final pillar, initially envisioned by Doniger, is the involvement of citizen journalists—town residents and leaders who contribute vital and ongoing reporting on town events and issues. Because of student turnover and the lack of funding for paid staff—at least for now—the continuity of fresh content depends on

citizen involvement.

From the outset of the Courier 2.0 project, Doniger and Castonguay sought to build community commitment to the paper. Through several meetings over the course of 2019, attended by more than 300 residents and community leaders, citizens made a commitment to contribute content. Momentum began to build, and even before the official launch, dozens of articles were written and submitted for publication.

One of the early and continuing contributors is Bruce Nelson, board member of the Historical Society of Easton, historical novelist, and official co-historian for the Town of Redding. Nelson, whose family dates back to the early 1800's in Easton (and to the mid-1700's in Ridgefield), submits original pieces and images each week, shedding light on Easton's history.

"My goal is to get younger people interested in local history, a subject that is pretty much ignored in modern education," Nelson said. "Since the majority of Easton residents are transplants from somewhere else, most know nothing about the history of the area, and the articles in the Courier provide some insight about the town's past."

Castonguay and Doniger were excited about the possibility of partnering with Nelson to help to expand his readership and educational reach.

"I had long been a fan of Bruce's writings from reading his meticulously researched Facebook posts, so I was thrilled when he agreed to contribute to the Courier," Castonguay said. "We were especially pleased to learn that his article about Private Olius Lyon became required reading for an eighth grade social studies class at Helen Keller Middle School after a student brought it to a teacher's attention."

Doniger and Castonguay also met early on with Gale Papageorge, the Easton resident behind the Facebook page Easton Front Porch: Arts Culture and News, and who has become a regular contributor to the Courier. "Nancy and I had both admired Gale's



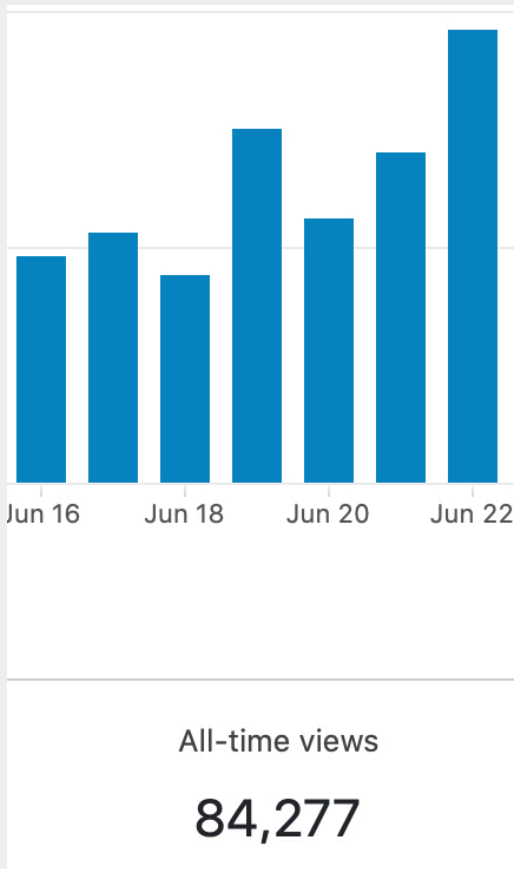
writing and were impressed by what she had accomplished with the Easton Front Porch,” Castonguay said. “We are extremely glad to be partnering with her.”

Overall, the citizen involvement has stayed steady and strong, according to Doniger. “This has far exceeded our expectations in terms of community involvement. We had envisioned more student reporting at the outset, but when schools closed [due to the pandemic], the community stepped up. We couldn’t have done it without the community’s willingness to write regular articles and columns, and submit opinion pieces. Easton residents have brought both quantity and quality to the paper. None of us imagined it would happen to this extent.”

“Very rarely can I say that something *far* exceeds what I expected,” Castonguay said. “The bottom line is that we have received an outpouring of articles, and we have enormous momentum. Nancy Doniger is my hero; the only reason I committed to this project is because she was involved. She had the credibility and relationships, and she’s a great journalist. I have to give her just about all the credit.”

Doniger praised Castonguay’s visionary leadership and skill in assembling a dedicated and hard-working editorial board where everyone brings a unique talent to the table. He has worked tirelessly to champion the experiential learning project for SCMA and Joel Barlow High School students and develop an innovative community journalism news source that truly could be a model for the nation.

## Looking Ahead

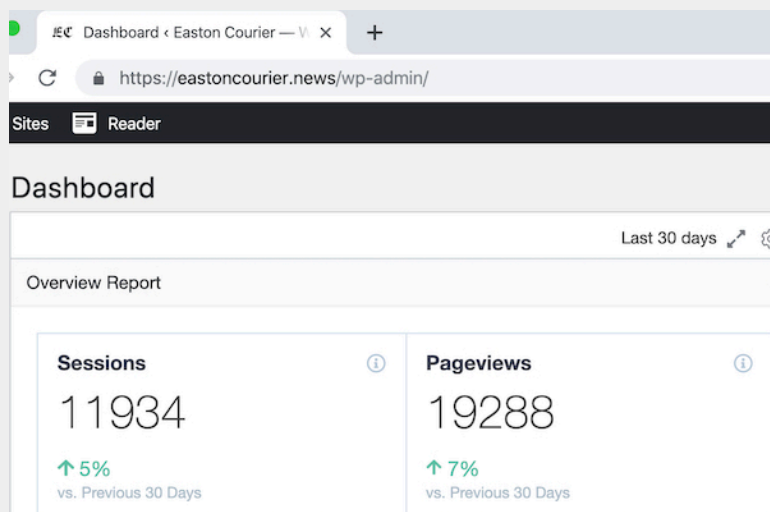


The Easton Courier is on track to have over 100,000 unique page views by mid-July. Source: WordPress site statistics through June 22, 2020.

Not only has the community contributed significantly to the paper, but there is growing data to suggest that more and more residents consider the Courier a vital resource. According to Google Analytics, the Courier had over 5,429 unique visitors or different readers in May, and WordPress has logged over 11,000 different sessions with close to 20,000 pages viewed from May 28 - June 28. With over 84,000 pages viewed through June 22, the Courier is on track to reach the 100,000 pages viewed mark by mid-July. "Given that Easton includes slightly over 2,000 families, 2,500 households, and roughly 7,500 residents, we are extremely encouraged by these early numbers," Castonguay said.

As Castonguay, Doniger, and the other members of the board consider the coming months and years, their eyes are on sustaining the momentum that has been built. One piece of this will be substantive local journalism projects. For example, the Courier team has already been planning and working on a series of long-form articles on the state of

farming in Easton, which ties directly to Easton’s culture, history, and traditions, and could be a model for farming across Connecticut.



The Courier has consistently had over 10,000 sessions and close to 20,000 page views per month. Source: EastonCourier.news site statistics accessed on June 28,2020.

The next phase of the Courier’s development will likely also involve raising money, ideally through grants, that could allow the team to expand its curricular impact, secure staff continuity, deepen local news coverage, and ultimately partner with other towns to expand this model throughout the region.

“We have reached the point where we’ve proven that we’re useful to the community—we’ve demonstrated our value,” Castonguay said.

Everyone involved in the Courier 2.0 believes it can start to be seen as a model for other communities. Doniger certainly sees it that way: “What we have done in Easton is special, but it can be replicated in other places.”

It’s a model that just may rewrite the story about local news.