



INSTITUTE FOR RURAL JOURNALISM AND COMMUNITY ISSUES

ANNUAL REPORT 2008



The Institute is part of the university's School of Journalism and Telecommunications, in the College of Communications and Information Studies. It has academic partners at the University of Alabama, the University of Alaska-Anchorage, Appalachian State University, East Tennessee State University, Eastern Kentucky University, Georgia College and State University, the University of Georgia, the University of Illinois, Indiana University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Iowa State University, Jacksonville (Ala.) State University, the University of Maine at Presque Isle, Marshall University, Middle Tennessee State University, the University of Mississippi, the University of Missouri, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Ohio University, Penn State, Southeast Missouri State University, the University of Tennessee, Virginia Tech, Washington and Lee University, West Virginia University and Wheeling Jesuit University.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, 2008: A year of new connections, from Mississippi to Alaska to New York and back to Kentucky

“Making connections” could be the motto of the Institute. We’ve tried to do that from the start, helping rural journalists and their communities overcome the isolation that defines rurality, so they define the public agenda in their communities through strong reporting and commentary – especially on big issues that have a local impact. But connections were especially plentiful in 2008.

Perhaps the best example is this year’s Tom and Pat Gish Award, which the Institute gives for courage, tenacity and integrity in rural journalism. The award is named for Tom and Pat Gish, *right*, publishers of The Mountain Eagle in Whitesburg, Ky., from 1957 until Tom Gish’s death in November. Their son Ben still edits the weekly newspaper and is on the Institute’s national Advisory Board. In The Associated Press’s year-end story on the notable deaths of 2008, Tom Gish was included, in recognition of his fearless journalism against tough odds over such a long time.



Early in the year, Institute co-founder Al Smith suggested that the 2008 Gish Award go to The Neshoba Democrat, the weekly paper in Philadelphia, Miss., that successfully campaigned for investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the murders of three civil-rights workers in Neshoba County in 1964, subject of the 1988 movie “Mississippi Burning.”



We figured the best authority to nominate the newspaper was Jerry Mitchell (*left, photo by James Patterson*), the investigative reporter for the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, whose reporting has helped put four former Klansmen behind bars for killings in the civil-rights era – including those near Philadelphia. Mitchell agreed that the Democrat deserved the award, and his nomination clearly placed the newspaper ahead of other nominees.

That contact with Mitchell, whose work on the case made him a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2006, led to appearances by him in October at the University of Kentucky, where the Institute is based. Billed as “Journalist for Justice,” he spoke to a large evening crowd, then to four journalism classes, a faculty lunch and a joint meeting of the campus and Bluegrass chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists.

The Bluegrass chapter co-sponsored Mitchell’s appearance, along with UK’s Scripps Howard First Amendment Center (a sister unit in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications), UK’s colleges of Law and Arts and Sciences, the Kentucky

Commission on Human Rights, the Kentucky League of Cities and the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky. The major sponsor of the visit was The Courier-Journal of Louisville.

Mission to Mississippi: The Gish Award was presented to Neshoba Democrat Publisher Jim Prince, *near right*, and former publisher Stanley Dearman, *far right*, at the Mississippi Press Association convention in Biloxi. On that trip we made more connections.



At the convention, we made a presentation on “Covering and Guiding Economic Development,” which also was given to the Tennessee Press Association and a Traveling Campus of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association. (We made broader presentations on rural economic development to Kentucky civic organizations.)

On the way to Biloxi, we stopped at the University of Mississippi and added the chair of the journalism department, Samir Husni, as an academic partner of the Institute. On another trip, to the University of Missouri, we added Bill Allen, director of its agricultural journalism program.

North to Alaska: We made connections farther away. On a trip to Alaska, we gained an academic partner at the University of Alaska-Anchorage. Edgar Blatchford is an associate professor of journalism, former state commerce commissioner, former chairman of an Alaska Native corporation and former president of Alaska Newspapers Inc., a chain of weeklies.

The Alaska Press Club sponsored the trip, for Institute Director Al Cross to make presentations at two sessions and speak on two panels during its annual Journalism Week.

The digital challenge: The New York Press Association sponsored a trip for Cross to make a presentation to the state's weekly newspaper publishers on leadership challenges and opportunities in small markets, focused on the need for weeklies to provide Web-based content – a major challenge many have not confronted yet. He gave the keynote address at “Meta|Morphosis,” a conference on digitization of newspaper archives, sponsored by the UK Libraries.



Environment: The Institute and the Society of Environmental Journalists co-sponsored “Covering Climate Change and Our Energy Future in Rural America,” a one-day seminar that began the annual SEJ Conference in Roanoke. Cross wrote an advance article for the group's SEJournal about the difficulties rural journalists face covering controversial issues, especially those dealing with the environment, such as mountaintop-removal mining for coal (*photo by The Associated Press*). The Institute helped plan the program and sponsored attendance of journalists from the Appalachian coalfield, to promote more coverage of the coal industry and related issues.

Money matters: Our sponsorship of Appalachian journalists was financed with the first year's earnings from the \$125,000 gift our endowment received last year from Sara S. “Sally” Brown of Louisville, the largest single gift to the endowment so far. Fund-raising for the endowment continues, and contributions are matched by state funds. To make a tax-deductible gift or pledge, go to our home page, www.RuralJournalism.org.

Watchdog journalism: Closer to home, the Institute partnered with UK's Scripps Howard First Amendment Center and the Kentucky Press Association to present two day-long Sunshine Seminars for journalists on open meetings, open records and other freedom-of-information issues in Lexington and Madisonville.

Health care: The Institute co-sponsored the Kentucky Diabetes Summit, recruiting from counties with high rates of the disease journalists who returned home and wrote stories about its local impact. The newspaper in the No.1 county did a four-part series. We delivered county health profiles to every newspaper in Kentucky, and urged the papers to expand their health coverage to help their readers make better health-care decisions and live healthier lives. Highlighted was a story from the Institute's newsletter, headlined, “If a news outlet can't take a stand for good health and better health care, what *can* it stand for?”

Students cover a small town: As an assistant professor in UK's School of Journalism and Telecommunications, Cross teaches Community Journalism in the fall, and an advanced writing and reporting class in the spring, focused on a topic or project. The spring 2008 class started a blog and Web site to report news of Midway, Ky., a town of 1,620 halfway between Lexington and Frankfort. (*Photo by student Ashley Camblin*) The fall 2008 class contributed to the blog and Web site, and the spring 2009 class is continuing the project. The Midway Messenger blog is at <http://midwayky.blogspot.com> and the Web site is www.MidwayMessenger.org.



Examples for educators, editors and publishers: Cross produced and moderated “Case Studies of Courage in Community Journalism,” a panel at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, and presented a study of Kentucky newspaper editorial pages at the National Newspaper Association convention. The paper was co-authored by Liz Hansen of Eastern Kentucky University, a longtime academic partner of the Institute who was its visiting scholar while she was on sabbatical during the 2007-08 academic year. During 2008, Hansen became chair of the Institute's steering committee, which comprises the academic partners.

More research and public service: Cross co-authored with three UK public-health faculty “Partnerships for Supporting Local Health Efforts: The Link between Rural Journalism and Public Health in One Rural Community,” published in Higher Education Exchange; moderated discussions at the East Kentucky Leadership Conference and the Kentucky Engagement Conference for higher education; and joined UK's new Faculty of the Environment. He is also a member of UK's Interdisciplinary Economic Development Research Collaborative, and was convener of its Community Engagement and Measurement Committee. He speaks frequently in Kentucky and other states about journalism, politics, economic development and other issues of concern to the Institute.

Outreach: The Institute transformed its occasional publication, Rural Report, from a printed newsletter about Institute activities into an online-only journal about rural journalism. Its featured story examined how then-Sen. Barack Obama built his groundbreaking victory in the Iowa caucuses in part by appealing to rural newspapers. To read Rural Report, go to www.uky.edu/comminfolstudies/irjci/RuralReportSpring2008.pdf.



The Institute's highest-profile activity is The Rural Blog, a digest of events, trends, issues ideas and journalism from and about rural America. It is at <http://irjci.blogspot.com>.

Holding media accountable: In late October, the Institute released the early results of a study of news coverage and advertising on Lexington television about Kentucky's nationally important U.S. Senate election. From Sept. 1 through Oct. 20, the four stations sold almost \$3 million worth of ads, totaling more than 92 hours, but ran only 44 minutes of news stories. Most were horse-race stories about campaign tactics and support, and most stories that touched on issues did so only superficially. The Institute launched the study because many rural Kentuckians do not read daily newspapers, and their local, weekly papers generally do not cover statewide elections or subscribe to AP. Thus, for many rural voters, television is the major source of information about candidates in statewide races. Final results will be published in 2009.



A legacy for Rudy Abramson: The Institute suffered some losses and gains in 2008. The greatest loss was the death of Rudy Abramson, *left*, who co-founded the Institute with retired Kentucky publisher and commentator Al Smith. He died Feb. 13 of injuries suffered in a fall at his home in Reston, Va., and his family designated the Institute as a recipient of memorial gifts. Succeeding him as chair of our national Advisory Board, Smith proposed that we memorialize him by creating the Rudy Abramson Fellowship in Journalism and Rural Democracy. The name of the fellowship reflects the co-founders' vision of strong journalism at all levels as essential to the democratic process. It will support professional guidance for enterprise reporting by rural journalists and students.

Turning over rocks and exposing the facts was the kind of work Rudy Abramson loved. After a stellar career with The Tennessean and the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times, he became an acclaimed author and a fighter for the public interest, usually through journalism. In a memorial service at the Newseum in Washington, his friends remembered him as a role model for reporters and an advocate for rural America who treasured his small-town roots. "He was a stranger to self-importance and a sworn enemy to smugness," political commentator Mark Shields said. "Rudy never, never forgot where he came from, or the people from whom he came. Rudy understood that the one demographic group that could be caricatured could be ridiculed and could be condescended to with total impunity, are the white working-class Americans that did not go to college, and who often live in the rural United States. He was truly the voice for the voiceless."

While he was writing an update on Appalachia in 2001, Abramson reported to Smith that newspapers in the region, as Smith put it at the memorial, "lacked the vigor to confront the issues" like poverty, disease, drug abuse, poor schools, local corruption and mountaintop-removal mining. That led him and Smith to think up the Institute, about which Smith quoted Abramson: "We are not about crafting pretty paragraphs. We want to change lives for the better." He concluded, "The Institute, we hope, will be his legacy to all of rural America." The fellowship is intended to do that more specifically. A campaign for it, within our endowment, is ongoing.

A new colleague: At year's end, the School of Journalism and Telecommunications welcomed to its faculty Terry Anderson, *right*, the AP's former chief Middle East correspondent who spent nearly seven years as a hostage in Lebanon. Anderson is working on projects with the Institute and the Scripps Howard First Amendment Center, starting with a Kentucky Open Government Blog to raise the profile of First Amendment and open-government issues in the state and keep journalists and others informed about them. Anderson will work on other projects with the Institute, which has received several inquiries from rural journalists in other countries.



Our reach exceeds our grasp in many ways, and your financial support helps us fulfill our mission. **To make a tax-deductible donation or pledge to the Institute's endowment, via a secure Web site, go to www.RuralJournalism.org, or call us at 859-257-3744** and ask for Al Cross or his assistant, Janet Whitaker. Their e-mail addresses are al.cross@uky.edu and jlwhitl@uky.edu. Our fax number is 859-323-3168.