

# Five years of helping rural people through journalism



## INSTITUTE FOR RURAL JOURNALISM AND COMMUNITY ISSUES

School of Journalism and Telecommunications  
College of Communications and Information Studies, University of Kentucky

### FIFTH ANNIVERSARY REPORT: 2004-2009

America and its journalism are changing. As metropolitan news media abandon audiences and coverage in rural areas, and struggle with challenges posed by the Internet, non-metro news outlets bear a larger burden for the accountability journalism and coverage of issues that are essential in a democratic society. Newspapers and broadcast stations in smaller markets often lack the staff and other resources that are needed to properly cover some issues and to hold local officials and institutions accountable.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues was created to help rural journalists set the public agenda in their communities, through strong reporting and responsible commentary – especially on broad issues that have local impact, such as education, the environment, health care and economic development. In short, we are about helping rural people through journalism. We do that by helping rural journalists and their communities overcome the isolation that defines rurality. And because it is more difficult to be a strong, ethical journalist in a small town than a big one, we promote courage in rural journalism, like that shown for more than 50 years by Pat Gish and the late Tom Gish (*right, in 2004*) of The Mountain Eagle of Whitesburg, Ky. The Institute has given its **Gish Award** for courage, tenacity and integrity in rural journalism to the Canadian (Tex.) Record and The Neshoba Democrat of Philadelphia, Miss.



On Aug. 1, 2009, the Institute marked the fifth anniversary of the employment of its first staff, thanks to a grant to the University of Kentucky from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and additional support from the Ford Foundation. (The Institute was created as a research project in 2001 with grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation of the Society of Professional Journalists.) Now the Institute is trying to match \$1.5 million set aside by the university from the state Research Challenge Trust Fund to establish a permanent operating endowment. The deadline for meeting the match is **June 10, 2011**.



The Institute is primarily a public-policy and information center, but provides some help with reporting, writing, editing, presentation and management. Director Al Cross is an assistant extension professor of journalism, because most of his work is directed off campus, but he teaches community journalism and manages an online news site and blog for the small community of Midway, between the Lexington campus and the state capital of Frankfort. Students report stories in Midway and present them via text, audio and video on [www.MidwayMessenger.org](http://www.MidwayMessenger.org), and the blog, <http://midwayky.blogspot.com>.

*(Photo by student Ashley Camblin)* Earlier courses gave students experience in covering statewide and local elections and examining the future of tobacco and

tobacco-dependent communities in Kentucky. An Appalachian project is in the works. The Institute received the East Kentucky Leadership Foundation's 2009 Media Award for its work in Appalachian Kentucky. Cross appeared on an ABC-TV follow-up to the network's report on "A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains."

**A national mission:** While the Institute is based at the University of Kentucky, it has a national mission. With help from the Farm Foundation, it sponsored the **National Summit on Journalism in Rural America** in 2007 and is active in the National Newspaper Association. 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. More are coming.

## Environment: Helping reporters and editors tackle tough questions

Extractive industries do most of their extracting in rural areas, with considerable effect on the environment. From its beginning, the Institute has helped rural journalists develop the interest and information needed to cover environmental issues, which can often be complex, with few good sources close at hand.

In November 2005 the Institute sponsored “**Covering Coal**” at the Marshall University Graduate Center in South Charleston, W.Va., the first conference in Appalachia for journalists to learn from industry leaders, opponents of mountaintop-removal mining, mine-safety advocates, state and federal regulators and other experts. A few months later, the Institute and the Appalachian News-Express of Pikeville, Ky., held a **Coal-Media Roundtable** in Pikeville for journalists and industry representatives to hash out their often contentious relationship. (*Associated Press photo of mining in West Virginia, with Coal River Mountain in the background*)



In 2007 the Institute hosted an intern from the Knight Community Journalism Fellows program at the University of Alabama, who earned her master’s degree partly by writing the first-ever story comparing the regulatory and lobbying situations in the four mountaintop-removal states: West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee.

In October 2008 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. Director Cross wrote an advance article for the society’s magazine about the difficulties rural journalists face covering controversial issues, especially those dealing with the environment. 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.

Also at the conference, Cross moderated a reporters’ discussion on covering the environmental and health issues in agriculture, and will moderate a similar discussion at the 2009 SEJ meeting in Madison, Wis.

**Money matters:** Our sponsorship of Appalachian journalists at the Roanoke conference 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. To make a tax-deductible gift or pledge to the endowment, go to [www.RuralJournalism.org](http://www.RuralJournalism.org), and choose a link at the bottom of the home page.

## Health care: Helping deliver information on living healthier lives



Rural communities have chronic problems with access to health-care coverage and specialists, and some rural areas have high rates of certain diseases and disorders. Appalachian Kentucky is one of those, and the first conference held by the Institute was on covering health care and health in Central Appalachia, in 2005. It attracted more than 50 journalists, practitioners and experts, and resulted in several stories.

In 2006 and 2007 the Institute oversaw a project, funded by the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, which produced localized material for special sections on health in three rural, weekly newspapers. The project successfully tested the concept of reaching non-subscribers, who may have greater need for health information, with sample copies. Newspapers that use the mail can send up to 10 percent of their annual circulation as samples to non-subscribers at subscriber rates, and can sell sponsorships for the additional circulation – typically to health-care providers, who buy most of the advertising to support such sections.

The Institute has reached out to health professionals, presenting “How Rural Journalism Can Help Rural Health,” at conventions of the National Rural Health Association, the Kentucky Rural Health Association, the Priester National Extension Health Conference, and a Kentucky Hospital Association public-relations group. Director Cross’s collaboration with a doctoral student in the University of Kentucky’s College of Public Health

led to a series of articles in a weekly newspaper serving a county where she was conducting research and forums on health care. (For more on health care, see the Research section.)

In 2008 the Institute co-sponsored the Kentucky Diabetes Summit, recruiting journalists from counties with high rates of the disease. All wrote stories about its local impact. The newspaper in the No.1 county did a four-part series. We delivered **county health profiles** to all Kentucky papers, and urged them 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?" Several papers used the material in special sections on health.

The Institute co-sponsored the 2007 workshop "Children and Agriculture: Telling the Story of Risks and Safety," with the **National Farm Medicine Center** and the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, and is working on a multidisciplinary project to reduce all-terrain vehicle deaths and injuries.

## **Economic Development: Defining, dividing civic and journalistic roles**

The news media of rural America have long played a role in bringing jobs to their communities, with reporting, commentary and civic leadership. Today, they and their communities face new challenges. The Institute is helping them respond, with a continuing presentation, "**Covering and Guiding Economic Development**," which has been given to newspaper groups in Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Iowa, and as part of broader presentations to Kentucky civic organizations on rural economic development. Here's our message:

Globalization of the economy has made it more difficult for rural communities to attract and retain jobs. That means rural development strategies are changing, or need to. The changing landscape calls for more coverage, and for more editorial guidance. Local newspapers can help inform policymakers and build public support for needed changes in policy. As changes are debated and implemented, or employers are recruited or retained, it's all the more important to keep policymakers at arm's length and hold them accountable. A newspaper or broadcast station should be an integral part of the local business community, but maintain enough independence to make sure that its handling of economic-development matters reflects the economic, social and environmental interests of the whole community — not just the business interests of local employers or officials. Where public money and public officials are involved, news media must hold them accountable and be careful about involvement in development efforts.

Some areas face special challenges in economic development. One is Appalachia, the Institute's initial focus and still the region in which it does most of its work. In 2009, the Institute hired J.J. Snidow, *right*, a native of the region who had just earned a degree in economics from Harvard College, to research and write about the economic issues of Appalachian Kentucky, particularly that part of the region in the Appalachian coalfield. His series of articles is being published in several Eastern Kentucky newspapers, and one was featured in a Sunday edition of The Courier-Journal in Louisville.



## **Education: Keeping reporters and editors current on a core issue**

Of all the major subject areas the Institute helps with, the most challenging is education coverage, because issues in schools tend to be specific to states or localities. The Rural Blog follows national and regional education newsletters to bring rural journalists the latest information on how federal and state policies, research and current trends might affect their local schools.

In 2006 the Institute, the Kentucky Press Association and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence sponsored a workshop on improving local education coverage, attracting reporters from about 15 media outlets. All the participants were put on an e-mail list that receives occasional updates on school issues.

## **Watchdog journalism: Keeping officials and institutions accountable**

The Institute also maintains a list-serve for Kentucky political reporters, another outgrowth of a workshop held in 2006. Director Cross still writes a twice-a-month political column for The Courier-Journal, which is reprinted in several other Kentucky newspapers.

To help news outlets without reporters in state capitals or Washington, the Institute sponsored “Bringing the Capitals to Your Community” in 2005 at the Center for Rural Development in Somerset, Ky. Twenty editors or reporters from six states attended the seminar, which was co-sponsored by the National Press Foundation and the Kiplinger Program in Public Affairs Journalism at The Ohio State University’s John Glenn Center.

To keep Kentucky journalists and citizens up to date on the openness of public records, public-agency meetings and court proceedings, the Institute and the School of Journalism and Telecommunications’ Scripps Howard First Amendment Center co-sponsor Sunshine Seminars with the Kentucky Press Association and maintain the **Kentucky Open Government Blog**. The blog’s main contributor is Terry Anderson, *right*, the AP’s former chief Middle East correspondent who spent nearly seven years as a hostage in Lebanon. Anderson will work on other projects with the Institute, which has received several inquiries from rural journalists in other countries.



## The digital challenge: Helping weekly papers adapt to a 24/7 news cycle



While rural newspapers have not been affected by the explosion of digital information on the Internet as much as their metropolitan counterparts, the Institute believes that they will be, and is trying to help prepare them for it. The National Summit on Journalism in Rural America in 2007 featured a presentation by Gary and Helen Sosniecki, *left*, a weekly editor and publisher who made money from their Web site. Gary is now a Web consultant to weeklies and will help the Institute with a day of programming on adapting to the Internet at the annual conference of the **International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors**, which the Institute and Eastern Kentucky University are bringing to the state in June 2010. In 2008, the **New York Press Association** sponsored a trip for

Director 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.

## Research: Filling a gap, detailing problems, giving guidance

Very little research has been conducted on rural news media in the United States, though most news outlets in the nation are rural. The Institute is filling the gap.

In 2007 the Institute published the first-ever survey of training backgrounds and needs at rural newspapers in the U.S. It found that almost half offered no training to their news employees in the previous year, and that the most common form of training was in layout and design, not reporting. The survey found that most such newspapers are willing to support mid-career training in journalism, and are more likely to do so if it deals with issues of concern in their coverage areas. The survey also found that more than two-thirds of reporters at the responding papers had at least a bachelor’s degree, but their average starting salary for a reporter with such a degree was only \$20,000 or so.

In 2008-09 Director Cross and Anna Hoover, a master’s-degree student in communication, presented a study of health-behavior information in selected Kentucky newspapers at the **Priester National Extension Health Conference**. The study found that few papers used stories prepared by the university’s College of Medicine about health problems of local importance, even though the stories included localized health data; that nearly 40 percent of health-behavior articles mentioned no source; that only 12 percent were written by a newspaper staffer; that most were press releases authored by organizations to promote specific health behaviors; and that about a third were classifiable as advertorial content that blurred the lines between editorial content and paid advertising. The Institute is examining health coverage in all Kentucky papers for a presentation to the state newspaper association that will discuss the issues raised and promote more and better health coverage. Aubrey Krekeler, a master’s student in health communication, started the statewide research as the 2009 Tall Grass Farm Foundation fellow. The fellowship was created by Institute contributor Lois Mateus.

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 the Kettering Foundation’s *Higher Education Exchange* journal in 2008.

Cross also presented a study of Kentucky newspaper editorial pages at the **National Newspaper Association** convention, which showed that only about half of Kentucky weeklies have regular editorial pages and no better

than a third publish local editorials, including columns by the editor or publisher. The paper was co-authored by Liz Hansen, *right*, 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. In 2008, Hansen became chair of the Institute's steering committee, which comprises the academic partners. She and Cross are active in the Community Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. At the 2008 AEJMC convention Cross produced and moderated "**Case Studies of Courage in Community Journalism**," a presentation and panel discussion; and at the 2009 meeting keynoted a panel on efforts in higher education to help rural journalists.



In late October 2008, the Institute released 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.

## Other programs reach varied audiences

Less than a year after it was staffed, the Institute programmed a five-day conference, "Rural America, Community Issues," at the **Knight Center for Specialized Journalism** at the University of Maryland. Thirty journalists from most sections of the country and a wide range of news outlets attended, and many of them remain frequent correspondents of the Institute.

The Institute sponsored appearances in Lexington in October 2008 by Jerry Mitchell (*left, photo by James Patterson*), the investigative reporter for the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Miss., whose reporting has helped put four former Klansmen behind bars for killings in the civil-rights era. Billed as "Journalist for Justice," he spoke to a large evening crowd, then to four journalism classes, a faculty luncheon and a joint meeting of the campus and Bluegrass chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists.



Also in 2008, Director Cross was the guest of the **Alaska Press Club** at its annual Journalism Week in Anchorage, making presentations and speaking on panels. In 2007, the Institute co-sponsored "Health, Wealth and Wireless: Issues for Rural Iowa" in Des Moines, in cooperation with the **Iowa Newspaper Association**, the Center for Rural Strategies and the Main Street Project. The latter two

sponsors also partnered with the Institute to hold the **National Summit on Agriculture and Rural Life**, which included a forum for presidential candidates. Cross helped conduct the forum, which included Barack Obama and John Edwards and (by video) Hillary Clinton. A few months later, the Institute published a story on how Obama won the Iowa caucuses by doing better than expected in rural areas, partly because he paid attention to rural newspapers. It was featured in the 2008 edition of *Rural Report*, the Institute's occasional publication about its activities and rural journalism, available at [www.uky.edu/comminfo/studies/irjci/RuralReportSpring2008.pdf](http://www.uky.edu/comminfo/studies/irjci/RuralReportSpring2008.pdf).



## Outreach: Building a national community of rural journalists

There are thousands of good journalists in rural America, but all too often only one or two fit that description where they work, and they don't get many opportunities to learn from their peers, their models or experts. The Institute helps them overcome that isolation with presentations and publications, mainly online.



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 updated almost daily and has a large audience. It is at <http://irjci.blogspot.com>.

Our Web site, [www.RuralJournalism.org](http://www.RuralJournalism.org), has resources for rural journalists, such as sources of information on key issues such as health, the environment, economic development and education; examples of good rural journalism, including Gish Award winners; reports on rural journalism issues, outlets and owners; reports on Institute activities; and research on rural journalism, including work by Community Journalism students and graduate students.

## Our founders, our history and our staff



The Institute was conceived by the late Rudy Abramson, *left*, who was a longtime correspondent for the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times. After retiring from the paper in the mid-1990s, he became an acclaimed author and a fighter for the public interest, usually through journalism. "He was a stranger to self-importance and a sworn enemy to smugness," political commentator Mark Shields said at Abramson's memorial service in February 2008. "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." For more

on the service and Abramson, go to <http://www.uky.edu/CommInfoStudies/IRJCI/RudyRemembered.html>.

On an Alicia Patterson Foundation fellowship to write a report on Appalachia in 2000-01, Abramson reported to his friend Al Smith, *right*, former federal co-chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, 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, on 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." Abramson and Smith thought local news outlets in the region and the rest of rural America could use more help from institutions of higher education: ideas, sources and stories. Smith, a retired Kentucky newspaper publisher and commentator, sold the idea to Dr. Lee T. Todd Jr., the newly installed president of the University of Kentucky, and helped UK's College of Communications and Information Studies get small grants from the **Appalachian Regional Commission** and the **Sigma Delta Chi Foundation** of the Society of Professional Journalists. The money funded a pilot project that culminated with a \$250,000 grant from the **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation** (which later gave another \$103,000) and \$50,000 from the **Ford Foundation**.



The funding allowed the college's School of Journalism and Telecommunications to hire Al Cross, *left*, as the Institute's first full-time staff member. After a year as interim director, he became director and assistant extension professor of journalism. He likes to say that his short job description is "**extension agent for rural journalists.**" Cross started his journalism career at rural weekly newspapers in Albany, Monticello, Russellville and Leitchfield, Ky., before joining The Courier-Journal, where he spent more than 26 years, the last 15½ as chief political writer, and shared in the staff's Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the nation's worst bus and drunk-driving crash. His political coverage ranged from presidential to local elections and all facets of state government. He still writes a political column, more or less fortnightly, for the Louisville newspaper. He was president of the Society of Professional Journalists in 2001-02.

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Cross's assistant is Janet Whitaker, *right*, an experienced broadcast journalist. In 25 years at Kentucky Educational Television, she worked her way up from production assistant to documentary producer-director. She does research, coordinates events, advises on broadcasting and works with Institute graduate assistants and other students. Much of her work is directed at helping the Institute reach its potential by matching the \$1.5 million the UK trustees set aside for its endowment from the state Research Challenge Trust Fund, better known as "Bucks for Brains." The deadline to meet the match is June 10, 2011. Whatever money is not matched must be returned to the fund, and that will reduce the earnings from the endowment, forcing the Institute to sharply curtail its activities.



## How you can support the Institute for Rural Journalism

To make a credit card gift or a pledge to the Institute, go to [https://giveto.uky.edu/CIS\\_p/cis.htm](https://giveto.uky.edu/CIS_p/cis.htm). Under the Gift selection, choose "Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues."

To make a gift by check, make it payable to the University of Kentucky and mail it to Janet Whitaker, University of Kentucky, 121 Grehan Bldg., Lexington KY 40506-0042.

Rudy Abramson's family designated the Institute as a recipient of memorial gifts, and donations made in his memory will go toward 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.



Another memorial fund was established by the family of Richard Whitt, *left*, a UK graduate and Pulitzer Prize winner for The Courier-Journal, who died in 2009 after retiring from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and completing a book about the University of Georgia. Earnings from the fund will be used to support enterprise reporting in Whitt's native Appalachian Kentucky. For more on Whitt, go to <http://www.uky.edu/CommInfoStudies/IRJCI/RichWhitt.htm>.

Gifts to the Institute are tax deductible. You can use this form to make a gift to the endowment. For more information, contact Cross or Whitaker at **859-257-3744**, [al.cross@uky.edu](mailto:al.cross@uky.edu) or [jlwhitl@uky.edu](mailto:jlwhitl@uky.edu). Our fax number is 859-323-3168. Or you may contact Janice Birdwhistell, development officer for the College of Communications and Information Studies, at 257-4241 or [Janice.bird@uky.edu](mailto:Janice.bird@uky.edu).

I'd like to help the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues gather the financial support needed to build an endowment to help the Institute fulfill its promise at the University of Kentucky and give it a permanent place on the landscape of journalism. I understand that my contribution will be matched by UK's allocation from the state Research Challenge Trust Fund if received by June 10, 2011, and perhaps by my employer, if listed below; and that givers of \$1,000 or more will be permanently recognized on a plaque in the UK School of Journalism and Telecommunications.

My gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed, OR I pledge \$\_\_\_\_\_ to be paid in installments of \$\_\_\_\_\_ by June 1, 2011.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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If you want your gift designated for one of our memorial funds, circle one: Rudy Abramson Richard Whitt

**Mail to: Janet Whitaker, IRJCI, 121 Grehan Bldg., University of Kentucky, Lexington KY 40506-0042**

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