



RECOGNITION

Anna-Claire Butler named Palmer Newspapers Employee of the Year

See Page 4

AWARDS

Journalist named to Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame

See Page 6



Arkansas Press Association PUBLISHER WEEKLY

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Veteran journalist Hibblen takes new role assisting six community newspapers



Michael Hibblen in front of the *Grand Prairie Herald* on March 8, 2026. (Photo by Ali Taylor)

Reporter: the word essentially reflects a specific concept, but its application can cover many varied forms and experiences in the journalism world.

Michael Hibblen's career is one example of the myriad opportunities a dedicated reporter can explore, interviewing and sharing fascinating stories with readers and listeners.

In his case, whether it be the *Miami Herald* or the *Glenwood Herald*, well-crafted stories are appreciated for their insight into the communities

being served.

Hibblen's journalism journey primarily has focused on radio, with the path starting in his native Arkansas, expanding into several big city markets, and then eventually back to his beloved home state.

The latest avenue is turning out to be one of his most rewarding, with his friend Roby Brock offering the opportunity to both report and help coordinate editorial operations in six local newspapers covering

communities throughout Arkansas.

Brock certainly has made community journalism news of his own in recent months with the acquisition of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, *England Democrat*, *Waldron News*, *Fordyce News Advocate*, *Grand Prairie Herald* in Hazen and the *Glenwood Herald*. In several cases, he essentially has "saved" the local newspaper from a potential closure.

Hibblen began his association with Brock's Newsroom Ventures, LLC, on March 9 and started full-time employment May 1. He will be assisting editorial teams across the company and will also serve as editor of the *Glenwood Herald* and managing editor of the *Grand Prairie Herald*. He will also be contributing to *Talk Business & Politics*, which is part of Natural State Media.

"To see someone invest like this in small community newspapers is amazing," Hibblen said of Brock's new journalism endeavors.

"I've known Michael for many years and I value his friendship as much as I do his news reporting, editing skills and attention to detail," Brock said. "He will be a great asset to our collection of newspapers, websites and social media platforms."

"This is what I know, and this is what I enjoy doing," Hibblen said of his new

See HIBBLEN Page 2

HIBBLLEN

Continued from page 1

role. “It is what I see as my strengths. I’m just very happy with what Roby has brought me in to do. I also think it will give Roby more room to work on the business end of it.”

Hibblen for now is especially focused on the newspapers in Hazen and Glenwood, traveling to the latter community every Friday to deliver the printed product and work on stories in the community. All six newspapers are printed at the *Leader* in Jacksonville.

Establishing relationships also is important for both Brock and Hibblen. A significant contact made in the Glenwood community has been Glenwood Regional Chamber of Commerce director Kayla Hartsfield and her husband Ki, who is executive vice president of Southern Bancorp. In addition to being helpful in directing Hibblen to potential story ideas, they also are among six young couples involved in efforts to revitalize the Glenwood downtown area.

Brock also works hard to establish relationships in each community served, as demonstrated by his recent visit to Glenwood to cover a meeting of the city council. “He definitely wants to show people he is fully invested with the papers,” Hibblen said.

Hibblen has been attuned to an array of interesting stories, ranging from a local woman who is opening a shop to sell soap made from goat’s milk to a rather controversial issue involving the potential legalization of alcohol sales in Pike County.

He also takes stories with statewide interest and localizes them for each newspaper market, such as pieces on how third grade reading requirements are being implemented and the effect of banning cell phones for students in public schools.

“The people in Glenwood seem to be very pleased with what we are doing.” Hibblen said of his visits to the community.

Hibblen plans to start spending more time in Hazen and



Kenneth Starr arrived in Little Rock in April 1994 to take over the Whitewater investigation of President Bill Clinton. He was greeted by a mob of local and national reporters, including Hibblen who was then working for radio station KARN. (Photo by AP)

continuing to expand his involvement with the various newspapers, including writing stories and coordinating work with freelancers.

“I’ve really enjoyed being able to do storytelling on an extremely local level,” Hibblen said. “While much of journalism at all levels is about storytelling, I’ve already had instances of meeting people, hearing something about what they’re doing and realizing these were great stories.

“They don’t have to be representative of a bigger issue or something others are experiencing. These can just be stories I know others in the community will enjoy learning about.”

Hibblen also is pleased that the newspapers in both England (Brock’s first weekly newspaper acquisition) and Hazen are still operating out of their historic buildings. “That certainly adds to the sense of history with those newspapers,” he said.

“In this era of so many people getting their news from social media, where anyone can post anything, I think it’s vital for community newspapers to be a reliable source of accurate, verified information,” Hibblen said. “We also shouldn’t be afraid to question those in power.

“It’s important too for newspapers to continue to be a record of what happens in their communities. While online posts can be edited or deleted, websites can disappear from the web and their information no longer be available, I hope newspapers will still be there for anyone interested in the history of this moment. Just as I can go back to bound volumes of our newspapers from 100 years ago, I hope current issues we publish will be preserved in some form exactly as they appear on the page.”

Hibblen started in media at a young age, working at radio stations in Benton and (ironically) England while still a student at North Little Rock Northeast High School. He graduated there in 1990 and began a course of study in radio broadcasting at Arkansas State University in

See HIBBLLEN Page 3



Hibblen in front of the *Miami Herald* sign outside of its headquarters on June 29, 2006 after Knight Ridder sold its newspapers to McClatchy. (Photo by Irina Lallemand)



Hibblen and his daughter Rylee Dewberry-Hibblen at the Texarkana Union Station on Dec. 26, 2025. (Photo by Hibblen)

HIBBLLEN

Continued from page 2

Jonesboro.

While at ASU, Hibblen worked at radio stations in both Paragould and Jonesboro. He started working full-time at one point, keeping up a grueling pace of midnight to 6 a.m. at the station and then beginning classes at 8 a.m. “There is no question I was letting my career get in front of my college work at that point,” he said.

Hibblen learned early in his radio career that news coverage was what he loved. “I just didn’t see myself going too far as a DJ,” he said. With that in mind, he was able to land an internship with C-SPAN in Washington, D.C., coupling his love of news with his desire to experience life in a bigger market.

He worked in Washington for about five months before landing a job at KARN NewsRadio in Little Rock, working for Ron Breeding, the news director he considers his mentor in the industry. “He gave me lots of great advice on how to cover stories,” Hibblen said. It was at KARN that he began an association with CBS Radio News and covered such stories as Whitewater and several state executions.

Hibblen wanted to wind his way back toward Washington and accepted a position at a station in Richmond, Virginia, where he worked nine months. Instead of Washington, his next opportunity came in Miami at WIOD NewsRadio, later working all over the state of Florida for CBS Radio News.

His first direct contact with newspapers came in Miami, where he was hired by the *Miami Herald* in 2003 when the company partnered with the local NPR affiliate to provide local news. “It was there that I learned a lot about the newspaper business,” he said. “There was a huge newsroom there at the time, but it was nearing the end of

the glory days.”

Ownership changes were happening at the *Herald* and Hibblen decided it might be a good time to return to the slower pace of his native state. Breeding was news and program director at Little Rock’s NPR station KUAR-FM and in 2009 hired Hibblen once again as a news reporter. He remained at the station for the next 13 years, serving as news director beginning in 2012. Along the way, he also earned a bachelor’s degree in mass communications from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

In 2023, Arkansas PBS hired Hibblen as its director of public affairs, where he oversaw production of “Arkansas Week” and other news-related programming and streaming.

Hibblen has a daughter, Rylee Dewberry-Hibblen, 14, a student at Arkansas Middle School in Texarkana.

Away from work, he has a major interest in the restoration of the old Rock Island Railroad Depot in the small community of Perry, west of Little Rock. Hibblen first gained interest in the Rock Island when the track ran right by his elementary school in North Little Rock. The line, which ran west to Tucumcari, New Mexico, shut down in 1980.

His interest led to the development of a book, *On the Rock Island Railroad in Arkansas*, published in 2017. Hibblen also is in possession of a large collection of taped interviews of Rock Island employees compiled by a deceased devotee of the subject.

The ongoing depot project perfectly combines Hibblen’s love of both railroads and historic preservation.

Hibblen looks back over his radio career and into his future as a newspaperman and sees both past satisfactions and future challenges in his cherished role as a storyteller.

“I’ve covered a lot of fascinating stories that sometimes stretched on for months that deeply impacted my life,” he said. “One was the international custody fight over Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez, who was five years old when he was found floating off the Florida coast on Thanksgiving Day in 1999. I was working that day for a Miami radio station and was on the air as we learned he was the sole survivor of a trip in which 11 family members, including his mother, drowned. I spent the next six months reporting on efforts by U.S. relatives to keep him here while the boy’s father in Cuba said he wanted him back. There are so many nuances I could go into about that.

“I have also covered long trials that included dramatic revelations. Things like how tobacco companies made concerted efforts to make people addicted to smoking and hide the dangers. Or how mistakes made by an airline maintenance company led to the crash of Valuejet Flight 592 in the Everglades.

“But perhaps nothing has felt more dramatic than the aftermath of major hurricanes and tornadoes with people coming together after traumatic events and in need of help, as well as information, which is when the media can be of most assistance.”

Butler recognized as Employee of the Year for Palmer Newspapers



Pictured, from left, are Harry Porter, the newspaper’s general manager; Nat Lea, president and CEO of WEHCO Media, Inc.; Beth Reed, editor; Butler; Eliza Hussman Gaines, publisher for WEHCO Newspapers, Inc.; Mark Lane, president of WEHCO Newspapers; and Jay Horton, president of digital media for WEHCO. (Photo by The Sentinel-Record/Gwen Kudabeck)

Anna-Claire Butler, marketing and digital engagement director for *The Sentinel-Record* in Hot Springs was named the Walter E. Hussman Employee of the Year for Palmer Newspapers this week. Palmer Newspapers is a subsidiary of WEHCO Media, Inc. comprised of the *Texarkana Gazette*, *The Sentinel-Record*, the *El Dorado News-Times*, the *Camden News* and the *Magnolia Banner News*.

Making the announcement was Publisher Eliza Hussman Gaines, President and CEO of WEHCO Media, Inc. Nat w. Lea IV, WEHCO’s President of Newspaper Division

Mark Lane, WEHCO’s President of Digital Media Jay Horton and *Sentinel-Record* General Manager Harry Porter.

Butler joined the company in 2024 as the newspaper’s first social media coordinator before being promoted to her current role last June. She is a graduate of Hot Springs High School, received her Bachelor of Arts degree in criminal justice and sociology from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville and earned a master’s degree in social work from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 2025.

Skip Rutherford mini-grants awarded

Seven students were awarded mini-grants of \$1,000 thanks to an endowment created in honor of APA Foundation Board Member James L. “Skip” Rutherford III, dean emeritus of the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service. The announcement marks the fifth year of awards after the endowment was established in 2021.

“I’m always so impressed by the hardworking, resilient nature of the individuals we learn about every year,” Rutherford said. “It’s truly a gift to me to have this program established in my name and to get to be a part of this process each year. It’s my hope that these mini-grants wind up being real difference-makers in the lives and educational journeys of these students. Once again the selection committee in this process did a wonderful job. I’m also grateful to all the donors who have helped make this program possible.”

Students receiving the 2026 from across the UA System include:

- Brandi Denley, University of Arkansas – Pulaski Technical College
- Arturo Estrada, North Arkansas College of the University of Arkansas
- Brian Hall, University of Arkansas Grantham
- Jaylin Harris, University of Arkansas Community College at Hope-Texarkana
- Natalie Hernandez, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
- Warren Williams, University of Arkansas at Little Rock
- Sofia Wilson, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

For more information, or to contribute to the fund, visit <https://uasys.edu/news/student-grants-from-endowment-honoring-clinton-school-dean-emeritus-announced-5/> or mail a check to Clinton School at 1200 President Clinton Ave., Little Rock, AR 72201.

Matheson returns to *The Commercial*



court systems, bringing more than 20 years of journalism experience. He worked as a sports journalist for the *Stuttgart Daily Leader*, sports editor at the *Sheridan Headlight*, stringer and sports journalist at the *Cleveland County Herald* and reporter for *Deltaplex News*. He's covered Arkansas State University athletics for the *Rivals.com* network for 15 years and is the publisher of *ArkansasVarsity.com*.

His work has been featured on PBS Sports, on the front page of *Yahoo.com* and highlighted during a CBS Sports Super Bowl Sunday segment.

A graduate of Pine Bluff High School, Matheson served eight years with the U.S. Army before medically retiring in 2006.

"Luke is definitely the right person for this role," said *Commercial* Editor I.C. Murrell. "He has shown a commitment to breaking news, which is necessary in timely informing our readers to help them stay safe and understand their surroundings, but he also came here with a desire to delve into long-form storytelling that helps readers better understand who, what, when, where, why and how. He understands our position as the longest-running media company in Jefferson County and the newspaper of record, and he wants to add to our tradition of excellence. We're happy to have him."

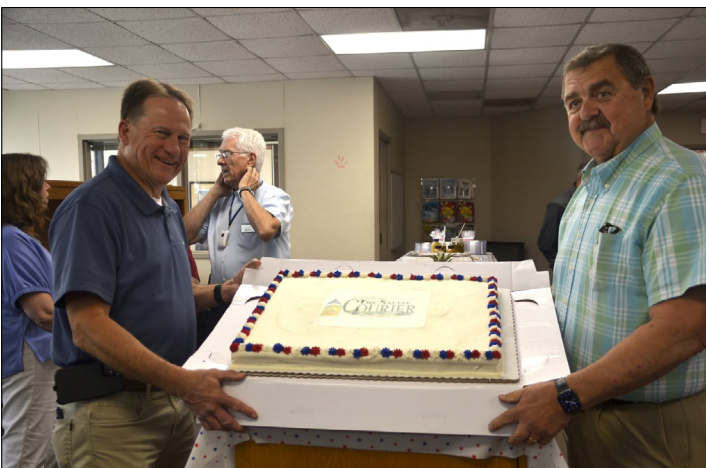
Matheson and his wife Sherri have two sons and a daughter.

Luke Matheson has returned to *The Pine Bluff Commercial* as a senior reporter, rejoining the company this past Monday. He previously worked as a reporter at the newspaper from 2018 to 2019.

"I'm excited about coming back to work for *The Pine Bluff Commercial* for a number of reasons," Matheson said. "But mainly because I have always had a fondness for local newspapers and I truly believe in credible local journalism. I hope to help continue to build a product that the people of Pine Bluff can trust and be proud of."

Matheson will focus on local crime, law enforcement and

Saline Courier celebrates 150 years



The Benton Area Chamber of Commerce hosted a celebration honoring the *Saline Courier* for 150 years of service to the county. The newspaper is a founding member of the Chamber which began in 1951.

"We are grateful for the years of reporting, service and dedication, and we wish you continued success in the years ahead," the Chamber said in a Facebook post.

Community members, business owners and current

and former employees ate cake and mingled during the celebration.

"In the past 150 years, we have reported from dirt roads and city halls, from harvest fields to house fires and from world wars to high school graduations," said the newspaper in a staff report published January 5 about reaching the milestone. "Through it all, one thing has stayed the same: our commitment to telling the stories that matter to Saline County."

Journalist posthumously recognized by Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame for six decade career



The Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame recently announced its 2026 class of inductees. Of the seven women recognized, one woman is posthumously honored for her career in journalism which spanned six decades — Phyllis Louise Dillaha Brandon.

Brandon covered everything from the Little Rock Nine to NATO operations in Belgium and the Clinton presidency from the White House, London and Paris. She was hooked on journalism since her time as editor of the *Tiger* at Little Rock High School (now Central High). She went on to earn a journalism degree from the University of Arkansas in 1957, serving as the associate editor of the university newspaper, the *Arkansas Traveler*. After college, she joined the *Arkansas Democrat*, staying with the company for decades.

She was asked by publisher Walter E. Hussman, Jr. to found the High Profile section of the newspaper in 1986, which is still a staple of the *Democrat-Gazette* today. She created weekly cover profiles for the section for 23 years. Upon leaving the section, editor Griffin Smith signed her farewell card: "Thanks for winning

the newspaper war," referencing the war between rival newspapers the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette* that merged during her tenure.

Brandon was inducted into the University of Arkansas Journalism Hall of Fame in 2007. The same year, she was named the inaugural Woman of the Year by Women and Children First. Outside of journalism, she was heavily engaged in civic life, serving on the Pulaski County Election Commission and as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. She was a member of Rotary Club 99 and a lifelong Episcopalian. She was an original member of the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools in opposition of Governor Faubus' closure of Little Rock's schools during the desegregation crisis. She was president of the Little Rock PTA Council in 1974 when she filed an and won an antitrust lawsuit in the U.S. Supreme Court against the dairy industry for fixing school milk prices. As a student she was inducted into the Mortar Board and was named to Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities and she was a member of the National Honor

Society.

Brandon, born July 31, 1935 in Little Rock died January 11, 2020 in Little Rock at age 84. She's survived by her sons Alex, who is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, and Philip, two grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

Joining Brandon in the Arkansas Women' Hall of Fame class of 2026 is Cynthia East, Marsha Martin, Cynthia Nance, Sharon Allen (posthumously), Dorothy Caldwell (posthumously) and Vada Sheid (posthumously). The ceremony is set to take place August 27 at the North Little Rock Event Center. For more information or to buy tickets, visit arwomenshalloffame.com.

APA member Arkansas Business Publishing Group is a partner in hosting the Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame event.

We want to know about your new hires, retirees and promotions! Send your staffing changes to info@arkansaspress.org to be updated online and included in the *Arkansas Publisher Weekly*.

Arkansas Press Women set 2026 award luncheon for May 30 in Conway



Caroline McCoy



Christian Leus

The Arkansas Press Women has scheduled its annual luncheon recognizing winners of the 2026 Professional Communications Contest for Saturday, May 30 from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. in the Community Room of the Central Baptist College Mabee Student Center in Conway.

The event will feature speakers from the *Oxford American*, a magazine published in Little Rock focused on the South. Speakers include Digital Managing Editor Carline McCoy and Managing Editor Christian Leus.

The award ceremony recognizes entrants who placed first through third or got an honorable mention among the total 338 entries submitted in the contest. Winners will receive a certificate along with the judge's comments. First-place winners will advance to the national competition which is administered by the National Federation of Press Women. Winners of the national contest will be recognized at the 2026 NFPW Conference set for Sept. 24-26 in Ellicott City, Maryland.

Tickets for the luncheon are \$25 per person and are available at the door

by cash, check or credit card. RSVP to Treasurer Richard S. Plotkin at rsplotkin@conwaycorp.net or at

501-920-9429 by May 16. Dietary restrictions should be noted in the RSVP.



**ARKANSAS PRESS
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JUNE 25-27**

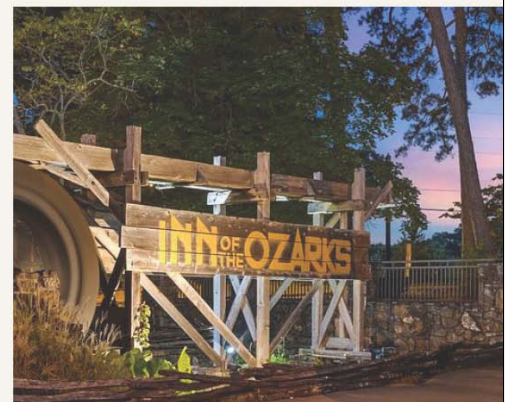
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GUEST COLUMN

Elections alert: Be aware of, prepare for legal minefield



The months-long election season is taxing enough as newsrooms stretch resources to monitor candidates and campaigns in addition to delivering everyday reports. All aspects of election coverage are put under the microscope. Fairness and consistency are paramount in today's supercharged political environment.

Newsrooms should brainstorm now to develop plans. The stronger your organization, the better you'll be in to handle unexpected circumstances that are certain to arise.

Add one more item to your checklist: Be aware of and prepared for the legal minefield. Many questions and challenges – legal and operational – are likely to confront newspapers during election season.

The topic was explored a couple of years ago in a webinar sponsored by the National Newspaper Association Foundation. I co-presented along with Al Cross, former director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky. The points bear repeating as newsrooms navigate another contentious election season.

Use this list as a starting point.

Equal coverage for all?: Newspapers are not governed by any legal requirement in contrast to broadcast media that are regulated by things like the “equal time” rule under federal law. Be prepared, however, for challenges that will come your way in news and advertising. Your

best defense is a strong offense in setting, implementing and explaining policies. Some tips:

Develop a uniform format for reporting candidacies and handling press releases for challengers and incumbents alike.

Develop guidelines for letters to editor submitted by the candidates themselves or key individuals on their committees such as a campaign chair or treasurer. You may want to tighten letters policies.

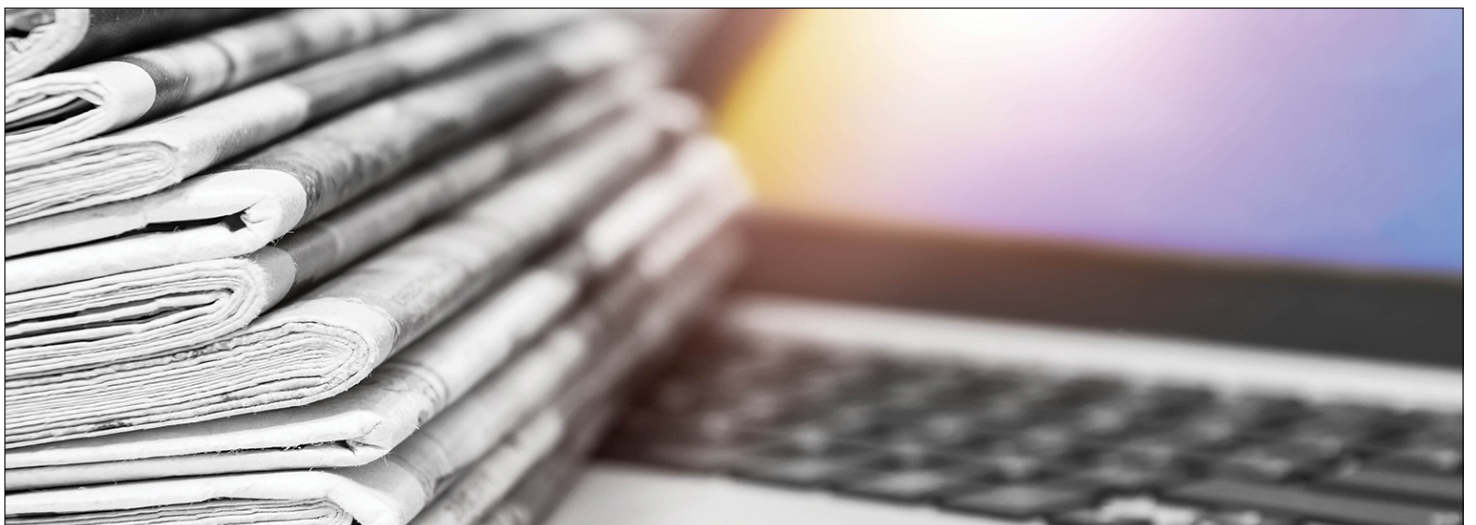
Develop policies for campaigns that pitch purely promotional photos. For example, a U.S. Senate candidate swings through your town to support local candidates. The event lasts less than 15 minutes with a stump speech. If you decide to cover, at minimum quiz candidates on local issues.

Retractions: Remember, you can be legally liable for publishing what someone else says as well as what you report in your own research. It's always wise to consult legal counsel before publishing a retraction. Some tips:

Pay attention to stories. Do your research and verify facts. When in doubt, leave it out.

Pay attention to letters. You cannot possibly confirm every assertion, or fact, in a letter. But be alert to anything that sounds an alarm and causes you to pause on whether it is fair play.

See LEGAL Page 9



LEGAL

Continued from page 8

Pay attention to ads. First and foremost, make certain all election ads carry a disclaimer: “Paid for by ...”

Are public figures fair game?: First Amendment law prohibits libel judgments against newspapers from public figures except when a newspaper publishes information it knew was false or if it disregarded the truth with reckless abandon. Be aware that some key policymakers, including a U.S. Supreme Court justice, are encouraging the landmark case of *Sullivan vs. New York Times* – that gives newspapers this protection – to be re-examined. Some tips:

Is it a public or strictly private issue?

Consider the forum where disparaging comments are made against public officials. Were they made at a public meeting? Does a letter to the editor reference remarks made at a private meeting? The context may affect whether any, or how much, legal attention is given to comments.

Weigh your right to publish something along with your accompanying responsibility of fair play.

Libel insurance: Libel insurance typically includes political coverage but always check with your agent or carrier. Today’s hyper partisan climate demands extra attention to anything that crosses your desk.

Don’t take risks with content that gives you pause.

How would you treat a story if you were the subject?

You’re accused of fake news: Journalists today, more than ever, need tough skin. Some tips:

Do your job responsibly and don’t self-censor because someone doesn’t like what you’re writing.

Ask for specifics when complaints are raised.

Make the distinction between mainstream media and

community newspapers, which often get swept in the broadbrush criticism of all media.

Be aware of threats to personal safety: These circumstances regrettably sometime happen, and the potential is even greater during the heated political season as many newsrooms have witnessed firsthand. Some tips:

Take common-sense steps.

Provide escorts for employees to and from cars at night.

Ask for police coverage of homes, if circumstances warrant.

Don’t risk personal safety posed by in-person coverage of events. Journalists also should have clear understanding with local law enforcement assuring their access to events.

The National Newspaper Association, as well as many state and regional press associations, have hotlines that can provide information to legal questions and to otherwise address issues specific to your jurisdiction.

Ask your peers who may have faced similar challenges and circumstances. Colleagues can provide a wealth of information.

Legal challenges to the dos and don’ts of election coverage are to be expected if you are thorough in coverage. As always, I underscore the value in explaining newspaper operations and policies on a regular basis. The benefits can be especially enormous during election season.

Jim Pumarlo is former editor of the Red Wing (Minn.) Republican Eagle. He writes, speaks and provides training on community newsroom success strategies. He is author of “Journalism Primer: A Guide to Community News Coverage,” “Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Coverage” and “Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in Small-Town Newspapers.” He can be reached and welcomes comments and questions at jim@pumarlo.com.

