

# This rural news start-up has two reporters and an editor with no broadband. Already, it's made an impact.

In western Virginia, veterans of a once-great newspaper are starting something small with big ambitions for serving Appalachian readers.



By [Margaret Sullivan](#)  
Columnist

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Two photographs tell the story of Cardinal News, a start-up news site in a mostly rural section of Virginia.

One shows a lawn chair and small table set up just outside the Fincastle branch of the Botetourt County public library. It's where editor Dwayne Yancey sometimes goes to use the broadband Internet access that he lacks at his nearby home. When he needs to upload big digital files — particularly photographs he wants to publish on the news site — his mobile hotspot can't get the job done.

The other photo is of the ravaged interior of Patty Coleman's home in Hurley, a community close to the Kentucky and West Virginia state lines, where a flood and mudslide destroyed dozens of homes and caused one death last summer. After Yancey sent Megan Schnabel, one of Cardinal's two reporters, to Hurley for several days, along with a photographer, their [in-depth reporting](#) about the devastation brought much-needed attention to Hurley's suffering residents — and may help them get [\\$11 million](#) of state aid.

“Without that story, we wouldn't have had the awareness we needed,” said Will Morefield, a state legislator who has proposed a funding bill that is moving forward; the money is sorely needed after the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied the state's request for financial help to individual homeowners. “It's incredible what they're doing with such a small staff.”

Like many similar start-ups around the nation, Cardinal — named for Virginia’s state bird — is helping to fill the gap left by the shrinking of traditional local news organizations, particularly newspapers. Most of the staff came from the Roanoke Times.

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Yancey made the move after watching the Times scale back its staff in recent years, especially after its sale by longtime owner Landmark Communications in 2013. Now the Times, like many other Virginia newspapers, is in the hands of Lee Enterprises, which has been fighting off a takeover bid by Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund that is perhaps the worst newspaper owner in the country.

Newspapers, of course, are in trouble just about everywhere. More than 1,800 local papers have closed since 2004 as print advertising revenue plummeted and reader habits shifted to online sources. The shuttering of those papers, along with the shrinking of other local news sources, is having profound negative effects on society.

“It was depressing,” Yancey said. “The job I had was great, but all around me, things were collapsing. It was like living in a grand old mansion with the roof falling in.”

Yancey was the paper’s editorial page editor; his section was a one-man operation. Cardinal’s executive director and chief development officer, Luanne Rife, was a longtime health reporter there. Cardinal’s board of directors includes a former Roanoke Times publisher, Debbie Meade. The paper’s former chief financial officer, Tonya Hart, has helped with finance and budget matters.

“It was basically like getting the band back together,” Yancey told me last week. They have also been joined by Markus Schmidt, the Cardinal’s second reporter, who is a veteran of the state politics beat at the Richmond Times-Dispatch. He remains based in Richmond, focused on reporting government news of particular interest to Cardinal’s part of the state.

Rife told me she took a buyout from the Roanoke paper after she was told she would no longer be able to do many in-depth stories on the health beat, even in the midst of a pandemic.

“I had always enjoyed my work, but I was burned out,” she told me. “I would go to my keyboard in the morning and start to feel tears rolling down my face.” When a foundation approached her about a reporting project it wanted to fund, it lit a spark of inspiration for her — and she started exploring whether she could start her own project, one that would be more ambitious and permanent.

Cardinal’s territory extends far beyond the Roanoke metro area; its mission is to cover the huge swath of the state described as “Southwest and Southside Virginia,” or what Yancey calls “Cumberland County to the Cumberland Gap.”

Much of it is considered part of Appalachia — “an easy part of the state to stereotype,” Yancey noted. Cardinal’s mission includes providing a more nuanced picture of the region to the rest of the state.

With no paywall, the site’s funding comes from foundations, businesses and individual donors; it has applied for nonprofit status.

Rife says she’s heartened by the way those contributions have grown from a handful when the site launched last September to more than 700. A new grant will allow Cardinal to add a reporter soon in Danville, along the North Carolina border; Rife also would like to hire an education reporter and one dedicated to health coverage.

“We’ve been amazed, overwhelmed and humbled by the support,” Rife told me. The other day, she picked up the mail to find five checks — one for \$25, another for \$10,000. Cardinal lists its donors on the site and discloses in stories if a person or organization it writes about is a significant contributor.

In Cardinal’s first big story about the devastation in Hurley, Schnabel describes Coleman’s house: “A blue tarp partially draped the door frame where the mud had rushed in. The floor had caved in, and mold and mildew covered the walls.”

The house was beyond repair. Coleman didn’t have flood insurance; she did have a homeowner’s policy, but the insurer, according to the story, had given her the crushing news that nothing would be covered.

Now there may be help on the way after all. And a tiny news start-up with big ambitions will have made a difference.



