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STUDY GUIDE

THE LAST AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

BY KEN TINGLEY



SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

"The Last American Newspaper" explores the changing landscape of journalism through the lived experiences of longtime editor Ken Tingley. This guide provides teachers with the context, themes, and instructional tools needed to help students understand the play's commentary on truth, community, and the future of local news.

The background information in this packet is drawn from the dramaturg's study guide, with added teaching notes, learning objectives, and discussion pathways.

About the Playwright
Ken Tingley is a longtime journalist and former editor of The Post-Star, a local newspaper in Glens Falls, New York. Over his decades in journalism, he became known for his commitment to ethical reporting, community engagement, and the belief that local news is essential to democracy.

His memoir, "The Last American Newspaper," reflects on his years in the newsroom during a period of massive upheaval in the industry. The play adapts this memoir for the stage, transforming lived experience into dramatic storytelling.

Why Tingley's Background Matters

- He lived through the decline of local newspapers.
- His leadership embodied the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics.
- His writing blends factual reporting with personal reflection.
- The play is both a love letter to journalism and a warning about its fragility.

CENTRAL THEMES IN THE PLAY

The Value of Local Journalism
The play argues that local newspapers are essential to community identity and accountability.

Ethical Decision Making
Characters must weigh truth, harm, privacy, and public interest.

The Changing Media Landscape
Digital disruption and declining revenue threaten the survival of local news.

Memory and Storytelling
The play examines how personal experience becomes narrative and how truth is shaped in the process.



SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT:

WHAT IS JOURNALISTIC INTEGRITY?

by Neena Arndt

"Newspapers exist to provide the citizenry with truth. Sometimes the truth can have a moral point. Sometimes the truth is painful. Sometimes the truth is banal. But it has to be true." — Pete Hamill (1935-2020), columnist and editor for the New York Post and New York Daily News

Journalists — whether they're working in print, audio, or video formats — don't just write or say whatever they're feeling. As part of their training, they learn to use words very carefully. The Society of Professional Journalists lays out a few core tenets in their Code of Ethics:

1. **Seek Truth and Report It**
   "Journalists must take responsibility for the accuracy of their work." They need to check facts, provide context, attribute facts, and ensure that their personal biases don't affect their work.
2. **Minimize Harm**
   Journalists must "balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort." They must consider how a story and its permanence (online or in newspaper records) could affect someone, especially private citizens who are not seeking fame.
3. **Act Independently**
   Journalists must "avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived." They should not accept gifts or give favored treatment to advertisers.
4. **Be Accountable and Transparent**
   Journalists should "explain ethical choices and processes to audiences." They should acknowledge mistakes quickly and prominently.

All of this was easier to do when newspapers relied more on subscribers who paid a monthly or yearly fee, or non-subscribers who bought single copies. Prior to the internet becoming a primary mode of communication (which happened in the '90s and '00s), many newspapers relied on this model. After media went digital and people had access to many online sources of news, many people were no longer willing to pay for their news. So, the media has had to rely on advertisers, who pay a set fees to advertise in papers and on websites. Now, the advertisers are stakeholders — and they might try to influence what the media reports.



Photo credit: Daniel Blume

LOCAL VERSUS CORPORATE MEDIA:

WHATS THE DIFFERNCE

Local media focuses on local news. Changes in a town's leadership, or events that occur in a town or region, like a new school being built or a crime that occurred. Communities often trust their local news outlets, and many may know the reporters involved. It relies on local subscribers and advertisers. Local media may try to put a local spin on national events, such as the 1999 Columbine High School shooting.

Corporate media, usually owned by large conglomerates, focuses on national news. Their news stories are often larger in scale (e.g., what the president of the United States is doing, versus what the mayor of a small town is doing). If people only read these news outlets, they may not know what's going on in their own town.

WINNING BIG: _____

WHAT IS A PULITZER PRIZE?

"You have the feeling that if you get a Pulitzer, you're somehow set for life."- John Sanford, winner of the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing

- The Pulitzer ("PULL-itz-er") Prize is a prestigious award established in 1917 by newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer.
- The competition includes 23 categories, including 14 categories in journalism, and the rest in drama, books, and music.
- Winners receive a certificate and a $15,000 cash prize. Winners in the Public Service category receive a gold medal.
- The competition is administered by Columbia University in New York City.



Both sides of the gold Pulitzer Prize for Public Service Medal, which also serves as a symbol of the Pulitzer Prizes in general.

TRUTH VERSUS FICTION:

WHERE DOES "THE LAST AMERICAN NEWSPAPER" FIT IN?

"The Last American Newspaper" is a play written by Ken Tingley. It is based on a memoir, also written by Ken Tingley.

- A memoir is a non-fiction book that tells part of the story of a person's life from their perspective. Although it is not fictional, it is subjective and contains their interpretations of events.
- A play can be original material, or it can draw on a variety of sources, like books, movies, or even songs. In this case, Ken Tingley adapted his memoir for the stage, which means creating scenes and dialogue. Since the play is about his lived experience, it is truthful — but since he probably can't remember every word of every conversation in his life, it's not a word-for-word documentation of what happened.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you read the news online or in a newspaper? Do you use national sources like CNN or more local sources? Digital newspapers like the New York Times or a local newspaper? How do you know that the information you're getting is true?

2. Should citizens have to pay for access to the news? If citizens don't individually pay, how will the media organization's costs (e.g. reporters' salaries) be covered?

3. Are there any reasons why print newspapers should still exist? Or do you think they shouldn't be used much going forward, just like people rarely use horses and carriages to get around?

4. If a journalist doesn't tell the truth, what are the possible consequences? For them, or for their readers/viewers?

5. Why is it important to know what's going on in your community?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Ethics in Action/Writing Prompts
Students analyze a scenario from the play and decide whether the newspaper should publish it, citing SPJ principles.

Local News Audit
Students research what local news sources exist in their community and what stories are missing.

Memoir vs. Scene
Students compare a moment from the play to how it might appear in memoir form.

Front Page Design
Students create a mock front page for the newspaper in the play.

Writing Prompts

- Write an editorial arguing for the importance of local journalism.
- Compare the SPJ Code of Ethics to a moment in the play.
- Reflect on a time when you encountered misinformation.
- Write a scene from your own life as if it were a memoir — then rewrite it as a play.

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