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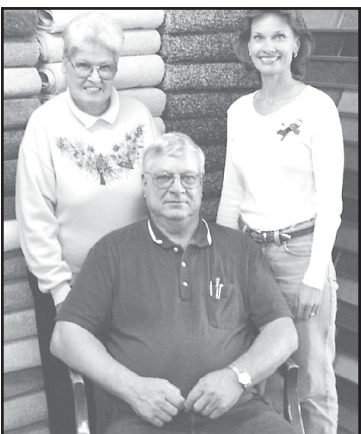
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Small daily newspapers load up on foreign news

By Seth Sutel
AP Business Writer

Something unusual came up at the annual meeting of Kansas newspaper editors last month: Foreign news.

The annual meeting is held the same morning as the Kansas State-University of Kansas football game to ensure maximum turnout, and it usually deals with issues close to home like circulation and state affairs.

But for the first time in as long as the organizer can remember, the main topic was news from abroad — how to get more of it into the paper, how to make it relevant to readers, how to explain complex issues like Islamic fundamentalism.

Like small and medium-sized newspapers across the nation, Kansas dailies are bulking up on foreign news in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the conflict in Afghanistan. But already concerns are emerging that reader interest is fading, possibly portending resumption of a long-term decline in usage of foreign news by smaller papers.

Jeff Burkhead, executive director of the Kansas Press Association who oversaw the Oct. 27 meeting, said the surge of interest in his state couldn't be more dramatic.

"Two months ago, readers in small-town Kansas would not have had any interest in Afghanistan," Burkhead said in a telephone interview. Now, he said, "there's more interest among our readers in the big world out there."

The change is especially heartening for Edward Seaton, editor in chief of The Manhattan Mercury, a daily based in the same town as Kansas State, where the editors meeting was held.

A former Fulbright scholar in Ecuador, Seaton has traveled widely and is a longtime advocate of getting foreign news into small newspapers such as his own, which has a circulation of about 10,000.

But Seaton, a former president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, doubts the heightened interest in foreign affairs will hold up.

"My own sense is that the interest won't go away, but it may not stay as keen as it is now," Seaton said. "I don't think we'll go back to where we were, with some smaller newspaper newspapers running no foreign news at all."

While industrywide figures documenting the increase in foreign news since Sept. 11 aren't available, examples of the trend are plenty. William C. Marcil, the publisher of the Forum in Fargo, N.D., said he went from carrying 75 percent local news and 25 percent foreign before the attacks to just the opposite afterward.

Now, about half of his paper is filled with foreign news, especially since there are many local angles with Air

Force bases nearby in Minot and Grand Forks. But eventually, he says, "people will turn it off."

Bob Ashley, editor of the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer in western Kentucky, said he's cutting back on foreign news now because his readers are "losing some of the adrenaline of the first few weeks."

"I've sensed a sameness to the story and it's starting to feel farther away," he said. "A lot of folks are back to being about as busy as they can be, trying to make a living, getting kids to football practice and mowing the lawn."

Ashley said he didn't see readers taking up interest in other foreign topics. If anything, the war story squeezed out other important news from overseas, such as a breakthrough in Northern Ireland politics and a deepening financial crisis in Argentina.

Local resident David Searles, a retired Peace Corps executive who frequently writes letters to the editor, says the newspaper is striking the right tone by moving stories closer to home.

"The outside world is a long way from Owensboro, and some here would say that is good," Searles said. "I can't recall anyone ever complaining that the local newspaper didn't cover stories outside of western Kentucky sufficiently."

The waning use of foreign news has been a longtime concern in the industry. By sheer coincidence, The University of Missouri in Columbia had planned a conference on "Making International News a Good Local Story" for Sept. 13 and 14. Professor Stuart Loory, one of the organizers, has rescheduled the meeting for February, saying it's needed just as badly now.

"Many more people than before September 10th are interested in foreign news now, but experience shows that this effect wears off," Loory said. "If it should happen that American troops are taken out, then that part of the world will disappear from the screen again, just like Vietnam did."

In a survey by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press in the two weeks just before the terrorist attacks, 29 percent of respondents said the news media paid "not enough" attention to foreign news, compared with 17 percent asked the same question in September 1997.

Nonetheless, editors of smaller newspapers say they still face a battle in making stories from overseas relevant to their readers' daily lives.

"This has made us all more aware of the importance of international news," said Joe Distelheim, editor of The Huntsville (Ala.) Times. "One hopes that will have some long-term effect, but who knows how long it will last or whether it will get burned into our brains."

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