

# STORM LAKE

A NEWSPAPER. A FAMILY. A COMMUNITY.



## General Guide

News  
Literacy  
Project



Supported by Microsoft



# Background Information

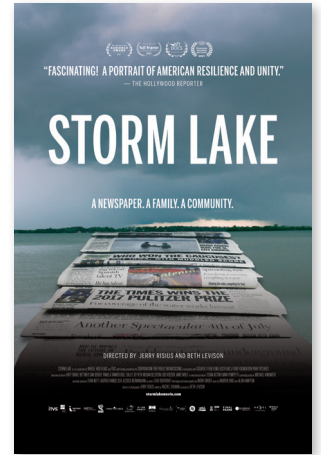
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## About the film

Newspapers are disappearing at an alarming rate, and more Americans are living in news deserts, or communities [“with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level.”](#)

[More than one in four newspapers shut down between 2004 and 2020.](#) At the same time, public opinion polls show a [lack of awareness](#) among Americans surrounding this trend and its wide-ranging effects.

The story of [The Storm Lake Times](#), a twice-weekly family-owned newspaper in rural Iowa, brings the struggles of sustaining local journalism to life and shows what these newsrooms mean to communities and American democracy overall.



## About this guide

This guide serves as a companion for adult learners and community members viewing the PBS documentary *Storm Lake*. The guide has three main components: **pre-viewing, during viewing and post-viewing activities**. The pre-viewing activities use one or more essential questions to focus on viewers' engagement with news and their opinions about its relationship to their community and to American democracy. The during viewing portion includes discussion questions that can be completed whole or in-part, individually, or in small groups. The post-viewing activities return to the essential questions raised prior to viewing and seek to extend engagement with local journalism.



## Background Information on News Deserts

Viewers may want to further explore the concept of news deserts and the effect on communities when local news is lost. Additional background information can be found here:

- [“The Expanding News Desert”](#) (UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media)
- [“When the Student Newspaper Is the Only Daily Paper in Town”](#) (Dan Levin, The New York Times)
- [“The Lost Local News Issue”](#) (The Washington Post Magazine)

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The general guide and educational screenings of *Storm Lake* are made possible with support from Microsoft.

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# Pre-Viewing

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- Consider the following essential questions before viewing *Storm Lake*. These questions could be considered and kept in mind individually or discussed briefly prior to watching the film. Take note of how your answers hold up or change as you go through the documentary.
  - What is news?
  - What role does news play in your family members' lives? In your community?
  - Is news important in a democracy? Why or why not?
- Consider how your household currently engages with news in daily life. This might include print news, television or radio. Which of the following sources does your household use to get news? Add a percentage that reflects the role of each source in your household news diet (such as 30%). Provide a more specific name for each source (such as Chicago Tribune, local NBC News, Facebook).

<b>TV</b>	<b>Print</b>	<b>Radio</b>	<b>Social Media</b>
<b>LOCAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>LOCAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>LOCAL</b> Percent: Name:	Percent: Name:
<b>REGIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>REGIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>REGIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	
<b>NATIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>NATIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	<b>NATIONAL</b> Percent: Name:	

Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

- In general, how often do members of your household read, watch or listen to news? (circle one)

| Daily

| Weekly

| Less than Weekly

- Approximately what percentage of news consumption in your household is deliberate, meaning you are fully focused on the news?

\_\_\_\_\_ %

- b. Approximately what percentage of your news consumption is less deliberate, when maybe the TV is on while you do something else, or news appears on your feed while you scroll through social media? \_\_\_\_\_ %
4. How do you evaluate news? In other words, how do you decide what pieces of journalism are credible and high quality? Do you think the local news organizations in your community do a good job? Why or why not?
5. What news coverage is important to you? What topics do you think receive too much coverage? What topics don't receive enough? Do others in your family agree with you?
6. Would you or have you engaged with the news beyond reading, watching and/or listening? For example, would or have you:
- g. Discussed the news (in general or specific coverage) with family and/or friends? Explain.
  - h. Reacted/responded to a news story? How?
  - i. Shared a news report on social media?
  - j. Used what you learned about current events and issues from news coverage in a comment or reply on social media?
  - k. Contacted a news organization to suggest an event or issue to be covered? Explain.
  - l. Written or otherwise produced a news story? Explain.

# During Viewing Activities

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The following discussion questions are broken into three sets and include timestamps that correspond to the film. They can be answered in part or in full, individually or as part of a wider group discussion.

## Part 1 – Discussion Questions (00:00:00 - 00:28:22)

1. (3:30) Is profit a motivation for the family? Why or why not?
  
2. (4:30) Art Cullen: *"A pretty good rule is that an Iowa town will be about as strong as its newspaper and its banks. And without strong local journalism to tell a community's story, the fabric of the place becomes frayed."*
  - a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
  - c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
  
3. (9:15) Describe the processes you see in the newsroom. What do you notice about the newsgathering process and how stories are selected and finalized?
  
4. Describe the difference between the articles Art Cullen writes and the articles Tom Cullen writes.
  
5. (12:00) Art Cullen: *"We did that presidential forum, but that's not the reason we get up in the morning. Most people in Storm Lake care a lot more about whether garbage is getting picked up than whether Elizabeth Warren is in town."*
  - a. Do you agree with this statement? What impact, if any, could visits by presidential candidates have on this or any community?

- b. How well do your local news organizations serve the community's information needs? Are they focused on stories that matter to people at a local level?
6. (12:33) How has the town of Storm Lake changed in Art's lifetime so far? Why does he call it a "microcosm" of the nation?
7. (12:54) Art Cullen: *"It's important to know who had a baby and who died in a community of 10 to 15,000 people...And it's important to know what the city council is up to, so I think it is important to have real news...But the question is, how long does a community support journalism?"*
- a. How would you rate the level of support for local journalism in your own community? How do you measure this support? Do family and friends follow specific media or discuss and share it?
8. Should communities worry about the impacts of a news desert? Why or why not?
9. (15:19) Art Cullen: *"If you don't have readers, you got nothing. But now people want to get their news for free, because apparently looking at their breakfast on Facebook is all the information they need to live as an informed voter in America, and that's not how you sustain a democracy, you know. You need people who can talk about facts and deal in facts, and that Iowa's getting warmer and wetter, through the decades, those are facts. That's what we're here for, and people are saying, 'Oh well, that's not worth a dollar.'"*
- a. Do you agree that people today expect to get news for free? What portion of your friends and family rely on their social media feed(s) to stay informed? What kind of return on investment do people who subscribe to local news get versus relying on social media?
10. If watching with others, share one thought that has struck you about the first part of the film. Has your view of news and its role in the community changed at all?

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## Part 2 – Discussion Questions (00:28:22 - 00:51:03)

1. (30:11) What does the presence of a reporter signal to those in powerful positions? How does this fit into the “watchdog role” newspapers play in our democracy?
  
2. (32:51) Tom Cullen discussing the family business: *“The prospect of the newspaper not being around terrifies me, because not only is it a newspaper, which is, in my opinion, the most important pillar of the community; it’s the family.”*
  - a. If communities are a kind of family, what role does local news play in it? Does this role remain static or can it evolve as events change?
  
3. (38:33) Why do you think the newspaper includes coverage like the pork producer royalty’s visit to the classroom (41:10) and the inclusion of recipes? How does this variety of coverage fit the newspaper’s role in the community?
  
4. (43:19) Why is it important to have ads for downtown businesses in the paper?
  
5. (44:14) John Cullen: *“The best stories in the world aren’t any good if you don’t get them out on the street so people can read them.”*
  - a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
  - c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
  
6. (44:29) What do readers say about the paper?

7. Does this reader feedback show the impact of the paper's presence in the community? How?
  
8. (45:33) Lorena Lopez, the editor of La Prensa, visits The Storm Lake Times and talks about the two papers collaborating. How would this benefit the community?
  
9. (46:37) Lorena Lopez, La Prensa editor discussing collaboration: "*Fifteen, 20 years ago, we probably wouldn't be talking right now.*"
  - a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
  - c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
  
10. (48:58) Tom Cullen suggests the newspaper start a podcast. What is Art's response? Do you think he should be more open to this idea? Why or why not?
  
11. (50:10) What is the significance of Art's holiday letter? Why do you think he writes them each year?



## Part 3 – Discussion Questions (00:51:03 - 1:25:00)

1. (53:22) Is the introduction to the dual language program meeting at the school a newsworthy event? Why or why not? To what larger issues might it connect? How might this story relate to the role the newspaper plays in the community?
  
2. (57:42) What specific role does The Storm Lake Times play in news coverage of the presidential election?
  
3. (1:01:33) Describe Tom Cullen's coverage of the caucus at the cafe. Why is it important that the newspaper report on this news?
  
4. (1:04:52) Art, Tom and Dolores Cullen spend a good deal of time in the community and in the newsroom waiting for news about the caucuses and checking facts and details. Explain what role their coverage plays in the community and how it extends beyond the community.
  
5. How does the newsgathering followed by The Storm Lake Times differ from information shared by other sources, such as a post on social media by a friend or neighbor or information shared by a political candidate? What does the newspaper do that sets it apart as an information source? Use this "[Standards of Journalism](#)" infographic to help form your answer.



6. (1:12:43) What impact does COVID-19 have on the newspaper's finances?
  
7. (1:14:33) Why is the paper's reporting during the pandemic important, particularly as it relates to the Tyson plant and the lack of testing for the workers who are primarily undocumented immigrants? If The Storm Lake Times didn't advocate for these workers and expose this issue, do you think it would have still come to light? Why or why not?
  
8. (1:18:11) Storm Lake becomes the "hottest spot" for COVID-19 cases in Iowa and one of the top 10 spots in the country. The newspaper is trying to report accurate numbers, but it's hard to get confirmed figures. Describe this coverage and how it evolves. How does this relate to the role the newspaper plays in the community overall?
  
9. (1:19:51) Art Cullen: *"Tyranny prevails whenever the press is not free. Stand guard."*
  - a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
  - c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
  
10. (1:20:19) Art Cullen: *"Nobody gives us license. We draw it from the Constitution... Readers decide our future. Not any branch of government."*
  - a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?

- c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
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11. (1:21:21) Art Cullen: *"The pay is lousy and the hours can be terrible, but you can change the world through journalism. That's the only good reason to get into this trade."*
- a. In your own words, what point is being made in this quote?
  
  - b. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
  - c. How does this quote fit into your definition of news and its role in the community?
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12. (1:21:50) What was the result of the GoFundMe campaign? What else has The Storm Lake Times done to survive?
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13. (1:22:15) At the time of this film, how many Americans live in "news deserts"?

# Post-Viewing

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After viewing the documentary and answering discussion questions, return to the [essential questions](#) and consider the following:

- How has this documentary changed your views on what news is?
- How has your view on the importance of engaging with news changed?
- How has your view of evaluating news changed?
- Has the film changed your opinion of local newspapers and their importance to communities? What about their importance to democracy? If so, in what ways?

## Action Plan Extensions

Consider one or more of these activities as an opportunity to extend your engagement with news.

- News Log: Commit to reading/watching/listening to a news source for a week and keeping a [log](#). Next, evaluate the source to determine what role it plays in your community, the quality of the news coverage and what topics you would like covered more. This activity can link to NLP lessons "[Practicing Quality Journalism](#)" and "[Understanding Bias](#)."
  - Interview a family member or friend about their news habits. Compare their responses to your own. Why might they be similar? Different?
  - Engage directly with local news by following local news organizations on social media or writing a letter or email to an editor with a story idea. Where can you find this contact info? What sorts of stories would you like to see covered? This activity can link to NLP lessons "[What is News?](#)" and "[Be the Editor](#)."
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# News Log

## Post-Viewing Activity

**Overview:** In this activity, you will commit to reading/watching/listening to a news source for a week and keeping a log of what you read/view/listen to. In Part 1, you will gather this news data. In Part 2, you will evaluate how this source covers your community, what stories you found worthwhile and how the news source can improve/increase its readership.

### Part 1

Follow a local news source for a week and note specific articles/stories that you read, what you learned and what questions you have.

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Name of News Source:

Date	Stories I followed	What I learned	Questions I have


## Part 2 Evaluate Your Source

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1. What role does this news source play in your community?
2. Do you feel that your community was covered accurately and fully by this source during this time period? Why or why not?
3. What stories did you connect with? Why?
4. Were any stories inaccurate or misleading in your opinion? Why? How do you know?
5. What stories do you think should be covered more?
6. What ideas do you have that could help the newspaper increase its readership in your community?