

**Rotary**  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

July 26, 2022

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## The Charlotte Ledger – local news you can use.

by **Rick Handford**

**Colleen Brannan** introduced Tony Mecia, the founder and executive editor of The Charlotte Ledger.

He founded the Ledger in 2019, after 25 years in the news business, the last ten of which were spent as a writer and editor for The Charlotte Observer.

Tony started his talk by saying that his purpose today was to talk to us about the future of local news, and by introducing the two members of his staff who were visitors at the meeting, Cristina Bolling, Managing Editor with the company since 2020, and Lindsey Banks, a recent addition as a reporter.

For the last 15 years or so, local news coverage has been in decline, and many believe that this trend will continue and that sources of reliable local news will simply disappear. He rejects this pessimism, and points to the rise of local news providers such as The Charlotte Ledger that are beginning to spring up around the country to replace the ones that have failed. Tony believes that reliable local news is essential to the future of our republic, and that the lack of such has contributed to people disengaging from their communities and from the political process. The lack of reliable sources of information also contributes to the spread of disinformation, as people have no way to distinguish between truth and fiction.

A study from UNC Chapel Hill shows that between 2004 and 2020 the country lost about 25% of its newspapers, many in rural areas, and the

papers that remain are shells of their former selves. In the case of The Charlotte Observer, circulation has gone from about 250 thousand down to 50-60 thousand, with perhaps 20 thousand or so digital subscribers. Not coincidentally, the newsroom staff, which had been around 250, is down to about 50 people.

This happened largely over the last ten years, as technology and the internet allowed advertisers to employ targeted ads aimed at specific individuals for much less than the cost of running ads in newspapers, which could not target and were thus less effective. The internet also provided access to sources of information other than the local print media. The more than 50% drop in advertising revenue resulted in the staff reductions and corresponding reductions in the ability to effectively gather and report local news. There are “dozens and dozens” fewer reporters on the streets of Charlotte than there were ten years ago.

In response, people all around the country are experimenting with new business models, methods, and formats for gathering and presenting the news. He cited a new non-profit digital news operation in Baltimore, funded by the Chairman of the Quality Inn and Comfort Inn brands, that has hired forty new reporters and gone into competition with the legacy newspaper; Memphis, where business leaders raised seven million dollars and hired a dozen or so reporters to provide news there; and Colorado, where a couple of blockchain millionaires opened up a news operation in that state. These are just a few of the new outlets opening up around the country.

The Ledger is a member of an organization called the Local Independent Online News (LIONs) that is working with about 400 upstart media sources across the country, helping them to become sustainable businesses providing reliable local news. Revenue sources for these businesses include grants, sponsorships and advertising, and subscription/membership revenues.

When Tony was starting his business, the fundamental question was whether or not people would be willing to pay for the product. He discovered that while many people are not, some people are. Currently, The Charlotte Ledger has about 14,000 subscribers, and some 3,000 of these are paid. Free subscribers have access to about half of the available content, and paid subscribers have access to all. The number of paid subscribers is steadily increasing, as people find that for a reasonable price, they can get smart, responsible, interesting news delivered to their inbox. Paid subscriptions provide about 85% of their revenue, which allows them to provide news that the subscribers want instead of the click-bait that advertisers demand. For information about subscribing, go to [cltledger.com](http://cltledger.com).

They are able to provide thorough reporting on complex subjects, such as the new 2040 development plan, the transit authority, park funding, and many others. They provide detailed on-the-ground reporting as opposed to simply repackaging press releases.

Interestingly, technology not only led to the downfall of the legacy newspapers, but has also provided the means for new sources of information to be created and expanded. The Charlotte Ledger is one of many such in the Charlotte market, some of which he briefly discussed. We are very fortunate to have the options that we do—more than most places in the country. He is not sure where the industry will go, but it looks like the Ledger will be a significant part of it.

He closed by answering questions from the audience. I highly recommend that you check out the recording of Tony's entire talk, which was both entertaining and insightful.

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/733741345>  
The speaker's presentation begins at 27:05 minutes.