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MEDIA

Local news reporting outsourced to India

A news site hires two to cover Pasadena from afar. That helps a shoestring budget go further.

By Alex Pham

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When is local journalism not really local? When it's about Pasadena and written by someone in India.

James Macpherson, editor and publisher of the Pasadena Now website, hired two reporters last weekend to cover the Pasadena City Council. One lives in Mumbai and will be paid \$12,000 a year. The other will work in Bangalore for \$7,200.

The council broadcasts its meetings on the Web. From nearly 9,000 miles away, the outsourced journalists plan to watch, then write their stories while their boss sleeps — India is 12.5 hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time.

"A lot of the routine stuff we do can be done by really talented people in another time zone at much lower wages," said Macpherson, 51, who used to run a clothing business with manufacturing help from Vietnam and India.

So, on the Indian version of Craigslist, he posted an ad that said in part, "We do not believe that geographic distance between California and India will present unsurmountable problems, and that working together with you will result in your development of a keen working knowledge of this city's affairs."

Dozens replied. One of the two chosen had attended the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Rob Gunnison, the director of school affairs there, is dismayed. "It just seems so fundamental to journalism to *be there*," Gunnison said. "I still can't quite believe it's not a hoax."

It's not. Macpherson plans to run his first batch of outsourced stories Tuesday. The Pasadena native runs the website, which he said gets 45,000 visitors a month, on a shoestring budget from his condo with help from his wife, a data entry worker and two interns.

Macpherson plans to hire half a dozen more Indian reporters. He'll add some local flavor by doing interviews, then e-mailing the recordings to India. "When you instant-message someone in Mumbai, it's like looking over her shoulder," he said.

Larry Wilson, editor of the 30,000-circulation Pasadena Star-News newspaper, scoffed.

"To pretend you can get the feel and the culture of a town as complicated and interesting as Pasadena by e-mailing and doing things over the Internet is nutty," he said.

Ann Erdman, spokeswoman for the city of Pasadena, thinks the approach is a little odd. But "as long as they get their facts correct, I'm a happy camper," she said.

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