

WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP: THE EVOLUTION OF THE GAZETTE IN THE COVID ERA

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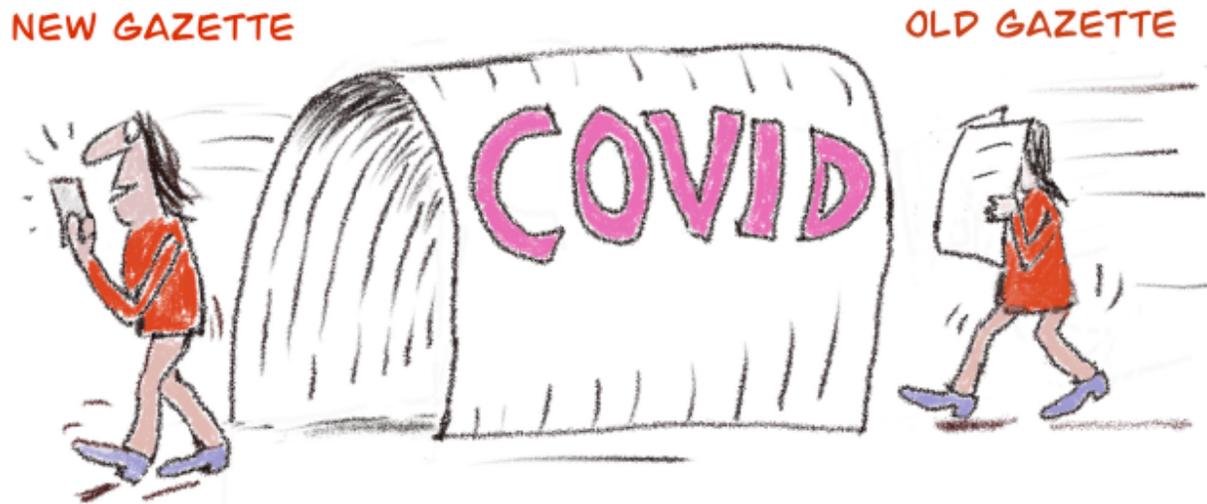


ILLUSTRATION BY ROD MORRISON

By Frank Haberle

The Park Slope Food Coop, much like Brooklyn and the world around it, has changed and adapted in multiple ways to survive the challenges of the COVID pandemic. In the same way, one of the Coop's chief sources of member communication, the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, has been transformed. Pre-pandemic, the *Linewaiters' Gazette* was a print biweekly available on the shopping floor to all members to leaf through while waiting in line—hence the name—and relayed important information about the Coop and features about its members. In the first months of the crisis, the *Gazette* team had to decide if it could continue producing the paper—and if so, how?

After two years and several manifestations, the *Gazette* has become a digital newspaper—and will remain so going forward. While the decision to move to digital was relatively easy, the process of re-invention took months. For the Coordinating Editors, the Development Art Directors, and Development Editors, there were multiple considera-

tions from an editorial, artistic, and technical perspective regarding how this new *Gazette* could best serve the needs and interests of the Coop community.

The *Gazette's* transformation was the result of thousands of work hours by dedicated staff editors, reporters, artists, and technicians. Recently, we asked several key *Gazette* staff about their role and experience during the digitization process, and their take on the change and its results.

What do you think of the change to digital, and what was your role in the decision?

"It's a change that was overdue," said Carey Meyers, a Coop member since 1997 and past reporter who became one of three Coordinating Editors in 2019. "Digital is more eco-friendly, it's in color, and it offers so much more flexibility in how we share news and stories about the Coop, the PSFC community, and issues that affect us and the food we eat. In fact when I first talked with Nancy [Rosenberg, Coordinating Editor] in 2019 about joining her as a coordinating editor, I agreed to do it with the understanding that we'd develop a process to create a digital *Gazette*."

"Carey, Tom Moore, and I talked about going digital from the get-go," said Rosenberg, a Coop member since 1994. "We wanted a more nimble paper and the opportunity to remake the *Gazette*, which probably had not been substantially reimaged since it was founded in the 1970s. In its last iteration, it contained three separate calendars, lots of boiler-plate and various features that used up ink, but didn't create a dynamic reading experience. Now that I know how much work digitization requires, I'm guessing it would not have happened without the pandemic."

"I supported the digital evolution of the *Gazette* wholeheartedly right from the start," said Eva Schicker, a Development Art Director for the *Gazette* since 2000. "My role was supportive. Nancy, Matt [Landfield], and Midori [Nakamura] were hosting early Zoom talks about the digital implementation. After these Zoom meetings, I talked to all our Team 4 illustrators and photographers and asked them to consider getting on

board, and they all did. As a Development Art Director, I immediately loved that we could go to full color on the illustrations and photographs.”

During the first six months of the pandemic, Rosenberg added, “we ran on fumes. By the early fall of 2020, people were generally exhausted about everything, and it became hard to keep the *Gazette* going when no one else at the Coop was required to work. Nonetheless, that first iteration was not a wasted effort. That was the period when [Co-Coordinating Editors] Matthew Landfield, Carey, and I basically laid out the foundations for the digital *Gazette*. We took a six-month break before starting once again to figure out how the digital paper could really succeed. Matt guided us toward WordPress as the format that would work best for the most people, he and Midori Nakamura chose the template, and then Matt dove deeply into coding. He had some help along the way, but he was the prime creator. So many unpaid hours went into the workflow creation.”

“Matt Landfield was the key to digitization,” Nancy continued. “Matt was actually sick with COVID when he designed the first iteration of the digital *Gazette*. I don’t know how he managed to do so. But, there were a lot of people eager to keep the *Gazette* going—I think it was a way to deal with the shock of the early pandemic and, perhaps, a denial that things could go really badly. People poured a lot of energy into that first digital version. People were stuck at home, dealing with illness, children, and challenging job situations, but they still wanted to keep the *Gazette* alive.”

“This was a great COVID project,” Meyers added. “It needed to happen, and the pandemic flipped the switch to get it started. It allowed us to rethink every aspect of the *Gazette*, and to be deliberate about how to offer stories and information to our Coop community in fresh and interesting ways.”



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What was your experience with the move from print to digital? What was gained and what was lost?

“In a strange way, the online *Gazette* process actually brought our Team 4 together during the pandemic,” Schicker said. “We had something to wrap our minds and hearts around. We experimented with styles and iconic art development, and learned a lot about what works best in a WordPress format. It took some trial and error to get the right specs in place, but that turned out all fine.”

“I loved the charm of the old *Gazette* and the physical copies I could toss in my cart and read while in line or at home,” said Leila Darabi, who joined the Coop in 2015 and the *Gazette*, as a reporter, in 2016. “As a reporter, it always frustrated me that the issues were only available for a two-week period or online as a clunky and hard-to-read PDF that was hard to scroll. With the change to digital, we now have unique links that

we can email and post and that the Coop Instagram and Twitter feeds can share. And we have analytics to see who clicks on the articles. It has also been very cool to see the art and photography team expand what's possible with color and animation."

"Transitioning from print to online was both painful in some ways and very natural in others," observed Landfield, who spearheaded much of the technical effort. "On the one hand, abruptly terminating production of the print version was painful. We definitely all felt a sense of loss in having the *Gazette* go silent. Having the change forced on us by the pandemic was, like so much else, a profound shock. But as the time spent in lockdown extended, it came to seem par for the course that we would put the *Gazette's* stories online. Everything else was online now anyway! Why not the *Gazette*? So that seemed very natural, a no-brainer. "

"In making the transition to an online journal," Landfield added, "for the Coop there were meaningful positives. For one, the Coop is saving money. Second, while readership of the print issue was what it was, many copies of the printed paper would go to recycling. So we are using less paper now. Beyond that, using a digital platform like WordPress gives us much clearer data about readership, which can help inform what kind of content the *Gazette* produces in the future. In addition, we have the potential to reach a wider reader base with the online *Gazette* than we were ever able to do with the print publication, as linewaitersgazette.com is available publicly. That also means that individual stories and the site itself can be shared and accessed via social media.

"What was lost," Landfield continued, "is the tangible, physical object that you can hold in your hand. That does mean that some readers who are not online will miss out. But in a day and age when everything is online and so much of our communication is done via smartphone, it's increasingly difficult not to be represented online. Sometimes I do miss not being able to grab the paper and peruse it while tucking my cart into the pasta aisle, but I also like being able to know about what's going on at the Coop without actually being at the store. "

“The best learning from the pandemic is to always keep open communications,” Schicker reflected. “Everyone is doing such an amazing job. We realized that producing one detailed lead illustration can easily take 8 to 12 hours, and it’s really a lot that the illustrators are giving. And it’s also something that they can be very proud of.”

“The digital *Gazette* is still a work-in-progress,” Rosenberg said. “One of the great things that it has offered is the chance to let our artists shine. We used to have beautiful photographs that would then look like mud once they were in print. Now, the art work is a major feature of the newsletter. We even have GIFs!”

What is your sense of the member reaction to the new digital format, and what can we do to build a broader audience for the *Gazette*?

Darabi offered that the response she has received has been entirely positive. “There are many ways we could build the audience, given the capacity. As a professional communications strategist, if the Coop were my client and the *Gazette* something we wanted to promote, I would do an audit of the existing channels and target audience and suggest we start there. There is a lot we could be doing and that I hope to see us build out over time.”

Schicker added: “My Coop friends who are not on the *Gazette* are very surprised to hear that there is now a digital *Gazette*. In most cases, they don’t know how to access it, on what device, or how to get it delivered without having to do anything. But they are very interested.”

Moving forward, Landfield said, “we are actively seeking to expand the diversity of viewpoints and voices represented on the *Gazette* to ensure that we cover and are covered by a range of voices that represent the membership of the Coop at large. And we are also looking at ways to add new types of content and features of the *Gazette* that will be useful to the Coop membership.

“This has been a long journey,” Landfield reflected, “one that is far from over. We’ve

come a long way though. As we have done thus far, with cooperation, we can continue to build something that will serve the Coop membership well for years to come.”