People who follow the news and public policy-making got a big surprise this week with the announcement that Omaha's most famous businessman, Warren Buffett, was buying the Omaha World-Herald.

It was a move widely praised because it keeps Nebraska's largest newspaper in Nebraska ownership.

Less widely heralded — perhaps unheralded outside the journalism college — was an employment notice that the Gannett Company, one of the nation's biggest media empires, plans to hire more than 30 people in Des Moines to consolidate page design for 21 Gannett newspapers.

Hmmm.

Full disclosure: I used to work for both companies, spending 10 years from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s as a reporter in the World-Herald's Washington Bureau, followed by five years as a regional correspondent for seven small Gannett newspapers in the Midwest.

So I took in this week's news with special interest. And I think it gives people who care about news and public policy issues much to ponder.

Does it matter if the people who design the front page of my newspaper live three states away and have never laid eyes on my hometown?

Does it matter if the largest daily newspaper in my state is owned by someone who has roots in the community and the financial wherewithal to keep it healthy?

The headlines about the Buffett purchase all said he bought the newspaper, not a media

company, although to be sure, the World-Herald is just that. But if you just think about those words — newspaper and media company — you'll get very different messages.

Media company, of course, tends to refer to those businesses that publish newspapers, web sites, magazines or other niche publications and may also own various broadcast outlets or movie and television production companies.

But notice that the term focuses on the method of delivery — the "platform," as people call it when they want to appear sophisticated.

Newspaper, on the other hand, tells you about its content, as well as the form in which it is delivered. And ultimately, it's the content that matters, not whether you read it on a piece of paper or a computer screen or some hand-held device with tiny images you can't see without putting on your reading glasses.

Maybe you don't need reading glasses and maybe you like your mobile device. But if you care about what happens in your community, you'll also care about getting the news.

No one but the journalists at your local news outlet — whether it's published on paper or on a screen — will tell you what the school board did this week. Or what the candidates for city council or county board of commissioners say they want to change about local government. Or whether local law enforcement officers are taking bribes. Or whether the village board is holding meetings in secret.

Spend all the time you want surfing the Web for national and international news, but don't count on the New York Times or MSNBC to tell you what's happening at the statehouse or the county courthouse or report the fate of the high school speech team's competition or the American Legion ball players' season.

For that you need fellow Nebraskans — and those who have adopted Nebraska — who care about their state and their communities and want to make them better, by offering news and information you need to be an informed citizen.

What you need is people who think of themselves as performing an essential public service, not as part of a consolidated design team or a media company, but as part of a newspaper.

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