For years, the Jewish Light has claimed to be the “true community newspaper” for New Orleans and Baton Rouge that “carries Jewish Community related news about the Louisiana Jewish community and for the Louisiana Jewish community,” attracting advertisers on that basis.

But while the publication accuses Southern Jewish Life, which is the community’s news magazine, of being “deceptive,” an analysis of the Light demonstrates that the Light does almost nothing to cover the “local” Jewish community, filling its pages with wire service material while claiming circulation numbers that are vastly out of proportion to the size of the Jewish community.

Despite the large circulation numbers claimed by the Light, it apparently has little impact or readership in the Jewish community.

Southern Jewish Life asked over 100 local Jewish households whether they knew of the Light. Over half of those responding had never heard of the publication, and only two recalled ever receiving it in the mail. Many of those who said they were not familiar with the publication are organizational leaders or agency professionals in the New Orleans and Baton Rouge communities.

A majority of the fewer than half who had heard of the Light said they never pick it up. Only about 20 percent of those responding said they ever look at a copy of the Light, with most of them saying they did so when they came across a stack at a synagogue or coffee shop, and generally would flip through it quickly.

Michael Weil, who was executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans from 2006 to 2017, said he viewed the Light as “acting under false pretenses. It claimed to be a paper of and for the Jewish community but in practice was neither.”

Knowing the History

The Light is published by United Media, with Donald Gares as editor and his son, Richard Rault, as advertising manager. They are not members of the Jewish community, and also have a Christian publication, Changing Times, published by On Eagles Wings Unlimited as part of their Save The Nations Ministries.

Neither publication lists Gares or Rault — or any other staff — in the staff box, which is very unusual for a news publication.

Gares’s history with Jewish publications goes back to the mid-1990s. In 1989, the Federation had contracted with Abner Tritt to produce a paper for the community, the New Orleans Jewish Voice. Through an editor on Federation staff, the Federation would provide content.

Tritt had been publishing the New Orleans-based Jewish Civic Press, a publication with its own checkered history, since 1965, having previously worked for the Jewish Monitor in Birmingham. At one point the Civic Press claimed to have editions in Atlanta, Houston and Alabama/Mississippi, with ads from those areas, but the actual editions were rarely seen in those areas by anyone other than the advertisers.

In 1995, the Federation ended its relationship with Tritt and set up Gares to produce the renamed Jewish News for them, leading to a lawsuit from Tritt, which was dismissed.

Disagreements over some procedures led the Federation to look at other options in 2003, with this publication, then known as Deep South Jewish Voice — not to be confused with the former New Orleans Jewish Voice — submitting a proposal to take over as the community publication, but the Federation and Gares worked out their issues.

When the levees broke in August 2005 and the community became scattered throughout the country, it quickly became clear that the Jewish News would be on hiatus and the mailing list was pointless. Deep South Jewish Voice contacted the Federation, which at the time had set up a temporary office in Houston, and volunteered to serve as the community’s publication for as long as needed. Previously, DSJV covered Alabama, Mississippi and the Florida panhandle.

New Orleans updates were routinely run on the DSJV website, and bulk copies of the paper were sent to various locations in an effort to keep the community informed. The Postal Service would not resume delivering standard mail in the New Orleans area until the following March.

When the Federation was finally able to assemble in Baton Rouge three weeks after the storm for its annual meeting, DSJV was there to cover it, along with the first religious services to be held in New Orleans after the storm, two weeks later on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, at Shir Chadash and Touro Synagogue.

DSJV’s coverage was also intended to keep the rest of the Jewish world informed about what was happening in New Orleans, and keep an international focus on the rebuilding.

At some point in October 2005, Gares contacted the Federation to opt out of their agreement. But in December 2005, stacks of a new...
publication entitled Jewish Community News appeared at Jewish institutions and a few stores around the community. Though sporting a new name, the layout was almost identical to the Jewish News and had generally the same advertisers — and was run by Gares.

Though DSJV was covering the community, Gares said that after the storm “there was no local paper. I spoke to a lot of the community agencies, JCC and synagogues, they had no representation. We decided to continue a community-oriented newspaper without connection to the Federation.”

What was the cover story for Gares’s first issue back after perhaps the most catastrophic local event in recent memory? It wasn’t about Katrina, it was the first part of a series published six weeks earlier by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about anti-Israel bias in school textbooks.

In the Jewish publications world, JTA is the equivalent of Associated Press for mainstream publications. Southern Jewish Life dropped JTA in 2009, choosing instead to fill its pages with local content instead of national articles that had been available online for weeks by the time a monthly publication could be printed and distributed.

JCN relied mainly on the New York-based JTA for its Katrina coverage in subsequent issues, along with verbatim copying of articles posted on the Jewish Federation’s website, complete with the copyright notice. The Federation soon sent JCN a cease-and-desist letter to get them to stop reprinting Federation content.

Conversely, this publication’s coverage of Katrina and the aftermath received first place for comprehensive coverage in the national Simon Rockower Awards from the American Jewish Press Association. The Rockowers are the highest honor in the field of Jewish journalism.

When the newspaper industry tanked in 2009, Deep South Jewish Voice switched from a twice-monthly newspaper to a monthly magazine format and became Southern Jewish Life. Concerned about the format switch and desiring a newspaper, the Federation looked at options, including discussions with Gares to produce a Federation paper.

Gares said because of the Federation’s desire for him to rebrand, he changed the name from JCN to the Jewish Light, and after the talks fell apart because “there was some wording… my lawyer and I did not approve of,” changing the name back “would be kind of dumb.” However, the name change actually happened in the summer of 2011, long after discussions with the Federation had broken off in early 2010.

Gares said the Federation recruited him “to replace” Southern Jewish Life, but Weil said “it was never about taking over” from SJL. In the talks, Gares had insisted that the Federation and local agencies cut any cooperation with SJL.

Weil said Gares “did suddenly back out and I got the impression that he was never really serious about it.”

Soon thereafter, more local options were available, with the introduction of the SJL weekly e-news, “This Week in Southern Jewish Life.” In fall 2011, Alan Smason, who previously wrote for this publication and others, started an online publication and weekly e-news, Crescent City Jewish News.

In 2014, the Federation began running its previous standalone Jewish Newsletter as an insert in Southern Jewish Life. Jewish Community Day School and Jewish Family Service of Greater New Orleans also run their annual reports as inserts in SJL.

The Federation also issued a letter stating that though Southern Jewish Life is an independent entity, the local Jewish agencies provide SJL with “proprietary and exclusive content;” as “we do not partner with any other print Jewish newspaper or magazine, nor does any other print periodical speak on behalf of the Greater New Orleans Jewish community.”

Got What Covered?

The Jewish Light promotes itself with “Cover to Cover, we’ve got you covered.” However, the Light does virtually no original coverage of the lo-
cal Jewish community, filling its pages instead with national wire service material, and occasional profiles of businesses that advertise.

Local content consists entirely of items the Light copies word for word from synagogue bulletins and websites, the occasional press release, or listings from the New Orleans Jewish Community Center’s calendar. Over the past two years, those items have generally taken up four or five pages in a typical issue, with six pages being the most. The rest of each issue is wire service material.

The local content in the mid-October 2020 issue of the Light consisted of two pages of items from the JCC’s calendar page, and a press release from Jewish Children’s Regional Service that was reprinted verbatim. The rest of the publication was entirely national and international JTA stories.

Even in cases where a JTA story could be supplemented with local coverage, such as the reopening of Jewish day schools during Covid, there was no attempt at providing a local angle, though the two Jewish schools in New Orleans were doing in-person classes.

Each of the four issues of the Light before mid-October, going back to early summer, had no local content. The only exception was an advertiser promotional profile for a disinfection company in August, with the story reprinted from the Advocate, and several advertiser profiles in the July issue.

Despite most activities being suspended due to Covid, Southern Jewish Life ran over 60 original New Orleans pieces from June to October, not counting briefs or special section promotional pieces.

The total distribution claimed by the Jewish Light is three times the number of Jewish households in the Greater New Orleans area.

For the last couple of years, one of the biggest local stories has been the upcoming opening of the Museum of the Southern JewishExperience. While the project has been extensively covered by numerous publications, including SJL, the only time the Light has run a piece was the summer of 2019, when New York-based JTA did an article on the museum’s collection moving from Mississippi to New Orleans. Their Light’s 2020 annual community guide does not have a listing for the museum but mentions it in passing, deep in a listing for its former home, the Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

The only time in the last four years that the Light had a local story on the front cover was in the summer of 2018, when Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards barred state contracts with any company engaged in a boycott of Israel. While Southern Jewish Life extensively covered that story, the Light merely reprinted the short JTA piece from New York.

This isn’t new. From April to June 2017, Southern Jewish Life published 62 articles that were original, New Orleans area stories. In that same period, the Light published one — which was a contributed piece by JCRS. Everything else was copied from the synagogues or the JCC, taking up the first three to six interior pages each issue.

When the synagogue in Mandeville was vandalized in 2018, Southern Jewish Life interviewed numerous people who were involved in the community response, and covered the community solidarity event. The Light’s entire coverage consisted of asking the photographer from the event for some photos and ran them with very little context — with more of an explanation coming from solidarity ads that the Light solicited from local political figures.

While neither of Gares’ publications have run articles that would be considered overtly offensive to Jews or denigrating Judaism, a piece in the Light in April 2020 on the Dead Sea Scrolls was a curious choice. Originally published by Catholic News Service in April 2019, the piece was written by a “messianic” who promotes the Christian interpretation of a section of Isaiah that is commonly used by Christian missionaries to try and convert...
In its current sales materials, the Light touts print as “the strongest option” to reach “the highest net worth niche market in Louisiana.”

As evidence, the Light emphasizes the Sabbath and how Orthodox Jews turn off all electronics “in favor of relaxation and reading,” and says “the Ultra-Orthodox market has recently protested overuse of the internet due to morality standards so print marketing is generally the best and only way to promote successfully to this market.”

In places like New York, with large Orthodox concentrations, that is why Orthodox-oriented print media thrive while more secular ones struggle, but that does not translate locally. The vast majority of the New Orleans Jewish community is Reform, with a small percentage of the community identifying as Orthodox.

The Light’s materials also say “Jews are no strangers to social networks. For thousands of years, Jewry has been a close knit, often ‘clique-ish’ and isolated community that relied on their networks to do business, buy goods, and create opportunities.” The synagogue, according to the Light, is the hub for that networking, as “when one community member finds quality buys and bargains, this close-knit community gets the word out quickly to each other.”

Aaron Ahlquist, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League office in New Orleans, said the Light’s “marketing ‘research’ and strategies are offensive and borderline antisemitic,” trivializing the synagogue as a place of commerce instead of a place for worship.

He noted that he had not been aware of the publication, and nothing in their approach to soliciting advertising “makes me think that the Light has the best interests of the Jewish community at heart.”

A major source of advertising revenue for the Light comes from politicians who they get to place greetings ads to the Jewish community on the three major holidays and, more recently, also on Israel Independence Day. They also secure a large number of campaign ads from politicians trying to reach the Jewish community ahead of local elections.

Weil said the Light solicits “campaign ads and holiday greetings from unsuspecting politicians, judicial candidates and so on, who were made to believe that they were speaking to and greeting the Jewish community,” but “this was furthest from the truth as the paper was rarely read by anybody, even if piles of copies were dumped at Jewish stores.”

Many candidates have expressed confusion when contacted by Southern Jewish Life, thinking the two publications were the same.

According to campaign filings with the Secretary of State, and not including federal offices, such as the routine greeting ads from Rep. Steve Scalise and others in Congress, from August 2018 to the end of 2019 the Light raked in over $69,500 in political advertising.

With many October disclosure forms still to be submitted, the Light has already totaled around $25,000 in political ads for 2020.

### Counting the Numbers

In its advertising materials, the Light currently claims a distribution of over 11,000, plus “2500 additional copies delivered to Kosher eateries, coffee shops, Synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and grocery stores.” The total claimed distribution of around 14,000 is three times the number of Jewish households in the area, according to Federation figures.

In the CityBusiness Book of Lists in 2020, the Light claimed a circulation of 10,500 by “mail, drop off.” Full page ads start at $1,499.

Also in that list, the Light’s sister publication, Changing Times, a
Christian newspaper, claimed a circulation of 70,000. By comparison, the ubiquitous weekly publication Gambit has a circulation of 40,000, and the monthly Where Y’At has 50,000 at over 650 drop points.

The Changing Times website has a list of 410 distribution points in the region. The Light’s website does not have a similar list.

In 2011, then-Jewish Community News claimed a reach of “over 16,000 community members” at a time when the Jewish community was inching close to reaching its pre-Katrina population of 9,500.

When asked about the numbers, Gares said 14,000 “sounds big. I don’t think that is what we put down” but said he did not have the numbers in front of him.

Gares said “when we have filled out a survey form, we have used the word readership, not just the word circulation,” but the CityBusiness form sent online to publications specifically asks for circulation, and the publications are ranked by circulation size.

The Light’s own ad material breaks down its distribution by zip code, listing the number of “units” in each area, to reach its total of over 11,000.

Readership numbers are always much higher than circulation, as it is standard practice in publishing to assume more than one reader per copy.

How are the copies distributed? As previously mentioned, only two community members in the SJL survey recalled receiving the Light at home, though Gares said the paper is sent by bulk mail, which is now called Standard Mail. Gares said “We’ve got a large list we’re mailing and dropping off and have been since taking over. We’ve purchased lists.”

Standard mail requires a minimum of 200 copies, a postage imprint at a specific location on the cover and enough white space for an address, along with a return address. The Light does not have any of that on its cover, but Gares explained that the copies that are dropped off around the community “we label differently.”

The online version of the Light also does not show evidence of the required mailing indicia.

Southern Jewish Life is distributed by mail using the entire Jewish community mailing list, plus supplemental copies to advertisers, institutions and others who request it. The Light does not have access to the community mailing list.

As for additional copies around town, the Light typically places about 100 copies each at Kosher Cajun and the Uptown Jewish Community Center. They are not permitted to distribute at the Metairie JCC. Each of the synagogues and Torah Academy, accounting for another 10 locations, receive a couple dozen copies, and there are some restaurants, coffee shops and retail establishments that also receive a couple dozen copies. A couple dozen copies are also dropped off at the two synagogues in Baton Rouge.

Gares and Rault did not respond to followup requests to further clarify their circulation numbers, including how many are actually mailed or dropped off.

A 2015 experiment sought to figure out the pickup rate for the Light at two of the newspaper’s largest distribution points. After a new issue was delivered to Kosher Cajun and the Uptown JCC, those stacks were counted, and tiny identifying marks were placed on the spine of the paper at certain points down the stack, to ensure that the stack had not been refilled.

After four weeks, the stacks were counted again, showing that in one month only 20 copies had been picked up at Kosher Cajun and just 31 at the Uptown JCC.

Claims of Deception

In-house ads that the Light ran for several years stated the New Orle-
community

ans community “deserves its own periodical from cover to cover with no deception in between.”

The Light claimed that Southern Jewish Life put New Orleans on the cover “to trick readers and advertisers of its content,” adding, “The last time we checked, there isn’t any Bama in Louisiana. Ask any LSU Tiger fan.”

Southern Jewish Life publishes two editions — New Orleans and Deep South, the latter going to Alabama, Mississippi, the Florida panhandle and areas of Louisiana outside the Greater New Orleans area. There are some regionally-oriented pages common to both editions, but generally 24 or 32 pages that differ from the other edition.

In the Light’s 2020 Community Resource Guide, which lists itself as the only local Jewish publication, the Light asserts “you won’t see New Orleans edition on our front cover with over 50% Alabama news and advertising in between the covers” and touts its local nature “from cover to cover and every page in between” — though the vast majority of the Light’s pages consists of national JTA stories.

From the July to October issues of this year, 70 percent of the ads in the New Orleans edition of Southern Jewish Life were local to New Orleans, while an additional 17 percent were of regional interest.

Still, Gares said it is “facetious” when Southern Jewish Life “puts a New Orleans label on the front cover and yet it’s not New Orleans through and through… I’ve had people who complained about you guys, ‘why do they put New Orleans only (sic) when it’s clearly a lot of Alabama stuff in there.”

Gares and Rault did not respond when asked how they claim to be “cover to cover” local if almost all of their content is JTA material.

In 2016, when an advertiser switched from the Light to SJL, Rault sent an email saying the Light was the best way to reach the local community, and that unless that professional was practicing in Alabama, she “is paying a lot of money to reach people that cannot work with her,” though the Light’s rates are higher than SJL’s while apparently having a smaller reach than Southern Jewish Life among New Orleans readers.

In the email, Rault added, “Smooth talking doesn’t always mean truthful talking, and we have honestly represented this community for over 20 years. We live here and pay taxes here.”

When asked to name the most recent New Orleans Jewish community story the Light has covered in person, Gares said “I don’t need to explain why I’m a newspaper. We have lots of compliments from the community. It’s working for us… and we’re going to continue as long as we can.”

Likening the local Jewish publication scene to the battle between Coke and Pepsi, Gares said “It’s just commerce, bro.”

Both Southern Jewish Life and the online Crescent City Jewish News have received multiple recognitions for journalistic excellence in the national American Jewish Press Association Rockower Awards, and locally by the Press Club of New Orleans. The Light is not a member of either organization.

In addition to their respective weekly email newsletters, both SJL and CCJN have extensive websites that are regularly updated with local news, and an active social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, among other outlets. In an age of online presence and social media, the Light’s website has only a link to their latest print issue and a JTA feed — and traffic too small to be measured by website monitor Alexa.

The Light’s Facebook page, created in January 2019 and “constantly publishing new articles keeping the community informed and connected” has four followers and placeholder images, with no content since it began. They do not have a Twitter feed.

In 2022, AJPA plans to hold its annual convention in New Orleans, co-hosted by Southern Jewish Life and CCJN.

As with everything else that has happened in the New Orleans Jewish community over the last 15 years, the Light will not be in attendance.