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Final Project: Discussion Paper and Website

Community Journalism: A discussion

Jill Martin

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This paper summarizes the research that led to creation of the website "Community Journalism: A discussion about the future of community journalism." The website, <https://nebraskajournalism.wixsite.com/jill>, is intended to serve as a resource specifically for journalists employed by weekly newspapers.

Key Findings

- While there is uncertainty about the future of print journalism, cautious optimism exists for long-time journalists who believe the demand for factual information will outweigh everything else.
- One emerging theme that rose from research and interviews was how generational differences may impact the future of community journalism.
- The discussion about the future of community journalism is ongoing. The industry as a whole appears to be in an experimental stage of trying new and different ideas to see what contributes to revenue and brand recognition.

Small-town community journalists and staff members regularly discuss, contemplate and debate how to keep readers engaged and businesses advertising. The conversation is about what needs to be done to maintain interest in factual community journalism and show advertisers the value of purchasing advertisements in the local newspapers. Journalists hear it fairly regularly: "Print is dead." It instills a sense of urgency, even panic to take action. What can be done? Will the small-town community newspaper survive what some call a decline?

"Community Journalism: A discussion about the future of community journalism" is a website created in conjunction with this project to explore the landscape of community journalism. What is discovered is far different than what was anticipated. There are very few concrete answers for what the landscape of community journalism

will look like in 10 to 20 years. The leaders of today's small-town newsrooms are searching for answers and discussing what the future will be. Like the inflow/outflow cycle of a weekly or daily newspaper newsroom, this project and website is an ongoing process. It changes as the demands of society and its environment require it to. This is an ongoing honest and earnest effort to keep moving forward, keep the discussion going and adapt to the industry's changes. External factors include technology advancements, business consolidations and social media influences. Internal factors include shrinking newsrooms, declining revenue and newspaper consolidations.

The website explores the following topics: print, websites, social media, page design, a forum called Newsroom Chat, an Idea Exchange, a blog with examples from the Seward County Independent, and discussion points from long-time journalists, editors and publishers in Nebraska and across the country.

A glance at the numbers

- In 2016, daily newspaper circulation was down 8 percent from 2015.
- Declines were highest in print circulation: Weekday print circulation decreased 10 percent, and Sunday circulation decreased 9 percent from 2015 to 2016.
- The total estimated newspaper industry advertising revenue for 2016 was \$18 billion, a decrease of 10 percent from 2015.
- The total estimated circulation revenue was \$11 billion, which is roughly on par with 2015 (rise of 0.4%) (Pew Research Center [Pew], 2017).

While these numbers reflect the industry as a whole with an emphasis on daily publications, they show an overall decline in circulation and revenue across the U.S. Weekly newspapers are a highly disparate lot, and there is a dearth of information about the extent to which smaller publications share the struggles with their urban counterparts.

Throughout history, technology has played a key role in changing and structuring journalism, specifically the American press. Journalists today are expected to have a notebook in one hand, a phone or tablet in the other, and a camera around their neck. The expectations are high for community journalists to fulfill the role of multimedia, multi-platform journalists. Technology is ever changing. Journalists have to be able to adapt to those changes while staying focused on their responsibilities as ethical journalists.

A Noisy Environment

In the 1920s, American journalist Walter Lippmann compared the press to a beam of a searchlight moving restlessly about. In the late 20th century, “the relationship between news media and audiences underwent a fundamental change” (Fuller, 2010, p. 2). Emotional approaches to news were gaining attention and affecting credibility. The change was a movement away from the standard model of professional journalism, a disciplined method of verification widely accepted by working journalists. It is that verification of information that sets journalism apart from other forms of writing and publishing. The information revolution drastically affected how the searchlight moves.

“So the two searchlights restlessly play across the landscape. One is the searchlight of the media looking for anything that will attract the attention of an audience. The other is the searchlight of the audience members scanning a cluttered and intrusive environment for something that seems important enough to attend to” (Fuller, 2010, p. 70).

The metaphor of the searchlights is powerful when considering the landscape of today’s industry. The media is doing its best with print and online news coverage to catch the attention of readers. The searchlights are restless in a noisy online environment. It is a difficult balance for journalists to take on. It is also something that many audience members do not recognize. They know they are annoyed by the pop-up

ads and click-bait headlines, but they may not recognize the reasoning and motive behind the distractions.

In the latest edition of the Columbia Journalism Review, editor-in-chief Kyle Pope said journalism is in the middle of a complicated story with high stakes. Pope says the local-news financial picture is daunting, but new energy is building to take on the problem. “Is it fixable, or are America’s local newsrooms going away for good? What are the implications for open records, for accountability – for our democracy?” (Pope, 2017). Pope raises questions about the financial picture of journalism. Journalists are worried about their jobs, but the big picture question is really about accountability and how the changes to the local newsroom will affect democracy. “It won’t come as news to many of you that local journalism in our country is in dire shape. Pick your metric – numbers of reporters, newspapers, readers—and nearly all the trendlines veer downhill. It’s not a happy story, but it’s an important one for CJR to tell” (Pope, 2017).

There does not appear to be a clear-cut answer of what the future will be for the community newsroom. Journalism continues to depend heavily on the public’s interest and demand for news and information. If there is no audience, interest or source for funding, there is no demand. Journalists have to engage their readers by providing accurate information in a compelling manner. Advertisers recognize where the demand is and will most likely adjust accordingly. Newspapers staff members have to show advertisers the value of the product. “To be effective, journalism needs to communicate with people as they are, and their minds turn out to be more complicated than we once thought. Today our message-immersed environment summons their emotional side with greater and greater intensity” (Fuller, 2010 p. 56).

In an article about the future of journalism, Megan Garber discusses Columbia Journalism Review stories over the years, and how the voices from the past are “at home in the present.” While the article was written in 2011, the questions are the same questions being asked by journalists today.

“Who is a journalist? they ask. How will new technologies affect that? Will those technologies undermine our ability to do our jobs, or improve it? How do we better connect with our audiences? How can we ensure that informational substance wins out over sensational drivel? How can we make reporting more profitable? Can we sell more and better ads? Are financial concerns compromising our ability to do journalism at the highest level? Should we consider government intervention to help support our work? Is that what the Founders would have wanted? Should we care anymore what the Founders would have wanted?” (Garber, 2011).

Journalists want to know what is next, how new technology will affect their ability to reach their audiences, obstacles and challenges they may face, and what the future of journalism will be. Garber goes on to say all of the uncertainties and shifts in journalism have been experienced before, but at the end of the day, journalism is still journalism. It will continue to face challenges but will remain intact. “The ground will stop shaking, because it always does,” Garber said. “And journalism will continue to be what it’s always been: a way for people to learn and participate and, finally, come together” (Garber, 2011). In the end, technology and finances may be the two most important factors when considering the future of community journalism. How well journalists are able to adapt to those changes could determine the outcome.

Another factor for the future of journalism will be a greater importance placed on local news coverage, specifically hyperlocal content. In the last decade, the industry began looking at models of journalism on a larger scope, being innovative, and operating with an entrepreneurial attitude. In doing so, the focus on local seemed to

shift away for the larger newspapers. The focus of local news and information has always been the bread and butter of community journalism.

The industry is competing for people's time and attention. Journalists are competing for the 2 minutes that people take to look at their phones first thing in the morning and the 5 minutes they take to peruse their Facebook and Twitter feeds at the end of the day. It is also a competition for resources. “In a way news organizations aren’t competing with each other anymore. They all face the same challenge, which is finding the resources to cover communities fully and to connect with them effectively in a world of distractions and powerful platform companies” (Oreskes, 2017). Those platform companies (i.e. Facebook and Google) have played a big part in the threat to the local newsroom.

Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg recently discussed the importance of a strong industry in an open letter posted on Facebook.

“A strong news industry is also critical to building an informed community. Giving people a voice is not enough without having people dedicated to uncovering new information and analyzing it. There is more we must do to support the news industry to make sure this vital social function is sustainable -- from growing local news, to developing formats best suited to mobile devices, to improving the range of business models news organizations rely on.” (Zuckerberg, 2017).

The website, <https://nebraskajournalism.wixsite.com/jill>, was created as a result of this project is based on and includes interviews with a variety of journalists, reporters and publishers with decades of experience.

Significant Findings from Interviews in the Field

Bill Blauvelt, The Superior Express/Jewell County Record – The challenge is how to finance the operation of a newspaper. Our traditional advertising sources are going away with the move to internet shopping, shrinking rural population etc. When I started, Superior had 5 grocery stores, today we have one, and the cost of gathering news has gone up. When I started, The Express didn't employ a reporter. As

editor I filled the front page and a bit more. A correspondent who was paid at the rate of 10cents an inch did the rest and we averaged 22 pages a week.

Kevin Zadina, publisher of the Seward County Independent –

Advertising has become tougher with more places to place ads with social media. But with that, businesses have a tough time deciding where they think is the best place. We have to educate the advertiser more and more to help them out. One challenge is deciding what our readers want to read. Readers are also much more fragmented with their news sources, and many of those sources are not trustworthy. The biggest challenges for both news and advertising is a person's time.

**Stephanie Croston, sports editor of the Seward County Independent –
(Question) What do small-town community newspapers such as the Seward County Independent look like in 10 years?**

I think they'll still be a viable part of the community. We chronicle the town's history. We can't let ourselves get stagnant, however. We need to continue to grow and change with our towns while staying true to the principles of truth, justice and the American way. Well, truth, at least and maybe justice.

We've been attacked very publicly in recent months, accused of publishing "fake news," conducting witch hunts and spreading lies. Sadly, there are people in the profession who are guilty of those accusations, but they are the exception. The local paper, at least the ones I work for, works very hard to be accurate, truthful and objective. If we do publish something that's incorrect, we fix it. We own our mistakes and try to get better because of them.

But the general accusations do call us into question and make us work harder to prove to our readers that those assertions are simply "fake news."

Kurt Johnson, co-publisher of the Aurora News-Register – "Hyperlocal is part of that formula that I absolutely believe in. I think it's the salvation of community newspapers and even small dailies."

Mark Rhoades, publisher of Enterprise Publishing Co. – Similar to other newspapers, Rhoades said his publications have increased the amount of short news briefs, breakdowns, charts and graphs they offer readers. "People look at those," he said. "People aren't taking the time to read the longer stories."

Bill Reader, Ohio University – "It's all about content. Millennials and Gen Zers will pay for content that they feel they need, but not out of habit or tradition. You should talk to the under-40 people in your community regularly about what local information they feel they need, and if you want their support (financial, intellectual, or both), then try to provide it. Gen Zers are especially frugal with coin but generous with emotional support -- they'll buy \$5 coffee from the local shop over Starbucks' \$4 of charcoal water, but only if the local shop has good coffee and a unique vibe. They are much more like Gen X than the Millennials in that regard, and many of them would rally around and support a local newspaper if they felt it had their backs. But they are frugal. They'll make you earn every dollar."

I invite you to explore the [website](#) and contribute to the community journalism discussion.

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