grassroots editor

A journal for newspeople

Published by the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors

volume 50, no. 3 • fall 2009

grassroots editor
A journal for newspeople
Published by the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors

Editor: Dr. Chad Stebbins
Graphic Designer: Liz Ford

Grassroots Editor
(USPS 227-040, ISSN 0017-3541) is published quarterly for $25 per year by the **International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors**, Institute of International Studies, Missouri Southern State University, 3950 East Newman Road, Joplin, MO 64801-1595. Periodicals postage paid at Joplin, Mo., and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **Grassroots Editor**, Institute of International Studies, Missouri Southern State University, 3950 E. Newman Road, Joplin, MO 64801-1595.
Volume 50, Issue 3, Fall 2009

Subscription Rate: $25 per year in the United States and Canada; $28 per year elsewhere.

What does this have to do with democracy?

By **Ross Connelly**

Editor's note: This is the text of a talk Ross Connelly gave at the Greensboro (Vt.) Church Summer Lecture Series.

Close to 20 years ago, when I was on the board of the New England Press Association, I attended a number of workshops that focused on this new thing called the Internet and addressed how newspapers could make use of it. One of the recommendations — or trends — that always popped up was getting one's newspaper online.

A parallel thought that popped up in my mind at each workshop, was, what does this have to do with democracy? I always asked this question as the press has a constitutional protection — one of two institutions given that status in the First Amendment. To me, that means the press rests on the foundation of a civic society, as that is what the constitution creates. A newspaper is, therefore, a civic institution that has a civic responsibility. I repeat that: a newspaper is a civic institution that has a civic responsibility. My view is that carries a lot of responsibility with it. And recognizing that responsibility — that privilege — is the reason I always ask what is the relationship between the technology the Internet offers and newspapers? Said simply, what does that relationship have to do with democracy?

As many of you may be aware, the *Gazette* does not have a Web site.

If you Google *The Hardwick Gazette*, you will find a link to a number of Web sites, but we didn't create any of them, and the people who did have nothing to do with us and never asked our permission. In fact, after we found out about a site several years ago, we discovered some of the information posted was incorrect. We sent an e-mail pointing that out. The information wasn't changed. After spending a bit of time asking around and making several telephone calls, I was able to get the name and a telephone number for the person in charge of the site — the webmaster, I believe is the correct title. I called. The person is in New Hampshire. I pointed out the errors and asked that if he put up a Web site using the *Gazette*'s name he at least list correct information. He said he would update the site.

I recently Googled the *Gazette*. There are at least 10 links to Web sites that give "information" about the *Gazette*, none of which was started by the *Gazette* nor were we contacted by any of the places offering those links. One of them states, "current estimates show this company has an annual revenue of $500,000 to $1 million and employs a staff of approximately 10 to 19." The information also indicates the *Gazette* has been in business only 23 years. I've never been a whiz at math but I do know the difference between 2009 and 1889 is more than 23. Another site gives us a few more years of longevity — back to 1977.

The sites have the *Gazette*'s location at 42 South Main Street, Main Street and 34 Main St. (the first is the correct street address), but on maps of Hardwick on a couple of the sites, we are located on South Main Street south of Wolcott Street, and another indicates we are on Vermont Avenue. I found several sites that listed an e-mail address we discarded at least four-five years ago. I also found a site that claimed someone from the *Gazette* attended a business journalism workshop at Arizona State University. That's news to me. So much for the timeliness and accuracy of the Web.

There are also a number of links that reprint *Gazette* articles, and with few exceptions, there was no prior request for permission from us. Not that they need it; we're not the music recording industry. So long as they are not charging for the articles, they are legal and not infringing on our copyright, as far as I know.

I also noted various organizations are linked to the *Gazette*'s name. One — the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick — has us on its Web site because the organization posts stories about the center. Stories from the *New York Times*, Vermont Public Radio, *Gourmet Magazine*, *USA Today*, *Eating Well* magazine, *Parade* magazine, Canadian Broadcasting Company, *Vermont Life*, the *Times-Argus* and the *Burlington Free Press* — to name most of them. While each of them has one posting, or maybe several in the case of the *Free Press*, there are about 15 for the *Gazette*. That suggests to me that if you want to keep up to date with news about the center and its various members — and want more than a fancy splash that is read, gushed over, and forgotten — there is a need to read the *Gazette* on a regular basis.

So, why don't we have our own Web site? The easy answer is money. Believe me, our yearly gross is far less that the $500,000-$1 million one Web site gives so generously to us. And we sure don't have the 10-19 employees, either. The simple answer is a staff of four full-time people, two part-time people and several correspondents does not give us the time to put the newspaper on the Web each week. I'm not sure whether our current computers and software are all that we need, either. And we have enough trouble getting local businesses to advertise in this economy. I'm not convinced they would want to pay extra to have their ads

linked to Web pages.

Another issue pertains to circulation — paid circulation. If the *Gazette* were on the Web, say the way the *Burlington Free Press*, the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* are, I hazard to guess a lot of summer people and residents of this area who spend the winters in Florida would not bother to subscribe to the newspaper. We sure don't need to lose even more subscribers and paid readers. So, why not charge for a subscription, the way they do at the *Wall Street Journal*, and some other newspapers? Well, that would take more staff time, plus once the newspaper is on the Web it is out there and we have no control over who reads it. Just as your mother used to send you articles from the local newspaper when you were away at summer camp or when you were in college, or your uncle passes on his copy to another relative after reading each issue, I imagine someone who subscribed to the *Gazette* online could cut and paste articles to send on to others, if not the whole issue — and that would be a lot easier and cheaper than finding the scissors, getting an envelope, addressing it, putting on a stamp and dropping it in the mailbox — and probably a whole lot more frequent by individuals, and certainly weekly by the various Web sites that already post *Gazette* articles.

Another point I want to emphasize is having a presence on the Web did not save the life of New Hampshire's *Claremont Eagle-Times*, which traced its origins to 1824, if not back to the 1780s in Windsor, Vt., from closing its doors in June. The *Boston Globe* has a Web site, but that has not curtailed its problems with staying afloat. *The Rocky Mountain News* is history. I'm sure there are other examples that pop into your minds.

There are other reasons I'm not keen on putting the *Gazette* on the Internet. I want to turn philosophical. Remember my initial question: What does it have to do with democracy?

First off, just what is a newspaper? A simple answer is that it is news on paper. There is more. When I spoke here a few years back, I talked about the newspaper as a mirror of the communities it covers, and said weekly newspapers are the dusty, back roads of journalism. I also said a newspaper that provided good information to citizens enabled them to make good decisions. Last month, while sitting in a doctor's waiting room I picked up a copy of the summer 2009 Wellesley College alumnae magazine and came across a wonderful article by Barbara W. Carlson, entitled "Losing The News." She begins her piece by recounting that Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is less than three minutes old when the stage manager mentions the local newspaper, The Grover's Corners *Sentinel*. In all, Carlson writes, newspapers are mentioned 14 times in the play.

She writes, "A newspaper is one of those small commonplace things of life. Some of the play's references to a paper are subtle, off-hand — but vital to the play, like a little dot of color in a painting.

"In *Our Town*," she continues, "and in real life, I realized, the paper is a witness, an affirmation, a source of information, a companion, a part of daily life. A living thing. And it's your paper, your *local* paper."

Carlson recounts how the *Hartford Courant*, her hometown newspaper growing up and as an adult, and one for which she reported for better than a decade, now has a page one that is "a garish poster of only three stories and often a huge photo that's spread over half the page. The news hole has shrunk so much that there's little room for funny or offbeat human-interest stories (or maybe no reporters to write them), and there are too many wire stories in place of *Courant*-reported stories."

The *Courant* is also on the Web. Take a look. I can do without it as it reminds me too much of the melodramatic voices more and more radio and television newscasters use as they broadcast the most mundane stories.

I digress. Back to Carlson.

She poses several rhetorical questions that have long been on my mind. "Does it matter?" she asks, referring to whether an ever-shrinking news hole and fewer and fewer local stories should cause us to worry. "Should we be thinking of doing something about the precarious state of newspapers? Will democracy really be in danger without newspapers? Will we know as much about what's going on around us?

"Yes, yes, yes, and no," she answers.

"It matters," she continues, "because without robust newsrooms, neither inky papers or newspaper web sites will be able to deliver features about your community, or in-depth news, or investigative reporting.

"... And if reporters on a decimated news staff are required (as many are) to be multimedia practitioners — reporters and photographers for print, TV, and for the Internet — they run the risk of not having the time or energy to be expert at any job."

Carlson interviews a number of Wellesley alums who are journalists. They are uniform in their assessment of the precarious state in which newspapers find themselves — and the critical role they play in a democracy. One of those people is Melissa Hale-Spencer, who is the editor of the *Altamont Enterprise*, a weekly in upstate New York. She tells Carlson her newspaper reports on all meetings in the towns it covers and is successful because the publisher is more interested in putting out a newspaper than getting rich, and because "the paper provides thorough coverage of the communities, and a voice for the people."

I went back to the Web after reading Carlson's article. *The Altamont Enterprise* has a Web site, but only teases stories, following each online version with a note to buy or subscribe to the newspaper to obtain the complete story.

I want to address another aspect of newspapers and where we are at as an industry. There is no question, many newspapers can look in a mirror and see the seeds of their own destruction. Outrageous profit margins have been the norm for years. As an example, a list of Gannett newspapers' pre-tax, net profit margins for the first three quarters of 2007 was put on the Internet last fall by a former employee of the chain, just before a corporation-wide layoff of 10 percent of the employees (there have been at least two more layoffs since, as well as mandated week-long furloughs for all employees). According to the list, the *Burlington Free Press* had a margin of 36.21 percent. The newspaper in Green Bay, Wis., had the highest margin of 42.5 percent, Honolulu had the lowest at 3.33 percent. The average for the 85 newspapers on the list was 23 percent.

The examples are about the Gannett Corporation, but I still remember listening to the publisher of the newspaper for which I worked in 1982 telling a group of reporters at this family-owned company, which owned four dailies, that most newspapers' profits averaged about 18 percent. Thus, I find a kernel of truth in the figures, and I'd be very surprised if Gannett is alone. Margins in other sectors of the economy, however, are not nearly as robust. As an example, according to a May 2006 article in *Business Week*, energy and materials benefitted then from jumps in oil and commodity prices. The profit margin for the oil industry was up to 9.1 percent, from 7.5 percent for the first quarter of 2004. Materials companies had margins of 6.3 percent. The tanked economy presumably lowered those, but maybe not, particularly for oil.

Margins vary greatly, but the question remains: what is the purpose of the particular industry: product or profit? Profit or the public good? And must it be an either/or?

Perhaps corporate journalism that is more beholden to shareholders than readers sows the seeds of its own destruction. In order to save money, I was told, the *Burlington Free Press* decided in June to contract a newspaper distribution company to deliver its issues each day, and to stop home delivery in Hardwick. A Hardwick retailer told me he had to pay 20 cents more per wholesale copy to the newspaper distribution company than he did when the *Free Press* delivered the newspapers. He passed that on to readers so the *Free Press* now costs 95 cents at his store rather than 75 cents. He also told me two other retail outlets decided to stop selling the newspaper. Perhaps, the savings in distribution costs outweighs the loss of newspaper sales — so the shareholders will be happy — but, as one former *Free Press* editor said to me, at some point readers have to be seen as having an intrinsic value that should not be measured in dollars and cents.

Back to the Web. Perhaps those lost readers will read the *Free Press* on the Web, although I know one person in town who won't because he doesn't have a computer. I doubt he is alone.

As a publisher, I also know I would rather *Gazette* readers have to go to the store or the mailbox to get the newspaper than read it on the Web. I say that because I see a generation of people who "communicate" with each other all day and night via the Web. As a matter of fact, none of them is interacting face-to-face with another person. They are interacting with a computer screen. Have they ever heard of Hal?

To me, part of democracy — no, a requirement of democracy — is face-to-face interaction. We have to interact with each other if we are to be able to live together — to work out solutions that benefit all of us. To me, a person who stops into Willey's on a Wednesday morning to pick up a copy of that week's *Gazette* will interact with other customers and employees. The person may take a glance at the front page and offer a comment to another customer or to a sales clerk and the other person may respond. The people are engaged in a form of civic life that strengthens society in comparison to a person who is speaking to a computer screen.

The executive director of the Vermont Press Association, who also works at the *Free Press*, was interviewed by Vermont Public Radio after the demise of the *Claremont Eagle-Times*. He talked about the decline in circulation at newspapers and focused on newspaper Web sites as a way newspapers are trying to keep readers in the fold. He said the one newspaper model, including the *Free Press*, is to use the traditional print, coupled with the Web, video and segmentation to target more and more audiences by special interests — by appealing to particular niches — in order to keep people coming to the Web site.

To me, that is recognizing — and fostering — that we are increasingly a nation of cubical dwellers. I view that as antithetical to democracy. A newspaper offers serendipitous knowledge and information. When we read the hard copy, we may well share that new knowledge with the person sitting on the next stool at the diner, or with our spouse or children sitting in the same room, or leave the newspaper with a note for another person to read, or someone may start reading over our shoulders. Even though we forward e-mails and links to others all the time, Web sites let us retreat from interacting with each other face to face. The web doesn't cause us to trip over each other and it doesn't reinforce the actuality that we live with each other.

As I said earlier, a Web site did not save the *Eagle-Times*. Economics and management are probably a greater culprit, but the newspaper's absence chips away at the sense of community in Claremont and surrounding towns. Another person interviewed by Vermont Public Radio about the newspaper's closing wondered where she would advertise her yard sale and how would she find out when the local church was having its chicken pot pie supper. Where are the citizens of those towns going to learn about their select boards and school boards, the tax rates, the new business that is coming to town, and read game stories about the local high school and youth athletic teams?

Barbara Carlson in her Wellesley magazine article offers reasons for Newspapers' problems that include changed reading habits, multiple sources for news, losses in revenues, greed, and paper vs. the Web. All are valid, but in my view, St. Michael's College journalism professor David Mindich was closer to the target a few years ago with the publication of his book *Tuned Out — Why People Under 40 Don't Follow The News*. His research led him to suggest the absence of civics education is the root cause. If young people aren't taught civics — don't learn about a civic society — it's small wonder they have little interest in newspapers — a civic institution — and, instead, view the "communicating" they do on the Web as all they need. I recommend his book.

The Kansas City Star touched on the disconnect between American citizens and engagement in the civic society in an editorial, published this July 5. The newspaper stated: "Here's a dose of sad reality on the heels of another Independence Day: America, the world's shining beacon of democracy, does about as bad a job registering voters as any democracy on Earth.

"A study released this week by the New York University's Brennan Center for Justice studied voter registration, rating 17 democracies," the editorial informed readers. "The nations surveyed had available information and 'face the same fundamental challenges in maintaining accurate voter rolls.'

"America was dead last.

"The United States registers 68 percent of the voting age population.

All but three nations studied register 91 percent or better, including France and Burundi. That's right — despite being a new democracy, surviving a period of genocide, facing massive AIDS death tolls — this central African country was able to register 23 percent more of its voting population.

"Argentina? Everyone who's eligible."

The newspaper reports the NYU study found that the burden of voter registration falls on voters in that whenever a person moves he or she has to make sure to re-register, which may have different requirements in different states. A data-sharing system works well in other countries and is proposed for the United States so states can track voters and pass on information if a person relocates. The study also found that any hurdles in the process discourage voting.

Vermont Secretary of State Deb Markowitz released a report this summer in which she said research indicated school children who participated in mock elections, such as the Vermont Votes for Kids' program her office began, indicated they were more aware of politics, issues, and they planned to vote. Something as simple as a parent taking a child into a voting booth when the parent voted also had a very positive impact, she found.

The Newspapers In Education program is another effort to heighten awareness about the civic society, and help students develop the concept of an engaged citizenry.

The Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont is also interested in the relationship between newspapers and civic engagement. The center approached the *Gazette* last winter and asked if we would be willing to participate in a study that will try to assess how people in Hardwick get their local news, their views of civic engagement — voting, attending meetings, speaking out about local issues, running for office — and whether there are feasible steps the *Gazette* can take to enhance that participation while also increasing its circulation. The study is to begin later this year.

The proposal for the study stated "the fact that Internet use is up and newspaper readership and civic engagement are down is old news. What's less obvious is the growing disconnect between the extensive amount of unfiltered information available online and news from credible and accountable sources. When people don't have access to critical information about their communities, they are missing the tools they need to make informed, sustainable decisions. Emerging media, citizen journalism and online blogs and forums can help increase social capital and bring people together as communities of interest, but they don't necessarily strengthen communities of place. They can also give the illusion of news without the substance. The Internet has fundamentally changed how people exchange information, how they interact with each other and how they make decisions about their communities. This leads to a big disconnect that leaves researched, vetted and fact-checked articles, as well as basic tools and information necessary for informed civic engagement, out in the cold."

In the article in the Wellesley magazine, Melissa Hale-Spencer, of the *Altamont Enterprise* in New York state, says: "I really fear for the state of democracy. If we don't have a well-informed public, we are in trouble."

Just retired Supreme Court Justice David Souter spoke to the American Bar Association in July and said two-thirds of Americans can't name the three branches of government. He expressed concern about the ability of the justice system to function if people lack such basic knowledge. Can the legislative and executive branches function, either, if few citizens understand their functions? The solution he offered is to increase civics education.

Can we have a democracy of, by, and for the people, if increasingly citizens don't think of themselves as citizens and more and more newspapers fail so people can't get the news they need to see they have an integral and critical role to play in society?

What are some other solutions? Are there other economic models? Community and/or foundation funded newspapers is an idea that is bandied about. Are there innovative ways to use the Internet that get people away from staring at their computers and start facing each other?

I wish I knew a simple solution, but I don't. The Internet is a useful tool, but I don't believe it will lead us to a more democratic society without lots of help. I also believe our ability to function as a democratic society is at risk unless we become more aware that we are citizens and we live in a civic society. Thus, I close with a self-interested pitch and urge you to buy the *Gazette* each week, and get a subscription if you don't have one. Of more importance, however, talk to young people with whom you interact and engage them in the meaning and importance of a civic society and civic engagement. Better yet, sit down with them and read a newspaper each day — and then discuss with them what was read. And lobby your local school board to make civics education an integral part of the curriculum — from elementary school through high school. Without that, we will have trouble strengthening and expanding access to our civic society, which, in turn, will decrease the amount of paper with news on it, and — for those who want it — less and less news we can trust and use will be available on the Internet.

A longtime member of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, Ross Connelly is the editor and co-publisher of The Hardwick Gazette, *a 120-year-old weekly newspaper in Hardwick, Vt., and a past president of both the New England Press Association and the Vermont Press Association. Named twice to the ISWNE Golden Dozen, he is also the recipient of numerous awards from NEPA and VPA. He can be contacted at News@thehardwickgazette.com.*

Connecting with the community: Hiring the right 'face' for the newspaper

By **Marshel D. Rossow**

Introduction

Many newspapers are facing a triple dilemma — an economy that has caused advertising revenues to decline, growing competition from Internet news sources, and a declining pool of students pursuing journalism majors. Although much of the focus on newspapers in major media has recently centered on bankruptcies, joint operating agreements and replacement of newsprint with on-line editions, many smaller papers are still surviving well and need a dependable supply of newsroom talent to gather local news and keep it flowing out to their communities. Readers of community newspapers hunger for local news — "the engine that drives circulation stability and growth" (Lauterer, 2006), but uncovering that news often means a reporter needs to spend more than a few months in the community to gain an understanding of what the "locals" really consider to be newsworthy, not to mention what sources can best provide that news. Having to hire and train new staffers, only to lose them before they even settle in and get to know their communities, is not conducive to good newsgathering.

The perpetual problem of "revolving-door" staffers — hired, gain a little experience and leave for other jobs — is not eased by the loss of student interest in small-town newspaper careers. A logical question to ask is how smaller newspapers attract, hire and retain newsroom staffers who stay around long enough to get to know their communities, and to let their communities get to know them. The question about hiring and retention policies and practices is an important one, because a smaller newspaper's reporters in particular are frequently the employees the community most often sees. They represent the newspaper's "face" in the community as they keep popping up at city council meetings, accident scenes, ribbon cuttings, county fairs, barn fires and Friday night football games, then writing about these news events to keep the community informed. Hiring the right, or wrong, news staff can make the difference between a newspaper that is seen as an integral part of community life and one that is viewed as disconnected from the community — a feeling among readers that "the newspaper doesn't understand what I want."

Purpose of study

First, a caveat on what this study was *not*. It was not intended to sleuth out new, cutting-edge, high-tech techniques that take the risk out of the hiring process. Rather, it was a descriptive study designed to gain an up-to-date look at the state of hiring policies, practices and expectations of editors, publishers and other hiring personnel at daily and weekly newspapers in Minnesota during a time of stress in the newspaper industry. It sought to learn whether the changing face of the newspaper industry has led to new methods of finding the best "hire" or whether tried-and-true methods still dominate the hiring process. The study examined the role of these traditional hiring elements — applications, clips, references, interviews — in today's context of fewer journalism majors, lower revenues and mounting Internet competition. It also looked at similarities and differences in hiring between dailies and weeklies and at efforts by those responsible for hiring to make the best choice — find the best "fit," if you will — of the new employee, the newspaper and the community. The examination included a look at editors' and publishers' expectations and requirements regarding job interviews, references, clips, training, experience and community "connectedness." It considered not only what characteristics come together to get a candidate hired but also what characteristics lead to job-search failure. The ultimate audience for the findings of this study was not media scholars but, instead, journalism majors hoping to find work in the newspaper industry and the publishers, editors[1] and others involved in hiring the best candidates for their newspapers and their communities.

Literature review

Joe Grimm, the recruiting and development editor at the *Detroit Free Press*, says the rise of e-mail has created what he calls "24-7" applications from around the world, many of which he discards (Grimm, 2008).

But at smaller papers, the story is different. Weekly editor Mike Buffington notes that "all weekly newspaper editors/owners have staffing horror stories" (Buffington, 2008).

One factor contributing to those "horror stories" is the declining number of job applicants at small and medium-sized papers for the past decade or longer. Says Scott Bosley, executive director of the American Society of Newspaper Editors: "Anybody who is an editor of a small newspaper...will tell you that their biggest problem is finding anyone" (Porter, 2003).

The situation has been years in the making. Foote (1993) noted that by the early 1990s, the newsroom work force had peaked and begun to shrink. The Newspaper Association of America said that in 1998, only 8.2 percent of journalism graduates were looking for newspaper or news service jobs (Wood, 2000). Terry (1998) observed that newspapers face a "paucity of candidates." Hickey (1999) noted the reluctance of young journalists to begin their careers in smaller markets. A 1999 survey of South Carolina newspapers showed weeklies in that state could no longer rely on the need for clips as an incentive for fresh journalism graduates to accept jobs at weeklies because of new employment opportunities in other media such as Web publishing, public relations and newsletters (Wood, 2000).

Landon (2003) and Becker (2005) cite a similar shrinking pool of young reporters. The reason is often not only the small-town environment, but also relatively low pay at smaller publications, a situation that has been cited for decades as a problem in recruiting and retaining young journalists (Rich, 1990; Hood, 2000; Wood, 2000; Porter, 2003; Fuentes, 2006).

By early 2008, the applicant pool had not deepened. Weekly editors in rural areas reported that they continued to have difficulty finding good reporters, with help-wanted ads sometimes running for weeks without applications (*Grassroott Editor*, spring 2008; Crockford 2008; Buffington, 2008; Roelfsema, 2009). More-rural states where journalism opportunities are limited may find it hard to recruit employees because of the relatively remote nature of some communities (Crockford, 2008; Mehlsak, 2008). When applicants do appear, they may be people who are far from qualified for the job or who have different work values than earlier generations (Crockford, 2008; Marston, 2007; Brown, 1998).

The problem is not limited to U.S. newspapers. Community newspapers in Canada and Great Britain face a similar dilemma (Whitehouse 2008, Roelfsema, 2009).

One roadblock to easier recruiting may be recent negative publicity about the newspaper industry — "convincing folks that newspapers are not a dying industry," as one news executive put it (Current, 2007). An annual survey of recent jour-

nalism graduates showed a flat job market for new grads through the first half of 2008 (Vlad, Becker, Vogel and Wilcox, 2008). Despite this apparently negative situation for the newspaper industry and for job-seeking journalists, 48 million papers are sold daily in the United States and more than 45,000 people are employed in gathering and editing news (State of the News Media, 2009), meaning jobs are out there if editors and job-seekers can come together to find the right fit.

Beyond a smaller pool of job candidates, retention of newsroom workers at smaller papers is also a long-term, continuing problem, and high turnover of staff can lead to credibility problems with readers as new faces come and go on the community beats (Overby, 1998). Weaver and Wilhoit (1982-83) found low salary and poor benefits driving young journalists from the profession. A quarter of a century later, Everbach and Flournoy (2007) found women leaving journalism for similar reasons. In the years between, Rich (1990) noted that almost 80 percent of journalists in their 20s would consider changing careers. Wood (2000) found 22- to 33-year-olds were most likely to leave their jobs, with more than three-fourths of editors saying they were losing staffers from that age group; a quarter of those editors said their most-senior news employees had been with the paper for five years or less. Landon (2003) found only 19 percent of journalists under 30 planned to make newspapers a career. Victory (2003) cited unattainable career advancement at small dailies and weeklies as a cause of frequent staff turnover. "And the turnover wheel continues to spin," he observed. Mostyn (2008) reported losing five reporters in five years at his weekly.

Editors and publishers understand the importance of good hiring decisions if such turnover is to be minimized. Recruiting and retaining the right people is an inherent challenge (Oickle, 2008; Current, 2007). "It's hard to come up with anything that says more about a leader's long-term influence on an organization than the people he or she hires," says Poynteronline news director Scott Libin. "It would probably be possible to trace most of journalism's epic failures on bad hiring decisions" (Libin, 2006).

Others agree about the importance of hiring. "Hiring a reporter is nerve-wracking business," says Editor Richard Mostyn. "It's never easy. And it's the most important job an editor can do" (Mostyn, 2008). Oickle notes: "You cringe at the prospects of trying to find the right person because you know it won't be easy" (Oickle, 2008). Among the challenges is attracting candidates with strong job skills. Hickey (1999) noted that editors were finding applicants with less knowledge of public affairs, weaker writing skills and lower motivation.

To find that "right person," editors traditionally have relied on references, interviews and testing.

References have long been a staple in the hiring process across most businesses. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management showed that reference checks are likely in 80 to 90 percent of job searches to fill desk-type positions (Doyle, 2009). With some references becoming unwilling to give out anything but basic "date-of-hire" types of information, some editors have begun going beyond provided references to seek information. Pohjolainen (2008) tells of contacting an editor at a paper in competition with a job candidate's own and learning the reporter had a reputation of being a weak performer.

Reference checks may lead to an interview, a key tool in determining a candidate's skills and character (Alves, 2007; Current, 2007). Interviews help editors check the candidate's potential fit in the organization and the community as well as his/her "hard" skills (e.g., writing, spelling, grammar) and "soft" skills (e.g., open-mindedness, flexibility, curiosity). Various types of tests are sometimes used as part of the interview to evaluate such skills in job candidates (Current, 2007; Coverdill and Finlay, 1998; Marsden, 1996).

Skills tests as part of the job application process have been a staple of newspaper hiring (Pierce and Miller, 2007; Engh, 2006; Gwin, 1998; Hipsman and Wearden, 1990). Becker, Fruit and Caudill (1987) found that about half of dailies used one or more tests during the application process. Basic skills (spelling, punctuation, grammar) often rank among the most important skills in a desirable employee (Pierce and Miller, 2007), along with critical-thinking ability (Lepre and Bleske, 2005; Pierce and Miller, 2007). But fit is also important, sometimes taking precedence over educational attainment (e.g., grade-point average) and personality (Bills, 1988) and even job-specific skills (Lowrey and Becker, 2001; Hollifield, Kosicki and Becker, 1997). Some editors eschew tryouts and writing tests altogether, relying instead on clips and interview performance (Mehlsak, 2008). And, as Grimm (2006) observes, "Some editors abuse tests, some never use them, and most aren't sure just what they're looking at when they scan the results."

Methodology

To examine editors' game plan for finding that often-elusive best fit, a 21-question survey was prepared for mailing to editors, publishers, human-resource people or others in charge of hiring newsroom staffers at daily and weekly newspapers in Minnesota. For a few of the larger dailies, the newspaper was contacted to get the name of a specific person to whom the questionnaire should be mailed. For the smaller dailies and the weeklies, the survey was sent to the editor or publisher as listed in the Minnesota Newspaper Association directory. The survey was pretested for clarity by faculty in the mass communications department at a state university.

The questionnaire and a stamped return envelope were mailed to all 26 regular daily papers in the state. (Two specialized dailies were omitted from the study.) It was also mailed to 52 Minnesota weeklies, which were chosen from the Minnesota Newspaper Association annual directory using a random-number table as a starting point; that sample represented about one in seven Minnesota weeklies. Circulations of the newspapers ranged from 642 to 368,794, with all the papers except two Twin Cities dailies having a circulation of less than 48,000. After two weeks, follow-up phone calls were made to non-responding papers asking them to return the surveys. After one more week, the researchers began making phone calls to non-responding papers to administer the questionnaire by phone.

Results

Either by mail or by phone call, all 26 dailies in the state (100 percent) and 37 of the sample of weeklies (71 percent) responded to the questionnaire. The process of collecting data took a little more than five weeks from the initial mailing to the point at which it was decided no more responses would be forthcoming after at least four attempts had been made to contact each non-responding paper by mail or phone call.

The researchers then tabulated the results,[2] which showed the following:

It is clear (but not surprising) that daily papers receive many more applications for job openings than weeklies, a situation that instantly gives dailies a greater chance to find the right person for the job. None of the dailies reported getting fewer than five applications for newsroom openings, but 41 percent of the weeklies said they get fewer than five. That contrasts with 38 percent of dailies getting more than 20 applications, but only 11 percent of weeklies having that luxury of choice among candidates.

The difference between dailies and weeklies was not so great when the number of candidates interviewed was considered. Dailies reported interviewing three to five candidates for an average opening and 62 percent of weeklies did three to five interviews. The difference was also not great when it came to multiple interviews of candidates, with about half of the papers in each group (54 percent dailies, 46 percent weeklies) saying they interview a candidate more than once in seeking the right hire. When doing those interviews, more than 80 percent of the dailies say they have more than one employee involved in weighing the candidate's fit; 68 percent of the weeklies call on more than one person to do the interviews. And it is clear that in-person interviews are a vital part of the hiring process: 92 percent of dailies and 84 percent of weeklies said they never hire without interviewing the candidate in person (as opposed, e.g., to phone or e-mail interviews).

The size of the paper didn't seem to make much difference in the number of

references contacted to help inform the hiring decision, with about half of the respondents (53 percent dailies, 49 percent weeklies) saying they usually check three to five references for candidates they are considering hiring. The favorite contact method for dailies and weeklies alike is the telephone, with 46 percent and 47 percent of dailies and weeklies, respectively, saying phone contact is No. 1. A handful of respondents from both dailies and weeklies indicated they go beyond listed references to check out job candidates. Said one: "We call past employers whether or not they are listed as a reference on a resume."

Regarding the qualifications candidates bring to the job, a journalism degree appears to be more important for landing a job at a daily than at a weekly. Among dailies, more than three out of four respondents said a journalism degree is an expectation. Only half of the weeklies agreed with that expectation, with several editors saying they are willing to train local residents who display potential for on-the-job training and already have the advantage of being familiar with the community.

Also a greater expectation among the dailies is hands-on experience (i.e., beyond classroom training). While only 4 percent of dailies said hands-on experience isn't a prerequisite, 28 percent of the weeklies said lack of hands-on work wouldn't preclude a candidate's hiring. About 10 percent of the dailies said they demand at least three years of hands-on experience in a candidate, but none of the weeklies reported such a requirement. Fresh journalism graduates who have gained student newspaper experience stand a chance of hiring at either a daily or a weekly, with 72 percent of dailies and 64 percent of weeklies saying they would consider hiring such a candidate.

It was interesting to note that an internship in journalism carried much more weight with both daily and weekly hirers. This was especially true at dailies, with 73 percent saying they preferred a journalism internship over student newspaper work. At weeklies, one-third said the internship was preferred, only 5 percent favored student newspaper work, but 57 percent valued the experience as equal.

In helping determine a candidate's qualifications, dailies are more likely to require formal skills tests of candidates. About 62 percent of the dailies said they ask the candidate to do a formal test, primarily via a writing assignment (35 percent of those requiring a test) or a test of spelling, punctuation and grammar (27 percent). A minority (43 percent) of the weeklies use formal tests, with 36 percent of those using tests asking the candidate to complete a writing assignment and 36 percent testing skills in mechanics.

Clips of previous work as evidence of ability and fit are important for papers large and small. A full 100 percent of the dailies say they won't hire without examining the candidate's earlier work, and 89 percent of the weeklies make that requirement. How many clips are enough? Fifty-eight percent of the dailies ask to see five to 10 examples, and 31 percent require four or fewer. Among weeklies, 43 percent want five to 10 clips, but a close 40 percent will accept fewer than five.

Once a decision is made to make a job offer to a candidate, hiring personnel at both dailies and weeklies are likely to act quickly on their choices. More than 40 percent of respondents at both types of papers said a job offer typically follows the interview in one to two weeks, and about one-third of each type of paper makes the offer in less than a week. The offer is most likely to be made by telephone, with three quarters of dailies and 69 percent of weeklies listing the phone as their tool of choice. Weeklies were somewhat more likely than dailies to make an on-the-spot job offer to the right candidate, with 17 percent of weeklies saying in-person offers at the conclusion of the interview are common, compared with 7 percent of dailies that said a job offer immediately after the interview was likely.

Respondents were asked to rate the readiness of candidates for the job for which they were applying. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant poorly prepared and 5 meant very well prepared, almost half of the respondents at both types of papers gave a "preparedness" score of 3 (46 percent dailies, 49 percent weeklies). An additional 28 percent of dailies offered an even stronger score of 4. On the other hand, 16 percent of the weeklies gave a score of only 2. None of the dailies and only 3 percent of the weeklies gave the lowest score, a 1.

Respondents were also asked to explain why a person brought in for an interview ended up *not* being offered the job. The No. 1 reason for both dailies (45 percent) and weeklies (33 percent) was because the interview didn't go well. Almost a quarter of the dailies reported turning down an applicant because of a "gut feeling" about the candidate's fit in the job and community; only 6 percent of the weeklies shared that feeling. But both types of papers (12 percent dailies, 14 percent weeklies) said the personality of the applicant factored into evaluating fitness for the job. Only 8 percent of the dailies and 4 percent of the weeklies actually stated that the candidate didn't seem to be "a good fit" for the paper, but those low numbers may be a matter of semantics — it is likely that such reasons as personality issues, weak interviews and gut feelings also might lead to a "bad fit" conclusion.

The final question of the survey allowed respondents to make other comments about the hiring process. A sampling of those comments is worth sharing.

A recurring theme among the editors at papers large and small was a lack of preparation for the job:

- "College grads always seem surprised at the amount of stories they have to write. We want quality and quantity. Later in their careers they can find positions with fewer stories."
- "Be able to take pictures! Be able to find local news. Know the community."
- "College journalists underestimate the necessity of hands-on experience."
- "Too many fresh grads have not completed an internship or worked on a school newspaper...There is nothing to distinguish them from other applicants."
- "Do an internship at a real paper."

Several of the comments from editors focused on the professional appearance candidates bring to the interview:

- "Don't wear jeans to the interview."
- "Dress for the interview like you want the job. Don't come in jeans or baggy clothes. Suit and dress is still very respectable."
- "A smile and proper dress attire goes a long way."
- "Candidates need to dress the part. Professional."

Some editors decried the penchant among younger grads to overuse e-mail:

- "A resume by e-mail won't work."
- "I find today's journalism grads lack drive and ambition. Too many would rather do their interviews using e-mail rather than person-to-person." (The editor was referring to on-the-job interviews of sources, not the job -application interview.)

Many of the editors' comments simply had to do with using common sense in applying for the job:

- "Some people are slow to apply. Apply quickly."
- "Respond to opening as soon as possible."
- "Get names right; watch grammar in letters and resumes."
- "Rarely do candidates write a thank-you."
- "Common sense goes a long way."

Discussion

The data gathered in this study suggest that weekly and daily newspapers face both shared and different challenges in hiring newsroom personnel. Dailies tend to have much larger pools of applicants from which to choose the "best face" to represent the paper in the public's eye. Weeklies still face the long-standing, continuing challenge of finding and retaining applicants who will work for what some job-seekers see as low pay in a dull, unexciting small-town setting. The result is that reporters at many smaller newspapers seem to be continuing a "tradition" of taking a job to get some experience, then parlaying that experience into a job at a larger, better-paying paper, often within a year or so of being hired. This staff turnover, of course, makes it difficult for a paper to have reporters who stay around long enough to develop a sense of community, who come to understand the specific needs of the community and who represent the newspaper well in the

community's collective eye and are accepted by the community. (Acceptance of newcomers of any kind in some small, rural communities has always been an issue. [Kassover and McKeown, 1981; Harper, 1989]. Just ask a new reporter making a first appearance at a small-town city council meeting.)

The findings suggest it is not only newspaper hiring personnel who have to work tirelessly at finding the right fit for the new hire. Journalism-school graduates need to do their homework and tailor their job search to mesh with not only the type of newspaper (e.g., daily vs. weekly, urban vs. rural) to which they are applying, but also to the specific papers to which they are applying and to the specific communities in which those papers operate. And they must understand the demands of the job well enough in advance of actually applying to be sure they are prepared, through their education and experience, to handle the job should it be offered.

The data do provide a bit of sunshine for job-seekers in what is often today painted as a bleak and stormy era for journalists: There are newspaper jobs waiting out there, despite the economy and the new competition from the Internet. Those jobs may not be at the big-time dailies the job candidate dreamed about when entering J-school, but they are jobs that will provide not only experience but a decent living, and way of life, for those young journalists who are prepared to embrace community journalism and to become a vital part of that community.

Recommendations

American media are in a state of transition, with traditional media evolving and new media joining the game. The newspaper landscape is changing as part of the evolution of the larger media landscape. The ideas held by students seeking careers in journalism also are evolving. Editors, publishers and others involved in hiring newsroom staffers need to stay aware of trends in educating future journalists as well as trends in media use in their communities so that new hires will be the best people to serve both their newspapers and their communities. Research into training these new journalists and into successful hiring and retention practices should be ongoing. The study described in this paper looked broadly at traditional hiring policies and methods. Follow-up research should focus on specific aspects of modern-day hiring — e.g., the efficacy of journalism job Web sites vs. traditional print advertising for locating candidates. An area in which more research would be useful is the use of and reliance on applicant-provided references vs. references the editor digs out on his/her own for help in making hiring decisions. Another area that cries out for research-supported information is how editors actually interpret and apply the results of the application tests they require, as well as how much validity those tests have in predicting the success of new hires. Yet another area for study is what new reporters themselves do to try to fit into their community (and how long it takes to feel accepted) in regard to their connections with both news sources and ordinary citizens; an angle on that direction of research might be an examination of how quickly and well those sources and citizens feel a new reporter fits in, and what they see as behavior that helps secure the fit. Future research should also examine the motivation behind students seeking careers in print newspaper work vs. Internet news work so that the "best and brightest" journalism students don't so quickly gravitate toward the Internet at the expense of traditional newspapers.

Marshel D. Rossow is a professor and chair of mass communications at Minnesota State University in Mankato. He can be contacted at marshel.rossow@mnsu.edu.

This paper was presented at the Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XV, co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media and the National Newspaper Association Foundation, at the NNA's national convention in Mobile, Ala., Sept. 25, 2009.

References Cited

Alves, Lynee. "Hiring Techniques That Deliver...Every Time," *SNPA Bulletin*, http://www.snpa.org/circuitaddon/ebulletin/10.25.07.htmm, Oct. 25, 2007.

Becker, Lee B. "Are We What We Enroll?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 135-139.

Bills, David B. "Credentials and Capacities: Employers' Perceptions of the Acquisition of Skills," Sociological Quarterly 29, Fall 1988, pp. 439-449.

Brown, Sarah. "Generation X in the Labor Market: Why We Need to Understand Them," Publishers' Auxiliary 134, Sept. 7, 1998. p. 4.

Buffington, Mike. "Consider Hiring Native Residents Who Have Reporting 'Bug,'" *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 9-10.

Coverdill, James, and Finlay, William. "Fit and Skill in Employee Selection," *Qualitative Sociology* 21, Summer 1998) pp. 105-127.

Crockford, Dick. "Finding Writers Poses Tough Challenge for Rural Weeklies," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 12-13.

Current, Sharon. "The Right Skills: Best Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Newspaper Professionals," *Newspaper Association of America*, July/August 2007, http://www.naa.org/ Resources/Publications?Newspaper%20Marketing/News...-Right-Skills/Newspaper/Marketing-2007-JulAug-The-Right-Skills.aspx.

Doyle, Alison. "References: Will They or Won't They?" http://jobsearch.about.com/od/ gettingreferences/a/references.htm, 2009.

Engh, Dinah. "Testing, Testing: Assessment Tools Give Newspaper Managers Insights Into the Work Force," *Newspaper Association of America*, Winter 2006, http://www.naa.org/Resources/ Publications/Fusion%20Magazine/FUSION-...er-Testing/FUSION-Magazine-2006-Winter-Testing-Testing.aspx.

Everbach, Tracy, and Flournoy, Craig. "Women Leave Journalism for Better Pay, Work Conditions," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Summer 2007, pp. 52-65.

Foote, Cornelius F. Jr. "Newsroom Work Force Continues to Shrink," *ASNE Bulletin*, No,. 750, May/June 1993, p. 18.

Fuentes, Diana. "Unconventional Hiring Finds Hidden Gems," *The American Editor*, November/December 2006, pp. 28, 31.

Grimm, Joe. "How to Take Newspaper Tests," http://www.freep.com/legacy/jobspage/ toolkit/ tests.htm, 2006.

Grimm, Joe. "I'm an E-Mail Meanie," http://www.freep.com/legacy/jobspage/toolkit/meanie.htm, 2004.

Gwin, Louis. "Prospective Reporters Face Writing/Editing Tests at Many Dailies," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 101-111.

Harper, Sarah, "The British Rural Community: An Overview of Perspectives," *Journal of Rural Studies*, V. 5, Issues 2, 1989, pp. 161-184.

Hickey, Neil. "Rating the Recruits, "Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1999, p. 39.

Hipsman, Barbara, and Wearden, Stanley T. "Skills Testing at American Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Winter 1990, pp. 76-89.

Hood, Robert. "Why Low-Wage Newspapers Are Now2 Paying a Price," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 200, p. 73.

Kassover, Jodi, and McKeown, Robert L. "Resource Development, Rural Communities and Rapid Growth," *Environmental Geochemistry and Health*, V. 3, No. 2, June 1981, pp. 47-54.

Landon, Kim. "Editors' and Young Reporters' Differing Views on Community News," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 14-16.

Landon, Kim. "Young Journalists' Attitudes Toward Their Communities," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 18-20.

Lauterer, Jack. "Hold That Obit! The Report of Our Death Has Been Greatly Exaggerated," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 13-15.

Lepre, Carolyn, and Bleske, Glen L. "Little Common Ground for Magazine Editors and Professors Surveyed on Journalism Curriculum," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 190-200.

Libin, Scott M. "Hiring: Nothing Matters More," *Poynteronline*, http://www.poynter.org/ content/content-print.asp?idf776&custom=, Sept. 29, 2006.

Lowrey, Wilson, and Becker, Lee B. "The Impact of Technological Skill on Job-Finding Success in the Mass Communication Labor Market," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 4, Winter 2001, pp. 754-770.

Marsden, Peter V. "The Staffing Process," in *Organizations in America*, Arne L. Kallerberg, David Knoke, Peter V. Marsden and Joe L. Spaeth, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 1996), pp. 133-156.

Marston, Cam. "Retaining Younger Workers in the Workplace," *Fast Company.com*, Dec. 19, 2007, http://www.fastcompany.com/node/76716/print.

Mehlsak, Mo. "Maine Attraction: The Way Newspaper Life Should Be," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 10-11.

Mostyn, Richard. "Nuts! Another One Bites the Dust," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 2-4.

Oickle, Vernon. "The Hiring Game," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 5-6.

Overby, Charles. "High Newsroom Turnover Hurts Credibility," http://www.freedomforum.org/ templates/document.asp?documentIDf22, September 15, 1998.

Pierce, Tamyra, and Miller, Tommy. "Basic Journalism Skills Remain Important in Hiring," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Fall 2007, pp. 51-61.

Pohjolainen, Erkki. In "How Can I Avoid Making a Bad Hire?" Canadian Business Online, http://www.canadianbusiness.com/entrepreneur/peer-to-peer/article.jsp?content=20066015_152946 _5864, August 2005.

Porter, Tim. "Vacancies in Vacaville," *American Journalism Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2, March 2003, pp. 40-45.

Rich, Carole. "Take This Job and Shove It!" *ASNE Bulletin*, No. 736, November 1990, pp. 12-19.

Roelfsema, Isaac. "Rural Weeklies Persevere Despite Special Challenges," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 50, No. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 1-6, 8.

State of the News Media. "Newspapers," http://stateofthenewsmedia.org/2009/narrative_ newspapers_intro.php?0&media=4.

Stebbins, Chad, ed., "Recruiting Reporters in Rural Outposts," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, p. 1.

Terry, Carolyn. "Desperately Seeking Workers," *Presstime*, May 1998, http://www.naa.org/ presstime/9805/jobs.htm.

Victory, Darren W. "Employee Retention: Flip the Pyramid," *Poynter Online*, http://www. poynter.org/content_view.asp?idU070, Dec. 28, 2003.

Vlad, Tudor: Becker, Lee B.; Vogel, Stephanie Hanisak; and Wilcox, Donna. "Job Market Remains Flat," AEJMC News, Vol. 42, No. 3, November 2008, pp. 1, 4-8.

Weaver, David H., and Wilhoit, G. Cleveland. *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Whitehouse, Harry. "Real Training Starts When Graduates Arrive," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 4-6.

Wood, Jennifer. "Weekly Newspapers & Problems With Attracting Young Journalists," *Grassroots Editor*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Fall 2000, pp. 1-8.

Footnotes

1. Although hiring personnel at newspapers included in this study listed various titles — editor, publisher, editor/publisher, general manager, managing editor, executive editor, personnel manager, human-resource director, etc., this paper will refer to those responsible for newsroom hiring as "editors," because an editor under one title or another inevitably is involved in the hiring process, and the "editor" title generically well represents those involved in the process.

2. Three questionnaires were returned as much as five months after the instruments had been mailed, but these responses arrived too late to be included in the tabulation of data and were not included in the response rate cited.

Bringing journalism back: Reviving a community newspaper in an age of retreat

By **Timothy Boudreau**

Newspapers across the nation are in retreat. Pundits routinely predict the demise of print journalism, and in fact, papers large and small are cutting staff, offering buyouts, reducing the size of their news holes, struggling to make a profit and, increasingly, closing altogether. But a group of investors in Simsbury, Conn., has bucked that trend. Two former employees of the Journal Register chain and one of the employee's father have teamed up to launch their own free weekly after the chain closed the papers that served their homes in the Farmington Valley of central Connecticut.

This paper will examine the factors that influenced the decision to launch *The Valley Press*, whose first issue went out in February. The paper will consider the effort to revive the journalistic voice of four communities. What are the unique challenges of launching a newspaper in an era of global recession and journalistic retreat? How have readers, local leaders and advertisers responded to the new publication? What does the paper mean to the area's sense of community? These are among the questions this paper will consider. It will also look at the revival of a community newspaper within a larger context. How have other communities fared after their main journalistic voice went silent? How can we expect the recent spate of closures to affect their senses of community? What sort of journalistic presence if any, is likely to arise in the wake of those closures? Focusing on a weekly that hopes to prevail against the conventional wisdom, this study will highlight the importance of local journalism to a community and the challenges facing smaller papers today.

Bringing journalism back

The decision to revive the local paper by starting *The Valley Press* came shortly after the *Journal Register*'s Imprint Newspapers division announced plans to close the *Avon Post, Farmington Post, Simsbury Post* and *Tri-Town Post*.

That's when Melissa Marinan, a long-time sales rep with the *Journal Register* papers, her father, Stephen Friedman, and Ed Gunderson, who worked with a nearby *Journal Register* paper, decided to launch the *Press*, a free weekly mailed to single-family homes in Simsbury and four nearby communities.

Even in an era of journalistic retrenchment, the decision to resurrect a weekly newspaper was less daunting than some might expect, said Gunderson, who is now publisher of *The Valley Press*. While he conceded the economic recession threatens the overall newspaper industry, he remains bullish on community newspapers because "news in those papers isn't readily available anywhere else," he said. They have a niche. Larger dailies face the greatest financial turmoil today, in part because the national and international news they report is available in many other places (E. Gunderson, personal communication, June 9, 2009).

Smaller papers struggling today are often owned by large chains. The *Journal Register* papers being replaced by the *Press*, for example, reported local news but lost touch with their readers.

"Readers didn't feel the tie," Gunderson said, in part because the papers were published elsewhere and were owned by a company in Pennsylvania. He predicts the *Press* will be more visible in the local communities and more successful.

Gunderson called the closing of the *Journal Register* papers a "wake-up call" for readers. "Until they closed, people didn't realize what a void it would leave...Many thought those (*Journal Register*) papers were poor, but at least we had one."

The nearby metro daily, the *Hartford Courant*, had closed its suburban office and largely ignored the areas served by *The Valley Press*, he said. "The community was going to take a double-hit. The daily abandoned them, and the weekly went away."

That left an opening for the new publication. "I saw an opportunity and took it." Gunderson said. "On the passion side, I get to do something I like. I was very fortunate to be at the right place at the right time."

In an era of unusual turmoil for newspapers, *The Valley Press* faces the usual challenges for publications large and small: adequately covering its communities and trying to find "the right balance" between the business and editorial sides, he said. "I hate to say it, but the editorial staff is almost a necessary evil," and some cuts at the *Press* have taken place there. "All good newspapers want unlimited editorial staff, but with our model of free mailed distribution, our costs are high, and we have to watch that particular expense line carefully."

Community response

After losing their journalistic voice with the closing of the *Journal Register* papers, local readers and advertisers welcomed the new publication, which now reaches about 30,000 homes. "We get calls every week saying 'thank you for being here,'" Gunderson said. "It's amazing. The passion (for a local newspaper) has been a lot greater than expected."

The *Press* started publishing 28 pages, but strong advertising demand had pushed the page count to 48 by late June (E. Gunderson, personal communication, July 2, 2009). The paper has been "bombarded" with press releases from local schools, charities and local town halls eager to communicate with the public.

Michael Clark, town council chairman in Farmington, a community served by the *Press*, said, "The most difficult part of the job is getting accurate information out to the taxpayer, and the best vehicle for that is the newspaper. Any newspaper now that will cover local matters and can get the information out to the public is really welcome," he told the *Hartford Courant* (The Laurel, 2009).

Gunderson said the *Press* is also considering adding staff to bolster its watchdog role and increasing its online presence, although the focus — and its main revenue source — will remain its print product.

The *Press* is relying on traditional methods to attract local readers by focusing on area sports, school events, local government and activities involving children. And while the industry is struggling to attract younger readers, the *Press* is focusing specifically on younger families. "They spend the money, and they're important to the community," he said. The paper runs writing contests and lots of photographs that appeal to that demographic.

The weekly has also distinguished itself by running more news — its ad content is about 30 percent — and more color than many papers its size.

Local leaders and readers say the newspaper is serving a public good, Gunderson said. "On other hand, it's been educational process when I meet with public groups. I have to remind them we're not a public service; we're a business." While many journalists are passionate about their work and want to serve the public good, their newspapers also must make a profit.

Newspaper closings and their effects

Other communities have been less fortunate than those served by *The Valley Press*: When their local newspapers closed, no other media stepped in to fill the

journalistic void, and some researchers suggest that void can hurt civic engagement. In one of the few studies of the effects of a newspaper's closing on its community, Princeton University researchers reported disheartening findings.

In northern Kentucky towns once covered by the *Cincinnati Post*, voter turnout dropped, fewer people ran for public office and more incumbents were re-elected after the paper closed at the end of 2007 (Luscombe, 2009). While the researchers cautioned against drawing definitive conclusions from their small-scale study, it seems to support predictions by many that a community's loss of a journalistic watchdog and venue for public debate discourages civic activity. "To the extent that we can extrapolate, we can say that local coverage is something the newspapers uniquely provide," researcher Sam Schulhofer-Wohl told *Time* magazine. "When people don't have (local newspapers), they are much less engaged."

For purposes of this paper, however, it should be noted that those effects were less pronounced in smaller communities.

Those smaller towns sometimes draw a sense of pride and purpose from their local papers. In a 2005 Humboldt, Kan., study, almost half (47.2 percent) of respondents said the loss of the *Humboldt Union* newspaper was a sign their community was dying (Smethers, Bressers, Harvey, Willard, & Freeland, 2007). Even more respondents said the town "should have a newspaper of its own" and that the presence of one gave them a sense of pride in their community (Smethers, et al., 2007). Overwhelmingly they said they missed following local government news — which leads to more civic involvement — after their paper closed.

The lack of civic engagement brought on by a newspaper's closing might stem from the unique role print media play in many communities. "More than any other medium, newspapers have been our eyes on the state, our check on private abuses, our civic alarm systems," Paul Starr argued in a 2009 article in *The New Republic*.

Newspapers provide the bulk of original reporting and coverage of public affairs, and Starr (2009) said their demise could lead to an increase in public corruption, greater disparities in knowledge between news junkies and news dropouts, and more ideological polarization as readers seek exclusively information from sources tailored to their beliefs and preconceptions instead of newspapers aimed at general audiences.

Even if broadcast outlets or locally based Web sites try to pick up the slack left by a departed newspaper, the community loses an important — often the primary — source of information in the journalistic ecosystem. Newspapers routinely set the agenda for broadcast media in many communities and provide a starting point for debate and analysis on blogs and other Web sites. General-interest newspapers are also credited for incidental learning among readers who ordinarily would ignore civic issues but catch a glimpse of a headline on their ways to another story or feature in the paper (Starr, 2009).

The loss of newspapers in communities large and small poses a special risk to political transparency, some warn. "More of American life would occur in the shadows," said Tom Rosenstiel of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. "We won't know what we won't know" (Starr, 2009).

Others suggest we must find ways to keep journalism alive and that the newspaper ranks with other important social institutions. "We need to view journalism in the same way that we view libraries and public schools — as absolutely essential to any prospering community," Theodore Glasser, professor of communications at Stanford University, told *USA Today* (Lieberman, 2009).

Americans in general are less certain about the effect of a newspaper's closing on their communities. In a March 2009 Pew Research Center study, fewer than half (43%) said that losing their local newspaper would hurt civic life in their community "a lot." Only 33 percent said they would personally miss reading the local newspaper a lot if it were no longer available. Read more positively, however, almost three in four (74 percent) said the closing would hurt civic life *a lot or some* and more than half (57 percent) said they would miss reading their paper *a lot or some* if it closed. And those who read newspapers more often — generally better educated and more politically active than non-newspaper readers — were far more likely to say they would miss their newspaper and that its closing would hurt civic life.

Some observers are sanguine about the impact of the Web — which is often blamed for the demise of traditional newspapers — on journalism. Johnson (2009) argues in *Prospect* that online journalism is maturing into a "vast new forest of news, data, opinion, satire — and perhaps most importantly, direct experience." Newspapers will remain part of the media landscape, but they will lose their dominant position. Citizens as well as media professionals will share in identifying, creating and discussing news, and an era of hyper-localism, more diversity and greater government transparency is likely to follow, he said.

Responses to newspaper closings

The question of whether and how a newspaper's closing would affect a community is no longer mere speculation. In cities across the country, dailies have been closing or cutting back operations and laying off staffers at an alarming rate. In Michigan alone in recent months, the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* cut home delivery to three days a week. *The Ann Arbor News* announced plans to close, making it the first city in America to lose its only daily newspaper. Other newspapers in the Booth chain, part of Newhouse's Advance Publications, announced plans to cut back on their print editions and to consolidate their operations.

Elsewhere, the *Rocky Mountain News* closed completely in February, leaving Denver a one-daily newspaper city, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* closed its print operations in March after nearly 150 years in business. The Tribune Company and the *Journal Register* have filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

The 45,000-circulation *Ann Arbor News* has largely been replaced by AnnArbor.com, which now employs just a handful of former journalists from the its print operation and is run by a "content director." Although AnnArbor.com will publish a print edition twice weekly, some local officials fear the impact of losing the traditional paper (Murray, 2009). "My biggest worry is there going to be an adequate amount of news that will get out to the community," Ann Arbor City Council Stephen Rapundalo told the News. "It is a serious concern of mine."

Joan Lowenstein, a former City Council member with ties to the business community, told the *News*: "Citizens find out about government from reading the newspaper, but government officials also find out what is happening with the citizens by reading the newspaper. You lose that kind of mirror as a government official. Citizens will lose the ability to follow all kinds of information" (Murray, 2009).

That sense of loss is typical for many journalists and some readers. In response, former staffers at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which went online only in March, launched a competing local news Web site and others were planning to start one focused on investigative and narrative journalism. After the closure of the *Rocky Mountain News*, former writers and editors tried unsuccessfully to attract 50,000 subscribers for access to premium content on their *InDenverTimes* Web site (Lieberman, 2009). They drew only 3,000, but they still hope to develop a successful business model. Similar Web sites have tried a combination of reader subscriptions and donations, funding by philanthropic organizations and ad sales, although none has yet found the ideal model.

Sites such as VoiceofSanDiego.org, an independent non-profit, have tried to fill the traditional watchdog role by uncovering conflicts of interest at city hall and doing original reporting on local politics, schools and the environment (Perez-Pena, 2008). In many ways the San Diego site resembles a traditional daily. A recent edition featured a hard-news story about sheriff deputies raiding a political fundraiser and feature-oriented fare such as architectural critiques of the new library or suggestions for summer beach reading. Similar sites such as MinnPost.com and the *St. Louis Beacon* draw thousands of readers a day, but those pale in comparison to readership numbers at traditional newspaper Web sites.

While cuts at traditional newspapers have given these Web sites an opening, "Even the most well-funded of these sites are a far cry in resources from a traditional newspaper," Robert Giles, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, told the *New York Times* (Perez-Pena, 2008).

Stanford's Theodore Glasser doubts the Web can ever replace traditional newspapers. "'I've seen nothing in the blogosphere that provides the sustained, systematic coverage that a good newsroom provides. Not even close."

Some communities recognize the value of good journalism and have rallied to save their local newspaper. After Gannett announced plans to close the Birmingham *Eccentric*, which serves five wealthy Detroit suburbs, local leaders and citizens came together to rescue it. They hope to raise 3,000 new subscriptions, although they are still short of that goal. In a cost-cutting move, the paper has stopped free deliveries and plans to limit its free Web content (Dellamere, 2009).

Still, the *Eccentric* may be an aberration. It serves an older, affluent, highly educated readership with an allegiance to print. It remains to be seen whether this rescue attempt will work and, if it does, whether it can be duplicated in other places.

In her discussion of the *Eccentric*, Diana Dellamere draws several lessons:

• Stress the paper's value to the community; don't let readers take it for granted. *Eccentric* readers quickly recognized they would lose a valuable resource if the paper folded.

• Get in touch with readers and find out what they want. *Eccentric* readers demanded more local news, unavailable elsewhere, but less national and state news, which was available.

• Build on a sense of community. The *Eccentric* hired more local columnists, some of them local high-school students, to give its readers something unique.

In Humboldt, Kan., the gap left by the closing of the *Union* was partially filled by coverage in nearby newspapers, a Chamber of Commerce newsletter, and by family and friends (Smethers et al., 2009). But residents surveyed said they still preferred their own newspaper. Eventually a nearby editor re-established the *Union*, later reselling it. The newspaper was still in operation as of late August.

"The town found out...just how much they missed their own newspaper, said Steve Smethers, one of the study's authors (personal communication, August 24, 2009). Whether real or perceived, "losing the newspaper became symbolic of the town dying."

Reason for optimism?

Despite the widely publicized troubles of some newspapers in 2009, some observers say journalists are their own worst enemies (Lieberman, 2009). "They are running around arguing the sky is falling. And they're making the situation appear far worse than it is,"" said Robert Picard, a media economist.

These observers say the optimism displayed at *The Valley Press* and some community newspapers around the nation is warranted. While profits have dropped significantly in recent years, the average newspaper still generates about a 10 percent profit margin, and the outlook, at least for many smaller papers, continues to be good.

Papers with less than 15,000 circulation saw classified ad revenues increase an average of 23 percent in the five years ending in 2008, The Inland Press Association found in a recent study of 125 newspapers. Overall ad revenue also grew slightly for those papers but decreased about 25 percent for dailies of more than 80,000 circulation (Liedtke, 2009).

Many larger papers have seen drastic cuts in their news staff in recent years, while papers under 50,000 circulation were also spending more on their newsrooms in 2008 than in 2004, the study found.

Smaller publications tend to have a lock on local news, and they provide information unavailable elsewhere. Further, online sites such as Craigslist are yet to reach many smaller communities (Liedtke, 2009).

"Advertisers in big cities have plenty of options to reach consumers," said Randy Bennett, senior vice president of business development at the Newspaper Association of America (Lieberman, 2009). "Advertisers outside of big cities have far fewer alternatives ... Smaller markets are in better financial shape."

Gunderson of *The Valley Press* agreed. "Many smaller (papers) are growing," he said. "You can't get that news anywhere else. That's the heart of it. "

Timothy Boudreau is an associate professor of journalism at Central Michigan University. He can be contacted at boudr1t@cmich.edu.

This paper was presented at the Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XV, co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media and the National Newspaper Association Foundation, at the NNA's national convention in Mobile, Ala., Sept. 25, 2009.

References

Dellamere, D. (2009, August 19). Lessons from the Birmingham *Eccentric*: How one community is saving its newspaper. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved August 23, 2009. http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/lessons_from_the_birmingham_ec.php?page=all.

Johnson, S. (May 2009). Are we on track for a golden age of serious journalism? *Prospect*, 158.

Lieberman, D. (2009, March 17). Newspaper closings raise fear about industry. *USA Today*.

Liedtke, M. (2009, August 9). Small is beautiful (and successful). Retrieved August 23, 2009. http://tech.yahoo.com/news/ap/20090809/ap_on_hi_te/us_small_newspapers

Lubscombe, B. (2009, March 22). What happens when a town loses its newspaper? *Time*.

Murray, S. (2009, March 23). *Ann Arbor News* to close in July. *Ann Arbor News*.

Perez-Pena, R. (2008, November 18). Web sites that dig for news rise as watchdogs. *The New York Times.*

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2009, March 12). Many would shrug if their newspaper closed. Retrieved June 20, 2009, at http://people-press.org/report/497/many-would-shrug-if-local-newspaper-closed.

Smethers, J. S., B. Bressers, L. Harvey, A. Willard, and G. Freeland. (2007). "No Union in Humboldt, Kansas: Readers' Perception of Loss When a Community Loses Its Newspaper." *Newspaper Research Journa*l, 28 (4), 6-21.

Starr, P. (2009, March 4). Goodbye to the age of newspapers (Hello to a new era of corruption). *The New Republic*.

The Laurel. (2009, January 30). *The Valley Press* is born. Retrieved June 30, 2009, at http://thelaurel.wordpress.com/2009/01/30/the-valley-press-is-born/

Tartakoff, J. (2009, April 15). Former Seattle P-I staffers launch non-profit news site. paidContent.org. Retrieved July 5, 2009, at http://paidcontent.org/article/419-new-seattle-news-website/.

Citizen journalists starting newspapers in towns that have lost their weeklies

By **Claire Serant**

For the past three years, annual festivals, church-sponsored events and city council meetings have been missing from the pages of Collinwood, Ohio's weekly newspaper.

Because the newspaper, the *Sun Scoop Journal*, is gone.

Collinwood was the first community stunned by Sun Newspapers Inc.'s plan to downsize in the East Side Cleveland neighborhood in response to the economic downturn.

"It was devastating," Collinwood City Councilman Michael D. Polensek recalled about the decision of the Sun Newspapers' parent company — Advance Publications — to eliminate the *Sun Scoop* from its roster of weeklies. "Many older people in urban areas rely on print media. They don't have access to the Internet. They want to clip coupons."

The *Sun Scoop*'s larger sister daily newspaper, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer,* provides scant local coverage of the community. So some Collinwood news consumers have taken matters in their own hands — or fingertips if necessary. A group of concerned Collinwood citizens, which includes Polensek, debuted a weekly print newspaper in September — the *Collinwood Observer*.

The move is part of a growing trend that has citizen journalists working with non-profit organizations to become frontline communicators in towns that lost newspapers recently.

Within the past year, the newspaper industry has seen major dailies such as the *Rocky Mountain News* in Colorado shut its doors after 150 years along with the 146-year old *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. About 87 newspapers nationwide, mostly in rural communities, closed or became online publications since Jan. 1, according Paper Cuts, a Web site that monitors the newspaper industry. Since July, troubled weeklies the *Ann Arbor News* in Michigan and the *Eagle Times* in New Hampshire shut their doors. The *Ann Arbor News* will become AnnArbor.com — an online publication that offers readers print editions on Thursdays and Sundays.

"In the foreseeable future, it seems, there will be two kinds of nonprofit newspapers — those which are deliberately so and those which are reluctantly so," Steven Coll, a former *Washington Post* journalist, said in the Think Tank column he wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine in January. Coll now works for a nonprofit organization, New American Foundation in Washington, D.C. He argues that fundraising issues and cost-conscious management required in a tax-exempt business could work well for ailing newspapers.

The Collinwood venture, which has been available online since late July, allows citizens to post news stories on topics they consider newsworthy. But true news hounds beware. The inaugural online edition has no mention of President Obama's health care debates, the evils of sub-prime mortgages or actress Lindsey Lohan's latest antics. Don't expect to see a summary lead or the traditional inverted pyramid style of writing used since the Civil War to emphasize important facts and end with points of lesser value. The *Collinwood Observer*, like its namesake sister Cleveland effort, the five-year old *Lakewood Observer*, will tap volunteer delivery persons, editors, illustrators, photographers and writers to help the nonprofit civic journalism endeavor succeed, said publisher Betsy Voinovich.

"You can write about anything and everything that has to do with this community: report news from your family, from your street to your street association to what our representatives are doing downtown, downstate, and in D.C.," Voinovich, the daughter of U.S. Sen. George Voinovich, declared in the inaugural issue adding, "From praising a St. Jerome's fashion show to outing parking problems on East 185th street, to sharing information to help keep your church or your elementary school open."

Polensek stressed, "People miss the *Sun Scoop* because they had stories about the police beat, Little League and other sports teams...*The Plain Dealer* has so much negative stuff. People don't want to read it. We need a paper that local residents and kids can rely on."

The rallying cry for citizen journalists is encouraging, said Laura Rich Fine, a retired newspaper industry analyst and adjunct professor at Kent State University in Ohio.

"People migrate to certain news to get their own point of view," Fine said "Both (objective news forums and citizen-driven publications) can coexist."

Cleveland Plain Dealer editor Susan Goldberg agrees.

"Just because a community is losing a paper doesn't mean it loses coverage from the geographically broader paper that will be delivered to that area."

The major daily recently broke a story about a Cuyahoga county corruption scandal which touched Bedford. However, most readers agree, *The Plain Dealer* no longer provides as much community news as it once did. Through buyouts, layoffs and attrition, it newsroom staff, which once numbered more than 400, has been reduced by around 175. In the past decade the newspaper also eliminated four zoned Metro editions and closed its five suburban bureaus.

To critics, the push for citizen journalism and its positive affects remain to be seen. Concerns are apparent. Without the benefit of journalism training, the citizen scribes undermine news credibility of their organizations. Those writers can become mouthpieces for certain political groups or individual politicians which violates ethical guidelines that most salaried reporters support. Some media observers contend the "new" publications will celebrate the new fire engine but underreport other budget items on City Hall agendas.

During the Civil War, freelance reporters were hired by newspapers to help cover battles. Historians contend several conflicts were underreported as editors scrambled to keep up with the news and correct grammar and reporting skills of the untrained correspondents. Will today's untrained citizen journalists fare better?

In suburban Cleveland proponents say the time is right for citizen journalism since Sun Newspapers, which once operated 22 weeklies in the area, has downsized to 11 weeklies after consolidating some coverage. However, the reduction left five communities without any coverage at all. The *Bedford Sun Banner*, *Euclid Sun Journal, Garfield Maple Sun, Nordonia Hills Sun* and *Twinsburg Sun* were closed in August as long-time staffers took voluntary buyouts, said Linda Kinsey, Sun Newspapers' executive editor. Many of those reporters wrote seven or eight stories each week about local issues. Remaining staffers from those papers will be absorbed by the Sun chain.

"My heart aches for the papers that are folding," Kinsey said adding, "We will continue to cover them online."

Kinsey noted that many of Sun Newspapers' older readers, who are not Internet savvy, love having their weekly print editions "in their hands."

Diane Cobb, an Oakwood Village city councilperson expressed concern that Bedford, a neighboring town that shared stories in the *Bedford Sun*, would lose

its advertising voice.

"People go to the local paper for the advertisements," Cobb said. "They want to know about the yard sales, to sell a car or furniture. Those types of things aren't put in the bigger paper."

Indeed the lack of classified and national advertising has hurt the newspaper industry. Some citizen-run news organizations, like the *Collinwood Observer*, seek a not-for-profit status as a means to get their ventures started. Polensek provided seed money — an undisclosed amount — to turn the newly created Web site into a full-fledge print operation. He, Betsy Voinovich and *Lakewood Observer* publisher James O'Bryan are recruiting volunteers.

Polensek believes his foray into journalism is complemented by his three decades as a city councilman and longtime role as a local activist But some media executives say news-starved communities will not be rescued by public officials.

"Don't count on politicians to come through. It's difficult to get real resources," said Michael Schroder, owner of Central Connecticut Communications, a for-profit media company that purchased *The Bristol Press*, *The Herald of New Britain* and *The Sunday Herald Press* from Journal Register Company earlier this year. The sale included assets of the papers' Web sites and of three Connecticut weeklies: the *Wethersfield Pos*t, the *Newington Town Crier* and the *Rocky Hill Pos*t, according to the company's Web site.

"We had to dig deep," said Schroder during a panel discussion on community journalism at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Boston convention in August. "We cut operational expenses to the bone...We have to show our worth and value (to the community)."

And Clevelanders look for that same value. Now, so Bedford residents are preparing for life after the *Bedford Sun*. The community lost another weekly *The Bedford Register* last year.

"Losing the *Register* was bad, but to lose the *Bedford Sun* will affect our quality of life," Bedford Mayor Daniel Pocek said of the publication that covered Bedford Heights, Oakwood and Walton Hills.

Meanwhile, Bedford's 14,000 residents, who have a median income of $41,838, according to 2008 City-Data.com statistics, face not having a reporter show up to city council meetings and other community events.

Pocek fears *Bedford Sun* advertisers, many mom-and-pop businesses, will be unable to reach the area's older customers who do not have Internet access. Many area residents do not subscribe to the *Plain Dealer*, which offers access to the *Sun* weeklies online, he said.

For now, the *Bedford Sun*'s loss has Clevelander Joseph Mestnik, poised to expand his *Liberty Views & News*, a monthly periodical that covers Oakwood Village and Bedford, to a weekly paper. Mestnik calls the monthly media outlet he created in 1984 an "information resource" for residents. He used thousands of dollars of his own money to print 10,000 copies of the free newspaper, which allows government officials and concerned citizens to pen their own articles.

"At least 95 percent of *Liberty* readers don't read the *Plain Dealer*," Mestnick said adding, "They don't see the news they can use. They get it from us every month."

Claire Serant is an assistant professor in the Division of Mass Communications, Journalism, Television and Film at St. John's University in Queens, New York. She can be contacted at cdserant2003@yahoo.com.

Where editors can turn for advice

By **Kevin Warneke**

Jason Sturek considers himself fortunate.

As the new editor, and soon-to-be publisher, of the *Pender Times*, Sturek had people to whom he could turn for advice.

His first option was his former instructors at Wayne (Neb.) State College. Next, was his old boss at the nearby *West Point News*. Finally, he could turn to the Pender paper's former publisher, who guided Sturek during his short stint as editor and who ensured a smooth transition when he sold him the business.

Without these outlets, Sturek figures he would have found himself isolated during his initial time running the weekly Nebraska newspaper. "It would be a total vacuum," he said. "There wouldn't have been anyone local who could tie it all together for me."

Twenty years earlier, Russ Pankonin found himself in the same enviable situation. He admits he was unprepared for his new duties as editor of the *Wauneta Breeze*. "I was a greenhorn," he recalled. "I was a business major in college."

Pankonin turned to his father-in-law, a veteran community newspaperman, and he turned to the *Breeze*'s former publisher for advice. His father-in-law helped him understand the intricacies of community journalism; the former publisher helped him become acclimated into the southwest Nebraska community.

"As an outsider to Wauneta, it was hard to fit in," Pankonin recalled. "He (the former publisher) helped make the transition for me into the community."

Most communities have several bankers, dozens of business owners and numerous attorneys. These communities, however, have — at the most — just one newspaper editor.

One of a kind

"We're our own breed of cats," said Dean Dorsey, a longtime community newspaperman in Nebraska.

While newspaper editors often are viewed as leaders in their communities, theirs can be a lonely existence. The options for confidants, role models and mentors likely are limited. This solitary existence can be especially challenging for younger editors who have yet to become established in the communities their newspapers serve.

Further complicating matters is the detachment newspaper editors must exercise with community leaders — the very people who could serve as their mentors. This detachment is based on the distance journalists must often keep from the subjects in their newspapers to ensure objective reporting.

Five Nebraska community newspaper editors and publishers — with a combined 210 years in the business — talked about who they relied on as mentors during their early days in the business. They also offered advice for young editors about finding appropriate mentors.

In addition, three editors — new to the profession — discussed the challenges they have faced when trying to establish themselves in their communities.

The concept of mentoring dates to Homer's *Odyssey*, according to *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring*. History is ripe with examples of mentoring relationships. Gertrude Stein mentored Ernest Hemingway, George Wythe mentored Thomas Jefferson and Duke Ellington mentored Tony Bennett.

Typically, mentors are viewed as those who help others find wisdom — or promotions, wrote Laurent Park Daloz in the foreword to *The Mentor's Guide*. "Great mentors extend the human activity of care beyond the bounds of the family," Daloz wrote. "They see us in ways that we have not been seen before. And at their best they inspire us to reach beyond ourselves; they show us how to make a positive difference in a wider world."

Seeking words of wisdom

While advice for finding the right mentor is plentiful, suggestions directed toward community newspaper editors isn't as available. At issue, according to Jack Lauterer in his book, *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach*, is the expectation that weekly newspaper editors serve their communities. "A community newspaper cares about its community in a supportive, positive nurturing way...The community paper, by its very name and description, is a creature of service."

In conflict is the editor's call to serve as a fair and balanced journalist with the call to serve as an advocate. "At times the paper must function as a 'tough love' counselor and say things the community may not want to hear but needs to be exposed to." Reporters at larger papers don't face this dilemma, according to Lauterer, because "theirs is a relatively simple role when it comes to public service — report the news fairly and completely, and don't get involved."

Don Russell, who recently retired after 50 years working in community journalism, explained that he looked for two types of mentors when he took over newspapers in Clearwater and Ewing: those with experience in the business and those entrenched in the communities.

Russell turned to the editors in nearby communities. At the time, these newspapers were aligned as part of a corporation. "Any time I had problems, I could turn to them. They looked out for me." He especially relied on these mentors for advice on what supplies — and how much — to purchase. "I had no idea what to have on hand."

In his community, Russell found himself turning to several parishioners from his church for mentoring. Especially helpful were the community's postmaster and the owner of a fertilizer dealership. The two helped Russell become acclimated in Clearwater.

Despite the relationships he developed with these men, Russell recalled, he never forgot his responsibility to cover the community — and its residents — without showing favoritism. "They were treated like anyone else. If someone got in trouble — a DUI, for example — I wrote it. People recognized that I couldn't play favorites."

Russell suggested that newspaper editors new to their communities should look in familiar places when seeking mentors. Prime candidates, he said, are successful business owners and members of civic organizations an editor chooses to join. For Russell, it was people involved in scouting. The other old standby is members of the editor's church. "Church plays a part," he said. "Maybe it shouldn't, but it does."

A matter of familiarity

Jim Dickerson, co-publisher with his wife, Julie, in Albion and Petersburg, recalled that his introduction as a new editor was made easier when the former publisher remained in the community. "I could always seek advice, his outlook," Dickerson said. "That doesn't happen all the time."

Dickerson also turned to the owner of a local clothing store. The businessman was outgoing and offered to do anything he could to help welcome Dickerson into the community.

Finally, Dickerson made a point to get to know the community's city administrator. He relied on the administrator for background information about community and governmental issues.

"You don't get all that just by attending the meetings," he said.

Dickerson suggested that editors and publishers proceed slowly when seeking mentors in their communities, especially when approaching government officials. "If they're smart, they'll cooperate." Russell added: "Get a feel for the communi-

ty. Then, look for young business owners who look at your town in the future."

When Greg Viergutz came to Gothenburg in the late 1970s, he said, he received a warm welcome into the community. Working with his father, who purchased the newspaper, made the introduction even easier.

Two too many

Finding a mentor in Gothenburg, he said, wasn't as easy. The community had two bank presidents. "It would be difficult to be seen as favoring one over the other." The community also included two doctor's offices, and the two physicians didn't get along. "We figured on being unfamiliar on our own for a while."

Dorsey, whose journalism career dates to the mid-1960s at the *Tri-City Tribune* in Cozad, recalled receiving encouragement from numerous community residents, guidance from the former owner who remained in the community, and encouragement from the local banker.

Dorsey said he realized his relationship with the banker was based on a mutual understanding about each person's motivation. Dorsey's was to become a part of his community. The banker's was to see his community move forward. "He was probably thinking more of wearing his 'community' hat as to what he'd like to see in his community. He was not only a banker, but also a promoter."

Pankonin added another suggestion for new community newspaper editors: Get involved with your state's press association. "That's where you meet people."

Amy Frederick, who along with her husband, Jason, own three Nebraska weeklies, said the couple turned to the editor — a 28-year employee — when they bought their first paper. She guided the Fredericks, neither of whom had majored in print journalism in college.

The owners of the nearby newspaper in Benkelman also served as mentors for the Fredericks. Later, the Fredericks returned the favor by purchasing their paper when the owners decided to sell.

This example should help motivate veteran community newspaper editors to devote time to the newcomers to their profession and to their region, Frederick said. "It's a two-way street. They might just buy your paper when you're ready to retire."

As for Sturek, he's glad his introduction into the community was gradual. He served as editor for 15 months before buying the paper. That stint allowed him to learn from the paper's owner and benefit from his former bosses' standing in their community.

"I wouldn't have done it any other way."

Kevin Warneke can be contacted at kwarneke6593@cox.net.

Experience and honesty count

Author Patricia Fritts contends that mentoring no longer requires a teacher-learner relationship. Instead, a collaborative learning experience, based on connection and mutual influence, is necessary.

An effective mentor — according to MindTools, an online management leadership and careering training source, is someone with experience. "Someone who's been where you are now, who's journeyed close to where you want to be, and who's made his or her own mistakes; Someone who is willing to impart the wisdom of experience, and so help you avoid the same pitfalls."

Pat Williams, senior vice president of the NBA's Orlando Magic, author and motivational speaker, listed 10 steps for selecting the right mentor:

1) Look for people you know. Inventory those who are in your personal and professional life. Look for someone you admire, someone you want to emulate or someone who has wisdom.

2) Consider someone you've never met. Find out who are the top people in your profession. Then, find out as much as you can about them.

3) Select someone who is a good role model. Look for someone who is known for having character and solid principles.

4) Select someone who is a good listener. "The best mentor is one who gets to know you — your skills and strengths and weaknesses, your individual personality and your aspirations."

5) Select a mentor who is honest with you. Good mentors not only encourage, they also are blunt. A good test: Is your mentor candid and open about his or her own life?

6) Select a mentor who is unlike you in some important manner. Avoid the tendency to gravitate toward those with whom you have much in common. "Instead of pairing up with someone who will reinforce your weaknesses, find someone who will challenge you to acquire new strengths."

7) Look for your mentor in an unlikely place. Avoid the stereotype that mentors must be older with much experience. Mentors can be people who are younger, even a person with a lower professional position.

8) Introduce yourself with a brief letter. This is especially important if you plan to approach someone who doesn't know you.

9) Make personal contact. Don't hesitate, just ask. Avoid the fear that you are imposing on your potential mentor. Remember that by asking someone to mentor you, you are offering that person high praise.

10) You're never too old to be mentored.

grassroots editor

A journal for newspeople

Published by the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors

Institute of International Studies
Missouri Southern State University
3950 East Newman Road
Joplin, MO 64801-1595
(417) 625-9736
www.grassrootseditor.org